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Experience and Political Action in Kant: Between Cynicism and Moral Significance

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Abstract. By holding that the anthropological condition of unsociable sociability forms the sinew of Kant's conception of political action, this essay distinguishes the relationship between experience and political agency from that between experience and moral agency. It argues that the former cannot be fully subsumed under the latter since political action, for Kant, is bound up with the mobilisation and manoeuvring of our cynical experiences. Kant maintains that the cunning of nature assists politics by channelling selfish interests into outcomes that ultimately advance a lawful civil order. The essay then turns to experiences that are, by contrast, symbols of the moral faculty by virtue of involving a 'disinterested interest', as most clearly articulated by Kant in his account of aesthetic experience. Given that political action primarily operates on prudential grounds, it may seem unlikely that it would also serve as a symbol of humanity's moral predisposition. Yet, foregrounding disinterested interest as a general trait of morally significant experience opens an intriguing space to read Kant's consideration of revolution as a historical sign of our moral vocation.
Keywords: Kantian ethics, Kantian anthropology, aesthetic experience, political action, unsociable sociability.

Patyrimas ir politinis veiksmas Kanto filosofijoje: tarp cinizmo ir moralinio reikšmingumo

Santrauka. Laikantis nuostatos, kad nesociabilaus sociabilumo antropologinė sąlyga formuoja Kanto politinio veiksmo sąvokos raumenis, šis straipsnis atskiria santykį tarp patyrimo ir politinio veiksmo nuo santykio tarp patyrimo ir moralinio veiksmo. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad pirmasis santykis negali būti visiškai subordinuotas antrajam santykiui, kadangi Kantui politinis veiksmas yra susijęs su mūsų ciniškųjų patirčių mobilizavimu ir manevravimu. Kantas teigia, kad gamtos klastingumas padeda politikai, kadangi savanaudiškus interesus nukreipia į tokias baigtis, kurios galiausiai įgalina teisėtą pilietinės tvarkos pažangą. Tuomet straipsnis imasi nagrinėti patyrimus, kurie, atvirkščiai, išreiškia moralinę gebą dėl „nesuinteresuoto intereso", kurį Kantas aiškiausiai išreiškė kalbėdamas apie estetinę patirtį. Kadangi politinis veiksmas visų pirma įgyvendinamas remiantis išmintingumu, gali atrodyti neįtikėtina, kad jis taip pat veiktų ir kaip moralinės predispozicijos simbolis. Tačiau jei nesuinteresuotą interesą iškeliame į pirmą planą kaip bendrąjį moraliai reikšmingo patyrimo bruožą, atsiveria intriguojanti galimybė Kanto svarstymus apie revoliuciją interpretuoti kaip istorinį mūsų moralinio pašaukimo ženklą.
Pagrindiniai žodžiai: Kanto etika, Kanto antropologija, estetinis patyrimas, nesociabilus sociabilumas

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The cardinal lesson of Kantian ethics is that experience cannot be morally legislative. We are indeed familiar with his insistence that "experience cannot teach us what is right" (2006b, 59). How does experience stand in relation to political action, though? The answer to this question is not as obvious and, therefore, requires explication, which this paper seeks to provide. The lack of clarity arises because Kantian political action is, as I shall try to argue, split and stretched between his 'nation of devils' and 'ethical commonwealth'. It may then be possible to take these two communities as together constituting the present moment, although their momentums come from the opposite heuristic poles of Kant's philosophy of history; the 'nation of devils' bears upon the present from its contractarian beginning, while the 'ethical commonwealth' does so from the putative end of his natural teleology. The tendency in Kantian scholarship to emphasise the moralisation of political action sometimes obscures that politics, for Kant, involves more the manoeuvres of nature than those of morality[1]. Kant himself allows for this moralisation with the talk of moral politicians. But his anthropological observations and their salience to his critical project now draw a growing scholarly attention and encourage considering political action in all its complexity and ambivalence, rather than only in terms of the universalisability of reason. The moral ambivalence of political action, I further argue, reflects the anthropological condition that he terms 'unsociable sociability' (*Ungesellige Geselligkeit*). It is the proposition that human beings are driven by the paradoxical tendencies to seek company and live in a society and, at the same time, assert their individual interests and isolate themselves. They cannot, in Kant's own terms, endure the others, nor can they do without them (Kant 2006b, 7). Given this anthropological condition, he holds that politics is not concerned with

> how to attain the moral improvement of the human being […] but rather only how to use the mechanism of nature on human beings in order to direct the conflict between their hostile intentions in a people in such a way that they compel each other to submit themselves to coercive laws and thereby bring about the condition of peace in which laws are in force" (Kant 2006b, 91).

