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Speculation, Method, and Self-Knowledge in *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*

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Abstract

This paper provides an account of the purpose and methodology of *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* (1786). I show that Kant subordinates the theoretical goal of plausibly reconstructing the origin of humankind to the practical goal of helping the reader understand herself as a moral agent that must contribute to the achievement of humankind's moral destination. First, I show that *Conjectural Beginning* is an innovative instance of conjectural history. Second, I argue that its methodology involves experience, imagination, and reason, whose conjoined use explains why Kantian conjectural history fares better than others. Third, I argue that the essay contributes, through a moral exhibition of the imagination, to the reader's moral self-knowledge and cures some misconceptions that obstruct her commitment to moral progress.

Keywords: conjectural history; philosophy of history; Kant; moral self-knowledge; methodology

1. Introduction

In an early paper, Pauline Kleingeld set herself the task of providing an until-then missing account of the purpose and methodology of Kant's *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* (1784). She aimed to show the 'not sufficiently appreciated fact' (2001: 204) that Kant's philosophy of history fulfils a theoretical and a practical function. The former is to formulate an organising principle of history, the teleological development of our rational dispositions, that makes us able to understand the chaotic mass of human actions as a systematic whole. The latter is to ground hope that moral progress can be realised insofar as the world is providentially ordered. This became the standard interpretation of Kant's philosophy of history, which scholars have subsequently applied to other works.[1] Interestingly, insufficient attention has been given to *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* (1786).[2]

This omission should be corrected because the text is not a minor instance of Kant's philosophy of history, but it contains some interesting puzzles about how imagining primitive human history bears on our self-understanding as moral agents. First, the work is depicted as the 'oldest history of humanity attempted by philosophy'

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(CB, 8: 123).[3] However, the text is supposed to follow 'step by step' (8: 110) the course of events which Genesis records. How should we understand the alliance between the authority of reason and the paradigmatic role of the Holy Scripture? Second, Kant emphasises the conjectural character of his project, whose truthfulness must be tested by criteria quite different from those of regular history (8: 109). These criteria, which prevent *Conjectural Beginning* from becoming 'mere fiction' (ibid.), are not manifest. How does Kant distinguish his conjectures from the 'wild conjectures'[4] (CB, 8: 110) he accuses others of indulging in?

In the present paper, I attempt to provide an until-now missing account of the purpose and methodology of Kant's *Conjectural Beginning.* I make use of the unappreciated fact that it belongs to a genre of historical writing referenced in its title: conjectural history. I argue that Kant's essay is an innovative instance of this genre since it subordinates the theoretical goal of providing a plausible account of primitive history to the practical goal of helping the reader understand herself as a moral agent (instead of as a mere natural being) that must contribute to the achievement of humankind's destination (instead of either trusting or blaming providence). Although subordinate, the theoretical goal cannot be despised since indulging in wild conjectures would provoke the incredulity of the reader and obstruct her self-knowledge. Moreover, Kant's conjectural history is a philosophical appropriation of Genesis because the latter provides archetypes that facilitate the moral lessons which help the reader accomplish her moral vocation.[5]

I shall proceed as follows. First, I argue that *Conjectural Beginning* is an original instance of conjectural history since it exemplifies the four essential properties of this genre (conditional tense rhetoric, non-providentially based, non-contractually founded, and stadial structure) in a philosophical way. Second, I argue that the methodology of *Conjectural Beginning* can be clarified by focusing on the cognitive sources Kant appeals to (experience, imagination, and reason) and whose conjoined use explains why his conjectural history fares better than Herder's or Rousseau's. Finally, I show how *Conjectural Beginning* fits into the corpus of Kantian philosophy of history, how it attempts to reinforce, through imaginative exhibition, the reader's moral self-knowledge, and how it cures misconceptions that might obstruct her commitment to moral progress. The payoff of my account is understanding the philosophical value of a seemingly minor work of Kant's philosophy of history and uncovering a missing link in the development of Kant's views on self-knowledge and his philosophical engagement with the Bible.

2. The business of speculation and conjectural histories

It is widely believed that Augustine's *De civitate Dei* inaugurates the philosophy of history. For him, history is neither the conjoining of meaningless time-slices nor a cyclical repetition of events, but the progressive unfolding of God's plan of salvation.[6] The interpretation of history as the development of humanity's moral education opened the path for secular accounts of progress. Renaissance utopianism and Enlightenment philosophy of history draw resources from the Christian tradition, but with an increasing effort to get rid of the concepts of God and providence. These projects attempt to substitute for theodicy a sort of historical anthropodicy,[7] that is,

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they depict progress and regress as the result of human actions. Humans make their own history instead of being pieces on a divine board.

One of those modern projects receives the name of conjectural history.[8] As the name implies, this genre of historical writing does not ground its claims on documents or records but rather speculates about what must have been the case. Dugald Stewart's 1793 definition of conjectural history makes it consist in a means by which to represent the different forms which society has assumed in different stages via a priori speculation and facing the scarcity of empirical evidence.[9] Although conjectural history was a product of the Scottish Enlightenment,[10] scholars include figures and works from other traditions too.[11] However, Kant's *Conjectural Beginnings* is never mentioned.[12] I will now present Kant's essay in overview, before turning to identify the ways in which it innovates conjectural history.

In the First Section, Kant starts his narration with a couple of human beings who already possess motor skills, basic conceptual thinking, and speech. They guide themselves by instinct, which provides them with knowledge of what is beneficial and harmful. At this point, Kant offers a *history of reason* which depicts some stages of its development attending 'to what is moral' (CB, 8: 111). The first step of reason is the invention of new desires, which makes these go beyond (and even contradict) the boundaries of what is recommended by instinct. This event constitutes 'the first attempt at a free choice' (8: 112). The second step is the attainment of some rational control over impulses, especially sexual instinct, which allows the invention of some sense of decency. The latter prepares human beings for the later restrictions of morality. The third step is the expectation of the future, which prepares humans for thinking beyond what is immediate and considering remote objectives (e.g., the fulfilment of a destiny). Finally, the fourth step is the discovery that, unlike any other creature, the human being is an end in itself. In the Second Section, Kant provides a *social history of mankind* divided into three ages distinguished according to their socio-economic structures: the first (that of peace and leisure) is the age of hunting and gathering, and the second (that of labour and discord) is the age of pastoral and agricultural life. Agriculture demands permanent settlement, ownership of land, and defence against intruders. This demand brings about a separation between herdsmen and farmers. Such a separation marks the beginning of the third age, which is the age of commerce and involves the setting up of culture, art, and the state. The constant risk of war between herdsmen and farmers promoted the development of internal freedom of the latter's society. However, when the two nations were amalgamated, both war and its collateral benefits ended, bringing about despotism and the deflection of humanity from its intended course.

