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Problems with Kant's Reasoning on a Republican Constitution

Immanuel Kant was a renowned German philosopher of the 18th century, who contributed principally to the field of metaphysics. Metaphysics is the division of philosophy which precisely deals with the concepts of being, existence and reality. Kant devotes an explicit passage in his informal work, *Towards Perpetual Peace*, to vouch for a Republican Constitution as the superlative means of granting the prospect of continual peace. A Republican Constitution is a form of government whereby the legislative branch and the executive branch are two separate entities that help to ultimately run the State. Nevertheless, in my own view, Kant's supposition is not necessarily problematic, but his argumentation for it is flawed. His idea, that the people of a warring nation are only hampered by the outlays of war, is erroneous. No matter what war, there are always benefits a country experiences because of war initiating. I shall go about illustrating that war always begets jobs and income. My ultimate problem with his argument is that he presupposes the head of state in a non-republican government sacrifices nothing by affirming war. This is impossible. The very act of deciding on war is paying the opportunity cost of time. There is more to this premise that will be conversed shortly. But foremost, let's inspect the whole of his argument.

Kant lays out the following verbose argument:

“Now, in addition to the purity of its origin – its having arisen from the pure source of the concept of right – the republican constitution does offer the prospect of the result wished

for, namely perpetual peace; the ground of this is as follows. When the consent of the citizens of a state is required in order to decide whether there shall be war or not (and it cannot be otherwise in this constitution), nothing is more natural than that they will be very hesitant to begin such a bad game, since they would have to decide to take upon themselves all the hardships of war (such as themselves doing the fighting and paying the costs of the war from their own belongings, painfully making good the devastation it leaves behind, and finally – to make the cup of troubles overflow – a burden of debt that embitters peace itself, and that can never be paid off because of new wars always impending); on the other hand, under a constitution in which subjects are not citizens of the state, which is therefore not republican, [deciding upon war] is the easiest thing in the world; because the head of state is not a member of the state but its proprietor and gives up nothing at all of his feasts, hunts, pleasure palaces, court festivals and so forth, he can decide upon war, as upon a kind of pleasure party, for insignificant cause, and can with indifference leave the justification of the war, for the sake of propriety, to the diplomatic corps, which is always ready to provide it.” (Kant, pp. 323-324).

Alas, let’s break down his argument to its premises, both explicit and implicit.

1. Consent of citizens is required in a republican constitution to decide whether war will take place or not.

“When the consent of the citizens of a state is required in order to decide whether there shall be war or not (and it cannot be otherwise in this constitution)...”

2. When war occurs, the people of a warring nation must burden the cost of war which includes sending soldiers, providing food, and cleaning the mess afterwards.

“...they would have to decide to take upon themselves all the hardships of war (such as themselves doing the fighting and paying the costs of the war from their own belongings, painfully making good the devastation it leaves behind,”

3. There is always a possibility that another war may come before a warring nation has the time to recover from their previous battle.

“...a burden of debt that embitters peace itself, and that can never be paid off because of new wars always impending...”

4. Therefore, it is natural that people are hesitant about going to war and their consent is still required to go ahead. (1,2,3)

5. When subjects are not citizens of the state (according to the constitution), it is not a republic.

“...on the other hand, under a constitution in which subjects are not citizens of the state, which is therefore not republican...”

6. Tacit Premise: being a non-citizen in this non-republic form of government makes it such that you have no power or say in whether a war goes on or doesn't. (5)

7. The head of a non-republic government has nothing to lose and so can go ahead and declare war if need be, merely based on a whim such as feeling bored.

8. This type of justification of war, based on a whim, is avoided when you have a constitutional republic in which everyone must consent to burdening the costs of doing such a war.

C. A republican constitutional government provides the prospect of constant peace (7,8)

However, this argument is defective. There are two crucial issues that I find with Kant's reasoning. Kant offers the view that war unambiguously doles out burden and "hardship" to society (in premise 2) while he disregards that those "hardships" are indisputably beneficial.

To illustrate that sending soldiers is always good for society, I present the following argument. The very act of training and delivering soldiers during war is one that irrefutably requires more men to join, for the sake of swapping the deceased prior soldiers. This means that more jobs are formed in this society and there are less unemployed people who do not contribute to the wellbeing of the state. The state, no matter what, benefits since they either utilize the man power at their disposal or get rid of people who are hopeless for their society (assuming that they die in battle). One may find issue with my argument since I do not address the fact that resources need to be allocated to sustaining and nourishing such a swelling army.

Nonetheless, such an objection to my argument would align you with Kant's second error in this premise. He assumes that all non-soldiers, back in the society that is warring, must face adverse consequences for the choice to go to war.

This is always false since we take it that throughout war, a society necessarily will generate equivalent amounts, likely more, of food/supplies. This is true since maintaining a growing army requires that each man has the necessary supplies to best be victorious. There are people at every level required to grow food, make supplies, transport said items, etc. When you have an increased necessity for all these supplies/food, you will inevitably need people to either work longer or hire more workers. Either way, more money is put into the pockets of people and the economy booms with businesses having increased demand. All in all, regardless of the situation, more people are utilized and unemployment is brought down. To conclude, all wars bring about benefit and the “hardships” that Kant pronounces are on the contrary, quite useful for society.

As a closing objection, premise number 7 is another mistaken idea that Kant argues. He says that in non-republican governments, whereby the authority is held by one person solely as the proprietor of society, this sovereign may declare war just for fun or jokingly. He would not have to care about justifying it since the “diplomatic corps” would be delegated to finding reason within this verdict by the sovereign. The sovereign loses nothing in pursuing war. There are several errors here which I shall hereby lay out.

The very act of thinking about and planning on whether to declare war is an opportunity cost of time that the sovereign must deal with. The time that the sovereign spends on just making this decision, even be it a whim, is time that has vanished. This could have been, for example, used to ponder philosophy or resolutions to bureaucratic matters. Not only is there an opportunity cost of time involved, the reaction from society may possibly cause either stress or jubilation to the sovereign. Regardless of the

sovereign's position in society, it does not entail that people will not revolt or express their dismay and be irrational beings towards him. There is always a possibility of "illogical" people, namely his subjects, revolting against him.

Besides this, the emotional weight that a ruler may feel by losing his subjects and seeing his numbers diminish might personally outweigh all the economic benefits that war gives to society. Even if the sovereign is proper and has no emotional attachment to his subjects, it is impossible to rule out that there will be unrest in society if subjects find the ruler's justification (given by the diplomatic corps) for fighting as unnecessary. This is why it is impossible to say that a ruler feels nothing and bears no costs at all in declaring war in a non-republican form of government.

To finish, Kant's argument for a republican form of government is not flawed but the premises he uses, are problematic. Kant may have offered a lot to the field of metaphysics but this specific argument of his does not hold its merit. We have shown thoroughly that the two premises (2 and 7) are false by arguing opportunity costs, civil unrest, and the benefits war brings.