Emancipation and Kantian Critique ‘Towards Perpetual Peace’*

Mustafa A. Sezal
Yildirim Beyazit University
masezal@ybu.edu.tr

In 1784, Immanuel Kant wrote an essay response to the question “what is enlightenment?” that was posed previous year by Reverend Johann Friedrich Zellner in the monthly magazine Berlinische Monatsschrift. According to him, enlightenment was human being’s ‘emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity’. Kant’s description of enlightenment provides us a starting point for a deeper analysis of his other political writings, moral principles, and their relationship to Critical Theory. Therefore, this paper seeks to locate Kantian ‘good will’ in his political philosophy that would lead to ‘perpetual peace’. Then, building upon Andrew Linklater’s works on ‘cosmopolitan harm conventions’, ‘civilising processes’, and ‘emancipation’ will argue that emancipatory International Relations (IR) and Security Studies are essentially Kantian. Emancipatory project of Critical Security Studies (CSS) can thus be linked to Kant’s cosmopolitanism and articles of perpetual peace that, in a sense, depicts the elaborate intricacies of Kantian philosophy in IR that goes beyond the simplistic view of ‘democratic/liberal peace thesis/theory’.

Kant’s political philosophy is essentially a continuation or a macro-projection of his moral philosophy. In this vein, understanding political notions such as ‘perpetual peace’ need a brief introduction through his moral philosophy and particularly the ‘categorical imperative’. In the Groundwork for Metaphysics of Morals, Kant describes the ‘categorical imperative’ through a two-dimensional formulation: “Act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” and “[a]ct as though the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature”. This has certain implications for the practical world, but for the time-being it will be less distracting to continue in the theoretical realm. In order to understand this formulation one must go back to Kant’s understanding of ‘duty’ as well as ‘good will’. ‘Good will’ is essentially the only universal good because it is unconditional. It is unconditional, because, as Kant argues, everything else is a means. A brief example is in order here. Helping the poor may seem an act good in itself, however, helping the poor out of pity, or to feel good, or as a religious task makes it actually a means and these motivations do not

---

* This paper is part of a larger work in progress. Please do not cite without contacting the author.

5 ‘Categorical imperative’ is also dubbed as Kant’s formulation of universal law.
qualify for universality. Moral worth of an act has nothing to do with its objective or consequence, but its relation to duty as “good will is manifested when we act of duty rather than inclination”. This gives us the deontological nature of Kant’s moral philosophy meaning that the consequences of actions are more or less irrelevant whereas intent (or rather duty) is important.

The moral worth emanating from ‘good will’ thus ‘categorical imperative’ is actually the core of a Kantian commonwealth. The civil condition is grounded on freedom, equality, and independence as a citizen. The ideal form of government is a republic based on these principles. However, it is important to note that this a rather different formulation of republic. In mainstream contemporary political theory republic is merely defined as a “system of government that does not entail monarchy, nor (...) aristocratic or oligarchic rule”. For Kant, form of sovereignty and form of government are two distinct classifications. Form of sovereignty can be autocracy, aristocracy, or democracy based on the position of the highest authority, while form of government can be republican or despotic based on the manner the state is ruled. Kant believes that democracy is essentially a despotic form of government because it puts executive above all. Therefore it can be inferred that a representative republican system establishes a sort of separation of powers and Kant’s reservations concerning democracy resemble the notion of ‘tyranny of the majority’. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Kant’s argument for republicanism and against democracy is one of the least developed parts of his philosophy. That being said, we must go back to his moral philosophy to understand his position and propositions regarding condition of an endless international peace, namely ‘a perpetual peace’.

In Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch, the categorical imperative comes up in the discussion of ‘political moralist’ vs. ‘moral politician’ in a somewhat implicit manner. The former refers to a person who uses morality to fit to her/his political interests while the latter refers to a person who interprets politics to be in line with morality. Kant contrasts these two characters to show the morality that the practical political system should be based to achieve perpetual peace. Kant argues that perpetual peace may only be achieved as a result of rational moral behaviour, which in essence is behaviour that comes out of duty and therefore good will. In other words, through a universal morality manifesting itself in categorical imperative, moral politician seeks perpetual peace through reason and out of duty.

