

Reasonable Hope in Kant's Ethics

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Abstract

The most apparent obstacles to a just, enlightened and peaceful social world are also, according to Kant, nature's way of compelling us to realize those and other morally good ends. Echoing Adam Smith's idea of the 'invisible hand', Kant thinks that selfishness, rivalry, quarrelsomeness, vanity, jealousy and self-conceit, along with the oppressive social inequalities they tend to produce, drive us to perfect our talents, develop culture, approach enlightenment and, through the strife and instability caused by our unsocial sociability, push us towards justice, political equality and the highest good. What are we to make of these arguments, which seem to rely on questionable empirical assumptions, invoke dubious claims about natural teleology and sit uncomfortably with fundamental aspects of Kant's ethical framework? I suggest that the arguments reveal one of Kant's deep and important insights about the moral life by partially describing what a good and virtuous person reasonably hopes for.

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1. Introduction

The most apparent obstacles to a just, enlightened and peaceful social world are also, according to Kant, nature's way of compelling us to realize those same morally good ends.¹ In his ethical writings, Kant denounces natural human tendencies of selfishness, miserliness, greed, rivalry, quarrelsomeness, envy, jealousy and self-conceit as vices that we must guard against. The natural propensities to dominate others, acquire what is theirs and lord our successes over them are often encouraged and expressed by such things as open market competition, which tends to produce oppressive economic inequalities along with deceptive and coercive behaviour, as well as outright war, which Kant describes as the 'source of all evil and corruption of morals' (CF, 7: 86; cf. IUH, 8: 22).

Yet some may be surprised that Kant also recognizes potential benefits of cut-throat commerce and bloody war, along with the vices of rivalry, envy and selfishness they engender, describing them as ‘indispensable means’ for bringing about morally good ends such as justice, peace and enlightenment (CB, 8: 121). Echoing Adam Smith’s idea of the ‘invisible hand’, in which even selfish and vain profit-seekers in a free market end up collectively benefiting society as a whole, Kant claims that market competition leads us to work harder, develop our talents and skills and produce valuable art and culture.² He also thinks that war forces us to settle the globe and join together into a state under a republican constitution; that the threat of war leads states to guarantee the civil and economic liberties of their citizens because these are apparently necessary to secure the economic productivity and so the power and security of the state; that war can lead to revolutions that pave the way for more just political arrangements; and that the costly preparations for war, its draining aftermath and the civil unrest it causes lead states to seek peace with one another through an international federation.³

Although we have imperfect duties not to indulge or overindulge our natural tendencies for vanity, rivalry, jealousy, self-conceit and selfishness, as well as perfect duties to avoid the kinds of manipulation, deception, coercion and violence that they tend to manifest in our economic or political dealings with others, Kant nonetheless claims that we should regard these evil human tendencies as leading us to a more ideal world. He summarizes his view of the good effects of vice and immorality in this way:

The distinguishing characteristic of the human species, however, in comparison with the idea as such of possible rational beings on earth is the following: that nature has sown in it the seeds of *discord* and has intended that it create, through its own reason, *harmony* out of this discord, or at least continually approximate such harmony. In the *idea* this harmony is the *end*, but in its *execution* this discord is the *means* of a supreme wisdom inscrutable to us, which intends to bring about the perfection of the human being through the continuous progress of culture, even though this entails many sacrifices of the pleasures of life. (*Anth*, 7: 322)

What are we to make of these claims that otherwise evil human tendencies along with the immoral actions and arrangements that they tempt us to engage in should nonetheless be seen as the workings of an ‘invisible hand’ leading us towards moral perfection? Kant’s arguments, at least, seem to rely on questionable empirical assumptions, invoke dubious

claims about natural teleology and sit uncomfortably with fundamental aspects of his ethical framework. Kant is well known for proposing a system of perfect and imperfect ethical duties that we must not violate despite temptations to the contrary. But he also seems to find redeeming qualities in immoral acts of war, revolution and unrestrained market competition as well as to praise evil aspects of our nature that we must also strive to overcome in doing our duty.

Kant's teleological arguments, as I will call them, strike many of us as scientifically dubious, uninteresting insofar as they rely on teleological premises, and morally suspect for apparently trading in one set of evils for another. There is a different way of looking at the arguments, however, that helps to fill out one of Kant's deep and important claims about the moral life. By appealing to the 'invisible hand' of nature as working through our inclinations of selfishness and profit-seeking, Kant is not simply making empirical claims about the structure of the natural world but is instead partially describing what a good and virtuous person can reasonably hope for.⁴

According to Kant, we are required to affirm the end of an ideally just, peaceful and morally upright world. Yet when we reflect on the history of the human species and recognize pervasive war, poverty, gross inequality, jealousy and unconstrained profiteering; when we dwell on their dominant role in our history and its maddening fluctuations from good to evil and back again; and when we consider that these forces will likely have a leading role in our future against our best efforts, the empirical evidence may lead us to think that a morally perfect world is an unfeasible and impracticable goal. Our reflections naturally tempt us to despair, cynicism, apathy and misanthropy, which may lead us to abandon our moral ideals and even abandon our commitment to morality itself because we regard widespread moral perfection as a vain and delusive dream. In order to prevent these deliberative tendencies from leading us to lose faith in morality and instead indulge our desires for power and wealth, I suggest that, in Kant's view, we may *reasonably hope* that nature is hospitable and favourable to our moral perfection so that we can sustain and continually reaffirm our rational commitment to the moral law. We need not think on objective grounds that war, oppression, unrestrained market competitiveness or other corrosive forces will actually lead to a better future. But we can reasonably hope, from a practical point of view, that nature is structured in such a way as to be hospitable to universal moral perfection in the long run. If cynicism and despair are vices, and if reasonable hope is an antidote, then reasonable hope is itself a virtue.

