Richard Rorty’s ‘Post-Kantian’ Philosophy of History

“...consider the kind of nation we may have in the middle of the next century, a period when U.S. yuppies may need not only to learn Japanese, but to know a lot about traditional Japanese culture, in order to get promoted within a U.S. economy owned and directed by Americanized Japanese.”
   -Richard Rorty, 1991

“But short odds seems no reason to stop constructing utopias.”

Introduction

In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Richard Rorty complains that Western philosophy has been steadfastly ahistoricist, and that his own particular brand of Pragmatism redresses this problem. In Achieving Our Country, however, Rorty uses his bully pulpit to do just what he claims to avoid in PMN, namely by (ahistorically) selecting out aspects of American history in service of his particular political ends. Hence while in his earlier work he suggests a course that will close off historical continuity, in his later work he relies on a selective continuity that belies his original claims. In this, ironically, Rorty is close to Kant himself, despite the way that he frames his understanding. In this paper, I argue that Rorty – and indeed all pragmatists – can benefit from appreciating the Pragmatic elements in Kant’s own philosophy of history.

In what follows, I have a lot of ground to cover, and I’ll try to keep my remarks as short as possible. I’ll begin with a few of Rorty’s disparagements of Kant, just to ensure we’re all up to speed together on this. Then, I’ll offer my interpretation of how Rorty reads Kant as a philosopher of history, showing how he assimilates Kant to the grand constitutive historical metaphysical narratives a la Hegel and Marx (though

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1 An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 2013 meeting of the Western Division of the American Philosophical Association; thanks go to Mark Bevir for inviting me and to Paul Roth for his helpful comments.
3 Ibid., 201, n. 26.
indeed perhaps Rorty should have said “Condorcet”), drawing on Rorty’s essays on the history of philosophy, particularly those collected in *Truth and Progress*. Next, I offer my own reading of Kant’s philosophy of history as a regulative progressivism, one that looks different from the dogmatic vision Rorty ascribes to him. Against this more sensitive reading of Kant, I then place Rorty’s own contributions to intellectual activism, particularly “Solidarity or Objectivity” and *Achieving Our Country*, showing how his approach is far more akin to Kant’s than Rorty allows. I conclude with reflections on Rorty’s philosophy of history as a version of “prophetic Pragmatism,” and suggest that the link between the two thinkers *in this particular regard* is considerable.

I should say in advance that I am a scholar of Kant and Dewey, not Rorty, and this is my first foray in making sense of things I earlier dismissed as naïve. In addition, I have a propagandistic aim of reinforcing the continuity between Pragmatism and German Idealism, for Rorty’s rejection of Kant in particular has unfortunately obscurantist implications given the long shadows he throws on the Pragmatic world.

I. Kant, Rorty’s Rhetorical Bugbear

In practically all of Rorty’s works, Kant plays the role of philosophical whipping-boy. The *enfant terrible* of Charlottesville invokes the sage of Königsberg as a symptom of everything that is supposedly wrong with philosophy. For Rorty, Kant is an abstract rigorist, a thinker who not only held on to the pointless quest for certainty, but whose apriorism spelled complete disregard for the actual problems facing humans in the real world. Rather than breaking the spell of epistemology, Kant’s Copernican Revolution in response to Hume’s skeptical predicament merely recapitulated it at a deeper level, adding to the usual concerns about how we can know the world a new and equally fruitless worry about conditions for the possibility of experience. Instead of transcending the Humean problematic, then, Kant reinforced it at a different frequency, for – as the work of Hegel demonstrates – the noumenal-phenomenal divide left subsequent philosophers with the pressing problem of reinscribing Kant’s division of the subject into a pure, rational
self and contingent empirical self within the greater metaphysical whole of Geist so that the twain can meet, somehow. Indeed, it is only with Hegel’s Phenomenology that Rorty espies the “beginning of the end of the Plato-Kant tradition and as a paradigm of the ironist’s ability to exploit the possibilities of massive redescription” (CIS, 78).

For Rorty, this “Plato-Kant tradition” orients philosophy towards “the impossible attempt to step outside our skins… and compare ourselves with something absolute” (CP, xix). Kant’s particular innovation in this millennia-long intellectual aim was to read the absolute as “the notion of philosophy as a tribunal of pure reason, upholding or denying the claims of the rest of culture” (PMN, 4). For Kant, of course, this required the identification of our deeper, noumenal nature as, well, deeper within us than the contingent phenomenal characters we present to the world. This “authentic” self is the one from which we take our orders, and insofar as this is a disembodied noumenal character, abstracted from all concrete qualities, to act in accordance with the dictates of pure reason, reality be damned!, is to act morally.

