

The Finding of Voice: Kant's Philosophy of History¹

James Kent

Kant's philosophy of history is not explicit. History, according to Kant, being the "idiotic course of all things human" is not worthy of a sustained and coherent philosophical critique.² Kant's philosophy did, however, contain a notion pertaining to the nature of human progress and, thus, through a careful reading of Kant, an implicit philosophy of history emerges. As Louis Dupré points out in his paper "Kant's Theory of History and Progress," Kant insists that the success of the Enlightenment relegates the question as to "whether the human race (is) universally progressing as lying beyond responsible conjecture."³ However, towards the end of his essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, Kant writes: "Men will of their own accord gradually work their way out of barbarism so long as artificial measures are not deliberately adopted to keep them in it."⁴ The problem of the re-visitation of barbaric violence within the Enlightenment's perception of historical time is clearly one that exists in the background of Kant's thought. His insistence that the history of humanity must, by necessity, be a narrative of progress—what Dupré calls "the emergence of the human race from an animal state to one of genuine humanity"—is dogged by the idea that these modalities of thinking about historical time might be harmful in

and of themselves. Robert Anchor suggests in his paper "Kant and Philosophy of History in Goethe's *Faust*" that Kant, along with Rousseau, is one of the first thinkers to dismiss history as "merely the empirical records of the past" as simplistic.⁵ What is crucial in the historical enquiry is the position of spectatorship: that is the historian's interpretation. Kant is, then, one of the first to realise that the historical project is marked by the point in time of its departure—that is our historical insights from a point in time define our understanding of history and the modality of historical time in which that moment exists. The philosophical end of Kant's enquiry is, always, the question as to whether we, that is humanity, are living lives befitting rational beings. Subsidiary to that point of enquiry lies the question: Is there another way to live a human life, that fulfils our maxim as rational, and moral, beings? Within Kant's implicit philosophy of history lies the suspicion that any "history of man" contains the remnants of our animal state—of barbaric life—which threatens the Enlightenment's promise; that is the necessary *possibility* of progress.

The Enlightenment paper, published in 1784, was Kant's response to an essay competition organised by the Berlin Monthly, *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, which sought an answer to the question, *Was ist Aufklärung?*, "What is Enlightenment?"⁶ Kant's emphasis on the philosophical importance of the time of writing locates Kant, as Foucault argues, as one of the first thinkers to ponder what it meant to live at a particular time in history. Enlightenment, however, was neither simply a world era, nor the "dawning of an accomplishment" but, rather, a project of reception, whereby the philosophical importance of the time of writing comes to inform the present in which it is written, and vice versa.⁷ For Kant, enlightenment embodied a culmination of progress. This progress moved toward a state in which history, in all its brutality, was recognised as the negotiation between our humanity and our animality; rather than a concept that is necessarily linked with the movement of historical chronology. The Enlightenment—that is the historical moment in which Kant lived (but one moment in chronological time), and the project of enlightenment, necessarily converge in Kant's writing. Kant makes clear, however, that his own present, rather than being enlightened, was a time of enlightenment. This was a moment in historical time in which the project had been recognised as historically contingent. That is, the question of enlightenment was inextricably tied to the time in which it was asked. The Enlightenment's representation by Kant as the finding of voice demands that such a possibility must, necessarily, shape the story of humanity to come, insofar as humanity's voice cannot be rendered silent again, unless it is rendered mute by an authority. In this sense at least, Kant's "Enlightenment" essay must be understood as an important

document, not merely in extrapolating the possibilities of enlightenment, but also the fundamental importance of the historical contingency of thought. If Kant has a philosophy of history at all, it is that a conception of progress that is aligned with what Walter Benjamin called “empty, homogenous” chronological time, cannot constitute genuine progress.⁸ Despite Kant’s conviction that there is no going back from the possibility of progress post-Enlightenment, he fears the barbaric remnants, of which his day’s conception of historical time is one example, that remain in our thought.

In “Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History” Kant outlines the beginning of human life as being marked by two events, which would go on to define the narrative of human history. The first was, as Kant suggests in a footnote, “the urge to communicate” as being “the original motive for human beings who were still alone to announce their existence to living creatures outside themselves.”⁹ The second, most likely a result of the ability to speak and thus think in conceptual shapes, was the emergence of reason, and the inevitable “anxiety and fear as to how he should employ his newly discovered ability.”¹⁰ For Kant, human history, that is the narrative of our rising up out of the purely biological sphere, is the story of the seemingly unending conflict between our animalistic beginnings, and the full realisation of our rationality, that is the “realisation that (man) is the true *end of nature*.”¹¹ Kant’s motto of the Enlightenment, “*sapere aude*,” (“dare to know”) is summarised by his notion of “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.”¹² This sentence of Kant’s contains a reference to the finding of voice, both at the beginning of human history (a reference to the frame of possibility in which Kant writes) as well as what he considers the contemporary events (that is the intellectual advances of the eighteenth century) as representing the first step in the necessary realisation of humanity’s rational, and thus moral, ends. He writes, in his “Idea for a Universal History,” published in 1784, that history was made up “often of childish malice and destruction.”¹³ This guarded critique of the benefits and possibilities of a universal history gives way to a more optimistic claim in the Enlightenment paper, published later that year, that progress is now, logically at least, ensured.¹⁴ In the last essay published before his death, “The Contest of the Faculties” Kant points to the French Revolution, problematic as it was, as empirical evidence that the human race had reached a point of no return in humanity’s progress toward the perfection of the moral tendency.¹⁵ This optimism is arguably a by-product of Kant’s increasing conviction that the Enlightenment project allowed for the grounds upon which a different modality of historical time, and the subsequent historical perspective, might emerge.

