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## Kant's "On the Common Saying"

### **Overview and Critique**

In his piece "On the Common Saying: 'This May Be True in Theory, but It Does Not Apply in Practice,'" Immanuel Kant focuses on establishing his political theories and attempting to connect them to the practical world. In Section III, Kant objects to pessimistic views of human progress by arguing for the possibility of human progress and international harmony. His arguments from this Section have two main themes: first, the possibility of human progress; second, the implications of this possibility for international society. I argue that Kant presents extremely flawed, though intriguing, arguments in this Section. Although there are numerous interpretations of Kant's "On the Common Saying," I have chosen to pursue one which is critical of Kant's argumentation. It is important to note that there are more sympathetic readings of this piece, which perhaps would give him the benefit of the doubt in regards to his shortcomings, and thus could lead to fewer points of critique. What I present in this paper, however, is an academic opinion that is based upon my interpretation.

The first theme of Kant's arguments in Section III promotes his assertion that human progress is possible. This category consists of an explanation and dismissal of Moses Mendelssohn's view, an explanation of Kant's belief in human progress, and an establishment of the possibility of this progress. This is clearly an important question to address, as the possibility of human progress can lead one to accept the possibility of peace. That is, if there are prospects of human moral progress, one could look to the long-term implications of certain policies to determine which is preferable—as opposed to the short-term benefits of, for example, a policy of aggrandizement. This is examined later, when Kant dismisses war and attempts to address the

potentially unfavorable consequences of war. Thus, the establishment of the possibility of progress serves as the foundation to Kant's future arguments in favor of peace and diplomacy.

Kant begins this theme by asserting that we must examine whether people "possess natural capacities which would indicate that the race will always progress and improve," before attempting to establish our attitudes toward the rest of mankind.<sup>1</sup> If we believe people possess these capacities, we could admire our species.<sup>2</sup> However, if we do not believe humans can progress, "we may not wish to harm men, but shall not want to have any more to do with them than we can help."<sup>3</sup> Using Moses Mendelssohn as an example of the latter opinion, Kant states that he "regards it as sheer fantasy to say 'that the whole of mankind here on earth must continually progress and become more perfect through the ages.'"<sup>4</sup> Mendelssohn also claims that the human race, "whenever it takes a few steps forward, it soon relapses twice as quickly into its former state."<sup>5</sup> According to Kant's explanation, it is evident that Mendelssohn has a pessimistic view of the potential for human progress.

Kant then objects to Mendelssohn's view: according to Kant, "it is a sight quite unfit [...] even for the most ordinary, though right-thinking man, to see the human race advancing over a period of time towards virtue, and then quickly relapsing the whole way back into vice and misery."<sup>6</sup> In other words, Kant states that it is absurd to believe the human race can shift between the periods of progress and regress described by Mendelssohn. Kant also believes Mendelssohn is incorrect because, "in the long run, it [the world according to Mendelssohn] becomes a farce. And even if the actors do not tire of it [...] the spectator does, for any single act will be enough for him if he can reasonably conclude from it that the never-ending play will go on in the same way for ever."<sup>7</sup> That is, our Creator (i.e., the spectator) would not allow the human race to constantly advance and decline, as Mendelssohn asserted; rather, He would end it

before it recurred. Kant, therefore, states that Mendelssohn's above claim is incongruous with the "morality of a wise creator and ruler of the world."<sup>8</sup>

Kant introduces his belief in human moral progress with the assertion that we are "engaged in progressive improvement in relation to the moral end of its existence."<sup>9</sup> He states that this moral "progress may at times be *interrupted* but never *broken off*."<sup>10</sup> Kant claims that he does "not need to prove this assumption," but rather that it is left to those of the opposite opinion to prove their case.<sup>11</sup> I believe that this significantly hampers the persuasiveness of Kant's argument, as even *he* acknowledges that he will not provide a legitimate reason to believe his assertion. In spite of this, Kant then states he bases his argument on the belief that we have an "inborn duty of influencing posterity in such a way that it will make constant progress," which is passed through generations.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Kant argues that humans must have an "unselfish goodwill [...] since we shall have been long dead and buried" before our moral progress truly blossoms.<sup>13</sup> In other words, according to Kant, with no regard for selfish desires or propensities to commit immoral actions, we will morally progress for the benefit of humankind. Thus, Kant is essentially arguing that the human race *actually* progresses because it has a *duty* to progress. This, however, does not logically follow: a duty to perform certain actions does not guarantee that those actions will, in fact, be performed. What if, for instance, people decided to neglect their duty and commit immoral actions? Kant provides no true argument to justify his belief that a *duty* to do something will result in that action *actually* being done. Thus, Kant's argument for human progress is unconvincing.

