Perpetual Peace

Immanuel Kant

Several times in the course of his writings Kant linked his faith in moral progress and ethical perfection to a vision of peace among nations. The first selection is from his Idea of a Universal History on a Cosmopolitan Plan, *published in 1784, and the second is from his* Project for a Perpetual Peace (1795).

PROPOSITION: *The problem of the establishment of a perfect constitution of society depends upon the problem of a system of international relations adjusted to law; and, apart from this latter problem, cannot be solved.*

To what purpose is labor bestowed upon a civil constitution adjusted to law for individual men, i.e., upon the creation of a commonwealth ? The same antisocial impulses, which first drove men to such a creation, is again the cause, that every commonwealth in its external relations, i.e., as a state in reference to other states, occupies the same ground of lawless and uncontrolled liberty; consequently each must anticipate from the other the very same evils which compelled individuals to enter the social state. Nature accordingly avails herself of the spirit of enmity in man, as existing even in the great national corporations of that animal, for the purpose of attaining through the inevitable antagonism of this spirit a state of rest and security; i.e., by wars, by the immoderate exhaustion of incessant preparations for war, and by the pressure of evil consequences which war at last entails upon any nation even through the midst of peace—she drives nations to all sorts of experiments and expedients; and finally, after infinite devastations, ruin, and universal exhaustion of energy, to one which reason should have suggested without the cost of so sad an experience; viz., to quit the barbarous condition of lawless power, and to enter into a federal league of nations, in which even the weakest member looks for its rights and for protection—not to its own power, or its own adjudication, but to this great confederation *(Fœdus* Amphictyonum), to the united power, and the adjudication of the collective will. Visionary as this idea may seem, and as such laughed at the Abbé de Saint-Pierre and in Rousseau (possibly because they deemed it too near to its accomplishment)—it is notwithstanding the inevitable resource and mode of escape under that pressure of evil which nations reciprocally inflict; and, hard as it may be to realize such an idea, states must of necessity be driven at last to the very same resolution to which the savage man of nature was driven with equal reluctance—viz., to sacrifice brutal liberty, and to seek peace and security in a civil constitution founded upon law. All wars therefore are so many tentative essays (not in the intention of man, but in the intention of nature) to bring about new relations

of states, and by revolutions and dismemberments to form new political bodies: these again, either from internal defects or external attacks, cannot support themselves, but must undergo similar revolutions; until at last, partly by the best possible arrangement of civil government within, and partly by common concert and legal compact without, a condition is attained which, like a well-ordered commonwealth, can maintain itself in the way of an automaton.

Now, whether (in the first place) it is to be anticipated from an epicurean concourse of efficient causes that states, like atoms, by accidental shocking together, should go through all sorts of new combinations to be again dissolved by the fortuitous impulse of fresh shocks, until at length by pure accident some combination emerges capable of supporting itself (a case of luck that could hardly be looked for); or whether (in the second place) we should rather assume that nature is in this instance pursuing her regular course of raising our species gradually from the lower steps of animal existence to the very highest of a human existence, and that not by any direct interposition in our favor, but through man's own spontaneous and artificial efforts (spontaneous, but yet extorted from him by his situation), and in this apparently wild arrangement of things is developing with perfect regularity the original tendencies she has implanted: or whether (in the third place) it is more reasonable to believe that out of all this action and reaction of the human species upon itself nothing in the shape of a wise result will ever issue; that it will continue to be as it has been; and therefore that it cannot be known beforehand, but that the discord, which is so natural to our species, will finally prepare for us a hell of evils under the most moral condition of society, such as may swallow up this very moral condition itself and all previous advance in culture by a reflux of the original barbaric spirit of desolation (a fate, by the way, against which it is impossible to be secured under the government of blind chance, with which liberty uncontrolled by law is identical, unless by underlaying this chance with a secret nexus of wisdom)—to all this the answer turns upon the following question; whether it be reasonable to assume a final purpose of all natural processes and arrangements in the parts, and yet a want of purpose in the whole? What therefore the objectless condition of savage life effected in the end, viz., that it checked the development of the natural tendencies in the human species, but then, by the very evils it thus caused, drove man into a state where those tendencies could unfold and mature themselves, namely, the state of civilization; that same service is performed for states by the barbaric freedom in which they are now existing, viz., that, by causing the dedication of all national energies and resources to war, by the desolations of war and still more by causing the necessity of standing continually in a state of preparation for war, it checks the full development of the natural tendencies in its progress; but on the other hand, by these very evils and their consequences, it compels our species at last to discover some law of counterbalance to the principle of antagonism between nations, and in order to give effect to this law to introduce a federation of states and consequently a cosmopolitical condition of security (or police)—corresponding to that municipal security which arises out of internal police. This federation will itself not be

