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KANT, LIBERALISM, AND WAR*

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Many liberals of the nineteenth century, and their predecessors of the middle eighteenth, thought the natural condition of men to be one of harmony. Dissension and strife do not inhere in man and society; they arise instead from mistaken belief, inadequate knowledge, and defective governance. With the evils defined, the remedies become clear: educate men and their governors, strip away political abuses. This is one theme in the history of liberal thought. Urged by humane philosophers and supported by pacifistic economists, its appeal in Western society is immense and enduring.

There is in liberal thought another theme as well, which is often obscured though it goes back to the earliest philosophers who can fairly be called liberal. Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and Kant made no easy assumptions about the rationality and goodness of man. Among men in nature and states in a world of states, they found not harmony and peace but hostility and war to be the natural condition.

The two liberal traditions are partly contradictory. Kant is often improperly placed in the first of them, which helps to account for many of the misinterpretations of his political philosophy. His essay *Eternal Peace* is seen as one of a succession of peace plans going back to Dante and Dubois in the early fourteenth century, encompassing the French monk Crucé and the abbé St. Pierre, and culminating in the League and the United Nations. Some emphasize the plan, that is, international organization; others the importance of its being based on republican or democratic governments. In his guise as a philosopher urging the peaceful proclivities of democracy, Kant has even infiltrated the State Department. Giving full credit to the analysis of Kant, George V. Allen, an assistant secretary, once said: "The United Nations, with all its virtues, has not yet been able to achieve freedom from fear. The reason is easy to understand. Its second most powerful member is not a democracy."¹

Some have accepted such an interpretation not to applaud Kant's commanding vision and

* Prepared for delivery at the 1961 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, St. Louis, Mo., September 1961.

¹ George V. Allen, "Perpetual Peace Through World-Wide Federation," *Department of State Bulletin*, Vol. 20 (June 19, 1949), pp. 801-802.

high moral purpose but rather to decry his political naiveté and simple-minded optimism. Kant's supposed conviction that a Europe of republics would be peaceful, Crane Brinton finds to be a pathetic relic of the Enlightenment.² The statement exposes one of the problems of interpretation. Kant is a child of the Enlightenment; he is also the father of a critical philosophy that goes beyond it. Sometimes he writes as though peace were inevitably coming; at other times, as though *Realpolitik* were the mode of the present and the future. One who cannot ignore the latter aspect may label it a Germanic aberration, as Gooch did in his work on Germany and the French Revolution.³ While Kant may be seen as a backsliding liberal, he may also be considered a theorist of power politics who hid his Machiavellian ideas by hanging 'round them the fashionable garments of liberalism. Since he explained and in a sense accepted the practice of power politics in the relations of states, since he wrote of nature's plan and man's predetermined destiny, this interpretation too becomes plausible, the more so if his *Rechtsstaat* is taken to be a thinly disguised despotism with the sovereign supposedly limited by law but actually free of any human constraint.⁴

It is little trouble to collate passages that would support in turn each of the preceding interpretations of Kant, but the whole man would thereby elude us. There is a unity in his thought that is hard to grasp. His manner of thinking is foreign to social-science fashions, his mode of analysis rigorous and yet subtle, his style difficult but clear, his writing crabbed and still, as Goethe said, sometimes slyly ironic and even eloquent.

I

"A true political philosophy . . . cannot advance a step without first paying homage to the principles of morals. . . ." ⁵ It is incumbent

² Crane Brinton, *A Decade of Revolution, 1789-1799* (New York, 1934), p. 261.

³ G. P. Gooch, *Germany and the French Revolution* (London, 1920), p. 271.

⁴ For a recent example, see the lead review of *The Times Literary Supplement*, January 23, 1959.

⁵ Kant, *Eternal Peace and other International Essays*, tr. W. Hastie (Boston, 1914), p. 118. This book contains: pp. 1-25, "The Natural

upon us to take Kant at his word and begin by briefly discussing his moral philosophy. Kant was neither an empiricist nor an idealist. Empiricism he criticizes as leading to "merely contingent" knowledge; idealism as exceeding the bounds of reason. Man is a member of two worlds: the phenomenal and the noumenal. In the first, he is a creature of the senses, of impulse and desire. Utility or happiness as a standard of morals or legislation is mere caprice, for the object of action is taken from the realm of contingency. There can be no certainty nor universality of agreement. If your happiness is not mine, a government that presumes to tell either of us what objects we should seek and how we should seek them exceeds the bounds of permissible legislation. It undertakes to do what all men could not possibly have assented to.⁶ This is the kernel of all liberalism, rigorously defined. It is expressed, for example, by Lord Acton in his argument that liberty is the only end of government that can be generally pursued without producing tyranny. In Kant's words: "No one may force anyone to be happy according to his manner of imagining the well-being of other men; instead, everyone may seek his happiness in the way that seems good to him as long as he does not infringe on the freedom of others to pursue a similar purpose, when such freedom may co-exist with the freedom of every other man according to a possible and general law."⁷ Where others have grounded the injunction more

