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CHAPTER 13

Kant's Philosophy of History as Stoic Consolation

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> During stressful times when I was small . . . I'd lie in bed before I fell asleep and count in my head . . . the different layers between me and the centre of the Earth: crust, upper mantle, lower mantle, outer core, inner core. Then I'd think upwards in expanding rings of thinning air: troposphere, stratosphere, mesosphere, thermosphere, exosphere. A few miles beneath me was molten rock, a few miles above limitless dust and vacancy, and there I'd lie with the warm blanket of the troposphere over me and a red cotton duvet cover too . . . and downstairs the sound of my mother busy at her typewriter.
>
> This evening ritual wasn't a test of how much I could keep in my mind at once, or of how far I could send my imagination. It had something of the power of incantation.. . . No matter how tightly the day's bad things had gripped me, there was so much up there above me, so much below, so many places . . . that were implacable, unreachable, entirely uninterested in human affairs. Listing them one by one built imaginative sanctuary between walls of unknowing knowns.. . . I needed to know where I was. It was a way of bringing me home.
>
> (Macdonald 2020:137–8)

13.1 Introduction

In his essay *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*[1] and in other writings, Kant famously proposes that human history is progressive, building political order from the formation of individual states toward perpetual peace among a cosmopolitan federation of states. At least since Pauline Kleingeld's defining work (1995 and 2001), scholars have recognized that Kant's aims in these discussions are not solely theoretical, but also practical: not just to describe, explain, or make predictions about

[1] Hereafter abbreviated *Idee*, as noted in the Bibliography of this book.

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history, but also to provide a view of it that supports moral action. In this essay, I propose a new interpretive possibility concerning Kant's history writings (particularly *Idee*), and, specifically, what sort of support for moral action they might aim to furnish. Prompted by Kant's claim that his idea of history opens a "consoling prospect [*tröstende Aussicht*] into the future" (*Idee* 8:30),[2] I consider Kant's philosophy of history as a form of Stoic consolation writing, such as, paradigmatically, Seneca's "Consolations" to Marcia, Helvia, and Polybius. Consolations also have a practical aim: to relieve the reader of grief. And, though Kant's discussions of history lack the personal address of Seneca's consolations, I will suggest that his view can likewise be understood to distance his readers from sorrow, deploying similar consolatory strategies to those deployed by Seneca (and Macdonald). Thereby Kant's discussion of history can be understood to support moral action, but differently than is often thought: neither directly encouraging nor articulating a necessary presupposition of moral action, it would rather operate as therapy, relieving the reader of entangling grief concerning historical events out of her control, freeing her to engage in effective action in her own sphere. This interpretation offers a novel perspective on Kant's aims in his philosophy of history, and (I will suggest) one that can account better for some aspects of his discussions than do some dominant interpretative proposals. I close by noting several differences between Seneca's and Kant's consolatory strategies, reflecting not only their metaphysical disagreements, but also Kant's more demanding (perhaps overly demanding) conception of the requirements of consolation.

13.2 An Initial Note: Different Forms of Practical Import

Kant's claims in the philosophy of history are, in the first instance, theoretical claims concerning nature and the human situation within it, describing a trajectory of past events brought about by human behavior and offering predictions about what might happen in the future.[3] But

[2] The present essay in effect is a reading of the entire passage – too lengthy to quote in full, running from the top of 8:30 to the end of the paragraph – in which Kant makes this comment. All quoted passages will be from Kant (2007).

[3] In Zuckert (2021), I argue that Kant's *Aufklärung* and *SF* progress essays approach history differently to Kant's dominant approach in *Idee*, *KU* §§82–84, *TP* Section 3, and *ZeF*. (*MAM*, an explicitly fictional narrative, is an outlier, though thematically closer to the second group.) In the present essay, I focus on *Idee*, drawing only glancingly upon the other treatments, and leaving aside the first two entirely.

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these discussions also have practical import.[4] Most obviously, Kant has a moral-political *standard* for what constitutes historical *progress* – as opposed to historical change or development (in a value-neutral or even, as in Rousseau, pejorative sense). For Kant, history is progressive not insofar as human beings gain more knowledge, technology, social complexity, or artistic prowess (etc.), but insofar as it produces politically rightful outcomes (states and then the federation thereof) and perhaps, consequently, moral enlightenment (see *Idee* 8:21 and 28).[5]

More centrally for my concerns, Kant also seems to understand his views concerning history *themselves* to have practical import, in two senses – which I shall term "practical effects" and "practical status." That is, first, Kant claims that the philosophical articulation of his "idea" concerning history will help to *bring about* the good outcome therein envisioned (*Idee* 8:29): his own philosophy of history is supposed to have good practical effects. Second, and consequently, Kant sometimes appears to take his claims concerning history to be justified – or otherwise recommended – *because of* those practical effects. Notably, in the passage that prompts the present chapter, he writes that the "guiding thread" he proposes for thinking about history not only can function as "explanation" of past history or as "soothsaying about future changes" (prediction) but also "open[s] a consoling prospect into the future" (*Idee* 8:30). The "justification of nature" proffered in such consolation, Kant adds, "is no unimportant motive for choosing a particular viewpoint for considering the world" (*Idee* 8:30). Kant thus suggests that his proposed view of history is to be endorsed ("chosen") *because* it has practical effects: promoting hope for the future or alleviating disgust and despair at human history (*Idee* 8:30). This I call the "practical status" of Kant's claims. Again, those claims are themselves theoretical or cognitive, rather than practical: they are descriptive, not prescriptive claims; they characterize what history is or will be like, not what one should do. From a theoretical point of view, the claims are also permissible, in the sense that they are supported by some evidence and not ruled out as false.[6] Yet Kant suggests that they are ultimately proposed or endorsed not primarily for theoretical purposes (of knowing about history) or for theoretical

[4] See Kleingeld (2001) on the combined theoretical and practical aims of Kant's philosophy of history.
[5] On difficulties facing Kant's claims concerning moral progress, see Kleingeld (1999). Kant's standards resemble Stoic views – cosmopolitanism and a stringent rationalist conception of virtue – but these points of intersection will not be discussed here.
[6] As argued in Kleingeld (2001) and Zuckert (2021).

