

KANT'S IDEA OF PERPETUAL PEACE: STILL RELEVANT TODAY?

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Abstract: This paper draws on Kant's idea of perpetual peace that is central to his cosmopolitan theory, which remains highly relevant in contemporary debates on global justice, social theory, and education. Kant's cosmopolitanism, while not systematically presented in his major works, is most clearly articulated in his later writings, where he explores the intrinsic value and dignity of human beings. This shift in focus enables a new reading of Kant that emphasizes universal human rights and the ethical obligations that transcend national boundaries. A central tension in Kant's cosmopolitanism is the paradox between state sovereignty and cosmopolitan principles. Kant is often viewed as an advocate for world citizenship, challenging nationalist ideals and promoting the idea that individuals are not only citizens of their states but also members of a global community. He argues that law alone cannot establish cosmopolitanism, but the role of moral formation (*Bildung*) is also essential for fostering the moral motivation necessary for peace and justice, and the paper focuses on the educational dimension which is especially important today. Kant's work *Perpetual Peace* outlines three definitive articles: the establishment of republican constitutions, a federation of free states, and universal hospitality. Republicanism, for Kant, is not a specific form of government but a mode of governance based on freedom, legal equality, and common legislation. The federation of states aims to secure peace without erasing individual state identities, while universal hospitality requires states to treat foreigners with respect, rooted in the shared possession of the Earth. The paper argues that Kant's cosmopolitanism is dynamic, stressing the importance of individual moral development as a prerequisite for global justice. Kant contends that perpetual peace is a regulative ideal – never fully attainable, but a goal toward which humanity must strive through gradual institutional reform and personal moral growth. Thus, Kant's vision of perpetual peace continues to offer a compelling framework for addressing ethical and political challenges.

Keywords: Kant, perpetual peace, cosmopolitanism, republicanism, education

I.

The idea of perpetual peace is the key theme of Kant's cosmopolitan theory, and cosmopolitanism remains one of the most intensively discussed topics in Kantian studies, with many contemporary theories of cosmopolitan-

ism still drawing on Kant's ideas. Although Kant did not work on his cosmopolitan theory in the form of a systematic work, traces of it can be seen in his *Critiques* and in his lecture notes. However, the theme becomes dominant in his short writings from the 1780s, during which time he devoted considerable attention to his fourth question: "What is man?" As there is no "fourth *Critique*", the answer must be found in these works. In connection with this question, Kant reflects on the intrinsic value of human beings, which stems from human dignity.¹ This represents an important shift in Kant's thinking, liberating him from the traditional history of philosophy and creating the conditions for a new reading of his work. Galston puts forward the interesting idea that fifty years ago, the influence of Kant's moral and political philosophy extended little further than a few German professors and their disciplines. Today, evidence of Kant-inspired practical philosophy is everywhere, and he suggests that Kant's surprising comeback is neither a coincidence nor a fad. According to him, it is rather rooted in the fundamental features of our contemporary experience.² The relevance of Kant's ideas to the concept of humanity has only been seriously considered since the mid-twentieth century.³ Today, many authors argue that there is a broad compatibility between Kant's approach and contemporary ideas. For example, González⁴ discusses Kant's contributions to social theory, while Garcia⁵ and Höffe⁶ examine his views on the history of civil society. Other authors, such as

¹ Sensen, O. 2009. "Kant's Conception of Human Dignity." *Kant-Studien* 100, no. 5: 309–331.

² Galston, W. A. 1993. "What Is Living and What is Dead in Kant's Practical Philosophy." *Kant and Political Philosophy: The Contemporary Legacy*, edited by R. Beiner and W. J. Booth. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 207.

³ Fackenheim, E. L. 1956/1957. "Kant's Concept of History." *Kant-Studien* 48: 381–398.

⁴ González, A. M. 2009. "Kant's Contributions to Social Theory." *Kant-Studien* 100, no. 1: 77–105.

⁵ Garcia, E. V. 2001. "Kant on Founding Civil Society." *Kant und Berliner Aufklärung: Akten des IX. Internationalen Kant-Kongress*, edited by Volker Gerhardt, vol. 4, Sektion XI–XIV, 116–125. Berlin and New York: de Gruyter.

