A CRITICAL EXPOSITION OF 'HUMAN NATURE' IN KANT'S *PERPETUAL PEACE*

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A detailed description of the grand vision for 'world peace' has been presented in Immanuel Kant's 200 year old essay Perpetual Peace. Due credit is attributed to this seminal work on account of the lasting impact it made on peace studies, the conception of the United Nations and the realization of a new world-order based on everlasting peace. It is, however, to be noted here that the temporary conclusion is not about 'what will be' and 'how it can be realized', rather about 'what ought to be'. This objective is tentatively, though not conclusively, made in the very First Supplement of this work. Kant, here, doesn't give a description of the preconditions for acquisition of everlasting peace, but gets engaged in the issues pertaining the underlying rationale and justification of the entire enterprise.

With this context, the present paper proposes to have a closer look at the following questions: the notion, pervasive throughout Perpetual Peace, that 'human nature is necessarily evil' (the state of nature is the state of war); the notion that 'Nature, standing in for a divine Providence, employs the very inclinations that push people to make war guides them further towards eventual peace; and the possibility and desirability of going beyond a loose league of nations and achieve and integrated 'world republic'.

Throughout his essay (and some of his other writings), Kant builds on this assumption that human nature is evil or 'dissolute', a significant exodus from Rousseau's position . Experts presume that Kant borrowed this pessimistic view from Hobbes and it is an undeniable fact that this position recalls his English predecessor's state of nature as a 'war of all against all' (bellum omnium contra omnes, Leviathan, 1651). It is also true that Kant mentions Hobbes occasionally, but not necessarily in an approving way. If Kant rejects Hobbes' suggested solution of 'coercive rights' (of the sovereign) unduly brutal, it is first of all because his understanding of the state of things is fundamentally different. Kant's exposition of the 'fallen human nature' in his Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason is indispensable to be read if one is to comprehend how he believes that a decisive step can be taken toward a 'state of peace'. Here, he clearly conveys his belief in human beings' implicit proclivity to do evil, while at the same time being conscious of the categorical imperative to do what is right. In Religion as well as in Perpetual Peace, Kant's declarations are very close to the Biblical verses.

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A detailed description of the grand vision for 'world peace' has been presented in Immanuel Kant's 200 year old essay *Perpetual Peace.* Due credit is attributed to this seminal work on account of the lasting impact it made on peace studies, the conception of the United Nations and the realization of a new world-order based on everlasting peace. It seems apt at this point to draw attention to the fact that the tentative conclusion reached here is not about 'what will be' and 'how it can be realized', rather about 'what ought to be'. This objective is tentatively, though not conclusively, asserted in the *First Supplement* of *Perpetual Peace*. Kant, here, doesn't give a description of the 'preconditions' for acquisition of everlasting

peace, but gets engaged in the issues pertaining the 'underlying rationale and justification of the entire enterprise'.

With this context, the present paper proposes to have a finer understanding of the following issue: the idea, persistent throughout *Perpetual Peace*, is that 'human nature is essentially evil' (the state of nature is nothing but the state of war); the notion that 'Nature, standing in for a divine Providence, employs the very inclinations that push people to make war guides them further towards eventual peace; and the possibility and desirability of going beyond a loose league of nations and achieve and integrated 'world republic'.

Throughout his essay (and some of his other writings), Kant builds on this presumption that human nature is evil or 'dissolute', a significant exodus from Rousseau's position[1]. However, some expert commentators are of the opinion that Kant's exposition bears indubitable inkling towards both Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In fact, Geismann clearly mentions:

> "…standing on the high shoulder of Hobbes and Rousseau, Kant… was able to look into a limitless land of liberty and peace."[2]

It is worth-mentioning here that Rousseau's Judgment on a *Plan for Perpetual Peace* was published in 1761 and Bentham's *A Plan for a Universal and Perpetual Peace* was published in 1786 (approximately): the two valuable theses caught Kant's attention and thereby, generated high regard both for Rousseau and Bentham.[3] However, as against the two mentioned thinkers, the underlying tone of Kant's work is repeatedly redolent of Voltairian humor (without its sarcasm), but the intention is quite somber.

