

Kant's Dual Commitment: Human Rights, State Sovereignty, and the Path to Perpetual Peace

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Abstract: *This paper examines the core tension in Immanuel Kant's political and international thought: his simultaneous commitment to universal human rights and the sovereign rights of states. Michael Doyle argued that Kant's simultaneous defense of both human rights and the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states is logically contradictory¹². This paper demonstrates that no such contradiction exists in Kant's systematic framework, with a central focus on his foundational claim that the state is a "moral personality." The paper also analyzes Kant's teleological account of "Nature's guarantee" of perpetual peace, clarifies how his regulative use of teleology shapes his vision of international order, and distinguishes his position from both contemporary cosmopolitan liberalism and political realism.*

Keywords: Immanuel Kant; State sovereignty; Human rights; Non-intervention; Perpetual peace; Democratic peace theory.

1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, Immanuel Kant's once-overlooked political philosophy has emerged as a central touchstone for theoretical debates in international relations. This is especially true of his writings on interstate relations, where Kant frames the establishment of universal and lasting peace not merely as one component of the theory of right within the bounds of pure reason, but as its "entire ultimate purpose." [1] We are morally obligated, Kant insists, to act as if perpetual peace among states "could really come about (which is perhaps impossible)." [2] Since no one can definitively prove that perpetual peace is unachievable, we bear an unconditional duty to work toward its realization. Crucially, this duty is not grounded in a dogmatic faith that the end is attainable, but in the inescapable demands of right itself: the ideal of perpetual peace "is based upon duty, hence also upon the rights of man and of states, and can indeed be put into execution." [3]

Kant's ultimate vision for this lasting peace lies not in a unitary world government, which he warns would devolve into either soulless despotism or endless factional strife, but in a federation of free states [4]. This federation, he argues, will be gradually advanced by states organized around what he calls "republicanism" – a constitutional system roughly corresponding to what we now term liberal democracy. What makes Kant's thought uniquely challenging, and uniquely relevant to contemporary debates, is his unwavering dual commitment: he defends both the universal "rights of man" and the inviolable sovereign rights of states. This dual stance sets him apart from two dominant traditions in international relations theory: on the one hand, cosmopolitan liberals who prioritize universal human rights over state sovereignty, and on the other, political realists who elevate state sovereignty and

national interest above all other normative concerns. This paper unpacks the internal coherence of Kant's dual commitment, addresses prominent contemporary criticisms of his framework, and clarifies its enduring implications for modern debates about military intervention, democracy promotion, and the foundations of international peace.

2. Democratic Peace Theory: Kantian Roots and Contemporary Controversy

Any serious engagement with Kant's international thought today must grapple with Michael Doyle's seminal "democratic peace" interpretation of Kant's 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace*⁴. Doyle's core thesis has become a cornerstone of modern liberal international theory: modern liberal democracies do not wage war against one another, though they may enter into military conflict with non-democratic states. He explains this pattern through two key arguments rooted directly in Kant's text: first, citizens in a liberal democracy must bear the human and material costs of war in blood and treasure in a way that despots never do, making them inherently disinclined to support military conflict; second, shared liberal values between democratic states eliminate the ideological and normative frictions that drive war between them [5].

Critics of the democratic peace thesis have challenged both its empirical validity and its internal logical coherence. Georg Cavallar, for instance, argues that the thesis is fundamentally self-contradictory: either liberal democracies are genuinely peace-loving, in which case they would not wage war against any state, democratic or non-democratic, or they are not truly liberal democracies at all [6]. Cavallar is correct to highlight the missionary zeal with which liberal democracies have sometimes sought to impose democratic governance on other states, and to note that the major liberal democracies of the modern era – Britain, France, and the United States – were also the world's dominant imperial powers for much of modern history. That said, his critique overlooks a critical distinction at the heart of the thesis: the democratic peace claim does not hold that liberal democracies are perfectly pacifist, only that they have a strong, consistent probabilistic tendency to avoid war with one another.

The democratic peace thesis is often framed by its proponents as a well-established empirical law, and by its critics as a mere contingent, context-dependent tendency among liberal states. This debate, however, rests on a false dichotomy between universal deterministic laws and ungrounded tendencies. Laws in the social sciences can and should be probabilistic rather than strictly universal. On the strict universal reading, the thesis claims that liberal democracies will never under any circumstances fight one another; on the probabilistic reading, it claims that they are highly unlikely to do so, unless an overwhelming, existential national interest compels them to act otherwise. This latter, probabilistic reading is far more empirically plausible, and it is the reading most consistent with Kant's own cautious, nuanced approach to the empirical prospects for perpetual peace.