An engagement with the genre of conjectural history might help us understand the outlook of Kant's story. According to Palmieri (2016: 34), conjectural history has four relevant features. First, insofar as it traces the origins of society back to a time before the existence of documents, it uses a rhetoric of conditional tense. Second, it returns to earlier times as an alternative to accepting providential accounts based on the Holy Scripture. Third, it does not argue for a contractual foundation of society, since it privileges historical development over thought experiments. Finally, it adopts a long view of early society and distinguishes stages in the development of socio-economic life.[13]

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Conjectural Beginning has these four features. First, Kant uses a rhetoric of conditional tense throughout the work. Stylistically, he uses phrases like 'must have' (CB, 8: 111), 'presumably' (8: 112), 'might have taken place' (8: 118), or 'could seem to' (ibid.). The pervasiveness of conditional tense reminds the reader of the epistemic status of conjectural history. Conjectures 'cannot compare themselves' (8: 109) with a conventional historical account of the same events and, therefore, they 'must not make too high claims on assent' (8: 118). They have a lower epistemic status than the straightforward assertions proper to conventional history, science, and philosophy. It seems reasonable to think of conjectures as hypotheses. Although Kant sometimes uses these terms interchangeably, in general they play different roles. Hypotheses are propositions which one sets up and then tests (especially in the context of scientific inquiry), whereas conjectures resemble interpretations that are explicitly designed to be plausible insofar as they concern untestable states of affairs.

Second, Kant does not present a dogmatic justification, but a philosophical appropriation, of the Scripture. Although he uses Genesis as a map, he says this is allowed because *Conjectural Beginning* is a 'mere pleasure trip' (8: 109). Given that no other conjectural historian makes such a dismissive remark, it is tempting to read Kant as depriving his project of all seriousness.[14] However, I think his self-deprecating tone is rhetoric and that he only wishes to qualify the authority of the Bible. Genesis must be interpreted according to the demands of reason, and this implies interpreting it in a non-standard manner.[15] Consider the following examples. First, instead of taking God as an anthropomorphic figure who literally speaks in paradise, Kant interprets the 'voice of God' (8: 111) as natural instinct. An anthropomorphic God transcends possible experience, so Kant decides to exploit some features of instinct (e.g., it is immediately felt and it is ubiquitous in animal behaviour) to describe it in a godlike fashion.[16] Second, Adam and Eve covering their genitalia with a fig leaf is not interpreted as an expression of shame, but as a way in which they gain control over their impulses and transform their mode of thought (8: 113). This reading of Genesis 3:7 engages with sexuality in a way that is foreign to the Scripture.[17] Third, Cain's murder of Abel (*MAM*, 8: 118–9) is interpreted as showing how political society, crucial for the attainment of our moral goals, arose from the enmity between two social groups (farmers and shepherds). The episode is thus an illustration of unsocial sociability.[18] The previous examples foreshadow the philosophical approach to Scripture laid down in the *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) (CF, 7: 38), according to which reason is the supreme interpreter of the Bible.

Third, Kantian conjectural history moves away from social contract theory and aims to provide narratives of historical development instead of thought experiments focused on a single founding moment. Kant does not make his conjectural history depend on a single event, even if he could ascribe an utmost importance to any of them.[19] The emphasis is put on the developmental character of history. A benefit we get from this narrative decision is avoiding an artificial account of the origin of society. In the *Metaphysics of Morals* (MM, 6: 315–9), Kant gives his own version of social contract theory. However, its transcendental principle of public right helps us understand the content of moral claims, whereas *Conjectural Beginning* tells the story of how we came to make moral claims at all.

Fourth, *Conjectural Beginning* adopts a long view of early society and distinguishes stages in the development of social life. The essay assimilates stadial history, a genre

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that describes how societies undergo changes based on socio-economic factors.[20] A famous example is Adam Smith's concept of the four stages in the history of property: hunting, herding, agriculture, and commerce. Kant also depicts the transitions between epochs as implying a change in the 'way of living' (CB, 8: 119) and follows Smith's periodisation.[21] In agreement with other conjectural historians, Kant claims that culture arose from those economic changes (ibid.).

Nonetheless, we should not read Kant as offering naïve praise for scientific progress. He defines culture as 'the production of the aptitude of a rational being for any ends in general' (CPJ §83, 5: 431), of which the moral ones are the most relevant. Opposing French philosophy of history,[22] Kant partially agrees with Rousseau's portrayal of 'the historical development of human natural capacities ... as deleterious for both human morality and happiness' (Zuckert 2021: 71). It is a partial agreement because, as Kant claims in a footnote (CB, 8: 118), Rousseau's regressive history is one-sided. Attention to other Rousseauian works (and to history itself) shows that regression and progress are two sides of the same coin. In a Rousseauian spirit, Kant does not regard scientific and economic advances as paradigmatic signs of progress. He rather privileges smaller events. For example, the emergence of decency through the fig leaf was 'a small beginning, which, however, is ... more important than the entire immeasurable series of extensions of culture that followed upon it' (8: 113).[23]

In conclusion, Kant's essay exhibits the four defining features of the conjectural history genre. However, because it is embedded within a distinctive philosophical project, Kant's conjectural history presents *sui generis* difficulties that arise from both its approach to history and its grounding. The moral orientation of his philosophy of history transforms the very notion of conjectural history and introduces demands that are not merely theoretical. In the following two sections, I address the theoretical and practical dimensions of *Conjectural Beginning*, though with a different emphasis in each section.

3. The method of Kantian conjectural history

Recall that Kant emphasises that conjectural history lacks the epistemic status of conventional history. Nonetheless, it is not supposed to be a made-up story based on its author's fancies. Because the beginning of history is something that 'nature makes' (CB, 8: 109), it does not have to be invented but rather discovered. We can explain why Kant's conjectures are better than others by considering the cognitive sources which he lists. According to Kant's formulation, *Conjectural Beginning* is a journey on the wings of *imagination*, guided by *experience*, and mediated by *reason* (8: 110). An account of these sources and their use should clarify the criteria of adequacy of Kant's work.

3.1. Experience

The beginning of history 'does not have to be invented but can be taken from experience' (CB, 8: 109). This claim seems surprising given that conjectural history rests upon the idea that we have no experience of the beginning of human history. However, appealing to experience is something we find in all the major figures of the genre (Kelley 1998: 237). They use empirical information about human beings – some

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physical and psychological facts – to hypothesise about the behaviour of primitive individuals and social groups.

Regarding physical traits, Kant makes use of a wide variety of them. For example, he appeals to the observed facts that smell has an affinity with taste and that the latter has a direct connection with the digestive organs (CB, 8: 111) to provide a simple account of how instinct could have shown Adam and Eve which food was suited to them. Appealing to those facts prevents the conjectural historian from advancing the unnecessary hypothesis that the first human beings had a sixth sense that has now been lost (ibid.). Another example is the way in which Kant suggests that the skills of standing, walking, or speaking are acquired instead of innate. If they were innate, they would be inherited, something which 'experience contradicts' (ibid.). The fact seems banal, but it serves Kant to convey a crucial idea of the essay: that human beings must work and acquire things for themselves, instead of passively trusting nature.[24]

The psychological observations also provide more plausibility to the story since they concern drives and passions. A first example is Kant's appeal to curiosity to explain why Adam and Eve ate a fruit that was not in their natural diet. This drive need not be the only cause, for Kant alludes to imitative behaviour and abstract thinking too.[25] A second example is Kant's interpretation of Adam and Eve's fig leaf, which involves some sexual psychology. When humans want to attain more satisfaction, they prolong the lack and hide the stimulus (CB, 8: 113) before giving in to pleasure. This observation is invoked to suggest how human beings first attained control over their impulses. A third example is Kant's appeal to pride and self-satisfaction to explain our discovery of dignity (8: 114).[26] Human beings compared themselves with animals and things surrounding them and realised that everything but them could become a mere means.