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reasons (definitive evidence), but for practical reasons, because of their practical effects.[7]

Scholars propose different practical effects that Kant's philosophical discussions of history might have, including encouragement of politicians to amend their practice (Kellner 2022) or to rule morally (Guyer 2000: chapter 12), or encouragement of all human beings to contribute to the politically progressive movement of history (Bittner 2009 and Lloyd 2009). The prevailing view, however, takes Kant's philosophy of history to have practical effects and status in a way parallel to that of the postulates of practical reason. For, on Kant's view, the postulates are, similarly, descriptive claims or beliefs about things (namely, that God exists and that the soul is immortal) endorsed for practical reasons.[8] On this view, Kant's line of thinking in his philosophy of history runs roughly as follows: one cannot pursue moral ends if one believes that they are not achievable; one will instead fall into paralyzing moral despair. History gives reason to doubt that those ends are achievable. Thus, to avoid incapacitating moral despair, one needs a view of history that, while accurate to the facts, can allay such doubts, and Kant aims to provide such a view. The practical effect of Kant's account of history is, then, to allay despair – and this provides a reason to "choose" the "viewpoint" he proposes, as a presupposition for active moral commitment.

These proposals all seem interpretively plausible.[9] Kant's "Toward Perpetual Peace" (*ZeF*), which includes an account of history, appears to be directed to persuade rulers to promote peace. Kant explicitly states that his view of history is meant to prevent despair (*Idee* 8:30), and that moral agents do and must presuppose that their aspired-to ends are realizable, and, specifically, that history can progress (*TP* 8:309–10). Nor are these interpretive proposals in competition, as it seems likely that Kant has several rhetorical-practical aims in these "popular," politically engaged works concerning history.[10]

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[7] There has been considerable scholarly debate about whether or how practical reasons could provide decisive reason to endorse a theoretical claim, usually with respect to Kant's view of the postulates (see, e.g., Wood 1960).

[8] *KpV* (5:122-148); see, e.g., Kleingeld (2001) and Lindstedt (1999).

[9] Bittner's suggestion (2009:236, 239–41) that Kant aims to persuade readers to act morally, in order to be in concert with the trajectory of history, is an exception: Kant's essays seem to be addressed to (already) morally committed agents (they are the ones despairing about history); and, for Kant, such reasons for action would not render the agent's actions moral, properly speaking.

[10] To anticipate, one might see Seneca's consolations as engaged, similarly, in a multi-audience rhetorical-argumentative project: consoling grieving individuals, but also (through publication) promoting political positions to both populace and politicians (see Wilson 2013:114).

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Yet there are elements of Kant's treatments of history, particularly in *Idee*, that are not accounted for, and are even in tension with them. It has been objected – against proposals that the history writings are meant to encourage moral action, or support it in the manner of a postulate – that the view Kant proffers may disempower, rather than promote, moral agency: if one is persuaded that the march of history will bring about one's aims, then it is unclear why one should exert oneself.[11] Kant's personification of nature as agent of history especially connotes such a superfluity of individual moral action (see *Idee* 8:18, 21, 24). So too, more specifically, his apparent suggestion that the moving human-natural force of history is unsociable sociability, an amoral, if not immoral, human drive (*Idee* 8:20–1): this proposal implies that individuals' *moral* actions are largely irrelevant to historical change.[12] Most generally, one may note the spectatorial stance toward history his treatment both presupposes and inculcates in the reader. Kant narrates (sketchily) a long historical trajectory, from early prehistoric stages of making tools or clothes for survival to an indefinitely far-off future, after the establishment of perpetual peace (*Idee* 8:19–20 and 26, respectively). It is difficult for individuals to see how their actions could make a difference to that wide sweep of events. (Or, correlatively, to see how beliefs about that wide sweep could be practically necessary presuppositions concerning the realizability of agents' own small, individual ends of action – except in the case of great rulers.) Consonantly, Kant addresses the reader not as agent, but as spectator, albeit a morally concerned one, in referring to history as the "great stage of the world" (*Idee* 8:17), "tragedy" or "farce" (*TP* 8:308).

I shall suggest that these very elements in Kant's history writings can be understood, rather, as part of consolatory project, akin to that of Seneca's consolations.[13] Accordingly, I turn now to discuss Seneca's consolatory

[11] E.g., Krasnoff (1994). This problem may be less pressing for Kant on Guyer's construal (2000: chapter 12), according to which Kant aims to support a weaker claim: that nature (including human nature) is *compatible* with the realization of moral ends (not that such ends *will* be realized).

[12] This proposed cynical interpretation of human historical action may also discourage moral agency for another reason: Kant argues that one ought to interpret others' actions and intentions charitably (where possible) because lingering on others' potential iniquity can "dull" one's "moral feeling" (MS 6:466; see also Church 2018).

