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Are Justice and Peace Coming Nearer?

- A Contemporary Account of Kant's Views on the
"Ethical Commonwealth" and "Perpetual Peace" -

Abstract:

When we deal with Kant's vision of future world society, an understanding of two concepts is essential: the concept of "perpetual peace" and the concept of the "ethical commonwealth". This article will attempt to tentatively answer the question whether we are gradually coming closer to the historical stage marked by these two concepts, concepts that Kant uses to describe what might be interpreted as the "aim of history". I will first briefly shed some light on Kant's understanding of the ethical commonwealth and perpetual peace and then propose an assessment of humanity's advance in its possible historical path to these two conditions.

Key words:

justice, peace, perpetual peace, Kant, ethical commonwealth

For a correct comprehension of Kant's vision of the future world, let us first note that for him it is not only material perfection that nature wants of us, but also ethical perfection. The true value of our present material advance is to be reflected in a future purpose. This purpose is both in humanity's prosperity and in its greater ethical maturity. Furthermore, no matter how anarchic the world may appear to us, the same power which worked amongst individuals to bring about an organized and ordered civil society must eventually be materialized on the international scene as well. This materialization will in its final instance take the form of

perpetual peace - a concept Kant elaborates in his essay *Toward Perpetual Peace (Zum ewigen Frieden)*.

Kant's conception of history is fundamentally based in our duty, because the alternative to our understanding of history serving a purpose would be to accept the possibility of humans regressing to barbarism. Hence, history is to be comprehended as serving a moral purpose. Progress is not inspired by empirical or theoretical but by moral consideration. Consequently, perpetual peace as the final phase of humanity's historical progress is inspired by the same principle.

It is useful to associate Kant's concept of perpetual peace to his postulations on the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. In his *Critique of Practical Reason (Die Kritik der praktischen Vernunft)* Kant derives the postulate on the immortality of the soul from his understanding that the highest good (morality) can only be accomplished by assuming an endless development of the human capacity for the good. The highest good can only be attained in eternity. Because of that, it is our moral duty to assume the immortality of the soul (Kant 1902: 122, 123). Concerning the existence of God, Kant provides us with a related argument: the achievement of the highest good is not possible without God, and hence it is duty that makes us postulate God's existence (Ibid., Ak. 124). Kant: "Now, it was a duty for us to promote the highest good; hence, there is in us not merely the warrant but also the necessity, as a need connected with duty, to presuppose the possibility of this highest good, which, since it is possible only under the condition of the existence of God, connects the presupposition of the existence of God inseparably with duty; that is, it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God" (Ibid., Ak. 125). And: "...the moral law leads through the concept of the highest good, as the object and final end of pure practical reason, to religion, that is, to the recognition of all duties as divine commands, not as sanctions...but as essential laws of every free will in itself..." (Ibid., Ak. 129). There is, nevertheless, one important difference between our obligation to assume perpetual peace and our duty to assume the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. In the first case, the fulfilment of our duty (our realization of the moral law

and our assumption that perpetual peace will be realized in the future) will finally result in perpetual peace, whereas our moral duty to assume the immortality of the soul and the existence of God will not result in these assumptions becoming reality.

Nature and history, however, are not purposeful in themselves. Kant's argument is rather that the constitution of our reason requires that we *suppose* that they are purposeful. In fact, there is no other way for our mind to understand them fully. Hence, Kant postulates the comprehension of history as a comprehension of something with a good purpose. It is duty that is the reason for this postulation (the alternative being historical regression ultimately resulting in barbarism). In addition to that, conceiving history in a teleological sense has the advantage of not only making sense of it for us, but also of creating the possibility of realizing a purpose in the future development of humankind. Through embracing the idea of the possible existence of a teleological moral pattern in history, it becomes possible to envision future society as increasingly being imbued with morality. That has also its ramifications for the future of politics: the political realm can be expected to be increasingly open for the moral realm!

Kant believes that nature and morality serve his argument concerning the pursuit of perpetual peace and that they do so in a mutually supporting sense. Morality steps in, namely, to provide what nature cannot provide, whereas nature or Providence steps in to provide what morality cannot. What morality is not able to achieve of itself are the external conditions in which peace might be possible. Kant expects that it is nature that will achieve this, while the moral politician will provide what nature cannot provide: the will to take advantage of external conditions to accomplish lasting peace.

Kant opts for a federation of states in the relatively near future, deeming that a world state might be possible only at some later stage of development of humanity. A world state is thus an objective we are not supposed to expect as an immediate prospect in the development of our civilization. Being aware of this, however, does not mean that we ought to remain idle. On the contrary, we are supposed to fulfil our moral duty as humans, and Providence will then be

instrumental in helping us approach a just society and international order that will culminate at some stage in a global state. Ultimately, justice and peace have to be thus instituted as a result of conscious moral choice. Obviously, Kant has to rely on the moral improvement of humanity as the only possible development that can, in the final instance, ensure justice and perpetual peace.