⁶ Höffe, O. 2001. *Königlicher Völker: zu Kants Kosmopolitischer Rechts- und Friedenstheorie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp; Höffe, O. 2004. *Kant's Cosmopolitan Theory of Law and Peace*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kneller⁷ and Hill⁸, have also explored his social philosophy. There is also an emphasis on Kant's conception of humanity⁹ and social justice¹⁰.

One of the most frequently discussed issues in cosmopolitanism is the paradox, or even contradiction, between state sovereignty and cosmopolitan principles. From various discourses, Kant is often perceived as an anti-nationalist philosopher whose concept of world citizenship abolishes the aspirations of nationalism and specific nations. Another topic discussed is the pedagogical legacy of Kant in the context of cosmopolitanism¹¹, and showing pedagogy as one of the practical dimensions of Kant's ethical conception¹². Recent studies also respond to the educational nature of cosmopolitanism. Although law is considered a fundamental building block of cosmopolitanism, Kant emphasized that education must also be cosmopolitan. This idea is perhaps even more relevant today than in Kant's time, when the role of education in fostering cosmopolitan principles was first discussed.¹³

Environmental issues are also a theme reflected in contemporary cosmopolitanism, and the Kantian approach – from ethics to cosmopolitanism – seems useful in this context. As awareness of global warming has

spread over the last few decades, it has become clear that humanity faces an existential threat. Several Kantian social and political theorists, including David Held¹⁴, have attempted to address issues of climate justice.

II.

But what about the idea of perpetual peace? Since governments have not followed Kant's six preliminary articles from his work *Perpetual Peace*, we can conclude that the world is no more peaceful or secure than before. Political reality shows daily that the idea of perpetual peace is difficult (or rather impossible?) to achieve. It should be stated that Kant did not intend to provide instructions on how to immediately achieve perpetual peace. He suggested ways to gradually achieve peace in the future and acknowledged that perpetual peace could never be globally achieved, yet it is a worthwhile aspiration for humanity.

Kant writes that political history has been characterized by the frustration caused by incessantly diverting economic and human resources into wars and preparations for them. He knew this course of human history could not easily change, yet he hoped lasting peace could be guaranteed if states accepted the three definitive articles of peace.

The First Definitive Article states that “the civil constitution of every state shall be republican”^{15,16}. A republican constitution is founded on three principles: first, freedom for all members of society as individuals; second, dependence on a single common legislation as subjects; and third, legal equality for all as citizens.¹⁷

To Kant, “republican” does not refer to a specific form of government (e.g., democratic, aristocratic, or monar-

⁷ Kneller, J. and S. Axinn, eds. 1998. *Autonomy and Community: Readings in Contemporary Kantian Social Philosophy*. New York: State University of New York Press.

⁸ Hill, T. E., Jr. 2012. *Virtue, Rules and Justice. Kantian Aspirations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁹ Ruffing, M. 2012. “Moral Bildung and Cosmopolitanism According to Kant.” *Studia Philosophica Kantiana* 1, no. 1: 9–21.

¹⁰ Reitemeyer, U. 2012. “Kants bildungsgeschichtlicher Entwurf der Moderne in weltbürgerlicher Absicht.” *Studia Philosophica Kantiana* 1, no. 1: 22–42; Ripstein, A. 2009. “Kant on Law and Justice.” *The Blackwell Guide to Kant's Ethics*, edited by T. E. Hill Jr., 161–178. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell; Fleischacker, S. 2004. *A Short History of Distributive Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Seidler, J. V. 2010. *Kant, Respect and Injustice: The Limits of Liberal Moral Theory*. London: Routledge.

¹¹ Heitger, M. 2005. “Aufklärung als pädagogisches Programm.” *Kant – Pädagogik und Politik*, edited by L. Koch and Ch. Schönherr, 133–143. Würzburg: Ergon Verlag; Ruhloff, J. 2005. “Auch Moralisierung? Bemerkungen zur Aktualität von Kants Gliederung der Erziehungsaufgabe.” *Kant – Pädagogik und Politik*, edited by L. Koch and Ch. Schönherr, 23–31. Würzburg: Ergon Verlag.

