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Revisiting Kant's Notion of Perpetual Peace

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century the studies on peace and conflict-resolutions have focused on different aspects of geo-politics and uneven globalization in order to achieve world peace. Many peace studies have used historical evidences to convey the importance of social, political, and moral philosophies. Side by side, they merge theories and thoughts, and provide useful principles, policies, and rules in their forward march. These studies focus on critical analysis of war incidents, economic stabilization, and people-to-people connections to establish world peace. Still, the many states today ignore the moral standards of living in peace. Consequently, war and war-like incidents occur sometimes here and sometimes there.

I take this opportunity to revisit the general moral standards set by Immanuel Kant through his celebrated article "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch" in the endeavour of establishing global peace on a permanent basis.

Keywords: Perpetual Peace, Kingdom of Ends, Summum Bonum, Peace Studies, Morality, etc.

I

The great German philosopher Immanuel Kant is known for his philosophical or ethical doctrines involving critical and practical thinking by human reason. He wrote many books and essays, but among his other writings, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch' (originally titled 'Zum Ewgen Frieden. Ein Philosopher Antwerp') is a great work on achieving world peace. It was written in 1795, at the end of his life, and the first English translation was made in 1903. At first, this essay was not so popular but when 'United Nations Peacekeeping' was formed in 1948, it was considered a unique approach to placing permanent world peace. The essay contains six preliminary articles, three definitive articles, two supplements, and two appendices. We often consider these 'articles' as principles or rules for acquiring perpetual peace. In short, here I mention the preliminary articles below:

P1. "No treaty of peace shall be regarded as valid, if made with the secret reservation of material for a future war." (Kant 1917, 108)

-The first article refers to all those peace treaties based on a temporary agreement that free countries make to the interim end of war and it serves as a seed for future war preparation.

Even that does not bring peace. According to Johan Galtung¹, that type of peace treaty is a negative peace, which is the opposite of lasting peace.

P2. "No state having an independent existence—whether it be great or small—shall be acquired by another through inheritance, exchange, purchase or donation." (Kant 1917, 109)

-The second article poses that an independent state is not something obtained by anyone, it is inherent in human civilization, that is, it is for the society or the people.

P3. "Standing armies (*miles perpetuus*) shall be abolished in course of time." (Kant 1917, 111)

-The third article refers to a complete dismantling of military power because having permanent military power means, a state is ready to invade another state or to defend itself against attackers. There can be no lasting peace where there is a possibility of war or being attacked.

P4. "No national debts shall be contracted in connection with the external affairs of the state." (Kant 1917, 112)

-The fourth article confirms that war expenditures are costly if the expenses can be met by borrowing then war never ends. But if there is no opportunity to take out debts, this enthusiasm of statesman is bound to wane. This increase in power is based on the debts that one country incurs from another country, and as a result, the other country prepares for future war, as well as the first country that is currently involved in the war is equally dependent on the future debt. Therefore, peace in other countries is preparation for war. For example, in World War II, Germany was responsible for paying billions of dollars in reparations to the Allies.

P5. "No state shall violently interfere with the constitution and administration of another." (Kant 1917, 113)

-The fifth article confesses that an independent nation can make its own constitution and administration and no one interfere with it violently.

P.6 "No state at war with another shall countenance such modes of hostility as would make mutual confidence impossible in a subsequent state of peace: such are the employment of assassins (*percussores*) or of poisoners (*venefici*), breaches of capitulation, the instigating and making use of treachery (*perduellio*) in the hostile state." (Kant 1917, 114)

-The sixth article poses that states should condemn the mode of hostility in wartime, and make mutual confidence for building trust climates in the future state of peace. For example, ingredients like poison assassination, aiding treachery, are all hostile to the state.

Here, the six primary articles are expressed as negative, which have been considered from three types of war environments during the federation of free nations: 1. when they are bound in war; 2. when they are engaged in a peace treaty after the war; and 3. when they are at peace. When a free state engages in war with another state, it is understandable to assume

¹ Johan Galtung, who is regarded as the founder of peace research studies. He is the founder of 'The International Peace Research Institution', where he writes many books and essays on it, but his primary doctrine on peace is Negative and Positive peace. According to him, negative peace is the absence of human violence and war, and positive peace is the absence of structural violence (Galtung, 1964, pp. 1-4)

that both nations are in trouble within a similar state of nature, where the absence of a governing authority renders the establishment of rights and peace challenging. In this context, the decision to resort to war may be perceived as a means to assert rights rather than inflict destruction. However, if the objective of war is to establish rights, consideration must also be given to the enjoyment of those rights. Notably, the adage "you can catch fish with poison, but you cannot eat them"² serves as a poignant reminder that the pursuit of rights through war ultimately yields no tangible benefits. Consequently, the outcome of war is typically characterised by widespread destruction, with little to no lasting enjoyment of the rights being sought.

