Kant’s Conviction of the Inevitability of Perpetual Peace

Paulina Ninkovic

European thinkers, among others, have long reflected on the causes of people’s tendency to group themselves into organized communities and on the nature of interactions both within and between those communities. While discussing the European philosophers, contemporary scholars recognized three major trends of thought in political philosophy that deal with the aforementioned issues: liberalism, realism and marxism. Nonetheless, Immanuel Kant is an example of a philosopher who cannot be labelled as a representative of any of these trends, as he did not follow any stream but his own, creating a unique philosophical model. His influence on the shaping of the doctrine of Rechtsstaat – the state governed according to the rule of law – was profound. In fact, Kant is considered to be the father of modern German political thought. Through Hegel’s writings, Kant influenced Marx, whose impact on modern political thinking was enormous.

Nonetheless, for many years Kant’s political philosophy, claiming that lasting peace on earth is possible and actually inevitable, was unrecognized and did not attract much attention. This was due to two facts. Firstly, Kant’s most brilliant works developed problems of morality and metaphysics. Appearing late in his life, and never reaching the level of sophistication of his previous works, these writings were summed up by one final philosophical model. Secondly, although lasting peace may be a condition of international relations desired by most, often the concept of lasting peace is regarded as a mere utopia. Consequently, Kant was given the label of ‘utopian political philosopher’, which was enough to draw the critics’ attention away from his works on the subject of politics.

Nevertheless, Kant was neither a dreamer who insisted on the possibility of establishing perpetual peace immediately, nor was he a moralist who believed that only perfectly moral people could ensure a perfect system. However, to understand Kant’s justification for the infallibility and importance of the emergence of the state of lasting peace on earth, it is essential to place his thoughts into the historical context of his time, and to elaborate on the linear process proposed by the philosopher that, starting from the state of nature, inevitably leads humanity to perpetual peace.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was born in Konigsburg, Eastern Prussia. At the University of Konigsburg, he studied philosophy, mathematics and physics. He lived at the end of the Enlightenment. However, contrary to the representatives of this era, Kant saw the Enlightenment not as static, but as a dynamic process leading to the individual’s self-emancipation. In his opinion, the time-period in which he lived was not yet enlightened, but merely in the process of becoming.

Having devoted himself to teaching, Kant started publishing his philosophical works late in his life. He commenced with Critique of Reason in 1781, and then followed with: 1) Idea of the Universal History in 1784; 2) Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals in 1785; 3) Critique of Pure Reason; 4) Critique of Practical Reason in 1787; and 5) Metaphysics of Ethics in 1797. Among his works on political philosophy, the first, a political essay, was published when he was sixty years old. After its publication, the following were published: 1) Theory and Practice in 1792; 2) Perpetual Peace in 1795; 3) The Metaphysical Elements of Right in 1797; 4) The Contest of the Faculties in 1798, and 5) Critique of Judgement in 1790. Two historical events triggered the appearance of political thought in Kant’s philosophy, namely the American Revolution and, most importantly, the French Revolution, which established a people’s government and abolished the monarchy. Even though Kant did not approve of the revolution as a method of bringing about a better political order, he, who still lived under a monarchic...
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order where the bourgeoisie was under the dominance of the aristocracy, agreed with its aims of “freedom, equality and fraternity”. This was the beginning of Kant’s preoccupation with the problem of establishing a “just and lasting international order and world peace” ⁶, the basis for which would be universal freedom, equality and fraternity.⁷

Kant’s label as a ‘utopian philosopher’ was rooted in the fact that the definitions proposed by him were independent of personal experience. This was caused by Kant’s division of the world into ‘noumena’ – things as they really are – and ‘phenomena’ – things as they appear to be to the human senses. Kant directed his interest towards the true nature of things, the ‘noumena’: Things only reasonably, not empirically penetrable. As both entities are connected, he sought, nonetheless to establish a set of principles that would be universal and logically independent of sense experience in order to understand the external world and moral conduct.⁸

For Kant, the individual and the primary conditions of his or her existence constitute the basic elements of his thoughts on the emergence of perpetual peace. According to Kant, man has two intrinsic values: Freedom and reason. However, as man possesses a dual character of ‘phenomena’ and ‘noumena’, the nature of his freedom is also two-fold: “Man as a phenomenal being is casually determined, but as a noumenal being he is free”.⁹ This implies that man, when placed in reality, while performing a civil function, is not entirely free, but must be subordinated to the rules of his surroundings. Thus, as an officer, for example, he should follow the rule of law regardless of his opinion of it. However, as a noumenal being, independent of the material world, every man is free, thus he is permitted to use his mind unrestrictedly to form statements as he considers it appropriate. Moreover, man is entitled to express his opinion as a private person. It is the reason, the second natural possession of man that enables him to do this. Furthermore, Kant claims that man is obligated to use his mind, because it is the only way he can proceed on his way to becoming enlightened and to gain “courage to use [his brain] without the guidance of another”.¹⁰ Indeed, Kant’s motto was “Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!”¹¹ The philosopher was convinced that individuals, such as political or spiritual leaders, serve people as guardians and guides and should recognize the growing maturity of men by granting them public and political freedoms and rights.¹²