According to Rorty, the consequences of Kant’s position (and influence) are all deleterious. For one, Rorty suggests that Kant’s fixation on the Absolute leaves the qualitative uniqueness of an ethical situation uninterrogated, subordinating it to a preconceived schedule of right and wrong. As a universalist, Kant believes that “all the logical space necessary for moral deliberation is now available – that all important truths about right and wrong can not only be stated but be made plausible, in language already to hand” (TP 203). Any moral situation that arises is already conceivably resolvable given the Kantian framework; the algorithm is always right. This particular quote comes from an essay in which Rorty contrasts Kant’s universalism with Feminists’ attention to perspective, but it equally apropos to offer the moral vision of John Dewey, Rorty’s personal hero. For Dewey, no algorithm applies in every situation, and morality, as

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5 Consequences of Pragmatism (Cambridge 1982).
8 See “Feminism and Pragmatism.”
with all knowledge, must be understood in response to ethically problematic circumstances, each of which
demands unique assessment. Hence Dewey, in “Three Independent Factors in Morals,” offers deontology,
utilitarianism and virtue as parallel, irreducible criteria for moral reasoning, and suggests that moral inquiry
into a given situation alone can shed light on which factors are relevant for the purposes of resolving the
problem in question.9 Rorty likewise believes in inquiry, not theory. His preferred ethical framework is
negative: the best we can aim for is to reduce our cruelty,10 and he writes that in reading philosophy we
should “distinguish books which help us become autonomous from books which help us become less cruel”
(CIS, 141). Kant, of course, wrote books that (ostensibly) help us become autonomous, which can only
occur through the bifurcation of the self, as our empirical characters are entirely bound by the “mechanistic
causality” of nature (see, e.g., 5:388). Yet to seek autonomy is an impossible aim, for our undeniable place
in the realm of nature makes the reconciliation of is and ought the primary purpose of ethics towards others
and ethics towards the self. The result plunges humanity into a state of bad consciousness, to borrow a term
from Hegel, whereby an acknowledgement of the Absolute comes with the distressing realization that we
shall forever be alienated from our supposedly authentic rational essence. A philosophy meant to free
humanity from the burden of heteronomy, to liberate us from the dual dangers of dogmatism and
transcendental illusion, ends up substituting new dogma and illusions in place of the old.11

Rorty’s reading of Kant’s “desire for purity”12 carries over into his understanding of Kant’s philosophy
of history. To be brief, Kant presumed moral progress in history and thought that it could only be fomented
by, to put it in Rorty’s terms, making people more rational. This approach of Kant’s translates practically
into a politics of discrimination and exclusion, for it is predicated on dividing humanity into those, like Kant

10 Rorty follows Judith Shklar in his definition of Liberals as “people who think cruelty is the worst thing we do” (CIS, xv). See
11 See Rorty’s comments about the “post-Kantian” (i.e. “Kantian”) inheritance in contemporary philosophy, TP 118, CIS 30.
(or his philosophical adherents), who are “paradigmatic humans” and those who are beyond the pale.\textsuperscript{13} Rorty writes of three binaries regularly employed to effect this exclusion: animal/human, adult/child, and male and non-male. Kant arguably employs all of these binaries,\textsuperscript{14} but the second in particular evidently refers to his famous definition of enlightenment as removal of the self from one’s self-incurred minority; in “What is Enlightenment?,” Kant explains that this entails gaining one’s voice in public affairs, a capacity based on autonomous, critical reflection in which humans must be trained.\textsuperscript{15} What’s more, as Kant explains in the Third Critique, this training requires both the negative discipline to not act heteronomously (according with Kant’s notion of “humanity”) and the positive cultivation of moral character as autonomy (according with his notion of “personality”) (5:431-2; cf. A709/B737-- A710/B738).\textsuperscript{16} At best, this sort of distinction between those who can and those who could, if only they’d be more like us, leaves us estranged from our fellow humans, with whom Rorty thinks we should have solidarity – in the words of Elias Canetti, “[m]an petrifies and darkens in the distances he has created.”\textsuperscript{17} At worst, it foments cruelty, a possibility dramatized by Rorty by Serbian atrocities committed against their supposedly sub-human Muslim countrymen.

Now Rorty isn’t entirely negative. He praises Kant and Plato because they “prophesied cosmopolitan utopias – utopias most of whose details they may have gotten wrong, but utopias we might never have struggled to reach had we not heard their prophecies” (\textit{TP} 173). On its face, this is rather faint praise. Linking Kant and Plato into the same project alone might raise hackles for fans of either thinker (or responsible scholars), for the relatively undetailed Kantian highest goods of perpetual peace and an ethical community of ends stand in significant contrast to Plato’s highly structured (and totalitarian \textit{avant la lettre}) just polity. Moreover, practically everything that matters in the political philosophy of Kant and Plato alike concerns the nature of their respective utopias, such that praising the presence of a utopia is akin to praising

