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Kant: the Duty to Promote International Peace and Political Intervention

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Kant argues that it is the duty of humanity to strive for an enduring peace between the nations. For Kant, political progress within each nation is essential to realizing lasting peace, and so one would expect him to view political intervention—defined as coercive interference by one nation, or some of its citizens, with the affairs of another nation in order to bring about political improvements in that nation—as justified in some cases.¹ Kant, however, explicitly rejects all intervention by force, and some aspects of his work support an unqualified prohibition of political intervention. In this paper I will examine on which grounds, stated or inferred, Kant's practical philosophy upholds the absolute prohibition of political intervention, and conclude that, although these grounds are inadequate, they have the merit of pointing to important restrictions on justified political intervention.

The Duty to Promote International Peace

The content of this duty depends on how international peace can be realized. In *To Perpetual Peace*, Kant argues that the emergence of republican states (representative democracies) is crucial for realizing peace: “[If] a powerful and enlightened people should form a republic..., it will provide a focal point for a federal association among other nations that will join it in order to guarantee a state of peace among nations..., and through several associations of this sort such a federation can extend further and further.”² Perpetual peace will then be realized when all nations have together formed a federation of states, which Kant further explicates as a union of republican states in which each state has abolished its standing army, voluntarily upholds the sovereignty of all other nations, and is hospitable to visitors who seek to trade or to exchange ideas. On Kant's account, republican states can function as focal points of peace because in these states “the consent of the citizenry is required in order to determine whether or not there will be war, [and] it is natural that they consider all its calamities before committing themselves to so risky a game.”³ Kant continues to argue that despotic states, to the contrary, easily go the war because their rulers need no public consent and usually can avoid the ravages of war. More broadly, Kant holds that since republican states, unlike undemocratic states, allow, and even promote, the “public use of reason,” they facilitate the moral and political enlightenment of their citizens and thus are more likely to

seek lasting peace.⁴ Granted Kant's view that democracy is a crucial contributing factor to international peace,⁵ it seems to follow that the duty to promote peace significantly includes the duty to promote the republican ideal, both within one's own nation and in foreign nations.

Kant himself explicitly draws this inference regarding the duty to promote the republican ideal within one's own nation, even though he severely restricts the scope of this duty by claiming that political change may not occur through resistance and revolution, but must take place through gradual reform initiated by existing rulers.⁶ However, it is less clear whether Kant thought that we have a duty to promote republicanism in foreign nations for the sake of peace. He argues that a defeated "unjust enemy" may be required "to adopt a new constitution that by its nature will be unfavorable to the inclination for war." This constitution is the republican constitution, and so this treatment of a defeated state may be seen as an instance of the duty to promote republicanism in foreign nations for the sake of peace.⁷ Kant does not provide other similar examples, but the duty can be given more Kantian content as follows. It accords with Kant's view that wealthy nations and their citizens have a duty to assist developing nations in their endeavor to eliminate poverty, hunger, preventable diseases, and poor education; for the elimination of these ills removes impediments to individual autonomy, and one aspect of the duty to respect other humans as ends in themselves is to promote the conditions of their autonomy.⁸ Improved conditions of autonomy facilitate political progress and thus help the cause of peace. Hence, assistance in the struggle against poverty, hunger, and so forth, in developing countries may be seen as a way of satisfying the duty to promote republicanism in foreign nations for the sake of peace. Nonetheless, Kant's ethics is too restrictive here because it supports the view that we may never seek to promote peace by furthering republicanism in foreign nations through political intervention.

Kant's Arguments Against Political Intervention

Preliminary Article 5 of *To Perpetual Peace* prohibits intervention: "No nation shall forcibly (*gewalttätig*) interfere with the constitution and government of another." In his explication of the Article, Kant suggests that just as one may not coercively interfere with the immoral conduct of a person who only sets a bad example, so it is wrong to coercively interfere with a foreign state that does not harm other states but oppresses its own people. Rather, the example of the oppressive government should be seen as a warning to other nations not to commit the same injustices. Kant adds that foreign assistance to one of the parties in an internal discord is justified only in the case of civil war; for since the parties are in a "condition of anarchy," the assistance "to one of the parties could not be regarded as interference by the other in its constitution."⁹ He concludes that, short of civil war, "a foreign power's interference

would violate the rights of an independent people struggling with its internal ills. Doing this would be an obvious offense and would render the autonomy of every nation insecure."

