

Summer 1989

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Recommended Citation

Kain, P. J. "Kant's Political Theory and Philosophy of History," *Clio*, 18 (1989): 325-45.

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HISTORY IN PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

PHILIP J. KAIN

Kant's Political Theory and Philosophy of History¹

The uniqueness, the real achievement, and the importance of Kant's political thought, which has not always been taken as seriously as it deserves, can best be understood if we do two things: compare it to political theory as it existed before Kant, and see how it includes and fundamentally depends upon his philosophy of history. It is Kant's philosophy of history that allows him, in his political thought, to take a major step beyond previous political thinkers.

Traditional political theory (before Kant) almost always did one or the other of two things—never both. One sort of theorist speculated about the ideal state in utopian fashion, that is, without really attempting to explain how such a state might be brought about in the real world. Plato and Thomas More would be good examples of this approach. For Plato it was simply a legitimate and worthwhile philosophical endeavor to try to understand the nature of justice even if it could not be realized in the actual world. For Thomas More, as well as for Plato, such an ideal at least provided a standard to use in criticizing existing society.

The other traditional approach was the opposite. It was relatively unconcerned with ideals and simply sought to examine the actual, empirical dynamics of real world power struggles. It studied human self-interest and aggression in order to understand political reality adequately enough to be able to act in it with some chance of success.

1. I would like to thank Michael Brint, Michael Meyer, William Parent, and James Felt, S.J., for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

Thrasymachus in Book I of Plato's *Republic*, to some extent Thucydides, and in large part Machiavelli did this.

Until Kant, political theorists tended, for the most part, in one or the other of these opposed directions. From the perspective of power dynamics, the concern with justice and morality often appeared naive, utopian, or at best hopeless. As Machiavelli says, "How we live is so different from how we ought to live that he who studies what *ought* to be done rather than what *is* done will learn the way to his downfall."² After all, what can moral investigations tell us about the actual workings, let alone the stable consolidation, of political structures? What can the moralist hope to do: merely argue that we should get everyone to behave morally, that we educate people, or that we should turn the administration of the state over to a wise and just philosopher? If that is all you have to say, why bother doing political theory? You are hopelessly naive.

But, on the other hand, from the perspective of the moralist, to simply analyze power dynamics is totally to abandon the most important considerations of political theory, namely, the development of human virtue, justice, and the good life. The ability to manipulate power may gain you your self-interest, may even produce order, but never virtue, dignity, or justice.

Kant, for the first time—and this is what makes him, perhaps, the first truly great political theorist of the modern period—seriously attempts to take both of these approaches. Political theory, for Kant and for many after him, must not only discuss the *ideal* state but must also have a theory of how to actually *realize* the ideal. It must analyze actual power struggles, self-interest, and conflict, but do so in order to show how this empirical dynamic, if properly understood, can be morally guided toward the realization of the ideal society.³

2. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince (P)*, trans. Thomas G. Bergin (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947), 44 (my emphasis).

3. It might be argued that Aristotle and Locke adopted both of these approaches to political theory before Kant did. But I would hold that this is not so. Aristotle and Locke do empirically consider what goes on in actual societies (Aristotle, for example, collects the constitutions of all the Greek city states) and they also talk a bit about the best state. But neither has a real theory for how an empirical dynamic will actually realize the ideal state—and certainly no philosophy of history. On the other hand, I have argued elsewhere that in Hobbes's writings one can sense the beginnings of an attempt to take both of these approaches, but Hobbes's attempt was far less successful than Kant's; see my "Hobbes, Revolution, and the Philosophy of History," in *Hobbes's 'Science of Natural Justice'*, ed. C. Walton and P. J. Johnson (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 203-18.

In other words, it is Kant's philosophy of history that makes for the greatness of his political theory.

For Kant, there are two forces at work in history. One is the empirical dynamic of conflicting self-interests. The other is morality. And both, if understood properly, will lead us toward the very same goal: peace, a league of nations, international law, and just societies. Let us first examine the conflict of particular interests.

Kant begins his essay, the "Idea for a Universal History," by noticing a paradox, namely, that rates of birth, marriage, and death in any given population are stable. This is a paradox because marriages, and at least to some extent births and deaths, depend upon or are influenced by individual choices which involve free will, but nevertheless, we can accurately predict rates of birth, marriage, and death in the population as if they were causally determined in the strictest possible way.⁴ How are we to make sense of this?

One explanation, Kant suggests, is that individuals (motivated by their own inclinations, decisions, or choices) seek only their own particular purposes, but in some way (which will have to be explained) each individual furthers, without realizing it, some common but unknown purpose or end (*UH*, 12; *Ak* 8:17). In other words, there is some sort of directedness, some sort of purposiveness, operating here behind the scenes—a purpose which individuals are completely unconscious of, a purpose which is not the purpose of any individual. They seek only their own personal, particular ends, but some larger, common purpose is realized without their intending it.

If we were able to understand this purposiveness, then perhaps we could direct it. Perhaps we could even direct it so that history progresses toward a state in which human beings are both moral and happy (*UH*, 13-14; *Ak* 8:19-20). If we could understand this directedness in history, humans perhaps could control their own destiny.