\textsuperscript{14} I say “arguably” only because Kant would have preferred “rational being/animal” rather than the binary “human/animal,” in line with his universalism.
\textsuperscript{15} Rorty quotes Habermas paraphrasing Kant at \textit{TP} 234.
\textsuperscript{16} On the distinction between humanity and personality, see Allen Wood, \textit{Kant’s Ethical Thought} (Cambridge 1999), ch. 4.3.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Crowds and Power} (New York 1984), 18.
the fact that a friend has a car, without which you wouldn’t have thought of getting one. Things get more
dire in “The End of Leninism, Havel, and Social Hope,” where Rorty draws a sharp divide between thinkers
like Kant who aim for social progress predicated on the correct knowledge of the Absolute, and activists
like Vaclav Havel who reject grand metaphysical narratives in favor of creative responses to concrete
political problems, looking “to the future rather than to eternity” (TP 175). In this essay, Kant’s position as
sketched elsewhere by Rorty is assigned to Lenin – another provocative parallel for obvious reasons. Lenin,
Hegel, Marx and their ilk (Rorty writes) all see history as “History,” “a temporialized substitute for God or
Nature, as a large blurry object around which to weave our concrete fantasies” (TP 240). For similar reasons
to those noted in the previous paragraph, Rorty avers that it is time to give up the “Hegelian blur,” the
“Marxist blur” (TP 233), and indeed any totalizing conception of History based on a thinker’s conviction
that “they know, or ought to know, something about deep, underlying forces – forces that determine the
fates of human communities” (TP 228) and instead, with Havel and Dewey, work at opposing injustice in
“small experimental ways” (ibid.).

II. Turning back to Kant

“The root of Kantian optimism… is a horror of relapsing into barbarism.”
– Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 67.18

It will come as no surprise that Rorty’s reading of Kant is contestable, even tendentious; it is
something of a scholarly sport to point out his misinterpretations, especially within Pragmatism.19 Insofar as
Rorty holds that the best hope for philosophy is for the discipline to dissolve and that the quest for certainty
should be supplanting by the quest for “finding the right jargon to frame hypotheses” (CP 193), calling him
out on the precision of his scholarship may be beside the point: his preferred approach insouciantly jettisons

18 Stanford 1999.
19 See, for example, Robert Westbrook’s description of correcting Rorty time and again at conferences (See the Introduction and
Chapter 6 of his Democratic Hope [Cornell 2005]). Many of the criticisms lodged at Rorty, however, evidence little familiarity with
his work, if conference-hall conversations are representative.
objectivity for the sake of solidarity. Yet I wonder if his redescription here goes too far, for I believe Rorty has an ally in Kant, whose philosophy of history is far more supple and sophisticated than Rorty suggests. One problem is clearly Rorty’s broad brush approach to the history of philosophy. Ironically, for a Pragmatist who decries artificial dichotomies as philosophical rigmarole, Rorty proposes a Manichean view of the possible positions one might hold concerning moral and political progress. For Rorty, the law of the excluded middle applies: one can be Lenin (bad) or Havel (good), nothing else.

Kant’s philosophy of history falls between these extremes, and the epigraph from Adorno and Horkheimer above (taken from an exceptionally critical treatment of Kant that likens him to the Marquis de Sade) reveals why: his optimism stems from a fear of relapsing into barbarism. As it stands, this statement is only partly accurate, but if we unpack it according to Kant’s own texts, we will see that a more accurate, modified version of Kant’s conception, namely that his hope stems from a fear of relapsing into barbarism, we will see that Rorty’s fear of cruelty is at the root of his own social hope. This comment is not to say there are no significant differences between Rorty and Kant on the details of utopia and the content of the morality that can lead us to the promised land, of course, but to suggest that the two share as much as they differ. Interestingly, Rorty’s praise of Kant’s prophetic vision plays a large part of my claim, for it points us to an important yet overlooked section of the latter’s underappreciated essay on Theory and Practice concerning prophecy that reveals Rorty to be abusing the phrase as Kant meant it. Before getting there, however, I’ll first give a brief synopsis of Kant’s philosophy of history.

Kant accepts that appearance and reality are distinct, yet he denies the possibility of bridging the gap between the two. Empiricism had reduced human knowledge to what could be inferred by sense experience, collapsing reality to the play of appearances. Causality was its greatest casualty, for if we can

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20 See, e.g., Rorty’s “Solidarity or Objectivity?,” in Objectivity, Relativism and Truth.