He even holds that the rationally grounded general will is 'impotent', needing nature's assistance "by means of [precisely the same] selfish inclination" (Kant 2006b, 90). So, unlike what some of the critics claim, Kant hardly proposes any 'pure politics'[2]. However, this partial retreat to naturalism does not fall into either political quietism or moral inculpability, precisely because teleology is a regulative idea and not a constitutive principle. To strive towards the ethical commonwealth is always a moral duty. Kant is the philosopher par excellence of antinomies, and this extends well into his practical philosophy. Foucault's observation (2008) that Kant's pragmatic anthropology grapples with the tension between

[1] This is partly due to the tendency, as Goldman (2012) points out, that even the recent works on Kantian political philosophy by scholars like Katrin Flikschuh, Elisabeth Ellis and Otfried Höffe tend to overlook Kant's philosophy of history either as part of dogmatic cosmology or as unworkable.

[2] The charge of 'pure politics' is articulated by William Connolly (1999), in whose opinion Kant takes politics away from the sites of contestations where it is really required.

the moral community and civil society points precisely to the 'antinomous' character of political action. To resolve this tension, Foucault further observes, Kant conceives the human being as a 'citizen of the world', mediating between the human being as a moral subject and a legal one. In this sense, Kant's interest in anthropology reflects a "cosmopolitical perspective with programmatic value" (Foucault 2008, 33).

Some of the scholarly observations hold that this ambiguity leaves an interstice between political action and morality – one that Derrida calls the 'Kantian caesura', conceiving politics as a negotiation of the morally non-negotiable (2002). However, this understanding of political action does not aim to eliminate experience, but instead, it harnesses its inherent cynicism to propel it towards its own overcoming. As we just saw, natural teleology as a regulative idea sublates this cynicism as a part of the 'cunning of nature' operationalising itself[3] in political action[4]. This, then, begs the subsidiary question (to the one I began with, *How does experience stand in relation to political action?*), whether experience in the political domain has any positive moral significance. But answering this question requires us to clarify what the positive moral significance of experience can be. I think the best place to look for that clarification is Kant's third *Critique*. So, this essay will have three parts: the first establishes that, according to Kant, the cynical task of experience, in service of 'the hidden plan' of nature, is not only an unfortunate path with a silver lining but also a necessary phase, contra Rousseau, in the intergenerational progress of the human species; the second part establishes that the best positive service experience may offer to morality is to bear a sign of our ability to take an interest in things which do not satisfy our self-interests, and the third part attempts to locate such an experience of positive moral cachet within the domain of political action.

1. Unsociable Sociability: Kant in Dialogue with Rousseau

Sociability breeds unsociability. This apprehension is not exclusively Kantian but one that he shares with many of his predecessors, contemporaries and successors – including Rousseau[5]. In his *Anthropology*[6], Kant observes the following: "the human being's self-

[3] This personified account of nature follows Kant's own practice and need not confuse us once we understand that he does it in a regulative sense.

[4] Kant himself has not used the term 'cunning of nature'. The term, which is clearly an allusion to Hegel's cunning of reason, was popularised in the discussions on Kant's philosophy of history primarily by Yirmiahu Yovel's work (1980).

[5] See Schneewind (2009) for a discussion of similar accounts of unsociability held by a host of thinkers. The phrase that Kant uses, 'unsociable sociability', itself seems to have come from Montaigne. Perhaps the most illustrative analogy is that of Schopenhauer, who explains it in terms of a group of porcupines who, in the winter, come together for warmth. But then their quills force them apart. They find themselves in a continuous process of huddling together and withdrawing (Schneewind 2009, 109).

