

FORUM: ON RICHARD ELDRIDGE, *IMAGES OF HISTORY*

3.

NATURE, RELIGION, AND IMAGINATION:
COMMENTS ON *IMAGES OF HISTORY*

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ABSTRACT

After sharing some reflections, I raise three questions. The first asks about the role of nature and reason according to Kant's teleological history, and the extent to which Kant's essays written before the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) are "dogmatic," as his phrase "aim of nature" might suggest. The second asks about Kant's "impure" ethics and the role of religion. What that would Kantian religion look like today? The last question concerns the relation between images and ideas—a thornier issue than Kant's initial definitions of imagination and reason would seem to suggest.

Keywords: action, nature, teleology, religion, reason, ideas, imagination

Richard Eldridge offers us a rich and insightful book, at once lyrical and insistent. He interacts with Kant and Benjamin dialectically, in both the Platonic sense of engaging with an interlocutor and a more Hegel-inspired sense in which one thought is contrasted with another, though without any Hegelian *Aufhebung*. The title seems in part an allusion to Dieter Henrich's *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World* (97) as well as a reference to Kant's and Benjamin's reflections on images and imaging, especially as they relate to rational critique and criticism. Eldridge examines how our images can help shape our historical self-understanding and give form to the ideals by which we live, enabling us to create meaning in our lives.

As the author's précis reveals, the book sits somewhere between moral and political philosophy, philosophical anthropology, and theory of action, mixed with some philosophy of art and literature. Eldridge's analysis is lucid and fair, displaying both rigor and wit.

His discussion is subtle and balanced. The balance can be seen in phrases like "more or less" and "coherently enough" and "good enough." In fact, it is *so* balanced, sometimes I could not resist wishing that he would favor one side of a dispute more than another. The fact that he does not do so, I take it, is part of a larger substantive point. He wants us to avoid, on the one hand, formulaic rigidity and bureaucratic commitment to unchanging norms (liberal procedural Kantianism at its worst), as much as, on the other hand, an ephemeral, overly sensitive, or aesthetic celebration of an ever-escaping present.

Although my remarks will focus on Kant, I enjoyed and profited from his discussion of Benjamin, too.

HUMAN ACTION AS OVERDETERMINED

In reading the opening of Eldridge's book, I was reminded of the beginning of an article recently published by Alexander Nehamas.¹ He relates that years ago, when he was a smoker, he was unable to find cigarettes one day. So Nehamas decided to wait a bit, just to see how long he could go before the urge set in, at which point he was prepared to give in and light up. Soon, it became a sort of game he played with—or against—himself. He decided to wait a little longer, and then a bit longer, and so on. At some point, he realized that he had “quit” smoking. But he had not done so on purpose, that is, he had not done so intentionally.

There is something very compelling about this story. Eldridge opens the book with similar themes that lead to a thesis about the overdetermination and non-reductionism of human action. “Just why did I reach for that last cookie? . . . Just why did I choose to study philosophy?” (1). When I read this, various answers naturally came to mind in relation to my own experience. Did I choose to major in philosophy because I enjoyed it or, with youthful enthusiasm, thought I could contribute to the field? Was it a discipline that seemed respectable enough as a major? Did I think I could even become more virtuous by studying it, as Socrates had promised me?

According to one narrative I could tell about myself, I majored in philosophy because I took a required course in it, had an excellent professor, and loved the subject. (Of course, this only raises other questions. Why did I go to the university I did—was it because my brother had gone there the year before and I wanted to imitate him . . . Felt close to him? . . . Wanted to *prove* that I felt close to him?) As is probably the case for many academics, my interest in my field was sparked by an inspiring teacher, a passionate yet challenging professor. I enjoyed thinking about the answers to the kinds of questions asked in philosophy. I need not pursue such autobiographical points further; the upshot is that there are many explanations for my choice of major.

If so, human actions (such as quitting smoking or choosing a major) seem to be overdetermined. Causal explanations of nature might not be able to cover actions by human beings (22, 26, 195 n. 39). If the line of thinking offered by Nehamas and Eldridge is right, we often do not know exactly or fully why we do what we do, or why we have arrived where we are, have the partners or friends that we have at this time, as we are living out this particular mode of life. This thought may be unsettling to some readers (even if familiar in some form to many of us), but I wanted to note that it struck me as accurate.