[13] This is meant as an interpretive proposal, not a claim of historical influence. (Though there is evidence that Kant knew Seneca's works [see Merritt 2021b], which may have included the consolations.) Bittner is the only scholar of whom I am aware who takes up Kant's reference to consolation (2009:233, 244–6); he argues that the need for consolation arises from Kant's (unjustified, Bittner takes it) adoption of Christian dogma concerning original sin. Contra Bittner, ancient (including Stoic) practice of consolation shows there is need for consolation without Christianity; nor does any particular doctrine seem required to find the human historical

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argumentative strategies, before exploring how Kant's philosophy of history could be taken to echo them.

13.3 Seneca's Consolations

Consolation is a long-lasting literary genre in classical antiquity, practiced by Roman writers and then adapted by early Christian and Islamic writers, such as Boethius. Though the genre is vaguely defined, for present purposes consolations can be understood as writings addressed to those grieving a loss, commonly a bereavement, sometimes other harms,[14] aiming to help them come to terms with that harm and recover from grief.[15] Consolation was not an exclusively Stoic form, but Seneca is one of its canonical practitioners, and Stoic themes, for example, of accepting fate, are obviously relevant to its subject matter and aims.[16] Similarly, the Stoic commitment to "philosophy as a way of life" or as "therapy" (well-known descriptions from Hadot 1995 and Nussbaum 2009, respectively) is consonant with the project of consolation, that is, the use of argumentative strategies to transform one's viewpoint, thereby to calm one's emotions, and so to live a better – more self-controlled, more rational, happier – life.

As practiced by Seneca, consolations are elaborate letters of condolence (then published): they are addressed to an individual, concerning a specific loss (Marcia's son and Polybius' brother died; Helvia's son – Seneca himself – was exiled). They are filled with examples of other individuals who have suffered similar losses, whose behavior is to be emulated or avoided.[17] They are filled, too, with explicit advice, even moral scolding: to live up to the addressee's reputation for upright behavior (*Marcia* 3.3), to

record distressing. As I will discuss, however, some aspects of Kant's account may reflect Christian(-like) demands concerning the form consolation must take.

[14] See Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.81; I cite throughout from the translations in the edition of Graver (2002).

[15] See Scourfield (2013): while the genre is explicitly recognized in the tradition, it is understood capaciously.

[16] See *Marcia* 2.1, where Seneca suggests that he is altering the standard form. See also Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.52–71, for a lengthy presentation of Stoic consolatory arguments. Cicero largely endorses these (by contrast to Epicurean arguments) and reports that he used them in his own self-consolation (no longer extant). The edition of Seneca's consolations from which I cite is Seneca (2014).

[17] On Olberding's account (2005), Seneca uses these examples to promote a (non-typically Stoic) response to loss: not a calm indifference to external goods, but a heroic bravery in facing up to unassailable fortune (a position that has echoes more in Kant's account of the dynamic sublime than in his treatments of history). Wilson adds that the practice of consolation, in which one might come to share another's grief, is in tension with the Stoic emphasis upon maintaining one's equanimity (2013:109, 112). I cannot consider Seneca's perhaps atypical relation to Stoicism here, however.

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meet social expectations in performing duties and putting aside grief (*Marcia* 4.3–4), to live as the dead person would have desired one to live (*Polybius* 5.1), to remember the lost one as valuable and so with happiness instead of sorrow (*Marcia* 5.3–4), and the like.

Seneca's consolations are, then, both personalized and explicitly prescriptive: they are aimed to persuade the individual reader (in the first instance the addressee, by extension other individuals undergoing similar suffering) into performing reasonably specific actions. In these ways, the consolations are unlike Kant's writings in the philosophy of history;[18] accordingly, given the purpose of this essay, I set these aspects of Seneca's writings aside. His consolations also, however, include argumentative and rhetorical strategies more like Kant's history writings, namely, theoretical claims aimed to bring about practical effects. Here I have in mind observations that are sometimes called "contextualizing"[19] (or "philosophical"[20]), that is, descriptive claims concerning the human condition, which (sometimes implicitly) place the reader's situation within that broader context. Such contextualization takes two forms, which I will term "universalizing" and "cosmic." That is, first: Seneca emphasizes that *all* human beings face death, loss, and pain (e.g., *Marcia* 10.5–11.5). Second, he sketches visions of the whole of nature, as it were encompassing the reader's own position. These are beautiful passages, in which Seneca, like Macdonald in her evening ritual, provides a synopsis of the cosmos – of the universe filled with stars, the sun, moon, and planets on regular paths, thunder and lightning, plains and streams, mountains and woodlands, animals and minerals – and then situates the human world with its sufferings, longings, evils, and death within it (e.g., *Marcia* 18; *Helvia* 6.2–7.10).

Though neither directly prescriptive nor exhortative, these claims are meant to have practical effects: not to encourage specific action, but to alleviate the addressee's suffering and thereby (indirectly) to support her moral action. Seneca refers to his consolations as medical "treatment" or "remedy" (*Marcia* 1.8; *Helvia* 1.2, 3.1; *Polybius* 7.1, 8.1) and it seems appropriate to understand these strategies as curative or restorative.[21] That is, these ways of seeing things will, Seneca hopes, *free* the addressee

[18] As noted above, *ZeF* does contain extensive political prescription, though the discussion of history within it is not prescriptive.

[19] Olberding (2005). [20] Scourfield (2013:19 and n. 136).

[21] See Nussbaum (2009:336–41). I do not discern in Seneca's consolations the depth psychotherapy (revealing an individual's hidden beliefs, desires, or pathologies) described by Nussbaum (2009:40), however.