Kant thinks that human *selfishness* is the key here. More specifically, he thinks that we find two different propensities within human beings. He sums these up as "*unsocial sociability*." Human beings have an unsocial propensity—a propensity to isolation, self-

4. "Idea for a Universal History" (*UH*), in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 11; for the German see *Kant's gesammelte Schriften* (*Ak*), ed. Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1910-), 8:17.

ishness, and lack of concern with the interests of others. But they also have a social propensity—a propensity to associate with others in society. They need others just to stay alive. They must cooperate with others to be able to produce enough to satisfy their basic needs. And after all, even aggression would not get very far without someone nearby to attack. As Rousseau pointed out in his *Discourse on Inequality*, selfishness is only possible in a situation where you can compare yourself to others and prefer yourself. In other words, selfishness is only possible in a social setting.⁵

These two factors then—being close enough to others, associating with them, plus our selfishness—produce conflict, competition, and even war. While there is an obvious negative side to this conflict, we must also attend to the positive side, which perhaps is even more important. Conflict and selfishness, even avarice and lust for power, do, after all, awaken our human powers and stir us out of complacency. Selfishness drives us to accomplish things; competition sharpens our abilities. We develop our human potentialities. We are driven toward the fullest development of our powers and capacities (*UH*, 13, 15; *Ak* 8:18-19, 21).

So we are driven to society by sociability and the need for others. Once in society, antagonism, competition, and selfishness set in and our powers and capacities develop. In fact, for Kant, this development will eventually lead toward the society of morality, justice, and peace that he is after.⁶ *Selfishness and aggression will lead toward morality*—that is Kant's argument. We must try to understand how this will occur.

Kant is following Hobbes here. But also in Book II of Plato's *Republic*, Glaucon set out a social contract theory of society which, though much simpler, is very much like Hobbes's theory and will make it easier for us to understand an important point involved here. Let us look at Glaucon first.

5. *UH*, 15; *Ak* 8:20-21. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, in *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. Roger D. Masters and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's, 1964), 222; for the French, see *Oeuvres complètes (OC)*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 3:219.

6. *UH*, 15; *Ak* 8:21. *Perpetual Peace (PP)*, in *On History*, 106, 111; *Ak* 8:360-61, 365. Also *On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice,'* in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971), 90; *Ak* 8:310-11.

Glaucon assumes that before individuals established society they existed alone in relative isolation. Moreover, individuals are selfish and aggressive—they really prefer doing injustice to others and benefiting themselves. And if they were powerful enough, or if, as Glaucon puts it, they had magic rings like Gyges, they would do exactly what Gyges did—seek their own self-interest and injure others. But alas, for Glaucon, such rings exist only in stories, which is to say that Glaucon, at least in part, disagrees with Thrasymachus, whose argument we heard in Book I of Plato's *Republic*. Glaucon and Thrasymachus agree that individuals are selfish and aggressive. But Glaucon does not agree with Thrasymachus that some people are superior. If some people *were* superior or more powerful, they would rise to the top of the struggle and establish order in this way. For Thrasymachus, if all are selfish and aggressive, but some are superior, the superior will gain control and establish justice *in their own interest*. For Glaucon, this is illusion. Much as he might wish for it, it only happens in mythology. All *are* selfish and aggressive, but at the same time, alas, all are *equal*. Therefore, the only way out of this chaos of conflict between bumbling equals is to make a contract which establishes society, order, and justice *in the interest of all*. Nevertheless, for Glaucon, justice is second best. People really prefer doing injustice and pursuing their self-interest, but lacking magic rings, they realize that this is impossible; that they will fail and be hurt; and that others will do them injustice. So they settle for justice, order, and security in the interest of all (*Republic*, 358b-361e).

Hobbes's views are similar. He begins with the hypothetical notion of a state of nature, which is to say, a condition of human beings where no political institutions, laws, or morals have been established or are in effect. In this state of nature, for Hobbes, human beings are selfish and aggressive. They also are equal, motivated by a concern for self-preservation, and rational.

Given their natural selfishness and aggression, they will fight. There will be, as Hobbes puts it, a war of all against all. But since all are equal, no one will be able to impose order by establishing power over the others. All will simply be threatened by this very dangerous state of conflict. Given their concern for self-preservation, they will fear for their lives and begin to seek a way out of this chaos. Given that they are rational, they will eventually discover that, since all are equal and thus that none will successfully rise to the top of the struggle, the *only* way out is to come to an agreement and establish a social contract. If we grant Hobbes's assumptions

concerning the nature of human beings, we will have to admit that individuals will inevitably be driven to this social contract. They will have to relinquish their power to a sovereign who establishes order, security, and justice.⁷

Kant takes up the Hobbes-Glaucon model but extends it to the relationship between nations. For Kant, the same conflict that drives individuals from a state of nature to society, drives societies toward law and morality. Once political societies exist, conflict and war between individuals ceases—law and authority puts an end to it. Instead, conflict and war take place at a more general (and more destructive) level; it occurs between nations. Conflict and war, just as it forced individuals to society, law, and authority, will force nations toward a league of nations, lawful regulations, and a common authority. Wars, revolutions, and conflicts will continue remaking the international political map until we get a league of nations and international peace (*UH*, 18-20; *Ak* 8:24-26. *PP*, 106-8; *Ak* 8:361-63).