[6] The following short titles of Kant's work are used in the main body of the essay: Critique of the Power of Judgment / *the third Critique*, Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim / *Idea*, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals / *Groundwork*, Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason / *Religion*, Towards Perpetual Peace / *Perpetual Peace*, The Contest of the Faculties / *The Contest*, and Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View / *Anthropology*.

will is always ready to break out in aversion toward his neighbour, and he always presses his claim to unconditional freedom; freedom not merely to be independent of others, but even to master over other beings who by nature are equal to him" (2006a, 232). He holds that unsociability predisposes human beings "to want to direct everything only to their own ends [and,] driven by lust for honour, power, or property, to establish a position for themselves among their fellows" (2006b, 7). As we know, Kant positions himself as Rousseau's interlocutor across many themes. Although unsociability for Rousseau is not the original anthropological condition but a consequence of the progress of civil society, his description of the unfolding of unsociability in the *Discourse on Inequality* is remarkably close to Kant's. He says bitingly that, as the society progressed, it

> became the interest of men to appear what they really were not. To be and to seem became two totally different things; and from this distinction sprang insolent pomp and cheating trickery, with all the numerous vices that go in their train […] Man must now, therefore, have been perpetually employed in getting others to interest themselves in his lot, and in making them, apparently at least, if not really, find their advantage in promoting his own. (Rousseau 2005, 39)

In Wood's observation, both Rousseau's 'amour propre' and Kant's self-conceit maintain that "the natural human desire for happiness, which arises in us *only as rational and at the same time social beings,* is always originally a desire to compare our state with that of others with the aim that it should be better than theirs" [emphasis added] (Wood 2009, 117). But, unlike Rousseau and the social contractualists in general, Kant is among the first modern philosophers who embrace unsociability or social antagonism as the driving force of history. He says in the *Idea* that

> Without those characteristics of unsociability […] which give rise to the resistance that each person *necessarily encounters* in his selfish presumptuousness, human beings would live the Arcadian life of shepherds, in full harmony, contentment, and mutual love. But all human talents would thus lie eternally dormant, and human beings, as good-natured as the sheep that they put out to pasture, would thus give their own lives hardly more worth than that of their domesticated animals. [emphasis added] (Kant 2006b, 7)

As Rossi (2019) notes, the anthropological concern to understand what makes finite human beings distinct is supremely important for Kant. Rousseau, in contrast, rhapsodised that

> wandering up and down the forests, without industry, without speech, and without home, an equal stranger to war and to all ties, neither standing in need of his fellow-creatures nor having any desire to hurt them, and perhaps even not distinguishing them one from another; let us conclude that, being self-sufficient and subject to so few passions, he could have no feelings or knowledge but such as befitted his situation; that *he felt only his actual necessities*, and disregarded everything he did not think himself immediately concerned to notice, and that his understanding made no greater progress than his vanity. [emphasis added] (Rousseau 2005, 31)

Kant's emphasis on the necessity of unsociability has even inspired Siemens in a recent work (2024) to position him alongside Nietzsche as 'thinkers of antagonism'. He

traces the roots of unsociable sociability back to the notion of 'real opposition' in one of Kant's pre-critical essays, in which he distinguishes it from logical contradiction. Siemens argues that Kant identifies real opposition "in the form of the conflict between the forces of attraction and repulsion as the principle of reality governing everything" (2024, 10). Regardless of the details of his juxtaposition of Kant with Nietzsche, this reading arguably brings some clarity to my earlier assertion of Kant as a philosopher par excellence of antinomies even in the realm of practical philosophy.