Principle of the Political Order Considered in Connection with the Idea of a Universal Cosmopolitan History"; pp. 27-54, "The Principles of Political Right Considered in Connection with the Relation of Theory to Practice in Natural Law"; pp. 55-66, "The Principle of Progress Considered in Connection with the Relation of Theory to Practice in International Law"; pp. 67-168, "Eternal Peace, A Philosophical Essay."

⁶ See *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, esp. sec. 2; and in general, *Critical Examination of Practical Reason*. Both are in Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, tr., *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, 6th ed. (London, 1909). For the political parts of the argument, see "Principles of Political Right."

⁷ Acton, "Nationality," *The History of Freedom and Other Essays* (London, 1907), pp. 270-300; Kant, "Theory and Practice: Concerning the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory But Does Not Apply to Practice," tr. Carl J. Friedrich, *The Philosophy of Kant* (New York, 1949), p. 416.

pragmatically, Kant roots the limitation in a profound analysis of the nature of reason.

By his possession of reason, man is distinguished from all mere animals. Man's reasoning abilities are, however, circumscribed. He can know that noumena, things-in-themselves, exist; he cannot know their content. The imperative, which is the basis of morality and of legislation, is then necessarily without content. "Act according to a Maxim which can be adopted at the same time as a Universal Law."⁸ My act is proper if everyone could, without contradiction and conflict, claim the right to act similarly. Men would always act in accordance with the categorical imperative if they were wholly creatures of reason. They are not. From the sensual nature of man conflict and violence arise. The contradiction between his condition and his potential gives the right to compel others to enter with him into a civil society in which his rights are secured, and with them the possibility of moral behavior.⁹ The criterion of legislation is abstract in order that it may be, within the limits of reason, of general validity. The purpose of legislation is negative: to "hinder hindrances" to freedom so that each may enjoy his antecedently existing rights unmolested.

Each man is an end in himself. The rights of one man before the law are the same as the rights of another. Kant is sharply critical of all practice contrary to this dictum. In the state of nature men have possessions; in the civil state their possessions are secured to them by law and become property. Men have equal rights to property but in varying amounts depending on their situation and abilities. There can, by right, be no nobility of birth but only gradations of rank according to merit. Great inequalities of wealth may, however, limit or even destroy equality of opportunity, as Kant himself remarks. The remedy, negative and typically liberal, is to arrange the laws so as to lessen the perpetuation of family lands by inheritance.¹⁰ To take another example and one that will incline our analysis toward the problem of war, Kant steadfastly opposed the impressment of subjects into military service. The practice was widespread. Karl Alexander, nephew of Frederick the Great, sold his regiments to England for the American War. At the bidding of his English mistress, he finally sold his principality to Prussia for cash and retired to England. In England impressment of sailors

⁸ *The Philosophy of Law*, tr. W. Hastie (Edinburgh, 1887), p. 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78, 157.

¹⁰ "Principles of Political Right," pp. 34-39.

was regarded as an undeniable prerogative of the Crown, and the brutal and inefficient practice not eliminated until it was made unnecessary by the Continuous Service Scheme adopted in 1853.¹¹ In the face of such practices, Kant writes:

A State is not to be regarded as a property or patrimony like the soil on which it may be settled. It is a society of men, over which no one but itself has the right to rule . . . and to incorporate it as a graft in another State is to destroy its existence as a moral person; it is to reduce it to a thing, and thereby to contradict the idea of the original compact without which a right over a people is inconceivable.

Subjects are not, like the vegetables the farmer uproots and carts off to market, objects that the ruler can dispose of according to his whim. In many states the ruler does so treat them. Where war does not require of the ruler the least sacrifice of his pleasures he may

resolve for war from insignificant reasons, as if it were but a hunting expedition; and, as regards its propriety, he may leave the justification of it without concern to the diplomatic body, who are always too ready to give their services for that purpose.¹²

The practices of governments contradict the principles of right. How are the required limitations to be secured? The answer has two parts: first, the institutions that are appropriate, and then how they may come to exist. Only in a republic can it be hoped that the principles of right will prevail. In such a state the executive is made up of one or a few; separated from it is an assembly representing the self-dependent citizens, men of property, profession, or craft. The executive presents its proposed legislation, the assembly chants its ayes and nays. The question put to it is not, for example, is a 10 per cent tax on bread supportable as compared to a tax of 5 per cent? The question, in the manner of Rousseau, is simply this: Does the proposed law accord with the general will? Is it one that everyone, though he would have preferred the lower tax, could conceivably have agreed to? If it is such, then the idea of the original contract is preserved. Still, what if the assembly says "nay" and the executive refuses to listen?