In the last component of the first theme, Kant presents a second reason why moral progress is possible. He believes it is possible not only because of the "duty" described above, but also because "as compared with all previous ages, the human race has made considerable

moral progress” in recent years, “and short-term hindrances prove nothing to the contrary.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, Kant states, the pessimistic arguments exemplified by Mendelssohn demonstrate that “we can see further ahead, because we have reached a higher level of morality.”<sup>15</sup> That is, because we are more critical of ourselves as compared to what we should be, our “self-reproach increases in proportion to the number of stages of morality we have advanced through during the whole of known history.”<sup>16</sup> It is clear that Kant believes progress is possible because we have made much progress in this age, as demonstrated even by the pessimistic claims of Mendelssohn. The argument presented here, as above, clearly depends upon the unjustified assumption that human progress can never be broken off. In addition, Kant does not explain why “short-term hindrances” do not contradict the supposed moral progress of our era. For example, in Kant’s era, there was slavery; arguably, to an extent, this slavery still exists, with the descendants of slaves trapped by class and social barriers, the pervasiveness of “glass ceilings” in certain educational and professional environments, and other such impediments. In Kant’s argument, he does not explain how such hindrances are truly short-term; rather, he relies on the unjustified assumption that moral progress can only be interrupted. Furthermore, Kant provides no proof why the mentioned outcry indicates we will progress: is it not possible to criticize the morality of mankind, and continue in immoral behaviors—that is, to essentially engage in such criticism, yet have no desire to change it? Thus, this continuation of the previous argument in favor of human progress is also fallacious.

The second theme of Section III consists of Kant’s attempt to apply his foregoing arguments to international affairs. More specifically, this part is composed of an assertion of the source of progress, an establishment of the necessity for international law, a discussion of the disadvantages of war, an argument for allowing the deciding vote on war to go to the people of a

nation, and an argument that such decisions will pursue a policy of peace. The final component of this part is his conclusion—namely, that his political philosophy applies in practice.

In the first component of this theme, Kant argues that we cannot think of moral progress in terms of the *means* of maintaining and accelerating progress towards a better state, but rather in terms of “what human *nature* may do in and through us, to *compel* us to follow a course which we would not readily adopt by choice.”<sup>17</sup> Kant believes this because “the schemes of men [...] begin with the parts, and frequently get no further than them. For the whole is too great for men to encompass,” as their schemes often conflict.<sup>18</sup> That is, humans do not generally consider the interests of all of society. Thus, according to Kant, our own volition is generally inadequate to produce progress; rather, forces *outside* of this desire—namely, reason or nature—compel us to achieve progress, because these forces take into account the interests of society as a whole.

This argument, however, is difficult to accept: why would someone accept a course of action which we would not normally accept, simply because it considers everyone and promotes progress? Kant is effectively stating that progress can only be achieved by considering the interests of society as a whole, and that we would pursue actions which consider the whole, even if it would be against our will (after all, it is a course of action “we would not readily adopt by choice”<sup>19</sup>). He provides no justification why we would pursue progress if we have such conflicting interests: his previous argument that it was a duty failed. Moreover, is it not possible for a course of action to both fulfill entirely selfish desires, yet contribute to the advancement of society? For instance, a relatively wealthy man, with absolutely no intention of benefiting anyone but himself, donates money to a charity for the sole purpose of gaining the favorable opinion of his wife. In this case, he is certainly not attempting to achieve “a successful outcome which will first affect the whole and *then* the parts [emphasis added].”<sup>20</sup> Thus, he was clearly

not compelled by nature or providence to act in this way, as he did not consider how his donation would affect society as a whole; rather, he considered how it would affect his reputation at home. Nonetheless, this contribution could ultimately promote moral advancement in society—for instance, it could fund the cure for AIDS. However, this example would not reflect the standards set forth by Kant in the foregoing argument, as it lacks a necessary condition for achieving moral progress (i.e., considering the interests of society as a whole). Thus, Kant's argument in this instance is fallacious.