As I briefly indicated before, in the assertion that a human being thus necessarily encounters resistance to his selfish interests from the incompatible selfish interests of others, and that this mutual resistance is necessary to human progress lies the necessity of experience's cynicism. Reading unsociable sociability as the nature *willing* human beings to "abandon their sloth and passive contentment" to strive towards their species development in a way that reveals "the plan of a wise creator"[7] (2006b, 7–8) helps us better understand experience as the source of nature's continuity in human beings. It also puts the observation that the human will, determined by desires and inclinations, is "a mere conduit for natural forces" in a different light. I think explicating the term 'experience' with the help of some distinctions Bernard Williams (1985) makes could be beneficial here. Williams alerts us to the possible division of the term 'experience' into two senses: 'experience past' and 'experience present'[8]. The former refers broadly to knowledge, consciously or unwittingly, gained from past events (E_1), while the latter refers to an active awareness. It is mostly in the former sense that we refer to experience when speaking of ethics in an Aristotelian sense of habituation. Kant is emphatically clear that habituation or cumulative experience cannot make us moral. However, we need to allow here the possibility of past experiences escalating unsociable sociability. Experience, in this sense, could also be considered a repertoire of prudential intelligence. Kant's comparison between a politician who obtains the principles of the political community *from experience* and the political theorist who has 'impractical ideas' in the very beginning of *Perpetual Peace* is a case in point. Further, Williams highlights two extremes in the concept of 'experience present', which may help us to discern a significant debate surrounding the term. Experience, he notes, "is offered as the necessary (immediate and authentic) ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis" (E_2), while, on the other extreme, it "is seen as the product of social conditions or of systems of belief or of fundamental systems of perception, and thus not as material for truths but as evidence of conditions or systems by definition it cannot itself explain" (E_3) (Williams 1985, 128). Kant's view of political action is empirical insofar as it is grounded in experience – the experience of unsociable sociability – in the first and the second sense, while both his theoretical philosophy and moral philosophy engage with experience in the third sense.

[7] This argument also reveals the Kantian version of theodicy. He remarks elsewhere that "all theodicy should truly be an interpretation of nature insofar as God announces his will through it" (Kant 1998, 24).

[8] In a similar vein, Heinemann points out that experience is at once a noun and a verb, and both are philosophically functional forms. He calls them "experienced experience" and "experiencing experience" – result and action, respectively (1941, 570).

Two interrelated things must be noted here. One is that Kantian anthropology is pragmatic for it concerns human beings as rational agents who are regulated by freedom – which is to say, human beings as, to borrow Allison's words, "centers of thought and action" (1997, 42). Louden (2021) draws our attention to a distinction Kant himself makes in his preface to *Anthropology* between the physiological perspective of anthropology and the pragmatic one. Kant points out that the former investigates "what nature makes of the human being", while the latter investigates what "he as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself" (2021, 9). Two, political action concerns this free-acting being. To be sure, the freedom invoked here is freedom as spontaneity that consists in *Willkür* or the ability to choose between good and evil, and not freedom as moral autonomy. This implies that the propensity to subordinate the interest of reason to the interest of inclinations, what Kant calls the radical evil, lies in freedom and not human nature. Freedom of the political actor is thus prone to radical evil, and a condition of unsociability accentuates this radical evil. Political action defies moralisation because, as Kant recognises, "nothing entirely straight can be fashioned from the crooked wood of which humankind is made" (2006b, 9). As earlier suggested, in their sociability, human beings seek unconditional freedom and mastery over others. Prudential reasoning based on cynical experiences allows politics to institute legal and coercive limits to this pursuit. The interstice between politics and morality, thus, lies precisely in that politics cannot rid humanity of its unsociability but only contain it in ways that will eventually make the vicious choice a difficult one to make. Sociability that overcomes its own precarity remains the ideal of morality; ethical commonwealth is that final purpose (*endzweck*).

