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 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 insight about the moral life by partially describing what a good and virtuous person reasonably hopes for.

The most apparent obstacles to a just, enlightened and peaceful social world are also, according to Immanuel Kant, nature’s way of compelling us to realize those good ends.¹ In his ethical writings, Kant denounces natural human tendencies of selfishness, miserliness, greed, rivalry, quarrelsomeness, envy, jealousy, self-conceit as vices that we must guard against. These natural propensities to dominate others, acquire what is theirs, and lord our successes over them, according to Kant, are often encouraged and expressed by open market competition, which tends to produce oppressive economic inequalities along with deceptive and coercive behavior, as well as outright war, which Kant describes as the “source of all evil and corruption of morals.”²

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.³ Echoing Adam Smith’s idea of the “invisible hand,” in which even

¹ Thanks to Thomas Hill, Markus Kohl, Clerk Wolf, Jennifer Baker, Jon Garthoff, Stephen Palmquist as well as participants at the 2013 UK Kant Society Conference and at a 2013 Eastern APA panel for valuable discussion about this paper.
² IUH 8: 22; CF 7: 86.
³ CB 8: 121.
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. He also thinks that war forces us to settle the globe and join together into a state under a Republican constitution, the threat of war impels 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, war can lead to revolutions that pave the way for more just political arrangements, and the costly preparations for war, its draining aftermath, and the civil unrest it causes leads states to seek peace with one another through an international federation.

Although we have imperfect duties not to over-indulge 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.

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 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

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4 (Smith, Campbell, & Skinner, 1976b; Smith & Haakonsen, 2002). IUH 8: 22.
5 PP 8: 363, 365-6; CB 8: 27-8, 120-121; CB 8: 121; PP 8: 374; CF 7: 85; R 6: 35; IUH 8: 24; TP 8: 310.
immoral acts of war, revolution and unrestrained market competition as well as praise evil aspects of our nature that we must strive to overcome in doing our duty.

Kant’s practical 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 radically different way of looking at the arguments, however, that helps to fill out one of Kant’s deep and important insight about the moral life. By appealing to the “invisible hand” of nature as working through our inclinations to 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 reasonably hopes for.6

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, 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 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 moral perfection as a vain and delusive dream. In order to prevent these deliberative tendencies form leading us to lose faith in morality and simply indulging our desires for power and wealth, I suggest that Kant thinks we must reasonably hope that nature is hospitable and favorable to our moral perfection so that we can sustain and

6 My account is inspired by some remarks Rawls (2000) makes in his lectures on Kant as well as by (Sussman, 2005, 2010).
continually reaffirm our rational commitment to the moral law. We need not believe that war, oppression, unrestrained market competitiveness or other corrosive forces will actually lead to a better future, but only hope from a practical point of view that nature is structured in such a way as to be hospitable to 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.

**The spirit of trade**

If Kant were simply relying on empirical data to justify his assertion, for example, that in the long run foreign trade tend 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 toward perpetual peace, culture, enlightenment and moral perfection. There is room for considerable doubt 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 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, avarice, envy, selfishness, greed, miserliness, and vanity.  

Two perspectives on moral progress

Kant’s commentators tend to interpret his teleological arguments in light of his *Critique of Judgment*. 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 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. Teleological arguments, according to this interpretation, are 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

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9 PP 8: 365.
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. 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 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.\textsuperscript{10}

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

\textsuperscript{10} TP 8: 309.
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.”\(^{11}\) 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.”\(^{12}\)

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.\(^{13}\) 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.\(^{14}\)

**Moral despair and reasonable hope**

Let’s consider in more detail the nature of Kant’s practical teleological arguments as addressed to practical questions about what we should hope for rather than theoretical questions

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\(^{11}\) IUH 8: 17.

\(^{12}\) IUH 8: 28, CJ 5: 477.

\(^{13}\) IUH 8: 30, 28; CF 7: 8.

\(^{14}\) PP 8: 368.
about how to organize our thoughts about the natural world. 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. From this point of view, Kant downplays the role that feelings and desires have in our practical lives and 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 fulfill 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 forced to postulate that this could happen, for otherwise we cannot maintain our commitment to morality or regard ourselves and others as free.

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

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15 “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).
our lives by the demands of morality. 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. 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 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? Natural forces by themselves, according to Kant, cannot literally cause us to become virtuous or impede us from doing so, for we must take ourselves to have the ability to act “independently of alien causes,” so why should we hope that the natural world tends toward morality?