My plan is as follows. In section 2 I discuss one example in which Kant argues that certain evil tendencies are leading us towards a morally perfect world. I also explain three apparent problems with how we should understand his arguments of this form. In section 3 I distinguish between two perspectives we might take on moral progress. In section 4 I describe Kant's conceptions of hope and reasonable hope. I also distinguish between reasonable hopes that are rationally required and those that are rationally permitted. In the fifth section, I argue that, according to Kant, hope that nature is hospitable to morality is both reasonable and rationally permitted because it wards off despair and helps us to maintain our commitment to morality. And in the final section, I consider some objections to the interpretation of reasonable hope that I provide.

2. Example: The Spirit of Trade

In one of Kant's most sustained discussions of trade and commerce, which appears in *Perpetual Peace*, he considers the objection that the peaceful and just international regime that he has described is unlikely ever to come about because many states will fail to strive for it. Kant responds that

Nature ... unites, by means of mutual self-interest, peoples whom the concept of cosmopolitan right would not have secured against violence and war. It is the *spirit of trade*, which cannot coexist with war, which will, sooner or later, take hold of every people. Since, among all of the powers (means) subordinate to state authority, the *power of money* is likely the most reliable, states find themselves forced (admittedly not by motivations of morality) to promote a noble peace and, wherever in the world war threatens to break out, to prevent it by means of negotiations, just as if they were therefore members of a lasting alliance ... In this way nature guarantees perpetual peace through the mechanism of human inclinations itself. (TPP, 8: 368)⁵

Luckily, according to Kant, the 'spirit of mere commerce ... along with base selfishness, cowardice and weakness' are naturally implanted devices that tend to diminish war between states and so produce a just and lasting peace among them (CPJ, 5: 263).⁶

As an empirical matter, social scientists can debate whether foreign trade tends to diminish the likelihood of war, but the available evidence at best supports a tenuous causal connection between them, and certainly not one as strong as what some have claimed.⁷ Countries with various kinds

of trade agreements have repeatedly gone to war while also managing to maintain certain mutually beneficial economic arrangements with one another. Perhaps the best way to achieve peace with a rogue state is to incorporate it into the international financial system, but in other contexts isolating the country through economic sanctions meant to foment rebellion may be the best way to prevent war. States may use trade as a means of acquiring weapons and resources to make war; trade wars can escalate into shooting wars; leaders may not be very concerned with their country's overall economic productivity; and non-state actors can incite conflict between otherwise friendly trading partners.

If Kant were simply relying on empirical evidence to justify his assertion that, in the long run, foreign trade tends to prevent war then his argument would seem naive and under-supported. But there is also a teleological component to his view that makes his empirical assertions in one way more plausible, although contemporary readers are likely to be uneasy invoking natural purposes as part of our scientific theories. Kant's view of science is that we must think of the natural world *as if* it were ordered and aimed at a final end of moral perfection. We need not posit goals in nature itself, but instead use them in our thinking as regulative or heuristic devices for comprehending the natural world. When we think of the world as teleologically structured, according to Kant, we find that the same selfish instincts that get in the way of doing our duty are also naturally designed mechanisms that propel us towards perpetual peace, culture, enlightenment and moral perfection. There is room for considerable doubt, of course, about whether our scientific theories must incorporate such teleological considerations in order to make sense of human history or the natural world more generally.

A further difficulty for Kant's teleological arguments, beyond their questionable empirical credentials and their appeals to teleology, is this: if we look to these arguments for practical guidance about how to bring about peace with a rogue state, for example, it seems we would be advised to treat people in ways that are deeply at odds with Kant's ethical framework. We would need to weigh the risks and benefits of encouraging international trade or imposing economic sanctions, calculate the consequences of employing the levers of natural instinct, and cajole and goad people on the basis of their non-rational nature. By characterizing selfishness and profit-maximizing motives as natural mechanisms for bringing peace, Kant seems to be praising these character traits along with others they tend to engender, even though he elsewhere repudiates jealousy, rivalry, self-conceit, avarice, envy, selfishness, greed, miserliness and vanity.⁸

3. Two Perspectives on Moral Progress

Kant's commentators tend to interpret his teleological arguments in light of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*.⁹ As they see it, the arguments are clearly questionable as statements of empirical fact, but on Kant's view we should regard ourselves as if we are unconsciously and unintentionally progressing towards moral perfection and the highest good. They caution that teleology, for Kant, is not metaphysically demanding; it is instead a regulative principle of the understanding that is indispensable for formulating scientific theories about living organisms. The teleological arguments, on this view, are not primarily meant to give us practical guidance – Kant emphasizes that just because nature 'wills' some end does not mean we have a duty to bring it about (TPP, 8: 365). Teleological arguments of the sort I have described, according to this interpretation, are part of a larger theoretical project of making our past and future intelligible to ourselves.¹⁰

Kant's account of teleology is supposed to help us understand the nature of organisms from a scientific perspective. But when he describes the specific mechanisms that nature employs to move human beings towards enlightenment, culture, perpetual peace and the highest good, his primary concern is often more practical than theoretical. Whatever else Kant may think about how to understand human beings from a scientific point of view, I suggest that he offers practical teleological arguments that are supposed to tell us what we can reasonably hope for from a practical point of view. As he says:

I will thus be allowed to assume that since the human race is constantly progressing with respect to culture as the natural end for the same, it is also progressing toward the better with respect to the moral end of its existence, and that this progress will occasionally be *interrupted* but never *broken off*. It is not necessary for me to prove this supposition, rather my opponent has the burden of proof. I rely here on my innate duty to affect posterity such that it will become better (something the possibility of which must thus be assumed) ... However many doubts about my hopes may be given by history that, if they were sufficient proof, could move me to give up on a seemingly futile task, I can nonetheless, as long as this cannot be made entirely certain, not exchange my duty (as the *liquidum*) for the prudential rule not to work toward the unattainable (as the *illiquidum*, since it is mere hypothesis). And however uncertain I am and may remain about whether improvement is to be hoped for the human race, this uncertainty cannot detract from my

maxim and thus from the necessary supposition for practical purposes, that it is practicable. (TP, 8: 309)¹¹