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(somewhat) from the suffering and paralysis of grief, thereby ridding the agent of an impediment to action.[22] To be clear, Seneca does not aim to eliminate all grief; he acknowledges the unavoidability of suffering in response to loss (*Marcia* 7.1; *Polybius* 18.5).[23] Such suffering should not be indefinitely extended, however: when habitual or "hardened," Seneca claims, it becomes a "sad, wretched, self-destructive fault" (*Marcia* 1.7–8; see also *Helvia* 16.1). Habitual grief worsens the grieving person's life, making happiness impossible. It also impedes her fulfillment of moral obligations, by distracting from them and by paralyzing the mourner in static brooding over what is lost.[24] Thus it is both in the mourning person's interest and morally good to mitigate grief, so that she may return to an active, engaged life.

I now pause to discuss how Seneca's contextualizing strategies work such effects. Like other Stoic argumentative strategies for calming the emotions, these strategies present descriptive claims and so aim to change the mourner's emotional state through transforming her cognitive awareness; thus they presuppose that emotions are (at least in part) based upon beliefs or responsive to one's way of viewing the world, of seeing certain objects as salient or imbued with evaluative tone.[25] Unlike other Stoic argumentative strategies for calming the emotions, however, these strategies do not call into question a belief that underlies grief, as false or ill-founded: as just noted, Seneca acknowledges grief as unavoidable and

[22] Seneca emphatically uses language of liberation in his cosmic contextualizations (*Helvia* 11.6–7, 20.1–2). I thus would differentiate more than does Nussbaum between the removal of disease (restoring one to "neutral," freeing one from burdens) and positive inculcation of a good way of life.

[23] As Seneca points out in the second cited passage, his refusal to condemn such emotional responses outright distances him from a stricter Stoic position that one ought not grieve at all. Seneca takes that position to be "inhuman" (*Marcia* 4.1; see also Olberding 2005). He takes a harder line at *Prov.* 4.5, however.

[24] These points restate in more abstract terms Seneca's comments about Octavia's grief (*Marcia*, 2.3–2.5, 3.3; see also 16.6–8). Seneca can be understood here to pursue a weakened form of what Graver calls a "Chrysippean" approach to consolation (2007:197), i.e., that of arguing that an emotional response is not appropriate to the situation (rather than that the situation is in fact not bad). Seneca argues that only the *prolonged* emotional response is inappropriate; likewise (to anticipate) he uses more indirect argumentative strategies, addressing factors that contribute to prolonging the response (rather than directly criticizing the grieving response itself as inappropriate).

[25] Seneca also suggests, for example, that grief is mitigated by focusing one's attention elsewhere (*Marcia* 8.2), or even deluding oneself (thinking of the dead person as traveling) (*Marcia* 19.1). Because Seneca takes the *habitual* grief on which he focuses to be (in part) voluntary – one chooses to reinforce one's grief by performing rituals or by focusing one's attention on one's loss (*Marcia* 7.2; *Polybius* 4.1) – it might also be remediated by rousing competing desires or making other choices. Perhaps Seneca aims at eliciting such desires and choices in his more directly exhortative strategies; the contextualizing strategies seem more cognitively oriented, however.

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human; correlatively, he does not argue here that grief is ill-founded because the loss is not truly a loss or is not truly bad, not a good reason for suffering.[26] Rather, these strategies put loss "into perspective," as we now say; they are directed to mitigate grief rather than to undermine its reasons or to eliminate it.

Such "putting into perspective" may, I suggest, be understood as involving (at least) three mitigating techniques: (1) adjustment of modifying beliefs, (2) compensation, and (3) disruptive re-identification. First: while contextualizations do not undermine the mourner's belief that she has suffered a loss (which is bad), they may correct her estimation of its importance as towering, all-consuming. When reminded of the universality of suffering, one might recognize that one's loss is not so huge as it appears to one: it is a single loss, among many; one should not think of oneself with "empty pride" (*Polybius* 18.4). (One should not think of oneself as an exception, to use Kant's terms.) Similarly, in line with the Stoic commitment to recognizing and accepting truths, remembering that everyone dies, that all suffer loss, can lead one to recognize that one's own loss is simply a fact of the human condition, an inescapable part of the natural order. One should not add to one's grief, or prolong it, through further, self-inflicted sufferings of complaint against unavoidable fate.[27] Contextualization thus can mitigate or abbreviate grief by undermining what I am calling "modifying" beliefs, that is, not the core belief that one has lost something, but further beliefs about that loss: that one has things especially hard, that such bad things might have been avoided, that one is ill-used, that one's fate is unfair. Thereby, such contextualization also defuses related emotions (self-pity, indignation) that heighten and extend one's grief and resultant paralysis.[28]

Seneca acknowledges, however, that *just* referring to "a mass of wretched people is a cruel consolation": recognizing that there is more suffering does not negate one's own suffering (*Marcia* 12.5).[29] As truer consolation, he then proposes that one can recognize the universal fact of suffering and bear it with composure, thereby demonstrating dignity (*Marcia* 12.5).

[26] Seneca appears to argue so elsewhere; for example, he argues that the dead person does not suffer, so that there is no pain with which the grieving person could appropriately sympathize (*Marcia* 19.5). In "On Providence" (an essay, not a consolation), he implies that a loss is not truly bad, since "external things" are not important (*Prov.* 6.1–2).

[27] So I propose to read the lines of thought at *Marcia* 6.2; *Polybius* 4.1. See also Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.56–60, for further suggestions concerning the function of this consolatory strategy.