exempt from danger, else the powers of the human race would go to sleep; it will be sufficient that it contain a principle for restoring the equilibrium between its own action and reaction, and thus checking the two functions from destroying each other. Before this last step is taken, human nature—then about halfway advanced in its progress—is in the deepest abyss of evils under the deceitful semblance of external prosperity ; and Rousseau was not so much in the wrong when he preferred the condition of the savage to that of the civilized man at the point where he has reached, but is hesitating to take the final step of his ascent. We are at this time in a high degree of culture as to arts and sciences. We are civilized to superfluity in what regards the graces and decorums of life. But to entitle us to consider ourselves moralized much is still wanting. Yet the idea of morality belongs even to that of *culture;* but the use of this idea, as it comes forward in mere civilization, is restrained to its influence on manners, as seen in the principle of honor, in respectability of deportment, etc. Nothing indeed of a true moral influence can be expected so long as states direct all their energies to idle plans of aggrandizement by force, and thus incessantly check the slow motions by which the intellect of the species is unfolding and forming itself, to say nothing of their shrinking from all positive aid to those motions. But all good, that is not engrafted upon moral good, is mere show and hollow speciousness—the dust and ashes of mortality. And in this delusive condition will the human race linger, until it shall have toiled upwards in the way I have mentioned from its present chaotic abyss of political relations.

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The public right ought to be founded upon a federation of free states.

Nations, as states, like individuals, if they live in a state of nature and without laws, by their vicinity alone commit an act of lesion. One may, in order to secure its own safety, require of another to establish within it a constitution which should guarantee to all their rights. This would be a federation of nations, without the people however forming one and the same state, the idea of a state supposing the relation of a sovereign to the people, of a superior to his inferior. Now several nations, united into one state, would no longer form but one; which contradicts the supposition, the question here being of the reciprocal rights of nations, inasmuch as they compose a multitude of different states, which ought not to be incorporated into one and the same state.

But when we see savages in their anarchy, prefer the perpetual combats of licentious liberty to a reasonable liberty, founded upon constitutional order, can we refrain to look down with the most profound contempt on this animal degradation of humanity? Must we not blush at the contempt to which the want of civilization reduces men? And would one not rather be led to think that civilized nations, each of which form a constituted state, would hasten to extricate themselves from an order of things so ignominious? But what, on the contrary, do we behold? Every state placing its majesty (for it is absurd to talk of the majesty of the people) precisely in this independence of every constraint of any external legislation whatever.

The sovereign places his glory in the power of disposing at his pleasure (without much exposing himself) of many millions of men, ever ready to sacrifice themselves for an object that does not concern them. The only difference between the savages of America and those of Europe, is, that the former have eaten up many a hostile tribe, whereas the latter have known how to make a better use of their enemies; they preserve them to augment the number of their subjects, that is to say, of instruments destined to more extensive conquests. When we consider the perverseness of human nature, which shows itself unveiled and unrestrained in the relations of nations with each other, where it is not checked, as in a state of civilization, by the coercive power of the law, one may well be astonished that the word right has not yet been totally abolished from war-politics as a pedantic word, and that a state has not yet been found bold enough openly to profess this doctrine. For hitherto Grotius, Puffendorf, Vattel, and other useless and impotent defenders of the rights of nations, have been constantly cited in justification of war; though their code, purely philosophic or diplomatic, has never had the force of law, and cannot obtain it; states not being as yet subjected to any coercive power. There is no instance where their reasonings, supported by such respectable authorities, have induced a state to desist from its pretentions. However this homage which all states render to the principle of right, if even consisting only in words, is a proof of a moral disposition, which, though still slumbering, tends nevertheless vigorously to subdue in man that evil principle, of which he cannot entirely divest himself. For otherwise states would never pronounce the word right, when going to war with each other; it were then ironically, as a Gallic prince interpreted it. "It is," said he, "the prerogative nature has given to the stronger, to make himself obeyed by the weaker."

However, the field of battle is the only tribunal before which states plead their cause; but victory, by gaining the suit, does not decide in favor of their cause. Though the treaty of peace puts an end to the present war, it does not abolish a state of war (a state where continually new pretences for war are found); which one cannot affirm to be unjust, since being their own judges, they have no other means of terminating their differences. The law of nations cannot even force them, as the law of nature obliges individuals to get free from this state of war, since having already a legal constitution, as states, they are secure against every foreign compulsion, which might tend to establish among them a more extended constitutional order.

Since, however, from her highest tribunal of moral legislation, reason without exception condemns war as a mean of right, and makes a state of peace an absolute duty; and since this peace cannot be effected or be guaranteed without a compact among nations, they must form an alliance of a peculiar kind, which might be called a pacific alliance different from a treaty of peace inasmuch as it would for ever terminate all wars, whereas the latter only finishes one. This alliance does not tend to any dominion over a state, but solely to the certain maintenance of the liberty of each particular state, partaking of this association, without being therefore obliged to submit, like men in a state of nature, to the legal constraint of public force. It can be proved, that the idea of a federation,

which should insensibly extend to all states, and thus lead them to a perpetual peace, may be realized. For if fortune should so direct, that a people as powerful as enlightened, should constitute itself into a republic (a government which in its nature inclines to a perpetual peace) from that time there would be a center for this federative association; other states might adhere thereto, in order to guarantee their liberty according to the principles of public right; and this alliance might insensibly be extended.