1. Alexander Nehamas, “Nietzsche, Intention, Action,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018), 685-701.

TELEOLOGY OF NATURE?

I now turn to more Kantian themes, namely, the teleology or purposiveness of nature, and its connection to reason.² When reading the author's discussions of Kant's 1780s essays on teleology and history, I was wondering if (or to what extent) Eldridge thinks this purposiveness (finality) was on the part of nature, or instead, of reason. This is a fundamental and basic question, almost on the order of, "Why is there something rather than nothing at all?"

What is the driving force, what is behind all the action there is in the world? Is it nature, or reason, or perhaps a combination, some other thing? Which of the two has the intentions that lead ultimately to what Kant calls the final end of nature—that is, to reason-determined morality?

Kant scholars understandably tend to emphasize reason here, given its role in autonomy, legislating the moral law, and so on. But this seems only to push the question back: What is the origin of reason? Perhaps Kant, or one half of the "Kant-Laplace" team, would have to say that it is nature. Indeed, in the 1784 "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," Kant writes as if nature has been more concerned about our rational self-esteem than about our well being (63). Likewise, in the *Groundwork* (1785), Kant states that if happiness were nature's aim, then nature should have allowed us to be guided by instinct rather than (at least in part) by reason.³ "Now in a being that has reason and a will, if the proper end of nature were its . . . happiness, then nature would have hit upon a very bad arrangement in selecting the reason of the creature to carry out this purpose."⁴ This implies that *nature* developed reason so that reason could become autonomous and set its own laws, and thereby have (practical) cognition of itself. Such an emphasis on nature is certainly not textbook Kant.

Even if Kant speaks as if nature had a plan (an "aim of nature," *Naturabsicht*) (57), readers of the third *Critique* know better. They realize that Kant cannot have meant that nature *really* had a plan, at least he could not have meant this after 1790, when he insisted that the idea of a purposively organized nature is merely regulative for our practice of inquiry, not constitutive or objectively applicable to natural beings as such (59). So when one finds such claims in pre-1790 writings such as "Idea for a Universal History," which Eldridge discusses, one of at least three options seems to obtain.

2. I pose the following questions primarily at the level of Kant scholarship, that is, concerning what Kant claimed and meant. But, as Eldridge shows, it is difficult to investigate such questions without at the same time asking what the response means for us, today, hence at a more philosophical level.

3. References to Kant will be to the volume and page of *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (KGS), edited by the Deutschen (formerly Königlichen Preussischen) Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1900–), except for quotations from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which are cited by the customary use of the pagination from its first (A) and second (B) editions. When available, I use the English translations in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, general editors Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992–).

4. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:395.

First, perhaps Kant was at that time committed to “dogmatic” views (as we might call them), and did not revise them until 1790. This seems to be a position Henry E. Allison (whom Eldridge cites) adopts, at least when Allison writes that Kant’s claim in the 1784 essay is “seemingly dogmatic” (59). Eldridge also seems (if for a moment) to subscribe to this interpretation when he writes that in “Idea for a Universal History,” Kant “nonetheless draws on” the idea that nature is a system of purposively organized beings (60).

Second, perhaps Kant is not committed to such dogmatic claims but is instead merely speaking loosely and metaphorically. On this view, Kant does not really mean to make dogmatic claims. In other words, maybe he was already aware of the strictures he would eventually lay out in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, but he did not yet care to apply these strictures in his earlier writings, perhaps since they had a different purpose, audience, or genre. After all, Kant does something similar in his teaching; he speaks in a way we would call “dogmatic” in his courses on geography, even after 1790.⁵

Third and finally, Kant’s position might be that there is a dialectical interplay between nature and reason, or that both work together, making it difficult to separate nature and reason even if they can be conceptually distinguished. Presumably, Kant could in principle have adopted such a position even in the 1784 essay.

I take Eldridge to write in a way that is compatible with this third option, and wonder if he could elaborate or correct me if I am wrong. To explain Kant’s phrase, “aim of nature,” Eldridge employs Spinoza’s distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. “Instead ‘an aim of nature’ must refer to something more like Spinozist *natura naturans* as opposed to *natura naturata*, that is, to an active force that underlies and is obscurely manifest in the order of empirical appearances, without being present as an object of distinct theoretical knowledge” (57f.). An aim of nature, Eldridge clarifies, cannot refer to or indicate “empirical nature” (57), a mere event or appearance determined by universal laws of nature. But note: once we introduce the “active” (“active force”), and related notions of activity and even the richer notion of agency, we *eo ipso* introduce the rational and/or reasonable. *Natura naturans* is imbued with culture, or involves “a developing order of culture within nature” (111). Thus, it requires the activity of reason.