Now let us get deeper into the premises of perpetual peace by scrutinising the three levels of rights. People are required to enter a civil condition to escape from the state of nature (war). This may take forms on different levels: right of citizens of a state, international right, and cosmopolitan right. It can be read in a way that actions with moral worth that come out of duty in each of these levels would eventually lead to a perpetual peace. One must, however, always keep in mind that Kant does not give a deterministic prediction, but instead

---

Ibid., 199-203.


11 Kant, "Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," 76.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 96.


15 Ibid., 93.

16 Kant, "Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," 73.
purports a foundation for politics which would achieve peace in some unknown future. A never-ending peace should be our ultimate objective, because it is a rational moral objective out of duty. Whether this peace will be in a form of world government or a federation of world states is not clear and can be interpreted differently, nevertheless it actually does not really matter if a perpetual peace is achieved. In regard with the whole Kantian philosophy it would not be absurd to argue that perpetual peace is, essentially Enlightenment, the ultimate purpose for human being to become emancipated“from its self-incurred immaturity” 17.

Kant’s short essay Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective is also very significant when his political philosophy is being re-read. Kant attempts at describing history philosophically where there is a progressive movement towards realisation of humanity’s capabilities. This manner of describing history also gives agency to the process itself. In other words, humanity’s self-realisation moves towards a cosmopolitan existence domestically and internationally. Philosophical history, as such, promotes this progress towards nature’s “highest aim, a universal cosmopolitan condition” 18.

In the IR discipline, manifestation of Kantian philosophy had been somewhat superficial. Mainstream textbooks start their ‘liberalism’ chapters with reference to Kant while deeper and more thorough works also refer to him with regard to ‘democratic/liberal peace theory/thesis’ and the ‘English School’ 19. Nevertheless, the literature on Kant and reflections of his philosophy in IR has been increasing. This interest has two theoretical sides and another conceptual one: On one hand, ‘democratic/liberal peace theory/thesis’ still attract attention particularly from proponents of quantitative methods, and on the other hand increasing relevance of Critical Theory makes it almost imperative to re-read Kant; and conceptually, ‘perpetual peace’ is still interesting for both perspectives. Let us briefly explain these Kantian connections in IR.

Michael Doyle, in his seminal two-article paper, adapted Kant’s argument that the republican constitutions would be one of the three bases for a perpetual peace and came up with a thesis that liberal states would not go to war with other liberal states 20. Following Doyle’s footsteps numerous positivist and post-positivist scholars discussed and tested this theory/thesis 21. Based on David Singer’s Correlates of War (CoW)

Project at Michigan University, Doyle argued that almost no liberal state waged war against other liberal states and when they did liberalism of these states were somewhat arguable. The usual dyadic and monadic explanations depend on limited data or unsubstantiated claims. Even though neighbourhoods in which democratic regimes are predominant are generally peaceful, dyadic relations are never only between two established liberal democracies. Another explicit reference to Kant can be found in the English School. Kant is presented as a leading figure in ‘revolutionism’ which is one of the three traditions in IR, the others being ‘realism’ and ‘rationalism’. This is unfortunately a reductionist and a very superficial evaluation for Kant’s philosophy regarding international relations. A more contemporary approach, however, regards Kant as a ‘radical rationalist’ rather than ‘revolutionist’.

Contemporary debates in critical theory, it has been argued, have been inspired by the Kant’s understanding of the relationship between morality and politics as well as potential of political progress. This can be considered as the starting point for Linklaterian interpretation of Kant’s philosophy and critical theory. In the rest of the paper Linklater’s understanding of cosmopolitanism, harm, and emancipation will be at the core of discussion that will be locating Kantian morality in emancipatory IR.

One of Linklater’s initial points is the importance of human agency vis-à-vis history. He understands that the sentiment behind the Kantian philosophy of history is cooperation of human beings in a world-wide (possibly cosmopolitan) association to take control of their history and eliminate constraints. So he argues that “for Kant, expanding moral horizons was not just about being ethically correct” but was also about controlling history and becoming enlightened.