Kant's philosophy, including his political

¹¹ Gooch, *Germany and the French Revolution*, p. 12; Christopher Lloyd, *The Nation and the Navy* (London, 1954), pp. 131, 209.

¹² "Eternal Peace," pp. 70, 78; *Philosophy of Law*, p. 217.

philosophy, moves forward by resolving a series of antinomies or tensions. The enjoyment, as distinct from the possession, of rights depends on the state. However imperfect the state may be, it is greatly preferable to anarchy. On such grounds as these, revolution is absolutely enjoined. Yet one may, as Kant did, view with sympathy revolutions that according to the principles of right would stand condemned. There is no contradiction. He writes, one might say, sometimes noumenally and sometimes phenomenally, or, more accurately, with both aspects of human affairs clearly in his mind. Careful analysis and the clear specification of standards square easily in Kant's philosophy with caution, flexibility, and moderation in the judgment of human behavior.

The other institutional arrangement that is essential to proper governance is freedom of expression. Kant takes *Sapere Aude!* as the motto of the Enlightenment, and one of the most frequently quoted of his statements is that "the liberty of the press is the sole palladium of the rights of the people."¹³ One hears a distinct reverberation from the Philosophes' Shield of Evidence or an echo, to take a German formulation, of Schlözer's dictum that statistics and despotism cannot coexist. In his own and his subjects' interest, the ruler ought to permit the widest freedom of expression; but again, if he does not, there is nothing that can rightfully be done about it.

At such points as these some have concluded that Kant's political theory is a defense of despotism coupled with a hope that the despot will rule by law. He does, it is true, reflect the widespread ideas of his time. But they were ideas shared by many who were liberals as well as by others. Only a government secure in its power, Hegel once wrote, can permit the conscientious objector to live by his scruples. Across the North Sea one finds Lord Hardinge, Secretary at War in Wellington's Cabinet, describing the army as

a protection rather than any detriment to Liberty. We permitted a licentiousness which under any other constitution might be fatal to the public peace. Meetings were held and language was used which no other empire would permit and which nothing but the confidence of the Crown in the Standing Army would justify even our Government in permitting."

Neither Hegel nor Hardinge were liberals, but they reflect the idea that Kant emphasizes: A

¹³ "What is Enlightenment?" tr. Friedrich, *Philosophy of Kant*; "Principles of Political Right," p. 50.

government that while limited is strong in its sphere can permit a freedom to its subjects that would otherwise endanger the state. Thus Kant, with obvious reference to Frederick the Great, applauds the strength of the Prussian state upon which the individual's liberty depends.¹⁴

So long at least as the state "runs a danger of being suddenly swallowed up by other States," it must be powerful externally as well as internally. In international relations the difficulties multiply. The republican form is preferable, partly because republics are more peacefully inclined; but despotisms are stronger—and no one would expect or wish to bring the state into jeopardy by decreasing its strength.¹⁵ Standing armies are dangerous, arms races themselves being a cause of war, but in the absence of an outside agency affording protection, each state must look to the effectiveness of its army.¹⁶ A freely flowing commerce is a means of promoting peace, but a state must control imports, in the interests of its subjects "and not for the advantage of strangers and the encouragement of the industry of others, because the State without the prosperity of the people would not possess sufficient power to resist external enemies or to maintain itself as a commonwealth."¹⁷ Not only standing armies but also, indeed more so, the disparity of economic capacities may represent danger, occasion fear, and give rise to war.

Kant's concern with the strength and thus the safety of the state is part of his perception of the necessities of power politics. Among states in the world, as among individuals in the state of nature, there is constantly either violence or the threat of violence. States, like "lawless savages," are with each other "naturally in a nonjuridical condition."¹⁸ There is no law above them; there is no judge among them; there is no legal process by which states can

pursue their rights. They can do so only by war, and, as Kant points out, neither war nor the treaty of peace following it, can settle the question of right. A treaty of peace can end only a particular war; a pretext for new hostilities can always be found. "Nor can such a pretext under these circumstances be regarded as unjust; for in this state of society every nation is the judge of its own cause."¹⁹ More surely than those who extract and emphasize merely Kant's republican aspirations and peaceful hopes, Khrushchev speaks as though he had read Kant correctly. "War," in Khrushchev's peculiar yet apt phrase, "is not fatalistically inevitable."²⁰

Kant does set forth the "shoulds" and "oughts" of state behavior.²¹ He does not expect them to be followed in a state of nature, for, as he says, "philosophically or diplomatically composed codes have not, nor could have, the slightest legal force, since the States as such stand under no common legal constraint. . . ." ²² His intention clearly is that the "oughts" be taken as the basis for the juridical order that must one day be established among states, just as the rights of the individual, though not viable in a state of nature, provided the basis for the civil state.