To establish perpetual peace, Kant wrote three definite articles in addition to six preliminary articles, these are described as positive. The purpose of these articles is to garner widespread support and participation in the peace process, which is often a crucial component in achieving lasting peace. By encouraging the public to get involved, these charters aim to create a sense of community and shared responsibility for promoting peace.

- I. 'The civil constitution of each state shall be republican.' (Kant 1917, 121)
- II. 'The law of nations shall be founded on a federation of free states.' (Kant 1917, 129)
- III. 'The rights of men, as citizens of the world, shall be limited to the conditions of universal hospitality.' (Kant 1917, 138)

In a republican system of governance, each state's authority is derived from the principles of freedom, equality, and the rule of law. Specifically, a republic recognises the freedom of every citizen, applies the same law to all citizens, and treats every citizen as equal. It is essential to note that Kant's concept of a republic does not necessarily equate to democracy, as the former is based on the sovereignty of morality rather than the opinion of the majority. The governance of each state will be republican. According to him, the prerequisite for the peaceful coexistence of independent states is the peaceful coexistence of citizens within the state. However, it is not too clear what Kant means by a republic. But he mentions three common principles of the republic. First, the republic recognises the freedom of every citizen of the state. Second, the republic introduces the same law precept for every citizen of the state. Third, every citizen of the state is equal in the view of the republic.³ Aristocracy, democracy, etc, may or may not be compatible with the republic proposed by Kant. He spoke of the freedom of all subjects and this freedom is the 'categorical imperative'⁴. The freedom

² Khan, Gopal Chandra. (2010), "Nirantan Santi", *Kanter Darsan* by Prahlad Kumar Sarkar eds, Howrah: Darsan o Samaj Trust. p237

³ ...in the first place, founded in accordance with the principle of the freedom of the members of society as human beings: secondly, in accordance with the principle of the dependence of all, as subjects, on a common legislation: and, thirdly, in accordance with the law of the equality of the members as citizens. (Kant 1917, 121)

⁴ Kant defines categorical imperatives as commands or moral laws all persons must follow, regardless of their desires or extenuating circumstances. As morals, these imperatives are binding on everyone. According to Paton "Because of the obstacles due to our impulses and desires, this law appears to us as a law that we ought to obey for its own sake, and so as what Kant calls a categorical imperative." (Paton 1947, 22)

of all subjects, as outlined by Kant, is the 'categorical imperative,' which is consistent with the concept of citizens' rights and is a fundamental principle of a republican form of government. The concept of citizens' rights is consistent with the categorical imperative order, and a republic is a form of government that is governed by the concept of rights.

Second, The mutual behavior of states within a federation of free states is governed by the rules established by the federation. Similarly, the rules of individual states dictate the behavior of their citizens. In a federation of independent and sovereign states, regardless of their size or wealth, the authority of the state is derived from moral laws that apply universally and unconditionally.

Third, As a citizen of a federation state, an individual from one state can enjoy limited rights in another state, which are restricted to those of universal hospitality. In this context, a citizen of one state is considered a guest in another state, rather than a refugee or any other category.

In addition, he often said a couple of things in his first supplement like the distinction between the 'mechanical and theological view of things', between 'nature' and 'providence', which guarantee perpetual peace,- and those are directly connected with his concept of peace. or it is better to say his concept of perpetual peace is grounded on these two concepts, nature, and providence. Nature or the world of phenomena (or say the world of sense experience) strictly follows a mechanical system, that is valid only within the realm of possible sense experience by a priori principles of reason, e.g., cause and effect, substance and attribute, etc. These do not apply transcendent sense experiences such as the idea of soul or god, etc. But it is the form of imperatives to the will by which one can think beyond the world, not logically but dogmatically, which in turn falls into transcendent sense experiences. But the will is imperative, and itself a practical reason. This 'will' produce moral principles and necessarily follow from pure practical reason. He stated this fundamental insight of practical reason in Appendix I, through the universal law as an act, and kept the action as an end, not only the means. According to him,

