

KANT AND THE PROBLEM OF PEACE

BETWEEN the philosopher who returns thanks "to nature for the incompatibility, for the envious emulating vanity, for the insatiable appetite to acquire, or even to rule, (for) without them all the excellent natural predispositions in mankind would slumber to all eternity without being developed,"¹ and the General who proclaims that "war is not merely a necessary element in the life of nations, but an indispensable factor of culture,"² for "without war, inferior or decaying races would easily choke the growth of healthy budding elements, and a universal decadence would follow,"³ there is a striking "air de famille."

We may well wonder how the old man of Königsberg, who saw in human struggles "the direction of a wise Creator,"⁴ could write an essay on "Perpetual Peace," and can easily understand how the controversy as to whether Kant were pacifist or imperialist arose.

It can be affirmed without doubt that Kant was at heart a pacifist, his treaty on "Perpetual Peace" being sufficient proof of that. But had he written this essay alone, he would never have gained his present authority among philosophers; he would rapidly have been relegated to the little corner reserved for an Abbé de St. Pierre, a de Tattel, and other utopists.

Kant's works may be divided into two parts:

- (1) his *destructive* work, which culminates in the *Critique of Pure Reason*;
- (2) his *constructive* work, with his *Critique of Practical Reason*, his writings on *Morals and Right*, and his study on *Universal and Perpetual Peace*, which "constitutes not merely a part, but whole final purpose and end of the Science of Right."⁵

¹ Kant, *An Idea of an Universal History in a Cosmopolitical View*.

² F. von Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, transl. by Allen H. Fowler, p. 14.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴ Kant, *Loc. Cit.*, *Ibid.*

⁵ Kant, *The Science of Right*, Conclusion, transl. by W. Hastie.

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Kant's destructive works have unfortunately more influence on modern thought than his constructive, and if we may judge him by his influence over his followers, rather than by his intimate thoughts, we are forced to admit that in his philosophy considered in its entirety there is to be found the principles of that imperialism of which Fichte and Hegel were the fervent apostles, Bismarck, von Moltke, von Bernhardt and many others the faithful disciples, and Nietzsche the insane poet.



One of the most interesting features of Kant's philosophy is his famous distinction between the "noumenal" and "phenomenal" world. According to him, we perceive things through the medium of certain forms "a priori" of our sensibility, like time and space, and through certain "categories" of our understanding such as reality, existence, substance, etc. These forms of the sensibility and categories of the understanding are to our reason what blue or red spectacles would be to our eyes. Consequently we can never know a thing actually in its true being, the thing as it is in itself, "Das Ding an Sich," the "noumenon." We know it only in so far as it appears, transformed, or rather deformed, by our "glasses"; to use Kant's expression, we know but the "phenomenon." "What the objects are by themselves would never become known to us, even through the clearest knowledge of that which alone is given us, the phenomenon. Even if we could see to the very bottom of a phenomenon, it would remain for ever altogether different from the knowledge of the thing by itself."⁶

Kant transfers this dualism, which he maintains is present in human nature, into the social order. According to him, man belongs at one and the same time to two worlds, the sensible and the intelligible. "First, so far as he (man) belongs to the world of sense, he finds himself subject to the laws of nature (heteronomy); secondly, as belonging to the intelligible world, under laws which, being independent on nature,

⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 36.

have their foundation not in experience but in reason alone."⁷

The "noumenal" man enjoys an *internal* freedom; this freedom consists in the independence of every motive of empirical order, i.e., free from experience; it is the kingdom of *morality* which manifests itself apart from our inclinations, desires or self-interest: "A law in the moral sense is a proposition containing a categoric imperative, an order,"⁸ and when the motive of a human action is the respect of the law, when "the idea of duty arising from the law is also the motive of the action,"⁹ then and then alone this action is moral.

The "phenomenal" man enjoys an *external* freedom; This freedom is safeguarded by laws of empirical or "juridical" order: "the doctrine of Right (*Jus*) is the ensemble of laws which can engender an exterior legislation."¹⁰ It is the kingdom of *Legality*, i.e. "the mere agreement or disagreement of an action with the law, without regard to the motive from which the action springs."¹¹

Kant having separated legality from morality as the phenomenon from the noumenon, he logically concludes that "it suffices for an action, in order to be legal, to agree with the law, whatever its motive may be."¹² Consequently "It is not an ethical duty to keep one's promise, but a legal one that we can be compelled to perform."¹³

According to Kant, the external order of Legality should naturally give birth to universal and perpetual Peace, which would be secured as soon as each individual learned to respect his own freedom and that of his neighbour. The supreme principle of jurisprudence, and implicitly of peace is "Act externally so that the free use of thy elective will

⁷ Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics*, transl. by T. K. Abbot. Third Section, p. 86.