This is the culminating problem of Kant's philosophy. Men need the protection of law before they have any chance of leading the moral life to which their reason commands them. The civil state is not sufficient. Peace among, as well as within, states is essential to the development of uniquely human capacities. "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only."²³ This is the form of the imperative that is most appropriate here. The constant hostility of states and the pressures of recurring war make its fulfillment impossible. How can the problem be solved?

¹⁴ Alfred Vagts, *A History of Militarism* (New York, 1937), pp. 167-168; "What is Enlightenment?" p. 139.

¹⁵ "Eternal Peace," p. 108.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71. In a way that long remains typical of liberals, Kant, in effect, criticizes the army that has nobility as officers and rabble for its soldiers. He would prefer not the nation-in-arms but an army of citizen-soldiers periodically and voluntarily rehearsing their military duties.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99; "Principles of Political Right," pp. 42-43.

¹⁸ *Philosophy of Law*, p. 214; cf. pp. 223-224: "Further, it may be said that the expression 'an unjust enemy in the state of Nature' is *pleonastic*; for the state of Nature is itself a state of injustice."

¹⁹ "Eternal Peace," p. 83; cf. p. 76.

²⁰ *Report of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the 20th Party Congress. Cf. Kant's Critique of Teleological Judgement*, tr. James C. Meredith (Oxford, 1928), p. 96. Referring to "a system of all states that are in danger of acting injuriously to one another" Kant says: "In its absence, and with the obstacles that ambition, love of power, and avarice, especially on the part of those who hold the reins of authority, put in the way even of the possibility of such a scheme, war is inevitable."

²¹ *Philosophy of Law*, pp. 219-225; "Eternal Peace," pp. 69-75.

²² "Eternal Peace," p. 83.

²³ *Metaphysic of Morals*, p. 47.

II

As is well known, Kant proclaims the *Rechtsstaat*, or republic, as preeminently the peaceful form of the state. In a republic the unambiguous test of right is applied to every piece of legislation, and every act of the executive will in turn follow the universally established law.²⁴ Such a state could not undertake an aggressive war, for its sole purpose, a purpose guaranteed by its structure, is to further the moral life of its subjects by enacting and administering positive, general law.²⁵ There may be reasons for a republic to fight, but they are not internally generated. Kant records, as had Hume, the couplet from Pope's *Essay on Man*:

For Forms of Government let fools contest;
Whate'er is best administered is best.

And, just as with Hume, he cites the thought in order to disagree with it. The point for both of them is that as the context of action varies, similar causes have different effects. Notice what Kant has done. With no comforting illusions about man, he seeks in the state, and among states as will be seen in a moment, the structure that will turn men's "unsocial sociability," their conflict and violence, toward a constructive result.²⁶

How are the appropriate structures to come into being, nationally and in the world at large? Kant sees in history, indeed in the very horrors of war, "a deep-seated, maybe far-seeing, attempt on the part of supreme wisdom, if not to found, yet to prepare the way for a rule of law governing the freedom of states, and thus bring about their unity in a system established on a moral basis."²⁷ Aha! one may say, an overriding determinism, an uncritical teleology, an Hegelian world-spirit marching with benign purpose, a sterile optimism. Kant succumbs to none of these. He is neither determinist, uncritical, nor rosy-faced with hope. A universal plan of nature, unknowable in detail but dimly discernible in outline, must be assumed; it cannot be known. He is moving at the outermost

²⁴ *Philosophy of Law*, pp. 210–211.

²⁵ "Principle of Progress," p. 64: Each republic "unable to injure any other by violence, must maintain itself by right alone; and it may hope on real grounds that the others being constituted like itself will then come, on occasions of need, to its aid."

²⁶ "That politics may be reduced to a science," *Hume's Political Discourses* (London, n.d.), pp. 229–243; Kant, "Eternal Peace," p. 80n.