¹² Johnston, J. S. 2006. “The Education of the Categorical Imperative.” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 25, no. 5: 385–402.

¹³ Pinheiro Walla, A. 2018. “Kant on Cosmopolitan Education for Peace.” *Con-Textos Kantianos – International Journal of Philosophy*, no. 7: 332–347.

¹⁴ Held, D. 2010. *Cosmopolitanism: Ideals and Realities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹⁵ Kant's works are cited in accordance with Akademie-Ausgabe (AA), Berlin 1900ff.

¹⁶ Kant, I. 1991. “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch.” *Political Writings*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, AA 8:349, p. 99.

¹⁷ Ibid.

chical), but rather to a mode of governance whose opposite is despotism. A lawful constitution that guarantees everyone's freedom through laws represents the public good, and this establishment should be institutionalized. Only in a republican system will states be able to exist within a system of law.

The Second Definitive Article of a Perpetual Peace states that the right of nations shall be based on a federation of free states because, just as individuals can group themselves into a nation, each nation can and should demand that the others enter into a constitution similar to a civil one, within which the rights of each nation would be secured.¹⁸ Based on a peace contract, Kant introduces the concept of states forming an international state (*civitas gentium*).

These states should form a federation of nations in which each state would have its own rights and there would be no danger of states merging into one. For Kant, the idea of a large state is out of the question because the basis of federal unification is the republic. The other states would join this union, thus securing the freedom of states on the basis of international law. States should unite in the same way individuals do. They surrender their freedom and submit to public laws, forming a commonwealth. States should do the same to create a *civitas gentium* that grows ever larger until it could encompass all the nations of the Earth. Therefore, according to Kant, there must be a peace union, which differs from a peace treaty because a treaty ends only one war, whereas a union ends all wars forever, as Kant argues. Federalism should gradually be introduced to a larger number of states that would be united in this union. This federation would represent a legal state based on commonly accepted international law, and it would guarantee perpetual peace. Therefore, the condition of the first article is necessary, and the states in this federal union must have a republican form of government.

¹⁸ Ibid., AA 8:354, p. 102.

The Third and final Definitive Article specifies the subject of universal hospitality. According to Kant, "cosmopolitan right shall be limited to conditions of universal hospitality"¹⁹. Here, hospitality is understood as the right of a foreigner to be treated in a friendly manner in the state in which he is, as long as he behaves friendly. Thus, a state of peace based on international law is not enough; a law that binds all people together is necessary. Kant writes that a violation of the law anywhere on Earth affects everywhere, so the idea of cosmopolitan law is not an exaggerated concept, but rather a necessary addition to national and international law. All acts are interrelated, and the threat of a rights violation cannot be limited geographically. A foreigner has a right of visitation in a country he enters, which guarantees that, as long as he behaves in a friendly manner, he will not be met with hostility.²⁰

The current challenge is to address the long-standing confusion over the meaning and justification of the right to hospitality. This can be done by showing that the right cannot function as a stand-alone, positive, quantitative claim that can be enforced by foreigners.²¹ Additionally, it cannot be used negatively to wage war against those who can be described as enemies under traditional state law. This right is valid only as a necessary condition for functional legal treaties and contracts and should not be used in isolation. This raises important questions for current theories of global justice. In arguing for property rights, Kant reminds us that the Earth's surface is finite and spherical. If the Earth's surface were infinite, people could scatter themselves so much that they would not come into contact with one another. Thus, community would not be a necessary consequence of human existence on Earth. Kant adds that the right of hospitality belongs to all people because they have a right to the

¹⁹ Ibid., AA 8:357, p. 105.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Meckstroth, Ch. 2018. "Hospitality, or Kant's Critique of Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights." *Political Theory* 46, no. 4: 537–559.

common possession of the Earth's surface but because the Earth's surface is spherical, people cannot scatter themselves indefinitely and the formation of a human community is inevitable.