But cynicism is not only a matter of what our historical experience teaches us, or 'experience past'. It is also a matter of our active awareness or the 'experience present'. Katrin Flikschuh's study of Kantian political philosophy gives us a perspective on how to understand what Kant termed the "resistance that each person necessarily encounters". She points out that, in ethics, desires refer to "subject's affective attitude towards others as well as themselves", while, in political agency, desires "typically specify relations between subjects and objects" (Flikschuh 2002, 98). I think this also entails that, in the Kantian scheme, that other human beings may appear to the political agent primarily in the capacity of objects – means to ends rather than ends in themselves. Flikschuh observes that, if we are to follow the distinction between ethics and politics along the lines of subject-subject relations and subject-object relations, respectively, desires in the realm of politics come to have an economic function; simply put, as the want for objects. It would then also establish that politics is a matter of the inevitable conflict arising from the scarcity of objects so desired. This 'economic' outlook of politics helps the saturation of cynicism. Flikschuh's contrast between subject-object relation and subject-subject relation is reflected in Thorpe's (2011) argument that Kantian ethical commonwealth reflects 'community' as a theoretical category of relation, in contrast to causality. He points out that causality involves a subordination of the consequence to the cause or the ground while the community establishes a coordination. As I have observed, political action driven by unsociability is an attempt at mastery over others.

2. Aesthetic Experience as the Symbol of Moral Faculty

Political action is thus couched in prudence. What is more is that Kant is stringent even towards dutiful actions which find crutches in favourable empirical interests. In his *Religion*, Kant refers to the adulteration of moral incentives as impurities, which, to his mind, is a gradation of radical evil itself (Kant 1998, 52). It leaves us with the question: could experience be of any positive moral relevance? In this section, I argue that common to both moral laws and certain pre-philosophical moral intuitions is the experience of being released from the compulsions of inclination. In *Groundwork*, Kant states that he is trying to articulate formally the moral intuitions that are commonly held. He acknowledges a widely shared recognition of self-control or selflessness as something unconditionally good – not merely as a means to some further end[9]. While he insists that such a judgement holds true only when grounded in the principle of goodwill – that is, this recognition fails to motivate human action unless it is elevated to conscious self-legislation – it does not exclude the possibility that some experiences may yield a posteriori awareness of selflessness. This suggestion allows us to speak of the symbols of our moral constitution. As hinted above, an action is morally worthy – that is, autonomous – only when it arises from the interests of reason. A moral imperative, he points out, does "not have validity for us because *it interests us* (for that is heteronomy and dependency of practical reason on sensibility, namely a feeling grounding it, which could never be morally legislative), but rather that it interests us because it is valid for us as human beings" [original emphasis] (Kant 2002, 77). I contend that this explanation of the kind of interest that underlies moral reasoning allows us to hold that our interest in matters that we do not collate within a means-ends paradigm of self-interest can be a vicarious intimation of our moral faculty.

This 'disinterested interest' is most commonly associated with Kant's account of aesthetic experience. Guyer points out in his editor's introduction to the third *Critique* that Kant's account of aesthetic experience serves the purpose of explaining how moral autonomy can be made palpable for embodied rational agents (Guyer 2009a, xxxv). Kant's explication of aesthetic experience holds that we take delight in our judgements of the beautiful not because such objects serve our interests or satisfy any desire, but because they engage our faculties in a free and harmonious play. Similarly, the 'sublime' experiences mark a rupture from our ordinary, interest-governed state – confronting us with something that momentarily overwhelms the senses yet affirms our capacity for reason and moral autonomy. Thus, aesthetic experience nourishes our disposition to find and value delight in matters that otherwise do not satisfy your interests. Aesthetic pleasure is analogous to what Kant calls a moral feeling, as it *symbolises* what it *feels* to be free. This contribution to our moral character is well recognised by Kantians. However, as I have pointed out above, Kant's aesthetic experience is not only propaedeutic to the cultivation of moral character, but it also serves as an analogical overture or a symbol of the

[9] Grenberg (2013) also points out that Kant's attempt is, in fact, to articulate the common understanding that recognises the priority of morality over happiness.

