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Towards Perpetual Peace?

In *Towards Perpetual Peace*, Kant faces an uphill battle. His thesis is not something that is intuitively obvious. In fact, it seems rather that the opposite is true. Kant makes the claim, at the very end of the essay, that, “If it is a duty to make the state of public right actual..., and if at the same time there is a well founded hope that we can do it, then *perpetual peace*...is no empty idea.”¹ To motivate this claim, Kant need only do two things – neither of which will be easy.

First, he must convince his readers that they ought to believe that there exists a duty to make the state of public right actual. For many people, this will probably seem somewhat uncontroversial. These sorts of people have moral intuitions close to Kant’s. Thus, convincing them is like preaching to the choir.

However, there also exist a number of people who would do not share those intuitions for whatever reason. Most probably, these people might believe it would be against their own self-interests to follow such a course of action. That is to say, strictly moral arguments, for the most part, are not the sorts of things that convince people who do not already cleave to the view intuitively.

Thus, the question of whether or not it is a duty is a rather moot point. Those who need no convincing would already follow it, and those who do are the sorts that care overmuch for following such duties. Therefore, the real question that is on the table is whether or not Kant can convince a significant amount of people that it is, in fact, in their best interests.

His second task is a bit more difficult. While to complete the first task, he only has to show that following the duty is something one ought to strive for, in this second task he must

¹ Immanuel Kant, “Towards Perpetual Peace,” *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983), 139.

show that his ‘ought’ implies a ‘can.’ For if it is impossible to ever achieve, then he ought not to say it is something people ought to do. In this particular case, it does not seem at all obvious that such a thing as “perpetual peace” can be achieved. So, the real burden of proof rests on whether or not Kant can show that it is possible – or, better yet, likely. Since this second task seems to be the more important of the two, we will begin our examination of the text with the question of whether or not perpetual peace is possible.

At this point, there are more questions than answers. What seems to bear the most scrutiny is this: what can Kant offer as incentive for the unconvinced to follow his lead? In other words, what is it – specifically – about perpetual peace that is so compelling that people should take it to be in their own self-interest.

Of course, no one really *wants* war², but it can be a rather lucrative time for some. Moreover, war also presents opportunities for glory, honor and power over others. Of these, though, the monetary possibilities seem to outweigh all the rest; money can buy the others, but the reverse is not always true. So, the question is, how can Kant convince *those* people, the manufacturers of arms and the like, that they should beat their swords into plowshares?

In a brilliant stroke, this is exactly the sort of question to which Kant actually does attend. He provides multiple purely economical reasons why it is not only possible that perpetual peace be achieved, but that it is actually inevitable. These are not his only arguments, either. However, we will begin there, and work our way through the others in due time. So, for now, the revised question is this: how economically lucrative would it be to live in a state of perpetual peace?

One of the very first things Kant attacks is the practice of keeping standing armies. He says, in preliminary article three, that such armies, “shall be gradually abolished.”³ Now, at first

² This is, of course, debatable. However, I like to think it is true, anyway.

³ *Ibid.*, 108.

glance, this seems a rather radical claim. It is an oft-quoted maxim that “to preserve peace, one must prepare for war.” However, upon reflection, a peace bought in that way is not the sort of peace that tends to last long.

Despite this, it is not entirely clear why such a state of affairs would ever come about. Kant has an economic argument for it, though. He maintains that, “the costs related to maintaining peace will in this way finally become greater than those of a short war.”⁴ If the article that lead to this supporting statement was unclear, this is nearly opaque. Rather than resolving the question, it brings up an entirely new one. Namely, how is sustaining an army in peace more costly than having a war?

To answer this, we are directed towards another of Kant’s essays. In *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, Kant asserts that, “by maintaining [the commonwealth] in constant readiness for war, they hamper progress toward full development of man’s natural capacities.”⁵ Together, these two statements make a sort of sense. It seems that Kant is not really making asserting *purely* economic argument.

What appears to be happening is that Kant is making a qualitative rather than a quantitative argument. That is, he appears to be saying that all the time and money wasted on keeping a standing army would be much better spent in the development of humankind’s ultimate potential. For example, he might be taken to mean that the money and time could be better spent on the arts and sciences. Rather than spending money on an army to defend against regression to a lesser quality of life, the money could be spent on progress towards a greater quality of life.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent,” *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983), 36.

Another thing that Kant says must be laid aside is the notion of national debt – something new in his time. While Kant allows for “[s]eeking either internal or external help for the national economy,”⁶ he decries it as “an instrument in the struggle among powers.”⁷ Nothing good can come of borrowing money for wars, he says.

The argument for this idea is more purely economical than the last. He believes that garnering of too much debt leads to, “unavoidable national bankruptcy [which] must entangle many innocent nations, and that would clearly injure them.”⁸ Moreover, because of this injury, “other nations are justified in allying themselves against such a nation and its pretensions.”⁹

This argument stands well on its own, but when coupled with later arguments, it holds much more weight. For example, Kant says, “Because a (narrower or wider) community widely prevails among the Earth’s people, a transgression of rights in *one* place in the world is felt *everywhere*.”¹⁰ This is not at all difficult to understand. If one just pictures a map, it is obvious that every nation borders some other nation. And, those nations on the borders have neighbors on their opposite borders, and so on until the globe returns full circle.

So, instability in one region begins a chain reaction, a sort of domino effect that spreads quickly around the globe. Given this sort of chain of events, and an unspecified length of time, Kant asserts that “the idea of cosmopolitan right is not fantastic and exaggerated, but rather an amendment to the unwritten code of national and internal rights, necessary to the public rights of men in general.”¹¹ What this boils down to is simple self-preservation where the “self” refers to

⁶ Immanuel Kant, “Towards Perpetual Peace,” 109.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

nations rather than individuals. It says, in essence, “if you don’t hurt me, I won’t hurt you; and we can all go about our business,” or something similar, at the very least.

