

Progress, Human Rights and Peace in Luigi Caranti's *Kant's Political Legacy*

HOWARD WILLIAMS

Cardiff University

Email: WilliamsH58@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

In recent decades a great deal of attention has been given to Kant's writings on politics as presenting a possible path to lasting peace. In this literature too high an expectation is created over what Kant's cosmopolitan thinking might achieve. Caranti's book provides an excellent antidote to these speculations by spelling out clearly the implications of Kant's peace theory. I suggest there may even be better ways for understanding the guarantee of perpetual peace, the role of religion and the ideal of the moral politician than Caranti maintains.

Keywords: international relations, democratic peace, moral politician, guarantee, religion, perpetual peace

A major complaint about Kant in the theory of international relations is that he fails to provide sufficient guidance as to how his proposed peaceful federation of 'free states' might work. It is as though commentators are expecting from the author of *Toward Perpetual Peace (TPP)* a book of instructions to deal with the most difficult problems that might arise in implementing foreign policy. They are perhaps thinking of Kant as a potential Metternich, Bismarck or Kissinger who might help steer the world out of crisis. In this common criticism of Kant, commentators place emphasis on the question of compliance: how are we going to get a collection of sovereign states (whose number now stands at over 190) to abide by the rules that are laid out by Kant in his six preliminary and three definitive articles? However viable the idea of a gradually expanding peaceful federation looks in theory, there seem to be no assured steps that Kant presents that might get us there. Given that, even on a cursory reading, Kant's *TPP* does not look to be a 'Handbook for Princes' in the style

of Machiavelli's *Prince*, an alternative favoured reading is to regard it as a work of ideal theory for an ideal world. And in one sense this rings true, because one question Kant is addressing is how rational finite beings *per se* can live together peacefully on this planet. In this case *TPP* seems deficient in not coming to grips with the complexities of world politics as in fact they arise. From this standpoint the book can be criticized for offering moral advocacy without any teeth. The temptation then is to depict Kant as a utopian who ignores the basic tasks of bringing security and stability to the world. Both approaches would be wrong.

What these critics appear to be looking for is a failsafe list of requirements that have to be met to meet the elusive goal of world peace. They find Kant's writings too short on technical and pragmatic advice. It does seem that when compared with the more strategic (and sometimes downright venal) recommendations that Machiavelli makes, Kant has a great deal less to offer the working politician. Working politicians are often looking for tactical advice (along the lines of that given by Clausewitz on war) which will help them deal with the problems of the moment. But from Kant's perspective this kind of realist approach represents a misunderstanding of politics. For Kant politics is deeply embedded in the moral, and any philosophical enlightenment with tactical implications has to take this symbiotic relationship fully into account.

It is very clear from Kant's writings that he was fully aware of the standpoint of the working politician whose eyes are fixed on the successes of today. He provides a very clear picture of the mind-set and stratagems of the worldly wise politicians. He is also starkly direct about the weaknesses of the human race. We are neither innately good nor innately evil. But we do have a clear propensity to act in an evil way. Politics has to guard against this, and so to be fully aware of the competitiveness and unreliability of leaders and the nations they represent. One of the great virtues of Luigi Caranti's book (Caranti 2017) is to bring out at every stage the realism of Kant's grasp of the human condition, whilst at the same time emphasizing the commitment to progress and cosmopolitan peace that lies at the heart of Kant's political philosophy. Caranti helps deal with the kind of criticism outlined above by drawing attention the true nature of Kant's thesis: neither a recipe for success, nor a lament about the fall of the human being, but a necessary moral path for rulers and their subjects through the continual crises of the present. *Toward Perpetual Peace* does not provide the equivalent of a cookbook of recipes for international politics but rather provides a valuable legal and moral compass for anyone engaged with the field.