Appeal to facts such as these is meant to help Kant reconstruct a plausible transition from animality to humanity, from nature to freedom, or from instinct to reason (CB, 8: 115) without indulging in fantasy. The classic authors of conjectural history made use of similar resources. However, Kant's selection of facts is done from a different standpoint: that of morality. In his review of Herder's *Ideas*, he claims that, before writing about human history, it would be nice if someone 'had done all the preliminaries … picking out from the immeasurable multiplicity of ethnographic descriptions … travel narrative and … conjectural records' (*HR*, 8: 61–2) the *adequate* facts. It is not so much their certainty that matters, but their usefulness in conveying moral lessons. Without making conjectural history into poesy, its author shares something with the writer of fiction (and with anyone who thinks about her own biography). They choose, among a wide array of materials, those that are more meaningful and conducive to their goals.[27] However, such a goal, conducted by imagination, can be misunderstood.

3.2. *Imagination*

To imagine something does not amount to arbitrarily fantasising about it. As Kant stipulates at the beginning of his essay, imagination must be aided by experience. This claim seems uninteresting since, irrespective of the taxonomical question about whether imagination belongs to sensibility or understanding, imagination is deeply intertwined with experience. My claim is that, in *Conjectural Beginning*, Kant opposes

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two authors who fail to make adequate use of those combined faculties: Herder and Rousseau. Kant accuses Herder of proceeding 'by means of a force of imagination given wings' (HR, 8: 55) and he disagrees with Rousseau's idealised imagining of primitive human beings. Because Kant's worries concern the way in which their stories frustrate moral self-knowledge, I will allude constantly to practical considerations, even though theoretical concerns are relevant too. I develop a more extensive account of moral imagination in section 4.

Kant's conjectural story begins with two human beings in their 'fully formed state' (CB, 8: 110), that is, as possessing motor skills, conceptual thinking, speech, and tools. By contrast, Herder[28] offers an extensive account of the 'revolutions which preceded the generation of human beings' (HR, 8: 46). The problem is not that he ventures to tell a story about the formation of the world before humans (Kant himself attempted to do so in his *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755)). Rather, the problem is that his historical reconstruction mixes naturalistic and supernatural elements. Regarding the naturalistic elements, Herder ascribes several moral dispositions to the adoption of an erect posture (HR, 8: 49), thus depriving reason of a privileged role in promoting development. Moreover, he reduces morality to prudential considerations. Regarding the supernatural elements, the powers of human beings, including reason, are understood as expressions of 'an invisible realm of forces' (8: 50) that have less resemblance with gravity than with pre-critical metaphysics. The explanatory use of these forces is a violation of the discipline of pure reason. As Kant claims, 'we cannot originally cook up . . . a single object with any new and not empirically given property and ground a permissible hypothesis on it; for this would be to found reason on empty figments of the brain' (CPR, A770/B798).[29] Another supernatural element is Herder's appeal to 'supernatural gifts or hyperrational inspirations' (Wood 1999: 230). These were given by God to humans, through revelations and traditions, so that they could bring about progress. Whereas the naturalistic elements threaten our self-understanding as moral agents, the supernaturalistic elements cast doubt on whether rationality, self-criticism, and autonomy can become true drives of progress.

Although *Conjectural Beginning* can be read as a response to Herder, it also engages Rousseau's *Second Discourse*. Unlike Herder, Rousseau's conjectural history starts with an existing human being 'always conformed as I see him today' (2004: 134). Starting earlier would be useless for his purposes and far 'too uncertain' (ibid.). Kant does not agree with Rousseau's use of imagination. Recall Kant's claim that we need not advance the conjecture that human beings had a now lost sixth sense or that their senses were more acute than ours. These very hypotheses are introduced by Rousseau (2004: 135) and must be rejected because they undermine scientific parsimony. According to Kant, the more hypotheses we introduce to support an already merely probable hypothesis, the more 'they arouse the suspicion of being a mere invention, since each of them requires the same justification which the underlying thought needed' (CPR, A774/B802).[30]

However, scientific parsimony is not Kant's main interest. Rousseau's introduction of adjacent hypotheses, like Herder's farfetched conjectures, might prevent the reader from recognising herself as a moral agent. The longing for a lost sixth sense or a celebration of primeval times might arouse in the reader a nostalgic, and pessimistic, spirit. While Kant agrees with Rousseau that progress comes at the expense of our

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individual happiness, he wishes to show that, as a species, we are allowed to believe we move towards the achievement of our moral vocation, and that we must work hard to get there instead of longing for a lost paradise. Kant's concerns with the use of imagination as an epistemic source exceed, therefore, merely theoretical considerations. Before expanding our understanding of the practical import of the essay, and as a way of bridging the practical and the theoretical, I now turn to reason.

3.3. Reason

This faculty should not be considered as a further item in the list but as shaping the previous sources and determining the ethical point of view which Kant adopts in his essay.

I have already mentioned that the selection of facts and the act of imagining primitive human beings obey some rational considerations. Likewise, *Conjectural Beginning*'s appeal to experience is not a contingent report of travel diaries. Kant believes he has justified the principle of the uniformity of experience. In the absence of this principle, the project of a plausible reconstruction of early human history is nonsensical. Kant references the *Critique of Pure Reason*'s justification of causal principles. When discussing the idea that experience 'was not better or worse than what we encounter now' (CB, 8: 109), he describes this principle as an 'analogy of nature' that belongs to 'philosophy of nature' (ibid.). Previous historians did not ignore that experience was uniform, but they lacked a proper justification for this fact.

Kantian uniformity of experience has two additional dimensions. First, the principle must be qualified because the development of human capacities (and moral progress) implies that change does happen. Likewise, the steps of reason described in the First Section of Kant's essay provide a cumulative framework in which reason does not remain immobile. For Kant, therefore, experience and reason do not change in a fundamental way. Our moral vocation and the moral law, as well as the principles of pure reason, remain unchangeable. It is their appearance in the phenomenal world that evolves. Second, Kant's initial emphasis on uniformity might be a way of targeting Herder, whose conception of reason and morality has relativistic vibes. When contrasting Herder and Kant, Wood (1999) draws attention to the fact that, according to Herder, each individual, culture, and age has its own conception of happiness which serves as its proper end. Moreover, he views 'reason … as identifiable with what is agreed upon by consensus within specific social traditions' (1999: 229). By contrast, Kant's account of the development of reason is not a defence of its malleable nature, but an account of how we discover who we really are.