The Earth's surface is a real space available to all of us to share within a certain period of time. Only when we have a living space at our disposal can we organize interpersonal relations within it. This includes ways of acquiring rights to external objects, which are only a small part of the many dimensions of interpersonal interactions that derive from the idea of original common ownership. Kant's emphasis on individuals as the true creators of the commonwealth is not an end in itself. Individuals unite into states through the expression of a common, general will. States function based on this general will. The expression of the general will ultimately creates a federation and states are higher structural units of human society. As long as states do not function as such, a world federation cannot be created by the will of states alone. It must also be created by the will of individuals, who are the basic structural units of a world federation. Only then can it realistically function according to Kantian principles.

According to Kant, this means that the role of the individual is crucial in the theory of perpetual peace. Margit Ruffing²² and others discuss *Bildung* (moral formation) in the context of cosmopolitanism. However, *Bildung* should not be understood as a form of indoctrination, but rather as the development of the individual personality that follows the motives given by reason (*Vernunftrecht*) toward realizing oneself as an autonomous, moral, and rational being. This *Bildung* is an unconditional prerequisite for achieving cosmopolitan consciousness. Similarly, Muthu²³ emphasizes that, for Kant, individuals have a moral obligation to develop their human capacities because only through individuals can communities achieve *Bildung* on a global scale.

²² Ruffing, M. 2012. "Moral Bildung and Cosmopolitanism According to Kant." *Studia Philosophica Kantiana* 1, no. 1: 9–21.

²³ Muthu, S. 2003. *Enlightenment Against Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 28.

According to Cavallar²⁴, Kant assumes that, despite differences in cultural development, skin color, religion, talents, and moral capacities, people are equal in terms of their humanity, dignity, and moral vocation (*Bestimmung*). He says that Kant's cosmopolitanism has three basic characteristics: it is embedded, dynamic, and pedagogical. Everyone belongs to a particular community, and Kant emphasizes shaping a synthesis of republican patriotism, republicanism, and moral cosmopolitanism. He also focuses on understanding the dynamic tension between entrenched local attachments and cosmopolitan commitments. This dynamic element is linked to the ultimate goal of the human species and serves as the basis for cosmopolitanism. Cavallar claims this dynamic element is present in Kant's understanding of *Bildung* as the key means by which individuals and the human species approach the ultimate end of their existence. Kant criticizes parents, teachers, and rulers who do not care about the moral formation of children²⁵ because this concept is essential to the educational process. According to Kant, moral formation can be achieved by helping young people understand themselves so they can participate in public affairs. This cannot be done through traditional teaching methods, in which students are expected to "learn"; rather, they should be taught to "learn to think" for themselves.

But if one cannot impose values from the outside, or obligate oneself to develop the capacities of others, how can one arrive at the idea of cosmopolitanism on a global scale? The answer lies in human reason and freedom. Both are inherent in every human being, forming the basis of every society. When Kant incorporates the concept

²⁴ Cavallar, G. 2015. *Kant's Embedded Cosmopolitanism: History, Philosophy and Education for World Citizens*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.

²⁵ "Parents usually care only that their children get on well in the world" and princes "regard their subjects merely as instruments for their own designs" (Kant, I. 2007. "Lectures on Pedagogy." *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, AA 9: 448, p. 442). "[M]oral formation [...] also demands the most insight from the side of the parents and the teachers" (Ibid., AA 9: 480, p. 468).

of cosmopolitan law into his legal system, he does so because he acknowledges the uniqueness of nations' and communities' ways of life as expressions of freedom and reason common to all human beings, regardless of their cultural affiliation. According to Kant, freedom, insofar as it can coexist with the freedom of all others in accordance with universal law, is the only original right that belongs to every human being by virtue of their humanity.