There are three parts to Caranti's study which are judiciously chosen: the first seeks to present a cogent view of the theory of human rights that is to be found in the writings on politics and law; the second looks closely at the theory of peace Kant provides in *Toward Perpetual Peace* and related writings; the third evaluates the account of progress which Kant judges essential to his future political programme. Each section brings us up against debating points that have arisen in the reception of Kant's peace theory in recent decades. In the first part Caranti argues that there is a theory of human rights to be drawn from Kant's legal and political philosophy. Caranti, highly plausibly, centres this claim on the theory of innate right that Kant presents in the Doctrine of Right of the *Metaphysics of Morals*. There is of course the possible pitfall of anachronism in making such a claim about Kant's theory of human rights since it is only in the late twentieth century that human rights thinking properly took hold on political life. However, the case for Kant's philosophy as providing one of the most important and reliable sources is arguably very strong. Caranti seeks to negotiate this difficulty through an engagement with Kant's view on human dignity and autonomy. Here he explicitly goes beyond Kant's view of morality (p. 58), which more orthodox Kantians will find difficult to accept. But as this is not an essential part of the argument of *Kant's Political Legacy* it is an issue I shall overlook here.

1. The Guarantee

In *TPP* Kant deals with the supposed consequences of the peace-seeking actions of leaders and subjects under the bold heading of the 'Guarantee of Perpetual Peace'. Caranti places a great deal of weight upon this possible verifiable hypothesis of progress that is a part of Kant's approach in outlining his idea of world peace. He tries to show 'that, properly understood, the idea that there is a guarantee of perpetual peace is both compatible with Kant's critical philosophy and less embarrassing than usually assumed' (p. 218). This seems a sensible precaution and an apt strategy in attempting to get the best picture possible of Kant's peace plan. Were it true that in all instances it proved possible to demonstrate that such a hypothesis is untenable – that the facts have always shown differently, and that one can predict with certainty this holds for the future as well – then it would make no sense to advance an argument for perpetual peace. In terms of Kant's own philosophy we are supposed to seek to do our duty regardless of what the outcome of our action might be; he none the less recognizes that there is an interest of reason to seek to discover what will become of our actions if we seek to govern them with duty. Thus there is always an interest of reason to know how things may turn out. The only proviso that Kant would make

about such an investigation is that its outcome should not decide the maxims we use in determining our actions. In this respect Caranti appears to be more consequentialist than Kant. He shows a deep concern for the empirical viability of the guarantee process which arguably goes further than Kant's concern primarily to establish that those who depict inevitable decline or eternal recurrence cannot be taken to be correct.

Here, as Caranti notes, Kant is dealing with a topic that he had approached several times before, and he gives particular attention to the answer Kant gives in the articles 'Ideas for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View' and 'On the Common Saying' before turning to the argument in *TPP*. Caranti sees many continuities in the arguments advanced but there are differences as well. There are three concerns about the Guarantee thesis that Caranti pays attention to. He labels these the 'epistemological concern', 'the anthropological concern' and the 'moral concern' (pp. 220–1). With the first Caranti indicates that there might be a contradiction within Kant's own critical philosophy in taking such a totalizing approach to a phenomenon whose future condition we can never predict. One of the firmest limits that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* places on our knowing is that we are to regard all empirical knowledge as a knowledge of appearances, and since the future of its nature can never form an appearance it must remain forever unknown to us. It is difficult to believe that Kant did not anticipate this objection and may indeed have relied on its veracity in making his own prediction about the human future. Kant seems aware of the fact that he is putting forward a quasi-prediction, and it seems to me that his emphasis is as much on the 'quasi' as the prediction. The second, anthropological concern refers to the seeming contradiction between Kant's estimation of the human race's always present propensity towards radical evil and his estimation that the human race also has the potential to overcome this inherent propensity. This is of course an objection that might be applied to Kant's moral theory as a whole. Given that he assumes the radical ineliminability of our propensity toward evil, what is the point of his pure moral theory which aims at presenting those rules that we should follow if we seek to act rightly? This is again an empirical concern which Kant casts to one side with his assumption of our shared internal understanding of ourselves as beings that are capable of establishing our own aims for acting and also seeking to carry them out. Contrary to this empirical argument for the moral corruptibility of each human being, Kant relies on our common awareness of an idea of responsibility.