Anchor suggests that what Goethe most admired in Kant’s teleology was “his premise . . . that Nature endowed man with nothing more than he

required to become independent of Nature.”¹⁶ It was this “de-naturing of nature” that the Enlightenment project, in its critical self-reflection, demanded of humanity. Kant's recognition that human history had, up until that point, been for the most part the story of man's inability to raise himself up out of barbaric and thus natural conditions, lay the critical groundwork for his implication that the time of writing was philosophically important in the philosophico-historical critique. Thus, for Kant, the Enlightenment embodied a collective recognition of humanity's state of ignorance and intellectual laziness, and thus represented a locus in which a philosophy of the present (that is what it was to live during a particular moment in historical time), and its relation to a different conception of historical time, might be articulated. If the history of humanity had, up until that point, been a story of our subjugation to an authority other than our own, the Enlightenment represented the critical, and thus rational reception of that history, and the attempt to subvert it. Thus, insofar as the historical time of the Enlightenment could be said to have had a project (that is, the task for those who came after Kant and his contemporaries) it was the necessary fulfilment of humanity as a rational being—that is the universalisation of the moral law (short of artificial and forceful coercion of people in a state of subjugation). This was not to suggest that such a fulfilment was easy, or even immanent, simply that the necessity of its possibility was now ensured. Previous to this, according to Kant, the conditions for the grounds of a genuine humanity were threatened by barbaric forms of life. The necessity of the possibility of progress was the marker of the Enlightenment because we could not, Kant believed, regress to a more barbarous state, once the conditions of possibility of a rational life had been asserted. This did not signify that Kant was insensitive to the problem of historical disasters. Indeed, in his *Perpetual Peace* essay, Kant outlines the real problem of historical regression, a problem that will be returned to later in this paper.¹⁷ However, Kant seems sure that the problem of historical disasters, after the questions of the enlightenment had been articulated, would forever be confronted differently. The question, in other words, concerning what another form of human life might look like, once it had been formulated, could not be forgotten.¹⁸

The Enlightenment's position as allowing for the conditions of possibility for progress, is Kant's warding off of the spectre of a genuine universal history, akin to Hegel's “cunning of reason,” in favour of a necessary hypothesis for the advancement of humanity. The progress of man, being a future event, could not fall under the realm of experience, and thus could not move beyond an internal logic.¹⁹ As Anchor argues, teleology plays a “regulative and not a constitutive” role in Kant's conception of history, with nature, rather than reason, the essence of that teleology.²⁰ Robert Wallace,

in a paper on the Löwith-Blumenberg debate over the legitimacy of modernity, argues (with Blumenberg) that the teleological universal histories that emerged after Kant and the Enlightenment existed within a misplaced teleology. Early modernity's conception of progress, (which Blumenberg argues began as a relatively localised reaction to the success of early astronomy and its practitioners' realisation that it would take more than the span of one human life to unlock the secrets of the sky), the spirit of which influenced the early Enlightenment, never implied a logical end of humanity.²¹ Rather, the inheritors of the Enlightenment, and the modern project, failed to recognise that the very questions, the answers to which they had dismissed as mythical authority, themselves belonged to a pre-modern teleology irrelevant to the modern era. Blumenberg concludes that the universal histories of thinkers like Hegel and Marx, functioned within a reoccupation of the eschatological category, as the rational answers to a Judeo-Christian futurism.²² Kant's refusal to posit a more explicit philosophy of history, is testament both to his awareness of the danger of falling back into religious categories of thought, and his commitment to the Enlightenment project, as a unique moment (historically) of insight into our human state. Kant, perhaps more than any other, understood that the tragedy of historical time lay in our inability to extricate ourselves from it, to gain the perspective of the necessity of our entire removal from the natural sphere, in order to accomplish a truly rational experience. Although the progress of humanity is rendered as the movement of nature—a case of nature's equipping man with everything he needs to remove himself from it—Kant recognises that nature is the sphere in which human barbarity subsists. So long as the human condition is marked by the taint of nature, history will remain on its “idiotic course.” Kant's Kingdom of Ends in fact exists outside of historical time, at least in its common modality. In that sense, Kant has no “philosophy of history” in its universal sense, because his philosophy of history is a liberation from history. To put it another way, Kant's particular way of thinking of historical time was centred around the present's incontestable advantage in defining the historical, and thus philosophical task, and therefore of defining the particular modality of historical time in which that moment of the present was going to exist. Foucault makes this very point when he argues that Kant's essay must be understood as the first time a philosopher “has connected . . . the significance of his work with respect to knowledge, a reflection on history and a particular analysis of the specific moment at which he is writing.”²³ Kant's recognition of the philosophical importance of the point of departure in historical enquiry, allows for the possibility of imagining the Enlightenment as forming a perspective of unique insight, to ponder the ontological question of the being of being hu-

man. Adorno's argument that progress can only occur once the notion of progress is done away with, is fundamentally Kantian.²⁴