Considering the language of Preliminary Article 5 and the political conditions of Kant's time, it is likely that Kant thought of intervention only in terms of military and other violent forms of intervention when he formulated the Article. Thus the Article may seem compatible with nonviolent forms of political intervention, such as financial support for democratic opposition parties in a foreign nation or trade sanctions aimed at improving its human rights record. The problem with this claim is that Kant's explication of the Article commits him to the prohibition of all intervention, including political intervention, because he maintains that the autonomy of all nations, oppressive or not, should be respected, just as we must respect alike the autonomy of non-harming virtuous and immoral persons. For Kant, the only exception to the rule of respecting state autonomy is that a nation injures, or poses a threat to, other states, and then war may be warranted.¹⁰

This argument (a), that political intervention is wrong because states are like moral persons with autonomy should be distinguished from Kant's immediately following and final argument (b), under Preliminary Article 5, that adopting a policy of intervention for the sake of eliminating injustice is wrong because it would lead to the bad consequence of making the "autonomy of every nation insecure" (and, hence, lasting peace would become an illusion). Kant does not address intervention in any detail elsewhere in his work, and so additional arguments that he might have held against political intervention must be inferred from various aspects of his practical philosophy. The following three arguments seem to be the most significant: (c) A central theme of Kant's ethics is that we must mirror the ideal of the realm of ends in our moral actions. We may infer that it is also his view that in working toward peace we must mirror the ideal of the federation of states as the political foundation of the realm of ends. In this federation, nonintervention is the rule, and so Kant's ethics seems to imply that this rule must always guide our political conduct, irrespective of whether intervention might at times lead to political improvements. (d) In *To Perpetual Peace*, Kant warns that political change should not be pushed too quickly. "Despotic moralists" make this mistake out of political inexperience and enthusiasm for the ideal, and, typically, the overall result is repression for the sake of the good and a worse political constitution. "Moral politicians," to the contrary, realize that change must come gradually.¹¹ Proponents of political intervention are like despotic moralists, seeking premature political change. They fail to realize that when people in a foreign nation are ready for change they can realize it by themselves, and that intervention will ultimately only worsen the situation. (e) Kant rejects revolution and resistance for various rea-

sons, and, since political intervention commonly involves assistance to popular resistance, it is also unjustified.

Objections to Kant's Arguments

Argument (a) is mistaken on Kant's own terms. Granted that it is wrong to coercively try to change the immoral conduct of a person who does not inflict harm on you, it does not follow in analogy that all political intervention is wrong. The crucial point is that not all states should be viewed as moral persons with autonomy. Kant claims that the state as moral person is constituted by the social contract. In other words, the state as moral person emerges when the people give up their lawless freedom in the state of nature and install the rule of law, expressing their united will, i.e., the will of the state as moral person. This means that the state is justified, and should be viewed as a moral person with autonomy, only if the state accords with the united will.¹² Thus, the more a government adopts laws and policies that cannot be seen as an expression of the united will—and, typically, this involves the more a government is undemocratic—the less reason there is to treat the state with this government as a moral person. Kant failed to draw this conclusion, perhaps because he could not accept its implication that most governments of his time were not legitimate. At any rate, the logic of his view is that political intervention is only wrong with respect to republican states, or approximations thereof, and may be justified with regard to unjust states if it accords with the will of their people struggling for democracy.¹³

Argument (b) is weak if based on the premise that it is not theoretically possible to articulate a principle that legitimizes political intervention in only some cases. We should, therefore, assume that the point of the argument is the practical slippery slope: in the real world of politics, political interventions justified by a limited principle will give rise to many unjustified interventions. Accordingly, wise political theorists should publicly reject political intervention altogether, even if they hold that it may be theoretically justified in some cases. And wise politicians will not pursue intervention, even if they believe it justified in a given situation, fearing that it would trigger many immoral interventions by other nations.

The danger of escalation, I think, should be granted, especially when intervention involves violence. However, we should not forget the very serious costs of an unconditional prohibition of political intervention, created by leaving oppressed people without any real international support.¹⁴ These costs have tremendously increased since Kant's time, as the instruments of oppression have become much more effective and destructive. So we must articulate a limited principle of political intervention, and promote a corresponding practice, that minimizes the risk of escalation. Some guidelines are that the intervention must be essential for political success; that nonviolent intervention rather than mili-

tary intervention should be chosen where it is at all effective; that the intervention should accord with the will of those on whose behalf it takes place; and that the intervening agent should seek support for its action within the world community.