The most urgent normative question raised by the democratic peace thesis remains unresolved: if liberal democracies do not fight one another, and if global peace will be fully achieved when all states become liberal democracies (as Doyle predicts may happen as early as the year 2113), what normative constraint stands in the way of liberal democracies waging war against illiberal states to "make the world safe for democracy" and advance the cause of universal human rights? It is precisely here that Kant's own political philosophy provides the most powerful check on aggressive liberal interventionism – through his core doctrine of the moral personality of the state.

3. The Moral Personality of the State: Foundation of the Non-Intervention Principle

For Kant, the lynchpin of the principle of non-intervention is his foundational claim that every state is a moral personality. This is not a mere rhetorical metaphor; it is the normative core of his entire account of international right. When we think of intervention, we most often think of direct military invasion and wars of conquest, but Kant recognized that intervention takes many forms, and that the sovereignty of a state can be violated through inheritance, exchange, purchase, gift, or even marriage between ruling houses. In all of these transactions, Kant argues, the subjects of a state are used or misused as mere objects to be manipulated at will. A state, he writes, is “like a tree, it has its own roots, and to graft it onto another state as if it were a shoot is to terminate its existence as a moral personality and make it into a commodity.” [7]

What does it mean to call a state a moral personality? For Kant, the concept carries the same core normative meaning for states as it does for individual human persons. He defines a state as “a union of a multitude of men under principles of justice.” [8] This union is not a mere aggregate of separate individuals, but an organized collective with its own legitimate decision-making procedures, capable of autonomous, purposive action. Kant defines “moral personality” as “nothing but the freedom of a rational being under moral laws,” [9] and a person as “a subject whose actions are susceptible to imputation.” [10] For a state, moral personality means that it is an autonomous collective entity whose actions can be ascribed to it as a unified agent, and which therefore bears both rights and duties under the law of nations.

Under the law of nations, Kant writes, “a state is a moral person living with and in opposition to another state in a condition of natural freedom which itself is a condition of continual war.” [11] The freedom of a state, like the freedom of an individual person, consists in its capacity to act according to its own self-determined decisions, and to be held morally and legally accountable for those actions. Just as individual persons have an inalienable right to autonomy under the categorical imperative, states have an inalienable right to sovereignty and non-interference in their internal affairs. This right is grounded in their fundamental juridical equality: every state, regardless of its size, power, or form of government, is equal before the law of nations, and this equality protects it from coercive intervention by other states [12].

4. Human Rights and Non-Intervention: Resolving the Kantian “Contradiction”

Modern liberal international theory, in the Doylean tradition, holds that a state which systematically violates the human rights of its subjects forfeits its claim to sovereignty and the protection of the non-intervention principle. Kant, by contrast, insists that the duty of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states is a perfect – that is, exceptionless – duty. This leads Michael Doyle to claim that it is flatly contradictory for Kant to defend both universal human rights and an absolute principle of non-intervention [13]. For Kant, however, there is no such contradiction, and understanding why requires us to grasp the core commitments of his political philosophy as a systematic whole.

First, Kant unequivocally holds that there is no right of revolution against even an unjust sovereign. While individual human beings possess inalienable human rights, the only legitimate path to the reform of a state is internal self-reform, led by the sovereign itself. This follows directly from his view of the state as an a priori necessity: the state is the only bulwark against the lawlessness and violence of the state of nature, and any attack on the sovereignty of the state undermines the very foundation of right and freedom itself. He writes that there must be an “absolute sovereign agent which can force each of us to obey a universally valid Will under which everyone can be free.” [14] Even an imperfect, unjust state, Kant argues, is infinitely preferable to the chaos of the state of nature. For this reason, no state has the right to intervene in the internal affairs of another, even to address serious human rights violations.

Those injustices, Kant believes, must be resolved through the state's own internal self-reform, not through external military coercion.

This does not mean that Kant is indifferent to the form of government within states. Ideally, he argues, all states should be republican in both form and spirit, meaning they are representative, protect the equal freedom of their subjects, and govern according to the rule of law. He even allows that some states may be republican in spirit but not yet in form – famously citing the Prussia of Frederick the Great as an example. Over time, he believes, the spirit of republicanism will align with the institutional form of the state, and the human rights of all subjects will be fully secured. In the meantime, the freedom of public speech is an essential, non-negotiable safeguard: governments must allow citizens to voice their grievances and criticisms freely, so that the sovereign can understand the legitimate concerns of the people and enact meaningful reform from above.

