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 moral ends that we have a duty to pursue.\(^1\) 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 ultimately, through the strife and instability caused by our unsocial sociability, push us towards justice and political equality (CJ 5:432; IUH 8:20-1; R 6:27; E 8:41-2). Nature implanted linguistic and religious differences to guard against a despotic world state and to foment competition of a kind that is likely to lead to peace (PP 8:367-8). War, which results from our naturally inculcated desires for power and wealth, is the “source of all evil and corruption of morals” (CF 7:86) but also “an indispensable means” (CB 8:121) for bringing about moral ends. External threat of war, for example, forces us to settle the globe and join together into a state under a Republican constitution (PP 8:363, 365-6). War impels states to guarantee the civil and economic liberties of their citizens because these are necessary to secure the economic productivity and so the power and security of the state (CB 8:27-8, 120-121). Internal conflict and war within a state leads to cultural development (CB 8:121) and sometimes

war causes citizens to engage in revolutions that pave the way for more just political arrangements (PP 8:374; CF 7:85). And, costly preparations for war, its draining aftermath, and the civil unrest it causes, leads states to seek peace through an international federation (IUH 8:24; TP 8:310).

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? According to the most prominent interpretations of these arguments, they are of little contemporary interest for these reasons, whereas I think the arguments reveal one of Kant’s deep and important insight about the moral life by offering an account of what a good and virtuous person reasonably hopes.²

I.

Consider one of Kant’s teleological arguments, as I will call them. After describing the main features of a peaceful and just international regime, Kant admits that many people will fail in their duty to bring it about. Echoing Adam Smith, Kant thinks that luckily the profit-seeking motive is a naturally implanted device that tends to diminish war between states and produce a just and lasting peace among them:

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

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² My account is indebted to some remarks Rawls (2000) makes in his lectures on Kant.
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 (PP 8:368, cf PP 8:364; CB 8:120, IUH 8:28).

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 Kant suggests and journalists like Thomas Friedman have popularized. Countries with various kinds of trade arrangements have repeatedly gone to war while also managing to maintain certain mutually beneficial economic arrangements with one another. Perhaps in some cases 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. Countries may use trade as a means of acquiring weapons and resources to make war, trade wars can sometimes escalate into shooting wars, governments may not be very concerned with their country’s economic productivity, and non-state actors can incite war between otherwise friendly trading partners.

If Kant were simply relying on empirical data to justify his assertion that in the long run foreign trade prevents war then his argument would seem naive and under-supported by the

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3 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 (2005) 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.”
evidence. 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 feel uneasy about invoking ends and purposes in nature. According to Kant, we must think of the natural world as ordered and aimed at a final end of moral perfection, but we need not posit such purposes in nature itself, we must only use them as regulative or heuristic devices for comprehending the natural world. When we think of the world as teleologically structured in this way, we find that the same selfish instincts that so often get in the way of doing our duty are also naturally designed mechanisms that propel us toward perpetual peace, culture, enlightenment and moral perfection. There is room for doubt, however, about whether our scientific theories must invoke such teleological considerations in order to make sense of human history.

A further difficulty for Kant’s teleological arguments is that if we look to them for practical guidance about how to bring about peace, say with Iran, 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, calculating the consequences of employing the levers of natural instinct, cajoling and goading people on the basis of their non-rational nature and somehow discerning nature’s purposes. And by characterizing selfishness and profit-maximizing motives as natural mechanism 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 (R 6:27), avarice (MM 6:432), envy (MM 6:458), selfishness, greed, miserliness (MM 6:433-4), and vanity (C 27:252; 409).
Contemporary philosophers tend to ignore Kant’s teleological arguments because they 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. I think there is a radically different way of looking at the arguments that should supplement our conception of a morally good person.

2.

Kant’s commentators tend to interpret these teleological arguments in light of Kant’s discussion of teleology in the Critique of Judgment. As they see it, these arguments are clearly questionable as statements of empirical fact, but they point out that teleology gives us grounds to 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 but is rather a regulative principle of the understanding that is indispensable for formulating scientific theories about living organisms like us. And the teleological arguments, according to them, are not primarily meant to give us practical guidance – indeed Kant emphasizes that just because nature wills something does not mean we have a duty to do it (PP 8:365). This line of interpretation regards the teleological arguments as part of a larger theoretical project of making our past and future intelligible to ourselves.

Kant’s theoretical 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 seems to be more practical than theoretical. Specifically, whatever else Kant may think about how to understand human beings from a scientific point of

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4 (Wood 1999; 2006; Guyer 2005)
view, the teleological arguments are mainly supposed to tell us what we can reasonably hope for from a practical point of view. As Kant 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).

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” (IUH 8:17), to “hope that, in this way, that which seems confused and irregular when considering particular individuals can nonetheless be recognized as a steadily progressing (IUH 8:17), and to “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).

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” (IUH 8:30) regarding the possibility of those ends and their likelihood of coming about in the future (cf. IUH 8:28; CF 7:8). Indeed after the quoted passage 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 (PP 8:368).