What about the “ethical commonwealth”? As we have seen, Kant’s political plan for perpetual peace depends on our moral progress. Political and moral progress, however, converge on the same objective: the objective of the ethical commonwealth. The concept of the ethical commonwealth Kant outlines most extensively in his *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (*Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*). There Kant states his position that the rational message of Christianity is a moral one and that this message is a call for the unity of humankind. The ultimate aim of human progress is, according to Kant, that “man ought to leave his ethical state of nature in order to become a member of an ethical commonwealth” (Kant 1793: 126). This commonwealth would be “a union of men under merely moral laws which have a special and unique principle of union (virtue)” (Ibid.,121). The idea of an ethical commonwealth is already announced, be it indirectly, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (*Die Grundlage zur Metaphysik der Sitten*) and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In both works, Kant refers to the *summum bonum*, or the highest good, which can only be attained in a perfect community of human beings. In *The Critique of Practical Reason* Kant speculates about the achievement of the “highest good in the world” as the necessary object of a will determinable by the moral law. In his *Groundwork*, he employs the term “Kingdom of ends” to describe the morally perfected community (Kant 1785: 75).

In an existing *political* commonwealth all the political citizens are in an ethical state of nature, whereas the concept of the *ethical* commonwealth implies a moral society that ideally extends to the whole of humankind. An ethical commonwealth Kant describes therefore as “a *world* republic under the laws of virtue” (Kant 1793: 132; emphasis added). Such a

commonwealth is a task that only God is capable of achieving adequately. Kant: "Indeed, the members of such an ethical commonwealth would be the people of God" (Ibid., 132). No matter how unachievable the goal of an ethical commonwealth appears to us, it is again Providence that will provide us the necessary help, but "only if we apply ourselves wholeheartedly to the task of moral improvement and the creation of an ethical commonwealth (Ibid., 133)".

The final aim of politics is thus the development of an ethical community. Such a community is marked by individuals who are guided by their duties, i.e. by the categorical imperative. Moreover, the highest political good and the highest moral good can only be achieved simultaneously. And that can occur exclusively in a world community. Hence, the exigencies of politics oblige political leaders to look beyond politics and their states and directly to ethics and the world state for the solution of the difficulties they are facing.

2009. How close are we to the ethical commonwealth, to perpetual peace – to justice? Is humanity gradually approaching these ideals of Kant? Without the ambition to elaborate in this short article on this question in any depth, let me just give an indication that humanity is indeed gradually moving towards more justice, i.e. to the two conditions Kant described as the ethical commonwealth and perpetual peace³.

A precondition for acting intentionally in a just manner is to be free. Without being free, one cannot act in a just manner because he wills so, but only because he is forced to. A truly just act, on the other hand, is an act that is performed on the basis of our free will. The issue of justice is thus to a significant degree an issue of freedom. Hence, the question whether humanity is gradually moving toward more justice can be partially answered by addressing the question whether humanity is gradually moving toward more freedom.

Humankind does indeed appear to be developing into a direction that is marked by an increase in freedom. For a persuasive support for this argument let us recall Michael

³ For my account of the concept of history as the development of justice, see Rakic (2004).

Doyle's pivotal article "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs (parts I and II)" (Doyle, 1983). This article relates strongly both to Kant's conception of the ethical commonwealth and to his understanding of perpetual peace. (1) Doyle provides cogent empirical evidence for the continuous increase in number of liberal states. As we have seen, an increase in number of liberal societies implies an increase in number of societies with the potential of justice. Consequently, indirect support is given to the thesis that the ethical commonwealth is coming nearer. (2) Doyle presents strong empirical evidence for the hypothesis that liberal states do not wage wars against each other. Hence, support is furnished for the idea that we inhabit a world that is gradually becoming more peaceful. It is important to note that Doyle published his article in 1983, i.e. before the collapse of state-socialism in Central and Eastern Europe. As we know, this collapse was followed by a further increase in number of liberal states, and thus by an increase in number of states that are unlikely to wage war against each other.

In sum: an increase in number of liberal societies means both an increase in number of societies in which individuals and communities can act intentionally in a just manner, as well as an increase in number of peaceful states. The trend that Doyle observed in the last decades indicates that, at least in that period, Kant's conceptions of the ethical commonwealth and perpetual peace appear indeed to come nearer. Whether this trend is to be attributed to an increase in number of humans who act on the basis of the categorical imperative (i.e., *from duty*), and to Providence giving such humans the necessary aid in approaching justice and peace, is a question the answer to which is marked by the degree to which we are generally committed to Kant's ethics and political philosophy.

References

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Apstrakt:

Ne možemo valjano razumeti Kantovu viziju budućeg svetskog društva, a da se ne pozabavimo ozbiljno njegovim konceptima „večnog mira“ i „etičke zajednice“. Osnovno pitanje koje će ovde biti postavljeno je da li se postepeno približavamo periodu istorije koji obeležavaju ova dva koncepta. Pokazaćemo pritom zašto su oni tesno povezani sa istorijskim razvojem slobode. Kao bitan pokazatelj koji ide u prilog tezi o istorijskom razvoju slobode uzeće se poznati članak Majkla Dojla „Kant, liberalna nasleđa i spoljni poslovi“. U njemu se naime tvrdi da je u poslednja dva veka svet obeležen kako porastom broja liberalnih država, tako i činjenicom da su one miroljubive u međusobnim odnosima. Nalaz o porastu broja liberalnih država ide u prilog ideji da postoji i sve veći broj društava u kojima građani imaju mogućnost da sa namerom deluju pravedno, tj. da se doista postepeno približavamo epohi koju obeležavaju dva gore pomenuta Kantova koncepta.

Ključne reči:

pravda, mir, večni mir, Kant, etička zajednica

