

Is Perpetual Peace Possible?

Political Theory

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Kant on the Frontier: Philosophy, Politics, and the Ends of the Earth, by Geoffrey Bennington. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017. 260 pp. \$125 cloth, \$35 paper.

Kant's International Relations: The Political Theology of Perpetual Peace, by Seán Molloy. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017. 272 pp. \$75 cloth.

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I

There are good reasons that people all around the world still read Kant's 1795 essay "Toward Perpetual Peace." Kant presents a vision of global justice where republican governments collaborate to prevent war and honor human rights. Kant's essay guides ethical and political action at a domestic and global scale and provides the philosophical foundation for cosmopolitan political theories and institutions. Kantian ideas circulate at the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and many other supranational, national, and nongovernmental organizations. Kant's idealistic vision inspires a kind of religious fervor; at the same time, Kant's political theory makes philosophical arguments that do not seem to require a belief in Christian doctrines. Kant appeals to human beings, or "imperfectly rational beings," not to Pietists, Lutherans, Calvinists, or any other group of theists. This rational foundation for a religious vision of global justice may explain why contemporary human rights philosophy often takes its bearing by Kant's work.¹

In *Kant on the Frontier* and *Kant's International Relations*, Geoffrey Bennington and Seán Molloy, respectively, problematize the foundations and contemporary applicability of Kant's political philosophy. Bennington shows that Kant's work is riddled with aporias, including unstable distinctions between reason and nature, limits and boundaries, and peace and war. Molloy demonstrates that Kant's international relations is interwoven with his theology in ways that make it perhaps impossible to secularize Kant's international relations theory. Both books perform a careful analysis of Kant's

“Toward Perpetual Peace” and the interconnections between that work and the rest of Kant’s philosophy. Bennington, for instance, shows how Kant’s reflections on the distinction between limits (*Schranken*) and boundaries (*Grenzen*) in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* lays the foundation for his later conception of the relationship between states, and Molloy shows how Kant’s conception of “radical evil” in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* informs his subsequent account of the savagery of international affairs. Both books challenge any contemporary political theory that imagines that one can take the part one likes of Kant and ignore the rest. Kant maintained that all of this work fit together as a system, and removing, say, the account of Providence, or focusing strictly on the account of democratic peace, might cause the “Kantian” edifice to shake. Kant scholars and Kantian political theorists should thank Bennington and Molloy for illuminating Kant’s political philosophy and the problems with trying to orient oneself by it in the present historical and philosophical milieu.

At the same time, Bennington and Molloy think that criticizing Kant’s philosophy will ipso facto lead to a critique of all subsequent Kantian political theory. In other words, both books focus almost exclusively on Kant’s philosophy with the expectation that this analysis will implicate Kantian political theorists such as Michael Doyle, Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls, and Onora O’Neill. This approach may work, but it could also be the case that other theorists have grafted Kantian insights onto other philosophical frameworks and given them new life. The task of contemporary Kantian political theory may not be to analyze, defend, or criticize Kant’s original philosophy (though that is a salutary pedagogical exercise) but rather to reconstruct his philosophy, including its notion of hope, in ways that serve our needs.

II

In *Kant on the Frontier*, Geoffrey Bennington aims to explore the concept of frontier, deconstruct Kant’s political writings, and propose a novel way to read philosophical texts (p. 88). Originally published in French in 2000, and citing Jacques Derrida’s work as an influence, Bennington does not participate in the language game of academic political theory. He should not be surprised, then, that political theorists may express frustration at reading a book that revels in identifying problems rather than proffering solutions.²

Bennington’s thesis is that “‘frontier’ is nothing less than the primary philosophical concept and the origin of all others” (p. xiii). One conception of frontier is “traversable,” “contestable,” a “separation where one might not otherwise notice it,” such as a river that acts as a frontier between two

countries (p. xvi). The concept of frontier also signals “the limit of civilization or of known civilization, on its edge or its point that advances or believes itself to be advancing” (p. xvi). The paradox of the frontier is this: “Push back the frontier to find what is beyond, and what was beyond is no longer beyond, because you are already there, the beyond has retreated beyond again; you will never get there” (p. xviii). Every territory must establish a frontier between itself and an entity that is not itself, and this establishment almost always entails exclusion and violence. “As Jacques Derrida has taught us, the foundation of an institution, its very institution, the institution of the institution, including the institution of science, and even of a science of logic, cannot be understood by that institution, can only be violent with respect to the institution” (p. xxv).