The particular modality of historical time that emerges out of Kant's concept of progress, should not be understood within the same framework as the later universal histories that contain within them an eschatological logic, or as revolutionary in the normal sense either.²⁵ Kant is guarded in "The Contest of the Faculties," regarding the long-term implication for the French Revolution.²⁶ A philosophical conservative in the classic sense, the notion of progress that Kant hypothesises does not hope to re-set time through the stopping of the town clocks.²⁷ The conflation of humanity's progress with the current modality of historical time necessarily fails to escape nature entirely, and thus fails to entirely overcome the barbarism that marks us as human beings. In this context, the "Enlightenment" paper can be understood, not only as an exploration of the time of its writing as a moment of historical insight on the human condition, but also as a warning that this insight would not save us from our failure to understand that the root of our subjugation existed within our historico-philosophical self image. The notion of historical time with which Kant lived represented the first barrier to a genuine notion of human progress—that is rationality's overcoming nature entirely.

Adorno, in his essay "Progress," published in 1962, appears to be far more optimistic surrounding the discourse of progress and modernity, than he seemed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written with Max Horkheimer.²⁸ In his paper "Adorno's Dialogue with Augustine, Kant and Benjamin," Peter Uwe Hohendahl, argues that, in light of the general pessimism of the Frankfurt school regarding the status of modernity, the 1962 essay "urges us to reconsider this verdict, not only for historical reasons, but also as a potential resource for a renewed engagement with the concept of progress."²⁹ Adorno insists on, and anchors his own argument through Kant's grounding of progress in the "idea of the human being."³⁰ He goes on: "The highest task which nature has set for mankind must therefore be that of establishing a society in which *freedom under external laws* would be combined to the greatest possible extent with irresistible force, in other words of establishing a perfectly *just civil constitution*."³¹ Kant's notion of the implementation of the Law as constituting the perfect civil state is a reminder that his notion of progress necessitates our de-naturing of nature. As Adorno points out, following Benjamin, a conventional notion of progress assumes an already existent humanity. A genuine progress would be "the very establishment of humanity in the first place."³² In this sense, again, Kant occupies the very epicentre of the original Enlightenment project. He articulates it most clearly in the "Enlightenment" paper, writing that it is freedom

that is at the heart of enlightenment, more specifically, “freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters.”³³ Adorno is right to argue that progress, as a concept, cannot be entirely removed from the “aspect of redemption, no matter how secularised.”³⁴ Indeed the Kantian notion of progress, the end result of which is freedom, retains the theological implications for man's salvation, historical time up until that point being the narrative of barbarity, and sin, that had afflicted humanity since its biological beginnings. It is at this precise point that Kant's philosophy of history, however, is most distinguishable from the larger universal histories that would look to his system as their point of departure. Kant recognised, as Blumenberg did, that universal history, although usually a philosophy of the progress of rationality (such as Hegel's Spirit) contains the internal logic of progress within it, wherein the eschatological category (which Blumenberg points out was made redundant with the success of modern science) is re-occupied with the *a priori* guarantee of human flourishing. The futurism that controls the means/ends conception of the Judeo-Christian world history—that is, the modality of historical time that emerges out of the Gnostic religions—remains unchallenged.³⁵ Kant is aware that a philosophy of progress that latches itself to the same modality of history as the traditions the Enlightenment sought to overthrow, cannot be any progress at all. Adorno writes: “Progress means: to step out of the magic spell, even out of the spell of progress that is itself nature, in that humanity becomes aware of its own inbred nature and brings to a halt the domination it exacts upon nature and through which domination by nature occurs.”³⁶ In this moment Adorno touches upon the genuine human urge hidden behind the motto *sapere aude*, and the fact that Kant's conception of progress resided entirely in the courage it takes to overcome authorities which had up until that point, left the emancipation of the human race in doubt. Again, Kant did not consider the progress of humanity as easy, but saw in the increasingly collective acknowledgement that it would require great individual and group courage, the seed of such a progress. The question of human autonomy, in terms of its logical possibility, for Kant, had been answered by the Enlightenment, but it remained for those who came after him, to continue the task of thinking critically about their own thought. In that sense Kant highlights the immense importance of the task of the present, insofar as it falls to the present to open up a space in which the barbarity of historical time up until then can be reflected upon, and what he considers the destiny of humanity, fulfilled.³⁷