In its narrower sense, cosmopolitan law concerns the relations between states and individuals, regulating their cross-border interactions in trade and communication. However, its primary role is to institutionalize the political-legal order to ensure peaceful coexistence, which is required by the original human right: man's innate right to freedom. Cosmopolitan law's systematic task is not to establish a civil society (national law's task) nor to ensure world peace (international law's task). Cosmopolitan law transcends the state of nature in all its aspects and is therefore complementary, not substitutive, to national and international law.²⁶ Cosmopolitan law creates a global rule of law to promote justice as a universally valid ethical category, giving this law a moral dimension.

Although one might be tempted to excuse oneself from personal responsibility by appealing to circumstances beyond one's control, such an appeal is not justified within Kant's moral and political philosophy. Kant's conception of freedom is not that of isolated autonomy but rather the shared exercise of practical reason, which is fundamentally social in nature. According to his account of the social contract and the general will, the legitimacy of laws and institutions depends on their conceivability as products of a united rational will, as if all citizens had participated in their formation. This "original contract" is not a historical event, but rather an idea of reason – a regulative principle that guides both sovereigns and citizens to act as if their choices could be universally willed. Kant's

notion of co-responsibility is thus future-oriented rather than rooted in history. His philosophy of history and his system of public law are directed toward the gradual institutionalization of justice and peace – a process that unfolds through the contributions of individuals acting in concert across generations. In this Kantian sense, shared responsibility does not collapse into undifferentiated collective responsibility. Rather, it acknowledges that, although individuals may be limited in their immediate power to alter circumstances, their cooperative efforts, guided by reason and law, can shape the trajectory of humanity's moral progress. Kant's preference for reform over revolution further underscores his belief that historical progress is an ongoing, open-ended process realized through the cumulative effect of countless individual actions that set precedents for others to follow.

The question of cosmopolitanism is not merely theoretical, but also practical. It concerns how individuals understand themselves as agents within the broader project of humanity's moral development. Although the ultimate realization of cosmopolitan ideals, such as perpetual peace, may only be achieved at the level of the species, Kant insists that the participation of individuals is indispensable. By recognizing their own responsibility in this collective endeavor, each person becomes a bearer of the cosmopolitan idea and contributes to its gradual realization. Moreover, Kant's practical philosophy acknowledges degrees of responsibility, recognizing that obstacles can affect the extent of one's responsibility. Nevertheless, the fundamental stance remains that to be a moral agent is to take responsibility, which is not negated by external constraints but rather calls for a rational assessment of what can be achieved individually and collectively. Thus, Kant's framework precludes abdicating personal responsibility based on external circumstances. Instead, it situates moral agency within a dynamic interplay of individual initiative and shared rational purpose oriented toward realizing justice and cosmopolitan ideals.

²⁶ Cavallar, G. 2002. *The Rights of Strangers: Theories of International Hospitality, the Global Community, and Political Justice Since Vitoria*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, p. 363.

III.

Unlike many contemporary approaches, Kant does not assume that cosmopolitan values are automatically present. Instead, he emphasizes the role of *Bildung* as an end in itself. Perpetual peace is an idea that requires long-term work and concerns every person, who should understand its importance. Kant's practical philosophy proposes conditions for the possibility of cosmopolitanism as a regulative principle. In a political context, each individual is a citizen of a particular state; in a cultural context, however, the individual is a citizen of the world.²⁷ Thus, it is necessary to reflect on the need for education for cosmopolitanism, which contributes to the overall development of the individual personality – namely, a person who understands themselves as an autonomous, rational, moral, and responsible being. Each person plays an important role in the development of humanity. Through active involvement, individuals directly impact the progress of humanity.

For Kant, human beings are culturally formed and must create institutional government structures. These governments should then create an international federation based on international law, referring to the highest ideal of perpetual peace based on cosmopolitan law. The permanent existence of war indicates that perpetual peace is an unattainable ideal, yet people should still strive for it. In his work on perpetual peace, Kant formulates an optimistic idea that “perpetual peace is a task which, as solutions are gradually found, constantly draws nearer fulfilment, for we may hope that the periods within which equal amounts of progress are made will become progressively shorter”²⁸.