After establishing the paradox of the frontier—primarily through a reading of the logician Gottlob Frege’s failure to explain how to draw sharp boundaries between concepts—Bennington shows how this paradox pervades Kant’s corpus. Kant’s critical philosophy suggests that just as there is one reason for all human beings, the rational destination for humanity is a World State governed and governing by rational principles. In “Toward Perpetual Peace,” Kant draws an analogy between the domestic and the international social contract. “Just like individual men [according to the familiar analogy], they must renounce their savage and lawless freedom, adapt themselves to public coercive laws, and thus form an international state [einen Völkerstaat] (*civitas gentium*), which would necessarily continue to grow until it embraced all the peoples of the earth” (cited, with Bennington’s commentary in the brackets, on p. 67). In “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent,” Kant makes a similar argument about the trajectory of states leaving the state of nature: “But these new bodies, either in themselves or alongside one another, will in turn be unable to survive, and will thus necessarily undergo further revolutions of a similar sort, till finally, partly by an optimal internal arrangement of the civil constitution, and partly by common external agreement and legislation a state of affairs is created which, like a civil commonwealth, can maintain itself *automatically*” (cited on p. 58). In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant speaks of a “philosophical chiliasm, which hopes for a state of perpetual peace based on a federation of nations united in a world-republic [ein Völkerbund als Weltrepublik]” (cited on p. 72). Though Kant describes the World State in different ways, there is a drive in his philosophy to eliminate the boundaries between countries defined by arbitrary geographical differences.

Kant also maintains, however, that humanity cannot and should not move toward a World State. Kant famously says that “nothing straight can be constructed from such warped wood as that which man is made of,” and much of

his international relations theory draws out the implication that human beings will not adopt “the positive idea of a *world republic* [Weltrepublik].” Therefore, “if all is not to be lost,” humans “can at best find a *negative* substitute in the shape of an enduring and gradually expanding *federation* likely to prevent war” (citations on pp. 31, 67). Bennington emphasizes that Kant is not purely regretful about the unlikelihood of a World State; on the contrary, he thinks that human beings need frontiers, including between states. The problem with a “universal monarchy” is that “the laws progressively lose their impact as the government increases its range, and a soulless despotism, after crushing the germs of goodness, will finally lapse into anarchy” (citation from “Toward Perpetual Peace” on p. 74). Even if the World State were rightly governed, Kant would still see problems. “Man wishes to live comfortably and pleasantly, but nature intends that he should abandon idleness and inactive self-sufficiency and plunge instead into labor and hardships, so that he may by his own adroitness find means of liberating himself from them in turn” (citation from “Idea for a Universal History” on p. 8).

Bennington shows that there is a tension in Kant’s work between a desire for, and an aversion to, perpetual peace. In the “Doctrine of Right” in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant himself suggests that the impossibility of perpetual peace does not mean that human beings should not strive for it. “So *perpetual peace*, the ultimate goal of the whole Right of Nations, is indeed an unachievable Idea. Still, the political principles directed toward perpetual peace, of entering into such alliances of states, which serve for continual approximation to it, are not unachievable. Instead, since continual *approximation* to it is a task based on duty and therefore on the Right of men and of states, this can certainly be achieved” (cited on p. 82). For Bennington, this position elides the fact that Kant himself thinks that a World State will lead to universal despotism and a torpor that betrays man’s destiny as the end of nature.

Kant is torn between wanting and not wanting perpetual peace. Here is how Bennington makes the point:

Kant’s (hi)story, then, involves, on the one hand, an apparently irresistible advance toward the abolition of all frontiers, to the establishment of a World State in which everyone would be a “citizen of the world,” and, on the other, a pulling back from this advance moving toward what would in fact be death, a pause or an interruption of this movement at the *inter*-national moment, a moment at which frontiers, with the tension they entail, the moment at which we must accept the surrogate, the federation, rather than pure cosmopolitanism. (81)

Throughout the book, Bennington describes Kant’s aporias in similarly paradoxical ways: e.g., “the end of the end is the end of the end” (p. 61) and “the cosmopolitanizing of cosmopolitanism would be its death” (p. 64). The book

presents a methodology of reading that entails “groping around in search of itself through revisions and reorganizations of this text that I am writing” (p. 84), describes the aporias in Kant’s political writings and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and concludes: “we do not know where have arrived” (p. 204). Bennington declines to say what political theorists should do after they discover that Kant’s philosophy stands on shaky ground.