Kant is, then, perhaps one of the first to understand the importance of the historical project, in being grounded by the present, as being fundamentally linked to the idea of historical time that emerges out of it. In the

case of Kant the dismissal of a conventional interest in history stems from the suspicion that the act of “doing history” contributes nothing to the ontological project of thinking critically about humanity's liberation from mythic authorities. Indeed, the conventional historical narrative of man becomes a story of its inability to overcome the historical conditions in which it was written. Kant's progress is, therefore, grounded in the recognition that the present is unique in its allowing for the historical insight that the present is generative of the philosophical task. The Enlightenment represents, for Kant, the recognition of the historical contingency of thought, but also the foundational philosophical implications of this recognition: while the material historical conditions must naturally shape the philosophical task, the philosophical task must also come to shape the present.³⁸ Kant embodies the modest conception of progress that emerged at the beginning of modernity that Blumenberg outlines. Modesty in this case should not be misunderstood as a form of humility—for indeed Kant's question dealt with the nature of humanity—but, rather, in its refusal to respond within the eschatological category.³⁹ As Wallace points out, Blumenberg argues that the early modern conception of progress had nothing to do with eschatology and “everything to do with . . . ‘human self-assertion,’ the fundamentally irreligious effort of modern man to make the most of what is available to him in this life and this world.”⁴⁰ The recognition of the historical contingencies on which the present obtained as being generative of the philosophical and historical insight into the nature of the modalities of historical time to which we are bound, for Kant, embodies the Enlightenment's “finding of voice.” In Kant (and also perhaps Voltaire) the historical task becomes the critical self-reflection of humanity's conscious reflection, rather than God's.⁴¹

The revolutionary quality of “the finding of voice” lies in the history of our insight into our human struggle to find it. In Alison Ross' paper “Moral Metaphorics, or Kant after Blumenberg: Toward an analysis of the aesthetic settings of morality,” she explores the possibilities that open up in a reading of Kant's moral law that is illuminated by Blumenberg's philosophico-anthropological understanding of the aesthetic qualities of myth. Blumenberg outlines myth as that which emerged to tame the primal terror of what he calls the “Absolutism of Reality.” The state of intense alienation—the intense anxiety that lingered after the futility of the animal response of fleeing became self-conscious—was a reaction to our biological beginnings; namely the change (forced or incidental) that led us to leave the ecological niche of the rainforest, and brave the savannah, in an upright position. This expansion of horizon, both physical and metaphysical, came at a price: the emergence of reason allowed for our ability to acknowledge the terror of a world not made for us. Myth, so argues Blumenberg, rendered a world ut-

terly alien to us—a world absolutely terrifying in its vast, infinite ambivalence—at least comprehensible. Ross writes, of Blumenberg's myth: "Myth is how humans make the world habitable for themselves, a world which was not created for them; in other words, myth does not serve so much a cognitive as a practical need, the practical need to make absolutely strange (and hence hostile) powers only humanly strange."⁴² The first rudimentary reactions to the terror of life beyond the purely biological, these first myths, are lost to us, and exist only in the murkiness of pre-history. That they must have occurred is known purely through what *is* left to us; indeed the beginning of our collective history begins with the reception of a history of myth. The epics of Homer and Hesiod, as much as they embody a material history of the Greek polis, also capture that moment of Greek thought in their dealing with their origins in past oral traditions. That these early documents embody what had been occurring since the Absolutism of Reality—that is the tethering of nature's ambiguity—is well documented. From Horkheimer and Adorno's claim that the journey of Odysseus embodies a work of *logos*, insofar as it orders, chronologically and thematically, what almost certainly would have been an older, undateable tradition of myths, belonging to the collection of Greek isles from which Homer emerged; to Benjamin's argument that Greek tragedy, through the introduction of the chorus, embodied a moment in history, wherein our collective subjugation (as humans) to the fate of mythic authority, was celebrated through the power of aesthetic distance before an attentive audience.⁴³ It is in this history that Kant recognises the historical importance of the Enlightenment as a moment of illumination. History, in being a story of our attempt to subvert the authority of nature, whether through war, or the primeval savage catalyst for myth, becomes the story of our struggle for an autonomous voice. The Enlightenment represents a moment of historical insight, like that of tragedy, into our collective lot; but also, in Kant's case, a way of understanding historical time to ensure that we do not descend back into the eschatological powers of fate, that renders history (in its current modality) merely the story of our inability to escape our original historical conditions. That Kant's notion of the relation between humanity and nature rested on an explicit anthropology cannot be underestimated and renders more coherent the argument that his notion of progress and "the end of history" did not exist as teleological visions of the future, but as a rallying cry for the philosophical in the present, by which *logos*—with which humanity had struggled to overcome the primeval demons that haunted us throughout our history—might culminate in a morality that finally dispatched our savage beginnings, wherein nature, rather than our own judgement, dictated our fate.