²⁷ *Teleological Judgement*, p. 96.

rim of reason to establish the necessity of an act of faith and its compatibility with his own critical philosophy. We can discern in nature "a design to bring forth concord out of the discord of men. . . ." This must be so if Kant's moral theory is correct, for only in concord can man follow the categorical imperative. But, he warns,

human reason, when dealing with the relation of effects to their causes, must keep within the limits of possible experience; and to speak of Providence as knowable by us in this relation would be putting on Icarian wings with presumptuous rashness in order to approach the mystery of His unfathomable purposes.²⁸

His argument, both of limits and of possibilities, is established in the *Pure Reason* and elaborated in the *Practical Reason*. Along with its relation to moral philosophy, his reasoning is great with political implications.

The activities of bees and beavers, guided by instinct, produce regular patterns and predictable results. Citizens of a purely rational world, on the other hand, would act according to a preconcerted plan. Because men behave in neither of these ways, "no regular systematic history of mankind" appears to be possible. But if we take progress not as a final cause but as a postulate of the practical reason, "the cheerless gloom of chance" is illumined by "the guiding light of reason."²⁹ In the economic world of Adam Smith, men scratch and claw, each seeking his profit. The result is the greater good of all. If we look at the world and see discrete events, we are overwhelmed by the chaos: each event without cause and all events without meaning. But if we look at the aggregate of events with a proper organizing principle in our minds, we may see in the chaos, order; in the welter of events, a plan of nature. Newton, as Darwin said, did not explain why there is a gravitational force but that there is such a force. The cause, as Kant would put it, located in the bodies, is inaccessible to our reason; but the rules by which it operates can be discerned.³⁰ And so it is that out of the "universal violence" of the state of nature and "the necessity arising therefrom" comes the resolution of a people "to subject themselves to national law. . . ." ³¹ The juridical union itself is "a condition of [legal] equality . . . de-

²⁸ "Eternal Peace," p. 91.

²⁹ "Principle of the Political Order," pp. 3–5.

³⁰ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (London, 1928), p. 455.

³¹ "Principle of the Political Order," pp. 15–17; "Principle of Progress," p. 62.

terminated by the action and reaction of free wills limiting one another. . . ."³² And

even if a people were not compelled by internal discord to submit to the coercion of public laws, war as an external influence would effect this. For, according to the arrangement of nature already indicated, every people finds another pressing upon it in its neighborhood and it must form itself internally into a State in order to be equipped as a power so as to defend itself.³³

Men and states seek their ends little knowing that they are by their actions producing a result that may have been no part of their intentions. Smith's invisible hand is at work in the realm of politics. The "planless aggregate" of human actions can be represented as "constituting a system," though the demonstrations of Kant in the realm of the political are necessarily vaguer, crasser, and less certain than are those of Smith.³⁴

There is a sense of progress but not a naive optimism, for as we advance Kant sees that the dangers and difficulties also grow. The practical reason pronounces its irresistible veto: "There shall be no war."³⁵ Yet without war in the past, men now would be feeble types sheltering in caves and feeding on nuts and berries. The development as conceived by Kant is dialectic:

By the expenditure of all the resources of the commonwealth in military preparations against each other, by the devastations occasioned by war, and still more by the necessity of holding themselves continually in readiness for it, the full development of the capacities of mankind are undoubtedly retarded in their progress; but, on the other hand, the very evils which thus arise, compel men to find out means against them. A law of equilibrium is thus discovered for the regulation of the really wholesome antagonism of contiguous States as it springs up out of their freedom; and a united power, giving emphasis to this law, is constituted, whereby there is introduced a universal condition of public security among the nations.³⁶

³² "Principles of Political Right," pp. 34-35.

³³ "Eternal Peace," p. 95.

³⁴ "Principle of the Political Order," p. 22.

³⁵ *Philosophy of Law*, p. 230.

³⁶ "Principle of the Political Order," p. 17; cf. p. 23: "Applying the same method of study everywhere, both to the internal civil constitutions and laws of the States and to their external relations to each other, we see how in both relations the good they contained served for a certain period to elevate and glorify particular nations, and with themselves, their arts and sciences,—until the de-

Kant mentions, by way of suggestion, some of the ways in which peace may come out of war. The strength of a state is directly related to its general prosperity and well-being, and these in turn to the amount of liberty enjoyed by its subjects. "If the citizen is hindered in seeking his prosperity in any way suitable to himself that is consistent with the liberty of others, the activity of business is checked generally; and thereby the powers of the whole State are again weakened." Since states are in close competition, the sovereign, to avoid weakening his state, must grant a greater liberty to his subjects. Meanwhile the growing intensity of the competition among states leads them to spend larger amounts of money, even in time of peace, in military preparation. Prices rise, the national debt mounts, and finally the states are so weakened by this competition and by actual war that the sovereign is forced to give in peacefully to the people and place in their hands the power to choose between war and peace.³⁷ The attempt to win in the competition of states leads the sovereign to make some concessions; the impossibility of winning leads to the final concession, at which point, presumably, the republican form becomes the pattern of government throughout the world.