21 For a longer version of this reading of Kant, see my “In Defense of Blinders,” Political Theory 40:4 (August 2012), 497-523. While there are a number of good works on Kant’s philosophy of history, the single best treatment is Pauline Kleingeld’s Fortschritt und Vernunft (1995); see also Allen Wood, Kant’s Ethical Thought (1999), Robert Louden’s Kant’s Impure Ethics (Oxford 2000), and Emil Fackenheim’s classic article, “Kant’s Concept of History,” Kant-Studien 48 (1956/1957), 381-398.
only know what we gather from perception, discrete observations cannot be objectively linked: in David Hume’s words, “constant conjunction,” i.e. the regular appearance of two events in close chronology, does not equal “necessary connexion” (Hume 1978, I. 3). Kant attempted to rescue causation by distinguishing between the “phenomenal” and the “noumenal,” or things as they appear to us and as they really are in themselves (A235/B294-A260/B315). Whatever the world’s real nature, appearances must accord with certain logical and ontological categories if experience is to be coherent: they must possess quality, quantity, volume, and be (apparently) causally related, for example. While we lack insight into things as they are in themselves, the distinction between appearance and reality enables us to at least conceive of the possibility that empiricism alone does not describe the entirety of human experience. In Kant’s language, though we may not make constitutive claims about the reality of these transcendental ideas, we may still accept regulative “heuristic fictions” (A771/B799) as true for the sake of practical reason. While the reality of freedom is unknowable, for instance, we may nevertheless assume it lest moral responsibility become meaningless. What stands in ethics stands in politics, and taking a noumenal perspective enables Kant to maintain useful fictions like historical progress and perpetual peace without making dogmatic claims about the actual nature of reality. The empirical record concerning both progress and peace may be indeterminate, yet the negative conceptual space of the noumenon holds out at least their practical conceivability, and should we ever hope to realize these ends among appearances, we must act as if they were live possibilities encouraged by nature (8:29; see also Kant 2006). Kant’s philosophy of history then aims to make practical action compelling in a world where there are no scientific reasons for believing morality to be possible.

The idea of progress provides the framework in Kant for both political understanding and action, parallel to the role of the transcendental ideas in his epistemological and moral work. We must project hope in progress because empirical history shows at best no direction and at worst only decline. A glance through the annals reveals “bustling foolishness” to be characteristic of our species (7:82, cf. 6:20), and
“despite the occasional semblance of wisdom to be seen in individual actions, [human activity appears] all to be made up, by and large, of foolishness, childish vanity, and, often enough, even of childish wickedness and destructiveness” (8:18, cf. 6:33). This appearance of destruction notwithstanding, the determination of a systematic historical tendency cannot ultimately be gleaned from empirical history, for the permanence of any perceived directionality in a snapshot can never be ascertained. Given this indeterminacy, Kant holds that there are nonetheless good reasons to employ the idea of progress for the satisfaction of theoretical and practical reason. Moreover, like the ideas of reason in epistemological and moral works, Kant’s historical works elevate the practical use of progress over its theoretical use, though there is considerably less daylight between these two aspects of his thought here than in his systematic writings. In both cases, however, historical cognition is geared towards action in the service of the highest good, and practical belief in progress is meant to empower the self-amelioration of humanity towards a peaceful and just future.

As a hypothesis, progress is Kant’s answer to the question of how we are to comprehend history as a chain of phenomenal events. Since to do so requires we postulate a historical telos, and since Kant argues that the end (Zweck) of history is the development of humans in their capacities as moral actors, this theoretical use of the idea of progress becomes bound up with its practical use as a regulative guarantor of humanity’s moral-political efficacy. This hermeneutic aspect of progress as a hypothesis is most evident in the “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective,” whose title is itself significant: with it, Kant intends to offer an empirically unverifiable “Idea” for understanding history should we be interested in explaining it systematically as a product of nature. Whatever we hold of human freedom, we must recognize that action is instantiated in empirical events, and insofar as history is “a narrative account of these appearances” (8:17) we may ask “whether we can discover a guiding principle [Leitfaden] for such a history” (8:18). Answering in the affirmative, Kant writes that this “philosophical attempt to describe the universal history

22 See Kleingeld, Fortschritt und Vernunft, and Lindstedt, “Kant: Progress in Universal History as a Postulate of Practical Reason.”
23 One of the few faults of Kleingeld’s Fortschritt und Vernunft is its tendency to separate Kant’s historical essays according to their theoretical and practical import, when in fact the two run together in all of his pieces.
of the world according to a plan of nature that aims at the perfect civic union of the human species must be considered to be possible and even to promote this intention of nature” (8:29, emphasis in original). Like the teleological research program for investigating the eye, the regulative assumption of teleology in history aids us in promoting its “natural” end, the realization of a cosmopolitan whole in which rationality gains traction over heteronomous impulses towards strife. Hence the role of Kant’s doctrine of “un-social sociability,” a heuristic allowing political actors to practically believe nature is at least amenable to peace and justice. Empirical history undeniably shows human inclinations towards both sociability and selfishness (8:20-21): though the latter quality draws individuals into conflict, it also encourages them to develop their capacities for the sake of survival in a hostile world. The struggle between sociability and selfishness may never end, but its negative effects can be mitigated in a rightfully constituted civil society, “one in which its members continually struggle with each other and yet in which the limits of this freedom are specified and secured in the most exact manner, so that such freedom of each is consistent with that of others” (8:22). The last three propositions of “Idea for a Universal History” as well as “Perpetual Peace” extend this logic to external relations between states and hence to the highest political good. Nature “guarantees” perpetual peace by virtue of the visibly purposive mechanical course history takes “to create harmony through discord among people” (8:360). Though war is the ultimate evil, its horrors may nonetheless prompt humanity to develop stable institutional structures for peace. From the perspective of theoretical reason, teleology offers a hermeneutic framework for hope, without which political action would appear pointless.