Just as at the level of individuals, so at the international level, there are two important propensities in operation. There is an "un-social sociability" between nations. On the one hand, we find the assertion of national self-interest which drives nations toward aggression and war. But there is also an important form of sociability between nations, namely, their interest in commerce, trade, and economic interaction. It is the dynamic interplay between these two factors, this international unsocial sociability, that will lead toward a league of nations, peace, and international law. *War, for Kant, will lead toward the end of war.*

As wars become more serious, destructive, and expensive, they become more uncertain. They come into conflict with ever-increasing economic interests. Wars, as they become more disruptive, interfere with trade. As world trade grows, as nations become more interdependent, as they rely more and more on each other commercially, war poses an ever greater threat to the smooth functioning of the international market. At the first sign of war, other nations will intervene to arbitrate, to quash the war, in order to secure their own national commercial interests. This is the first step toward a league of nations.⁸

7. For a fuller discussion of Hobbes's views, see my "Hobbes, Revolution, and the Philosophy of History." (See note 3).

8. *UH*, 23; *Ak* 8:28. *PP*, 114; *Ak* 8:368. *Theory and Practice (TP)*, 90; *Ak* 8:310-11.

As commerce continues to increase and as wars become even more expensive and destructive, we move further toward a league of nations. With the establishment of this league, pressure will be put on each nation to establish civil freedom and just internal constitutions because any domestic threat to peace within a specific nation will be of concern at the international level, since it could eventually affect other nations.

Kant's philosophy of history exhibits a mixture of real insight and real error. In modern times the relations between major powers in many ways have borne out Kant's prophecies. The threat of serious conflict between major powers often drives them to back off, negotiate, and compromise. Kant's model seems to work between major powers that are relatively *equal* in strength. It will not work between powers that are very *unequal* in strength. Commercial self-interest, rather than hinder the outbreak of war, may very well drive a powerful nation to invade a smaller and weaker one, especially if the war can be handled so as not to draw other powerful nations into direct conflict and if the powerful nation thinks it can clean things up quickly and get its way economically. From the other side, a weak and poor nation may well find itself driven to almost suicidal revolt in order to attempt to throw out a powerful nation if they think circumstances will allow for even a hope of success. And, indeed, we have seen many wars of this sort in recent times. Moreover, the interests of powerful nations may lead them to side with different factions in a weaker nation if the powerful nations think they can avoid direct conflict with each other and if they think the general conflict can be contained.

So Kant's model does not work in all areas. Nevertheless, what is really interesting about it is the notion that selfishness and aggression lead toward peace, law, and morality. This is a secular version of the traditional theological view that God's providence brings good out of evil. Human evil or self-seeking is used by God, or by history, to bring about a good result which humans neither intended nor foresaw. However, this makes for a radically different picture of the proper relation of morality to self-interest. Traditionally, it was morality's task to suppress self-interest, even annihilate it if possible. Think of Plato or Thomas More. For Kant, morality's task is not to suppress self-interest or conflict. Kant argues that self-interest, conflict, and war are leading toward the very same end that moral reflection would have dictated from the start (*UH*, 18-9; *Ak* 8:24-25. *PP*, 112-13; *Ak* 8:366-67). The task of morality is to use this conflict, guide it, not suppress it, at least not immediately.

Let us move on to the second force at work in history, namely, morality. For Kant, the categorical imperative is the general form of the moral law. It is not a specific law with a specific content. It is a general form which allows us to discover or test the morality of any specific maxim. What we need, to perform this test, is to know the general form of law—the general form which any law must have if it is to be a moral law. All laws, in the first place, are commands or imperatives. They command us to do something or command us not to do it. It is *necessary* that we do it or not do it. Secondly, they tell us to do it or not to do it in all cases without exception. They tell us to do it or not to do it *universally*.⁹ The general form of law, then, is the categorical imperative—a universal and necessary command.

We examine any situation, ask how we want to act, and formulate that action as a maxim—for example, we say, “We will steal whenever we want to.” We then ask whether, if this maxim were formulated in a universal and necessary fashion, we could will to carry it out. We must act only on that maxim which we could will to be a universal law of nature (*F*, 18-19, 39 ff.; *Ak* 4:402-3, 421 ff.)

To make this maxim universal and necessary we would say: “Everyone should steal always and under all conditions.” We immediately see that this would be impossible—a contradiction. We might decide to steal in a specific situation where it served our particular interest, but we would reject stealing when it is universalized. Universalizing the maxim allows us to see what can be a moral law and what cannot. For Kant, morality must be determined by reason, not interest. We might feel that it is in our interest to steal in a particular situation, but our reason tells us plainly that stealing in general—universalized stealing—must be rejected. For Kant, we engage in this rational analysis of a maxim in order to separate our interests, feelings, or inclinations about a particular act from our rational, abstract assessment of what is moral in general.

For Kant, to be moral *is* to act rationally. It is not moral to be determined by interest or inclination. Only if we are determined by reason are we free, self-determined, and moral. If we are determined by our interests, inclinations, or feelings, for Kant, we are not free. We would be determined by natural forces (or by motives

9. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals (F)*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 18-19; *Ak* 4:402-3.

determined by natural forces) and thus we would be causally determined heteronomously. We are only self-determined if we are determined by our reason,¹⁰

To put this another way, it is not enough to act simply in accordance with reason or in accordance with the categorical imperative, we must do the act *for the sake of* the categorical imperative or, the same thing, because it is rational and for this reason alone. The only thing that can determine the action, if we are to be free and moral, is our own reason—this rational analysis—and nothing else (*F*, 6, 14-15; *Ak* 4:390, 397-99).