Now, in addition to shaping other sources, reason seems to motivate the very project of Kantian conjectural history. Throughout his works, Kant speaks of the 'undeniable need of human reason, which finds complete satisfaction only in a complete systematic unity of its cognitions' (CPrR, 5: 91). Human history is no exception. In the *Idea*, Kant introduces the notion of a 'guiding thread' (IUH, 8: 29) that allows the philosophical mind to make a fragmented chain of events into a historical narrative: the practical idea of a cosmopolitan order. In *Conjectural Beginning*, we find a complementary reflection on how to approach history. Historians attempt to 'fill up gaps in the records' (CB, 8: 109), that is, in the course of history. Kant's essay tries to fill up a gap in the beginning of human history. In a nutshell, human beings have a

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strong interest in knowing their own history in the most complete way, something which explains why we put effort into unveiling how we were in primitive times.

The standpoint from which we regard human history is eminently practical. The Kantian conception of reason – and consequently of its pursuit of systematic unity – implies that its nature is more practical than theoretical (CPrR, 5: 105). The primacy of the practical over the theoretical had already been sketched before the second critique. According to the first critique, a system is a totality organised according to a principle which assigns each element its place and gives cohesion to the whole (CPR, A832/B860). When discussing the system of philosophy, of which the *Critique of Pure Reason* is both a propaedeutic and a first part, Kant claims that its overarching principle is the 'entire vocation (*Bestimmung*) of human beings' (A840/B868). Such a vocation is nothing but the legislation of nature (metaphysics of nature) and the legislation of freedom (metaphysics of morals). Unsurprisingly, human beings interpret history as the process by which they master their natural dispositions and bring about sociopolitical conditions that suit their moral status. This explains why the fact that human reason is practical is 'no unimportant motive for choosing a particular viewpoint for considering the world' (IUH, 8: 30).

In sum, Kant's methodology – through which he hopes his conjectural history will be both plausible and philosophically meaningful – involves the joint use of the epistemic sources of experience, imagination, and reason. Although Kant appeals to theoretical considerations to ground his project, such considerations are always imbued with a practical spirit. The criteria for the adequacy of a conjectural history, therefore, require an understanding of the practical function it is meant to fulfil. Although I have addressed the idea that the achievement of our moral vocation and the attainment of moral self-knowledge play a crucial role in *Conjectural Beginning*, a more detailed account is required.

4. Self-knowledge in *Conjectural Beginning*

As mentioned in the Introduction, the received view is that Kantian philosophy of history has a moral orientation which accounts for the unity of Kant's writings on history. Nevertheless, interpreters also point out their heterogeneity. While some have argued that Kant advances an official philosophy of history[31] that is ultimately replaced with a non-official one[32] (Honneth 2007), others have argued that different Kantian works reply to different challenges which history presents to the moral subject (Zuckert 2021). The official works address the ambiguity problem – that history involves non-moral actions that are supposed to indicate moral progress – and concern the realisation of moral ends, whereas the unofficial works address what might be called the loneliness problem – that on Kant's portrayal of history the moral agent has the prospect of acting alone – and concern the agent's need for community (Zuckert 2021: 62–3). I will show how *Conjectural Beginning* fits into this picture so that we can appreciate its originality and assess its practical functions.

On my view, *Conjectural Beginning* has the following practical functions. First, it makes up the first part of the philosophy of history which Kant envisions in the *Idea*. Unlike other Kantian philosophy of history texts, which are focused on either the future or the present, it is the only work that addresses the remote past in a substantial way. Second, it contributes to the reader's moral self-knowledge, more

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specifically, to some version of what Kant calls in the *Metaphysics of Morals* natural self-knowledge and substantial moral self-knowledge (whose combination addresses an alternative version of Zuckert's ambiguity problem). Third, it exhorts the reader to accomplish her moral vocation instead of trusting or blaming providence. Whereas most Kantian philosophy of history texts depict moral progress as the outcome of unsocial sociability, *Conjectural Beginning* also reminds the reader that moral progress ought to become the outcome of her own conscious and responsible activity. The previous functions are fulfilled through a moral exhibition of imagination. Moreover, by addressing the loneliness problem, the essay also incorporates some version of a call for collective action through a reading of Genesis 3:22.

4.1. The first chapter of philosophical history

Kant claims that the very writing of philosophical history contributes to moral progress (IUH, 8: 29). Although Kant never claims that he himself is going to write the philosophical history he envisions, he offers an example of it. The *Idea* contains a sketchy retelling of European constitutional history from the Greeks to modern times. This sketch gives the reader a glimpse of how a potential philosophical historian would proceed. Such a historian, who is an interested party and chooses a moral point of view, would reconstruct history as an intelligible process moving towards the realisation of moral destiny, that is, the establishment of a cosmopolitan constitution and perpetual peace.

We should ask ourselves what place *Conjectural Beginning* has in this philosophical history. At first sight, it is excluded. The *Idea* and *Conjectural Beginning* seem incompatible because the latter establishes a divide between the *course* and the *beginning* of human history (CB, 8: 109). Nonetheless, this difference concerns methodology, instead of content. The content is always human actions from an ethical point of view (8: 111). Even if Kant never says so, I believe that, in light of his own ideas, he should regard *Conjectural Beginning* as a potential first part of the philosophical history.[33] I say *potential* because Kant would have welcomed subsequent empirical investigations into the origin of the human species. A philosophical conjectural history does not need to take the form of a philosophical appropriation of Genesis, but it must be a 'pre-history'. It is the story of the natural development of primitive humans which preceded the discovery of morality (hence 'pre-'), but without abandoning the ethical point of view (hence 'history').[34]

Zuckert (2021: 67) claims that Kant's official history is predominantly a history of the future, and she remarks that the unofficial history is, rather, a history of the present. There is a sense in which the whole Kantian philosophy of history is forward-looking. However, the benefit of a present-looking depiction of history is that it makes the reader feel like a participant of the events. Similarly, a benefit of a backward-looking depiction of history is that it facilitates the experience of discovering – perhaps in the sense of remembering – what one truly is. A recollection is, as Hegel will say in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, also a retreat into oneself.

4.2. The varieties of self-knowledge

In the Preface to the *Second* Discourse, Rousseau claims that 'the inscription on the Temple at Delphi alone contain[s] a more important and more difficult precept than

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all the big books of the moralists' (2004: 124). But the imperative of self-knowledge is hard to follow since, like the statue of Glauco, the ravages of modern society and arrogant science have disfigured our soul. One of Rousseau's goals is to remedy 'this ignorance of the nature of man' (2004: 125).

Although interpreters have addressed several connections between Kant's philosophy of history and Rousseau, they usually omit the notion of moral self-knowledge. The latter is not tangential to Kant's practical philosophy. There is some scholarship on the question of how to reconcile the Kantian duty of self-knowledge and the Kantian opacity thesis,[35] that is, the idea that the ground of our maxim is unknowable, on metaphysical grounds (R, 6: 63), and covert, on psychological grounds (G, 4: 407). Although *Conjectural Beginning* was written more than a decade before the *Metaphysics of Morals*, it was published between the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which both thematise self-knowledge. However, we need to specify the sort of self-knowledge present in the essay.