Kant, then, argues for the necessity of international law. A cosmopolitan constitution, according to Kant, is an agreement (at times against the will of a state) caused by “the distress produced by the constant wars in which the states try to subjugate or engulf each other.”<sup>22</sup> This type of constitution occurs, in addition, “under a single ruler.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the submission to a sovereign ruler of the international community, possibly against the desires of the state, characterizes the cosmopolitan constitution. Kant, then, acknowledges the danger a cosmopolitan constitution can present: “it may lead to the most fearful despotism,” which is “even more dangerous to freedom” than the absence of peace.<sup>24</sup> When this is the case, Kant argues, states will enter into a lawful federation “under a commonly accepted *international right*.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, because Kant asserts that the powers of a cosmopolitan constitution under a single ruler could grow to infringe on the freedoms of people, he believes that the establishment of what is essentially a more democratic international system would pose less a threat to states.

In this argument, however, Kant does not account for the threat posed to states under a federation: in this system, there would be no sovereign ruler, nation, or elected body which could compel the member nations to conform their actions to international laws. Thus, a state could enter into the federation, with no intention of conforming to its laws; this is illustrated by Iraq's

membership in the United Nations, yet its persistent noncompliance with certain United Nations resolutions. Instances like this, however, could not be explained in Kant's theory: Kant does not adequately establish why, under his federation, states would be *compelled* to follow the laws of the federation. Thus, it seems that under Kant's federation, there would be nothing more than anarchy, as he does not properly establish why states would act in accord with the international laws.

Next, Kant asserts that what would occur with the "increasing culture of the states" and a "growing tendency [of these states] to aggrandise themselves by cunning or violence" would ultimately not benefit society.<sup>26</sup> Kant believes that this competition among states would "make wars more frequent," cause "increasingly high expenditure on standing armies," and increase "the price of all necessities."<sup>27</sup> It is evident that Kant does not view these effects—or war itself—as having positive impact on the people. In fact, he states that in a world with war "no peace will last long enough for the resources saved during it to meet the expenditure of the next war, while the invention of a national debt, though ingenious, is an ultimately self-defeating expedient."<sup>28</sup> Thus, war will ultimately drain a state's economic resources, even if it attempts to save the funds required for war during times of peace. In addition, Kant clearly believes the accumulation of a national debt for purposes of war ultimately acts against the interests of the state. From these assertions, it is evident that Kant is leading towards views against the initiation of military conflict.

The fourth component of the second theme consists of Kant's solution to the disadvantages of war. Kant believes the disadvantages described above would be relieved (or prevented) if the power to declare war was given to the people, rather than the head of state. He argues that "the people will not readily place itself in danger of personal want [...] out of a mere

desire for aggrandisement, or because of some supposed and purely verbal offense.”<sup>29</sup> This contrasts, according to Kant, from the head of state: war ultimately costs the head of state nothing, yet has profound affects on the people of a country.<sup>30</sup> Kant also believes that granting them this power will ultimately enable people to “make perpetual progress towards a morally superior state,” because “posterity will not be oppressed by any burden which it has not brought upon itself.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, each commonwealth will “observe the laws on its own account, and [...] reasonably hope that other similarly constituted bodies will help it to do so.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, allowing the people to have the deciding vote on matters of international aggression will ultimately result in peace and progress.

Kant then argues that, though individuals may have a desire to pursue aggression, peace will ultimately prevail in decisions regarding aggression. Kant presents the objection to his own argument that, “in the normal order of things it cannot be expected of human nature to desist voluntarily from using force;” however, he states that “it is not impossible where the circumstances are sufficiently pressing.”<sup>33</sup> He argues, thus, that a person “may look to *providence* to create the circumstances in which [progress] can be fulfilled. The end of *man* as an entire species [...] will be brought by providence [...] even although the ends of men as individuals run in a diametrically opposite direction.”<sup>34</sup> This serves, to an extent, as a restatement of Kant’s first point in this theme—the incorrect assertion that people will depend upon human nature or providence for progress—because he is arguing that “reason” (or nature) will “master” all the individual inclinations and give predominance “to good.”<sup>35</sup> That is, he believes peace (clearly, an element of what Kant believes to be progress) may not be desirable to people as individuals, but ultimately results because something else effectively guides us to peace (as Kant mentions here, reason or nature). This dependence on nature, he argues, will

result in peace which “continues to maintain itself once it has been established.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, Kant believes, nature will direct people to choose peace; as a result, progress will occur.