"... nature guarantees the coming of perpetual peace, through the natural course of human propensities: not indeed with sufficient certainty to enable us to prophesy the future of this ideal theoretically, but yet clearly enough for practical purposes. And thus this guarantee of nature makes it a duty that we should labour for this end, an end which is no mere chimera." (Kant 1917, 157)

While providence (or divine providence) is associated with moral and teleological consideration. It is not an object of theoretical knowledge but a postulate of practical reason that is unseen, purposive direction of history, guided by a higher good (Summum Bonum), towards a morally better future. According to Kant

"... when looked upon as the compelling force of a cause, the laws of whose operation are unknown to us, is, when considered as the purpose manifested in the course of nature, called Providence..." (Kant 1917, 144)

"...supreme principle, which Kant calls the *categorical imperative*, commands simply that our actions should have the *form* of moral conduct; that is, that they should be derivable from universal principles." (Kant 2006, X-XI)

However, this first supplement is essentially a summary of Kant's essay on *Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1748).

However, The causes of war in the current global context are multifaceted and complex, often involving a combination of political, economic, social, and environmental factors. This section outlines the primary causes of war, which can be summarized as follows: 1. Conflict over land and borders, often due to disputes over resource-rich areas or strategic locations. 2. Competition for essential resources such as water, oil, gas, and minerals, especially in regions where these resources are scarce. 3. Struggles for political power, governance issues, and the desire to control state institutions, often exacerbated by authoritarian regimes and lack of democratic processes. 4. Deep-seated ethnic and religious divisions that can lead to violent conflicts. 5. Significant economic disparities within and between countries that can lead to social unrest and conflict. 6. Foreign intervention and geopolitical rivalries that can exacerbate local conflicts. 7. Non-state actors, including terrorist organizations and insurgent groups, that can provoke conflicts. 8. States that lack effective governance and institutions, which can become breeding grounds for conflict. 9. Long-standing historical grievances and unresolved past conflicts that can lead to renewed violence. 10. Environmental degradation, climate change, and natural disasters that can exacerbate resource scarcity and displacement. 11. The widespread availability of weapons that can make conflicts escalate and persist. 12. The spread of misinformation and propaganda that can inflame tensions and justify conflict.

The root causes of war significantly alter the current global landscape, concurrently posing a threat to living beings, as innocent living beings who are not involved in the conflict inevitably are most affected as a result of war incidents. However, these 12 causes directly or indirectly hinder lasting Peace. Although some hints can be found in Kant's preliminary articles, they are partially helpful in achieving peace. However, to condemn present-day war incidents, we need additional principles regarding territorial disputes, resource competition, ethnic and religious tensions, terrorism and insurgency, failed states, information warfare and Propaganda, etc. Therefore, it is necessary to make new policy arrangements on these subjects to achieve world peace.

Kant did not deny the possibility of war, but he accepted the possibility of perpetual peace.⁵ This perspective suggests that while war is a reality, it is not an inevitable or necessary state of affairs. He believed that the conditions for peace could be established through the creation of a just and moral international order. Kant's acceptance of perpetual

⁵ "If the consent of the citizens is required in order to decide that war should be declared (and in this [republican] constitution it cannot but be the case), nothing is more natural than that they would be very cautious in commencing such a poor game, decreeing for themselves all the calamities of war. Among the latter would be: having to fight, having to pay the costs of war from their own resources, having painfully to repair the devastation war leaves behind, and, to fill up the measure of evils, load themselves with a heavy national debt that would embitter peace itself and that can never be liquidated on account of constant wars in the future." <https://www.libertarianism.org/columns/immanuel-kant-war-peace#:~:text=If%20the%20consent%20of%20the,constant%20wars%20in%20the%20future.https://www.libertarianism.org/columns/immanuel-kant-war-peace#:~:text=If%20the%20consent%20of%20the,constant%20wars%20in%20the%20future.>

peace was not a naive optimism, but rather a recognition of the potential for human beings to work towards a more peaceful and harmonious world. According to him

“Men are by nature imperfect creatures, unsociable and untrustworthy, cursed by a love of glory, of possession, and of power, passions which make happiness something for ever unattainable by them.” (Kant 1917, 47)

This statement reflects a pessimistic view of human nature, suggesting that individuals are inherently flawed and driven by self-interested desires that often lead to conflict and unhappiness.