An examination of human history, according to Kant, 'allows us to hope that ... if we consider the free exercise of the human will *broadly*, we can ultimately discern a regular progression in its appearances'. We may hope that 'what may seem confused and irregular when considering particular individuals can nonetheless be recognized as a steadily progressing, albeit slow development of the original capacities of the entire species' (TP, 8: 309). We can also 'hope that, after a number of structural revolutions, that which nature has as its highest aim, a universal *cosmopolitan condition*, can come into being, as the womb in which all the original predispositions of the human species are developed' (TPP, 8: 365).

Rather than starting with scientific questions about the nature and organization of organisms and proceeding, from a theoretical perspective, to a belief-like attitude about how human beings are likely to progress, Kant in these teleological arguments tends to begin with a characterization of a moral ideal and proceed, 'from another perspective', to what we may 'reasonably hope' regarding the possibility of those ends and their likelihood of coming about in the future (IUH, 8: 28, 30; cf. CF, 7: 8). Immediately after the passage I quoted where Kant argues that the spirit of trade tends to diminish the likelihood of war, he adds:

To be sure, [nature guarantees perpetual peace through human inclination] with a certainty that is not sufficient to foretell the future of this peace (theoretically), but which is adequate from a practical perspective and makes it a duty to work toward this (not simply chimerical) goal (TPP, 8: 368)

That Kant was concerned with questions of hope should not be surprising given that he thinks the three great questions of philosophy are about what we can know, what we should do and what we may hope (CPR, A804–5/B832–3). I now turn to a discussion of how Kant understands the attitude of reasonable hope.¹²

4. Reasonable Hope

Kant does not explicitly define hope or reasonable hope, but his examples of these attitudes allow us to explain some of their essential characteristics. Hope, in Kant's view, is a combination of certain practical and theoretical attitudes. Most generally, when an agent hopes for something, she (1) desires it and she (2) assents to the claim that the object of her

desire will come about. Different kinds of hope can be distinguished by the sorts of desires and forms of assent that they involve. What I call *reasonable* hope, as I explain below, is a type of hope that involves taking a moral interest in something happening and Believing (in Kant's technical sense) that it will come about.

The practical aspect of hope is to want something to come about. Hoping for something involves desiring it, in Kant's broad sense of 'desire' that includes inclinations, needs, choices, ends, wishes, and rational dispositions and interests.¹³ The theoretical aspect of hope is to 'hold as true' the claim that the object of our desire will be realized. In order to explain this latter aspect of Kant's conception of hope, we must look to his epistemology and in particular to his conception of assent, which he develops in the Canon of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as well as in his *Lectures on Logic*.

Kant distinguishes various ways in which an agent can assent to a proposition or hold it as true. These attitudes are distinguished by two types of 'grounds' that an agent can have for assenting to a proposition. An objective ground of assent is something that indicates that the proposition has some objective probability of being true. An agent's subjective ground for assenting to a proposition is the ground that his assent is actually based on. One type of subjective ground is epistemic, as when an agent assents to a claim on the basis of a ground that he himself regards as indicating that the proposition has some objective probability of being true. The other type of subjective ground is non-epistemic, as when an agent assents to a proposition because doing so would serve his interests even though he does not regard this ground as bearing on the truth of the proposition.

The objective and subjective grounds that an agent has for holding a proposition as true can be 'sufficient' or 'insufficient'. An objective ground is sufficient for assenting to a proposition when it indicates that the proposition is most likely true; otherwise, an objective ground is insufficient for assenting to the proposition. An agent's subjective grounds for assenting to a proposition can be sufficient in two ways that correspond to the two kinds of subjective grounds he can have.¹⁴ First, an agent's subjective epistemic ground for assenting to a proposition is sufficient if, on reflection, he assents to it and he would cite this subjective ground as the sufficient objective ground for his assent. Second, an agent's subjective non-epistemic ground for assenting to a proposition is sufficient if he assents to it, he would not cite this subjective ground as the sufficient objective ground for his assent, but he thinks that his assenting

to the proposition is necessary in order for his rational interests to be satisfied (CPR, A821/B851–A831/B859). I will discuss below what these rational interests might be.

With these distinctions in place, Kant defines three forms of assent. First, an agent *has an opinion* when she assents to a proposition even though she is aware that her assent is subjectively and objectively insufficient. She may assent to the proposition as an assumption or working hypothesis while admitting that she does not have sufficient evidence for it. Second, an agent *knows* a proposition if she assents to the proposition and her assent is subjectively and objectively sufficient. That is, her assent to the proposition is based on strong evidence that she would also cite as strong evidence for the proposition. And, third, an agent has a *Belief* when she assents to a proposition, her assent is subjectively sufficient, but she is aware that her assent is objectively insufficient. Such an agent, in other words, recognizes that assenting to the proposition is necessary to realize her rational interests even though she is aware that she lacks sufficient evidence for its truth. (I will refer to these as Beliefs so as to distinguish them from our ordinary notion of a belief.)

In this sense, Beliefs, for Kant, are forms of assent that are based on what some contemporary philosophers now call the ‘wrong kind of reasons’ because they are held for reasons that do not bear on the truth of the relevant proposition. Moreover, when an agent has a Belief, she lacks sufficient evidence for that proposition, but she also lacks sufficient evidence for its negation. She regards the proposition as possible and, despite lacking objective grounds for its truth, she nonetheless holds the proposition as true because doing so is, in her view, necessary to satisfy her rational interests.