goodwill itself[10]. Section 59 of the third *Critique* is vitally instructive for understanding what Kant means by the 'symbol' of morality. Here, Kant explains that the concepts of pure reason have two kinds of representations, namely, the schematic and the symbolic. As we know from the first *Critique* itself, schematic intuitions are given a priori. Symbolic, on the other hand, also pertains to pure concepts for which no sensible intuition can be given. However, in symbolic representation, an intuition is attributed to this concept "with which the power of judgment proceeds in a way merely analogous to that which it observes in schematization, i.e., it is […] merely the form of the reflection, not the content, which corresponds to the concept" (Kant 2009, 225). A symbol, in simpler terms, is an analogous representation of a pure concept. Later in the same section, Kant elaborates on the analogous relationship between aesthetic judgement and morality. He says that, in aesthetic judgement, the mind is "aware of a certain ennoblement and elevation above the mere receptivity for a pleasure from sensible impressions" (Kant 2009, 227). As an affective state, this feeling is comparable to what Kant discusses elsewhere as the moral feeling of 'respect', which involves "something elevating" (Kant 2015, 67). But, as he pointed out, more than the comparable affect it produces, aesthetic experience qualifies as analogy for its form of reflection corresponds to the concept of pure reason. So, what qualifies the faculty of aesthetic experience as a symbol of the faculty of morality is that it is not "subjected to the heteronomy of the laws of experience" (Kant 2009, 227). In an earlier footnote in the third *Critique*, Kant makes the following remark: "A judgement on an object of satisfaction can be entirely disinterested yet still very interesting, i.e., it is not grounded on any interest, but it produces an interest; all pure moral judgements are like this" (Kant 2009, 91). 'Disinterestedness' represents the aesthetic subject's freedom from subjective inclinations and practical considerations.

Kant hastens to add to the above observation the following statement: "But the pure judgment of taste does not in itself even ground any interest. Only in society does it become interesting to have taste" [emphasis added] (Kant 2009, 91). The contrast this addendum offers to Rousseau is hard to miss and instructive. As Shell (2002) points out, this refers to a distinction that Kant makes between natural beauty and artistic beauty. Insofar as taste concerns the former, Shell explains, taste involves constitutive standards and involves 'pure judgements of taste'. But where the latter is concerned, taste is based on regulative standards that need to be cultivated and are dependent on civilisational progress. As I remarked earlier, this view reflects Kant's embrace of the progress of civilisation driven by unsociable sociability. Rousseau's human being, living in the pastoral bliss, was not defined by disinterested interest but the right kind of self-love (amour de soi), which is non-comparative and non-aggressive. As the earlier excerpt from Rousseau said, he "felt only his true needs, took notice of only what he believed he had an interest in seeing".

[10] Arendt's (1982) attempt to build an alternative Kantian political philosophy is well-known and needs no recounting here. Her primary interest in aesthetic judgement is related to the idea of 'sensus communis' and its potential for grounding a political judgement that is non-authoritarian yet universalisable, non-subsumptive yet shareable. But she deemphasises the role of cultivation and scarcely accounts for the role of historical progress in aesthetic or political judgement.

Rousseau thinks that artistic progress corrupts the self-love into a comparative amour propre, leading to jealousy and strife. Kant's reflection on this Rousseauian suggestion parallels his part-agreement, part-overcoming of Rousseau that we are already familiar with in the narrative of 'unsociable sociability'. That is, Kant is aware of the conflicts that an empirical interest or an interest of inclination in artistic objects can give rise to. It reveals that even though aesthetic judgement is a sign of moral faculty, unsociability permeates even experiences of art. Therefore, the aesthetic experience of art can serve as a sign of our moral capacity only to the extent that some moral progress has already occurred. Although the talk of cultivation invites charges of colonialism against Kant, I believe that this distinction is crucial in understanding Kant's 'cosmopolitical' perspective.

3. Sign and Symbol: Political Actors and Moral Spectators of Revolution

Familiarity with Kant's account of aesthetic experience prepares us for what to expect when Kant refers to something as a sign of our moral predisposition. Compared to aesthetic experience, though, holding a political event as a sign of moral faculty might seem even more delicate a move, now that we have realised that politics in Kant is a lot more untidy and liminal. Kant clarifies in no uncertain terms that nothing we know is ever sufficient to validate the direction of history with any lasting epistemological certainty. Our moral constitution has the power to reverse what appears to be an intractable decline, and conversely, our physical constitution has the power to disrupt the seemingly unstoppable epoch of progress[11] (Kant 2006b, 153). This is why one would do well to distinguish between a sign and evidence here. Kant even holds that the goodwill will shine like a jewel even amidst the most unfavourable circumstances (Kant 2002, 10). His hope that the moral faculty will eventually lead human beings to their final purpose is based rather on the impossibility of denying its probability than on what empirical history augurs. In other words, the theoretical probability of an ethical commonwealth exists precisely because no empirical evidence is sufficient to demonstrate its impossibility. As an effect of the moral faculty of our species, if the circumstances are right, it will emerge as a matter of a combination of probability and indefinite time.