Georg Cavallar has suggested that Kant might limit the duty of non-intervention only to states that possess a genuine moral personality, and that modern totalitarian states (which were unknown to Kant in the 1790s) might forfeit this status entirely [15]. Kant's own writings, however, make clear that all states are an improvement over the state of nature, and that all states possess a juridical equality that protects them from intervention by other states. Moral personality, for Kant, is not a matter of degree, like having a virtuous moral character; it is a minimal, binary threshold that is not easily forfeited. The only plausible exception to the non-intervention principle in Kant's framework is the extreme case where a state reduces its citizens to a condition objectively worse than the state of nature itself. For intervention to be justified on Kantian grounds, human rights violations would have to be egregious and systemic, and intervention would have to be the only possible way to protect the basic rights of the population. Even here, Kant's framework sets an extraordinarily high bar for justified intervention, far higher than that of modern liberal interventionism.

A further critical point of contrast between Kant and modern liberalism is his conception of rights. Kant's list of basic rights is narrower than that of most contemporary liberals, focused primarily on negative rights – rights that prevent interference with individual freedom – rather than the positive social and economic rights championed by the modern welfare state. This is partly a historical difference, but it also reflects Kant's core distinction between the internal moral dimension of freedom and the external juridical dimension of politics. For Kant, morality is an inward phenomenon, grounded in the free will of the individual; politics, by contrast, is concerned with external laws that regulate the coexistence of free persons. You cannot, as Barry Goldwater famously put it, legislate morality – and this is a deeply Kantian insight. While the state must respect the dignity of persons as ends in themselves, as required by the categorical imperative, it cannot coerce morality into existence. This further explains why Kant rejects external intervention to enforce human rights: coercive force cannot create the moral freedom that is the ultimate foundation of human dignity. Even so, scholars have persuasively argued that Kant's framework can accommodate positive rights through his conditional duty of benevolence and the categorical imperative's demand for equal respect for persons [16].

Teleology, Nature, and the Guarantee of Perpetual Peace

A persistent, unresolved question in Kant's international thought is whether he predicts that perpetual peace will necessarily come about, or merely hopes that it might be achieved. Georg Cavallar insists that Kant only hopes for peace, while Doyle reads him as confidently predicting its eventual arrival [17]. This apparent tension is fully resolved when we recognize that Kant is a teleologist, and that his distinctive account of teleology allows him to give both answers – without any contradiction¹⁸.

Kant's teleology is not a dogmatic claim to have discovered the hidden purposes of Providence or Nature in human history. Instead, he treats teleology as a regulative principle of inquiry: it invites us to ask of any natural or social phenomenon, "What end does it serve?" and to look for patterns in human history that point toward the progressive realization of right and peace. This regulative use of teleology serves two complementary functions: it generates testable empirical hypotheses about historical development, and it sustains our moral aspiration to work toward perpetual peace, even in the face of war and injustice [18].

In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant famously writes that "Nature guarantees" that perpetual peace will come about [19]. This claim is "far-fetched" in theory, he acknowledges, but it has a "very real foundation in practice" that gives us a moral duty to promote peace by working with, rather than against, the "mechanism" of Nature. Nature does not impose the moral duty to pursue peace – only practical reason can do that. Instead, Kant asks how Nature can ensure that what human beings ought to do by the laws of their own freedom, but so often fail to do, will still be possible, without undermining the free agency of human beings. He answers this question through three interlocking mechanisms of Nature, operating in the spheres of political, international, and cosmopolitan right.

First, in the political sphere, the mechanism of human antagonism will lead even "a nation of devils" to form a just state. The unsocial sociability of human beings – their desire to live in society with others, combined with their constant tendency to conflict with and resist one another – will compel them to submit to the coercive laws of the state, the only framework in which equal freedom can be reliably secured. Second, in the international sphere, the separate existence of independent states, which initially traps them in a state of war, will be preserved by linguistic and religious differences provided by Nature, which prevent the emergence of a despotic world monarchy. While these differences will initially serve as a pretext for war, the growth of culture and mutual understanding will eventually foster a commitment to peace. Third, in the cosmopolitan sphere, the "spirit of commerce" will take hold of every people, and the financial power of states will align with the cause of peace – for war and unimpeded commerce are fundamentally incompatible.