[28] *Marcia* 12.4; *Polybius* 4; see also *Ep.* 99. Similarly, Seneca suggests that extreme grief arises because one had the "delusion" that one was invulnerable to ills that plague all humanity (*Marcia* 9.5).

[29] Wilson (2013:103, 106–7) suggests that Seneca is worried about eliciting (immoral) Schadenfreude.

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This proposal exemplifies a second mechanism in Seneca's contextualizations: offering (or reminding one of) compensatory goods. Universalizing contextualization not only offers an opportunity for such composed, dignified response, but also renders the mourner aware of her community with others: we are all vulnerable, together; we can share and sympathize with one another's pain (*Polybius* 12.2). Cosmic contextualization calls the reader's attention to a larger whole: the order of the natural world. The world is ruled by "fixed eternal laws" (*Marcia* 18.2); its gifts and good fortunes are not separable from the ills and pains of life; all is part of a single, law-governed order. Thus, Seneca suggests, on holistic consideration, one would choose this world and this life, accepting its ills as a price one must pay, if one also wishes for the goods it offers (*Marcia* 18.8).[30]

The emphasis upon seeing oneself as part of the natural order – and attending to it – also enacts another indirectly practical effect: what I am calling "disruptive re-identification." By this phrase, I aim to capture the experience Seneca describes and elicits in the cosmic contextualizing passages, where the reader is invited to take up a spectatorial position upon the cosmos, or, in the Platonic terms Seneca deploys, the viewpoint of the disembodied soul rising into the ether, as if looking "down upon" the details of human existence – including her own grief – from afar (*Marcia* 23.2; *Helvia* 11.7). As with Macdonald's narration to herself, Seneca's cosmic passages take the reader in imagination far away from the tightly wound affairs of her ordinary life, allowing for a moment of distance and calm. From this point of view, Seneca writes at the end of a cosmic contextualization,

> All human affairs are brief and transient and occupy a negligible fraction of infinite time. This earth, with its cities and peoples and rivers and its encircling sea, we count as a pinprick in comparison with the universe; our life span occupies a smaller portion than a pinprick if it is compared with all of time, whose duration exceeds that of the world. . . . The only way our life can be long is if we find it sufficient. (*Marcia* 21.1–2)

One might understand such a passage as attempting an adjustment of modifying beliefs (as discussed above): Seneca here calls attention to the fleeting character of human lives, within the flow of eternal time; in that light, one may recognize that a fixed lingering over a comparatively small,

[30] This is a pervasive theme in *Polybius*, e.g., 18.3. In *Ep.* 63, Seneca disapproves of an apparently similar consolatory strategy – that one can take pleasure in one's grief – perhaps because it does not offer pleasures as counterweights to pain, but (contradictorily? immorally?) promotes taking pleasure *in* pain.

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no-longer-present person's life is disproportionate, out of accord with the ever-ongoing order of things (see also *Polybius* 1). But such passages also – I think more dominantly – deploy "disruptive re-identification": Seneca takes his reader outside of herself, disrupting the grip of her grief. He argues that the grieving person prolongs her grief by making present her lost beloved in imagination – and here he offers a different, fascinating, replacement object for the imagination: the beautiful cosmic order.[31] In doing so, he also provides the mourner with a new "identity": he solicits her identification not with her specific, grieving existence, but with the eternal rational order, speaking to her as a rational (and imaginative) soul, calling her to "contemplation of [the soul's] own nature and that of the universe" (*Helvia* 20.1).[32]

This re-identification is also disruptive in that it is itself not a permanent state. In Seneca's treatments, it is a viewpoint, a vision, that disconnects one from a present painful preoccupation, but then fades, allowing a calmer "reentry" into one's life. Once one has regained possession of oneself as a rational soul, one can then recognize one's "home" (as Macdonald puts it, in my epigraph). In Seneca's terms in the passage above, once one recognizes that one's life is fleeting, one also recognizes that one must find – or make – it "sufficient" (see also *Marcia* 10.2). Thus Seneca's cosmic spectator does not remain in the state of contemplation, but enlists this experience in support of action, if (again) indirectly. Its disruption allows one to distance oneself from one's self-destructive brooding by widening one's attention, identifying oneself as a rational soul in contemplation, and then enlisting one's regained connection to reason, to reconnect to one's active life, recognizing present opportunities for action, including one's moral obligations.[33]

13.4 Kantian Consolation

How, then, does Kant's discussion in *Idee* appear, if interpreted as Senecan consolation? As indicated above, the reader addressed is not mourning an individual loss. She is, rather, disgusted[34] by the folly and wickedness

[31] See *Marcia* 7.1; Nussbaum (2009:327–8).

[32] See also *Helvia* 11.3–7 and 20.2: in contemplating the rational order of nature, the soul achieves its own nature (rationality), and takes its own proper place within that order. See Nussbaum (2009:32, 326, 333–4).

[33] E.g., Seneca recommends to his mother that she turn away from grief over his exile, to focus on caring for her other relatives (*Helvia* 18.3–8).

[34] *Idee* 8:30.

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manifest in human history, a morally committed person, compassionate for widespread human suffering and despairing over the human evil displayed in past and present historical action. This despairing state is at once less personal, less focused on the loss of some valued individual, and more moralized – more concerned with the harms present and past that human beings have inflicted upon one another – than that characteristic of Seneca's grieving audience. But it is, I suggest, recognizably a form of grief, of sorrow concerning ills that cannot be undone (a sorrow not unfamiliar in our own dark and damaging times).[35] Correlatively, the practical danger for such a reader is similar to that for mourners whose habitual grief Seneca wishes to dispel: a despairing paralysis, the sense that there is no use acting, for all is lost; that the large-scale forces of history, political agencies, and so forth are alien and ill; that there is too much darkness, already, in the world for it to be worth acting in one's small way.