Kant provides a taxonomy of self-knowledge in the *Metaphysics of Morals*:

> This command is 'know (scrutinize, fathom) yourself', not in terms of your natural perfection (your fitness or unfitness for all sorts of discretionary or even commanded ends) but rather in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty. That is, know your heart – whether it is good or evil, whether the source of your actions is pure or impure, and what can be imputed to you as belonging originally to the substance of a human being or as derived (acquired or developed) and belonging to your moral condition. (MM, 6: 441)

Ware draws attention to a couple of distinctions established in this passage. The first is between natural self-knowledge and moral self-knowledge. The former amounts to knowledge of our natural perfections, also called gifts of nature, which we use to accomplish any goal whatsoever. On the contrary, the latter is, as its very name implies, knowledge of our moral disposition in relation to duty (Ware 2009: 677). The second distinction is within moral self-knowledge since it can be either substantial or derivative. The former amounts to knowledge of the good and evil imputable to me as a member of the human species.[36] It is a generic self-knowledge which is little concerned with my own individuality. On the contrary, the latter amounts to knowledge of the good and evil imputable to me as an individual, that is, of my 'idiosyncratic habits, propensities, and tendencies' (Ware 2009: 676). It is a personal self-knowledge which presupposes the generic one. Which sort of self-knowledge is to be found in *Conjectural Beginning*? Certainly not derivative moral self-knowledge, since a philosophy of history text is unable to help me dive deeper into the inner theatre of my heart. I believe that *Conjectural Beginning* displays natural self-knowledge and substantial moral self-knowledge. It provides an account of the natural dispositions which play a crucial role in the development of morality and reinforces the recognition of our moral status.

However, there is the temptation of being dismissive with the relevance of those two forms of self-knowledge.

It might be said that, by its very definition, natural self-knowledge does not play any role in moral self-knowledge. Natural dispositions lack intrinsic moral worth and belong to anthropology or physiology. However, *Conjectural Beginning* addresses

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natural disposition from an ethical point of view. A worry that could be raised about *Conjectural Beginning* is that it is *prima facie* strange to give a naturalistic account of humans' moral status in the service of helping us see our moral status as higher than anything natural.[37] There are two complementary answers to the worry. First, Kant's conjectural history is the story of how we came to discover and develop a clearer understanding of our moral disposition. Kant does not advance the idea that morality can be reduced to non-moral phenomena. As Filieri (2021: 159) notes, *Conjectural Beginning* introduces a distinction between an instrumental and a teleological use of reason. For example, we can appreciate the former when Adam and Eve choose to satisfy a natural inclination, and the latter when they treat each other as ends in themselves. The thought is that *Conjectural Beginning* does not tell a story of how morality proceeds from prudential reasons, but rather depicts coexisting aspects that make up our identity. Second, *Conjectural Beginning* involves another version of the ambiguity problem. Whereas in other works Kant wants to show how immoral actions are conducive to the achievement of a moral destiny, in *Conjectural Beginning* he wants to show how natural dispositions are compatible with and even conducive to morality. One might claim that natural dispositions receive their true meaning from a moral standpoint (Wood 2014).[38] Irrespective of whether Kant is successful in such a project, I think it is reasonable to ascribe him the intention of dispelling the idea that our natural status implies a rejection of our moral one.

While the problem with natural self-knowledge is that it seems to play no role at all, the problem with substantial moral self-knowledge is that it is 'not difficult to attain' (Ware 2009: 679). Consider Kant's rejection of a duty to seek happiness.[39] As natural beings, we pursue happiness by default, so there is no need to posit a duty in regard to it. Similarly, it is impossible to lack substantial moral self-knowledge. It is not difficult to know that the human species is prone to evil since we perceive evil 'in every human being, even the best' (R, 6: 32). Nor is it difficult to know that the human species does good. We cannot fail to notice the 'noble predisposition to the good in us, which makes the human being worthy of respect' (MM, 6: 441).[40] As Kant claims in the *Groundwork*, even the greatest scoundrel is aware of the moral disposition within him (G, 4: 454). Moreover, Kant claims that consciousness of the moral law is a fact and that the command that 'we ought to become better human beings … resounds unabated in our souls' (R, 6: 45).

And yet I believe that substantial self-knowledge is meaningful. Is it true that substantial self-knowledge is easy to bear in mind? There is a sense in which a reminder of our moral status is not useless. For example, in the *Critique of Judgement*, the experience of the sublime makes the subject aware of her supersensible nature (CPJ §28, 5: 262). Although the experience of the sublime is not cognitive, it does serve to move our inner strings and make moral ideas sensible. As Ware recognises, 'knowledge of my generic moral vocation could possibly strengthen my feeling for the moral law, which would strengthen my desire for self-improvement' (2009: 680). I do not think it *could*, but that, in the context of *Conjectural Beginning*, it *does* play those roles.

In terms of Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, it might be the case that some intellectual trends dim our awareness of our moral status. Kant knows about some intellectual trends with naturalistic and materialistic implications. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he seeks to 'sever the very root of materialism [and] fatalism' (CPR, Bxxxiv). More than Herder's naturalism, the targets are figures like Holbach, La Mettrie, or Schulz, who

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championed a rejection of moral responsibility, a strong determinism, and a machine-like conception of the human against which Kant argued in other works (Wilson 2022). Even if the audience of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, where Kant's essay was published, was not composed of *philosophes matérialistes*, the danger was around. Some years later Fichte, a Kantian who took the idea of moral destination seriously, complained that 'most human beings would rather consider themselves to be a piece of lava in the moon than an I' (2021: 265). Their failure to understand themselves as subjects amounts to their desire to reject the burden of recognising themselves as moral agents.[41]

By contrast, *Conjectural Beginning* addresses the difficulties of recognising ourselves as being both natural and moral beings. In a letter to Kant, the editor praises Kant for showing how 'the greatest contradictions resolve themselves into harmony' (Corr, 10: 417). A crucial contradiction is that between human beings as a physical and as a moral species (CB, 8: 116). As the contemporaneous *Lectures on Anthropology* show, the contradiction can be phrased in terms of the two *Bestimmungen* of human beings: humanity and animality that frequently stand in conflict.[42]

Granting that *Conjectural Beginning* provides the above-mentioned forms of self-knowledge, it remains to be clarified how it does so and how such self-knowledge relates to the teachings with which Kant closes his essay.

4.3. Moral teachings and *moral* imagination

In the Concluding Remark, Kant mentions that, when regarding history and its evils, human beings are tempted to turn their sorrow into moral corruption (CB, 8: 121). In order to resist such a scenario, Kant expects his conjectural history to reinforce three moral lessons. First, 'at the stage of culture where humankind still stands, war is an indispensable means of bringing culture still further' (CB, 8: 121). Second, the shortness of life is not something to lament about since living longer would be 'to prolong a play which is a constant grappling with nothing but troubles' (8: 122). Third, we should not idealise the past and resist a nostalgic desire promoted 'by the shadowy image of the golden age' (ibid.).

