

Kant and Flaubert on the role of historical progress.

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What do we mean by "historical progress"? People had answered to this big question differently in different historical periods. This essay is focused on the ideas of two outstanding thinkers of modernity - Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804) and Gustave Flaubert (1821 - 1880). How did they see historical progress? How historical events of their time did influence their views? These are the questions this essay is addressing.

Kant lived in the marvellous times - beginning of the Enlightenment. Optimism was in the air. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 - 1778) published his "Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences" in 1750. This work brought the question of moral progress on the table again as Rousseau stated that advances in arts and sciences lead to a degradation of morality (instead of a progress as most of the thinkers were sure about). Kant found a middle course in the view to the history.

He insisted that the history has an aim and this aim has a moral dimension [1]:

The history of mankind can be seen, in the large, as the realization of Nature's secret plan to bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition *in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed.*

Kant declared the teleological principle indispensable for any kind of methodological knowledge through that principle itself remained beyond rational proof [2]. He left the place for faith here. Moral progress was in the heart of Kant's view on the world - he believed that without it the universe loses its meaning altogether [2].

What about all the nasty tragedies happened in the history? Teleological approach seems to explain them [1]:

Through war, through the taxing and never-ending accumulation of armament, through the want which any state, even in peacetime, must suffer internally, Nature ... after devastations, revolutions, and even complete exhaustion, she brings them ... to step from the lawless condition of savages into a league of nations.

This thinking can be illustrated by Kant's words about French Revolution (1789) - *"For such a phenomenon in human history is not to be forgotten, because it has revealed a tendency and faculty in human nature for improvement"* [3].

The last Kant's work published in 1798 still shows muted historical optimism [3]:

in spite of all skeptics ... the human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth.

Contrary to Kant who saw the rise of Enlightenment, Flaubert had been able to see the results of that promising era:

- July revolution (1830) which brought power to the "bourgeois king" Louis Philippe I;
- February revolution (1848) which overthrew Louis Philippe and established the Second Republic;
- Establishment of the Third Republic in 1870 ("4th of September");
- Paris Commune also known as Fourth French Revolution in 1871.

These events were radical and bloody. But did they really change the people? Did they make people less stupid, more virtuous? Flaubert's answer is no as we can see from his letters. It explains Flaubert's pessimistic attitude towards the contemporary politics and the history of human being. He wrote to George Sand in 1871 [4]:

The whole dream of democracy is to elevate the proletarian to the level of the imbecility of the bourgeois. The dream is partly accomplished.

The three degrees of education have shown within the last year what they can accomplish: (1) higher education made Prussia win; (2) secondary education, bourgeois, produced the men of the 4th of September; (3) primary education gave us the Commune.

He saw history as a series of repetitions, inevitable because human nature never changes. This is an essential and lasting element in Flaubert's view of the historical process [5]. He also rejects the legacy understanding of the history as a sequence of events, stating [5]:

history is merely the reflection of the present on the past, and that is why it must always be rewritten.

As a result he escapes from politics and history to the art. The only "really real" for Flaubert is Art where he is looking for the truth. This idea becomes very important for the development of modernism [6].

Both thinkers, Flaubert and Kant shared the dream of making the human species better. But they had offered different paths to this goal. Kant believed in the teleological principle behind history and categorical imperative; Flaubert thought that the way to make us better goes through an art.

References

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