



Physiodicy, or, the Political Theology of Nature

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This article explores some of the strange contradictions that arise when political thought treats "nature" as sovereign, especially the constitution of what is termed a "physiodicy", the natural-political analogue to theodicy. Via a reading of Kant, it contrasts this political theology of nature with political theology as ordinarily understood, and explores its contemporary expressions in certain discourses of the economy and responses to the coronavirus crisis.

Political theology” is an area of inquiry that aims to unearth the systematic relationships between the great theological and political discourses of modernity. It examines the ways in which many seemingly outdated theological concepts have managed to obtain a new lease of life as they migrated to the newly ascendant domain of politics. This shift – often termed “secularization”, a term whose meaning and value is very much contested in this field – did not take place only within academic disciplines like philosophy, theology, and political science, but also within the everyday language of politics, which remains littered with political-theological concepts. When advocates of Brexit insist that European institutions such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Justice undermine British sovereignty, which ought to remain “unitary” and “indivisible”, they are implicitly referring to the paradigm of God’s inviolable rule over his earthly kingdom. Or, when “originalist” jurists interpret the constitution of the United States according to a hypostatized original intention of its authors, they tacitly rely on a tradition of reading supposedly timeless sacred texts, with “founders” usurping the place of the divine. Or, when politicians try to blame the public for the devastation of the pandemic – say, by pointing to supposedly irresponsible people using public transport or attending demonstrations – they unwittingly repeat the old free will argument that tries to absolve God of responsibility for any suffering that takes place on his watch by shifting culpability away from the ruler onto the conduct of individual human actors. Nor is it only conservatives or nationalists whose terms show their discourse to be part of this heritage. In the popular revolutionary tradition, it is not the king or the prince who receives the properties that had been previously ascribed to God, but the people. Evidence for this can be found not only in famous texts as in Rousseau’s foundational claim that the general will can never err, but also in popular consciousness, as in the classic revolutionary song “¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!” (“The people, united, will never be defeated!”). To be sure, this refrain is in part a performative one, attempting to bring into being the popular unity it announces through the very act of declaring it so in the “clamor of a thousand fighting voices”. But it should also be understood as a *metaphysical* claim, one which evinces a genuine belief in the invincibility of a people so united.

The focus of this discourse has generally been the transfer of theological concepts to the discourse of the nation-state, which has often functioned as the earthly stand-in for God within our allegedly secular modernity. My focus here will instead be on the concept of “nature”. Of course,

various conceptions of “nature” show up prominently within standard political-theological discourses through such ideas as the “state of nature”, theories of human nature, and the opposition between nature and freedom. But I would like to examine a slightly different aspect of this process that has not been so thoroughly explored: a certain tendency to transfer what were formerly taken to be qualities of God not to the monarch, the people, or any other political entity, but rather to “nature” itself, which is then understood on the model of sovereignty. By transferring Godly attributes in this way, nature is implicitly “divinized”, in the same way that modern political thought divinizes either the king in the case of conservative traditions, or the people, in the case of populist or revolutionary traditions. Whenever one hears it said that the coronavirus is a justified form of revenge against human beings for our many sins against it, one is in the presence of a political theology of nature, which treats “nature” as if it were what early modern philosophy and theology had once thought God to be.

◀◀ **It would be no exaggeration to say that for Kant, historical progress is the root of all evil.**

This is a huge topic but as ever, the devil is in the details.

Taking inspiration from certain genealogical traditions, I believe that large epochal questions like this one are best served by paying close attention to a small number of texts which lay out a paradigm for the wider logics one is interested in exploring.

In a short text like this I cannot prove, of course, that this process of transferring divine attributes to “nature” is a widespread phenomenon in modern thought. I can prove, however, that it takes place in the case of a singular author – Immanuel Kant – and I can also prove that the peculiar logic I will extract from his texts has an afterlife in our contemporary politics. As is so often the case, Kant’s extraordinary rigor leads him to state more openly than many others some of the strange and surprising consequences of core philosophical concepts, which makes his writings a perpetually useful resource for those seeking to grasp the dark secrets of political modernity. To understand these connections, I will stage a reading of the essay on “radical evil” from his late great philosophical-theological book *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.⁽¹⁾ I am interested specifically in the nexus between nature and history, between the merely anthropological and the properly moral, which we will see is mediated by a notion of “radical evil” that is Kant’s version of the theological idea of “original sin”.