According to my reading, *Conjectural Beginning* conveys these lessons, which contribute to moral self-knowledge, through a moral exhibition of the imagination. Imagination is defined as the faculty of exhibition (CPJ, 5: 192) and to exhibit is to make concepts or ideas present to sensibility. Direct exhibition takes place when the sensible content of intuition maps onto the logical content of concepts in a straightforward way, whereas indirect exhibition takes place when the mapping is through symbols or metaphors, which help us grasp the concept in a more open-ended manner (cf. Matherne 2024: 359ff)

One might claim that imagination does not play any role in morality. The supersensible status of the ideas of reason means that they cannot be sensibly exhibited by the imagination (CPR, A320/B377).[43] Moreover, Kant warns that imagination might turn us from the path of morality: when she has a free play we become the obedient toy of the senses (L-Eth, 27: 362). Nonetheless, there is a more positive assessment of imagination's impact on morality. Recently, Matherne has provided an extensive account of Kant's theory of imagination and called for rehabilitation of moral exhibition: imagination facilitates our comprehension of

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moral ideas and concepts by making them sensible to us in a way that broadens our concrete understanding of them (2024: 332).

In section 3, I alluded to the synoptic demand of reason, which prompts us to attain unity in any sort of cognition. Matherne rightfully points out another demand: intuitive clarity, that is, 'examples or other illustrations *in concreto*' (CPR, Axvii–xviii). Kant speaks of the 'natural need of all human beings to demand for even the highest concepts and the grounds of reason something that the senses can hold on to' (R, 6: 109). The demand is rooted in a certain cognitive limitation: we portray moral ideas 'in human guise' (R, 6: 64–5). Although we can rationally grasp moral concepts, they only become 'subjectively practical' (CPrR, 5: 157), that is, easier to grasp and follow, once we consider them in relation to fleshly human beings.[44] We can capture Kant's position in the following formula, which resembles the conjoining of reason, imagination, and experience as sources of conjectural history: 'the morally oriented reason (through the imagination) calls sensibility into play' (R, 6: 23). Now, Matherne is concerned with three uses of moral exhibition: specification of practical principles, assessment of a concrete situation, and deliberation about the best course of action. She claims that moral examples and ideals guide us in the previous actions. I think *Conjectural Beginning* shows other ways in which practical ideas become sensible.

The basic thought is that *Conjectural Beginning* makes use of archetypical characters and events to display the moral development of human beings and convey moral lessons. Moreover, the essay makes use of some sort of fellow-feeling to help the reader identify herself with the characters. Adam, Eve, and their offspring exhibit indirectly, although in a rich way, the concept of humanity. Kant's choice of Genesis might be grounded on the suspicion that it is an example of what Kant calls the 'art of popularity', which consists in 'finding the relation between representation *in abstracto* and *in concreto* ... through which the maximum of cognition is achieved, both as to extension and as to content' (L-Log, 24: 100).

The first lesson concerns the need for war, which is initially exemplified through the enmity between Cain (farmers) and Abel (shepherds). Their enmity brings about the state and the refinement of culture. But Kant adds something in the conclusion of the essay. He claims that 'the holy document is quite right ... to represent the melting together of the nations into one society and its complete liberation from external danger ... as a sinking into incurable corruption' (CB, 8: 121–2). The allusion is to the Tower of Babel of Genesis 11, which exhibits the idea of a failed cosmopolitan project. After the flood, humanity, which spoke one language, decided to build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. The episode represents a premature attempt to establish a unified political order. After claiming that 'the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do' (Genesis 11:6), God destroyed their pride. Another example is the universal flood of Genesis 6:12–13, which Kant interprets as conveying the second lesson, that is, that an extremely long life is not to be desired. Before the flood, people lived much longer (approximately 900 years), but the life span decreased afterwards (approximately 120 years). One could multiply the examples of representations which exhibit concepts and ideas to make them easier to grasp for a certain audience.[45]

The third lesson implies recognising that 'we are ourselves responsible for the ills against which we raise such bitter complaints' (CB, 8: 122).[46] It is a reminder of our duty to improve ourselves instead of passively trusting or blaming others. Kant

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portrays human actions in his official history works as legal, that is, as 'morally correct but done under compulsion, not for moral reasons ... morally approvable, but not brought about by moral agency proper' (Zuckert 2021: 67). However, *Conjectural Beginning* has the peculiarity of exhorting the reader to embrace moral agency. The first half of Kant's essay advances the message in a negative way. Rousseau's writing style in the *Second Discourse* might lead the reader to some wrong conclusions (e.g., that society is hopelessly awful and that we should go back to the forests).[47] This conclusion obscures Rousseau's own insight that we should rather shape the world in a way that suits our dual nature (CB, 8: 116). Likewise, Kant complains that, according to Herder, the development of human beings as moral creatures 'is not to be sought in the human species' own faculty, but rather entirely outside it' (HR, 8: 63), that is, not only in nature but also on 'teaching and instruction by others' (ibid.).

In the last section of *Conjectural Beginning*, however, Kant presents his exhortation in a more positive manner. He complains about a common way of reading Genesis and original sin: we are inexorably morally corrupt because our first father sinned. By contrast, *Conjectural Beginning* foreshadows a principle of Kantian Biblical interpretation, namely, that the Scripture should be read as representing human actions 'as issuing from the human being's own use of his moral powers, not as an effect (resulting) from the influence of an external, higher cause' (CF, 7: 42–3). The means through which Kant achieves this in the essay is through moral imagination's sympathetic procedure: '[the reader] must recognize with full right what they [Adam and Eve] did as having been done by himself and attribute the responsibility for all ills arising from the misuse of his reason entirely to himself, since he can very well become conscious of the fact that he would have behaved in precisely the same way under the same circumstances and would have begun the first use of reason that way' (CB, 8: 123).[48] The exercise of putting oneself in someone else's shoes, by reproducing the same circumstances and disposition, was familiar to Kant from his engagement with Scottish moral philosophers and which appears as connected with imagination in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (6: 457).

Granted, *Conjectural Beginning* is not an exercise through which we sympathise with real human beings with which we interact, but with fictional characters who are, at best, an exhibition of the concept of humanity. Although Matherne emphasises the role which moral ideals can play in our lives by helping us imagine alternative courses of action (2024: 346), I think the characters from *Conjectural Beginning* are not ideals. Adam, as someone who sins, is hardly a sage who embodies the idea of wisdom (CPR, A569/B597). The characters are archetypes in light of which we can judge, and hopefully improve, our own moral conduct. We do not want to imitate them but see our moral condition reflected in their actions and life episodes. By sympathising with Adam and interpreting him as an exhibition of the concept of humanity which I also embody, I can judge myself in a generic, even though meaningful, way. Now, the problem of loneliness comes back to the surface. Similarly to Zuckert, Ware complains that substantial moral self-knowledge's impersonality 'weakens its normative pull' (2009: 681). I do not think *Conjectural Beginning* addresses that problem in a satisfactory way. However, its answer evokes the communal spirit which Zuckert ascribes to the unofficial history texts. I say communal because the essay depicts morality as something that is collectively achieved. Readers are supposed to identify with Adam

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and understand themselves as equally responsible members of the species who are meant to bring about moral progress. This is reflected in Kant's reading of Genesis 3:22. Once Adam discovers his rationality and freedom, God claims that now he has become 'one of us'. This means he has entered the community of rational beings, which includes God and the angels in the Christian tradition, an idea with which Kant himself plays in the *Groundwork* (4: 433).