As explained in the previous paragraphs, in Kant’s vision an ideal domestic constitution needs to be based on freedom, equality and independence. These three core a priori principles enable the establishment of a state that is in accordance with universal human right. In such a condition, then, society accepts that all of its members have “equal entitlements to moral consideration” and as a result challenging this equality would cause moral resistance. This is because the domestic civil condition is, in essence, grew out of the ‘categorical imperative’. The implications of such a domestic constitution for international arena seems self-explanatory, however, there are certain problems. Principles of freedom, equality, and independence need to have corresponding conceptions in the global politics. Kant deals with this issue through the “articles of perpetual peace” where he puts forward “federalism of free states” as the basis international right; and “cosmopolitan right” as limited to

---

22 Navari, "Liberalism," 36.
27 Ibid.
28 Here a caveat is in order. Kant’s understanding of equality is different from the contemporary conception. For example, he describes in length the reasons only (probably white) males with property should vote. In postcolonial IR, Kant’s neglect of slavery in his moral philosophy has been seen as immensely problematic (i.e. Siba N. Grovogui, "Postcolonialism," in International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 242-44.).
29 Kant, "On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory, but It Does Not Hold in Practice, Parts 2 and 3," 45.
30 "Citizenship, Community and Harm in World Politics: An Interview with Andrew Linklater," 40.
“universal hospitality”\textsuperscript{31}. As mentioned earlier there are ambiguities in Kant’s formulations and scholars have long been debating whether he meant a “world state/federation” or an organisation similar to the United Nations. The distinction may not be very significant for contemporary IR. While trying to avoid pitfalls of anachronism we ought not overemphasise different connotations of these notions which have changed in time.

Transition from the domestic civil condition to perpetual peace entails a cosmopolitanism broader than just hospitality. Linklater brings cosmopolitan citizenship idea as a tool for engendering a universal understanding of harm prevention. This is, in essence, an extension of the initial civil condition where duty (or categorical imperative) dictates entry into “a civil constitution with those they are in a position to injure (…)”\textsuperscript{32}. Therefore prevention of harm can also be a central tenet in establishing a cosmopolitan civil constitution, which one may also name as “perpetual peace”.

Linklater looks at contemporary international society to find evidences of a move towards this cosmopolitan ideal. Combining Kant’s cosmopolitanism with Norbert Elias’s sociology of ‘civilising processes’, he depicts increasing visibility of cosmopolitan standards of self-restraint and sensibility towards vulnerable peoples in the international society\textsuperscript{33}. ‘Civilising processes’, as Linklater interprets, are the practices which societies develop in order to coexist without injuring or harming each other and he puts this at the core of his theoretical investigations\textsuperscript{34}. Accordingly, through Eliasian process sociology, Linklater finds the missing link between the nascent international society and the building blocks of an ultimate peace. It should be kept in mind that Elias’ inquiry and findings are very complex, yet for our purposes (as well as Linklater’s) a very short insight is sufficient here. Eliasian ‘civilised’ human constantly and stably behaves in self-constraint whereby mutual harm (i.e. physical violence) is prevented\textsuperscript{35}. It is argued that as the interconnectedness increase the degree of coexistence among peoples tend to increase as well. However, humanity is still at the early stages of this ‘global civilising process’\textsuperscript{36}. This process, then, continues and perhaps intensifies through the mutual understandings of societies not to harm each other in an anarchical environment similar to the development of self-restraint among individuals. This basic communicative action, in a sense, could be the very source and basis of a peaceful coexistence condition on a global scale.

Agreeing not to harm each other may seem commonsensical and the concept of ‘harm’ may sound as a self-evident term but it should be kept in mind that harm can be violent as well as non-violent. Violent (concrete) harm has not been eradicated from the world as can be seen in various conflicts throughout the world even though there are certain agreements, conventions if you will, against violent harm. Non-violent (abstract) harm such as economic exploitation, global forces, and environmental harm, however, may be at the core of the most of grievances around the globe in the contemporary (post-)industrial age\textsuperscript{37}. Put differently, humanity’s progress also brings new forms of harm which need to be overcome. NGOs lobby for new conventions while agreements within the framework of the UN or other international organisation enable spread of certain

\textsuperscript{31} Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” 78-85. (emphases in original)
\textsuperscript{32} Linklater, The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations, 16.
\textsuperscript{33} Social Standards of Self-Restraint in World Politics,” 9.
\textsuperscript{34} “Global Civilizing Processes and the Ambiguities of Human Interconnectedness,” 3; The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations.
\textsuperscript{36} Linklater, “Global Civilizing Processes and the Ambiguities of Human Interconnectedness,” 6.
cosmopolitan harm conventions (CHCs). There are, without doubt, many obstacles emanating from self-interestedness and/or nationalistic sentiments and even sometimes from unpredicted consequences of actions (as in the case of environmental harm).