My belief is that Kant is, with the idea of the Guarantee, attempting to clear space for the full deployment of practical reason in politics. Practical reason operates in a different register from theoretical reason. Theoretical reason rightly concerns itself with the reality of its beliefs. From the perspective of theoretical reason we need at all costs to avoid incorrect assertions about the objects we perceive. We have to be modest about the extent and nature of our theoretical knowledge. In contrast, practical reason generates its own objects. An object of practical reason is a structure of thinking about our potential actions that is coherent and moral. ‘By a concept of an object of practical reason’, as Kant puts it in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, he understands ‘the representation of an object as an effect possible through freedom’ (5: 57).¹ The thinking of a person who possessed a good will would be of this kind. An object of practical reason is an intellectual construct. And in Kant’s plan for perpetual peace the Guarantee forms such a construct. It is neither wholly an empirical prediction nor merely a source of reassurance for the right-minded. It is a future related way of conceiving our political actions that gives them moral coherence. Just as ‘the highest good is the necessary highest end of a morally determined will and is a true object of that will’ (5: 115), so perpetual peace is a highest end for a morally motivated political leader. ‘In this way nature guarantees perpetual peace through the mechanism of human inclinations itself, with an assurance that is admittedly not adequate for predicting its future (theoretically) but that is still enough for practical purposes and makes it a duty toward this (not merely chimerical) end’ (*TPP*, 8: 368). The Guarantee provides a vision of the past which ties up to a better future which is part of a larger vision of an improved and improvable world politics. It forms a realizable object for practical reason, even if from the standpoint of theoretical reason it appears unattainable.

2. Mediating Theory and Practice: the Moral Politician

Getting from the rivalrous state-centric politics of the present to a cooperative international system based on the federation of free states Kant envisages is a complex process. The path that he points out is often difficult to discern and even more difficult to follow. It involves the interplay of determining how to take advantage of inherited historical circumstances, current political behaviour and the policies pursued by political leaders. As Caranti stresses, for Kant the moral politician must play a key part in this process of the mediation between the theory of peace (or right) and established political practice (pp. 246–50). The moral politician who seeks to carry out the theory of right (and so adopts policies that are in accord with morality) is contrasted with

the political moralist who espouses moral ideals merely to advance self-interest (of both individuals and states). Though Caranti's discussion of Kant's moral politician is tinged with (perhaps an advisable) scepticism, he is not wholly cynical about the likelihood of such a role ever being played by some leader. The idea of a moral politician, as I see it, plays a vital role in mediating the teleological view of history Kant presents in the Guarantee with the pursuit of the goals of a rightful politics. It is practical reason (or morality) which recommends to the moral politician the principled path to peace that Kant charts out in *TPP*. Morality requires of politicians that they adopt its six preliminary articles as principles in acting (8: 344–7), such as the abandoning of unjust ways of waging war (Article 6), not raising the national debt to pursue foreign policies (Article 4), never contemplating stratagems that involve interfering violently with the constitutional arrangements of other states (Article 5). These principles ought to be firmly adhered to in determining new policies, but should not lead to bellicosity towards states that have not adopted them in the past. Present arrangements that have come into existence as the result of such previous dubious tactics should not be put under threat. For example, though the rejection of acquiring new territories through inheritance (e.g. dynastic marriages) and force is embodied in the second preliminary article, for Kant this does not imply that present legal arrangements (which may have come about in that way) are put in question. The maxims of lasting peace have to be implemented through existing sovereign states. It would be contrary to right to pursue them in such a way that might undermine existing sovereign conditions. The moral politician works not for the complete overthrow of existing conditions, but rather aims to transform them legally and gradually in a manner that advances the goal of lasting peace.

As Caranti notes in his discussion of the Guarantee, the path of peace has to be pursued in such a manner that it is assumed peace is possible. Thus past and present events should be interpreted in such a way that their progressive possibilities are drawn out. Kant's use of teleology, and his guiding idea of peace as an object of practical reason, rules out as illegitimate policies that are merely adopted from expediency (pp. 239–40), for example, the telling of untruths, seeking to divide and rule, and acting first and seeking a moral justification after. Such policies are ruled out because they are premised on the false assumption that world politics is merely a rivalrous game played against evil opponents. The standard of political behaviour ought not to be determined by an appeal to the lowest common denominator of crass self-interest. Such base self-interest is

rapidly undermined by the total loss of cooperation which ensues. Kant is fully aware that examples of such poor leadership and wretched policies abound, but the moral politician is not tempted to follow the same path since honesty should be given priority in the choice of any policy. As Caranti says, ‘the first criterion for political action must be the intrinsic justice of our initiative, not the availability of a fully reliable prediction of what is going to happen’ (p. 246).