As on interpretations of Kant's philosophy of history as parallel to the postulates of practical reason, then, *Idee* interpreted as a consolatory text is aimed to respond to despair. Yet on the consolatory interpretation, the envisioned practically beneficial "outcome" and the character of the discursive techniques used to promote that outcome are understood differently. First, rather than reassurance and encouragement that one's ends are realizable – as in the case of the postulates – consolation aims at a more indirectly practical effect: to calm, to disrupt, and re-direct attention, to free the agent from dwelling upon bleak facts. Such freedom from despair – one might say equanimity or even Stoic apathy[36] – is a *precondition*, a removal of an obstacle, which can allow the agent to recognize and reconnect with her present opportunities and obligations to act. But those obligations would be independently identified (by practical reason), and need have little to do with, whether to contribute to or to presuppose, the sweep of historical change.

This indirect practical effect might, in other words, be understood as freeing the agent from what Kant identifies as a practically useless "compassion" (*Mitleidenschaft*), a state he compares to a contagious disease (*MS* 6:457). In the same discussion, Kant argues that one should cultivate sympathy (*Mitgefühl*), an active fellow feeling that can help one to

[35] Cicero (*Tusc.* 4.18) lists many varieties of distress to which Stoic consolation may be addressed (correlating, perhaps, to the variety of harms over which one may mourn; see *Tusc.* 3.81); elsewhere Cicero mentions justified distress over one's own bad moral character (*Tusc.* 4.61; see also Graver 2007:191–6), though not over human historical evil generally.

[36] See *Anth* (7:253–4), and Merritt (2021b), for Kant's approval of apathy. Graver (2007) provides a helpfully nuanced account of Stoic apathy.

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recognize and perform one's duty to aid others. But, he claims, compassion should be rejected: if one cannot help the other, one's compassionate feeling is merely another pain, a pointless, extra ill in the world. Indeed, here Kant praises "the Stoic" for the "sublime way of thinking" that asks, "What is it to me?" when one is unable to act; in such a circumstance, pain is not only a pointless ill (as Kant is arguing), but also, as I am suggesting through the analogy to Seneca's view of grief, a distraction from effective moral action.[37] Sorrow over large-scale historical events – whether in the past or contemporary – would seem to be such ineffectual, potentially obstructive pain, as it concerns situations on which one's own action can have little effect.

Correlatively, interpreted as consolation, Kant's proposals concerning history would be understood not as reassurance concerning the realizability of the moral agent's own ends (these are too small to be reflected therein), but as contextualizing strategies. They provide (to quote Kant's term again) a "viewpoint" from which to regard events, a description that places those events within a large-scale account of the human condition. Specifically, I suggest that there are correlates in Kant's account to the three functions of Senecan contextualizing consolation discussed in the previous section: (1) adjustment of modifying beliefs, (2) compensation, and (3) disruptive re-identification.

First, in his discussions of history Kant portrays trade and cultural development, war, social status-seeking, and all manner of human behavior as propelled by unsociable sociability, and (thereby) as varied forms of or means to fulfilling "nature's purpose" of developing human faculties.[38] Thus, just as Seneca does not attempt to argue away the real pain of loss, Kant attempts to argue away neither the amorality of much human historical action nor the moral agent's disgust at it. (In the terms introduced above, Kant does not try to undermine the despairing agent's "core belief," here that history is full of wickedness and suffering.[39]) Rather,

[37] For a similar line of thought, also invoking a Stoic focus on virtuous action instead of sentiment, see Cicero, *Tusc.* 4.56. Correlatively, perhaps, one ought to judge charitably those toward whom one *can* act, to avoid dulling one's moral feeling (*MS* 6:466), but (as Kant himself demonstrates in *Idee*) more distant ills may be judged in a colder, more distanced, even cynical way. The relations between these views, and of them to Kant's doctrine of radical evil (in *Rel*), warrant further discussion, however.

[38] Kant introduces this notion at *Idee* 8:19 and thenceforth describes the progression of history in terms of nature's agency in pursuit of this end.

[39] Kant's position may in fact be closer to that of his addressee than Seneca's is to that of his audience: he probably endorses his disgusted reader's negative moral judgments of human history. By contrast, Seneca may hold that loss is *not* per se bad (though grief may be an unavoidable response to it) but may refrain from arguing so in order not to alienate his target audience (see

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again like Seneca's contextualizations, Kant's description de-exceptionalizes any particular period or polity or historical event: they all express this human-natural drive, are all part of the historical flow propelled by (purportedly) necessary tendencies in nature, not human intention. Thus, Kant's description – like Seneca's universalizing strategy – could mitigate excessive, brooding grief concerning historical events, by suggesting that they participate in widespread trends outside one's control; they are simply part of the order of things. One ought to recognize and accept these facts rationally, rather than rail against them as unusual, avoidable, or especially bad, exacerbating one's sorrow.