In contemporary studies, peace is defined as ‘the cessation of hostilities’, ‘the end of all hostilities’, or ‘the cessation of war’. At the same time, the meaning of perpetual peace denotes the subject of permanent peace of states. This is not merely a temporary ceasefire but rather a lasting and unending peace among states. In the account of Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace" denotes a lasting and enduring state of peace among states, which can be attained through the establishment of a global system governed by democratic republican constitutions and international law.

In contrast, philosophers like Hegel, Schiller, Moltke, Tennyson, Malthus, etc. are antagonistic towards lasting peace. On their accounts, lasting peace makes citizens of the state sleepy and dull, leading to their degradation by keeping them immersed in luxury and pleasure so that war is the natural way of life in the case of balance. They all disagreed with Kant on war by presenting various arguments, and they concluded war is essential stuff for rights and equality.

In the account of Kant perpetual peace is not an unrealizable dream nor he does believe in a speculative Utopian idea that is free from fear, crime, and war. Even, he is neither enough pessimistic nor excessively optimistic in the essay on perpetual peace. Kant views perpetual peace as an ideal that ought to be posed as a moral principle and therefore these can be realized through dedication and effort.⁶ However, he also acknowledges that achieving this ideal is contingent upon a thorough understanding of the necessary conditions for a lasting peace. Kant warns that attempting to pursue this ideal without considering these conditions would be futile or counterproductive. Consequently, he suggests that securing perpetual peace between independent nations is a hopelessness endeavor. While nations may enter into treaties, these agreements are only binding as long as they serve the interests of the parties involved, and enforcing them is impossible as long as nations maintain their independence.

This peace study mainly belongs to the practical ethics of Kant’s pure reason, where the concepts of ‘Kingdom of Ends’ and ‘Summum Bonam’ (the highest good)⁷ are seemingly merged, and the political form of these two concepts is ‘Federation of Free Nation’. We may

⁶ “Kant is not pessimist enough to believe that a perpetual peace is an unrealisable dream or a consummation devoutly to be feared, nor is he optimist enough to fancy that it is an ideal which could easily be realised if men would but turn their hearts to one another. For Kant perpetual peace is an ideal, not merely as a speculative Utopian idea, with which in fancy we may play, but as a moral principle, which ought to be, and therefore can be, realised.” (Kant 1917, P.Viii)

⁷ It is a belief that arises from the need to reconcile the moral law with the ultimate harmony of happiness and virtue, which Kant calls the ‘highest good’.

say that, his entire moral philosophy is based on 'Reverence of Law' or 'Respect for the Law', that often considered as deontological rules of duty itself. In his account, the moral law is preferable as an act of 'Categorical Imperative', these acts are simply a universal law, treat humanity not simply means but always as an end, and every individual is a law making member of the kingdom of ends. It is the basis of his ethical system grounded on the ultimate good (Summum Bonum) that fully conforms to moral law.⁸ Kant used the term 'Sumum Bonum' which means highest good or ultimate good, that is, the results of principles of pure practical reason, harmony between being moral and being happy, and it is the end goal of the categorical imperative.⁹

In the essay 'Perpetual Peace', Kant shows that the proposal for perpetual peace is not just expenditure. This idea is followed from the moral law and therefore it is the ideal that is the sole duty of man to strive to implement it. He states that

"We must desire perpetual peace not only as a material good, but also as a state of things resulting from our recognition of the precepts of duty" (Kant 1917, ix)

For that sake, in the current context, it is essential for the international community to prioritize the promotion of lasting peace as a fundamental responsibility, inherent to its natural and providential character. Concurrently, it is crucial to establish new and forward-thinking principles to address six additional causes of war: end of territorial disputes, end of resource competition, end of ethnic and religious tensions, end of terrorism and insurgency, sustaining failed states, and end of information warfare, including propaganda.

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⁸ "...the perfect accordance of the mind with the moral law is the supreme condition of the summum bonum" (Kant 2004, p 68.)

⁹ "[Summum Bonum] can only be found in a progress in infinitum towards that perfect accordance, and on the principles of pure practical reason it is necessary to assume such a practical progress as the real object of our will." (Kant 2004, p.96.)