Kant further distinguishes between contingent and necessary Beliefs. An agent has a *contingent Belief* if she recognizes that her assent to the relevant proposition is necessary to further some rational interest she has and she does not herself know of any other way that this interest could be satisfied besides those that involve her having the Belief. A contingent Belief becomes a necessary Belief if, in addition, the agent knows with certainty that no one else can know of any other ways in which her interest could be satisfied besides those in which she has this Belief (CPR, A824/B852). Kant gives the example of a doctor who is under an obligation to do something to save a patient in duress. The doctor has an educated opinion about what is ailing the patient but he does not know for sure. The doctor may come to think that a necessary condition of fulfilling his duty

in this case is that he firmly assent to the claim that the patient has consumption, for otherwise the doctor would not be able to act to save the patient. This Belief, however, is contingent and not necessary because the doctor also recognizes that there may be other ways to save the patient that do not require him to have this particular Belief.

Belief in God and immortality are, Kant argues, necessary Beliefs, in his technical sense. The highest good is a necessary end or interest of reason that we have a duty to affirm. We can hold this end only if we regard its realization as possible. The highest good can be realized only if God exists and there is an afterlife, even though we cannot have sufficient evidence for either of these claims. Therefore, our assent to the claim that God exists and that we are immortal serves a rational interest we have of affirming the highest good. And, because we do not know of any other way for that end to be realized, our beliefs in God and immortality are at least rationally permitted. In addition, however, Kant thinks that we know with certainty that no one else can know of any other way for our interest in affirming the highest good to be realized besides those that involve our assent to the claim that God and immortality exist, so our Beliefs in these postulates are not only rationally permitted, but they are rationally required as well (*CPR*, A828/B856).

Hoping for something, according to Kant, involves desiring it as well as assenting to the claim that it will come about. When he gives examples of people who hope for something, however, he is not always clear about what more specific attitudes he takes the agents to have. It is not always apparent, in particular, which practical attitudes the agents have, whether they are inclinations, wishes, ends or other kinds of desires. And it is often difficult to analyse what kinds of rational assent Kant thinks agents have when they hope for something in particular cases. He says in various places, for example, that an agent who hopes for something assumes, expects, believes, trusts, presupposes, has confidence and acts as if the object of her hope will be realized.¹⁵

I will not here attempt a comprehensive survey of the many types of hope that Kant seems to describe. I will instead focus on one kind of hope that Kant often discusses, which I call reasonable hope, and suggest that it can be analysed in terms of two attitudes, namely, a moral interest and a Belief.

An agent who has a reasonable hope for something has, first, a moral interest in the realization of that object or state of affairs. Rational agents, according to Kant, necessarily have moral interests in the realization of

such things as the highest good, universal enlightenment, a cosmopolitan condition, perpetual peace as well as moral progress and the moral perfection of themselves and all others in this life and in the afterlife.

And an agent who has a reasonable hope for something has, second, a Belief (in Kant's sense) that the object of her moral interest will come about. As we have seen, Beliefs in this sense can be either contingent or necessary. A contingent Belief, in this context, is one in which the agent assents to the claim that her moral interest will be realized, not because she thinks that this claim is backed by sufficient evidence, but because, in her view, her holding that claim as true is necessary in order for her moral interest to be satisfied. Her Belief would be necessary if she also knows with certainty that no one else can know of any other ways in which her moral interest could be satisfied besides ones in which she assents to the claim that it will be satisfied (*CPR*, A824/B852).

Reasonable hope is thus a type of Belief in which an agent has a moral interest in the realization of something and assents to the claim that it will come about, not because she thinks she has sufficient evidence to think it will, but because she either thinks or knows that her assent is necessary for her moral interest to be realized. Reasonable hope is not simply wishful thinking because the agent's interest must be a moral interest of reason, rather than a mere inclination or contingent end; and she must regard her assent as, or know it to be, necessary for realizing that rational interest, rather than simply treating her assent as an effective means of satisfying her interest.

The distinction between contingent and necessary Beliefs helps to make sense of a puzzling feature of Kant's discussions of reasonable hope, which is that he usually writes about what we 'may' or 'can' reasonably hope rather than what we are required to reasonably hope (*CPR*, A805/B833).¹⁶ Rational agents, in Kant's view, necessarily have certain moral interests that are not morally optional for us. Our Beliefs about the realization of those interests, however, can sometimes be permissible but not required. There are various contingent Beliefs that agents could rationally have about what is necessary to satisfy some of their moral interests even though they can also recognize that other people could know about other ways of realizing them that do not involve their having these particular Beliefs. In such cases, there is a class of reasonable hopes that agents may or can rationally have, in virtue of the various Beliefs they are rationally permitted to hold. None of these reasonable hopes is rationally required if the agents do not know with certainty that having one and only one of

these Beliefs is necessary to satisfy their moral interests. Some reasonable hopes, however, are rationally mandated because they involve Beliefs that the agent knows are necessary for realizing her moral interests.

An example of a reasonable hope that rational agents are required to have, according to Kant, is hope for immortality. We have a necessary rational interest in the highest good, Kant argues, but we do not have sufficient evidence that such a thing is possible. ‘One can well attain moral certainty of [a future life]’, Kant says, ‘if one considers that here on earth happiness is not always a consequence of good behavior, hence another world is to be hoped for in which this will occur’ (Log-Bl, 24: 200). That is, we know that the only way to maintain our rational commitment to the highest good is to believe in immortality, so we ‘must hope that there will be a future world and future rewards and punishments of [our] actions’ (Log-Bl, 24: 243).