It is often pointed out that when Kant says that evil is “radical”, he does not mean to say that it is particularly extreme, or of a great magnitude; rather, it is radical in the etymological sense of lying within the “roots” of the “crooked timber” of humanity. Each one of us has an inborn propensity to radical evil which “cannot be extirpated”, because it is “woven into human nature” (6:30). And indeed, he repeats a number of times the claim that when he speaks about “radical evil”, he is referring

not to individual moral actors, but to the human species taken as a whole. We can already see, then, that the question of radical evil involves an intertwining of who we are and what we do, of questions of nature and anthropology on one side, and of ethics and morals on the other. If one reads this essay carefully in light of Kant's writings on natural history and physical geography, it quickly becomes apparent that they have a great many concepts in common such as its leading notion of "predisposition" [*Anlage*], which is originally a natural-historical term in Kant. It is certainly true that he is interested in the question of how the radical evil of our species is expressed in individual human beings, and to that extent this essay has a lot to say about morality. However, it is also clear that he is interested in natural-anthropological questions about what human beings are like and how they fit into the overarching scheme of nature, and it is this side of his thought that most interests me here.

Where does this radical evil come from? Why should humanity be cursed with a "propensity to evil" in the first place? Wouldn't it have been better for us to be created without what he evocatively calls the "foul stain of our species"? There is a certain tradition in philosophy which says that, while the immense evil perpetrated by human beings is regrettable, it is nonetheless justified, because in order to fully eliminate the possibility of evil conduct, one would have to eliminate the possibility of *good* conduct as well. Evil is evil, it is true; but good is also good, and there is no way one can have the latter without the former. Human freedom would not be freedom *in the full sense* if it did not include the chance or the risk that it might be used for evil. Importantly, however, Kant is saying something quite different here. What he calls the human "predisposition to good" *does not depend on* its "propensity to evil" and could exist perfectly well on its own. In fact, it will turn out to be important for him to make the good "necessary" and evil merely "contingent", because he wants to keep open the space for one individual – Jesus Christ – whom he can say was not afflicted by evil at all. It is all the more puzzling, then, why we were created so "crooked", when things emphatically could have been otherwise.

Because these questions are about *nature* rather than about the ethical conduct of individual human actors, we must make sure to adopt the appropriate perspective when we answer them. If we remove ourselves from the standpoint of individual humans and their actions and instead begin to consider humanity as a whole, Kant thinks, we can begin to divine some wider tendencies in our seemingly erratic behavior. When you look to human history, what you see is not a random chaos of events that are all disconnected from one another, but something that actually follows certain regularities and perhaps even laws. The role of the historian is to understand the wider tendencies that govern human behavior when they are considered in aggregate, whether or not the individuals involved are aware of them or not. When we do this, Kant thinks, what we see is a sorry spectacle indeed. There are so many "woeful examples" of terrible human conduct that he doesn't even need to bother giving a formal proof of his claim that our species is radically evil; history

makes it so obvious that it should go without saying. Kant goes on to make some disparaging and characteristically racist remarks about so-called “savage” people; but the strong influence of Rousseau leads him to immediately add that so-called “cultured” people are even worse, having vices he describes as genuinely “diabolical”. One might think, then, that things are not looking so good for the idea that nature has teleologically pre-arranged everything to ensure the best possible outcome, especially if that highest outcome involves a community of human beings acting in a moral way. Nature could perfectly well have created human beings without evil, and yet here we are, up to our necks in it. Why?

In an influential interpretation which I rely on here, Sharon Anderson-Gold has connected this historical-anthropological aspect of Kant’s account of evil to his infamous concept of “unsocial sociability”.⁽²⁾ Kant describes this concept in the following way: “the means which nature employs to bring about the development of innate predispositions [*Anlagen*] is that of *antagonism within society* [...] by antagonism, I mean in this context the *unsocial sociability* of men, that is, their tendency to come together in society, coupled, however, with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society apart” (8:20).⁽³⁾ In other words, nature *deliberately implants in us* a tendency to certain “antisocial” vices – jealousy, competitiveness, envy, greed – because this is the best way to bring about the development of our capacities as a species. We most *bring about* the true ends of nature at the very moments where you might have mistakenly thought that we were most strongly *violating* them, namely in vice and immorality. Of course, these human traits always risk tearing apart the very social fabric they were designed to hold together, but even social breakdown can be part of nature’s overall plan: revolution, conquest, war – all things which seem to genuinely horrify a liberal thinker like Kant – do serve a “higher” purpose in the long run by driving states to form a supra-national federation of peoples that he thinks is the only way to bring about the vaunted goal of perpetual peace. Where human activity seems to be at its *most* disorderly and un-teleological – for example, when states wage war on one another for no reason other than a sheer lust for power – it is actually at its *most* “progressive”, from the point of view of the development of human capacities. So, Kant writes: “nature should thus be *thanked* for fostering social incompatibility, enviously competitive vanity, and insatiable desires for possession or even power. [...] Man wishes concord, but nature, knowing better what is good for his species, wishes discord.”