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[1] Kant was really far from sharing the often apparent forms of 18thc. optimism. Despite his appreciation for Rousseau, Kant did not share with him the belief that humans are born naturally good. Neither did he believe, with the popular philosophers, that progress was possible at the hands of enlightened cultural pioneers. He, quite contrarily, shared Voltaire's rather pessimistic estimation of civilization as something significant that, nevertheless, gave little reason to hope for a radical improvement in human nature.

[2] Georg Geismann, "Why Kant's teachings on peace are of practical use and why those of Fichte, Hegel, and Marx are already wrong in theory", *Kritisches Jahrbuch der Philosophie*, 1 (1996) pp.no. 37-51.

[3] Published posthumously as part of *The Principles of International Law* (Though Bentham's life and work as a whole chronologically follow rather than precede Kant's, this particular work was thus written a few years prior to Kant's *Perpetual Peace).*

Experts presume that Kant borrowed this pessimistic view from Hobbes and it is an undeniable fact that this position recalls his English predecessor's state of nature as a 'war of all against all' (*bellum omnium contra omnes, Leviathan*, 1651). It is also true that Kant mentions Hobbes occasionally, but not necessarily in an approving way. If Kant rejects Hobbes' suggested solution of 'coercive rights' (of the sovereign) as overly vicious, it is first of all because his basic understanding of the state of things is fundamentally distinct.

Kant's exposition of the 'fallen human nature' in his *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason* is indispensable to be read if one is to comprehend how he believes that a crucial move can be taken toward the 'state of peace'. Here, he clearly conveys his belief in human beings' implicit proclivity to do evil, while at the same time being conscious of the categorical imperative to do what is right.[4]

Kant, with a natural leaning in favor of the abstract speculation, suggests that the thesis he proposes in *Perpetual Peace* is no threat to the authority, rather he aspires for something else: In the *Second Supplement* of *Perpetual Peace* ("*Secret Article for Perpetual Peace*"), Kant actually prescribes that rulers and princes should seek the guidance and suggestions of the philosophers, who can thus be understood to be 'prophets of reason'.[5]

Kant's essay has two decisive advantages that give it long-lasting value:

1) It is very precise and definitive, rather than vaguely utopian and,
2) It proposes a realistic solution to a rather political problem[6]

When Kant authored *Perpetual Peace* in 1795, the incidents of the French Revolution had already been unfolding for quite a few years. It is worth mentioning here that just two years before, in 1793, Kant had also authored his clearly theological work, the frequently criticized *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason* within the boundaries of reason alone. This work has been assailed and criticized by Christians as anti-religious text garbed as a rational religion, an atrocity as per their view. It has equally been assailed by the 'enlightened

[4] In *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason* as well as in *Perpetual Peace*, Kant's declarations seem really close to the Biblical verses.
[5] It is to be noted that Kant absolutely rejects Plato's idea of the 'philosopher king'. See *Perpetual Peace*, p.no. 34
[6] As noted by A.C.F. Beales, it "lifts the discussion of war and peace far above the level of politics" and makes it a timeless question of ethics and conscience "The Evolution of Theories on War and Peace." In: *The History of Peace* (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd., 1931).

thinkers' such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who saw in it a testimony that Kant had finally surrendered to the lures of communicating in the conventional-religious terminology of 'sin', 'evil' and 'redemption' to soothe the Christian enterprise.[7] The fact is that in his *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason,* Kant employs biblical/religious language in such a way which he has not done in any of his other works, though here also, he never leaves the typical stance of a rationalist (quite expected from him).