However, there is one value that is not natural to man but which is, as Kant believed, of fundamental importance and should be developed by all individuals: Morality. Kant suggested two propositions aiming to help determine whether or not a person’s maxim, being the foundation of action, is grounded in morality. He argued that a person’s maxim is moral if it conforms to the moral law. This categorical imperative may be derived as the maxim of any action. Fundamentally, the action is moral if “you can wish your maxim to become a universal law”,¹³ regardless of the end result, and when you “act in such a way that you treat humanity both in your own person and in the person of all others, never as a means only but always equally as an end”.¹⁴ Therefore, although man should be his own law-giver to preserve his freedom, he must not violate the intrinsic value of humanity that all people hold. The first moral law also brings about the assumption that all people are universally equal, thus humanity in all people should be honoured and equal laws should applied to all.¹⁵ Ultimately, the categorical imperative in Kant’s philosophy became a guideline not only for the acts of individuals, but also for those governing rulers in the internal affairs of states and for state conduct at the international level.

However, in the primary state of nature, where no external restrictions are imposed on man, freedom and equality are the main reasons of insecurity. This is embedded in the fact that, as proposed by Kant, the main expression of human freedom is the right to acquire and possess property. The rule of equality grants this privilege to everyone, hence, all individuals are aiming to possess as much as possible. Consequently, their interests start to collide and rivalry introduces restrictions on the freedom of the weakest. Moreover, the fact that men cannot be constantly physically present to defend their possessions caused a feeling of insecurity, as the goods and properties left unprotected could easily fall
victim to anyone’s drive for acquiring possessions. This situation leads men to exit the state of nature and enter civil society, “in order to distinguish [one’s] possession from that of others, it is necessary that the choice of others should agree with [one’s] own”. Nonetheless, this move is not dictated by morality but rather by a need for self-preservation and the sheer awareness that, as all men want to rise above the others, only by entering a social contract and agreeing to restrict one’s own freedom may one be certain that others will voluntarily restrict their liberty. Thus by entering civil society, all individuals agree to voluntarily limit their freedom for the good of all. They also give the state a right to coerce those who would refuse to conform and try to expand their freedom at the expense of others. Consequently, the coercive nature of the state does not stand contrary to the idea of the intrinsic freedom of all men, but instead it safeguards its equal distribution so that the freedom of one individual can co-exist with the freedom of all people.

The state’s role is understood, as to “prevent competitive rivalry from degenerating into social chaos and anarchy, to set the limits for the permissible pursuit of self-interest and to maintain the juridical structure necessary for cultural development”. However, the power of law and coercion, according to Kant, cannot reach as far as an individual’s inner life, for as “men we are free” He claimed that “so long as he sees to it that all true or imagined improvements are compatible with the civil order, [a monarch] can otherwise leave his subjects to do whatever they find necessary for their salvation, which is none of his business”. Therefore, Kant denied the legality of, among other things, the rule Cujus regio, ejus religio: subjects are to accept the religion of their ruler. Kant considered a prince that would not conform to this requirement, which was rare in XVIII century, an enlightened one.

As mentioned previously, Kant only prescribed morality. He did not claim that people must be moral to enter civil society, as they can be simply compelled by others to carry out this civil duty. Also, “all the culture and art which adorn mankind and the finest social order man creates are fruits of his unsociability”. What made Kant believe that depraved human nature can establish future lasting peace? For Kant, it was the same force that made people enter the stage of civil society. He reasoned that “if man by nature were so constructed that they must inevitably war among themselves through all time, then the only perpetual peace would be that of a great burial ground of humanity, and the moral law”. However, Kant believed that the future was not so dim, for to understand history, through which one can also predict the future, Kant resorted to “an Idea, such as the one that nature has a purpose in history. This Idea cannot be proved or disproved by scientific inquiry, but without it, we cannot understand history at all”. He believed that the plan of nature is to educate man to the state of freedom and rationalism, which, in turn, will equip man with reason. This thinking made human history into a linear process that would lead to peace, as a natural outcome of reasonable thinking.