Unlike the postulates of immortality and, perhaps also, God’s existence, which are rationally mandated hopes that involve necessary Beliefs, Kant more often describes reasonable hopes as rationally permitted but not required because they include contingent Beliefs. For example, human persons have a self-regarding rational interest in our own moral perfection, yet we know that moral perfection is impossible by our own efforts. Someone may rationally think that achieving this obligatory end requires her to confidently affirm the claim that if she does her very best to make moral progress then God will make up the difference. As long as such a person is striving for moral perfection with all her might, she ‘may hope that God will have the means to remedy’ any remaining imperfections (Eth-C, 27: 317).¹⁷ On the interpretation of reasonable hope I have suggested, Kant means that this hope for divine assistance is permissible but not required because, for all we can know, there could be other ways to maintain and pursue moral perfection besides those in which we Believe in God’s grace. He gives similar accounts of why we are rationally permitted, but not required, to reasonably hope that we will eventually receive the happiness that we morally deserve, that perpetual peace will occur and that an ethical commonwealth will someday be established (*Rel*, 6: 62, 99–100, 151–2; *MM*, 6: 482; *TPP*, 8: 386; *Eth-C*, 27: 318). In Kant’s view, an agent could rationally think that these things will come about only if she Believes (in his sense) that they will occur even though she does not know that her having these beliefs is necessary for the realization of her moral interests. Still less does she have good evidence that these things will actually come about: ‘Empirical evidence against the success of these resolutions made in hope has no bearing here’

(TP, 8: 309). What matters, instead, is that an agent is permitted to Believe that they will happen when she thinks that her having this Belief is necessary for their realization.

5. Moral Despair and Reasonable Hope

With this conception of reasonable hope in hand, let us now consider in more detail some of Kant's teleological arguments. Suppose we start from a first-person, deliberative and practical standpoint in which our main concern is to fashion the world to our conception of it rather than to represent the world as it is (*MM*, 6: 211). From this point of view, Kant downplays the role that feelings and desires have in our practical lives and instead emphasizes the central place of action, of choosing, willing and end-setting. Duties are universal and rationally necessary constraints on our wills, on what we strive to do in the world, rather than on what we desire, feel, wish for or cherish. According to Kant's system of duties, the Categorical Imperative is the supreme moral principle that justifies more specific duties of right and virtue, including ones to develop our talents, unite with others in just constitutional arrangements and seek perpetual peace.

Because we are subject to moral requirements, Kant thinks we must take ourselves to have the freedom to fulfil them. We must therefore countenance the possibility that everyone successfully does his or her duty, which would result in an enlightened, just and peaceful kingdom of ends. If we all somehow managed to act as we should, against long odds, then all war would cease, unjust national constitutions would become republican, culture would develop very rapidly and we would quickly progress towards enlightenment. Kant admits that, from a theoretical or scientific perspective, we need not believe that our world will ever become perfectly moral, but from a practical point of view, we are permitted to Believe that this will happen, for without this or some other Belief that plays the same role, we would lose our commitment to morality and so prevent the existence of a morally perfect world.

Not only does Kant think we each have the capacity to act as we should, he also argues that we have rational *dispositions*, as part of our rational nature, that actively lead us to govern our lives by the demands of morality (*Rel*, 6: 27–8; *CF*, 6: 85).¹⁸ Rational, autonomous agents, according to Kant, are disposed to recognize the moral law as authoritative, and we can choose to act on those dispositions in the face of conflicting impulses and desires. Reason itself is leading each of us towards moral perfection, while sensible inclinations and selfishness tend to impede its progress (*Rel*, 6: 23–4; *CPrR*, 5: 72–5).

If having duties at all requires us to assume, at least from a practical perspective, that their perfect realization through acts of freedom is possible, and if reason itself is actively leading us to realize this ideal, why does Kant also invoke ‘the great artist *nature*’ to ‘guarantee’ that we achieve moral perfection in the long run through non-rational and apparently immoral means such as war, oppression, unrestrained profit-seeking, religious conflict, selfishness, jealousy, vanity and arrogance (TPP, 8: 360)? Part of Kant’s answer is to argue that we may reasonably hope that nature is hospitable to our collective moral perfection. A reasonable hope of this sort, I will now explain, includes a moral interest in the moral perfection of our world along with a contingent, not necessary, Belief that our moral interests will be satisfied through the workings of nature.

One of the moral interests we have, according to Kant, is in a morally perfect world. Rational agents, by our nature, necessarily want a world of enlightenment, perpetual peace, republican constitutions, a cosmopolitan condition and whatever else collective moral perfection involves or requires.

We all rationally want this state of affairs, but we might find ourselves wondering whether it will ever, in fact, come about. One thing we can be sure of, Kant argues, is that a morally perfect world is at least possible because we must take ourselves to have the freedom to fulfil any moral requirements we are under. We must countenance the possibility that everyone successfully does his or her duty, which would result in an enlightened, just and peaceful kingdom of ends.

But when we consider the evidence that a morally perfect world will ever be realized, Kant admits that we do not have sufficient evidence to think it will come about, but nor do we have sufficient evidence that it will not come about. What stands in the way of achieving a morally perfect world, according to Kant, is mostly our set of pervasive natural inclinations and dispositions that tempt us to immorality. When we examine ourselves and others, we find corrupting tendencies all around us that pervade our history and seem likely to dominate our future.