Recent commentators have persuasively made known that this work was neither an exodus from critical philosophy nor the concluding testimony of profaneness and agnostic inclinations. In fact, it is commonly presumed (with a considerable consensus) that, in his *First Critique,* Kant had blown up the very idea of a theoretical understanding about ultimate entities (including God). In his *Second Critique*, he persisted on the predominance of duty (i.e. the categorical imperative) irrespective of its penalties and plunders. Of course, Kant does reflect on the upcoming effects of our conducts in his contentious moral evidence for the existence of God and everlasting life, but that concern is quite otherworldly in nature. However, it is precisely the *Third Critique* that suggests something unique with its proposal of a teleological rationalization to this world's existence and nature.

His *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason* characterizes a prolongation of the *Critique of Judgment* and is proposed to illustrate the unavoidable necessity of religion in addition to ethics. Kant reiterates that moral action is self-sufficient and has no need for a purpose to make use of itself. But, at the same time, he adds that the idea of purpose cannot be overlooked either, because "reason cannot possibly remain indifferent to the question of the outcome of our right action."[8] In spite of the otherworldly accent in the work, one would anticipate finding something explicitly dedicated to the theme of religion; Kant discusses that 'outcome of our right action' in definitely this-worldly terms. That is why, in the third part of the *Religion* comes to the following finish:

> "Unnoticed by human eyes, the good principle is constantly at work… to establish a government and a kingdom representing a

[7] Goethe-Briefe, (ed.) Stein, Berlin 1924, p.no. 37. In the beginning, Schiller shared Goethe's critical opinion but, after re-reading the work cautiously, he changed his position.
[8] Kant, Immanuel, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, (*Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, 1793), Akademie-Ausgabe VI, De Gruyter, 1968, p.no.5.

> victory over the evil principle. Under its sovereignty, the world should be guaranteed eternal (perpetual) peace."[9]

The above illustration makes clear the connection between the *Religion's* 'Kingdom of God' and the secular counterpart of *Perpetual Peace*. Though it might not seem a good idea to a political philosopher, the religious heredity of Kant's conceptualization of *Perpetual Peace* conducive to a 'league of nations' is a fact and therefore, could not be overlooked.

As asserted in the very beginning of this paper, Kant throughout his essay *Perpetual Peace* (as well as some of his other writings), builds on the presumption that human nature is evil or 'dissolute', expert commentators have presumed that Kant borrowed this pessimistic stance from Hobbes and it is incontestable idea that Kant's position brings forth the possibility (no matter how feeble) that his 'league of nation' might be replaced by the negative substitute of a lasting, ever-escalating federation' that would, however, always be at the mercy of a change of mind. Therefore, there is a progressive as well as a retrogressive notion of a well-intentioned, yet limited 'League of Nations' and the grand dream of 'one Unified Nation'.

Kant unmistakably asserts his conviction in human beings' natural inclination to do evil, but at the same time, he acknowledges the role of categorical imperative to act as per 'what is right'. In Religion, his assertions to this effect hold proximity to the biblical verses. It is interesting to mention here that at several occasions, we find that he deliberately adjusts his text along with biblical excerpts: a rather exceptional incidence in his philosophical endeavors. Therefore, Kant could not be established as typical eighteenth century optimistic thinkers. Despite his high regard for Rousseau, he does not seem to approve Rousseau's emphasis on 'inherent goodness' of human nature being corrupted by the society itself. Quite surprisingly, he also denies the possibility of such leaders who are enlightened and thereby apt to lead the society and its culture. He, rather, looks inclined towards the 'pessimistic appraisal of civilization' presented by Voltaire as a noteworthy exposition, which provides enough reason to look forward towards progress of the human situation.

Broadly speaking, Kant is of the opinion that though it is human nature that it is inclined towards evil (original sin), but then, it is their conscience which

[9] Kant, Immanuel, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, etc., p.no.124.

categorically enlightens them that the only possible action that is rationally approvable would be the one which is right: now this is the thing which the humans cannot do unconditionally on account of their nature. He mentions in Religion that 'it is quite rational to believe that there must be a Supreme Being that gives us the necessary support once we set out to do good and mean it seriously'. It may be rightly said, therefore, that Kantian approach is essentially a Christian approach manifested in his rationalistic language. These Christian postulates are professed in a purely formal manner, which was quite strange to new-age reader. The theory of duty implying to do what is good is itself rational: It is the only conduct that would be sensible in a broad sense. Also, to do evil is not merely a wrong thing to do, but it is also unreasonable. The reason for such explanation is that no one can expect every other person to act in this manner and yet expect the world to become as we want it to be. This is precisely what forms the basic understanding of *Perpetual Peace*.