If we simply refrain from stealing, we do act in accordance with the categorical imperative—in external agreement with it. But if our actual motive is simply to have a good reputation, or to be liked, or because we like the other person, we are being determined by inclination or feeling, and then we are not free or moral. We are not acting for the sake of the moral law. We must refrain from stealing because it is rational, or, the same thing, because it is the moral law, the categorical imperative—because it can be universalized. Only in this way are we free. Only in this way are we determined by reason, not inclination. Moreover, if we are to be moral, for Kant, we must not even be determined by our long-term interests, even the long-term interests of others or of society. If we are, we will be determined by inclination, not reason. Nor can we be motivated by a concern for results, consequences, or outcomes of the act. Utility, benefit, good to ourselves or to others must not determine us. Or again, we would be determined by inclination, not reason (*F*, 10, 14-17; *Ak* 4:394, 397-401. *CPrR*, 122; *Ak* 5:117-18).

We must simply analyze: ask if the maxim can be universalized. We must be determined only by this rational analysis if we are to be free and moral. It is only the intention, the volition, the rationality of the act, which makes it moral.

We might take a moment here to compare Kant's ethics to Rousseau's concept of the general will—certainly the most central and also the most obscure notion to be found in the *Social Contract*. Kant's ethics can help us understand the concept of the general will, and the concept of the general will (which comes very close to being a categorical imperative) can help us understand Kant's categorical imperative and eventually Kant's place in the history of political theory.

10. *F*, 62-63; *Ak* 4:444. *Critique of Practical Reason (CPrR)*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), 66; *Ak* 5:64.

Rousseau makes claims about the general will that, at first sight, seem quite extravagant. He claims, for example, that the general will never errs about what is right, that it always seeks the common good, and that it naturally tends to equality.¹¹ The general will, at least in theory, I think, can do all of these things. But to see this we must understand the general will correctly.

First, we must notice that the general will is not to be confused with anyone's particular will, which is to say, their self-interest. Rousseau very clearly says that the general will is not the will of all. The will of all he takes to be the sum of all particular wills or the sum total of all the different particular interests of the citizens. The will of all is what is registered in any ordinary majority vote (*SC*, 61; *OC* 3:371). The general will, then, is not the vote of the majority. It is true that for the general will to manifest itself there must be a majority vote, but the general will is not to be *identified* with an ordinary vote of the majority as we shall see in a moment.

The general will can manifest itself and do what it is supposed to do (never err, always seek the common good, and so forth) given four conditions which Rousseau lays out in the *Social Contract*, but unfortunately not all in one place. The four conditions are the following. First, all citizens must vote as individuals on all questions or laws. Second, all questions put to these citizens must have an abstract and universal form; they must not name a particular person or fact. Third, the question put must always and only be, "What is the general will on this matter?" You must be asking: "What is the common good, the good of the community?" You must not address the citizens as individuals and ask them what their particular interests are. Fourth, all laws must be rigorously and equally enforced, and everyone must realize, when they are voting, that this will be the case (*SC*, 59 n, 62-63, 66, 110-11; *OC* 3:369 n, 373-4, 378, 440-41).

The point here is to address only a person's abstract, reflective, rational interest, not their personal, particular, selfish interest. Citizens are made to reflect upon what it would be like if everyone always acted in a specific way. We get them to consider the action as a universal and necessary principle—as a categorical imperative in Kant's terminology.

If they do so, even thieves would vote against theft. But if we were only to address the particular interests of thieves—if we were

11. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract (SC)*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's, 1978), 59, 61, 67; *OC* 3:368, 371, 380.

to ask them whether their particular acts of theft were right—we might well get some remarkably convincing justifications of those particular acts of theft. But if we address the abstract, reflective, rational interest, even of thieves—if we ask whether, in general, in all cases, everyone should be allowed to steal; if we ask them whether theft always should be permitted by laws which are rigorously and equally enforced—then thieves would vote against theft, or at least a majority would. Some individuals might be unable to put aside their particular, immediate self-interest; some individuals might be unable to vote their general interest in the abstract case; but a majority will be able to do so. The vote of a majority, then, is necessary to produce the general will, but the general will is clearly not an ordinary majority vote where each is expected to vote only their own self-interest. The majority must vote their general interest in the abstract case if the general will is to manifest itself.¹²

The difference between Rousseau and Kant is that, for Rousseau, the citizens are expected to vote their interest in the general, abstract case—their long-term interest as citizens of a community rather than their immediate interests as particular persons. For Kant, we must not be determined by interest at all.¹³

We shall return to Rousseau shortly, but, getting back to Kant and to the moral force at work in history, we can easily see that morality, the categorical imperative, would demand fair laws, just constitutions, and an end to wars. We could not will that everyone be allowed to do the opposite. We could not will to universalize war, unjust constitutions, and unjust laws. Morality would also demand a league of nations (*PP*, 100; *Ak* 8:356). And morality, for Kant, is one of the forces at work in history. Moreover, the other

12. For a fuller discussion of these matters, see my "Rousseau, the General Will, and Individual Liberty," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* (forthcoming).

