

## Synopsis of Perpetual Peace by Immanuel Kant (Daniel P. Aldrich)

Writing in the midst of late-18<sup>th</sup> century European wars, Kant uses the treatise Perpetual Peace to argue that, as a political and moral goal, peace is a realistic and achievable objective. Structured much like peace treaties of the time, Kant puts forth a series of arguments for creating lasting political stability along with the philosophical and moral grounds for creating such a condition. Kant's farsighted views, including an argument for a "league of nations" with interlocking security alliances (p.16) provided the basis for a moral system which inspired future philosophers (Rousseau, Wilson) and our own United Nations (based, of course, upon the failed League of Nations).

Kant is not naïve. He has no doubts that human nature, as seen by millennia of battles, has in its essence a warlike and volatile spirit; "the natural state [of men living side by side] is one of war" (p.10). Yet he argues that man's natural inclination for aggression is tempered by a divine concursus (i.e. divine providence) which naturally (and with political assistance) produces a "harmony among men." The "mechanism of human passions" (p.32) will, over time, cause individuals to organize around states and institutions, and then use those regimes to create alliances. Those alliances become the seeds for a lasting peace. Kant points out, in fact, that war creates the necessary preconditions to peace by showing that groups must live side by side all over the world (p. 26). But peace as a process takes work, and political will.

Why should we bother struggling to produce peace, then? Unlike Mills, Kant does not rely on utilitarian arguments. Instead, peace is a necessary goal because of two main reasons: a moral imperative for respecting other humans and a juridical principle which argues that man should extend the reign of law wherever possible. Kant sees morality as "practical" (p.35) matter and argues that morality and politics can be intertwined with a leader who "chooses political principles that are consistent with those of morality" (p.37).

How do we judge the correctness of leader's or state's action? Kant proposes a criterion of "publicity," in which those goals which cannot be publicly aired are considered immoral, while those which would be supported by the masses upon revelation would be considered responsive to the rights of others. After some wrangling, Kant proposes that "all maxims which stand in need of publicity in order not to fail their end, agree with politics and right combined" (p. 52). Thus, leaders and states must propose actions in a nonsecretive manner and need to seek out universal public approval for their plans. Kant argues that "[a]ll politics must bend its knee before the right" (p. 46), meaning the legal rights of man (and the states) must come before the whims of leaders.

What institution in the political realm best personifies a "self actualized" state capable of using publicity as a criterion for judging its actions? The republic, with its self imposed laws, is the appropriate political goal for states seeking to create a lasting peace (p 11). In a republic, "the consent of the citizens is required in order to decide that war should be declared," creating a situation which would make them "very cautious in commencing such a poor game" (p. 12).

Just a side note: Kant's indiscreet anti-Semitism (footnote 8 p. 20) concerning the "good Israelitic manner" where the Hebrews sang a hymn to God reveals Kant's poor training in Jewish law. Two canonical sources of Jewish tradition (*Pirkei Avos* and *Mishlei*) state clearly that Jews are not allowed to take pleasure in the downfall of their enemies. Also, his views of there "being only one religion valid for all men" (footnote 7 page 31) with only local variations in texts (Zendavesta, the Veda, the Koran) seems either naïve or incredibly accepting. This view, although supported by theorists like Joseph Campbell, is not accepted by most religious studies researchers.