Walter Benjamin writes in his essay "On the Program of the Coming

Philosophy" that the issue of "naked, primitive, self-evident experience" was for Kant the only experience possible. Benjamin rightly calls this form of experience the worldview that would mark the Enlightenment, and the category that would distinguish it from other ages.⁴⁴ That Kant was able to commence his work "under the constellation of the Enlightenment" is evidence, so argues Benjamin, for the weakened essence of knowledge that "attained its sad significance only through its certainty."⁴⁵ Here Benjamin suggests that the freedom with which the Enlightenment project wielded its authority, was due to its "religious and historical blindness."⁴⁶ These criticisms, while broadly true, also assist in marking Kant's reception of the Enlightenment that, in its blindness, offered a point in which to rephrase the ontological question. Here, perhaps, Benjamin strikes most poignantly on Kant's own awareness of the comparative weakness of naked experience, which, in the face of this recognition, shows Kant's awareness of the dangers of a stronger, transcendental account. The Enlightenment, for Kant, embodied the moment in which a new account of human experience was undertaken, represented the finding of voice, insofar as it became historically contingent recognition of the necessity for a sound philosophical groundwork in the attempt to overcome the tragedy of historical time. As the "Enlightenment" paper shows, however, the finding of voice was not a necessary step in an otherwise ensured chronology of progress. Nothing followed from the Enlightenment's achievements other than the *a priori* logic of progress, should nothing else attempt to prevent it.⁴⁷ The implicit philosophy of history contained within Kant's wider philosophy could not operate within a teleological eschatology, as some of his intellectual inheritors would, because his project attempted to understand (rather than ensure) the philosophical extent, and repercussions of, the category that had opened during the Enlightenment—namely the philosophical implications of what it would mean for the construal of the present if the philosophical task was to rephrase the question of historical time in relation to an ontology.⁴⁸ The dismissal of the eschatological character in Kant's work can be seen in the urgency with which he writes of the philosophical importance of the time in which he was writing as a time of enlightenment, rather than an enlightened period. The late eighteenth century did not embody the culmination of the philosophical project, and thus humanity, but, rather, the recognition that our history—the struggle for voice—must figure into the wider philosophical question, and thus how our present comes to be understood. History became a modality, not of fate, but of reason's self-engagement and criticism. The implicit philosophy of history in Kant, then, was entirely reliant on humanity.

Robert Anchor's argument that Kant was one of the first philosophers

to understand the importance of interpretation in the historical project—without which there existed nothing but the meaningless chronology of events—leads him to conclude that Kant shifted attention away “from history to the historian.”⁴⁹ This was a differentiation much clearer in the original German—from *historisch*, a mere empirical category, to *geschichtlich*, which attempts to conjure the rational, philosophical act of history.⁵⁰ It is unclear what precisely Kant thought of historians, but Anchor’s argument illuminates the notion that, with Kant, history became a project of humanity’s critical self-reflection and, most importantly, a reception of that self-reflection. The historical task became a lens with which to focus the philosophical question of the relation between the ontological question of human life and the development of humanity’s rational will. Thus the present becomes a locus in which history, in being recognised as the negotiation between our animalism and our vocation as rational beings, can look to change the conditions of humanity. Yirmiahu Yovel makes this exact point in differentiating Kant’s philosophy of history from others, writing: “Furthermore when he speaks of history, Kant does not mean an independent, natural process which takes place automatically, with the participation of human consciousness and the rational will. He is talking specifically about *rational* history, which grows out of men’s conscious intentions to change and reshape the world in accordance with a moral ideal and to contribute to the realisation of this ideal as a whole.”⁵¹ Kant is perhaps aware more than anyone of the curious modality of a conventional universal history that lacks an awareness of its point of departure—that is the notion that a “universal history” becomes a particular perspective in the history of our grappling with a concept—and thus fails in Kant’s demand for history’s critical reception of itself. The progress of humanity, and its fateful end, cannot be accepted as ensured in the manner demanded by a particular universal history, as long as historical time continues to answer to a category other than its own critical self-reflection. As Blumenberg points out, the universal histories that followed Kant utilised the Enlightenment’s tools to destroy religious authority, without realising that their answers were still operating within the eschatological category. Kant’s philosophy of history, emerging as it did under what Benjamin called “the constellation of the Enlightenment” attempted to differentiate between a history of ideas, in which the chronology of historical time failed to escape the futurism and eschatology the Enlightenment had tried to destroy (thus reining in the genuine progress of humanity) and a history of the demons in humanity’s thought—the anxious remnant from our biological existence and natural beginning. The remnants of pre-historical barbarism in our thought were so entwined in the structure of our cognitive abilities, Kant knew, that any progress could only come

from the philosophico-historical reception of our attempt to subvert, throughout history, those very demons. Adorno argues that only this act would constitute a stepping out of the circle of progress, that is the eschatological category, in the name of genuine progress—that is, human reflection's overcoming of older authorities. This is entirely Kant's position, encapsulated in his definition of Enlightenment, namely "*man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity*. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another," a matter he argues at the end of the same essay, which is essential to human dignity.⁵² The recognition of our collective autonomy that the Enlightenment embodied, meant that human progress was now irreversible. Thus the historical task, and its particular insight on the modality of historical time, must involve a conscious awareness of our limitations and of our beginnings in nature. History is, therefore, the struggle for autonomy over the very conditions that allowed for our progress in the first place.