13. Kant himself employs the concept of a "general will" from time to time in his writings and, much like the categorical imperative, the general will "concerns the form of right and not the material or object" to which I am related (see *TP*, 75; *Ak* 8:292). Moreover, the general will is incapable of being unjust: see *Metaphysical Elements of Justice: Part I of the Metaphysics of Morals (MEJ)*, trans. John Ladd (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 78; *Ak* 6:313-14. However, for Kant, the general will does not require that the citizens vote on each law. It is only necessary that they be given laws that they could have imposed upon themselves. Kant wants a sovereign that rules autocratically but governs in a republican way (see "What is Enlightenment?" (*WE*), in *On History*, 7; *Ak* 8:39. *TP*, 77, 79-81, 85; *Ak* 8:294, 297-99, 304. *Contest of Faculties (CF)*, in *Kant's Political Writings*, 184, 187; *Ak* 7:87-88, 91. Also, *MEJ*, 96; *Ak* 6:328).

force, as we have already seen, drives us toward the very same point that morality does. Wars between nations and commercial interests drive us toward peace, law, and a league of nations. Both morality and war converge asymptotically to the same end—one consciously, the other unconsciously (*UH*, 18-19; *Ak* 8:24-25. *PP*, 111-13; *Ak* 8:365-67. *TP*, 90; *Ak* 8:310-11).

In *Perpetual Peace*, though Kant is not discussing the historical realization of a league of nations but, rather, the organization of a republican form of government, we see a good example of these two forces at work:

Many say a republic would have to be a nation of angels, because men with their selfish inclinations are not capable of a constitution of such sublime form. But precisely with these inclinations nature comes to the aid of the general will established on reason, which is revered even though impotent in practice. Thus it is only a question of a good organization of the state (which does lie in man's power), whereby the powers of each selfish inclination are so arranged in opposition that one moderates or destroys the ruinous effect of the other. The consequence for reason is the same as if none of them existed, and man is forced to be a good citizen even if not a morally good person.

The problem of organizing a state, however hard it may seem, can be solved even for a race of devils, if only they are intelligent. The problem is: "Given a multitude of rational beings requiring universal laws for their preservation, but each of whom is secretly inclined to exempt himself from them, to establish a constitution in such a way that, although their private intentions conflict, they check each other, with the result that their public conduct is the same as if they had no such intentions."

A problem like this must be capable of solution; it does not require that we know how to attain the moral improvement of men but only that we should know the mechanism of nature in order to use it on men, organizing the conflict of the hostile intentions present in a people in such a way that they must compel themselves to submit to coercive laws. Thus a state of peace is established in which laws have force. . . . (A good constitution is not to be expected from morality, but, conversely, a good moral condition of a people is to be expected only under a good constitution). Instead of genuine morality, the mechanism of nature brings it to pass through selfish inclinations, which naturally conflict outwardly but which can be used by reason as a means for its own end, the sovereignty of law, and, as concerns the state, for promoting and securing internal and external peace (*PP*, 112-13; *Ak* 8:366-67).

Both of these forces are necessary for Kant. One without the other is not enough. Reason and morality alone, he says, would never achieve our end. Humans are too corrupt. Our reason alone is not powerful enough to produce a league of nations and just states (*UH*, 17-18; *Ak* 8:23).

On the other hand, conflict or war alone will never actually make us moral. Conflict and war drive us toward peace, a league of nations, and legality. But this is only to say that our self-interest drives us toward peace and law—and self-interest, we have seen, is not moral for Kant. Nevertheless, if the laws which get established are the sorts of laws that reason and morality demand, and if our external behavior conforms to these laws, though only due to our self-interest, if, then, we act in *accordance* with the law, a great deal has been gained.¹⁴ The next step, obeying the law not through self-interest but because the law is rational and moral—in other words, acting *for the sake of* the law—is a small step, but a step which we must each make for ourselves. Nothing can force us to be free and moral.

The notion that conflict leads toward the same result that morality would have demanded from the start, Kant gets, I think, from Adam Smith's model of a competitive market economy—or at least Smith hints in this direction.

In a market economy with a developed division of labor, individuals are dependent upon others. No one can perform all of the tasks necessary to satisfy their own needs—no one can produce all their own food, clothing, shelter, and tools. So each specializes, performs one narrow task, and relies upon others to perform the other tasks. Then they exchange goods and services in a market. There is a thoroughgoing interdependence of each upon all here—we need others to buy from, sell to, work for, hire, and in a thousand other ways (both domestically and at the international level).

But despite this interdependence, each individual in a market economy, for Adam Smith, attends only to their own self-interest. They are selfish. They seek only their own profit. They pay little attention to others and only infrequently cooperate with them consciously.

