**Kant and the European Union**

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**I**

I am going to be introducing some of the ideas of Immanuel Kant, and will try to explain why they are so important to the development of the European Union. But to do so I need to introduce the concept through which Kant thinks about human history. Kant thinks that the whole history of humanity exhibits a slow but nevertheless discernible movement towards what he calls a cosmopolitan condition.

Cosmopolitanism is not merely one political idea among others in European political thinking. Indeed, if we begin with the thought that Europe’s cultural identity is forged primarily within a context of the heritage of Greek rationalism and Christian faith there is reason to consider it the European political idea *par excellence*. Here is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida summarising the cosmopolitan tradition, in a lecture given in English in 1997:

[The] tradition of cosmopolitanism…comes to us from, on the one hand, *Greek* thought with the Stoics, who have a concept of the “citizen of the world”. [But] you also have [in] St. Paul, in the *Christian* tradition, a certain call for a citizen of the world as, precisely, a brother. St. Paul says that we are all brothers, that is sons of God, so we are not foreigners, we belong to the world as citizens of the world; and it is this tradition that we could follow up until Kant…

It is indeed in Kant’s work that these two traditions find their most systematic synthesis – in a conception of what he called Universal History. It is the history of “Man” understood as a theomorphic rational animal on its way from a primitive condition marked by endless war towards a civilised condition of perpetual peace – a condition in which every other is my brother. Kant’s cosmopolitanism is in fact both androcentric and, as we shall see, Eurocentric. But his work opened a passage for this cosmopolitan tradition to move beyond that.

It is pretty extraordinary that Kant did any of this. He was born in 1724 in Königsberg in what was then East Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia). He lived for eighty years and hardly ever left the city, never going more than ten miles from it. And yet despite the fact that Kant never really went anywhere, he became by the 1750’s the preeminent thinker of the most ambitiously universal form of social and political philosophy: a philosophy of a global humanity living a “universal cosmopolitan existence” (Kant, p. 51).

It is not just Kant’s cosmopolitanism that is ambitious. Indeed, his very inquiry, philosophical history, and its guiding question can strike one as the most unlikely to find a compelling answer. Kant asks what might “a philosophical mind” be able to say about human history. History: the sphere of what has actually happened*;* in all appearances the domain of the apparently “senseless course” of contingent human events, so much of which is “made up of folly and childish vanity” (Kant, p. 42); all-in-all a seemingly “planless aggregate of human actions” (Kant, p. 52). How can this be a field for philosophical inquiry?

How can philosophy say anything at all about history? There is an anxiety here to which Kant is alive, and which has, I think, only got more overwhelming intense in the time since Kant wrote:

It is admittedly a strange and at first sight absurd proposition to write a history according to an idea of how world events must develop if they are to conform to certain rational ends; it would see that only a *novel* could result from such premises. (Kant, p. 52)

The idea of a meaningful direction of history – what is called a teleological sense of all human history – is one that today we find incredible. And yet Kant’s own writing has in a certain way given history direction: he has helped make it happen that there will have been this direction, at least to Europe’s history. This is what I want to talk about today.

Kant’s view of the distant final aim of all human history is the achievement of what he calls “moral” cosmopolitan conditions: conditions of “mutual understanding” between human beings “even with the most distant of their fellows” (Kant, p. 111). However, his discussion is essentially “political” or cosmopolitical: it is about the political and social institutions of this moral form of human life. His basic thought is really quite simple: “the achievement of a just civic constitution” within which “the rights of each [*citizen*] can be secured” *presupposes* an international order “similar to a civil one”: an international order “within which the rights of each [*nation*] can be secured” (Kant, p. 102). It presupposes it because the achievement of a just constitution in a nation state is worthless as long as there is a threat from other human societies who might invade or destroy you.

As we shall see, Kant’s cosmopolitan history will *not* conclude with the formation of a world state or supranational world government. No. Just as a national constitution attempts to create conditions in which *the* *freedom* *of each [citizen] is made to be consistent with the freedom of every other*. So also in the international context the aim is the creation of conditions in which *the* *freedom* *of each [nation] is made to be consistent with the freedom of every other*.