For Kant, the three great, yet distinct, questions of reason are about what we can know, what we should do and what we may hope (CPR A804-5/B 832-3).

3.

Suppose we start from a first-person, deliberative and practical standpoint in which our main concern is to fashion the world to our own conception of it rather than to represent the world as it is.\(^5\) From this point of view, Kant downplays the role that mere attitudes have in our practical lives and instead emphasizes the central place of action, of choosing, willing and end-setting, which require “the summoning of every means in our power” to bring about our aims (G

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\(^5\) “The *faculty of desire* is the faculty to be by means of one's representations the cause of the objects of these representations. The faculty of a being to act in accordance with its representations is called *life* (MM 6:211).
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. If we are subject to these duties, which Kant thinks we are, then we must take ourselves to have the freedom to fulfill them ourselves.\(^6\) We must therefore regard it as an open possibility that everyone successfully does his or her duty, which would result in an enlightened, just, and peaceful kingdom of ends.

Kant’s view is that our commitment to the moral law requires us to assume that it is possible for the moral law to be fully realized in our world. He 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 forced to postulate this as a possibility, for otherwise we cannot maintain our commitment to morality or regard ourselves and others as free. If we all somehow managed to do our duty, 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.

Not only does Kant does think we each have the bare 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 reason (R 6:27-8, CF 6:85). A rational, autonomous agent, according to Kant, inevitably accepts the moral law as rationally binding and tends to conform her actions to its requirements, even though she might not always successfully do so. Pure reason can be practical because it involves rational dispositions that are sufficient to move us to act, and we are

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\(^6\) This is the way Kant argues in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, from morality to freedom, whereas in the *Groundwork* he argued in the opposite direction, from freedom to morality.
most fully free when we act according to our own acknowledged rational standards. In a sense, reason itself is leading each of us toward moral perfection, while sensible inclinations and selfishness tend to impede its progress.

If having duties at all requires us, at least from a practical perspective, to countenance the possibility of their perfect realization through acts of freedom, and if reason itself is actively leading us to realize this ideal, why does Kant also see a need to invoke “the great artist nature” to “guarantee” (PP 8:360) that we achieve moral perfection in the long run through non-rational and often immoral means such as war, oppression, religious conflict, selfishness, jealousy, vanity and arrogance?

Part of the answer, I suggest, is that when we recognize pervasive natural obstacles to justice and virtue, we tend to experience cynicism and despair of a kind that tends to undercut our rational commitment to the moral law. We find such corrupting forces all around us, they pervade our history and seem likely to dominate our future, so Kant thinks it is a “need of reason” (CPrR 5:144; O 8:139) to overcome our apathy and hope that even the most disconcerting features of our world are actually leading us to somewhere better.

Even though our rational dispositions are actively guiding us toward moral perfection, when we consider the history of the human species “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). We may find ourselves resigned to our loathsome ways and even sometimes led to “hate or despise” our species and “want to have as little to do with them as possible” (TP 8:309 cf. CF 7:94, 4:83). When we observe war, gross inequality, economic oppression and the rest, learn about their dominant role in history, and consider the high likelihood that they will have a dominant place in our future against all of our efforts, we might find ourselves drawing the conclusion 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 toward the good to regress back to evil, we are led to regard our history as “a mere farcical comedy” (CF 4:82) and “a mockery” (TP 8:308) that can “endow our species with no greater value in the eyes of reason than that which other animal species possess” (CF 4:82). 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 empirical evidence may suggest to us that this goal is “chimerical” (PP 8:368), unfeasible and virtually impracticable.

The kind of “sorrow” (CB 8:120), self-loathing and apathy (TP 8:307) we may feel about ourselves and our species can become “a moral corruption” when there is no “hope for something better” (CB 8:120). 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 justice, peace and enlightenment if we regard them as hopeless dreams that are unlikely to come about in our world. Third, we also have a tendency, when we consider ourselves and our history, to blame our animal nature and social circumstances as not hospitable 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). 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.
Because of these tendencies, Kant proposes that “reason does let us hope [that the mechanism of nature] will be in accord with our wishes” (PP 8:370). He says he means to be giving “a justification of nature” (IUH 8:30) when he gives his teleological arguments and that:

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” (CPrR 5:144) to reasonably hope for God and immortality as necessary conditions for proportioning happiness to virtue, so Kant thinks we must reasonably hope that nature is hospitable and favorable to our moral perfection in order to sustain and continually reaffirm our rational commitment to the moral law. This is not merely a psychological claim about what non-rational impulses tend to lead us astray, which could perhaps ground an indirect duty to have reasonable hope. Kant is also proposing a further constitutive feature of rationality, as it is found in human beings. Such 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 respect they have for the moral law, which is a necessary requirement for being subject to duty at all (MM 6:402-3).

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 rationality requires us to hope that this is the case, that nature is structured in such a way as to 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 (PP 8:365), so 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 have a duty not to do so (CF 7:86). This seems to have been Kant’s attitude toward the French Revolution, which he both regards as wrong (MM 6:319-20) while also hoping that it would succeed in bringing about a just constitution (PP 8:374, cf. CF 7:86).