To put this as a question: What does it mean to claim that an aim of nature is (like) an active force that is “obscurely manifest” in the order of empirical appearances? According to this third view, it surely must mean that it is reason that discloses and reveals what is obscure. (“Reason” could be broadly understood so as to include interpreting history, understanding ourselves, and/or making meaning.)

5. I document such remarks in Robert R. Clewis, “Kant’s Natural Teleology? The Case of Physical Geography,” *Kant-Studien* 107, no. 2 (2016), 1-29. The surprisingly dogmatic-sounding claims Kant made in his university lectures on geography, even after 1790, can in part be explained by his pedagogical (rather than philosophical-scholarly) aims and his application of a transcendental-empirical distinction in his teaching practice—even if these distinctions can sometimes be blurry.

Eldridge indeed implies something like this when he claims that the relevant aim of nature will be “evident only to and for beings who exercise both interpretive and practical powers in relation to the understanding of human actions” (58). Commenting on the third proposition in the 1784 essay, Eldridge writes that “nature” must mean “rational nature” rather than empirical nature, for empirical nature has no will (62). But note again: from a Kantian point of view, as soon as we refer or appeal to human will and “actions,” we immediately introduce what is reason-based and/or reasonable (which is of course not to say that human actions are *fully* in accordance with reason). This even holds from some non-Kantian philosophical perspectives. Aristotle, for instance, claims, “For we do not say that a child acts, or a brute either; only someone who is already doing things from reasoning.”⁶ I take Hegel to be saying something similar, too.

RELIGION AND IMPURE ETHICS

Eldridge shows admirable sensitivity to the particular contexts and circumstances in which autonomy is to develop and unfold. He emphasizes the role that educational institutions, arts, sciences, and religions can play in helping us become autonomous. This aspect seemed similar to what Robert Louden calls Kant’s impure ethics in his book of that name, which Eldridge cites.⁷ (Here, if I could make a friendly suggestion, I thought Eldridge’s discussion might have further benefited from sorting out and appealing to Kant’s discussion of empirical and intellectual character and to the relations between them.)

Eldridge addresses the role of aesthetic experience in cultivating humanity. The arts and aesthetic experiences can bring us together, help refine us, even indirectly promote moral improvement as we practice and/or enjoy the arts together. Religion, too, has an important role to play. One question implicitly raised by Eldridge’s excellent chapter on Kantian religion is what this form of religion would look like today, if one were to pick a historical faith. Perhaps Unitarian Universalism, as Sharon Anderson-Gold once suggested to me—at least if we assume that Unitarian Universalism can be practiced or observed in a unified, internally consistent way, as Kant’s philosophy of religion and philosophical theology would surely require.

It seems to me that Quakerism, too, bears some similarities with concrete Kantian religion. Leslie Stevenson argues, quite plausibly, that the similarities between Kantian religion and Quakerism run deep. He concludes that “the combination of Kant and Quakers leads us in a promising direction, not merely in the philosophy of religion but in religion itself.”⁸ The comparison is indeed a good one. This is not to deny that there are crucial differences between the two. Kant and Quakers would seem to differ, for instance, on the nature and value of

6. Aristotle, *Eudemean Ethics*, 1224 a 29; book II, ch. 8. Quoted from *A New Aristotle Reader*, ed. John L. Ackrill (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 492f.

7. Robert B. Louden, *Kant’s Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

8. Leslie Stevenson, “Kant’s Approach to Religion Compared with Quakerism,” in *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chris L. Firestone and Stephen R. Palmquist (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 227.

religious experience—with the Quaker view of the “inner light” likely to invite a Kantian charge of *Schwärmerei*.

But more fundamentally: How does one respond to or prevent atheism in the age of secular humanism? How do participants avoid becoming mere observers? This raises the question of what, exactly, the Kantian believers are supposed to believe, and what they are committed to, metaphysically speaking, as well as what they are supposed to do in terms of ecclesiastical practice, rites, and liturgy.