The hypothetical use of progress for reading empirical events bleeds quickly into its use as a postulate for normative conduct, and in “Theory and Practice,” “The Conflict of the Faculties,” and the late sections of the Third Critique, this other aspect of historical teleology comes to the fore. In these works, furthermore, the action-theoretic function of the idea of progress is especially evident. The moral argument

24 Compare Kant’s proposal to use the book of Genesis as a “map” for imagining the early history of humankind with “a guiding thread connected to experience by reason” (8:109-110), namely the eventual development of the species’ intellectual and moral capacities on which the cosmopolitan condition is predicated, in his “Conjectural Beginning of Human History.”
for progress parallels the logic of the postulate of immortality in the Second Critique: since it is impossible by any reckoning to achieve the highest good in this lifetime, it can only be something approachable over many generations, for only over the long course of history can humans experiment sufficiently to design institutions and hit upon the appropriate modes of cultural formation for the realization of our rational capacities.\footnote{See 8:18–19.} If this is the case, however, we must be able to think that history is at least amenable to progress.

Thus faced with the choice of viewing history as moving regressively, recurrently or progressively, Kant argues that the last option alone is tenable from the perspective of our practical interests. He dismisses the regressive conception out of hand, calling it “moral terrorism” because of its adherents’ unseemly yearning for “the re-creation of all things and a newly born world after this one has gone down in flames” (7:81; cf. 8:308). The recurrent conception, “abderitism,”\footnote{Named after ancient Abdera, a city renowned for its citizens’ stupidity, satirized by Kant’s contemporary Christoph Martin Wieland in his \textit{Geschichte der Abderiten}.} holds human history to be nothing more than a directionless hither and thither, an “empty bustling, letting good and evil alternate by moving forward and backward” (7:82). Kant offers several different arguments against this view, all of which have the rational need of humanity at their heart. In “The Conflict of the Faculties,” he claims that abderitism demeans human dignity, since it “would require regarding the entire play of interaction of our species with itself on this planet as a mere prank, which can lend it no greater worth in the eyes of reason than that of other animal species that engage in this game with far lesser costs and without the use of intellect” (7:82; cf. 8:380).

A fuller arsenal of arguments is deployed in “Theory and Practice,” where Kant seeks to establish that the human race is “as a whole to be loved” (8:307). Presented as a rebuttal of Moses Mendelssohn’s abderitism,\footnote{Kant is responding to Mendelssohn’s claim that “the human race as a whole makes small oscillations; and it has never made steps forward without soon thereafter slipping back in to its previous states with twice the speed” (8:307–8). For this citation, see Mendelssohn, \textit{Jerusalem}, 44–47.} Kant’s begins his this essay with the familiar claim that a recurrent conception of history offends human dignity (8:308) and is therefore precluded by our practical certainty about moral duty. He
makes this point forcefully, insisting that the obligation to promote humanity’s moral vocation trumps theoretical skepticism about its real possibility in history, for “however [theoretically] uncertain I am and may remain about whether improvement is to be hoped for in the human race, this uncertainty cannot detract from my maxim and thus from the necessary supposition for practical purposes that it is practicable” (8:309). While historical progress may be occasionally interrupted, he writes, we have to assume it can never be fully broken off. Were the latter possible, our ultimate moral ends would be incapable of actualization, and “the dismal reign of chance thus replaces the guiding principle of reason” (8:18).

Historical progress therefore safeguards our moral vocation and grounds our confidence in the possibility of approaching our ends; without it, as without the postulates of pure practical reason, Kant thinks humans cannot even anticipate the efficacy of their agency. As he puts it in “Conjectural Beginnings of Human History,” looking to history as if it were providentially ordered must be done “in part so that one can still take heart in the face of such labors” (8:121) required by the moral law. Kant’s view of history is accordingly a regulative, critical chiliasm to be distinguished from a simple blind faith in the development of human harmony.

Where Adorno and Horkheimer quote gets things wrong is in characterizing Kant’s perspective as “optimism,” a term better associated with the constitutive belief that progress is happening and will continue to happen. Condorcet’s “Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind” is one such optimistic contemporary text; Godwin’s Enquiry Concerning Human Justice is another. The sort of chiliasm that such thinkers offer was associated by Kant with doctrinal religion, and he rejects such constitutive assumptions of historical progress because they can only offer “sanguine hopes” that make it “untenable” (7:82). Kant’s chiliasm differs from such doctrinal wishes because it places human agency and not a mysterious harmonious tendency at the center of history: “this is a chiliasm the idea of which, although only from very far away, can itself promote its realization, and which is, for that reason, anything but fanciful” (8:27). Kant had once held a constitutively optimistic view, drawn from Alexander Pope’s “An
Essay on Man,” but he had long dropped that belief by the time of the critical turn (and perhaps even by the beginning of his “silent decade”). 28 Instead of optimism, Kant proposes hope, defined by uncertainty over the future. Hope is anticipatory, but does not entail expectation: it does not guarantee the future will be better, but rather posits the possibility of the future being better. As such, hope does not ultimately construct History as immutably progressive so much as it allows us to conceive of the world as if it were open to progress. Progress, if it can occur at all, can only be effectuated by human activity, which means republican reforms at the level of the state, socialization towards moral personality at the level of society, and the duty to be virtuous at the level of the individual.