The manner of approach is immensely impressive. Its execution is accomplished with modesty, perception, and political sensibility. This is not to say that the vision is without flaw, the plan without blemish. Kant, if read from one point of view, can be taken as a study in the futility of the unsoundly based "ought." This was clear in his analysis of the individual in a state of nature where, he argued, the moral obligations, the "oughts" that apply to every rational being, cannot possibly be fulfilled. Prior to the establishment of a pacific federation, the "oughts" in international law turn out to mean as little as those applied to man in the state of nature. When the state of nature gives way to the civil state, the "oughts" applied to moral man take on a practical meaning. Those that apply to states can be taken seriously only if the environment of the state is similarly improved. For he says: "Every people, for the sake of its own security, thus may and ought to demand from any other that it shall enter along with it into a constitution, similar to the civil constitution, in which the right of each shall be secured."³⁸ The civil state is necessary for two reasons, because men are imperfect and be-

fects attaching to their institutions came in time to cause their overthrow."

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20; "Principle of Progress," p. 63.

³⁸ "Eternal Peace," p. 81.

cause even good men may fall into dispute and require a legally established mediator. The universal law-state would seem to be necessary for a similar pair of reasons.

Yet in spite of a number of statements such as the one just quoted, Kant will not accept the "legal state of Society" on a grand scale, the world constitution "similar to the civil constitution," as a solution to the problem. Every time he uses such phrases he quickly adds qualifications that materially change their meaning. His "universal International State, or Union of Nations," turns out to be "a voluntary combination of different States that would be *dissoluble* at any time, and not such a union as is embodied in the United States of America, founded upon a political constitution, and therefore indissoluble."³⁹ In such a voluntary organization, Kant says, the settlement of disputes among states can be conducted according to a civil process instead of by war. And yet he has also said in the clearest terms that against the evils of war and the general insecurity of states "there is no possible remedy but a system of international right founded upon public laws conjoined with power, to which every State must submit,—according to the analogy of the civil or political right of individuals in any one State."⁴⁰ The seeming contradiction calls for some explanation.

III

Why does Kant, after having constructed an argument internally consistent, turn to the conclusion that not government but a voluntary organization is the solution to the problem of war? He gives two reasons. The first is partly a logical proposition resting on his definition of terms. States already have a legal constitution; it would be illogical to place them under another. Individuals in a condition of nature have a right to compel others to join with them to form a state. The right of a state to demand that other states submit to the rule of law is not comparably strong. As a matter of right, no state can interfere with the internal arrangements of another. Kant, in contrast to Mazzini and Woodrow Wilson, is a non-interventionist liberal.⁴¹ One suspects that his second reason

for shying away from a world state is more important. He fears that such a state, once achieved, would be a greater evil than the wars it is designed to eliminate. It could so easily become a terrible despotism, stifle liberty, kill initiative, and in the end lapse into anarchy.⁴²

States in the world are like individuals in the state of nature. They are neither perfectly good nor are they controlled by law. Consequently conflict and violence among them are inevitable. This statement does not lead Kant to the conclusion that a world state is the answer. Distrusting that solution, he casts about for another. The other possibility open to him is that all states so improve that they will act according to maxims that could be universally followed without conflict. While he fears the former solution, he is too cautious and critical to place his faith entirely in the latter. Instead he attempts to combine them. It is the aim of his political philosophy to establish the hope that states may improve enough and learn enough from the suffering and devastation of war to make possible a rule of law among them that is not backed by power but is voluntarily observed. The first factor is the internal improvement of states; the second, the external rule of law. But the second, being voluntary, is dependent on the perfection with which the first is realized. The "power" to enforce the law is derived not from external sanction but from internal perfection.

Can one sensibly expect all states gradually to conform to a pattern that, once universally established, would provide the basis for perpetual peace? At one point Kant says: "Seek ye first the kingdom of pure practical reason and its righteousness, and then will your object, the benefit of perpetual peace, be added unto you."⁴³ This is a strange injunction to come from Kant, for he has pointed out, as we have several times noted, that it is only in the civil state that man has the possibility of living the moral life. The civil state made changes in man's behavior possible; it was not the other way around. And this is also the view that Kant takes of the relation between the internal and external affairs of states. In the 7th Proposition of his "Principle of the Political Order," for example, he avers that without the proper ordering of the external relations of states, the internal establishment of the perfect civil constitution is impossible.

see Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York, 1959), ch. 4.

⁴² "Principle of Progress," pp. 62–63; "Eternal Peace," pp. 97–98.