This account raises an obvious and pressing question: if Nature guarantees perpetual peace, why should we do anything at all to bring it about? The answer lies in Kant's strictly regulative use of teleology. Nature does not guarantee peace regardless of human action; it makes peace possible, by ensuring that the very human antagonism that drives war will eventually lead humanity to seek a legal order to end war forever. The causal mechanisms Kant identifies are necessary but not sufficient for perpetual peace. Moral agency is still required: we have an unconditional duty to work toward the federation of states that will institutionalize peace, and to reform our own states along republican lines. Nature provides the material conditions for peace, but only human action can realize it in the world.

This reading of Kant's teleology also addresses Patrick Riley's influential critique, which claims that Kant briefly and mistakenly held that "culture and legality can become morality" before recanting this view three years later in the *Critique of Judgment*²¹. Kant does not argue that legality collapses into or becomes morality; rather, he holds that the growth of culture and legal order creates the necessary conditions in which moral freedom can flourish. In his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, he writes of a continuous process of enlightenment whereby "a beginning is made towards establishing a way of thinking that can with time transform the primitive natural capacity for moral discrimination into definite practical principles; and thus a pathologically enforced social union is transformed into a moral whole."^[20] This is not a reduction of morality to legality, but a recognition that the state and its legal order are the indispensable preconditions for the development of human moral freedom.

Antonio Franscehet has noted an apparent ambivalence in Kant's legacy: his deep commitment to the sovereign state sits in tension with his account of human freedom, which is universal and transcends national borders. This tension is resolved, however, by recognizing that for Kant, the sovereign state is not an end in itself, but a necessary means to human freedom. As Kant famously puts it, "man is an animal who needs a master" [21] – without a legal political order, there can be no stable, secure freedom. The state liberates the individual from the anarchy of the state of nature, and its success in this regard creates the conditions for its own gradual reform, as humanity develops a more sophisticated understanding of internal moral freedom and external juridical freedom. The state may one day become less necessary, but for Kant, it remains the indispensable foundation of right and freedom in the present.

Crucially, Kant's vision for lasting peace is a federation of free states, not a unitary world state. A world government, he argues, would either become a soulless, universal despotism, eliminating the freedom of individual states and peoples, or collapse into endless civil war between rival factions⁴. A federation of states, by contrast, preserves the sovereignty and moral personality of each individual state, while creating a binding legal framework to prevent war. Kant writes that states "already have an internal juridical constitution and have thus outgrown compulsion from others to submit to a more extended lawful constitution according to their ideas of right." [22] This federation will grow over time, as more republican states choose to join it, but it can never coerce states into joining – for that would violate their sovereign autonomy and contradict the very purpose of the federation itself. Kant further clarifies that "the concept of a law of nations as a right to make war does not really mean anything because it is then a law of deciding what is right by unilateral maxims through force and not by universally valid laws which restrict the freedom of each one." [23]

5. Conclusion

Kant's international thought offers a powerful, coherent alternative to both the aggressive liberal interventionism that has grown out of the democratic peace thesis, and the amoral political realism that reduces international relations to a naked struggle for power. His dual commitment to universal human rights and state sovereignty is not a logical contradiction, but a unified normative framework grounded in his conception of the state as a moral personality. The principle of non-intervention, for Kant, is not a rejection of universal human rights; it is a recognition that human rights can only be sustainably secured through the internal self-reform of states, not through external military coercion. Coercion among states, he insists, is a denial of the fundamental juridical equality that respect for their moral personality requires.

Kant's teleological account of Nature's guarantee of peace further reinforces this framework. It gives us rational hope that perpetual peace is possible, without relieving us of our moral duty to work toward it. For Kant, the primary purpose of international law is to protect states from the aggression of other states. It is opposed to all forms of ideological jihad, including liberal jihads that seek to impose democracy on other states by force. This does not mean that international law cannot support the cause of human rights; to the contrary, it can and should underpin treaty-based agreements among states to protect human rights, just as individual states can create legal frameworks to protect the equal freedom of their citizens.

The probabilistic democratic peace thesis, properly understood, is fully consistent with Kant's thought. The growth of republican government around the world makes peace more likely, and the internal self-reform of states toward republicanism is the only sustainable path to global peace. What Kant's framework forbids is the use of military force to accelerate this process, for it violates the moral

personality of the state and undermines the very foundation of international right. In the end, Kant's vision of perpetual peace is not one imposed by the strong on the weak, but one built through the free cooperation of sovereign states, each reforming itself from within, bound together in a federation dedicated to preserving peace and right for all. As Kant writes, "Whatever diminishes the obstacles to an activity furthers this activity itself." [24] The work of building peace begins with the internal reform of each state, and the recognition of the equal moral personality of every nation.

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