Argument (c) concerns the problem of ethical rigorism. Kant rightly contends that we must uphold the ideal of the realm of ends in our moral conduct in the sense that we should determine our moral rules from the perspective of members (ideal legislators) of this realm. However, Kant at times wrongly denies that in deciding how these rules should guide *our* conduct we should take into account that we are not acting in a world of ideal legislators.¹⁵ Thus Kant arrives at his rigoristic adherence to truth-telling, as exemplified in his infamous insistence that a servant may not lie about the whereabouts of his master to the person at the door who seeks to kill his master. This ethical rigorism is morally untenable even on Kant's own account; for by neglecting that one is confronted with evil, one may become an instrument of this evil. This would violate Kant's duty of self-respect and also be contrary to his duty of mutual aid.¹⁶

The upshot is that it is similarly wrong to act as if all existing nations are like republican states in the federation of nations and thus arrive at an absolute prohibition of intervention. Just as we may need to lie in order to prevent great harm to an individual, so political intervention may be justified in order to counteract political oppression in a foreign nation. This does not mean, however, that we should not mirror the ideal in our conduct. Rather, in this context, this moral demand should be interpreted to mean that we should continue to strive for the ideal and not deny its moral validity through our actions. Kant's view in *The Metaphysics of Morals* on the rules of war is instructive here. He does not claim that we must be unconditional pacifists, apparently rejecting the reasoning that led up to his rigorism concerning truth-telling.¹⁷ A defensive war may be waged, but it should be waged "in accordance with principles that always leave open the possibility of leaving the state of nature among states...and entering a rightful condition" (VI, 347/153). Wars, then, must not undermine the possibility of future peace. Accordingly, Kant continues to argue that wars may not aim at the extermination or subjugation of other people. Plunder is also wrong, and in support of this claim Kant makes the important observation that the people do not wage war, but rather the state "*through the people*" (VI, 348/154). Last, Kant emphasizes that assassins, poisoners, snipers, and the like, should not be used; for "such underhanded means...would destroy the trust requisite to establish a lasting peace in the future."¹⁸

In my view, political intervention should likewise aim at peace and not undermine trust as the very basis of the future federation of states. This underlines the significance of the restrictions on justified intervention mentioned earlier. Intervention must be based on the will of the people needing outside assistance;

it should ideally be supported by many republican nations in the world community; and it should be a last resort measure, especially when violence is involved. More generally, intervention directed against an oppressive government should incorporate Kant's guideline concerning war that the target should not be individuals but the state as it acts through them.¹⁹

Argument (d) points to an additional restriction on justified political intervention. It should be acknowledged that intervention may lead to premature change because, as the gradualist rightly claims, emancipation is a slow process even in revolutionary periods. So it is important that intervention in general aims at increased moral and political self-determination of the people on whose behalf it takes place. Kant, however, is often too conservative in his gradualism. In the anti-revolution/resistance passages in his work, Kant assumes that the people are only ready for change when it is initiated and gradually pursued by their governments, and that any successful attempt on the side of the people to force change temporarily involves a state of anarchy that is worse than any government whatsoever.²⁰ Once this bleak vision of the capacity of self-determination of the people is adopted, political intervention must always appear to be politically unwise. Kant's historical location may have prevented him from seeing that popular struggles may be well-organized and disciplined. Certainly, external support of such struggles does not necessarily lead to premature change; for the people may be ready for political change and, yet, their political success may require intervention to counteract an otherwise too powerful oppressive government.

In response to argument (e), it may first of all be noted that Kant's rejection of resistance and revolution does not commit him to prohibit all political intervention. After all, intervention might involve support for an aspiring democratic government against its internal opposition. Further, although it is not my purpose here to examine all Kant's arguments against revolution and resistance in any detail, it may be noted that most of these arguments are similar to his objections to political intervention and involve similar weaknesses. My discussion of argument (d) illustrates the point. A second example concerns Kant's claim that revolution and resistance are unjustified because their acceptance "would render all just constitutions insecure."²¹ This argument can be refuted along the same lines in which I have refuted argument (b): A defense of civil disobedience, revolution under exceptional circumstances, and so on, does neither in theory nor in practice imply the consequences foreseen by Kant. A final example is Kant's argument that revolution and resistance are self-contradictory practices in that they entail that the people wish to act as judges of their own cause and, yet, have given up the right to do so in the social contract. Kant here makes the same mistake as in argument (a), namely, that any government, no matter how oppressive, must be seen as an expression of the united will and, hence, as a moral person.²²

Conclusion

Although Kant's arguments against revolution and resistance, on the one hand, and political intervention, on the other hand, display similar weaknesses in his practical philosophy, his rejection of political intervention poses less serious problems for his work. One reason for this is that political intervention is less essential in bringing about political progress than are revolution and resistance. Another reason is that Kant might have contradicted his condemnation of all active resistance by predicting political progress on basis of the moral enthusiasm that the French Revolution created among its spectators,²³ whereas a similar inconsistency cannot be found with regard to his rejection of intervention.