⁴³ "Eternal Peace," p. 114.

³⁹ *Philosophy of Law*, p. 225.

⁴⁰ "Principle of Progress," p. 65. Cf. "Eternal Peace," pp. 122–123; and *Philosophy of Law*, pp. 163–164, where Kant emphasizes that the federation must have the function of determining according to law, wherever there is a significant conflict, which interpretation of right should prevail.

⁴¹ "Eternal Peace," p. 81; and see above, n. 9. For differences among liberals on this question,

For the moment, however, let us assume that, without profound change in their external relations, all states have become republics. Kant's conclusion is that at this point perpetual peace is established, at least approximately. The international rule of law is realized, for the law is voluntarily agreed upon and voluntarily obeyed. This whole system of voluntary universal law rests upon an equilibrium of forces that is the culmination of world history.

To show that the equilibrium, once realized, is bound to collapse, one need only refer to Kant's own analysis. He points out that in a state of nature, where each state must define its rights and prosecute them with its own power, no one country can be secure against any other. "Lesion of a less powerful country may be involved merely in the condition of a more powerful neighbor prior to any action at all; and in the State of Nature an attack under such circumstances would be warrantable." This is a logical justification of the right of preventive war. From it Kant derives the principle of the balance of power.⁴⁴ How, one may ask, does the final equilibrium of the voluntary federation among states differ from the equilibrium sometimes attained by balance-of-power politics, an equilibrium that Kant properly labelled precarious? It should be clear by now that it differs in only one of the two respects that Kant believes to be essential. He ridicules the balance of power by comparing it with "the house described by Swift, which was built by an architect so perfectly in accordance with all the laws of equilibrium that when a sparrow lighted upon it it immediately fell." Yet the same doubt would seem to apply to Kant's hope for a pacific world secured "not by the weakening of all the separate powers of the States, but by an equilibrium which is brought forth and guaranteed through their rivalry with each other."⁴⁵ It is, in Kant's impeccable logic, necessary to supersede the state of nature among states and establish the rule of law. It is, by the same logic, impossible for a voluntary international federation effectively to guarantee the peace. If equilibrium depends on spontaneous agreement or if equilibrium depends on a balance of

forces, the federation of Kant is either way doomed to be transitory and shifting. Just as the house designed by a Laputian would collapse under the weight of a sparrow so Kant's structure falls to the ground whenever one major state chooses to forsake the international federation and flout its universal law.

The difficulty is made all the clearer by noting how, in a republic, the general will pronounces on the question of war and peace. The unambiguous test of right is again applied to a proposed act of the executive. The question is, as with domestic legislation, abstractly put. The answer to it must be a simple yes or no. Since the point is important and generally overlooked, I quote the relevant passage.

If, for example, a proportioned war-tax were imposed on all the subjects, they are not entitled . . . to say that it is unjust because somehow, according to their opinion, the war was unnecessary. For they are not entitled to judge of this; whereas, because it is at least always possible that the war was inevitable and the tax indispensable, it must be regarded as rightful in the judgment of the subject.⁴⁶

IV

Kant has held out a hope for perpetual peace, which upon closer scrutiny seems to disappear. Has he deluded himself with a false optimism, which has then been transferred to many of his interpreters? To answer the question we have to complete the circle and return to a consideration of his moral philosophy.

It is, Kant writes in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, "absolutely impossible to make out by experience with complete certainty a single case in which" an act was purely moral. However, whether this or that takes place is not at all the question; but that reason of itself, independent on [sic] all experience, ordains what ought to take place, that accordingly actions of which perhaps the world has hitherto never given an example, the feasibility even of which might be very much doubted by one who founds everything on experience, are nevertheless inflexibly commanded by reason. . . .⁴⁷

A moral act may never have been performed; yet moral behavior is a "necessary" or "practical" goal of mankind. When Kant uses such adjectives he means that the action described is the only action in accordance with man's noumenal nature, that its performance is a duty. Kant demonstrates that the categorical

⁴⁴ *Philosophy of Law*, p. 218, where in addition to what is quoted above, he writes: "This international relation is the foundation of the Right of Equilibrium, or of the 'balance of Power,' among all states that are in active contiguity to each other."

⁴⁵ "Principle of Progress," p. 65; "Eternal Peace," p. 98.

⁴⁶ "Principles of Political Right," p. 41n.