If that is still not convincing, and indeed it might not be, Kant has one more economic argument that aims directly at nations’ coffers in a practical rather than abstract sort of way. He asserts that, “The *spirit of trade* cannot coexist with war.”¹² It seems that such a statement stands alone; it needs almost no argument. No nation can trade goods with a nation with which it is at war. For why would a country buy goods from its enemy? The money and goods given in exchange could only be used against the nation so foolish to trade in such times. Even neutral parties are affected, because the combatants must use their resources on war expenses and not on trade with others, no matter their allegiances.

However, it might just be that certain nations are just not interested in trade. Kant does not think so, though. He claims that, “sooner or later this spirit [of trade] dominates every people.”¹³ Now, this notion is not *a priori* true. There have been nations in times past that isolated themselves from the global community¹⁴. However, looking back on the history of the world since Kant’s time, the actual events of the world do seem to bear this claim out.

What follows from this is, perhaps, one of the strongest arguments Kant gives for the necessary advent of perpetual peace in the future. Kant, though he wishes the opposite to be true, understands that many people are not motivated by purely moral reasons. In fact, it is probably true that *most* people are not motivated by purely moral reasons. Luckily, though, Kant believes

¹² *Ibid.*, 125.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ For example, Japan kept itself isolated from the west for quite a long time. However, it was to its detriment, and it eventually capitulated and opened its ports to trade. (Thanks go to Prof. Fried for reminding me of this.)

(probably correctly) that, “among all those powers (or means) that belong to a nation, financial power may be the most reliable in *forcing* nations to pursue the noble cause of peace.”¹⁵

So, at this point, it seems that Kant has shown pretty decisively that there are good economic reasons to believe that an approximation of perpetual peace is possible – perhaps even likely. However, it might be that he has misread human nature or the nature of our nations. The question now becomes: is the world and human nature such that they allow for peace, or is it inevitable that humans will always strive against each other violently? Again, Kant has arguments on this topic.

In fact, Kant believes that “Nature” has contrived the world and the humans in it in such a way that perpetual peace will *perforce* be achieved. Kant boldly asserts that Nature has set up the world such that:

1. She has taken care that men can live in all regions of the world.
2. Through *war* she has driven them everywhere, even into the most inhospitable regions in order to populate them.
3. Also through war she has constrained them to establish more or less legal relationships.¹⁶

Once this state of nature is in place, law-like behavior is unavoidable. “Even if people were not constrained by internal discord to submit to public laws, war would make them do it.”¹⁷ What can all this possibly mean, i.e., how can *war* force *peace* on people?

It seems that Kant is putting forth an argument to the effect that we are naturally warlike and bellicose. However, to continue to be such harms us both physically and economically; the savage state is not sustainable. Eventually, some equilibrium must be achieved. If fear of death or poverty does not force peace on the world, then another sort of thing will. Namely, “the desire of every nation (or its rulers) is to establish an enduring peace, hoping, if possible, to dominate

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

the entire world.”¹⁸ Fear or greed will motivate peace, not high moral standards (though, obviously, high moral standards *could* do it, and it would be nice if they did, but it is not a good idea to bet on it).

At this point, Kant has mustered some good arguments. Though it would seem that bringing to bear high-minded moral arguments would be the normal route to such a utopian ideal as “perpetual peace,” Kant has stayed close to what he takes to be human nature. Moreover, his idea of humanity strikes very close to the mark.

Kant’s economic arguments are very persuasive. It does indeed seem that peace is a lot less costly in both lives and goods than war is. Speaking to people’s wallets is rarely a bad idea – humans, in general, are often selfish. Even if we assume that people are altruistic more often than not, it still remains true that everyone needs to eat, and nearly everyone likes certain comforts. While peace does not guarantee bountiful harvests for all, the situation is much more hopeful there than during war. Thus, since Kant does such a good job of capturing our economic needs, I am tentatively persuaded; there are some issues that might need to be addressed.

The problem that is plaguing me is simple to state: some people are just *bad*. There are lunatics who come to power in nations and send them hurtling into war for no better reason than that they do not like the way the people in another country look, or the way another people worship the divine, or for whatever mad reason compels them today. However noble it is to strive for peace, however reasonable it is to stay out of war to prevent widespread poverty, there always seems to be some charismatic madman that seizes power and slaughters others for the pure joy of it. You cannot reason with the irrational, and many, many people are irrational.

Despite this, there are also many people who *are* rational. The duty to aid in the progress towards the goal of perpetual peace falls upon these people. Whether they do it for the moral or

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

the economic or whatever other reason, it should be done. For all the reasons Kant gives, it does seem that it can be done. And, the more nations that follow Kant's prescription for perpetual peace, the more likely it becomes others will follow; to stand against the peaceful nations is to court economic ruin.

There are only two alternatives, as I see it. Namely, the situation we have now, and something far, far worse. The situation we have now is what Kant suggested we abolish at the beginning of this essay. That is, we have standing armies; always prepared for war, waiting, watching, ready to pounce on an enemy. Massive amounts of national debt are accrued during wartime (like now), and the world's economy is placed in danger.

Be that as it may, it could be worse. We could just destroy ourselves. We definitely have the ordinance. All it would take is one of the madmen from the previous example to get his hands on such weapons and unleash them. The economic travails of the previous option could, in fact, lead to this one.

I like to think that these alternatives are not the way humanity is heading. I very much hope Kant is right. He was very prescient in his predictions of a league of nations banding together for the common good. We do have a United Nations that is supposed to broker peace. Unfortunately, the UN is not always the most powerful of bodies. Only time will tell how it will turn out.