Part of the answer, I suggest, is that when we recognize pervasive dispositions to immorality in ourselves and others, we tend to experience cynicism and despair of a kind that tends to undercut our commitment to the moral law. Our wills are subject to deliberative tendencies of various types that do not cause us to choose in one way or another, but nonetheless dispose us to do so. We find corrupting tendencies all around us, they pervade our history and seem likely to dominate our future, so Kant thinks it is a “need of reason” to overcome our

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16 R 6: 27-8; CF 6: 85. 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’.
17 R 6: 23-4; CPR R 5: 72-5
18 PP 8: 360.
apathy and hope that even the most disconcerting features of our world are actually leading us to somewhere better, even if we cannot explain exactly how this happens.\textsuperscript{20}

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.”\textsuperscript{21} We may find ourselves resigned to our loathsome ways and even sometimes led to “misanthropy,” to “hate or despise” our species and “want to have as little to do with them as possible.”\textsuperscript{22} 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.”\textsuperscript{23} 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” and “a mockery” that can “endow our species with no greater value in the eyes of reason than that which other animal species possess.”\textsuperscript{24} 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.”\textsuperscript{25} 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,” unfeasible and virtually impracticable.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{20} CPPr 5: 144; O 8: 139; A 7: 329.
\textsuperscript{21} IUH 8: 30; R 6: 33-4.
\textsuperscript{22} R 6: 34; TP 8: 309; CF 7: 94, 4:83.
\textsuperscript{23} IUH 8: 18.
\textsuperscript{24} CF 4: 82; TP 8: 308.
\textsuperscript{25} TP 8: 308.
\textsuperscript{26} PP 8: 368.
The kind of “sorrow,” self-loathing and apathy we may feel about ourselves and our species can become “a moral corruption” when there is no “hope for something better.” 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. 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.” 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.” 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 deliberative tendencies, Kant proposes that “reason does let us hope [that the mechanism of nature] will be in accord with our wishes.” Teleological arguments, according to Kant, are thus meant as part of “a justification of nature:”

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.

27 CB 8: 120; TP 8: 307.
28 CB 8: 121.
30 CB 8: 121; MM 6: 441.
31 PP 8: 370.
32 IUH 8: 30.
33 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 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.\textsuperscript{34} 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 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 respect they have for the moral law, which is a necessary requirement for being subject to duty at all.\textsuperscript{35} We need not believe that war or oppression will actually lead to a better future, or that they will cause us to become virtuous, but only hope that the selfish tendencies that dispose people to immorality may somehow lead them to bring about morally good ends. If reasonable hope helps us to avoid 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 rationality requires us 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

\textsuperscript{34} CPrR 5: 144.
\textsuperscript{35} MM 6: 402-3.
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.\textsuperscript{36}

How then does Kant understand the attitude of reasonable hope?\textsuperscript{37} First, when we reasonably hope that something will happen, we wish for it to happen, but we do not necessarily will it to happen in the sense that we strive to bring it about through our actions.\textsuperscript{38} 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 than the empirical evidence by itself warrants us in thinking from a theoretical point of view. Third, we can only hope for something if we cannot prove that what we hope for is impossible.\textsuperscript{39} Fourth, we rely to some extent on our reasonable hopes rather than just the empirical evidence when making practical choices about what to do.\textsuperscript{40} Finally, we may hope for anything that satisfies these conditions, but our hope is reasonable, according to Kant, only when the object of our hope is commended by reason. When Kant looks to history, he finds that the empirical evidence cannot prove or disprove that we are progressing towards the good, so he advises us as reasonable people to wish for moral perfection and assume in our practical deliberations that it is likely to emerge in the long run: “Empirical evidence against the success of these resolutions made in hope has no bearing here.”\textsuperscript{41}

\section*{Objections}

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.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{36} PP 8: 365; CF 7: 86.
\bibitem{37} For other discussions of Kant’s conception of hope, see (Axinn, 2000; Chignell, 2013; Insole, 2008; Kleingeld, 1995; O’Neill, 1997).
\bibitem{38} MM 6: 213; 6: 430; 6: 441.
\bibitem{39} A 7: 328-9.
\bibitem{40} For contemporary discussions of hope see (Martin, 2013; Meirav, 2009; Pettit, 2004).
\bibitem{41} TP 8: 309.
\end{thebibliography}
to understand ourselves. 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 found in his political and historical writings is the idea of reasonable hope.

Wood argues 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, that essay can also be read as thoroughly practical, describing what we may reasonably hope for. 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”, 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.”

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 rightly 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. Even so, the empirical facts that could dash our reasonable hopes are usually unavailable to us as rational agents. When we

42 IUH 8: 28.
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 in moral progress 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” but is instead a rational wish that the world is steadily improving and a willingness to rely for certain practical purposes on that assumption.43

Finally, Wood 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.

Although a clear-eyed assessment of the odds 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, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

Works cited


44 (King, 1991, p. 632).


Kant, Immanuel. (2006c). On the common saying: This may be true in theory, but it does not hold in practice. In P. Kleingeld (Ed.), *Toward perpetual peace and other writings on politics, peace, and history* (pp. 44-66). New Haven: Yale University Press.