Now before turning back to Rorty’s own vision of the philosophy of history, there’s one crucial aspect of Kant’s “Theory and Practice” that deserves mention: his understanding of prophecy. Rorty, recall, praises Kant and Plato alike for having constructed prophetic utopias, without which we would have never even begun to strive towards them. Rorty appears to think that prophecy differs from the epistemological thrust of Kant’s philosophy because rather than offer an “immanent teleology” of increasingly undistorted knowledge coming into the world, it accepts that “evolution has no purpose and humanity no nature” (TP 206-207) and posits a future open with possibilities, good and bad, but announces a yearning for amelioration and works towards the realization of a brighter tomorrow. What’s striking is that Kant himself proposed a conception of prophecy that makes the plausibility of regulative immanent teleology rely on human collective action toward its prophetic end. In a section of The Conflict of the Faculties entitled “Whether the human race is constantly improving for the better,” Kant argues that this is only answerable a priori, and that in normal circumstances such an a priori history is unacceptable, given the restrictions on constitutive claims about the real nature of the world. The only way in which a history of the future is possible a priori is in a prophetic register, however. A “prophetic” (wahrsagende: “sooth-saying”) history of

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28 See his “Versuch einiger Betrachtungen über den Optimismus” (1759), in Ak 2:27-37. Dreams of a Spirit-Seer (1766) suggests that Kant had already given up his constitutive optimism.
the future is possible a priori “if the prophet himself brings about and prepares the events that he announces in advance” (7:80; cf. 7:188). Kant’s examples of prophetic history are entirely negative, however: the Jewish prophets foretold their nation’s doom only to become “themselves agents of this fate;” contemporary politicians argue that people cannot live responsibly, ignoring the fact that the people have been made docile “by means of unjust coercion;” and the clergy “occasionally prophesy the complete decline of religion and the imminent coming of the Antichrist while doing precisely what is required to make it so” (SF 7:80). These negative examples notwithstanding, Kant’s entire project in the philosophy of history is an exercise in prophecy, for he himself is the prophetic agent of the future. Indeed, taken together with his important claim in the Third Critique that “it is [mankind’s] vocation to be the ultimate end of nature; but always only conditionally, that is, subject to the condition that he has the understanding and the will to give to nature and to himself a relation to and end that can be sufficient for itself independently of nature…” (5:431; cf. 8:19).

Though teleological history is in the service of effectuating humanity’s duty to seek justice and peace, the presumption of this historical schema is contingent upon the willingness of humans to strive for these ends. We may entertain hope if and only if we act in a manner that can conceivably realize this progress; this is the crux of Kant’s conception of secular prophecy.

So what of the particular conception of the highest good that regulative historical teleology makes possible? Rorty clearly opposes any a priorism or universalism, both catchwords of Kant’s approach, and indeed Kant believes that all humans share the same practical interests and hence will converge on the same understanding of their moral vocation. I agree with Rorty here, yet also believe that Kant can be modified to allow the intersubjective negotiation of the utopia for which we aim. Indeed, as much as I find Kant’s regulative framework illuminating for understanding political action, the content of his claims rightly arouses misgivings. Rorty is right that we should doubt that Kant adequately identifies the highest good, and indeed whether social action aims at the highest good at all. Whether one takes the idea of the highest good
in its individual signification as the confluence of virtue and happiness or in its social signification as a world under rational laws, neither is obviously the ultimate moral or political aim. Both ends are undoubtedly good, but need not play for us the almost fetishistic role they do in Kant’s thought. We can maintain a pluralism about the good without rejecting the insight that goods are nonetheless aims to be achieved, and that the process of striving for a good’s realization presupposes a story about how the end is possible. Furthermore, while Kant was himself skeptical of democratic governance – a point that democratic peace theorists miss when assimilating his republicanism to modern mass democracy – it is reasonable to see the aims of concerted political action oriented intersubjectively by the members of the public.

III. Rorty’s American Jeremiad

“Prophecy… is all that non-violent political movements can fall back on when argument fails”

-Rorty, TP 207

If we take these qualifications to heart, we can see that Rorty’s own approach to history mirrors rather than opposes Kant’s. Three aspects of Rorty’s thought in particular suggest this affinity: like Kant, Rorty trucks in hope, not optimism; like Kant, Rorty offers a prophetic narrative; and like Kant, Rorty selects an image of a utopian end that makes possible the realization of that end, even if we have no objective grounds for otherwise believing in its realizability. Since my time is short, I’ll approach these issues in quick succession, focusing especially on Achieving Our Country (1998), Rorty’s longest treatment of politics and progress.

