Symposium

Perpetually Toward?
Revisiting Kant on Global Peace

Johns Hopkins University
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Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace* is arguably his most topical text. Written under the immediate impact of the Peace of Basel concluded between Prussia and revolutionary France in 1795, the famous treatise took a public position on pressing geopolitical developments as they were unfolding. It continued to have real-world relevance long after its appearance, most famously through its impact on Wilson's project for the League of Nations and, less directly, on the formation of the United Nations. Many of the treatise's major themes—hospitality, human rights, the inherent value of cultural and religious difference, the critique of colonialism, the essential role of a global public sphere, international law and the rules of armed combat, cosmopolitanism—are no less germane today than they were when it was written. Its insistence on the imperative for global coordination and its detailed descriptions of geography and climate seem uncannily relevant to the current challenge of climate change. What does it say about this text that it can appear to be so immediately relevant across such a long span of time? This symposium will endeavor to shed new light on Kant's famous treatise by focusing on its curiously long-lived topicality, its perennial towardness or imminence. Combining highly abstract tenets with a concrete political applicability that leaves no doubt about the urgency of its demands, the treatise affords an opportunity to address fundamental questions about the ways in which a theoretical text can relate or refer to the mode, time, and timing of its realization. Some of the issues raised by this theme include:

- *Utopia and practicality.* With its adherence to seemingly impractical a priori principles and its uncompromising call for a global federation of free republics, a goal without example in human history, the treatise could scarcely seem to be at a greater remove from the constraint of political realities. But the history of its reception amply documents its practical effectiveness, and the concreteness and topicality of its program indicates

that it is anything but a utopian dream with no real-world importance. How does the treatise straddle the divide between ideals and realities, and how can we account for this double function?

- *The temporality of theory*. On the one hand, many of the treatise's categorical demands would appear to brook no delay. On the other hand, the text also takes account of the impossibility of achieving its ends immediately. A priori imperatives confront the empirical contingency of implementation. How does the text envision the temporality of the program it propagates? What is its time frame? One might think here of how the text relates to the eschatological tradition and of *Naherwartung* vs. the rhetoric of delay and withholding.

- *Teleology and the "guarantee" of peace.* The question of time also subtends Kant's challenging and much-discussed claim that "the great artist nature" issues us a guarantee of peace as our final immanent purpose. Does the guarantee of peace ever come due, and if so, when and in what kind of time? Can it be indefinitely postponed? How does the finality of the guarantee relate to the openness of human history and agency?

- *Publicity and secretiveness*. The test whether any given political measure accords with international law is its susceptibility to be made public, making publicity the functional equivalent in matters of global affairs of the categorical imperative in ethics. The theme of publicity and secretiveness runs through the treatise as a whole. What is the treatise's imaginary of the public sphere? Does it envision the act of *making* public as something that actually occurs? Or is it that the mere possibility of disclosure is always only meant as a deterrent, a kind of continuously operative force working, as it were, in secret? How does the "secret article" Kant added to the 1796 edition complicate, not least through its irony, the concepts of publicity and secretiveness?

- *Form, genre, and format.* The text's seemingly Prussian order of preliminary and definitive articles lends it the appearance of a legally binding contract or treaty. But its generic characteristics and layout, from the satirical opening paragraph to the extensive footnotes, supplements,

and appendices that take up the bulk of the text, are strikingly reminiscent of digressive literary works by such authors as Diderot, Sterne or Wieland. What is the relationship between the question of the text's applicability to its peculiar formal and material qualities? Did Kant, all too aware that his program stood no chance of being implemented any time soon, purposefully opt for fiction, irony or satire, as though to preempt accusations of fanciful thinking? Or does its form, on the contrary, sharpen its critique or emphasize the all-too-real urgency of its demands? Or both?

● *Faith and the philosophy of the as-if*. The role of the hypothetical at the basis of Kant's moral philosophy—acting on the assumption that free will is possible in the absence of any theoretical proof—is just as fundamental for Kant's treatise on peace, which prescribes that we must, in a kind of leap of rational faith, act *as if* eternal peace could really come about, even if we can never prove that it can. But while the issues raised by Kant's moral philosophy attain ultimate resolution only in the world to come, eternal peace would appear to be something that must occur in the realm of possible experience. What is the status of this hope or faith in a worldly outcome? Is this an empirically verifiable faith? Or is the hope for peace, like the faith in the Postulates of Reason, fundamentally insusceptible of theoretical verification—and if so, what does this say about the applicability of the treatise's principles?

In addition to new insights into a much-read text, the symposium promises to address broader questions concerning the status of political philosophy in its relation to political practice.

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