Two years after the original French publication of *Kant on the Frontier*, Bennington published an essay called “Derrida and Politics” that may partially explain why he does not engage mainstream academic political theory. People often asked Derrida to explain the importance of his work for politics or political philosophy. “If Derrida was ever simply to *answer* to that demand, to provide an answer which that demand could hear and accept, then his own thinking could safely be located in the metaphysical tradition he also claimed to outflank.”³ However, “*all the conceptual dealings deconstruction has could be taken to be political.*”⁴ Deconstruction “strives to keep open the event of alterity which alone makes politics possible and inevitable, but which political philosophy of all colors has always tried to close.”⁵

In sum, Bennington shows that Kant’s political philosophy has aporias and tensions that pose a challenge to Kantian theorists or political actors who wish to use Kant’s writings as a blueprint for a just world order. Bennington undermines liberal universalists who blithely hold that their vision of the good life should apply to every one on the planet. But as far as articulating a positive vision of perpetual peace, or how we may hope for it when things are falling apart, Bennington gives us little guidance.

III

In *Kant’s International Relations*, Seán Molloy challenges cosmopolitans and democratic peace theorists who take up Kant’s legacy. Citing Michael Sandel’s famous critique of John Rawls in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Molloy argues that contemporary Kantians cannot easily detach Kant’s conception of perpetual peace from the rest of his philosophy. “The very *centrality* of the metaphysical and theological concepts within Kant’s remarkably complete theorization of the international political environment poses a challenge to those who identify as his successors” (p. xi). Kant soldered his international relations theory with a theology that rubs modern atheists the wrong way. Despite the epilogue’s brief engagement with a few contemporary Kantians, however, Molloy has not shown that Kantian insights cannot be recovered in a different philosophical framework. Molloy shows that certain Kantian scholars lack a satisfactory account of how one can have faith in the actualization of perpetual peace without Kant’s account of

Providence; Molloy does not consider, much less propose, a naturalized Kantian conception of hope that can sustain one's effort to work for global justice.

Molloy contends that "to understand Kant's work as a theorist of 'International Relations' it is important to examine the various stages of its development, from the critical philosophy to his synthesis of politics, philosophy of history, theology, and morality in *Toward Perpetual Peace*" (p. 3). Molloy shows the interconnections between Kant's account of limits of knowledge and the need for belief in the first two Critiques; the account of regulative principles in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*; the account of God and Providence in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; and the account of teleology in "Toward Perpetual Peace."

According to Molloy, Kant's political theology tells the story of an epic struggle between human beings and humanity. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant says, "A human being has a duty to raise himself from the crude state of his nature, from his animality (*quoad actum*), more and more toward humanity" (cited on p. 31). If one relies only on experience, then one may rightly hold a low estimation of human beings and their place in the universe. Human beings answer the question of what they ought to do "solely in terms of achieving security and material well-being, while hope is restricted to survival and, at best, the extension of rational self-interest on a universal basis in the political and economic spheres" (p. 30). Kant agrees with empiricists who are cynical about human beings and their motivations. On strictly empirical grounds, he concurs with Mendelssohn that "the discord that is so natural to our species will in the end prepare a hell of ills for us" ("Idea for a Universal History," cited on p. 79).

Fortunately, for Kant, a "divine man within us" differentiates humanity from animality (*Critique of Pure Reason*, cited on p. 36). If we rely only on our senses, then it does appear that human beings are animals that rely on strength and cunning to overpower other human beings. "By contrast, when viewing himself as a citizen of the world of understanding, a member of the rational species humanity can *know* nothing of this world, but is entitled to *think* about its possible foundations and to hope for an ultimate and beneficial arrangement of human affairs derived from pure practical reason" (pp. 30–31). As animals, human beings are trapped in the natural order and have no freedom or morality; as rational beings, humanity is free and necessitated to act on moral principles.

Kant's political theology is consumed by the question of how humanity can triumph over human beings, or how reason can actualize itself in the natural world. "Kant is perfectly clear that the intelligible world *can* and *ought* to influence the world of sense" (p. 34). "Toward Perpetual Peace"

offers multiple principles that should guide political actors, including how to conduct and finance war or interfere (or not) in other states. Kant lays out a system of domestic, international, and cosmopolitan right that removes causes of war and makes possible a global legal order. Kant writes a supplement that argues that nature guarantees perpetual peace, say, by making people realize that it is to their advantage to seek peace for the sake of commerce. And Kant gives useful guidance on how human agents can use publicity to bring about a global sense that it is shameful to commit injustice. Molloy acknowledges all of these points, but then makes his critical thrust: These conditions are insufficient to bring about perpetual peace, and Kant knows it. "A peace based solely on self-interest and expressed in terms of formal right would not be sufficient to avoid Mendelssohn's cycle of decline" (p. 95). Economic self-interest is no sure road to perpetual peace and could easily lead, say, to the rapacious behavior that European powers displayed in their colonies.