However, for Adam Smith, this self-seeking not only produces a common good but it does so much more effectively than if individuals consciously and cooperatively sought to realize the common good. Active, aggressive, competitive self-seeking, given this economic interdependence of each upon all, produces a national capital, the wealth of the nation: that common good, out of which each struggles to gain their particular share. Self-seeking, through an "invisible

14. On the difference between legality and morality, see *MEJ*, 19-21; *Ak* 6:219-20. Kant also says that perpetual peace is an ideal that can never actually be realized, but that we can continually approach it as a duty; see *MEJ*, 124; *Ak* 6:350.

hand," Smith says, produces the common good much more effectively than consciously seeking to produce it would.¹⁵

Rousseau, I think, remains a utopian moralist largely because he retains an ancient conception of wealth. He thinks, as Plato and Thomas More did, that a complex and wealthy society will irrevocably corrupt its citizens. Wealth turns the citizens away from concern with the common good and feeds their self-interest. This explains that remarkable passage in the *Social Contract* where Rousseau suggests that a society unfortunate enough to have a great deal of natural wealth should be a monarchy. Society's wealth should be dumped upon the Prince and kept away from the citizens. Since wealth corrupts, it is better to corrupt one person rather than the whole state.¹⁶

Smith and Kant, however, were able to see how the self-interested concern for wealth and commerce can lead, if only unconsciously or through an "invisible hand," toward a common good. If, for Kant, we are able to locate such an unconscious directedness in history; if we are able to form an idea for a universal history; if we can see with Adam Smith that self-seeking combined with commercial interdependence leads toward the common good; or, much the same thing, if we can see that in history the dynamic tension between war and commerce will lead us unconsciously toward the same point that reason and morality would consciously lead us; then Kant thinks that the other force at work in history, our own reason, our own morality, can begin to work to hasten this historical development toward its goal (*UH*, 22; *Ak* 8:27).

One of the main tasks of any political theorist is to explain how to reconcile particular interests with the general interest. To have order, let alone morality and justice, any society must bring about the common interests of its citizens. If the society is not to collapse, the interests of the citizens must agree and be harmonious at least to some extent. The problem is that the only agents that can be used to realize this harmony of interests are the individual citizens themselves; and they, presumably, are all motivated by their own particular and selfish interests. The task of the theorist, then,

15. Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York: Random House, 1937), 423.

16. *SC*, 92-93; *OC* 3:415-16. For a fuller discussion of this matter, see my "Rousseau, the General Will, and Individual Liberty." (See note 12).

is to explain how these individuals motivated by selfish, particular interests can produce the common good.

What Plato does, basically, is to remove all social institutions which feed particular interest. He eliminates money, private property, and even the family. He then gives certain individuals a philosophical education that will train them to be concerned with the abstract common good, and he puts these philosophers in charge of society. Thomas More does much the same thing though he differs from Plato in interesting ways.

The trouble here is that there is no attempt to explain how we can start with selfish individuals in existing society and move step by step toward the ideal society in which self-interest has been eliminated and the common good realized. For More, the ideal merely exists in a far off land called Utopia—which means “nowhere.” For Plato, the whole project is a philosophical exercise to enable us to know what justice is. Moreover, whatever might be said in support of his theory of education, a theory of education is not a political theory. Education, important as it is in other respects, cannot transform existing society enough to realize the ideal.

Machiavelli, despite first appearances, has a more practical theory of how to turn particular interests to the common good in existing society. Anyone who wants to become a Prince will obviously be motivated by an interest in wealth, personal power, and prestige. But despite this, Machiavelli's point, if he is read very carefully, is that Princes cannot be caught up in their own particular interests. If they are, then sooner or later they will fail. Successful Princes must consider only the large scale map of competing political forces. They must be concerned with the stable consolidation of an overall power structure. To do this, the Prince must be something of a scientist, and, like a scientist, disinterested. The Prince can be committed neither to virtue nor cruelty for their own sakes. Princes must be detached, so that they can *use* virtue or cruelty—use them merely as tools or means—to consolidate a stable balance of power. Just as much, Princes cannot be caught in the grip of their own self-interests, or they will eventually lose sight of the overall constellation of forces. They must be committed to nothing but the stable consolidation of a political power structure. They must be detached from *everything* else so that they can view *all* things *only* as potential instruments—things merely to be *used*. They must have no other commitment to them. They must put aside their own aims and have the consolidation of a stable power structure as their only aim (*P*, 8, 33, 34, 50, 51). The pressure of power politics, together with a little advice from Machiavelli, will force the Prince to shift away from personal interest.

If not, eventually the Prince will simply fail. The Prince, to succeed, must begin to look beyond narrow self-interest to the establishment of an ordered power structure, and this, if only in a minimal sense, is in the common interest.

In Hobbes, we find that conflict between self-interested equals in the state of nature forces each of them, if they are to preserve themselves in this very dangerous situation, to begin to concern themselves with their long-term common interest in security, a social contract, and law. Their self-interest drives them toward the common interest.

Machiavelli and Hobbes, unlike Plato and More, are not out to eliminate particular interest, but, like Kant, to use it, to allow it to lead toward the common good. They take a modern view of the relation of self-interest to the common good. Nevertheless, the societies which Machiavelli and Hobbes are able to generate may have order and even security, but they are certainly not moral, just, or ideal.