Kant also identifies compensations for painful historical ills. Perhaps Kant's narration of history as a single project involving the species as a whole – developing human powers – provides some compensatory sense of community, as Seneca elicits a compensatory sense of sympathetic community.[40] Also like Seneca, Kant seems to offer a compensatory sense of one's courageous dignity in facing difficulties. For, he claims, nature propels human beings to develop capacities, precisely because we are not initially well provided either in our given instincts and capacities or in relation to our environment (*Idee* 8:20). Hence the competitive self-propulsion of historical development – and hence too, Kant suggests, "self-esteem" (*Idee* 8:20) concerning that which we generate in and for ourselves. Of course, the evils of human history are likewise to be attributed to human action on this reasoning[41] – not necessarily a consolatory thought for Kant's morally committed reader. And indeed Kant offers political progress toward cosmopolitan peace as a more unambiguous compensatory good resultant (almost as by-product) from restless human striving (*Idee* 8:27–8; *KU* 5:432).

Finally, though Kant does not quite offer beautiful invitations to imagined cosmic travel, as Seneca does, his history writings may be seen as enacting a parallel form of "disruptive re-identification." For, by portraying history as an abstract, high-level trajectory, Kant detaches the reader from her own historical moment, inviting her to take up a distanced, spectatorial stance – which he compares to the astronomer's stance

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Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.77, and Graver 2007:196–9 on this rhetorical concern among the Stoics; and see Kaster 2010:11 on Seneca's similar argumentative strategy in *Ira*).

[40] The amorality of this species-project may vitiate any sense of community for the morally committed addressee, however (see Zuckert 2021).

[41] See indeed *MAM* (8:123). Ella Harmon (private communication) has emphasized to me the contrast between this claim and Kant's tendency in *Idee* to displace historical agency from human beings to nature.

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in calculating laws of the heavens (*Idee* 8:18, 27). He refocuses the reader's attention from present or past human failings to the "prospect of the future," in fact a future off "in the remote distance" (*Idee* 8:30). Perhaps, by inviting the reader to place herself in that remote future (imaginatively), Kant encourages her to allow her sorrow to "dry out" and "wither with age" – to enact, through imagination, a healing passage of time, to identify herself with a later time when her sorrow will have abated (or, in Stoic terms, will have become less "fresh").[42]

This consolatory transformation of viewpoint must be understood somewhat differently from that of Seneca's addressee, for, as noted, Kant's reader is not grieving a personal loss, not directly involved, but already a spectator – of the folly or knavery, tragedy or farce, of historical events. Thus Kant's abstract account of history brings about a more subtle transformation: not from grieving participant to contemplative spectator (as for Seneca's reader), but from a brooding, tightly wound spectatorship, frustrated by an inability to change horrific events, to (one might say) a cold hopefulness, in which one lets go of what one cannot control, believing that history will take care of itself (somehow), that ills will be rectified or compensated for in some distant future.

The consolatory interpretation allows one, in sum, to make sense of those elements in Kant's discussions of history difficult to account for by reference to more direct practical effects (e.g., encouragement to action): the broad sweep of Kant's narrative and its attribution of historical agency to natural teleology or to an extra-moral human drive. These discussions are still understood to have practical effect, but an indirect one: a calming freedom from grief and despair, as precondition for moral action.[43] Likewise, on a consolatory reading Kant's claims concerning history would have practical status, though an attenuated one: neither prescriptive nor rationally presupposed by moral action, but therapeutic.[44] That is, these descriptions offer a mode of interpretation of human history *useful* for

[42] The terms quoted are from Cicero's description of Stoic views of grief (*Tusc.* 3.33), though I have adjusted their grammar to fit into my sentence. Cicero takes it that it is not the fact of time passing, but rather one's adjustment of one's belief (that one's loss is bad), that promotes such healing (or loss of "freshness" of grief).

[43] Perhaps one could connect this indirect practical effect to Kant's surprisingly lengthy rejection of the right to revolution in *ZeF*: both are attempts to calm, to disengage readers from historical-political sorrow and to redirect them toward properly moral obligations. Cf. Kellner (2022).

[44] In a late essay, "Proclamation of the Imminent Conclusion of a Treaty of Perpetual Peace in Philosophy," Kant explicitly endorses a Stoic conception of philosophy as medicine (8:424), though he seems to mean – and perhaps only ironically – that philosophy could have effects on physical health.

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practical life, because of its consoling function.[45] One *might choose* to take up this mode of interpretation, its characteristic emphases or patterning of events, as needed in particular circumstances, to combat emotional-attentional barriers to one's moral life. It is neither definitively established by evidence *nor* rationally demanded on practical grounds. Rather, it is an interpretation that selects true aspects of known events on which one may concentrate one's attention, construing them in a way that may be clarifying and calming, in a way that is practically useful.[46]

13.5 Caveats

I conclude by mentioning some caveats about both the analogy I have drawn between Seneca and Kant and Kant's philosophy of history interpreted as consolation. Though this interpretation makes sense of some aspects of Kant's treatment of history, it also recasts some familiar problems.

As I have noted, Seneca's and Kant's consolation projects (if it is correct to interpret Kant so) address different forms of grief, and, though they may both be understood to deploy contextualizing consolatory strategies, the substantive claims used within those strategies also differ. Seneca provides visions of cosmic order and calls attention to basic truths of the human condition (such as mortality and vulnerability, e.g., at *Marcia* 11.3); Kant provides a progressive account of history, within a reflective teleological conception of nature. Such differences clearly reflect general philosophical differences. Seneca's evocations of a cosmic order cohere with a Stoic view of nature as ruled by necessary laws, and endorsement of a fatalist acceptance thereof,[47] while Kant's account of history emphasizes the possibility of change through human action – of the re-formation of nature into a moralized world – a position consonant with Kant's libertarian conception

[45] See Nussbaum (2009:46) on the instrumental value of therapeutic philosophical argument, and see Epictetus, *D.* 1.4.27, for a strong statement concerning (in my terms) the "practical status" of philosophical claims.