Kant justifies this bewilderingly paradoxical idea through an analogy drawn from the natural world: “in the same way, trees in a forest, by seeking to deprive each other of air and sunlight, compel each other to find them by upward growth, so that they grow beautiful and straight – whereas those which put out branches at will, in freedom and in isolation from others, grow stunted, bent and twisted. All the culture and art which adorn mankind and the finest social order man creates are fruits of his *unsociability*.” (8:21-22) Notice how incessantly *negative* this idea is. Kant is not saying that trees, searching for air and sunlight, are able to do

so even more effectively when they are spurred on by a bit of competition. He is saying, instead, that *the attempt to deprive the others of light* is what originally drives their growth; this is more fundamental than any merely “selfish” desire or *conatus* to gather resources for themselves (trees and other plants apparently have their own form of “unsocial sociability”). When he moves back to humans, the claim is again an extraordinarily strong one. Kant is not saying merely that apparently “negative” human traits often bring unexpected benefits to humanity, when understood in its historical totality. I have just cited him making the much more forceful claim that *all art and culture* derive from these traits, as well as our “finest” social orders. History is driven not by human beings making good, positive moral choices, but more fundamentally by the development of our capacities that is itself best served by what look like the worst and most immoral of human characteristics. The idea that human beings constantly do terrible things to one another is no criticism of the idea that nature arranged everything for the best, with the human being’s moral self-legislation at the very pinnacle. On the contrary, humanity’s propensity to evil is in fact *the very best proof of it*; a much better proof of the purposive arrangement of nature than, for example, if nature had spared us the trouble by directly creating us as good in the first place.

If this all sounds obscurely familiar, then it should: this is still a version of the typical Enlightenment account of historical progress. It has a weird Kantian twist, to be sure, but it is not so far from other unfortunately influential ideas, such as the claim that vices like self-interest and even greed are beneficial to economic development (some, like Margaret Thatcher, even went so far as to claim that these are actually positive moral virtues which should be cultivated). But I would like to draw attention to another place where we have seen this argument before. Kant’s justification of a notion of progress in history exactly follows the logic of *theodicy*, that is, the philosophical project of justifying God’s goodness in the face of the evil that exists in the world. The strategy of Kant’s argument is in fact very classical: he tries to explain all the apparently “bad” things that exist in human history in such a way that they are seen to be necessary from a wider perspective, and thereby to justify them in terms of the final end that they will eventually bring about. He does not deny the existence of “evil” – on the contrary, he develops a radical theory of it – but he does claim that it nonetheless remains part of Nature’s master plan. This is not a theory of evil in which evil is *opposed* to progress; on the contrary, evil is the primary *means* of progress. The self-appointed heirs of the Enlightenment who defend contemporary forms of optimism by pointing to things like an alleged fall in rates of global violence, hunger and poverty – often based on very dubious statistics, I might add – do not realise that, according to one of their heroes, such things would not be evidence of progress but of *stagnation*, a slowdown in the development of the innate human capacities that are the most fundamental motor of history.

Interestingly, though, it isn't *God* whose plan Kant has to defend in this way, but *nature*. For another thing the late Kant is famous for is for having *criticized* all theodicies in his essay "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Attempts at Theodicy". (4) It is already perfectly obvious from the title, but the main point of this essay is to criticize not just one text, but the philosophical project of theodicy as such on the grounds that it cannot attain "insight into the necessary *limitation of what we may presume* with respect of that which is too high for us." Theodicies have posited knowledge about the intentions of God and about the content of his higher plan for the world, a knowledge which clearly oversteps the bounds of what human beings can legitimately claim to know through the use of our own reason. But the same problem does not arise for an attempted justification of nature: we *can* divine her purposes by looking to trends in human history, which reveal her intentions to us, so long as we know how to look. The historian, guided by the philosopher, can see the wider laws governing human conduct, even if they remain generally invisible to the historical actors themselves. What we see in Kant is therefore not a *theodicy*, a justification of the goodness of God in the face of the evils in the world, but what I would call a *physiodicy* – a justification of nature that follows the very same logic.