Still, Kant's proposal that we ought to seek international peace with all our efforts is weakened by his prohibition of political intervention. To be sure, Kant explicitly rejects only intervention by force, but several arguments in his work commit him to an unqualified rejection of political intervention. This view is unacceptable, especially for our own age. The greatly increased interdependence of all nations and people since Kant's time, together with the revolutionary developments in the means of communication and the increased effectiveness and destructiveness of oppressive governments, have changed the political, moral, and economic significance of national boundaries, making political intervention more viable, urgent, diverse in its forms, and justified. Yet, I hope to have shown that the arguments in Kant's work against intervention have the merit of pointing to important restrictions on justified political intervention. A final restriction needs to be mentioned. In *To Perpetual Peace*, Kant passionately condemned the practice of hiring out troops to other nations because the soldiers "are used and wasted as mere objects to be manipulated at will" (VIII, 344/108). Moreover, he argued that "paying men to kill or to be killed appears to use them as mere machines and tools in the hands of another (the nation)" (VIII, 345/108). Similar remarks apply to political interventions that do not accord with the free will of those who execute them.

Notes

1. Political intervention, as I have defined it, is only a subclass of intervention. In the broader definition, the purpose of intervention is left open. My definition (and its later explication) has profited from discussions of the broader concept in Charles R. Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 72-74; Jeff McMahan, "The Ethics of International Intervention," in Anthony Ellis, ed., *Ethics and International Relations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 24-28; and Mark R. Wicclair, "Human Rights and Intervention," in Peter G. Brown and Douglas MacLean, eds., *Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1979), pp. 142-144.

2. *To Perpetual Peace*, VIII, 356/117. In all citations of Kant's writings, the first number refers to the volume number of the "Akademie-Ausgabe" of his complete works, the second number refers to the page number of this edition, and the third number refers to the page number of the English translation used. I have used the following translations: Mary Gregor, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1991); Ted Humphrey, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), for translations of "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent," "On the Proverb: That May be True in Theory, But Is of No Practical Use," and *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*; Werner S. Pluhar, *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987); and Hans Reiss, *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), for H. B. Nisbet's translation of "A Renewed Attempt to Answer the Question: Is the Human Race Continually Improving?", Part II of *The Contest of Faculties*.

3. *To Perpetual Peace*, VIII, 351/113. At some places Kant suggests that international peace is a precondition for the emergence of republican states. See the Seventh Thesis of "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent," VIII, 24/34, which states that "[t]he problem of establishing a perfect civil constitution depends on the problem of law-governed external relations among nations and cannot be solved unless the latter is." See also *Critique of Judgment*, V, 432/320. There is no serious inconsistency here. His view should be modified and made consistent as follows: The emergence of republican states is essential to the realization of lasting peace, but war threatens the stability of republican states, and steps toward peace promote the formation of these states.

4. How the public use of reason may contribute to peace (in various areas of human life) is a central topic of Hans Saner, *Kant's Political Thought*, translated by E. B. Ashton (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973). Kant's own peace proposal is meant to contribute to the enlightenment of the citizens and thus to the cause of peace. See the Ninth Thesis of "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent." However, Kant assigns a greater role to self-interest rather than to moral motives in bringing humanity closer to lasting peace.

5. In "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," Michael W. Doyle shows in support of Kant's view that secure liberal democracies during the past two centuries have not engaged in war with one another, even though they have fought frequently with nonliberal states. See *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12 (1983): 205-235 and 323-353, pp. 213 and 225ff. The fact that liberal states have fought with nonliberal states for imperialistic reasons shows that lasting peace requires both democracy and international economic justice. Kant anticipated this latter point in his biting criticisms of European colonialism. See *To Perpetual Peace*, VIII, 358-59/119, and *The Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 353/159. It may further be noted that the ideal of enlightened citizens requires a more extensive democratization of society than Kant envisioned. This is not only so because Kant limited the right to vote to economically independent males, but also because it has become clear that modern representative democracies, as more consistent embodiments of his republican ideal, have not realized widespread political participation and debate.

6. See "A Renewed Attempt to Answer the Question: Is the Human Race Continually Improving?", where Kant claims that the republican constitution "is the best qualified of all to keep out war, [and] [t]hus it is our duty to enter into a constitution of this kind" (VII, 91/187). That this duty requires gradual reform undertaken by existing governments rather than popular struggle is, for example, stated by Kant in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 355/161.