When we recognize these pervasive dispositions to immorality, Kant thinks that we tend to experience cynicism and despair of a kind that tends to undercut our commitment to the moral law. When we consider the history of the human species, he says, ‘the sight of it compels us to reluctantly turn our eyes from it and ... despair at ever finding in it a completed rational aim’ (IUH, 8: 30; cf. *Rel*, 6: 33–4). We may find

ourselves resigned to our loathsome ways and even sometimes led to 'misanthropy', to 'hate or despise' our species and to 'want to have as little to do with them as possible' (*Rel*, 6: 34; TP, 8: 309; cf. CF, 7: 83, 94). When we observe war, unconstrained profit-seeking, economic oppression and the rest, learn about their dominant role in history and consider the high likelihood that they will dominate our future, we are tempted to conclude that human beings are characterized by 'foolishness, childish vanity, and, often enough, even of childish wickedness and destructiveness' (IUH, 8: 18). When we find episodes of fluctuation from progressions towards the good to regress back to evil, we are led to regard our history as 'a mere farcical comedy' and 'a mockery' that can 'endow our species with no greater value in the eyes of reason than that which other animal species possess' (CF, 4: 82; TP, 8: 308). Observing 'such a tragedy' can lead a spectator to 'tire of it after one or two acts of it, when he can conclude with good reason that the never-ending piece will be an eternal monotony' (TP, 8: 308). Even though we have to assume that moral perfection is at least possible and that there are aspects of ourselves that are leading us towards it, the evidence we have suggests that this goal is 'chimerical', unfeasible and virtually impracticable (TPP, 8: 368).

The kind of 'sorrow', self-loathing and apathy we may feel about ourselves and our species can become 'a moral corruption' (CB, 8: 120; TP, 8: 307). This can happen in a number of ways. First, if we are not '*content with providence* (even though it has laid such a toilsome path for us in our earthly world)' we are unable to 'take heart in the face of such labors' by steadily exerting our will to overcome obstacles and do our duty (CB, 8: 121). Second, our cynicism may lead us to lose our commitment to morality itself if we regard virtue as a more or less hopeless dream, a 'mere phantom', that may never come about in our world so that 'all striving toward it would be deprecated as vain affectation and delusive self-conceit' (*CPrR*, 5: 153; cf. *Anth*, 7: 329).¹⁹ Third, we also have a tendency, when we consider ourselves and our history, to blame our animal nature and social circumstances as inhospitable to morality, which can lead us to 'lose sight of our own fault, which may perhaps be the only cause of all these ills, and fail to seek help against them in self-improvement' (CB, 8: 121; cf. *MM*, 6: 441). Finally, we may come to regard ourselves and our species as worthless, which may lead us to debase ourselves and others, in violation of our perfect duties of respect.

An agent who has a moral interest in the realization of a morally perfect world who is faced with strong evidence that such a world will never come to fruition can rationally come to Believe that such a world will

nonetheless someday be realized. A Belief, recall, is an assent to a proposition in which an agent recognizes that she lacks sufficient evidence for its truth even though she regards it as possible, yet she nonetheless assents to it because, in her view, her assent to it is necessary to satisfy a rational interest she has. Such an agent may think that her having such a Belief that a morally perfect world will come about is necessary for her to overcome her apathy, despair and cynicism so that she is able to do her part in realizing such a world. She may thus come to Believe, and so reasonably hope, that even the most disconcerting features of our world are actually leading us to somewhere better, even if she cannot explain exactly how this would happen (*CPrR*, 5: 144; *WOT*, 8: 139; *Anth*, 7: 329).

Because of these deliberative tendencies, Kant proposes that reason does ‘let us hope [that the mechanisms of nature] will be in accord with our wishes’ (*TPP*, 8: 370). Many of Kant’s teleological arguments are thus meant as part of a *justification* of nature’ (*TPP*, 8: 370): ‘This hope for better times, without which a serious desire to do something that promotes the general good would never have warmed the human heart, has always had an influence on the work of the well-thinking’ (*TP*, 8: 309).

Just as we have a ‘need of reason’ to reasonably hope for God and immortality as necessary conditions for proportioning happiness to virtue, so Kant thinks we may reasonably hope that nature is hospitable and favourable to our moral perfection in order to sustain and continually reaffirm our rational commitment to the moral law (*CPrR*, 5: 144). The former hopes are rationally required because we must take a moral interest in the highest good and we must Believe that they exist because, Kant thinks, we know with certainty that there is no other way in which the highest good could come about without our assent to the claim that God and immortality exist. The latter hopes, however, are rationally required, in one way, but rationally permitted in another. That is, we must take a moral interest in the realization of a morally perfect world; we must Believe that such a world will come about through some mechanism or other so as to maintain our commitment to morality; but we have some latitude about the particular mechanisms we Believe will lead to a morally perfect world and we do not know with certainty that any particular mechanism, whether it is nature favouring our moral progress or something else, is the only one that could bring about such a world in the long run.

These claims about reasonable hope are not merely psychological claims about what non-rational impulses tend to lead us astray. Kant is instead proposing a further constitutive feature of rationality, as it is found in

human beings. Fully rational agents necessarily have reasonable hope in order to avoid lapsing into moral nihilism and despondency and in order to retain their commitment to the moral law. If we really thought that our moral efforts were in vain and had very little chance of success, rational persons would be disposed to weaken or abandon their moral commitment and the respect they have for the moral law, which is a necessary requirement for being subject to duty at all (*MM*, 6: 402–3). When it comes to the specific ways in which our rational interest in a morally perfect world will be realized, there are various Beliefs that we may have, including that the selfish tendencies disposing people to immorality will somehow lead them to bring about morally good ends. We need not believe (in our ordinary sense of ‘belief’) that war or oppression will actually lead to a better future, or that they will cause us to become virtuous, but we may reasonably hope that they will do so. If reasonable hope is necessary for us to avoid the vices of cynicism and despair then reasonable hope is itself a virtue.

When Kant praises war, rivalry, competition and so on as mechanisms that nature wills as means to perpetual peace, republican constitutions, enlightenment and culture, what he means is that we are rationally permitted to hope that this is the case, that nature is structured in such a way as to somehow bring about moral perfection in the long run. But crucially for Kant, we do not necessarily have a duty to bring about what we reasonably hope for. Just because we must reasonably hope, for example, that war will lead to more secure civil liberties does not mean that we have a duty to go to war; in fact we usually have a duty not to do so (*TPP*, 8: 365; *CF*, 7: 86). This seems to have been Kant's attitude towards the French Revolution, which he apparently regarded as wrong while also hoping that it would succeed in bringing about a just constitution (*MM*, 6: 319–20; *TPP*, 8: 374; *CF*, 7: 86).