According to Kant, even war was not in opposition to nature’s plan, because through this sad experience men would learn to value and seek out peace. Moreover, through men’s “unsocial sociability”, which, as they desire honour, power or property, “drives them to seek status among their fellows, whom they cannot bear yet cannot bear to leave”, they must finally establish the order regulated by law. Still, peace is something that should be worked out by humans through their intellectual labour to become enlightened; it was “a stern moral task, not a shore reached by simply riding on a historical wave”. Thus, to advance the spread of rationality is a moral obligation necessary to fulfill the nature of man. As enlightenment gradually occurs, “the history of the human race as a whole can be regarded as the realisation of a hidden plan of nature to bring about an internally — and for this purpose also externally — perfect political constitution as the only possible state within which all natural capacities of mankind can be developed completely”. This belief stands also as an explanation of why, according to Kant, men should pursue the path given to them by nature.

As previously mentioned, the formation of civil society is the first step that man takes to exit the state of nature. A unified group of men, under laws, form a state that consequently will become more
complex in its ability to reach the stage of a two-fold model consisting of those who govern and those who are governed. This stage introduces the idea of politics to Kant's philosophical model. However, for Kant, politics did not mean a divorce from morality. He argued that, since politics deals with "what we ought to do" and seeks laws, it is indeed inseparable from morality. Therefore, he believed that "in objective or theoretical terms, there is no conflict whatsoever between morality and politics. In a subjective sense, however, ...this conflict will and ought to remain active, since it serves as a whetstone of virtue". But Kant claimed that for the political practice to be coherent and supportive of justice, it "must be subordinate as much as possible to formal principles that are derived from reason rather than from experience". Thus, the first question of a political action should be "is it right?" rather than "is it feasible?" As ethics is not empirically derived, it may only be the basis for action, but cannot be based on the action itself. To judge the rightness or wrongness of a political maxim, Kant came up with the criterion of publicity or transparency: An application of the moral laws to the reality of politics. It follows that actions whose maxims cannot be publicly exposed without thwarting the purpose of the action itself are not responsive to the rights of others, and are therefore immoral. Actions are right if they can be fully effective only when their maxim is known to those touched by the action, for in these actions the person is treated as end in himself. These are actions which the person affected could himself have willed. Where such actions are willed, the persons are equal, lawgiving members of a realm of ends. where the government is by the consent of the governed.

Kant's idea of an appropriate political system is one in which state organizes and serves the principles of universal freedom and equality. He did not support a democracy, as he saw it as a rule of the majority, which implied an oppressed minority. However, he supported the authoritarian regime even less. For Kant, the realm of ends was a republic: A rule of all citizens. However, in this point Kant went against his modernizing spirit, calling for the honouring of all human rights. Furthermore, Kant betrayed his ideal of universal equality independent of the material world, as he divided citizens into the 'active' and the 'passive'. He defined the 'active' citizens as ones that are economically independent, whereas 'passive' citizens - such as servants, women or employees - are those who cannot support themselves without the help of another person. Kant only gave the right to participate in law making to the first group. Concerning how law making should be carried out, Kant proposed two options: Either every active citizen participates by submitting one vote, or the legislative power is represented in the sovereign.

As the sovereign's role is to maintain peace, he is responsible for coercing his subjects to abide by the law. Nonetheless, his duty is not to abuse his power, but to create a constitution that would provide laws that are just and equal for everybody and would allow "the greatest possible human freedom in accordance with laws which ensure that the freedom of each can coexist with the freedom of all the others". However each man "desires a law to impose limits on the freedom of all, he is still misled by his self-seeking animal inclinations into exempting himself from the law where he can. He thus requires a master". Kant viewed the obligations of a ruler, not as a legal but a moral duty, denying the citizens any right to punish the sovereign. That such a sovereign would also be human and therefore possess the universal characteristics of man; he would need to be constrained such as "an animal who needs a master. Thus while man may try as he will, it is hard to see how he can obtain for public justice a supreme authority which would itself be just". No man is infallible therefore; power has the ability to corrupt any one man, no matter how moral his initial position. In such a situation, Kant denied the subjects the right to rebel, in favour of the more important purpose of establishing peace. He believed that all the reforms should be performed in accordance with the law, as a revolution poses a danger of falling back into the state of nature. Nevertheless, once the revolution has taken place, it would be equally wrong to try to undo it, for it is man's duty to obey, as citizens. Kant believed that a well-organized state would force man to be a good citizen, even without being a morally good person.