7. See *The Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 349-505/156. The imposition of a republican constitution should not be seen as an instance of political intervention. After all, the victorious nation temporarily has political/legal control over the defeated nation. The liberalization of Japan and Germany after the Second World War may be seen as an example of imposed republicanism.

8. Cf. Onora O'Neill, "Ending World Hunger," Ch. 7 of Tom Regan, ed., *Matters of Life and Death* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).

9. *To Perpetual Peace*, VIII, 346/109. Although I have my doubts about Kant's argument here, I agree with his view that assistance to a party in civil war should not be viewed as a form of intervention. Certainly, the moral issues in standard cases of intervention and assistance to a party in civil war are not the same. However, on a broader account of intervention, one might argue that Kant here is stating an exception to the rule of nonintervention. On this account, my concern is to contest that he does not make more exceptions.

10. See *The Metaphysics of Morals*, par. 56. Accordingly, it is a mistake to claim, as Carl Joachim Friedrich does in *Inevitable Peace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 178, that Kant might have held that the prohibition of intervention does not apply when a nation is made undemocratic by a coup d'état. This also follows from Kant's view that Preliminary Articles 1, 5, and 6 formulate strict prohibitions that hold "regardless of the circumstances" (*To Perpetual Peace*, VIII, 347/110).

11. See *To Perpetual Peace*, VIII, 372-73/128-29. For a more detailed discussion, see my *Kantian Ethics and Socialism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), pp. 170-72. I also elaborate on these pages, and on pp. 267-68, my view of gradualism as set forth in my later discussion of argument (d).

12. In further support of this view, it may be noted that it is a mistake to view a state that does not harm other states but oppresses its own people as similar to a person who does not inflict harm on others but acts immorally. After all, the immoral person only harms himself, but the oppressive state harms its own citizens.

13. Cf. Fernando R. Tesón, "The Kantian Theory of International Law," *Columbia Law Review* 92 (1992): 53-102, pp. 92-93. Tesón is one of the very few commentators on Kant's peace proposal who goes beyond merely mentioning his rejection of intervention. Tesón's critical discussion is limited to argument (a). Another brief discussion can be found in Howard Williams, *Kant's Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 246-247. Howard touches on argument (d). Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, pp. 75ff., and McMahan, "The Ethics of International Intervention," pp. 29ff., refute modern variants of Kant's "autonomy" argument against intervention. I have profited from their discussions. Beitz also briefly discusses Kant's view (p. 82).

14. Cf. McMahan, "The Ethics of Intervention," p. 44.

15. Cf. Thomas E. Hill, Jr., *Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 66.

16. See Christine M. Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 15 (1986): 325-349, p. 340.

17. My analysis here is indebted to Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie," p. 349.

18. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 347/154. The same point is made in Preliminary Article 6 of *To Perpetual Peace*. Preliminary Article 1 indicates that Kant also held that the conclusion of war in a peace treaty must be consistent with the future ideal of the federation of states.

19. Thomas Nagel offers an excellent explication of this idea (with regard to war) in his classic "War and Massacre," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 123-144.

20. See "On the Proverb: That May be True in Theory, But Is of No Practical Use," VIII, 303n./81n. See also *To Perpetual Peace*, VIII, 373n./129n.

21. See "On the Proverb: That May be True in Theory, But Is of No Practical Use," VIII, 301/80.

22. The final argument against revolution and resistance is set forth in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 320-322/131-33. My criticisms here of Kant's rejection of revolution and resistance are elaborated in *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, pp. 180-184.

23. Whether Kant is indeed inconsistent here remains a matter of ongoing debate. The strongest recent case against the claim of inconsistency is made by Peter P. Nicholson, "Kant, Revolutions and History," in Howard Lloyd Williams, ed., *Essays on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Nicholson rightly argues that Kant explicated the enthusiasm of the spectators as a sign that people are morally concerned with republicanism and the prevention of war. Accordingly, Kant's mere support of this enthusiasm does not commit him to supporting revolutionary change. However, Nicholson fails to elaborate on how political progress can be predicted on basis of these moral concerns among the people. Kant's view is that political progress can be predicted because sooner or later "favorable circumstances" will emerge in which these moral concerns will lead to "renewed attempts of the same kind as before" [i.e., the French Revolution]. See "A Renewed Attempt to Answer the Question: Is the Human Race Continually Improving?," VII, 88/185. Kant's prediction of progress, then, is incompatible with his condemnation of revolution and resistance. If Kant had predicted progress on basis of a moral enthusiasm of the rulers of his time for the French Revolution, he would have been consistent. But, of course, these rulers displayed the very opposite reaction.