Benjamin was right to understand the Enlightenment as a constellation under which its champions could work. The implicit historical awareness in Kant was only possible under the original formations of Enlightened thought before, as Blumenberg successfully outlines, its descent back into the mythical category. The original Enlightenment project—that is the dismissal of the demons that had haunted our thought since our beginning—represented for Kant, a present in which the tragedy of historical time could not only be understood as such, but also a point in which such a historical insight could define and inform the philosophical task. The philosophical anthropology that emerged out of the historico-philosophical task was the grounds upon which Kant's hope for progress lay. That is, Kant's emphasis on the philosophical importance of the present's relation to historical time was his attempt (in conjuring the philosophical project) to ensure the progress of human kind. If the Enlightenment represented the finding of voice, religion dictated that which would be spoken, and Kant was fully aware of the possibility of humanity failing to grasp the radical new forms of human life that might emerge, should the finding of voice fail to become a collective finding. Kant's philosophy of history, then, considers the historical insight of the present, in being generative of the philosophical task, as fundamentally changing our perception, not only of the present's relation to the rest of time, but also the possibilities of the future that could emerge with such a perspective. Kant's notion of the irreversible nature of the necessary possibility of progress is, as a philosophical idea, entirely grounded in the time in which he was writing. The Enlightenment represented a unique insight into humanity's subjugation to nature's barbarism, but nothing more. The project, for Kant, had been determined, but humanity's progress could

not be ensured without the continued historico-philosophico-anthropological reception that recognised the present's relationship to the past as that of a spectator to a tragedy, of a grappling with demons. Much like Greek tragedy and the solidarity that was founded on the aesthetic distance of the chorus, Kant's philosophy of history, and the philosophical task it generated, sought the human progress that would lift us out of the narrative of subjugation in favour of the Enlightenment's original hope: freedom and responsibility.

This is not to suggest that Kant's views were not subject to the doubts that arose from his own historical conditions. His views of the possibilities of enlightenment in the "Enlightenment" essay, which in themselves are a retreat from those expressed at the end of *The Critique of Pure Reason* in the chapter "The History of Pure Reason" (first published in 1781), seem far more optimistic when compared to his far more ambivalent position expressed in the 1795 essay "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch."⁵³ Within this latter essay Kant outlines the necessary conditions for the end of war. Although Kant is still clear on the philosophical necessity of peace for the attainment of humanity's moral ends, his tone is marked by a deeper uncertainty. Despite his hope that the time in which he lived might embody a locus of possibility for the gradual move toward collective enlightenment, Kant now seems more fearful that there lurked forces within those historical conditions that might prevent his vision of history's ultimate moral ends from ever being realised. Within "Perpetual Peace," after outlining the necessary conditions for the end of war and the *collective* striving toward moral duty (something he emphasises) Kant discusses the primary factor preventing these conditions as being the continued subjugation of morality to politics. He writes:

there can be no conflict between politics, as an applied branch of right, and morality, as a theoretical branch of right (i.e. between theory and practice); for such a conflict could occur only if morality were taken to mean a general doctrine of expediency, i.e. a theory of the maxims by which one might select the most useful means of furthering one's own advantage—and this would be tantamount to denying that morality exists.⁵⁴

The greatest threats to enlightenment, then, are those men who would derive their morals from their political goals, rather than their politics from a deep sense of moral duty. Kant's fear of politics subsuming the moral law derives from his broader philosophy, which requires theory to precede practise. Practise, as he writes in "Perpetual Peace," applies only in particular empirical conditions, whereas theory (pure, practical reason) applies

universally, meaning its development was critical to perpetual peace.⁵⁵ In other words, the less the end envisaged plays a role in conduct, the more likely the end will be met—the question of duty must depart from *a priori* principles.⁵⁶ Politics, thus, must derive from the moral law. The “Perpetual Peace” essay (which requires, amongst other things, that standing armies eventually be abolished) seems to cast uncertainty over Kant’s earlier work that a world in which this was possible could be realised. Enlightenment as a marker of historical progress falls into doubt.