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Moreover, to avoid despotic rule, Kant proposed a division of power, indicating his understanding of a state as an institution rather than a particular ruler. As the sovereign was to be the legislator, the executive power was to be given to the ruler or the government, while the judicial power would be in the hands of a court of law or a jury of representatives of people.

The three powers in the state would be related to one another in the following ways. Firstly, ...each would be complementary to the others in forming the complete constitution of the state. But secondly, they would also be subordinate to one another, so that the one cannot usurp any function of the others to which it ministers; for each would have its own principle, so that although it would issue orders in the quality of a distinct person, it would be doing so under the condition of a superior power’s will. 42

Moreover, all citizens, including the ones in power, should have respect for and be equal in front of the law. But Kant did “not specify in detail how the representatives of the people ought to exercise their power, nor does he say accordingly to what principle they should be chosen”. 43 However, the supremacy of power should be, according to Kant, so overwhelming that to rebel against it would be absolutely forbidden, as “a law permitting violation of the constitution and thus of the system of laws itself would amount to a law contradicting itself, which is absurd”. 44 Nonetheless, to enable citizens the freedom to express their dissatisfaction, they should be granted the freedom of speech and public criticism. 45

Concerning relations among states, Kant argued that there are necessary preconditions that must be first fulfilled to make a lasting peace possible in the future, as he posits in his essay Perpetual Peace. Firstly, “no conclusion of peace shall be held valid as such if it was made with a secret reservation of the material for a future war”. 46 However, according the Kant, all peace treaties were not considered definite, because each was signed only as a means to halt the fighting for some undefined time period and that none of the signatories believed that the accords would put an end to the hostilities. Secondly, “no independently existing state ... may be acquired by another state by inheritance, exchange, purchase or gift”, 47 as this would be in opposition to the rule of freedom of its citizens. Such an acquisition would result, most probably, in an open conflict and opposition. Thirdly, “standing armies will gradually be abolished altogether”, 48 as they pose a threat to neighbouring countries and create a sense of military competition, to which there are no limits. Fourthly, maintaining such an army in peace becomes so oppressive that this burden is released in war. Rather, a standing army should be replaced by periodic exercises of citizens to enable then to defend their country, if necessary.

Furthermore, “no national debt shall be contracted with the external affairs of the state”, 49 and “no state shall forcibly interfere in the constitution and government of another state”, 50 as states as actors are free and equal and such an interference would violate this rule and lead to an opposition of a disturbed state. As Kant believed, only after a revolution when there would be a state of anarchy, which would break a state into two hostile camps, would an external interference be allowed and not lead to an opposition of a disturbed state. Finally, “no state at war with another shall permit such acts of hostility as would make mutual confidence impossible during a future time of peace. Such acts would include the employment of assassins...or poisoners., breach of agreements, the instigation of treason...within the enemy state, etc”. 51 There must remain some confidence in the character of the enemy to make future peace feasible and not turn the war into a war of extermination. Also, these rules, including the ban on the use of spies, should be equally valid during the time of peace, in order to not inflict war.

Thus, the necessary preconditions that should be met, as early as possible, are those that would make war less probable for material reasons, as well as those that would prevent distrust between nations. Nonetheless, “the first step [towards establishing perpetual peace] must be taken by imperfect, warlike, perhaps despotic, rulers of states”. 52 Slight changes should reinforce the opinion that peace can actually be
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worked out with the help of diplomacy. Furthermore, an establishment of the republican rule would be a
great step forward towards international peace. Kant argued that when it is the ruler's decision to declare
war, he treats his subjects as things to be used, not as persons.53 However, if it was left to the people, as it
would be in a republic, to decide whether to start a war or not, they would most probably vote against it,
afraid of putting their lives and possessions at risk.54

Right and peace, however, cannot prevail in any state that is threatened by the actions of other
states. Such a situation would resemble a state of nature where each state would be in a position of
unrestricted freedom in its external relations.55 Thus, a paradox occurs when the internal sovereignty of
every state creates an international anarchy.56 However, as Kant believed, the devastating effects of war
would finally convince states

...to take the steps which reason could have suggested to them even without so many sad
experiences – that of abandoning the lawless state of savagery and entering a federation of peoples in
which every state, even the smallest, could expect to derive its security and rights not from its own
power or its own legal judgement, but solely from this great federation, from a united power and the
law-governed decisions of a united will.57

For, as states are governed by the same rules of reason as individuals, “this distress [i.e. war]
must force the states to make exactly the same decision, however difficult it may be for them, as that
which man was forced to make, equally unwillingly, in his savage state – the decision to renounce his
brutish freedom and seek calm and security within a law-governed constitution” 58.