In a very telling conclusion Caranti tackles the idea that Kant sets his aim very high in calling for the political leader to be consistently moral and to combine this morality with a fine knowledge of human beings and the ways of politics. In a strange way, although Kant’s account of practical reason centres on the good will of each individual, so much in the end depends on the unique skills and the ability of the moral politician. Caranti points out that the ‘task of the moral politician is thus harder than that of the honest human being’ (p. 253). For the would-be moral person the task set is always achievable. We all know well enough where our duty lies, and we know how to set our goals to seek to comply with it. The difficulty is only to be found in attending to it in the face of the competing claims of self-love. However, moral politicians not only face the demanding task of achieving ordinary morality, but also the highly onerous and daunting task of demonstrating sound judgement. The moral politician has to combine the most supreme judgement with the pursuit of the highest good. Judgement is clearly not wholly absent in the pursuit of virtue by the individual but a great deal more is at stake with the political leader’s choice of actions. More knowledge is required and the greater is the leader’s experience of complex circumstances and choices the more one may expect success of them. Politicians’ failure to show good judgement can count against them much more than ordinary failures of judgement can count against the private individual. And as ‘judgment is a peculiar talent which can be practiced only and cannot be taught’ (p. 254), the primacy of politics places us all in a precarious position.

Caranti possibly makes too much of this precariousness that is inherent in political decision-making. For Kant the uncertainty it represents is no obstacle to the pursuit of a better politics. In politics we cannot allow the possible negative outcomes of our policies to determine the policies we choose. We should of course consider those possible negative outcomes but only as a guide to attaining the best possible results. The overarching concern has to be with the rightfulness of the policy. An important conclusion Kant draws from considering such consequentialist

views is that we should choose our leaders wisely, and this is one major ground for his advocacy of a republican polity where the leaders (both those in the executive and the legislature) are the selected representatives of the people. An additional precaution Kant builds into his political theory is the advocacy of publicity. Publicity is a topic of one of the supplements to *TPP* and it is a theme that figures earlier in Kant's article 'What is Enlightenment?' For Kant it is very important for rulers to be able to expect obedience from their subjects. Citizens and subjects should never consider resistance or rebellion. However, in return for their obedience rulers should be prepared to give their subjects a hearing. And in *TPP* Kant spells out the kind of hearing that he thinks appropriate (8: 368–70). He suggests that rulers should heed the advice of philosophers – not by taking philosophers into government, but by allowing the most extensive possible public debate of the views of philosophers. Kant champions the freedom of the pen as one aid towards enabling rulers to make the right decisions. Rulers should draw upon the disinterested researches and conclusions of scholars, and for philosophers properly to thrive the fullest possible freedom of expression compatible with public order should be encouraged. In encouraging the public to 'dare to be wise' Kant also is relying on our rulers taking advantage of the knowledge and advice that is available to them. So maybe the moral politician should not be viewed in the isolated, unique manner that Caranti's excellent study implies. Moral politicians have as their companion, support and counsel all good citizens and subjects.

I think I differ from Caranti in believing that practical reason (and so religion) plays a more important part in Kant's Guarantee than that presented in *Kant's Political Legacy*. I say this with some reluctance, not because I am averse to the emphasis on morality in bringing about peace, but rather because I believe that the recourse to religion which Kant sees as necessarily connected with morality might well be seen to imply a weakening of his argument. If one's main aim is to undermine the view of Kant's project provided by exponents of the democratic peace thesis, then this explicit connection with religion would serve that goal well. On the whole those who support the democratic peace thesis support it on factual and wholly secular grounds. To suggest that Kant wants to bring theology in as a key part of his argument would seem to undermine the thesis most forcibly in relation to these current followers.