Kant concedes that reason cannot know the intention of nature, the drive of history. However, reason does equip human life, through *a priori* principles, with enough to stay on the path of the moral law, which, if allowed to develop enough, ultimately creates the conditions for the exit from nature.⁵⁷ As previously specified, Kant sees this not as a guarantee of enlightenment, but rather of its necessary possibility. The question of moral duty (and thus by definition perpetual peace—in some sense the *end* of history) is forever a question before humanity. Following Kant’s own time, the question of the actualisation of human life’s potential cannot be forgotten. In essence this means that humanity is forced to grapple, even in the face of oppressive historical conditions, with the question of the actualisation of that potentiality. Human life, although still at the mercy of natural, historical forces, is now understood within the realms of a potentiality that is marked by its removal from nature. Human life is forever marked by the question of contingency, even in the face of perhaps endless political machinations that block the development of the moral law, keeping it constrained within the realm of nature and thus necessity. This does not solve the genuine ambiguity at the heart of Kant’s changing view of history’s progress and enlightenment. Despite these doubts, however, Kant shows that so long as enlightenment remains a human question to be dealt with and reflected upon, the potentiality of another form of human life remains. The existence of the potentiality of contingency implies human life can never be entirely subsumed by its creaturely origins again.

As Hohendahl points out, in the “Enlightenment” essay Kant argues for a “process of enlightenment in which the public is involved in a movement of self-improvement through dialogue and debate with its members” and also points to Adorno’s reading of Kant’s plan of nature as the “immanent unfolding of reason in history.”⁵⁸ Anchor agrees, citing Kant’s firm opinion that human history, for the most part, is the narrative of immaturity, writing that “(Nature), and not Reason, (to be) the driving force of history.”⁵⁹ Both Hohendahl and Anchor in some respects, and Adorno in others, have struck upon the fundamental teleology of Kant’s philosophy of history. While the progress of humanity is a force of nature, rather than reason, its end is not.

Humanity's teleology lies entirely outside the natural realm, a blueprint which lies in nature itself to allow us to unshackle ourselves from the purely biological sphere, and the barbarity, or animality, which dogs us as creatures of nature. In the eighth proposition of his "Idea for a Universal History" Kant recognises the externality of the internal end goal of nature.⁶⁰ Humanity's progress, in other words, although a process of nature, must end with our overcoming of that condition. In the ninth proposition Kant recognises the benefit of sketching out the philosophical implications of "a perfect civil union of mankind" —that is the end of nature—as assisting in that very project.⁶¹ In that sense, it can be seen the extent to which the "Enlightenment" paper merely outlines the possibilities of human progress, that is the logical framework of the necessary possibility of enlightenment. Kant's philosophy of history is, then, marked by conditions of possibility, of which the Enlightenment period (that is, Kant's present, which he recognised in terms of a collective acknowledgement of our subjugation to authority's other than our own) represents a particularly strong groundwork. It is unclear what Kant thought of notions surrounding "the end of history." This is not intended in the Hegelian sense. A universal history could not have a genuine end for Kant, because its structure and category fail to engage in a genuine reception of the human condition, remaining within the logic of eschatology. The natural process of Kant's history, the conditions for which are outlined in the "Enlightenment" paper, and the ends of which are outlined in his "Universal History," results in what he calls the "perfect civil union of mankind," that is the establishment of the universality of the Moral Law. The Kingdom of Ends necessitates, for Kant, the end of our critical self-reflection—at least in terms of our relationship to the tragedy of historical time—that is the narrative of our attempts to escape the natural sphere. History, at least in the way Kant understands it, must be the critical reception of our dogged attempt to master our own authority. It is only such a reception that generates the philosophical task that allows us to progress toward the implementation of the Moral Law within a civil union. Kant's philosophy of history, in being a progress of nature, must necessarily cease once humanity has lifted itself out of those conditions. This is the final warding off of Blumenberg's Absolutism of Reality, the state of anxiety in which we found ourselves in the wake of our leaving the depths of the primeval forest, to be confronted with a radically ambivalent world, in which our newly developed rationalism, before symbolism, before metaphor, was unable to grasp at any form of meaning. The end of history, for Kant, can be marked by human life that is unmarked by any traces of that primeval anxiety within our discourse. In other words, an establishment of a common humanity.

Kant's philosophy of history is not explicit because, in many ways, it

does not exist. The refusal to outline, clearly, a philosophy of history is Kant's warding off of the eschatological character of the universal histories that he anticipates. The essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* represents Kant's recognition that the contingencies of the present will come to define and generate the philosophical task. In this case, the Enlightenment represented a genuine insight into the critical ontology of humanity—that of a constant struggle between the barbarism that marks our animality, and the rationalism that promises an autonomous freedom. If Kant's philosophy of history invokes a structure of progress, it is a progress that seeks to—as Adorno had also hoped—put an end to a notion of progress. For such a notion must necessarily belong to an eschatology that exists as a remnant of the barbarism of our pre-history.

NOTES

- ¹ I would like to thank Andrew Benjamin, Sam Cuff Snow, as well as the anonymous referees, for invaluable help in improving this essay through their suggestions and criticisms.
- ² Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 42. All references to Kant in this essay will be taken from this edition of his political writings.
- ³ Louis Dupré, "Kant's Theory of History and Progress," *The Review of Metaphysics* 51, no. 4 (1998): 819.
- ⁴ Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'," 59.
- ⁵ Robert Anchor, "Kant and Philosophy of History in Goethe's 'Faust'," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 26, no. 3 (2000): 490.
- ⁶ Foucault points out that, as opposed to contemporary periodical practises, in the eighteenth century, they preferred to pose questions that did not yet have an answer. See Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32-50.
- ⁷ Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 33-4.
- ⁸ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings: Volume Four, 1938-1940*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press,

2005), 389-99.