Hope is the simplest of these to dispense with, if only because Rorty does not give any detailed analysis of the topic. Instead, he invokes hope regularly as the necessary stance we should hold towards the future. 29 In “The End of Leninism, Havel, and Social Hope,” for example, Rorty does not so much define

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hope as contrast its openness with the closed worldview of teleological philosophies of history, and he suggests – drawing on Kenneth Burke – that we see history “as a collection of cautionary tales rather than a coherent dramatic narrative” (TP 242). In “Method, Social Science, Social Hope,” Rorty offers that the hope he envisions is “doesn’t need reinforcement from 'the idea of a transcendental or enduring subject’” (CP 206, emphasis in original). Instead, it is an “unjustifiable hope,” predicated on an “ungrounded but vital sense of human solidarity” (CP 208). While this call to hope is not necessarily Kantian, Rorty’s exposition in this essay nonetheless bears striking resemblances to Kant’s own arguments for the regulative need for a concept of possible progress, a need of reason that can guide our conception of history, as it were, by choice.

This can be seen in both the way that Rorty understands justification and in how he frames his discussion of hope. A justified hope, in contrast to Rorty’s unjustifiable hope, is one that presumably takes its impetus from the true inner essence of history, what Kant would call a constitutive account. An unjustifiable hope, by contrast, rests only on the need for human solidarity, which itself is a necessary orientation if we want to avoid cruelty, the worst thing that one can do. Rorty’s discussion, furthermore, offers a choice between Foucault and Dewey, two thinkers who he considered to have broken the spell of certainty and truth undergirding the Western philosophical tradition. As Rorty sees it, Foucault and Dewey are engaged in the same critical project of reorienting thought towards “current practical concerns, rather than a putative ontological status” (CP 203), albeit in very different ways.

One can emphasize, as Dewey did, the moral importance of the social sciences – their role in widening and deepening our sense of community and of the possibilities open to this community. Or one can emphasize, as Michel Foucault does, the way in which the social sciences have served as instruments of “the disciplinary society,” the connection between knowledge and power rather than knowledge and human solidarity (CP 203-204).

Which side to emphasize? That depends on one’s ends. There are no good theoretical reasons to choose one approach over the other, for Foucault and Dewey do not, according to Rorty, differ over theoretical

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30 Rorty is citing Ian Hacking’s review of Foucault’s Power/Knowledge.
issues.  Instead, the difference between them concerns the answer to Kant’s question of what we may hope (CP 204). On Rorty’s reading, Foucault sees humankind as mired in knowledge/power such that the desire to escape our frame is naïve; Dewey, on the other hand, “gives mankind an opportunity to grow up, to be free to make itself, rather than seeking direction from some imagined outside source” (CP 204). Dewey’s experimentalism “asks us to see knowledge-claims as proposals about what actions to try out next” (CP 204).

At the close of this section I’ll draw the lines of connection to Kant more comprehensively, but here it might be wise to note that Kant might not disagree with Rorty in general. Kant, too, allows that the impossibility of constitutively true knowledge about human nature enables us to choose to believe in a progressive philosophy of history for the sake of moral progress itself. Indeed, Kant, too, holds that his practical philosophy “gives mankind an opportunity to grow up, to be free to make itself” – we shall see in a moment how Rorty’s suggestion that this is only possible when one does not seek direction from an outside source is belied by his own selective vision of America as a utopian ideal.

Rorty’s appeal to prophecy offers a second point of connection with Kant. Prophecy has received increasing attention from political theorists in recent years, particularly from those studying African-American thought. Cornel West – a Rorty student – is perhaps the best known representative of this orientation, labeling his idiosyncratic blend of Pragmatism, Marxism and Liberation Theology “prophetic Pragmatism.” As George Shulman explains in a recent work on the topic, the term “prophet” “names the public role of those who address a community by mediating its relationship to the larger realities conditioning its existence and choices.” Prophecy is then “a genre of speech and form of action that people at once live, problematize and revise – to address the demands of their day.” Prophetic writing, moreover, tends to be formulaic, and the Jeremiad provides its basic shape: the prophet, like the biblical Jeremiah,

31 “Here we have two philosophers saying the same thing but putting a different spin on it” (CP 205). On the relationship between Dewey and Foucault, see Colin Koopman, Pragmatism as Transition (Columbia 2009).
33 George Shulman, American Prophecy (Minnesota 2008), 2-3.
recalls the collective memory of a Golden Age, Cockaigne,\textsuperscript{34} or once strong common moral virtues, laments our subsequent social decline, and sketches the present as a crossroad at which we face the momentous choice of continuing on the path of decline or to taking ameliorative action to reverse this slide.\textsuperscript{35} One of Shulman’s canonical modern prophets is James Baldwin, who strove to redeem America from its sad history of slavery, and struggled (even after his departure for France in order to escape American racism) to bring his former compatriots to reckon with the deep scar of white supremacy. Only with such a reckoning can America finally realize the egalitarian ethos it claims to represent.