5. Conclusion

I began this paper with the claim that I would provide an account of the goal and methodology of *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, which involves a consideration of its theoretical and practical functions. The goal of Kant's essay is to contribute to the reader's self-knowledge (both natural and substantially moral) through the theoretical endeavour of reconstructing a plausible account of early human history from a moral standpoint and to cure some misconceptions that might turn us from the task of accomplishing our moral destiny. The payoff of my analysis shows the often-neglected philosophical value of *Conjectural Beginning* and how it both innovates a historical genre and adds dimensions to the Kantian corpus of philosophy of history. Although Kant's philosophical system evolved throughout several years – which makes somewhat artificial the idea that *Conjectural Beginning* was written with the whole system in mind – I think Kant's essay is an interesting focal point of themes such as the right approach to history, anthropology, moral self-knowledge, and the philosophical interpretation of the Bible, all of which occupied him later. Moreover, insofar as the essay was written for a wider audience, we can read it as one of the many Kantian interventions in the public sphere and a text in which he appears as an ingenious reader and a talented writer. Perhaps the very title of his work suggests so. *Mutmassliche* means 'presumed' or 'conjectural', but it also alludes to *Mut*, that is, to the courage it takes to follow one's destiny.[49]

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Notes

1 See Ostaric (2023).

2 While some scholars (Yovel 1980; Wood 1999; Louden 2000; and Frierson 2003) include discussions of *Conjectural Beginning* in their accounts of Kant's philosophy of history, they do not address the peculiarities of the essay. While this paper was being submitted for review, Lenczewska's (2025) book, which attempts to bring more attention to *Conjectural Beginning*, came out.

3 Citations appear in the order of abbreviation, followed by volume/page number from the Akademie Ausgabe (*Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, and successors (29 vols.), Berlin: de Gruyter (and predecessors), 1900-). The only exceptions are the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which I follow the standard use of the first edition of 1781 (A) and the second edition of 1787 (B), and a quotation from *Conjectural Beginning* in H. S. Reiss (ed.), *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge:

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Cambridge University Press, 2004). All the other translations come from The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992-): *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* (CB); *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (CPJ); *Critique of Practical Reason* (CPrR); *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (G); *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* (IUH); *Lectures on Anthropology* (L-Anth); *Lectures on Ethics* (L-Eth); *Lectures on Logic* (L-Log); *Metaphysics of Morals* (MM); *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (R); *Review of J.G. Herder's Ideas* (HR); *The Conflict of the Faculties* (CF); *Toward Perpetual Peace* (TPP).

4 I use Nisbet's noun-translation of *in Muthmaßungen schwärmen* since it captures better the pejorative sense of *Schwärmerei*, which designates a sort of enthusiasm that threatens to undermine reason. It is a 'delusion of being able to see something beyond the bounds of all sensibility' (CPJ §29, 5: 275).

5 Lenczewska also recognises theoretical and practical dimensions of *Conjectural Beginning*, as well as a priority of the latter over the former (2025: 7–8). However, she does not interpret those dimensions in the way I do and she is not concerned with how Kant's own conjectural history fares better against alternative histories.

6 According to Ameriks, 'it is precisely this kind of dynamic historical insight that is often said to characterize the distinctive Christian (and Jewish) response to the call of the divine, in contrast to those religions and worldviews that embrace a basically cyclical, and in that sense static, understanding of humanity' (2012: 37). Naturally, any attempt to determine the beginning of philosophy of history is subject to several qualifications. Kant himself chooses Thucydides (IUH, 8: 29).

7 Zuckert summarises the way in which Kant's philosophy of history resembles a theodicy: 'the incipient, historically developed evil in human nature (unsociable sociability) and its conflict with somehow accompanying moral rational development can be resolved, perhaps compensated for, by the political institutions it ultimately helps to bring about' (2021: 72). A problem she draws attention to, and which I discuss in section 4, is that the agent of change is not so much human beings but nature.

8 Some interesting accounts of conjectural history can be found in Allan (1993), Wokler (1995), Kelley (1998), Salber Phillips (2000), and Palmieri (2016).

9 As Garrett has shown (2023: 181), Stewart's definition is a rephrase of Lord Kames'.

10 Some relevant works are David Hume's *History of Natural Religion* (1757), Lord Kames' *Historical Law-Tracts* (1758), Adam Smith's *Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages* (1767) and *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), and Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767).

11 A couple of relevant works are Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) and Rousseau's *Second Discourse* (1755). Wokler (1995) considers that Samuel Pufendorf's *De jure naturae et gentium* (1672) is the first conjectural history, whereas Palmieri (2016) claims Giambattista Vico's *New Science* (1725) deserves the title.

12 One might wonder whether Kant himself understood his essay as belonging to conjectural history. In addition to the similarities I have shown, there are more clues. Kant had knowledge of the main works and authors of conjectural history. Leaving aside his well-known engagement with Rousseau, Kant shows knowledge of Adam Smith's views on the development of society (MM, 6: 289; Anth, 7: 209) and was a colleague of Christian Jakob Kraus, a leading German exponent of Adam Smith's social theory. Kant also owned copies of Ferguson's *Versuch über die Geschichte der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. Aus dem Englischen übersetzt* (Leipzig, 1768) and Hume's *Gespräche über natürliche Religion* (Leipzig, 1781).

13 See also Kelly's account of conjectural history (1998: 233–8), which addresses some of these features from the standpoint of historiographical methodology.

14 Allen Wood (1999) has devoted some attention to *Conjectural Beginning*. However, I disagree with his account of its purpose and methodology. He reads the essay as a satire of Herder's *Oldest Document of Humankind* (1774–1776) and *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Mankind* (1784). Indeed, Kant's immediate motivation for writing the essay was a desire to react to Herder's work. But instead of interpreting the essay as a satire, I am sympathetic to the idea that Kant accepted the challenge of 'playing the game' (Raulet 2015: 33) of Herder, namely, to interpret Genesis philosophically (*HR*, 8: 63), and expected to fare better than he had. Wood claims that Kant uses Genesis 'in wry and sometimes irreverent ways, to tell an alternative story about the early history of our species' (1999: 244). Even though Kant reads several passages of Genesis in a heterodox way, the term 'irreverence' is an overstatement. *Conjectural Beginning* foreshadows the appropriation of Biblical texts which Kant develops in the 1790s. Regarding the methodology, Wood claims that the first part is a thought experiment (ibid.), and the second part a

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'proto-Marxist' (1999: 245) account of human history. My disagreements with these points should become evident in the next section of this paper.

15 Kant also uses a self-deprecating tone in the opening paragraphs of *Perpetual Peace* (8: 343), whose subject matter can hardly be considered unserious.

16 Interestingly, this reading of Genesis 3:2–3 bears some resemblance to Spinoza's naturalistic and prudential (instead of supernatural and strictly moral) account of the same passage. The prudential reasoning of Adam and Eve, interpreted in terms of Kant's anthropology, is developed in Lenczewska (2025: 9–10).

17 An account of the relationship between sexuality and morality can be found in the *Lectures on Anthropology*, especially in its discussions of genitalia (L-Anth, 27: 136) and sexual refusal (L-Anth, 27: 385).