⁹ Kant, "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History," 222.

¹⁰ Ibid., 224.

¹¹ Ibid., 225.

¹² Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 54.

¹³ Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," 42.

¹⁴ Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 57.

¹⁵ Kant, "The Contest of Faculties," 182.

¹⁶ Anchor, "Kant and Philosophy of History in Goethe's 'Faust'," 492.

¹⁷ Kant, "Perpetual Peace," 93-130.

¹⁸ Foucault makes clear that that he considers the "Enlightenment" paper as connected to Kant's wider philosophy of his three Critiques: "je crois qu'il faut souligner le lien qui existe entre ce bref article et les trois *Critiques*". See Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 36.

¹⁹ Anchor, "Kant and Philosophy of History in Goethe's 'Faust'," 493.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hans Blumenberg, "On a Lineage of the Idea of Progress," trans. E. B. Ashton, *Social Research* 41, no.1 (Spring, 1974): 5-27.

²² Robert M. Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate," *New German Critique*, no. 22 (1981): 71.

²³ Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 37. Foucault writes later that Kant's position embodies the emergence of modernity as an *attitude* rather than a period of history. He summarises the attitude of modernity as "the will to 'heroize' the present"; ("La modernité n'est pas un fait de sensibilité au présent fugitif; c'est une volonté d'« héroïser » le présent."), 38.

²⁴ See Theodor Adorno's essay "Progress," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 150.

²⁵ Indeed, any notion within this paper of Kant's desire to "step outside" of historical time, far from any desire to make Kant sound Benjaminian is, rather, on the contrary, an attempt to stress the extent to which thinkers like Benjamin and Adorno were responding directly to a Kantian problem.

²⁶ Kant, "The Contest of Faculties," 182.

²⁷ This is a reference to the mythologisation of the stopping of the clock towers during the first skirmishes of the French Revolution. The symbolism was clear: history must start again.

²⁸ See Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of the Enlightenment's project descent back into the mythical category in the first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1944).

²⁹ Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Progress Revisited: Adorno's Dialogue with Augustine,

Kant, and Benjamin," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 1 (2013): 243.

³⁰ Adorno, "Progress," 144.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Adorno, "Progress," 145.

³³ Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 55.

³⁴ Adorno, "Progress," 148.

³⁵ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985). See especially the first chapters, in which Blumenberg mounts a devastating critique of the very conception of secularisation as an incoherent bi-product of the wider hysteria surrounding the perceived illegitimacy of modernity.

³⁶ Adorno, "Progress," 150.

³⁷ Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 59.

³⁸ Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism* (Oxon: Routledge, 1997), 27.

³⁹ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. See especially pages 429-34, where Blumenberg outlines the peculiarity of Kant's position: both the emerging scepticism that humanity will achieve enlightenment, as well as the assurance that the historical contingencies in which he lived, assured it. Here Blumenberg refers implicitly to Kant's rejection of eschatology by highlighting Kant's interest in human action and thought as being the contingent factors of progress.

⁴⁰ Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate," 71.

⁴¹ Ibid., 70.

⁴² Alison Ross, "Moral Metaphorics, or Kant after Blumenberg: Toward an Analysis of the Aesthetic Settings of Morality," *Thesis Eleven* 140, no. 1 (2011): 44.

⁴³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See Excursus 1: "Odysseus, or Myth and Enlightenment" as well as in Walter Benjamin, "Fate and Character," in *Selected Writings: Volume One, 1913-1926*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Massachusetts: Harvard University press, 2005), 203-4.

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," in *Selected Writings: Volume One, 1913-1926*, 101.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 57.

⁴⁸ Foucault summarises his position in his essay on the "Enlightenment" paper thus: "The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond

them." ("L'ontologie critique de nous-mêmes, il faut la considérer non certes comme une théorie, une doctrine, ni même un corps permanent de savoir qui s'accumule; il faut la concevoir comme une attitude, un éthos, une vie philosophique où la critique de ce que nous sommes est à la fois analyse historique des limites qui nous sont posées et épreuve de leur franchissement possible."), 49.

⁴⁹ Anchor, "Kant and Philosophy of History in Goethe's 'Faust'," 490.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Yirmiah Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 125.

⁵² Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 54, 60.

⁵³ See Kant, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," 93-130 and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1929), 666-9.

⁵⁴ Kant, "Perpetual Peace," 116.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁸ Hohendahl, "Progress Revisited: Adorno's Dialogue with Augustine, Kant, and Benjamin," 352.

⁵⁹ Anchor, "Kant and Philosophy of History in Goethe's 'Faust'," 493.

⁶⁰ Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," 50.

⁶¹ Ibid., 51.