Similarly to the idea of perpetual peace, reforming our way of thinking is a long-term task. Therefore, each generation should focus on making further improvements. He adds that, in the moral formation of people,

states must also make an effort. Currently, states illogically use their power to expand themselves; however, they would be much more useful if they tried to educate their citizens. Without this effort, it will be impossible to take the final step toward cosmopolitanism, the ultimate form of culture.

Kant emphasizes the importance of individuals who “take an interest in the best of the world and are capable of conceiving the idea of a future improved condition” and who believe that “the gradual approach of human nature to its purpose is possible”²⁹. According to Kant's understanding of history, individuals can no longer escape their private morality or merely react to moral problems that arise in life. Instead, they must initiate global changes, such as world-ethical, political, and educational reforms, whose purpose is not only to make the world good, but also to make the world a good place overall.³⁰ Education plays a crucial role in this process. Kant writes, “[o]ne must stress to him (young man) philanthropy towards others and then also cosmopolitan dispositions. In our soul there is something that makes us take an interest 1) in our own self, 2) in others with whom we have grown up, and then also 3) an interest in the best for the world; must come to pass. One must make children familiar with this interest so that they may warm their souls with it. They must rejoice at the best for the world even if it is not to the advantage of their fatherland or to their own gain”³¹.

The goal of education is naturally linked to the idea of approaching the cosmopolitan state. It is a future-oriented project in which education can focus not only on strengthening knowledge but also on considering the individual as part of and representative of the whole.

²⁷ Castillo, M. 2008. “Kant's Cosmopolitanism Today.” *Človek – dejiny – kultúra II*, edited by Ľ. Belás and E. Andreanský. Prešov: Prešovská univerzita v Prešove, p. 129.

²⁸ Kant, I. 1991. “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch.” *Political Writings*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, AA 8:386, p. 130.

²⁹ Kant, I. 2007. “Lectures on Pedagogy.” *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, AA 9: 449, pp. 443–444.

³⁰ Yovel, Y. 1980. *Kant and the Philosophy of History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 269.

³¹ Kant, I. 2007. “Lectures on Pedagogy.” *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, AA 9:499, p. 485.

For Kant, the noblest idea that man can consider as his goal is the state of a person who realizes that he is at once a citizen of a nation and a member of the society of world citizens – cosmopolitan citizens. Anthropologically, it is a form of self-understanding that progress is conditioned by the individual. According to the cosmopolitan idea, humans are inhabitants of this planet who think and act freely. This means people participate in public affairs and understand themselves and others as citizens of the world and representatives of humanity. A key component of this is *Bildung*, which directly impacts the self-understanding of individuals who can think independently while making decisions that benefit the community.

Kant's vision of cosmopolitanism, developed through his concepts of perpetual peace, republican governance, and universal hospitality, is fundamentally forward-looking and grounded in the continuous moral and educational growth of individuals and societies. This vision is neither utopian nor static. Rather, it is a regulative ideal that guides humanity's gradual progress toward justice, peace, and a global community through the cumulative efforts of individuals acting together. Kant's emphasis on *Bildung* as the development of autonomous, rational, and moral individuals highlights the importance of education in the form of the cultivation of critical self-understanding and the capacity to act for the common good.

Pragmatist philosophers, especially John Dewey, complement this Kantian legacy by emphasizing the practical, experimental, and participatory dimensions of moral and political life. For Dewey, good political systems are ongoing processes requiring active engagement, public deliberation, and continual re-evaluation of values and institutions, not fixed achievements. Like Kant, Dewey sees education as central to social progress; however, he further stresses the importance of learning through experience, dialogue, and cooperation across diverse communities. Pragmatists also challenge the idea of absolute or final truths in ethics and politics, favoring a pluralistic and fallibilist approach instead. This aligns with the dy-

namic, open-ended nature of Kant's cosmopolitan ideal, which is perpetually coming nearer to its final realization yet never fully realized. Both the Kantian and pragmatist perspectives acknowledge that achieving cosmopolitan ideals depends on the ability of individuals and communities to adapt, learn, and respond to new political, social, and environmental challenges. These ideas open a promising field for further investigation of the practical dimensions of Kantian cosmopolitanism.

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