Rousseau's concept of the general will is also a device designed to transform particular interests into the general interest. He too, takes a modern view of the relation of self-interest to the common good. Self-interest is not to be repressed or eliminated. Rather, individual citizens with particular interests produce the common good by voting on general questions which ask them to reflect upon and register the general will. They register their interest in the abstract, general case. Furthermore, Rousseau's society is just and moral. However, Rousseau, like Plato and More, gives us no realistic explanation of how to realize such a society. He merely describes it and its institutional mechanisms.¹⁷

It is only Kant that pulls all these elements together such that self-interested conflict between nations leads toward just and moral societies. In Kant, we get both a sketch of the ideal state as part of an international league of nations and, at the same time, a theory of the dynamic of power conflicts—a theory which explains not only how these conflicts will lead historically toward the realization of the ideal state, but also how we ourselves morally and rationally can begin directing things toward the realization of this ideal. Kant brings together in a single theory the two opposed approaches of traditional political theory, and he outlines the project which later theorists like

17. For a fuller discussion of these matters, see my "Rousseau, the General Will, and Individual Liberty." (See note 12).

Marx and others will take up and develop in a more complicated and sophisticated way.¹⁸

I have argued in this article that Kant's uniqueness and significance as a political theorist is due to the fact that he has a theory both of the ideal state and of how to realize it. This is not to say, however, that I think that Kant has accomplished this project with complete success. In my opinion there are several things for which he must be criticized. While his philosophy of history, his theory of how to realize the ideal state, is a most interesting one, his theory of what the ideal state would look like when achieved leaves a great deal to be desired.

In the first place, Kant often tells us that civil laws are to be considered legitimate only if they are the sorts of laws that a people *could* have given themselves.¹⁹ But it is quite clear that, for Kant, it is not at all necessary, as it was for Rousseau, that the people be the ones who *actually* give themselves these laws. The sovereign can quite well be the one who gives these laws to them. Kant wants a sovereign who rules autocratically but governs in a republican way, that is, who governs in accordance with laws that the people could have given themselves.²⁰

It follows from this that Kant thinks revolution to be immoral. It is true that if an actual revolution succeeds in bringing about a more just political constitution, then, for Kant, the citizens ought to accept that constitution, but, nevertheless, the act of revolution itself was immoral.²¹ The only thing that citizens legitimately may do to further historical development is to criticize their institutions publicly in order to move the autocrat slowly toward reform (*WE*, 4-10; *Ak* 8:36-41. *TP*, 84-85; *Ak* 8:304). It seems to me that this alone would be rather ineffective, but more interestingly, it seems to me that Kant's arguments against the legitimacy of revolution will not stand up under criticism.

One of his main arguments against revolution is that it is shown to be illegitimate by the principle of publicity. This principle functions

18. See my *Marx and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1988), chap. 1, 2.

19. *WE*, 7-8; *Ak* 8:39-40. *PP*, 93 n; *Ak* 8:350 n. *CF*, 184; *Ak* 7:88. *TP*, 79-81, 85; *Ak* 8:297-99, 304. *MEJ*, 96; *Ak* 6:328.

20. *PP*, 120; *Ak* 8:372. *TP*, 77; *Ak* 8:294. *CF*, 184, 187; *Ak* 7:87-88, 91.

21. *PP*, 120, 130; *Ak* 8:372-73, 382. *TP*, 82; *Ak* 8:301. *CF*, 182; *Ak* 7:85. *MEJ* 89; *Ak* 6:322-23.

in the legal sphere much as the categorical imperative does in the moral sphere. No law, for Kant, is legitimate if it cannot stand the test of publicity. In other words, any maxim is to be considered unjust if it cannot be publicly avowed without risking the defeat of its own purpose by calling forth opposition to itself. Kant thinks this principle shows revolution to be illegitimate (*PP*, 129-30; *Ak* 8:381-82). But it seems to me that he confuses a revolution with a coup. A small conspiratorial group seeking to overthrow the government probably would be frustrated if it made public its plans. But a popular revolution supported by the majority of the citizens against an unjust government would not necessarily frustrate its plans by making them public. In fact, revolutionaries often complain that one of the main obstacles to revolution is lack of access to the means of publicity. Nevertheless, for Kant, the principle of publicity, as it has been stated, is merely negative. It will indicate which maxims are unjust. It will not tell us which maxims actually are just ones. This is so, for example, because a very powerful but unjust government might well be able to make public its repressive plans against the populace without risking the frustration of these plans in the least (*PP*, 130-33; *Ak* 8:382-85).

However, at the end of his discussion of this matter, Kant gives us an affirmative principle of publicity: "All maxims which stand in need of publicity in order not to fail their end, agree with politics and right combined." In other words, if these maxims can only attain their end through publicity—if publicity is actually *necessary* for their success—then these maxims are just (*PP*, 134-5; *Ak* 8:386). It seems to me that popular revolutions supported by the majority against unjust governments might well be able to satisfy this affirmative principle of publicity and thus serve legitimately to move society further toward the realization of the ideal society.²²

Kant also has another argument against revolution. He says in *Theory and Practice* that,

it would be an obvious contradiction if the constitution included a law for such eventualities, entitling the people to overthrow the

22. Moreover, it is not at all clear that the second formulation of the categorical imperative, which requires that we treat all persons as ends in themselves and never only as means (*F*, 47 ff; *Ak* 4:429 ff.), rules out the violence against others that might be unavoidable in a revolution. Kant suggests that standing armies attached to the state do treat individuals as means, but that defensive and voluntary citizen militias do not. (*PP*, 87; *Ak* 8:345). For a fuller discussion of these matters, see my *Marx and Ethics*, chap. 1 (see note 18).