However, we have to bear in mind here the structure of the whole of Kant's critical project, which not only gives a central role to morality,

and so the categorical imperative, but seeks also to follow this up by a defence of religion as a manner of conceiving the rules of morality as though they were divine commands. Kant intends to draw in religion as a servant of morality. It will not do for him to subordinate morality to religion. Religion for him gains its *raison d'être* in pure moral theory. Kant therefore seeks to incorporate the vocabulary of a properly understood fate, destiny and providence into his discussion of the guarantee of perpetual peace. There is an extensive footnote (*TPP*, 8: 361) which Kant devotes to the topic whose argument I cannot fully summarize here, but which I shall attempt to draw on to indicate the secular manner in which he interprets the religious talk of the purpose indicated by providence/nature/fate: 'In the mechanism of nature, to which the human being (as a sensible being) belongs, there is evident a form lying at the basis of its existence, which we can make comprehensible to ourselves only if we ascribe it to the end of a creator of the world determining it in advance; we call its determination in advance (divine) providence in general; in so far as it is put in the beginning of the world, we call it founding providence.' Kant is happy to move from the assumption of the value of such teleological thinking in natural science to imputing its potential value in comprehending past and present political circumstances. If natural science can advance only with the assumption that there may be a wise author who brought about the creation, so similarly Kant thinks it appropriate to assume that a wise creator might be at work in human history. But we have to note that he argues for the value of teleological judgement in human history not because he wants to establish the theoretical proof of claims advanced on its basis (because from his perspective such a proof is never possible), but rather he wants to support the practical deployment of such a teleological view in the attempts of wise politicians to improve our condition. Kant invokes the idea of the Guarantee, as given through a divine will 'from a morally practical point of view', 'so that we should never slacken in our striving toward the good' (8: 362). He is perfectly happy to concede that any attempt to demonstrate that there is a divine wisdom working in the world 'is a futile theoretical cognition of the supersensible and is therefore absurd' (8: 362). The Guarantee is a dogmatic, religious belief moral politicians must adopt so that they can pursue their tasks. Within it, there is no proof as to when the world will turn toward a wholly peaceful order, or how precisely a succession of events might bring it about, only the assurance that it is the path commanded by a divine will. This divine will is a supersensuous object that can never appear to the senses. We can speak of it only in the context of practical philosophy. For Kant it is the object of a

necessary belief of the moral person in general and the moral politician in particular.

One final area which I think is relatively overlooked in Caranti's treatise is the relationship between Kant's Doctrine of Right and *TPP*. Caranti notes that Kant's account of politics is closely dependent on his deduction of right but does not speculate greatly on what the relationship might be between this doctrine (which appears in the 1797 *Metaphysics of Morals*, Part One) and *TPP* (first published in 1795). The relationship between the two works is of some consequence, with some arguing that the 1797 work represents the definitive account of Kant's politics and right and others suggesting that *TPP* is the most authoritative account. This debate may be one which is difficult to resolve, as there are arguments for both views. However, there is the question of the systematic relationship between the two which affects any interpretation. I regard *TPP* as an integral part of Kant's doctrine of right. For me it is no speculative account of a utopian peace that the human race may one day aim at. It is rather a systematic continuation of Kant's account of law which is given its clearest expression in the 1797 publication. Kant comments that the cosmopolitan right he outlines in *TPP* is not a matter of 'philanthropy' but rather of 'right' (Doctrine of Right, 6: 352). And in my view it needs to be emphasized in relation to the contemporary use of the democratic peace thesis drawn from Kant that, for the original author, lasting peace was no dream but inherent in the institution of law wherever it might be found. In looking at Kant's account of peace we have always to have before us the realization that it is part of a whole system of right which ties together – and interdependently – private law, domestic national law, international law and cosmopolitan law. Law does not constitute a complete reality as an existent state of affairs until all four components of law are properly in place. At the heart of Kant's political legacy is this thoroughgoing understanding of law as a complex system of interdependency between individual rights, state rights and individual rights in relation to states (cosmopolitan right). This comes out most strongly in the final section of the Doctrine of Right, which deals with cosmopolitan law (6: 352–6). The noticeable expansion of law into the final sphere in the twentieth century and beyond is the evidence of the prescience of Kant's political theory. From a Kantian perspective perpetual peace is feasible because it is what the thoroughgoing implementation of the *rule of law* implies.

Note

1 Citations from Kant will be from Kant (1996) using Akademie pagination for ease of reference.

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