I'd also like to register exactly what it is that is being justified here. Kant is not merely talking about a particular evil action or individual. It's not that, say, the violence of the revolution will eventually be justified by the positive social change it promises to bring about. Rather, what is being justified here is the existence of evil "as such", the radical evil of human nature which is at the root of *anything at all* that can be called evil in the proper sense of the term. Without this prior "radical evil of human nature", human beings would be either innocent or wholly good ("angels" are his preferred image), and no evil deeds would be possible in the first place. The claim, then, is a rather unsettling one: Kant is saying that it is *better*, all things considered, for human nature to be radically evil than it would have been for us to have been created good. Why? Because evil proves to be much more effective at bringing about social progress and the development of our innate capacities than does the good. Critics of the Enlightenment programme have long suspected that the notion of "progress" is secretly about justifying destructive, exploitative behavior; in these texts, it is spelled out in black and white.



Rather than being the repository of an invincible goodness, "the people" are for Kant merely the dupes of nature, puppets in a shadow-play whose unthinking stupidity and destructive immorality is the originary cause of all political and historical change.

It would be no exaggeration to say that for Kant, historical progress is the root of all evil. This also leads him to the very counter-intuitive view that morality and progress in history lead in opposite directions. What's good in terms of individual morality is bad for historical progress, and what's good for historical progress is bad from the perspective of individual morality. Of course, Kant's "official" position is that the two must be compatible, and he even devoted a lengthy text to an attempt to prove this. (5) But from the arguments I've outlined above it's clear that they are sometimes opposing tendencies at work: though his ethics obviously implores us to be moral, from the perspective of his politics and philosophy of history he must secretly want human beings *not* to do good, since this would hold back the development of our capacities, and thereby slow down historical progress. Kant's ethics is carried out, as it were, with his fingers crossed behind his back. Were everyone to actually *follow* this ethics, we would never bring about the glorious "kingdom of ends" that is supposed to be the *goal* of that ethics.

I said at the beginning that the inclusion of "nature" as a key term has decisive consequences for the content of a political theology. The standard political-theological move of transferring positive features like sovereignty from God to the people leads to a politics where humanity takes centre stage in explaining the movement of history. One can take the "conservative" position that this action comes from "great men" who occupy the position of sovereign or one can take the "populist" position that it comes from a collective of people, whether they are understood as a *demos*, a class, or a multitude; in all cases, *human action* is the decisive thing. This has proven to be a popular model, and one can well understand why: it allows politics to take over the grand, cosmological role formerly played by religion. Instead of having to buy into a theological story about the coming of a Messiah, say, or dubious prophecies of what is to come, one can tell a purely political story, whether it be a Hegelian philosophy of history that justifies a certain model of the bourgeois state or a Marxism which predicts the coming of a communist *eschaton*. By contrast, in Kant's *physiocracy*, in his political theology of nature, human politics and human action in general are the stage of *nothing but evil*. Inasmuch as politics and human history take steps in the direction of their final goal, this is not because human beings were consciously pursuing the good, but because nature secretly "pulled the strings", using our self-destructive, immoral behaviour as means to bring about her own hidden ends. On this model, nature takes over all agency that would have otherwise been ascribed to God in the theological context, or to human actors in the traditional political-theological context. Rather than being the repository of an invincible goodness, "the people" are for Kant merely the dupes of nature, puppets in a shadow-play whose unthinking stupidity and destructive immorality is the originary cause of all political and historical change.

This model obviously seems much less attractive than the alternative: not only does it come with dubious consequences which seem at odds with Kant's own "official" political commitments, it also seems to rely on a

certain model of nature that is outdated, and no longer convincing to many of us. I do not wish to contest this assessment – I certainly hope this article has not been taken as an apology for Kant! But I do want to suggest that this other kind of political theology is a *real tendency* in Enlightenment thought, and indeed remains with us, even if it is rarely stated as openly as in these late essays of Kant's. One does sometimes come across a direct enunciation of this view in certain ecological discourses, as in the claim I mentioned above that the novel coronavirus should be understood as nature-as-an-agent defending itself against human predation. But the primary place this logic has survived, even flourished, is in discourses of the *economy*. Instead of taking all legitimacy to flow from our increasingly discredited sovereign leaders, or indeed our increasingly fractured peoples, abstractions like “the market” and “the economy” have taken up this justificatory function in their place. In this context, we find arguments more similar to this Kantian political theology of nature or physiodicy than to the traditional political theodicies. I will close this article by briefly outlining how.