The same objections stated earlier also apply here; Kant does not explain why coercion from an outside source will truly result in what is best for all of society. For instance, what if a state had to go to war with another nation (suppose a tyranny) in order to save not only itself, but the rest of the world? Based on the view Kant provides here, along with his earlier enumeration of the alleged consequences of war, it seems as though he would object. However, neglecting to use force in this case would *not* be most beneficial to mankind, and would result in the continued existence of a tyranny. In addition, Kant’s key premise that a human “is powerless to fulfil them [his moral hopes and desires] himself”<sup>37</sup> is neither explained nor adequately justified. Moreover, he provides no adequate justification why individuals will allow reason to override their individual desires for the good of mankind: if an individual has to choose between self-aggrandizement and pursuing the interests of all people (with no special benefits for himself), Kant does not properly establish why he would choose the latter. In other words, Kant fails to successfully account why people would agree to pursue their common, rather than individual, interests. As he has earlier in Section III, Kant clearly makes certain unjustified assumptions in the argument for peaceful actions; these render the argument illogical and unpersuasive.

Finally, Kant dismisses the objection to his theory that it does not apply in practice. Kant presents the objection that “no state is for a moment secure from the others in its independence and possession. The will to subjugate the others or to grow at their expense is always present...”<sup>38</sup> The only way of counteracting this, Kant argues, is to have “a state of international right, based upon enforceable public laws to which each state must submit.”<sup>39</sup> This is clearly a continuation of his earlier argument for an international federation, rather than a single

international ruler. Again, similar problems arise here: how can a federation enforce international laws? Kant does not establish how laws will be enforced in this system without a single ruler, or any other type of sovereign. In response to an objection like mine, Kant asserts that the theory he accepts recommends “the maxim that we should proceed in our disputes in such a way that a universal federal state be inaugurated, so what we should therefore assume that it is possible.”<sup>40</sup> This, however, seems to employ circularity: we should accept a premise in Kant’s theory because his theory dictates that it is true. Thus, I am unconvinced of Kant’s conclusion that “on the cosmopolitan level too, it thus remains true to say that whatever reason shows to be valid in theory, is also valid in practice.”<sup>41</sup>

In summary, Kant argues that human moral progress in international relations is possible. In the first theme of Section III, Kant attempts to establish the view that human moral progress is possible. In this part, Kant reviews and rejects Moses Mendelssohn’s pessimistic views. Kant then introduces his views, and provides an explanation of why moral progress is possible. The second theme is primarily concerned with establishing a connection between his arguments in the first theme and international relations. Kant first attempts to establish that providence or nature will guide humans where their own abilities are deficient in achieving progress. Then, he argues for the necessity of international law. Kant, next, presents the economic disadvantages of war, and argues for designating the power to declare war to the people. Using his earlier point that we can look to nature or providence to force us to commit moral actions as a premise, Kant rejects the objection that people will pursue their own inclinations when deciding whether to go to war. Rather, he believes they will pursue the interests of mankind—which, according to Kant, include peace. Finally, Kant concludes that his theory of international relations applies in practice—that is, that the international federation proposed earlier would be practical. Kant

clearly views peace as necessary in international relations, due to his confidence in the positive, progress-bound nature of mankind. However, his argumentation falls short, as he employs circular reasoning, bases crucial points on unwarranted assumptions, and fails to take into account important counterexamples to his arguments.

## **II. The Realist/Idealist Tension**

I have argued that Kant presents a fallacious justification for an international federation. In his discussion of international relations, one thing which particularly puzzled me was an obvious tension between Kant's use of conflicting models of international relations. If closely examined, it is evident that Kant switches between two contrasting views of international relations: idealism and realism. By "idealism," I am referring to the belief that "in order to realize the ideal of a just and permanent peace, nations must act, not according to their particular national interests, but according to universal moral principles."<sup>42</sup> By "realism," I am referring to the belief that "justice has no place in international politics because all nations—indeed all human beings—are compelled by a necessity of their nature to care most of all about their own interest and to pursue what they believe to be their interest, regardless of what justice demands."<sup>43</sup> Given that Kant fails to reconcile these differing views in "On the Common Saying," I believe this renders his argument even more questionable. I will argue this while providing an overview of the development of his idealism and realism.