When Kant argues that the spirit of trade, to return to my first example, decreases the likelihood of war, we can understand him as expressing reasonable hope that envy, jealousy, conceit and the other attitudes that tend to drive commerce are moving us closer to perpetual peace, which does not imply that we have a duty to engage in trade or to practice the vices that tend to encourage economic exchange. We must instead maintain our commitment to morality by reasonably hoping that an ideal world will come about, which can lead some people to the more specific hope that the world is progressively improving because they regard having this hope as essential to realizing their moral interests (*MM*, 6: 485).

6. Objections

My aim here has been to interpret, but not to evaluate or defend, some of Kant's teleological arguments. It is worth briefly considering some objections, however, that may help to avoid some misunderstandings about how Kant understands reasonable hope.

First, as Marxists and others warn, hope can be used as a form of false ideology to justify, defend and resign people to oppression, injustice, war and other social evils.²⁰ This is a complicated concern, but if we separate issues, we can at least see that Kant does not see reasonable hope as a way to rationalize bad behaviour. He is against those who say, for example, that there are no moral limits in business and trade. As a matter of law and justice, people must not violate the property rights of one another or deceive and coerce them, and they must support the state in its role of providing certain kinds of poverty relief (*MM*, 6: 239, 230, 326). Outside the limits of the law, Kant also argues that we have duties of virtue to help others, to avoid disrespect and even to compensate trading partners or employees who unluckily suffer sharp losses in their dealings with us (*MM*, 6: 388, 423–37, 450, 462–7; *Eth-V*, 27: 691). In addition, Kant thinks we are responsible for our actions even if we were tempted by natural inclinations; he is adamant that we must punish wrong-doers even if their actions are intended to bring about greater peace or justice; and the consciences of those who are violating their duties in the name of reform will usually produce painful feelings. But given all of this, there are remaining questions about the kind of attitude or stance we should take towards the natural world and its future. Are we going to let readily apparent evils dishearten us and lead us into cynicism and apathy, or are we going to wish and proceed as if the world has characteristics and tendencies that nurture our moral development? The moral law unconditionally binds our actions, so there is no concern that Kant recommends acquiescing to or engaging in unjust wars or deceitful trading practices, but having done our duty in a world where so few do, a good person also focuses on the good aspects of the world instead of dwelling on the bad ones, and her reasonable hopes for a brighter future reinforce her rational disposition to continue doing her part to bring about moral perfection.

A second concern is that Kant seems to be commending hopeless optimism and starry-eyed utopian thinking. His account of reasonable hope, however, is in part meant to combat such attitudes, which he thinks can have a corrosive effect on our commitment to the moral law. If we thought that our moral efforts were in vain, that moral perfection was either impossible or strongly disfavoured by the structure of the natural

world, then our continued adherence to morality would seem unrealistic and fanatical. But our reasonable hope that the natural world is amenable to our moral perfection, as long as we cannot prove that the reverse is true, can help to give us the strength we need to do our best to bring it about. But the value of reasonable hope is not merely instrumental; it is supposed to be a core feature of our moral psychology that allows us to possess a good will and sustain the strength to put it into action.

Finally, Allen Wood has raised a number of challenges to understanding Kant's philosophy of history as primarily a matter of reasonable hope rather than as a mostly social scientific endeavour to understand ourselves. It is clear that both themes are present in Kant, but I have suggested that some of the teleological arguments Kant gives in his political and historical writings invoke the idea of reasonable hope. Here are a few points to note.

Wood argues that Kant's 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective' proceeds from a theoretical understanding of history to our practical concerns with it. As I have suggested, some of the arguments Kant gives in that essay can be read as practical arguments meant to suggest that it is rationally permissible for people to reasonably hope that nature is favourable to moral progress. Kant reiterates there, for example, his teleological argument that foreign trade diminishes war: because of the 'reverberations which upheaval in any one state in our part of the world, so linked in its commercial activities, will have in all other states', they 'will offer themselves up as judges and thus ultimately prepare everything for a future political body the likes of which the earlier world has never known'. Kant then adds that

a feeling is nevertheless beginning to stir among all the members who have an interest in the preservation of the whole which gives us the hope that, after a number of structural revolutions, that which nature has as its highest aim, a universal *cosmopolitan condition*, can come into being, as the womb in which all the original predispositions of the human species are developed. (IUH, 8: 28)

Wood also points out a disanalogy between the practical postulates in God, immortality and freedom, on the one hand, and aspects of human history in which we place our hope, on the other. He says that experience cannot prove or disprove the existence of the former whereas the latter are within the empirical world, which means our hopes can in principle

be undermined by empirical evidence. This suggests, according to Wood, that reasonable hope is not justified on exactly the same basis as the practical postulates. I have argued, however, that Kant's conception of Belief, his distinction between contingent and necessary Beliefs, and his claims that we must reasonably hope for immortality show that the postulates and reasonable hope in moral progress share a common basis in our moral interests and the Beliefs we need to satisfy them. In neither case, I have suggested, can empirical evidence undermine these Beliefs. Although both kinds of attitudes are justified in much the same way, there are differences between them that depend on whether the Beliefs in question are necessary, as in the case of the postulates, or contingent, in the case of the hospitality of nature to our moral perfection. Appealing to reasonable hope, in the sense I attribute to Kant, is not necessarily an intellectually dishonest way of attempting to decide dubious matters of empirical fact (Wood 2006: 246).