How does Kant understand the attitude of reasonable hope? First, when we reasonably hope that something will happen, we wish for it to happen, but do not necessarily will it to happen in the sense that we strive to bring it about through our actions (MM 6:213; 6:430; 6:441). Second, on the basis of this wish, we justifiably assume, from a practical point of view, that what we hope for is more likely to occur then the empirical evidence by itself warrants us in thinking from a theoretical point of view. Finally, we rely on our reasonable hopes rather than just the empirical evidence when making practical choices about what to do. For example, suppose that, according to our evidence, it is very likely that the only way to prevent a large and deadly bomb from exploding is to torture our suspect. If someone reasonably hopes that circumstances are such that we will never be faced with a grave choice between torturing someone and preventing a nearly certain disaster, she refuses to admit that things are as dire as they appear to her scientific advisors and instead assumes and act as if there other ways of defusing the situation. But as the time ticks down and the evidence mounts that there is no other way to stop the disaster, hope at a certain point becomes unreasonable wishful thinking and a decision based on a sober evaluation of the evidence will have to be made. When Kant looks to history, he finds that the empirical evidence is not decisive, so he advises us as reasonable people to wish for moral perfection and assume in our practical deliberations that it is likely to emerge:
Empirical evidence against the success of these resolutions made in hope has no bearing here” (TP 8:309).

When Kant argues that the spirit of trade, for example, decreases the likelihood of war, we can understand him as expressing reasonable hope that envy, jealousy, conceit and the other attitudes that 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 drive economic exchange. We must instead maintain our commitment to morality by seeing the world as progressively improving and resting content with this optimistic outlook as we strive to do our duty in a “cheerful spirit” (MM 6:485).

4.

There are various problems one might raise with Kant’s account, as I interpret it.

First, as Marxists 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.7 If we separate out questions, however, we find that Kant does not see reasonable hope as a way to rationalize the bad behavior of ourselves and others. Kant is emphatic that it is contrary to duty for us to wage war or engage in unconstrained profit-seeking; he thinks we are responsible for such actions, which are freely done, even if we were also 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 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, for example, 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 our moral perfection and justly and virtuously as possible.

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 were either impossible or strongly disfavored 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 are not virtually certain the reverse is true, can help to give us the strength we need to do our best to bring it about. The value of reasonable hope though 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 endeavor to comprehend ourselves and our place in history. It is clear that both themes are present in Kant, but I have suggested that what is primary and most crucial in the teleological arguments, although perhaps less so in the *Critique of Judgment*, is the idea of reasonable hope.
whereas Wood thinks that for Kant theoretical intelligibility of ourselves precedes such practical concerns.

Wood’s first objection is that, as he reads it, 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, however, that essay can be read as thoroughly practical, describing what we may reasonably hope for. Indeed Kant reiterates there his teleological argument that foreign trade diminishes war: Because 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”, “compelled by the threat to their own security, albeit without legal standing, [states] 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’s second criticism is to note 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 rightly points out that experience can 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 the same basis as the practical postulates. Even so, however, the empirical facts that could dash our reasonable hopes are usually unavailable to us as rational agents. When we are uncertain about the prospects of moral perfection, Kant thinks our
commitment to the moral law depends on hoping not just that moral perfection is possible, but that there are forces in nature that are amenable to it. Unlike the practical postulates, experience may prove our hopes unwarranted and irrational, but without decisive evidence one way or the other, reasonable hope is a constitutive feature of a rational person. Appealing to reasonable hope is not therefore an “intellectually dishonest” way of attempting to “decide dubious matters of empirical fact” (Wood 2006: 246) but is instead a rational wish that the world is steadily improving and a willingness to rely for certain practical purposes on that assumption.

Wood also argues that many of the ends we reasonably hope for, such as perpetual peace, are not pure rational ideas but are applications of reason to our particular history, which involves, for example, states who occupy territory in a limited world, so Kant must be presupposing a theoretical accounting of our history that provides part of the basis for what we should reasonable hope. In response, it is not clear that Kant must be appealing to the specifically teleological aspects of human history for the empirical conditions in which reasonable hope in, say, perpetual peace makes sense – at most what we would need, it seems, is the usual sort of empirical data about the existence of agents whose freedom can influence each other, who have organized into states that can themselves affect one another, etc. And we may not even need that much, because Kant can be understood as describing a priori models of the person and the world in which they live and claiming that, for such agents living in a world like that, it is reasonable for them to hope that nature is in the long run amenable to their moral perfection. Empirical evidence comes in only to help us decide whether the model applies to us in the real world.

When Kant claims that commerce between states is likely to bring peace, he takes for granted that there are states, economies and trade among them. Although a clear-eyed assessment of the odds makes his claim doubtful, Kant nonetheless commends to us as persons
of good will a reasonable hope that, as Martin Luther King, Jr. (1991: 632) put it, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice”.

Works cited