According to Molloy, Kant needed an account of faith and hope to explain how humanity could work for perpetual peace in the face of adversity. "Hope and faith do not eclipse reason in *Toward Perpetual Peace*, rather they enable it to work *practically* to counter the despairing denial of hope by 'practical man'" (p. 71). Kant does not contend that human beings can know the existence of God or providence, but rather that humanity must believe in God and providence to have confidence to complete their moral duties. As Kant says in his essay on "Theory and Practice," "it can be considered an expression not unbefitting the moral wishes and hopes of people (once aware of their inability) to expect the circumstances required for these from providence, which will provide an outcome for the end of *humanity* as a whole species, to reach its final destination by the free use of its powers as far as they extend" (cited on p. 81).

Molloy takes up Nietzsche's thesis that Kant was a "cunning Christian" who "enabled the persistence of eschatology and soteriology as aspects of the theorization of global politics into the liberal era" (p. 164).⁶ In the conclusion, Molloy shows the parallels between Kant's account of faith in global justice and Christian accounts of the final destiny of humanity and the doctrine of salvation. For Molloy, these parallels pose a problem for modern (atheistic) sensibilities. "From a non-Kantian perspective God is always introduced by Kant on those occasions when Kant's system begins to crack under the weight of unresolved tensions, culminating in a series of stopgap measures designed to shore up the problematic foundations at the heart of Kant's project" (p. 137). According to Molloy, contemporary cosmopolitans and democratic peace theorists cannot adopt his philosophy without the metaphysical, religious baggage. "Contemporary cosmopolitans assume in an uncritical

manner that hope can be invested in human beings, a position to which Kant was opposed and many of their own observations would suggest is highly unlikely” (p. xi).

So what is the alternative? In the acknowledgments, Molloy says the book grew out of an offhand remark that Kant was “history’s greatest monster” (p. xiii), but Molloy does not reveal much of his preferred alternative international relations paradigm. “Kant’s is a political theology that depends on acknowledging, but ultimately removing, the political from politics” (p. 25). Fair enough. Still, one finishes the book not knowing whether Molloy thinks that there is anything for international relations theorists to salvage from Kant’s conception of perpetual peace.

IV

In *Kant’s International Relations*, Molloy says that going back to Kant’s original texts “provides a clearer idea about the potential and limits of his theory than cherry-picking elements of his thought and putting them to work in the service of contemporary theory” (p. 16). For both Molloy and Bennington, Kant is more profound and worthy of engagement than many subsequent Kantians.

But there is no reason to insist that Kant’s philosophy is a system where if you remove one piece the whole system crashes to the ground. Kant was raised in a Pietist household and taught generations of students destined to become Lutheran pastors and teachers.⁷ He lived virtually his entire life around people who believed in God and providence, and he assumed that people needed these beliefs even if they could not prove their existence. Perhaps philosophers can give another account of belief that explains why people act ethically even if they do not believe in God or providence.

Is it possible to combine elements from Kant’s and David Hume’s philosophies to forge a naturalistic account of hope for global justice? From Kant, one could take concepts and arguments to capture the aspect of human nature that is capable of rising above its milieu to think about a more just global order. From Hume, one could take a naturalistic account of how habits lead to a regular pattern of impressions that lead to certain ideas of global justice and its possibility. For Hume, how we live shapes how we think; if we live in an environment that calls forth our calm rather than violent passions, then we are more likely to grow up to be kind, thoughtful adults. From a Humean perspective, going to restaurants with cuisines from different parts of the globe, visiting museums to learn about other cultures, making friends with people of other religions: all of these can sustain a hope for a better world without requiring belief in God or providence. Kant’s thinking about the

interconnections between art, science, morality, religion, and perpetual peace are all valuable for envisioning a just order where every person is treated with dignity, but philosophers informed by Hume's naturalistic framework have no problem rewriting passages that make no sense, say, after Darwin.⁸

In conclusion, Bennington and Molloy show that Kant's original conception of global justice is not possible in today's historical milieu. But that does not mean that Kantians cannot envision new ways to think about the possibility of perpetual peace.

Notes

1. See Andreas Follesdal and Reidar Maliks, eds., *Kantian Theory and Human Rights* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
2. See Simon Critchley, "No Exit for Derrida," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 9, 2014.
3. Geoffrey Bennington, "Derrida and the Political," in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 198.
4. Italics in original, *ibid.*, p. 199.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
6. On how Kant's conception of teleology reinforces rather than compromises human autonomy, see Loren Goldman, "In Defense of Blinders: On Kant, Political Hope, and the Need for Practical Belief," *Political Theory* 40, no. 4 (2012): 497–523.
7. Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 278.
8. On how contemporary political theorists have combined elements from Kant and Hume, see Nicholas Tampio, *Kantian Courage: Advancing the Enlightenment in Contemporary Political Theory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), chap. 2.