In a broad understanding, CHCs are the bases of diplomacy and international law in the sense that they regulate the relations between societies that come into contact but cannot predict whether their actions would cause harm. It is ideal and perhaps imperative that the CHCs maintain “the equal right of every person to be free from cruelty, unnecessary violence, and degrading and humiliating treatment irrespective of citizenship, nationality or ethnicity, or race and gender” to reflect a universal global morality based on equality. This definition of CHCs resembles description of emancipation and security in Critical Security Studies (CSS, or the Aberystwyth School of critical security studies): “Emancipation is the freeing of people (as individuals and groups) from those physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do.” These constraints include but not limited to cruelty, unnecessary violence, poverty, political oppression and so forth. When taken as a positive state with the negative definition of “absence of threats” (as the CSS/Aberystwyth School does), ‘security’ is produced by ‘emancipation’. If ‘security’ is the product of ‘emancipation’, and based on the definitions provided above CHCs are emancipatory moral conventions, it would not be nonsensical to claim that ‘global civilising processes’ are pathways for security. Furthermore, as an extension, global condition of security based on emancipatory CHCs is nothing other than ‘perpetual peace’ itself.

This ‘perpetual peace’ as a result of global consolidation of emancipatory CHCs has certain differences from Kant’s articulation. Perhaps most importantly, it incorporates the Frankfurt School’s critique of Kant. There seems to be a sensitive balance between Kant’s unemotional rationalism of duty and Frankfurt School’s focus on sympathy and compassion. Frankfurt Schools ‘new categorical imperative’ of absolute prohibitions based on the shared experience of suffering needs to be strengthened by a common identification with cosmopolitan values through the ever-increasing interconnectedness (and communicative opportunities) of the contemporary world.

If we go back to Kant’s answer to the question “what is enlightenment?” and evaluate it in the light of the discussions above it might appear more meaningful than it was in the beginning. Enlightenment is actually the process in which humanity progresses, civilises itself and gets rid of the immaturity of kneeling for something/

---

40 For the comprehensive treatise of CSS please see: Ken Booth, Theory of World Security (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
44 Linklater, "Towards a Sociology of Global Morals with an 'Emancipatory Intent'," 143.
someone. It is the emancipation of human mind as well as body from all constraints. In CSS terms, Enlightenment is security and security is the Kantian ideal of a universal cosmopolitan condition whereby everybody has a sense of “belonging to a universal community of humankind”45: Perpetual Peace

Theoretically all of these may make sense. It might even stir optimistic feelings, however, in practice we are reminded that we may actually be at the very early stages of ‘civilising process’46. Violent conflicts in various regions (particularly Middle East) continue, the refugee crisis that the EU is somehow devising an action antithetical to CHCs intensify47, poverty and human rights violations still remain as priority issues in the global agenda. If there is a progress it seems to be very slow. It should be remembered, though, ‘perpetual peace’ and/or ‘emancipation’ are actually ultimate targets. The “universal cosmopolitan existence” and “the universal kingdom of ends” can only come into being when states, individuals, and any other actors understand the necessity to overcome their “ethical particularity”48. Practical implications and aspects need to be studied more deeply so that ‘civilising processes’ can continue. As always, speaking truth to power remains a central responsibility for intellectuals. In addition, we as scholars, teachers, and students need to follow a normative philosophy with this cosmopolitan/emancipatory intent and embrace our agency. It is only by becoming agents for process the challenge of practice can be overcome. We all have a role to play for achieving ‘perpetual peace’, be it small or large, and one of these roles is continuing our research even more passionately.

45 Critical Theory and World Politics: Citizenship, Sovereignty and Humanity, 114.
46 The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations, 16; Devetak, Kaempf, and Weber, "Conversations in International Relations: Interview with Andrew Linklater."
47 For details of EU-Turkey deal regarding the refugee crisis, which is argued to be against European values: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/08/eu-turkey-refugee-deal-qa
Bibliography