⁸ Kant, *The Science of Right*. Preface.

⁹ *Introduction to the Metaphysic of Morals*, transl. by T. K. Abbot, iii, 19.

¹⁰ *The Science of Right*. Preface.

¹¹ *Introduction to the Metaphysic of Morals*, iii, 19.

¹² *The Science of Right*. Preface.

¹³ *Introduction to the Metaphysic of Morals*, iii, 20.

may not interfere with the freedom of any man so far as it agrees with universal law."¹⁴

But it is difficult, not to say impossible, to see how Order and Peace can be the natural offspring of "Legality," or even of "Morality" in the Kantian sense of the words. Peace, Order and Truth are notions intimately connected with one another, and it is impossible to establish one without the other. Peace cannot be based upon error. Now Kant's notions of Right or Legality, and of Morality are erroneous.

(1) *The Notion of Right.* According to the Scholastic teaching, Right is but an aspect of Morality or Ethics. Ethics is the study of moral actions, i.e. actions which are imputable to man, for which man is responsible: "*Actio cuius homo est dominus.*"¹⁵ But I think that it is universally accepted that man is not only responsible for his internal thoughts, but, as a rule, for his external actions also, and surely no well-balanced man would pretend that scandal-mongers are not to be held responsible for the results of their calumnies: "*Quae autem procedunt de ore, de corde exeunt, et ea coinquant hominem.*"¹⁶ Consequently, if there is a distinction between Ethics and Right, Morality and Legality, there is no separation; Right is submitted to the higher principles of Morality.

Now, as has already been said, Kant seems not only to have made a distinction, but to have separated Legality from Morality, so that it is no longer a moral duty to keep a promise! What can Right divorced from morality be but a word without meaning? If our external actions need no longer of necessity be in compliance with the moral law, we should be reduced to automatons, and the man who injured his neighbour would be compared to a machine-gun which spits fire and sows death without knowing why it does it. Right without Morals is like a triangle without sides and angles; but a triangle without sides and angles is an expression which could be applied as well to a square or to a curve;

¹⁴ *The Science of Right*, p. 33.

¹⁵ *Sum. Theol.*, Ia 2ae, q. 1, a. 1.

¹⁶ *Matt.* xv, 18.

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Right stripped of all moral character can mean anything, precisely because it means nothing; it can at the same time be the right of the stronger, or the right of the thief or prostitute.

Who shall, therefore, determine this "universal law" with which individual wills should agree? Who shall, for instance, demonstrate (if we leave out every *moral* proof) to the cannibal devouring his fellow, that he is encroaching on the freedom of others? Does not experience prove that men rarely agree even on the most fundamental principles of life? Do they all agree, for instance, on the idea of happiness? "Unfortunately," says Kant himself, "the notion of happiness is so indefinite that although every man wishes to attain it, yet he never can say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes and wills."¹⁷

And let us not allow ourselves to be taken in by the pretence that the individual will would be bound by the effect of spontaneous limitation; for self-limitation is no limitation, and to accept such limitation only is to say that the power or right of the individual is boundless.

Actually, in a conflict of Rights or external laws, the strongest will prevail, and Kant seems obliged to accept the equation: *Right = Force*. He himself seems to consecrate this Right of the stronger when, in a passage quoted above, he writes that "it is not an ethical duty to keep one's promise, but a legal one that we can be *compelled* to perform."¹⁸ And in his *Introduction to the Science of Right*, he acknowledges once more the Right of Force to exercise compulsion on any one who may encroach upon his neighbour's freedom: "Consequently, if a certain exercise of freedom is itself a hindrance of the Freedom that is according to universal Laws, it is wrong; and the *compulsion* or *constraint* which is opposed to it is right, as being a hindering of a hindrance of Freedom."¹⁹

To sum up our criticism of Kant's legality, we may say

¹⁷ *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics*. Second Section, p. 42.

¹⁸ *Introduction to the Metaphysic of Morals*, iii, 20.

¹⁹ *Introduction to the Science of Right*. Tr. by W. Hastie. Sect. D.

that Right without moral value has no value at all, except that of Force. Such a doctrine, put into practice, leads to the fetichism of legality and ends in anarchy and war. We could never remind our Politicians too often of Christ Our Lord's advice that the internal is far more important than the external; and those who, like Kant, claim to cure the disease by applying poultices without eradicating the cause, and believe in a "legal" and external disarmament between nations, without establishing before all a moral and spiritual disarmament, are deluding themselves; in the words of Kant himself, "Perpetual Peace, which is the ultimate end of all the Right of Nations, becomes in fact an impracticable idea."²⁰

(2) *Notion of Morality.* In order to throw light on such a nebulous doctrine, it is necessary to distinguish between the *negative* character of Morality and the *positive*, namely between what, according to Kant, does not belong to Morality, and what does.