That a people should say, "There shall not be war among us: we will form ourselves into a state; that is to say, we will ourselves establish a legislative, executive, and judiciary power, to decide our differences," —can be conceived.

But if this state should say, "There shall not be war between us and other states, although we do not acknowledge a supreme power, that guarantees our reciprocal rights;" upon what then can this confidence in one's rights be founded, except it is upon this free federation, this supplement of the social compact, which reason necessarily associates with the idea of public right.

The expression of public right, taken in a sense of right of war, presents properly no idea to the mind; since thereby is understood a power of deciding right, not according to universal laws, which restrain within the same limits all individuals, but according to partial maxims, namely, by force. Except one would wish to insinuate by this expression, that it is right, that men who admit such principles should destroy each other, and thus find perpetual peace only in the vast grave that swallows them and their iniquities.

At the tribunal of reason, there is but one means of extricating states from this turbulent situation, in which they are constantly menaced with war; namely, to renounce, like individuals, the anarchic liberty of savages, in order to submit themselves to coercive laws, and thus form a society of nations *(civitas* gentium) which would insensibly embrace all the nations of the earth. But as the ideas which they have of public right, absolutely prevent the realization of this plan, and make them reject in practice what is true in theory, there can only be substituted, to the positive idea of an universal republic (if all is not to be lost) the negative supplement of a permanent alliance, which prevents war, insensibly spreads, and stops the torrent of those unjust and inhuman passions, which always threaten to break down this fence.

The cosmopolitical right shall be limited to conditions of universal hospitality.

In this article, as well as in the preceding ones, it is a question of right, not of philanthropy. Hospitality there signifies solely the right every stranger has of not being treated as an enemy in the country in which he arrives. One may refuse to receive him, if it can be done without endangering his existence; but dares not act hostily towards him, so long as he does not offend any one. The question is not about the right of being received and admitted into the house of an individual:

this benevolent custom demanding particular conventions. One speaks here only of the right all men have, of demanding of others to be admitted into their society; a right founded upon that of the common possession of the surface of the earth, whose spherical form obliges them to suffer others to subsist contiguous to them, because they cannot disperse themselves to an indefinite distance, and because originally one has not a greater right to a country than another. The sea and uninhabitable deserts divide the surface of the globe; but the ship and the camel, that vessel of the desert, re-establish the communication and facilitate the right which the human species all possess, of profiting in common by its surface. The inhospitality of the inhabitants of the coasts (for instance of the coast of Barbary) their custom of taking the vessels in the neighboring seas, or that of reducing to slavery the unhappy wretches shipwrecked on their shores; the barbarous practice which in their sandy deserts the Bedouin Arabs exercise of pillaging all those who approach their wandering tribes; all these customs then are contrary to the right of nature, which, nevertheless, in ordaining hospitality, was contented with fixing the conditions on which one may endeavor to form connections with the inhabitants of a country. In this manner distant regions may contract amicable relations with each other, sanctioned in the end by public laws, and thus insensibly mankind may approach towards a cosmopolitical constitution.

At how great a distance from this perfection are the civilized nations, and especially the commercial nations of Europe? At what an excess of injustice do we not behold them arrived, when they discover strange countries and nations? (which with them is the same thing as to conquer). America, the countries inhabited by the negroes, the Spice Islands, the Cape, &c. were to them countries without proprietors, for the inhabitants they counted as nothing. Under pretext of establishing factories in Hindostan, they carried thither foreign troops, and by their means oppressed the natives, excited wars among the different states of that vast country; spread famine, rebellion, perfidy, and the whole deluge of evils that afflict mankind, among them.

The Chinese and Japanese, whom experience has taught to know the Europeans, wisely refuse their entry into the country, though the former permit their approach, which the latter grant to one European nation only, the Dutch; still, however, excluding them like captives from every communication with the inhabitants. The worst, or to speak with the moralist, the best of the matter is, that all these outrages are to no purpose; that all the commercial companies, guilty of them, touch upon the instant of their ruin; that the sugar islands, that den of slavery the most refined and cruel, produce no real revenue, and are profitable only indirectly, serving views not very laudable, namely, to form sailors for the navies, consequently to carry on war in Europe; which service they render to powers who boast the most of piety, and who, whilst they drink iniquity like water, pretend to equal the elect in point of orthodoxy.

The connections, more or less near, which have taken place among the nations of the earth, having been carried to that point, that a violation of rights, committed

in one place, is felt throughout the whole, the idea of a cosmopolitical right can no longer pass for a fantastic exaggeration of right; but is the last step of perfection necessary to the tacit code of civil and public right; these systems at length conducting towards a public right of men in general, and towards a perpetual peace, but to which one cannot hope continually to advance, except by means of the conditions here indicated.