existing constitution, from which all particular laws are derived, if the contract were violated. For there would then have to be a *publicly constituted* opposing power, hence a second head of state to protect the rights of the people against the first ruler, and then yet a third to decide which of the other two had right on his side.²³

This argument against revolution is persuasive only if we are willing to agree with Kant, who, like Hobbes and unlike Rousseau, is assuming that the ruler (the head of state, the government, or the monarch) is the sovereign. By a sovereign, we mean the highest actual power and the highest legitimate authority. It is obviously a contradiction to argue that any group can legitimately overthrow the sovereign because that would imply that the sovereign was *not* in fact the sovereign—not the highest power and legitimate authority. The group legitimately overthrowing the sovereign would be the highest power and legitimate authority and thus *they* would be the sovereign. And then no group could revolt legitimately against this sovereign. If you have a sovereign, then to revolt against it legitimately—whoever it is—is incoherent. If you *can* legitimately revolt against it, it simply is *not* the sovereign. If it *is* to be the sovereign, then you cannot legitimately revolt against it because it is the highest legitimate authority.

But what if, as for Rousseau, the *people* were sovereign? Then they certainly could overthrow an unjust head of state, monarch, or government without any of these contradictions arising, and the constitution could quite consistently contain provisions for this eventuality. Because the *people* and not the government are sovereign, the people could overthrow the government without acting against the sovereign at all, or getting involved in contradictions with regard to the concept of sovereignty. Furthermore, if it were the constitution that constituted the people as sovereign, then no small group could overthrow the constitution without giving rise to the same contradictions as discussed above, but the *people* as sovereign certainly could change the constitution. What could stop them from doing so if they were sovereign? To claim that there should be a power to stop them would be to claim that there should be a power higher than the people and thus that the people were not sovereign.

Kant also suggests that we could not consistently will to universalize the maxim that it is legitimate to revolt against an unjust ruler. To do so would be to make all constitutions insecure and

23. *TP*, 84; *Ak* 8:303. See also *PP*, 130; *Ak* 8:382. Also *MEJ*, 86, 140; *Ak* 6:320, 372.

produce complete lawlessness (*TP*, 82; *Ak* 8:301). Again, this argument only works if we assume that the ruler is sovereign and that, without such a ruler, all law, cohesion, and order would be impossible. But, clearly, if the people are sovereign and if, as such, they are capable of maintaining order, cohesion, and law, then there would be no difficulty in getting rid of an unjust ruler who was intended to serve the people rather than to dominate them. This would be no more inconsistent than firing an incompetent employee. Kant, like Hobbes, seems to think that the only force capable of providing cohesion and order is a political force—the government or sovereign. Like Hobbes, he seems to have no social theory, that is, no theory of how cohesion is possible in society apart from the political or governmental sphere. Social cohesion might be brought about, as for Locke, by property structure and property interest—or, more generally, as for Marx, by class structure and class interest. The more cohesion one finds in society, apart from the political sphere, the less power the political sphere or government need have. Marx, for example, thinks that the political state could wither away. Locke thinks governmental power can be limited. The less social cohesion one is able to find (or if one has no social theory at all, like Hobbes), the more power the political realm or the government must have.²⁴

Kant, at times, wavers and becomes quite confusing on these issues. There are places where Kant seems to claim that the people are sovereign. For example, in the *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, he tells us that the “legislative authority can be attributed only to the united Will of the people.” (*MEJ*, 78; *Ak* 6:313). Here, he seems to suggest that the people must actually make their own laws. He then says, “The sovereign of the people (the legislator) cannot at the same time be the ruler, for the ruler is himself subject to the law and through it is obligated to another, the sovereign. The sovereign can take his authority from the ruler, depose him, or reform his administration, but cannot punish him.” (*MEJ*, 82; *Ak* 6:317). Here, it seems that the people are sovereign and that they can even depose the ruler. But for some odd reason they cannot punish the ruler. This is so because, to “punish the ruler would mean that the highest executive authority would be subject to coercion, which is a self-contradiction.” (*MEJ*, 82; *Ak* 6:317). Here, one begins to wonder whether Kant is shifting back to the view that the ruler

24. See my “Hobbes, Revolution, and the Philosophy of History” (see note 3), and also my “Locke and the Development of Political Theory,” *Annals of Scholarship* 5 (1988):334-61.

rather than the people is sovereign. Two pages later—at least in the second paragraph of the quotation which follows—it seems clear that the ruler has again become the sovereign:

If the organ of the sovereign, the ruler, proceeds contrary to the laws—for example, in imposing taxes, recruiting soldiers, and so on, so as to violate the law of equality in the distribution of political burdens—the subject may lodge a complaint . . . about this injustice, but he may not actively resist.

Indeed, even the constitution itself cannot contain any article that would allow for some authority in the state that could resist or restrain the chief magistrate in cases in which he violates the constitutional laws. For he who is supposed to restrain the authority of the state must have more power than, or at least as much power as, the person whom he is supposed to restrain (*MEJ*, 85, see also 86; *Ak* 6:319, 320)

Here the ruler is clearly sovereign—the ruler must have more power than, or at least as much power as, anyone else in the state. And even if Kant has claimed, earlier in this text, that the people must make their own laws rather than submit to an autocrat who makes the sort of laws they would give themselves, nevertheless, if the people can do nothing about a ruler who violates these laws, then they have gained little.

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