⁴⁷ *Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 23-24.

imperative exists and that to follow it is not impossible; he does not imply that men will live according to it. From the moral duty inherent in man's noumenal nature arise other of Kant's postulates. He accords to man in the form of practical reason, or will, what he has denied to him in the form of pure reason. If we are ever to fulfil the moral law, we must assume the existence of progress, an immortal soul, a God.⁴⁸

Kant approaches the problem of war in similar fashion. Perpetual peace is a particular reading of the postulate of progress, for if a condition of peace is not possible, then the prospect of one day realizing the ideal of moral behavior disappears. It is a partial and erroneous interpretation of Kant to say that he thought the realization of "necessary" or "practical" goals something that would occur in anyone's lifetime. Kant's analysis makes the conclusion that a universal rule of law can be achieved almost incomprehensible, but even this conclusion makes sense in his way of thinking; for to say that we can only "comprehend the incomprehensibility" of something is simply to face up to the inherent limitations of reason.⁴⁹

The conclusion that follows from considering Kant's political philosophy in the context of his moral philosophy is borne out by many of his more purely political statements. In the *Philosophy of Law*, after one of his many iterations of the proposition that only in a universal state can man find security, he raises the argument that if the state is extended over too large an area it becomes physically incapable of protecting its members. "Hence," he says, the *Perpetual Peace*, which is the ultimate end of all the Right of Nations, becomes in fact an impracticable idea. The political principles, however, which aim at such an end, and which enjoin the formation of such unions among the States

⁴⁸ We must, for example, "postulate the existence of God, as the necessary condition of the possibility of the *summum bonum*. . . ." *Practical Reason*, p. 221.

⁴⁹ *Metaphysic of Morals*, p. 84. This is a difficult problem. To put peace in the infinite future would be to demonstrate its impossibility. Kant must therefore think of sequences in the phenomenal world that are not infinite but do continue without end. This abstruse statement of the problem may help to make clear the philosophic context of Kant's political thought. For this resolution of the problem, I am indebted to S. Körner's superb little book, *Kant* (Penguin, 1955), pp. 163-174.

as may promote a continuous approximation to a Perpetual Peace are not impracticable. . . .⁵⁰

As he had demonstrated the possibility of moral behavior, so he must establish the possibility of perpetual peace. The second is the precondition of the first, and nothing that is impossible can be imperatively commanded. Peace is possible. This Kant has sought to prove. Its achievement remains an improbability.

Now, as a matter of fact, the morally practical Reason utters within us its irrevocable *Veto*: 'There shall be no War.' . . . Hence the question no longer is as to whether Perpetual Peace is a real thing or not a real thing, or as to whether we may not be deceiving ourselves when we adopt the former alternative, but we must *act* on the supposition of its being real. . . . And although the realization of this purpose may always remain but a pious wish, yet we do certainly not deceive ourselves in adopting the maxim of action that will guide us in working incessantly for it; for it is a duty to do this.⁵¹

V

Kant shares the major tenets of liberalism: the source of the individual's rights lies outside of the state; his freedom may be limited only when its exercise interferes with the rights of others; such limitation must be by known general laws before which all men stand equal; men's capacities are greater than is shown by their present accomplishments; and, finally, their potential will unfold in time, with education being one of the important means of progress. But Kant sees in combination what others have often separated—the defects, or as he says, the evil of men and the possibility of their living good lives, the strength of the state and the liberty of its subjects, progress amidst ever greater difficulties, the approach to peace as wars become fiercer and more frequent. He has, as many liberals do not, an appreciation of politics as struggle, an idea of possible equilibrium not as simple and automatic harmony but always as something perilously achieved out of conflict.

Let the philosophers scribble as they will, writes Kant at the beginning of "Eternal Peace." There is no danger, for rulers will not listen. This has been taken⁵² as criticism of states and condemnation of their rulers. But to the philosopher's advice rulers cannot listen, as Kant well knew. He was not engaged in the

⁵⁰ *Philosophy of Law*, p. 224; cf. "Principle of the Political Order," p. 13.

⁵¹ *Philosophy of Law*, pp. 229-230.

puerile task of telling men of affairs to stop behaving badly. Nor could he have been, for the dependence of behavior upon condition is one of his major theses. Taken as a King's Mirror, Kant's "Eternal Peace" is lost in futility. But so to take it requires a very unKantian interpretation. In describing what the states and the world will have to do and to become if moral behavior is to be possible, Kant makes understandable and in a sense excuses the failures of men and their rulers to achieve moral rectitude.

Many liberals of Kant's time and after have

looked upon war as annoyance or aberration, as something, one might say, that lies outside of history. Kant, in contrast, at once condemns war and demonstrates that its occurrence is expected rather than accidental. In the end we are left not with a confident foretelling of "the end of wars and the reign of international law"⁵² but with a deeper appreciation of the causes of war and the immense difficulty of doing anything about them.

⁵² Edwin D. Mead's introduction to the book cited above, n. 5.