In each case what is required are *laws which would restrict the freedom of each [citizens or nations] in such a way as to maximise the freedom of all.*

In these circumstances both national and international society can be grasped as attaining a condition in which peace has become the norm not the exception: society with others has become, at both levels, “a community of friends” rather than a community in which every neighbour, whether that is a fellow citizen or another nation, would be encountered as “an enemy” or at least “a permanent threat to me” (Kant, p. 98).

Philosophers before Kant had already written about a “social contract”: In the formation of a civil society based on consent to submit to coercive laws, social life shifts from a barbaric and savage condition to a rational and civilised one: this is life in a nation state. But – and this is Kant’s innovation – exactly parallel considerations hold for the relations between States (and *their* particular wills) and their neighbours (with *theirs*): participant states would explicitly agree to submit to coercive laws, legal arrangements, “similar to the civil one”, in order to secure the rights of each to govern themselves without fear that their neighbours might be their enemy (Kant, p. 102).

For Kant this development also transforms the status of individuals as citizens of such participant states: the ideal attainment of political freedom for all members of a society as *citizens of a nation-state* would now belong to an international order in which those citizens are also conferred cosmopolitan freedoms as *citizens of the world*. The political animal that we are becomes, finally, a cosmopolitical animal, in what Kant called a “universal right of hospitality”.

So a cosmopolitan existence – the chance of mutual understanding and respect between the most diverse peoples of the earth – is to be realised through the institution of a “great political body” capable of securing what is “right” (rather than “wrong”) in international relations – a political body that can see to it that “men could live everywhere on earth” (Kant, p. 111) in a set-up that should “lead to mutual understanding and peace” rather than mutual ignorance and war (Kant, p. 114).

So, in his texts on the idea of universal history from the 1780s and 1790s Kant asks what “a philosophical mind” might be able to say about history in an *a priori* rather than empirical form. His answer is that a philosophically informed history of the development of an inherently theomorphic rational creature should see it as an unfolding movement towards a fully rational form of human life for all humanity: life lived in peace with others, life with a cosmopolitan character. This is the *telos* of Man after the Fall. Kant thus attempted to present world history as a movement of moral progress towards a worldwide cosmopolitan condition.

**II**

OK. That’s Kant and his cosmopolitan idea. But Kant did not think this idea was a mere fantasy or empty hope. In his own time – which was, we should not forget a time of almost interminable war and political violence in Europe – Kant thought he could see, even then, a nascent movement towards such a condition in the developing international relations among the bellicose European nations. It was no more than “a *feeling* beginning to stir in all its members”, but it was, he thought, a feeling, a spectral anticipation of what was coming, nonetheless: as a result of more or less constant wars, attempts at inter-national peace-brokering by European nations affected by but not themselves participating in a war will likely “prepare the way for a great political body of the future, without precedence in the past.” What then does Kant say about this European political body he sees coming?

I want to approach this question through the interpretations of it offered by two other philosophers. GWF Hegel and Jurgen Habermas. Both are attentive to Kant. But they really do not hear him, or rather they *only* want to hear him as belonging to a particular way of looking at global politics, a way which is essentially binary: we can think of global politics either in terms of a world of sovereign nation-states, or a world of their integration into a supranational world state.

We will get to Europe – but the context of the discussion of Kant’s cosmopolitanism is first of all global; the idea of a global international order: should it be a system of sovereign states or a single world state. Perhaps you can see the shape of the arguments about Europe in the referendum debate – it was often presented as a stand off between Eurosceptics and Federalists.

Hegel was a sceptic about international unions. And he thought that Kant believed this: that global perpetual peace would follow the realisation of a worldwide cosmopolitan existence achieved through the formation of a global union of nations, a *world government* capable of uniting the particular wills of nations around the “general will” of all humanity. Hegel thought Kant was crazy to believe this:

Kant’s idea was that eternal peace should be secured by a union of nations. This union should settle every dispute, make impossible the resort to arms for a decision, and be recognized by every nation. This idea assumes that nations are in accord, but this is an agreement which, strengthened though it might be by moral, religious, and other considerations, always rested on the particular sovereign will of nations, and was therefore liable to be disturbed by the element of contingency… Therefore, when the particular wills of nations can come to no agreement, the controversy can be settled [only by the resort to arms], only by war.