[46] In Zuckert (forthcoming), following Makkreel (1990) and Cohen (2009), I argue that Kant's philosophy of history and, specifically, the claims concerning natural teleology (agency and purposes) within it ought to be understood as comprising reflective, interpretive judgments: neither postulates nor regulative ideas (guides for empirical investigation), but helpful ways to organize or unify empirical facts of which one is already aware. The present essay adds another sense for "helpful." More needs to be said concerning interpretation-selection as a (relatively weak) version of "practical status" of philosophical claims, i.e., that practical effects determine (and in that sense "justify") what is worth thinking about or communicating to others.

[47] See, however, note 17 above on Olberding's and Wilson's interpretation of Seneca as promoting heroic resistance to necessity.

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of human action (though he explicitly denies that one should so view human action in considering history; see *Idee* 8:17).

This difference in substantive claims also, however, represents a more focused difference in their consolatory projects as such: Kant appears to have a considerably more demanding view of what consolation requires. Namely, that "compensation" for ills would need to involve showing not just that there are other, balancing goods (as Seneca tends to argue[48]), but that even the ills, the very objects of despair (in short, for Kant, behavior generated by unsociable sociability) will contribute to a good moral-political outcome, eventually (*Idee* 8:21). This is a high bar for consolation: in Kant's terms, that it "justifies" nature or defends "providence" (*Idee* 8:30).[49] Kantian consolation thus heightens moral concerns one might raise about Stoic consolation. For, though Seneca's worries about crippling habitual grief are reasonable, his consolation strategies may seem to go too far in minimizing harms – they are infinitesimally small in the order of things – and thus in recommending an uncaring stance toward oneself and others. These worries are exacerbated if, as in Kant's text, consolation aims to show that ills are themselves redeemed.

We may identify further challenges confronting Kant's and Seneca's respective consolatory argumentative strategies as well: doubts about their practical effectiveness, and thus reasons not to "choose" to make their respective arguments (i.e., in the terms used above, possibly failed "practical effects" of their argumentative strategies, which strategies therefore have shaky "practical status" or usefulness). Here Seneca and Kant appear to face diverging challenges, again reflecting the differences in their substantive claims: that, as just noted, Seneca's contextualizing claims are not a merely reflective interpretation of how things might be, as in Kant's account of history, but restate fundamental known facts (of mortality, of the order of the universe, and so forth). On one hand, then, it is unclear how Seneca's contextualizing strategies, restating familiar truths, can *transform* the reader's viewpoint, or provide a new and freeing perspective. In its venturesome (natural-teleological) reinterpretation of known facts, its

[48] Likewise, other (non-contextualizing) consolatory arguments in Seneca – e.g., one's sufferings in the past have healed, and this one can too (*Marcia* 1.5) – claim nothing about the utility of suffering.

[49] One might then endorse a modified version of Bittner's view (2009): if the need for consolation is not distinctly Christian (see note 13 above), perhaps this demanding conception of consolation is – i.e., that one must show (as in theodicy) that all, ultimately, contributes to the good. The substantive differences just sketched might similarly be understood as differences between Stoic and Christian understandings of providence, though Seneca's *Prov.* takes a position closer to Kant's on this point (and certainly Kant's views are closer to Stoicism than to other forms of Hellenistic philosophical therapy, such as Epicureanism; see Lloyd 2009:200–2, 206–7).

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reorganization of them into a new and unexpected pattern, by contrast, Kant's philosophy of history may better occupy, reorient, and assuage the reader's imagination, freeing her for renewed activity.[50]

On the other hand, however, it seems more likely that readers could take up Seneca's proffered viewpoint – as it requires only that one focus attention upon truths that one already believes to be true. By comparison, it is difficult to "choose" to take up a view understood as (mere) interpretation, as Kant appears to propose. Indeed, one might see Kant's account as prey to a worry that could be raised about the Stoic therapeutic project, in exacerbated form:[51] *if* this project is self-consciously conceived as engaged in for therapeutic reasons, it is self-undermining. For one is not reassured by thoughts that one takes to be endorsable *because* they are reassuring. Rather, to find reassurance through taking up a view on the world, one needs reason to believe it to be true – or, at least, to find it a plausible and compelling interpretation of known facts.

And so we come, perhaps, to a final commonality in the two consolatory projects: each appears to rely not only on contextualizing strategies, but also on aesthetically powerful formulations thereof, to accomplish its calming, reorienting aims. For Kant's "idea" of history perhaps gains its reassuring plausibility at least in part through its compelling narrative form, and Seneca's contextualizations elevate and alleviate the reader's imagination through their beauty.[52]

[50] Likewise (and I think relatedly), Kant's strategy replaces despair by an alternative emotion – hope, albeit (as I suggested) a cold hopefulness about a remote future – while Seneca rejects hope too as an unsettling emotional state (see *Ep.* 23).

[51] This worry recasts concerns often raised about Kant's defense of the postulates, as beliefs endorsed for practical reasons.

[52] I am grateful to Sam Filby, Juan Carlos Gonzalez, Ella Harmon, David Johnson, Katalin Makkai, and Jonathan Weid for helpful conversations about Kant's philosophy of history; and to participants at the UNSW workshop on Kant and the Stoics, particularly Lissa Merritt and Michael Vazquez, for insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

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