However, Kant argues further in *The Contest* that the moral progress of the human species is difficult to manifest through the experiences of one's lifetime and would need an abstraction from experiences to consider a broader timeline of history. As the moral vocation of human being could thus only be pursued in collaboration with past and future generations, he adds further that "there must exist some experience in the human race which, as an event, *indicates that the latter has a makeup and capacity* to be both the cause of human progress toward the better and the agent thereof" [emphasis added] (Kant

[11] Kant might seem in broad agreement with his main interlocutor in the debate on human progress, Moses Mendelssohn, whose position he rejects as *Abderitism*, suggesting that empirical evidence alone does not justify claims about the direction of history. However, Kant's argument from rational faith holds that the idea of human progress can be postulated independently of empirical evidence. For an account of the debate between Kant and Mendelssohn on human progress, see Merritt (2023).

2006b, 154). As a historical sign, this event indicates, according to Kant, "indefinite with respect to time, the existence of such a cause and the act of its causation in the human race, and which would allow the inference that progress toward the better is inevitable" (Kant 2006b, 154). Kant hastens to remind his readers that this experience of a 'great event' in itself is only a sign and should not be confused with the cause of moral progress.

The event that he cites as the historical sign of his time is the French Revolution. Indeed, Kant cannot uphold revolutionary action as commendable, for it violates moral imperatives, including the requirement of publicity. For example, if my sympathetic assessment of the revolution pushes me to engage in the revolution myself, not only would my actions be morally unacceptable, but they would also be considered criminal from Kant's republican viewpoint. Kant asserts that "all incitement in order to *express through action* the dissatisfaction of subjects, all revolt that leads into rebellion, is the highest and most punishable offence in the commonwealth because it destroys the latter's very foundations" [emphasis added] (Kant 2006b, 53).

Conversely, the spectators' experience of revolution is marked by what Kant calls the unselfish or disinterested sympathy. To be sure, revolution in itself is only a sign and not a symbol. It only *indicates* but does not *represent* moral faculty as an indirect intuition. This is where Kant's separation of the political event of revolution from the spectatorial experience of revolution becomes important. By virtue of the disinterestedness, the spectatorial experience of revolution is kindred in spirit (or form) to aesthetic experience. The tricky distance that Kant wants his moral agents to maintain is captured efficiently by Arendt's contrast between 'engaging actor' and 'judging spectators'. Accordingly, Kant holds that the historical sign of moral capacity is not characterised by a great transformation in itself but by the "spectator's mindset which reveals itself publicly in the face of the show of large-scale transformations and which makes known such a universal and yet unselfish sympathy with the players on the one side against those on the other, even at the risk that this partiality could become quite detrimental to them" (Kant 2006b, 155). The point is that, for the spectators, their sympathy is not in their own best interest; it may even be antithetical to their interests. But, as with the experience of beauty, the experience that elicits empathy demonstrates that it is not driven by self-interest. Expressing empathy for the revolutionaries may invite trouble for them. In spite of this risk, they are still enthusiastic about the revolution because they are moved by a 'disinterested interest'. Here, as in the case of aesthetic experience, it is *analogous* to what Kant calls elsewhere the interests of reason, for they are emptied of self-regard or self-love. As we have noted earlier, the interests of reason determine the will through moral law, producing the feeling of respect that represents "a worth that infringes on my self-love" (Kant 2002, 17). Kant says that the spectators' mindset 'demonstrates' a moral character of the human race as a whole. Demonstrating 'pure concepts', as we have learned earlier, is a matter of symbolic representation. We may also note here that the affective state in this spectatorial experience – a "feeling of exaltation" (2006b, 157) – is also similar to the sense of elevation that he identifies with both the aesthetic experience and the moral feeling of respect.