Kant presents evidently idealist views in "On the Common Saying." These views begin with his rejection of Mendelssohn's view: he asserts that "it is a sight fit for a god to watch a virtuous man grappling with adversity and evil temptations and yet managing to hold out against them."<sup>44</sup> In addition, he states that "hope for better times to come [...] has always influenced the activities of right-thinking men."<sup>45</sup> This view, as applied in international relations, would

support diplomacy: rather than pursue potentially fruitful military conquest, a state will refrain from attacking its enemies and attempt to foster policy in hope of better relations. Kant's idealism is also exemplified in his argument for the existence of an international federation, which would undermine the national sovereignty desired by the self-interested states in realism. Moreover, Kant believes that "the people will not readily place itself in danger of personal want [...] out of a mere desire of aggrandisement"<sup>46</sup> and will "observe the [international] laws on its own account."<sup>47</sup> This view coincides with the idealist model, as it would lead to peaceful, cooperative policy with other nation-states. Finally, Kant rejects one of realism's central components, the existence of a balance of power, by arguing against "a so-called *European balance of power*," calling it a "pure illusion."<sup>48</sup> Thus, it is clear that Kant argues from an idealist perspective: he believes that humans, and by extension nation-states, will seek peace.

In contrast to his idealist views, Kant also seems to present realist views. He states that "the schemes of men [...] begin with the parts, and frequently get no further than them. For the whole is too great for men to encompass."<sup>49</sup> Applied to the nation-state, this indicates that decision makers would not consider the *entire* world in its decisions, but rather would only consider itself (and, possibly, its allies) in its decisions. Kant, in fact, argues this later on: he believes that heads of state pursue policy which promotes aggrandizement;<sup>50</sup> this is a crucial component of realism. Moreover, Kant coincides with a realist perspective by stating that "in the normal order of things, it cannot be expected of human nature to desist voluntarily from using force."<sup>51</sup> His realism is further demonstrated when he argues that "nowhere does human nature appear less admirable than in the relationships which exist between peoples."<sup>52</sup> He also states that a state is *never* secure, and the will to "subjugate others" and pursue military action is perpetual, along with the production and maintenance of military defenses.<sup>53</sup> These views

*clearly* reflect the realist model of international relations, and contrast with his other, more idealist views.

This conflict especially makes me doubt why Kant believes there should even be an international federation: if humans will seek peace, even if it is against their will, it would seem to follow that there is no need to place a check upon the international power of different peoples. Kant, in fact, does not make any adequate attempt to reconcile these differences: the most he gives is an admission that it is only a “personal opinion.”<sup>54</sup> However, the conflict remains. Granted, it could be objected that it is the powers of the *state*, and the heads of state, that Kant is attempting to curtail with the international federation and international laws. Nonetheless, he does not seem to provide adequate demonstration that the people governing the state are not subject to the same principles as the population—namely, that they will seek peace, even if it is against their will or interest as individuals. These paradoxical assumptions in Section III, I believe, weaken the force of Kant’s arguments.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, Immanuel. "On the Common Saying: 'This May Be True in Theory, but It Does Not Apply in Practice,'" in *Classics of Political and Moral Philosophy*, Steven M. Cahn (ed.). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press (2002):789.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 789.

<sup>3</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 789.

<sup>4</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 789.

<sup>5</sup> qtd. in Kant, Immanuel, 790.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 790.

<sup>7</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 790.

<sup>8</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 790.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 790.

<sup>10</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 790.

<sup>11</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 790.

<sup>12</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 790.

<sup>13</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 790.

<sup>14</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>15</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>16</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>17</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>18</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>19</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>20</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>22</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>23</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>24</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>25</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

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<sup>26</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>27</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>28</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>29</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>30</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>31</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>32</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>33</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>34</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>35</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>36</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>37</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>38</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>39</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>40</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>41</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>42</sup> Ahrens Dorf, Peter J. and Thomas L. Pangle. *Justice Among Nations: On the Moral Basis of Power and Peace*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas (1999):218.

<sup>43</sup> Ahrens Dorf, Peter J. and Thomas L. Pangle, 259.

<sup>44</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 790.

<sup>45</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 790.

<sup>46</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>47</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>48</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>49</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>50</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 791.

<sup>51</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>52</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>53</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.

<sup>54</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 792.