IMAGES AND IDEAS

One of the important themes in the book is “orientation,” as we understand and critique the past and present and reflect on the future. This led me to ask: Are we oriented by imagined possibilities (“images”) or by ideas of reason, or by both, and what is the difference? How should we understand the Kantian distinction between ideas of reason and ideals of imagination (“imaginative envisioning” [58])? After all, young people speak of *imagining* a better world, and John Lennon sang of it. Was this a category mistake?

This issue—which is perhaps more a complication for Kant than for Eldridge—does not seem to be entirely a terminological one. On the surface, of course, it is easy to give Kant’s official answer. Ideas of reason—which are not to be confused with *aesthetic* ideas issuing from a productive imagination⁹—can never be exhibited or adequately represented. Images, then, would be representations that fall short of rational ideas (ideas of reason). Worse, the imagination can sometimes lead political leaders and political “artists” astray,¹⁰ create delusional visions and fantasies, and in short mislead and deceive us. The imagination would appear to be a (mere) tool of reason, which guides and constrains imagination. As Kant warns: “It is sweet . . . to *imagine* constitutions corresponding to the requirements of *reason* . . . but rash to propose them.”¹¹ Along similar lines, in his ethical philosophy Kant distinguishes between the “ideal” of imagination (happiness) on the one hand and the “idea” of morality on the other, constituted by practical reason. “Happiness is not an ideal of reason but of imagination, resting merely upon empirical grounds.”¹²

Yet after closer examination, Kant’s distinctions among ideals, ideas, and images seem to be quite complex. Ambiguities emerge clearly when one looks at the German word Kant employs, *Urbild* (archetype), which is rooted in *Bild* (image). Kant uses *Urbild* when discussing a perfect republican constitution. “The idea of this maximum is nevertheless wholly correct when it is set forth as an archetype [*Urbilde*] in order to bring the legislative constitution of human beings ever nearer to a possible perfection.”¹³ Imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) suddenly seems to be something more than a mere instrument of reason, if the imagination is necessarily involved in the creating of an *Urbild*.

9. On aesthetic ideas, see Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:314f.

10. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, 7:181.

11. Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*, 7:92n.; emphasis added.

12. Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:418.

13. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A317/B373f.

Kant's general view is that reason's ideas and imagination's images, albeit distinct, co-exist and cooperate. For instance, in the third *Critique*, Kant states that the "productive" imagination creates "another nature" out of ordinary natural material, and does so in accordance with "principles that lie higher in reason" (56).¹⁴

Likewise, according to *Conflict of the Faculties*, a "divinatory history" must rely on the *imagination* to recognize the sign of a universal moral tendency in a particular factual event (61). Moreover, that moral tendency ("enthusiasm," *Enthusiasmus*, not *Schwärmerei*) is, for Kant, itself a product of an expanded imagination. A stretched imagination (stretched, that is, by the possibilities suggested by reason) is a necessary structural component of the enthusiasm shared by removed yet enthralled spectators and witnesses of the establishment of the first French Republic.¹⁵

Finally, Kant refers to the power of imagination in the opening of "Conjectural Beginning of Human History." He admits that in making "conjectures," he is venturing on a "mere pleasure trip" and being carried away by the "wings of the power of imagination." Still, Kant says he is conjecturing with a "guiding thread attached by *reason* onto experience."¹⁶ In short, conjecturing is a team effort, a cooperation between imagination and reason.

This nonfantastic imagining and meaning-making, I take it, would include or encompass the kind of careful, historical, reason-guided self-understanding that Eldridge identifies and endorses. I wonder what this co-existence and coordination of imaging and reasoning implies for our self-understanding and critique of present institutions and practices. It seems that we need to *imagine* the moral-political "ideals" (2) if we are to formulate and recognize them. In turn, the images or imaginings are guided by principles and ideas of reason (rational ideas). The imagination plays a crucial and indispensable role when we critique the present and interpret the past in light of reason's ideas and principles. Eldridge's title mentions *images*; I would simply like to recognize and underline—and I have no reason for thinking that Eldridge should disagree—the importance of rational critique and the role of reason.

To conclude: Eldridge's book was a pleasure to read, and I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on it.

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14. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:315.

15. See Robert R. Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Robert R. Clewis, "The Feeling of Enthusiasm," in *The Faculty of Feeling*, ed. Kelly Sorensen and Diane Williamson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 184-207.

16. Kant, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," 8:109f.; emphasis added.