A great deal of mainstream political discourse assumes a benign intent behind a certain abstraction called “the economy”, which is often spoken of as if it were an agent having thoughts, feelings, and desires of its own. We learn that the markets are “unhappy” with the rise of certain political movements, that it “favors” certain candidates regimes, and we seem to never stop hearing about the personal “sacrifices” we must all make to appease it in its boundless desire for infinite growth. If it has effects which appear to us to be damaging, even “evil”, this can only be because we do not have access to the proper perspective; if we did, we would see that it is merely a form of “creative destruction” that is actually for the best in the long run. Even if massive errors are made (say the collapse of the banking sector), this is no evidence against the hypothesis that the market secretly arranges everything for the best, because this too can be explained away as part of the overall development of economic forces. When our investor-angels err in their judgment, thereby violating the fundamental law of capitalist development that money should always beget more money, this is just the market “correcting” itself, punishing and condemning to financial hell those whose judgment has gone astray. In “economistic” models of political change, major historic shifts are thought to take place *not* through the concerted action of political agents, as in the standard political-theological tradition of a Rousseau, but through “higher” anonymous processes secretly acting through us. Just as in the Kantian view analysed above, the true causes of these shifts come not from the sublime heights of the nobility of human nature, but from its grubby, dark corners: greed, self-interest, the desire for power. Inasmuch as one is a “good person”, one is not an effective economic agent, and inasmuch as one is an effective economic agent, this is because one has been elected as a vessel for the dictates of “the market”, which certainly moves in mysterious ways.

In the contemporary political arena, greed and self-interest are not the only negative human traits fueling our supposed social “progress”. It is

well-known that social media companies thrive much better on “negative” affects such as outrage and shame than they do on “positive” ones like trust or solidarity. Amazon, Google and Facebook increasingly function through the secret manipulation of human emotions, promoting some and disincentivising others, in what amounts to a weaponizing of human nature to carry out their own ends, whatever the consequences for actual human beings. Cat videos do not contribute to “progress” to the same extent as white supremacist propaganda, thus, they are demoted by the algorithms, which, seen in this perspective, are actually furthering the development of human capacities even as they disseminate violent hatred. Once again, this is not merely an issue of individual moral conduct; when people speak of an “age of trolling”, this is not about chastising individual basement-dwelling teenagers, but about characterising a certain politics of our time, which is increasingly defined by affects and behaviors directed by diffuse forces beyond our control, but which are in a profound sense rooted in who we are, even if we don’t know it ourselves. The fact that this is carried out primarily via algorithms rather than by conscious human intervention only makes the situation closer to the Kantian paradigm I have been describing. For all that he describes nature in teleological terms, it is essential to Kant’s account that nature *not* be understood as an agent, a world-soul, a consciousness or anything like that (his key formula is “purposiveness *without purpose*”). This all takes place without us knowing anything about it; one would completely misunderstand the situation if one took it to be primarily a question of *knowledge*.

I would also argue that the rather unusual *opposition* between politics and morality we see in Kant is operative in the contemporary political arena. Let us take the way that many supposedly “advanced” economies have responded to the coronavirus pandemic as an example. In many such countries the public is constantly bombarded with messages that are obviously contradictory: on the one hand, the authorities continually remind us that individually it is very important that we take care not to aid the spread of the virus by wearing masks, maintaining social distance and so on; if one does not do so, this is counted as a personal moral failing for which one can and should be publicly named and shamed. And yet at the very same time, we are also strongly encouraged to “go back to work” wherever possible, to go shopping to revive the shuttering malls, to attend bars, pubs and restaurants again, to visit the tourist hot spots. In some cases, workers are being encouraged to go back into offices – some of the worst locations for viral spread – even when it is perfectly clear that their work could take place remotely. Personal morality suggests one thing, the “progress” of the social body as a whole, at least as our ignominious leaders understand it, suggests the opposite. The strange contradictions I have explored through these late essays of Kant do not live only in the texts of a long-dead thinker but remain an objective part of our increasingly weird contemporary reality.

NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant (1998 [1792]), "Concerning the Indwelling of the Evil Principle Alongside the Good, or, Of the Radical Evil in Human Nature" in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings* ed. and trans. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 45-73.
2. Anderson-Gold, Sharon (2001), *Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*, Albany: SUNY Press
3. Immanuel Kant (1970 [1784]), "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent" in *Political Writings* ed. H.S. Reiss trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 41-53.
4. Immanuel Kant (1996 [1791]), "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" in *Religion and Rational Theology* eds. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, trans. George di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 24-37.
5. See the first appendix to his "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch". For a brilliant reading of the auto-deconstructive unraveling of this text, whose carefully crafted distinctions seem to run away from Kant just as quickly as he proposes them, see Bennington, Geoffrey (2011), "Kant's Open Secret", *Theory, Culture & Society* 28(7-8), 26-40.