In Rorty’s work, prophecy is linked intimately to America, and the declension narrative of \textit{Achieving Our Country} fits the mold of the secularized jeremiad to a tee. The title is itself a phrase of Baldwin’s, who writes that if whites and blacks can recognize each other, “we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country” (\textit{AOC} 13).\textsuperscript{36} Just as Baldwin laments the failure of his nation to realize its own self-image, Rorty laments what he considers the failure of the American Left to stay true to its ameliorative ideals. According to Rorty, the first two thirds of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century were rich with thinkers who engaged public problems with an eye to a progressive future, and Dewey and Whitman are prime examples of “this civic religion”; now (in 1998), “[t]he academic Left has no projects to propose to America, no vision of a country to be achieved by building a consensus on the need for specific reforms” (\textit{AOC} 15).

Rorty identifies the good days of engaged public intellectuals working for social justice with the “Old Left,” restyled by Rorty as the “Reformist Left,” “all those Americans who, between 1900 and 1964, struggled within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong” (\textit{AOC} 43). The culprit for the decline was the “New Left,” “the people – mostly students – who decided, around 1964, that it was no longer to work for social justice within the system” (\textit{ibid.}). In Rorty’s eyes, this New Left’s present incarnation is the “Cultural Left,” an academic class that fixates on “otherness” and identity in order

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\item On Cockaigne, see Herman Pleij, \textit{Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life} (Columbia 2001).
\item \textit{Achieving Our Country} (Harvard 1998).
\end{enumerate}
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to redress the historical humiliation of subaltern groups instead of the material well-being and political freedoms a good society demands (AOC 80). By ignoring the plight of the poor and unemployed, the Cultural Left is complicit in the continued marginalization of vast swathes of the American population.

For Rorty, the question of America’s future depends on our selection of the relevant moments in its past to bring into focus, for the country, like Whitman, contains multitudes. The argument between Left and Right “about which episodes in our history we Americans should pride ourselves on will never be a contest between a true and false account of our country’s history and identity. It is better described as an argument about which hopes to allow ourselves and which to forgo” (AOC 13-14). Rorty’s earlier claim that the choice between Foucault and Dewey concerns what hopes we may hold is apropos, for the argument between competing American Lefts is the same debate: the Old Left hoped for solidarity and justice; the New Left hoped for (in Rorty’s estimation) nothing. In choosing our future, we choose our past; in choosing our past, we choose our future.

Since this isn’t a paper about the details of Rorty’s particular conception of America or the specific claims made in Achieving Our Country, we needn’t interrogate his history too thoroughly. Rorty himself would undoubtedly not be concerned with the “truth” of his account. What interests me in our context is how closely Rorty’s vision approaches Kant’s. The framework is identical: the world has no evident meaning, and indeed if one were to see history wie es eigentlich gewesen ist, we would still have little sense of a directional tendency or the inchoate, latent political possibilities of the past, present or future. For this very reason, we are permitted to hope, and indeed the nature of that hope will derive from how we conceive of ourselves as citizens, of the whole to which we belong. What’s more, Rorty seems in Achieving Our Country to explode the strictures he places on his “ungrounded” and “unjustifiable” hope. As noted

37 Several good discussions of Achieving Our Country can be found in Robert Westbrook, Democratic Hope, ch. 6, and Judith Green, Pragmatism and Social Hope (Columbia 2008), 15-20 and ch. 1. Rogers Smith’s Civic Ideals (Yale 1999) demonstrates that the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion have been constitutive features of the American polity since its inception, suggesting that Rorty’s sanguine hope may be naïve if not tethered to at least some aspects of his reviled Cultural Left.
before, Rorty’s social hope is intended to allow humans to freely reconstruct themselves, “rather than seeking direction from some imagined outside source” (CP 204) or with the presumption of a “transcendent or enduring subject” (CP 206). What, however, is Rorty’s “America,” save for an imaginary outside source or transcendent and enduring subject? Just like Kant, who acknowledges that his progressive philosophy of history is an only practically justifiable “Idea” for how we might imagine of ourselves as members of an inchoate, solidaristic ethical community, Rorty presents his America as a practically justifiable narrative in order to allow us to strive to realize what is – in terms Rorty would abhor – our genuinely progressive natures.

IV. Conclusion

Rorty writes that we need to revise our conception of moral progress from one in which we gradually get to an undistorted perspective to one in which we “talk about the need to modify our practices so as to take account of new descriptions of what has been going on” (TP 206). If indeed the real issue is “finding the right jargon” (CP 193) to express our hopes, then Kant and Rorty are far closer than contemporary pragmatists (and Rorty himself) would have one believe, for both thinkers maintain a regulative notion of historical progress whose content is ultimately rooted in the need for orientating our practices towards collective ends. The particularities of each thinker’s approach are not identical, of course, as Kant grounds his understanding of history in humanity’s ostensibly objective moral vocation, while Rorty considers justice and other political goals as masks for “larger loyalty” rather than any genuinely transcendental self.18 Yet this difference too can be exaggerated, as both philosophers acknowledge in the last instance that we can know nothing more than what we contribute to the world, and that we and we alone are burdened with fulfilling our own prophecies.