18 A moral objection to Kant's philosophy of history is that it treats the historical actors as means to an end. Regarding the achievement of humanity's moral destination: 'the argument that evil may somehow be made good by contributing to some ultimate good outcome seems dismissive concerning its victims and appears to absolve evildoers of blame, even to vindicate their behavior, as ultimately useful' (Zuckert 2021: 77). While Kant does not justify the enmity between shepherds and farmers, he does use it as an example of how unsocial sociability is conducive to moral progress.

19 Wood's claim that the formation of the state is the most relevant event that Kant wants to reconstruct (1999: 246) overemphasises one line of thought and loses sight of other dimensions of the essay.

20 The Kantian engagement with socio-economic factors motivates Wood's claim that *Conjectural Beginning* provides a proto-materialist account of human history. Again, while this reading captures something significant, the so-called materialism would need to be subordinated, on my account, to a moral message.

21 Although I fail to see a word that signals the fourth epoch, Gerhardt's account of *Conjectural Beginning* incorporates it (Gerhardt 2016: 190).

22 See Alexandre Sevérien's *Histoire des progress de l'esprit humain dans les sciences exactes* (1766) and *J.F.* Montucla's *Histoire de Mathematiques* (1758).

23 Ameriks believes that Kant's philosophy of history follows Rousseau's three-part pattern of history as described in the Second Discourse: 'first, to live in a peculiarly complex way as an immediately selfish animal; second, to plan as a prudently selfish rational being; and third, to enter into moral relations with other persons' (2012: 43). Different versions of such a threefold reading are listed in Lenczewska (2025: 2, 10, 28).

24 Kant had reviewed Moscati's *Of the corporeal essential differences between the structure of animals and humans* (1771), in which the latter argues that the ability to stand up and walk was not only unnatural but counter-purposive for human beings. Kant's defence of the opposite claim bears some resemblance to the story of *Conjectural Beginning*. As Frierson (2013: 82) claims, 'the issue of the relationship between the upright posture and reason was a hot topic of the day'.

25 The role of imitation in a reading of Genesis 3 is found in Spinoza: 'after [Adam] believed the lower animals to be like himself, he immediately began to imitate their affects' (2016: 64).

26 Compare this Kantian claim with Rousseau's similar picture (2004: 136).

27 To the objection that Kant deliberately either omits alternative facts or distorts the ones he chooses, he could respond that we are always selecting facts and that the question is only what the right criterion of selection is. In section 4, I develop an account of the moral criteria governing Kant's engagement with experience.

28 Wood (1999: 227–49) provides a discussion of *Conjectural Beginning* in light of Kant's relationship with Rousseau. While I profit from some of his claims, his interpretation does not touch upon criteria of adequacy of conjectural history and self-knowledge.

29 The example he provides in the first *Critique* is precisely that of Herder's 'new original forces' (CPR, A770/B798).

30 This a different methodological consideration than the one Lenczewska references in 2025: 7. Consider also: 'philosophy's concern is "pruning abundant saplings [rather] than with making them sprout"' (HR, 8: 55).

31 Expressed in works such as the *Idea* (1784), *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790), *Theory and Practice* (1793), and *Perpetual Peace* (1795).

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32 Expressed in works such as *What is Enlightenment?* (1785) and *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798).
33 Kant claims that the first page of Thucydides, not Genesis, is the beginning of all true history (*IaG*, 8: 29). Leaving aside the fact that Kant does not judge Genesis as a historical text, the notion of history in the *Idea* is restricted to the course of history.
34 A similar description of *Conjectural Beginning* is found in Yovel (1980: 191).
35 See O'Neill (1996), Sullivan (1989: 60–2), Wood (1999: 196–202), Guyer (2000: 384–5), Freierson (2003: 100–3), Grenberg (2005), Ware (2009), Berg (2020), and Halper (2023).
36 This invites a comparison with the notion of radical evil which Kant develops a decade after *Conjectural Beginning*. It is worth reminding that Kant's claim that evil belongs to human nature means that it is universal (R, 6: 25), innate (6: 31), and inextirpable (6: 37). There is no discussion of these features in *Conjectural Beginning*, even though Kant develops around the same time the anthropological ideas that will be exploited in *Religion*. For some accounts of radical evil in relation to nature, see Michalson (1990), Bernstein (2002), and Wood (2020).
37 I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to say more about this issue.
38 Despite being written in a very different stage of his philosophical development, some authors suggest that *Conjectural Beginning* provides some version of the three predispositions described in the *Religion*. Lenczewska (2025: 11–12) claims that the former text provides a chronological version of the latter. The disposition of animality, that is, the instincts of self-preservation, sex, and sociability, corresponds to Adam's initial stage; the disposition of humanity, that is, the capacity to engage in prudential reasons, corresponds to Adam's pursuit of happiness; and personality, that is, the capacity to legislate oneself and follow the moral law, corresponds to Adam's discovery of his status as a moral being. Wood (2014: 42) emphasises that these dispositions are neither neutral nor good due to their natural status. On the contrary, they already involve free agency, and if reason applies to them, they conduce to the good.
39 However, this does not mean that we should not be concerned with our own happiness. Timmermann (2006) speaks of the Kantian indirect duty to promote happiness. Promoting my happiness is of moral concern since being unhappy makes one more likely to submit to temptations (Halper 2023).
40 When discussing his own philosophical interpretation of Genesis, Hegel claims that 'it is false to ask whether humanity is only good by nature or only evil. That is a false way of posing the question' (2007: 299).
41 The self-deceit in which we engage is related to 'pathological incentives and grandiose self-conceptions' (O'Hagan 2009: 531). However, the distorted self-conception that appears in Conjectural Beginning stems from, as Fichte suggests, a form of self-contempt.
42 See Friedländer (L-Anth, 25: 682) for the conflict and Mrongovius (L-Anth, 25: 1420) for the resolution, respectively.
43 The previous is true of the moral law (CPJ §29, 5: 274), freedom (CPrR, 5: 56), and the morally good (CPrR, 5: 68–9).
44 Why, then, does Kant interpret 'the voice of God' as natural instinct, if an anthropomorphic god does more justice to the need of humanising moral concepts? I think it is because Kant wants to move away from heteronomy.
45 One wonders whether Kant expects imaginative representation to be replaced with concepts. Kant's account of moral examples likens them to resources children use when learning to walk but which should eventually be dispensed with (CPrR, 5: 152). The use of Genesis in *Conjectural Beginning* might be in no better position.
46 However, this does not amount to substantial self-knowledge about our capacity to do evil, understood as belonging to the concept of humanity. Otherwise, we might provoke 'another vice, namely that of misanthropy' (R, 6: 34).
47 Ameriks (2012: 43). However, Rousseau believes the opposite to that conclusion; see Note 9 of the *Second Discourse* (2004: 203).
48 Similarly to Kant's idea of exhibition, Hegel also emphasises that Adam is a symbol that stands for the concept of humanity: 'from the point of view of thought, the expression "the first human being" signifies "humanity in itself" or "humanity as such" – not some single, contingent individual, not one among many, but the absolutely first one, humanity according to its concept' (2007: 301).
49 I take this suggestion from Peter Fenves (1991: 184).

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