In conclusion, although a clear-eyed assessment of the evidence makes it doubtful that commerce between states is likely to bring peace or that war leads to moral perfection, Kant nonetheless commends to us as persons of virtue the reasonable hope that 'the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice' (King 1991: 632).²¹

Notes

- 1 See *CPJ*, 5: 432; *IUH*, 8: 20–1; *Rel*, 6: 27; *WIE*, 8: 41–2. I will refer to Kant's works with the following abbreviations followed by standard Academy volume, page numbers and the cited translation. *CPrR*: *Critique of Practical Reason* (Kant 2007); *MM*: *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1996b); *CPJ*: *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (Kant 2000); *CPR*: *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1998a); *Anth*: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (trans. Robert Louden in Kant 2007); *Rel*: *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Kant 1998b); *CF*: 'The Conflict of the Faculties' (Kant 1996a); *WOT*: 'What does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' (Kant 1998b); *WIE*: 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (Kant 2006); *CB*: 'Conjectural Beginnings of Human History' (Kant 2006); *IUH*: 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective' (Kant 2006); *TP*: 'On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory, but it does Not Hold in Practice' (Kant 2006); *TPP*: 'Toward Perpetual Peace' (Kant 2006); *Eth-C*: 'Moral Philosophy: Collins's Lecture Notes' (Kant 2001); *Eth-V*: 'Kant on the metaphysics of morals: Vigilantius's lecture notes' (Kant 2001); *Log-Bl*: 'Blomberg Logic' (Kant 1992); and *Log-W*: 'Vienna Logic' (Kant 1992).
- 2 See Smith (1976) and *IUH*, 8: 22. Smith thinks we should see divine reason as working through markets towards morally good ends (Smith 2002: 193). Even when we encounter gross injustice and violence that we are powerless to stop, he says that we may find ourselves in grave despair unless we think that God 'will complete the plan which he himself has thus taught us to begin'; in addition, although Smith claims that the proper use of our moral faculties is the most effective way to bring about good ends, each person

- should also regard his own selfish profit-seeking and competitiveness as helping to 'promote an end which was no part of his intention' (Smith 2002: 193).
- 3 See TPP, 8: 363, 365–6; CB 8: 27–8, 120–1; TPP, 8: 374; CF 7: 85; *Rel*, 6: 35; IUH, 8: 24; TP, 8: 310.
 - 4 My account is inspired by some remarks Rawls (2000) makes in his lectures on Kant as well as by Sussman (2005, 2010).
 - 5 See also TPP, 8: 364; CB, 8: 120; IUH, 8: 28.
 - 6 Kant's idea seems to be that, in certain contexts, trade and commerce are more effective means for securing perpetual peace than war, even though he thinks war may eventually bring about the same result.
 - 7 Friedman (1999) proposes 'The Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention' which says that no two countries that have a McDonald's have gone to war with one another, although there have been counterexamples, such as the recent wars between Israel and Lebanon and between Russia and Georgia. Friedman's newest version of the view is called the 'Dell Theory of Conflict Prevention' which says: 'No two countries that are both part of a major global supply chain, like Dell's, will ever fight a war against each other as long as they are both part of the same global supply chain' (Friedman 2005: 587).
 - 8 See *Rel*, 6: 27; *MM*, 6: 432, 433–4, 458; *Eth-C*, 27: 252, 409.
 - 9 See Wood (1999: chs 6, 7, 9; 2006) and Guyer (2005: chs 8, 12).
 - 10 The 'Critique of Teleological Judgment' in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* explains the necessary role of teleology in our understanding of nature, but the conception of teleology that Kant describes there is not wholly theoretical because he argues that we must presuppose certain moral ends and purposes in order to make sense of the natural world.
 - 11 Kant is not saying in the last sentence of this passage that we *must* hope that human beings will, in fact, achieve moral perfection. He is saying, instead, that because we have a duty to seek collective moral perfection as part of the highest good, we must assume that such an ideal world is possible. As I go on to explain, Kant thinks that, beyond this, we *may* also hope that a morally perfect world will actually come about through evil human tendencies.
 - 12 My account has benefited significantly from Andrew Chignell's work, especially Chignell 2007, 2013a, 2013b, 2014.
 - 13 See *CPrR*, 5: 74, 129, 147; *Rel*, 6: 117; *Eth-V*, 27: 728; *Log-Bl*, 24: 92.
 - 14 The conceptions of objective and subjective sufficiency I describe draw from Chignell (2007). Although that paper is mainly concerned with explicating the conditions of knowledge, his discussion of sufficiency, I think, fits the relevant texts and can be used for my purposes here.
 - 15 See *CPR*, A474/B502; *MM*, 6: 482; *CPrR*, 5: 159; *Rel*, 6: 62, 68–9, 117, 172; IUH, 8: 30; TPP, 8: 371; TP, 8: 312; *Eth-C*, 27: 321; *Eth-V*, 27: 728; *Log-W*, 24: 854–5.
 - 16 The interpretation I offer is somewhat speculative, but I try to explain how Kant's distinction between contingent and necessary Beliefs helps to make sense of the sometimes confusing way in which he says 'may' hope and other times says 'must' hope. A future research project could examine, in more detail than I do here, why certain Beliefs are rationally permissible while others are rationally required.
 - 17 See also *Rel*, 6: 52, 116–18, 144–5; *CPrR*, 5: 124, 129; *Eth-C*, 27: 326.
 - 18 The sense of 'disposition' I am using is not the same as Kant's technical term *Gesinnung*, which is sometimes translated as 'disposition' but could also mean 'conviction' or 'commitment'.
 - 19 See Wood 1970: 155–60.

- 20 Rawls (2001: 19) raises this concern as well.
- 21 I am grateful to Tom Hill, Markus Kohl, Clark Wolf, two anonymous referees, the editors of *Kantian Review*, as well as audiences at the UK Kant Society in 2013, the Eastern APA in 2012 and 2014 and the Southern Study Group of the North American Kant Society in 2016 for their feedback on this paper.

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