One may suspect here if any experience of selfless sympathy is sufficient to demonstrate moral capacity. Kant's answer is that the moral cause of the spectators' sympathy with the revolutionaries and their enthusiasm is the recognition of "people's right to establish a civil constitution and the end of the morally good in itself" (Kant 2006b, 155). It is here that we realise that the disinterested interest in revolution also rests on a certain threshold of progress, as was the case with our disinterested interest in the artistic objects of beauty. As Kant maintains, it is with the onset of enlightenment that we begin to consciously adopt and further the moral progress that nature had previously been guiding mechanically. The spectators' sympathy for revolution is a sign of moral faculty because this moral progress has already occurred.

Even if this spectator's experience could motivate political action, it would not have any moral worth. Experiences of moral significance, therefore, do not beckon any stipulations of action. But they do take exception to the premise of radical evil, which is to say that these experiences break away from the paradigm of ends-means reasoning that causes the agent to mobilise others as a means to satisfy his or her self-interest.

4. Conclusion

'Disinterested interest' is a crucial piece of the puzzle for Kant in two interrelated senses. One, since the ethical community lies in the distant future, long after the present human beings are dead, their hope and commitment towards a better future are grounded in an 'unselfish benevolence', which is not corrupted by their current empirical plight. Two, the ethical community as the 'endsweck' of reason will be the apogee of 'disinterested interest' as it overcomes what Rossi terms "the obduracy of self-interest" (Rossi 2019, 37). The distance of a spectator or of a theoretician is key to maintaining this disinterestedness that permits an experience to be a 'symbol' of something morally relevant, and yet nothing more.

I conclude this article by attempting a tentative juxtaposition between Kant's 'creative genius' and the 'revolutionary' to see the opposite end of the spectatorship, with the help from some lateral readings. Building on the Arendtian consideration of Kant's third *Critique* as a basis for an alternative political philosophy, Payne (2011) observes that a political community modelled after the 'sensus communis' would have no creative political action. Here, Payne understands political action as "the ability of an agent within a political community to create new conditions out of the existing legal structure" (2011, 246). He explores the notion of 'creative genius' in Kantian aesthetic theory as a 'parergon' – beyond work[12] – to the 'sensus communis'. Payne follows Allison in using 'parergon' in this renewed sense to describe the paradoxical relationship the creative genius has to the 'sensus communis'. While creative genius needs to stand outside the sensus communis to produce art, it must also conform to the demands of taste and judgement

[12] Originally in Kantian aesthetics, 'parergon' is a supplementary element, like the frame of a painting, that nevertheless affects our appreciation of that artwork.

within the community. The paradox arises from the tension between the creative freedom of the genius and the need to adhere to the standards and expectations of the community's judgement, or, in other words, from the fact that "the very constituent that is beyond (para-) the work (ergon) of the community is the very one whose works (beautiful art) are fundamental to the constitution of a theory and community of taste" (Payne 2011, 245–246). Payne suggests that, if we were to follow Arendt's sensus communis-modelled political community, we could think about a creative political agency as 'parergonal' to the political community in the same way 'creative genius' is to 'sensus communis'. That is, to effect change, the political actor has to be outside his community and yet conform to that very community to effect political change.

However, the political community based on the 'sensus communis' does not abandon the foundations of republicanism. The suggestion is that a political community is constituted through a communal judgement of this parergon's creative political action. Arendt recognises that, even as a creative genius is necessary for the constitution of the community based on taste, it also has a dangerous possibility of disrupting the taste – if the imagination exceeds understanding and dissolves form. So, she argues that the only legitimate genius in the political community has to be the sovereign legislator, and the subjects must remain merely spectators. Productive political action by the subjects will make them criminals, as Kant's account of the French Revolution suggests. That is, even the extrapolation of the notion of creative genius leaves us with the spectator/actor division and affords creative political agency for nobody except the sovereign. Political action on the part of citizens will necessarily be deemed a criminal activity.

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