The relation of nations to one another has sovereignty as its principle. Their rights have reality not in a general will, which is constituted as a superior power, but [only] in their particular wills. (Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, Sect. 333)

Hegel, then, can be counted as a profound sceptic about international unions. Kant was not opposed to international unions, and so for Hegel he must be rejected as a fantasist.

Jürgen Habermas, who is a Euro-federalist, thinks Kant was not so crazy. Indeed, he thinks Kant was basically right. What is it that Kant said that Habermas likes so much and Hegel dislikes so much? What Habermas says about Kant will also give us a clue why both he and Hegel misunderstand him so badly:

To the very end, [Kant] advocated the idea of a world government, even though he proposed a “substitute” of a federation of nations as a first stage towards realizing such [an end]. This weak conception of a voluntary association of nations which are willing to co-exist peacefully while nevertheless retaining their sovereignty seemed to recommend itself as a transitional stage on the way to a world government. (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p, 314)

It is quite true that Kant thought that we might approximate *ever closer* to a condition of peaceful co-existence (“cosmopolitan existence”), ever closer to a condition in which war had not only been made less likely but actually abolished, ever closer to the achievement of perpetual peace. But, as we shall see, Kant never proposed that what Habermas calls the “substitute” system (a federation of nations) would be a “transitional stage” to the real thing: a world government.

Indeed, it was *approaching ever closer to this* *substitute* that Kant thought was the best we could hope for. He never thought we could eliminate the chance of war. Making it “less likely” through the formation of the “substitute” is the best one can hope for. This is the best one can hope for in any world that, like ours, has an international order in which, as Hegel rightly states, in fact *following Kant*, “the relation of nations to one another has sovereignty as its principle.” It is a complicated third way between a world of states and a single world state.

Although Habermas is wrong to suppose that Kant ever thought that a voluntary association of nations should be conceived as a transitional stage to a world government, Kant does indeed have a transitional stage in view. Not from a world *federation* to a federal world *government*, but from a *European* federation to a *world* federation. Let’s look at Kant’s extraordinary anticipation of the emergence of the European union in full, something that took a further two-hundred years to achieve:

The effects which an upheaval [between any states] produces upon all the others in our continent, where all are so closely linked by trade, are so perceptible that these other states are forced by their own insecurity to offer themselves as arbiters, albeit without legal authority, so that they indirectly prepare the way for a great political body of the future, without precedence in the past. Although this political body exists for the present only in the roughest of outlines, it nonetheless seems as if a feeling is beginning to stir in all its members, each of which has an interest in maintaining the whole. And this encourages the hope that, after many revolutions, the highest purpose of nature, a universal cosmopolitan existence, will at last be realized as the matrix within which all the original capacities of the human race may develop. (Kant, “Sketch for a Universal History”, p. 51)

This “great political body of the future” would be the framework through which Europe would transform itself from a condition of ongoing war into one of enduring peace – or rather, and putting it negatively, a condition in which war is increasingly less likely. And in doing so, Kant thought that Europe would be providing a model for the world.

Habermas claims, and I think wholly unjustifiably claims, that Kant conceived the global version of this European federation to be only “a transitional stage” to a world government. Moreover, Habermas calls this supposedly transitional stage “weak”, “conceptually flawed” and “sterile”.

Kant thinks exactly the opposite is true. Indeed, *were* the transition somehow made to a European or World government there is no doubt that Kant would see this outcome as a total disaster, leading only to what he calls “a soulless despostism” and “the graveyard of freedom” – a condition of human misery that can only make conflict and war more likely, not at all its perfect eradication in perpetual peace.

I will look at one of the reasons why he thought that shortly. But I want to consider first what it is that seduces Habermas into thinking that the Kantian idea of a negative substitute (the federation of nations) is a transitional stage of some kind. There is a remark by Kant where he says that the only rational step to take if we want to achieve perpetual peace would be the formation of an ever expanding international state:

There is only one rational way in which states coexisting with other states can emerge from the lawless condition of pure warfare. Just like individual men, they must renounce their savage and lawless freedom, adapt themselves to public coercive laws, and thus form an international state, which would necessarily grow until it embraced all the peoples of the earth.