This kind of understanding helps us to comprehend Kant's position as he talks about the slyness of Nature (in his First Supplement of *Perpetual Peace*):

> "The guarantee of *Perpetual Peace* is nothing less than that great artist, nature (*natura daedala rerum*). In her mechanical course, we see that her aim is to produce a harmony among men, against their will and indeed through their discord. As a necessity working according to laws we do not know, we call it destiny. But, considering its design in world history, we call it 'providence', in as much as we discern in it the profound wisdom of a higher cause which predetermines the course of nature and directs it to the objective final end of the human race."[10]

He, further, adds that:

> "The use of the word 'nature' is more fitting to the limits of human reason and more modest than an expression indicating providence unknown to us. This is especially true when we are dealing with questions of theory and not of religion, as at present, for human

[10] Kant, Immanuel, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, Indianapolis: BobbsMerrill, 1984 (*Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf*, 1795) p.no. 24.

> reason in questions of the relation of effects to their causes must remain within the limits of possible experience."[11]

Kant's hint towards the divine destiny as an unflinching ground for *Perpetual Peace* is rarely observed by the readers: the only sensible explanation might be that the people sincerely interested in *Perpetual Peace* are those having a firm background as well as training in political philosophy, with little or no inclination towards theological conjectures. This divine thesis, in its subtle form, might be seen as a linkage to Aristotelian *telos* which maintains synchronization in the relationships of humans as well as the states. It is also worth noting, here, that Kant's enthrallment by the notion of a purpose in nature corresponding to the purpose of human actions, is also present in his *Critique of Judgment*: The beauty and purposiveness of nature's design leads Kant to regurgitate the notion of divine providence. It is thus not surprising at all that he affirms:

> "In a morally practical point of view, however, which is directed exclusively to the supersensuous, the concept of the divine concursus is quite suitable and even necessary. We find this, for instance, in the belief that God will compensate for our own lack of justice, provided our intention was genuine; that He will do so by means that are inconceivable to us, and that therefore we should not relent in our endeavor after the good."[12]

Kant's broad moral idea, in context of his personal ethics as well as in context of international relations, is that whatever we are given as a moral duty must, by definition, be attainable ('Ought implies Can'). As always, his rationalization is not based on the supposition that an always uncertain good will might perform the designated job for us, but on the contrary, it also does not eliminate the possibility of that good will. We thus have a three-layer assurance that *Perpetual Peace* will be attained:

- First, it does not depend on charity/compassion/generosity, but on sheer reason.
- Second, since reason is the guiding force for our moral behavior (I should not exempt myself from putting the whole community first, just because it is my nature), such behavior must be achievable in reality.

[11] Kant, Immanuel, *Perpetual Peace*, etc., p.no. 26.
[12] Kant, Immanuel, *Perpetual Peace*, etc., p.no. 25-26.

- Third, since an obvious though mysterious deficiency forbids most of us from attaining that goal completely, we can and we ought expect some guidance from divine providence, to which Kant refers in a sophisticated manner as the 'working of nature'.

But it is not difficult to see that this three-layered guarantee is nonetheless just 'a limited assurance'. Kant's most influencing and practical argument is that the spirit of trade, 'sooner or later gains the upper hand in every state', is 'incompatible with war', and thus assures the acquisition of peace 'sufficiently from a practical viewpoint' even though a theoretical certainty remains obscure. Here, as we see, Kant replicates his classic distinction between theoretical security and practical assurance- one of the kinds of 'Is-Ought dichotomy'.