Moreover, as Kant predicted, with the development of an economy, the spirit of commerce, which
requires peace, would win over the spirit of war.59 However, first the rule of law, embodied by the
republic, should prevail in all states, then reforms at the international level should take place in order to
enable the final emergence of an international lasting peace based on the unwillingness of citizens and
rulers to engage in war and “relations penetrating through and shared between states”. 60

Even though the best guarantor of peace would be the world state, according the Kant, the
international arena is composed of numerous nations that cannot be equalized and are unlikely to agree to
surrender completely their sovereignty to a supreme authority. Such allied nations would be in constant
peril of breaking down. Also, such a huge dominion would be administratively unworkable. Therefore,
Kant said, man can only approach such a utopian ideal of a peaceful world state by creating a federation
of free states opposed to any war, a “pacific federation”, 62 in which peace would be less certain then in the
world state, but more liberty would be secured from universal despotism.63 Such a league of nations
would be similar to the civil constitution, entered for the same reason of security, and governed according
to the adjusted rule of the categorical imperative and the maxim of publicity.64 Such a federation would be
a “counterbalance to the intrinsically healthy resistance of many states against each other, resulting from
their freedom, a united power which would give support to this balance”.65 The federation of states would
be interested solely in preserving peace, security and freedom for all, and it would not limit any state 66 as
the incorporated nations would be interested in preserving peace, they would obey international law
voluntarily.67

However, the federation of states would not mean free flows of citizens from one state to another. World
citizenship would be limited, meaning only the right for universal hospitality: A “universal right of humanity”. 68 The stranger would not be treated as an enemy when he arrives at the land of another, even
though the owner of the land may refuse to accept him. At the same time, world citizenship would not
give anyone the right to become a permanent visitor. In fact, the idea of world citizenship is unavoidable,
if the freedom of the individual is to be preserved in the world where different groups of people live close
to one another and are connected by various bonds. These simple rules of universal freedom and equality would be the only ones governing and granting perpetual peace on earth.

Following Kant’s reasoning, “even a race of devils, granted only that they are intelligent, would find it possible and necessary to cooperate and establish civil society; and states governed by intelligent devils would themselves in time find it to their interest to form leagues and alliances, to make treaties and fulfill them”. This shows that, as Kant saw men as reasonable creatures, he was convinced that pure practical reason, not pure morality, must finally lead them to establishing a state of perpetual peace based on universal rules. These rules may be called moral, but are most of all rational as they primarily ensure the rights of the one that agreed to obey them. Therefore, “Kant was not a blinkered visionary, nor was he even an unpractical utopian dreamer. As a scientist, he had learnt to respect fact. His own philosophical polemics and his attitude to the government of the day [a monarchy] reveal a keen awareness of the needs of the actual situation”. Using his mind, not facts, Kant came to the conclusion that a world lasting peaceful order is necessary to bring security and prosperity – the two basic things that every individual searches for. He then concluded that, since all men have reason, they must inevitably come, even if not fully consciously, to a similar conclusion and thus pursue the goal of establishing international peace based on freedom and understanding. These being the only things, coupled with the coercion of those who have not yet reached full understanding, which can really guarantee its perpetuality. Moreover, this longing for security and prosperity makes the labour to achieve it a duty, as only in this way can human nature be fulfilled.

As can be seen in the contemporary world, Kant’s reasoning was in many aspects correct, as demonstrated by the existence of the United Nations devoted to guarding world peace, as well as the European Union governing the European economy, thus enhancing the nexus between member-countries. It may also be said that he “established a theoretical ground” for the emergence of world peace based on the attention for the individual human being and his rights. However, more than two centuries after the ideas of this philosopher were presented, humanity is still in the process of becoming enlightened as, even though most of the people understand the importance of sustaining peace and know that the means to it is cooperation, neither the understanding of universal freedom and equality nor the stage of perpetual peace has yet been achieved.

Notes
5 Ibid, 15.
6 Ibid, 4.
11 Ibid, 54.
16 Ibid, 22.
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453-468.
26 Ibid, 44.
35 Ibid, x-xii.
39 Ibid, 46.
42 Ibid, 141.
44 Ibid, 32.
47 Ibid, 94.
48 Ibid, 94.
49 Ibid, 95.
50 Ibid, 96.
51 Ibid, 96.
53 Ibid, xii.
55 Ibid, 47.
58 Ibid, 48.
59 Ibid, 113-114.
63 Ibid, 115.
65 Ibid, 49.
69 Ibid, 105-108.
71 Ibid, 39.

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