However, far from endorsing this “only one rational way”, Kant *immediately* dismisses it, and dismisses it completely. *If* we are starting from *conditions in which states understand themselves as sovereign powers* (which amounts to saying as long as states think of themselves as nation-states, which means – as long as there are nation-states) then the truly rational steps *cannot* be made:

States, however, in accordance with their understanding of the law of nations, by no means desire this, and the positive idea of a world-government cannot be realised. If all is not to be lost, this can at best find a negative substitute in the shape of an enduring and gradually expanding federation of nations likely to prevent war. The latter may check man’s inclination to defy the law and antagonise his fellows, although there will always be the risk of it bursting forth anew. (ibid., p. 105)

Do states today have a different understanding of “the law of nations” – that is, do they think that the relations between nation states no longer have state sovereignty as their principle? Not at all. Indeed, it is just this basic fact about the member states of the European Union that constitutes the basic *fault* of the EU as Habermas sees it today. However, it is also that basic fact that makes his proposal for transferring sovereignty to a European supranational government so absurd.

Kant says, nation-states “by no means desire” the formation of an international state. The German is more literally: “it is not the will of the nations”. But they don’t desire or will this, *not because they happen at the moment not to like it* – it’s not like: maybe next week they will desire it but right now they don’t. No. Kant’s point is that this is not the sort of thing a nation-state, if that is what it is, *can intelligibly desire or will*. A nation cannot see the abolition of its own national interest as among the range of things that might be in its own national interest.

However, as Kant says, all is not lost. Beyond the Euro-scepticism of Hegel and the Euro-federalism of Habermas we can yet hope for an enduring federation of nations in Europe likely to prevent war. And hence a strikingly paradoxical conclusion: this negative substitute while falling short of what seems to be the rational ideal, could not, in fact, be bettered. Sharing sovereignty in areas where you can, enhances the sovereignty you keep by making war between member states less likely. In short, there is a third-way for Europe:

* Not just: *the independent nation-states of Europe – the retention of full sovereignty for each state*
* Nor yet: a *United States of Europe* – *the transfer of sovereignty to the supranational government*
* But instead: a *United Europe of States – a federation of states with limited sovereignty all round*

I said the formation of a supranational federal state is something that Kant thought, were it somehow to happen, would in any case lead to total disaster. Why did he think it would result in “a soulless despotism…which will lapse into anarchy”? Why would it result in the graveyard of freedom. Among other reasons: the formation of the particular will of a federal state would be largely determined by the particular will of its most powerful member.

Powerful states (indeed this is “the secret desire of every state”) would like to secure peace by “dominating the whole”.

But this hegemonic desire is thwarted by two (related) types of cultural differences that, as Kant puts it, “separate nations and prevent them from amalgamating” – “*linguistic* and *religious* differences.”

A single government could certainly rule over peoples with such differences. And there is of course a “germ of goodness” in the ambition for ending war which motivates that, which is why the humanitarian ideal and world government seem so nice. But for Kant it could only end badly. Instead of a federation of nations in which peoples might reach various levels of mutual understanding while maintaining the vitality of their differences, Kant considers a single authority always to be the expression of some particular will, never the expression of an abstract general will. And hence it produces what he calls a “universal despotism which saps all men’s energies and ends in the graveyard of freedom” (Kant, p. 114).

Ending in the graveyard is not the eternal peace we are looking for. Indeed, as should be clear by now, Kant did not believe one could produce the supposedly rational end of “perpetual peace”. The best one can do – and hence in fact the most rational thing to do – is to cultivate conditions which make peace “more likely”. That is the best we can humanly do, getting “ever closer” to such a union of states is not something we could better, and in his view it is definitely preferable to the two alternatives: Hegel’s world of many states and the constant threat of war, and Habermas’s world of just one – and the despotism of the graveyard of freedom. In my view it is a tragedy that a Kantian voice was not better represented in our referendum. But the contingencies of history might yet turn the tide in his direction.