Kant, as it has been said, has established a gulf between legality and morality, between the external and internal world; it follows logically that Morality "is that which cannot be external"²¹; nay more: "every empirical element is not only quite incapable of being an aid to the principle of morality, but is even highly prejudicial to the purity of morals; for the proper and inestimable worth of an absolutely good will consists just in this, that the principle of action is free from all influence of contingent grounds, which alone experience furnish."²²

Such is the negative character of Kant's morality: freedom from any objective or empirical influences: interest, pleasure, happiness and so on. As morality is essentially a non-objective notion, it must consequently be an essentially subjective one, and Kant believed he had discovered it in the idea of duty: "When the idea of duty arising from the law is also the motive of the action, the agreement is called

²⁰ *The Science of Right*, p. 61.

²¹ *Introduction to the Metaphysic of Morals*, iii, 20.

²² *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics*. Second Section, p. 53.

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the morality of the action"²³; and elsewhere: "The moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it, nor in any principle of action which requires to borrow its motive from this expected effect. . . . The pre-eminent good which we call moral can therefore consist in nothing else than the conception of law itself."²⁴ Such is the positive character of Morality.

But if Morality is reduced to the absolute freedom of individual wills, and as "everyone of his own will naturally does what seems good and right in his own eyes, entirely independent of the opinion of others, would not egotism follow, and then the clash of individual interests engender anarchy and disorder?

Kant thinks not: "Although freedom is not a property of the will depending on physical laws, yet it is not for that reason lawless. . . . Physical necessity is a heteronomy of the efficient causes, for every effect is possible only according to this law, that something else determines the efficient cause to exert its causality. What else then can freedom of the will be but autonomy, that is, the property of the will to be a law to itself?"²⁵

Once again, if morality is essentially subjective, i.e., if each "subject" or individual creates his own law, what shall deliver us from the caprice of our fellows? In order to fill in this new crack in so crumbling a philosophy, Kant had to put a limit to this internal freedom, to find an *end* to the autonomy of the will.

An end demands a principle, and must be proportionate to it. God, Who is absolute, cannot create for any other end but Himself. If God were to create a human being, for instance, who was an end in himself, God would become, *ipso facto*, "tied up," subordinated to this external end; this would introduce the idea of limitation in the concept of

²³ *Introduction to the Metaphysic of Morals*, iii, 19.

²⁴ *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics*. First Section, p. 21.

²⁵ *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics*. Third Section, pp. 78-79.

God, consequently God would cease to be the Absolute, the Infinite—He would no longer be God.

Therefore, though it would have been easy and reasonable for Kant to find the end of moral law in God, it would mean an objective morality, heteronomy. In order to save his own principles, Kant was bound to find the end of morality in man himself, instead of in God. Consequently he proclaimed human will to be an end in itself. "Supposing," he writes, "that there were something whose existence has in itself an absolute worth; something which, being an end in itself, could be a source of definite laws, then in this and this alone would lie the source of a possible categorical imperative, i.e. a practical law."²⁶

Here is the crux of Kant's morality. What is this "something whose existence has in itself an *absolute* worth," which is "an end in itself," and where, above all, is the proof of it, for without proof his whole edifice would crumble to the ground?

In his own words: "Now I say man, and generally any rational being, exists as an end in himself."²⁷

And that is all. As for the proofs, there are none. His whole system of morality is based on a groundless affirmation: "Now I say." Here then, "we see philosophy brought to a critical position, since it has been firmly fixed notwithstanding it has nothing to support it in heaven or earth."²⁸

To sum up: legality which presides over the relations between individuals and nations is either moral or not. If it is not based on morals, it leads to the hegemony of force and ends in anarchy and disorder.

If it is so based, and if moral law depends on the absolute autonomy of human will, we shall fall into absolute subjectivism, into a state of Perpetual War, not of "Perpetual Peace."

How erroneous and groundless principles can produce

²⁶ *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics*. Second Section, p. 55.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

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Peace, "how pure reason," to cite Kant's own confession, "can be practical—to explain this is beyond the power of human reason, and all the labours and pains of seeking an explanation of it are lost."²⁹

At the end of the work just cited Kant warns us that "while we do not comprehend the practical unconditional necessity of the moral imperative, we yet comprehend its incomprehensibility, and this is all that can be fairly demanded of a philosophy which strives to carry its principles up to the very limit of human reason." God grant that so brilliant a prospect does not discourage our young generation, anxious to "comprehend the incomprehensibility" of Kant's Morality, Legality and Perpetual Peace!

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²⁹ *Ibid.*, Third Section, p. 98.