

## Review - Kant's International relations

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DAVIDE ORSI, AUG 31 2018

### ***Kant's International Relations: The Political Theology of Perpetual Peace***

**By Seán Malloy**

**Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017**

One of the key assumptions of classical political realism is the immutability of human nature. Egoism, competition, and human unsociability are considered the unchangeable features of human beings in all times and places. International politics is therefore regarded as the clash among different interests in a state of perennial war and reciprocal subjugations. Theorists of different schools have challenged these ideas over the course of history, and indeed one of the most cogent theoretical and practical problems in International Relations is whether it is possible to reach the absence of conflict. This problem was addressed by Kant in his essays *Toward Perpetual Peace* and *Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent*, in which he tried to identify the conditions for a peace that is not the preparation of yet another conflict. These Kantian texts are a milestone in the history of international political thought and remain a point of reference for modern cosmopolitan writers, such as Charles Beitz (1999), Thomas Pogge (2008) and David Held (2010). Furthermore, it is no exaggeration to say that all students of International Relations have, at least once, encountered the democratic peace theory as first elaborated by Michael W. Doyle (1983), the most popular (mis)interpretation of the answer given by Kant to this issue.

As Seán Molloy points out in the introduction to his volume, the immense Kantian fortune in International Relations is not often based on a critical study of the whole of Kant's system that was developed in some of the most influential texts in the history of Western philosophy. Modern cosmopolitans and democratic peace theorists mention Kant but do not offer a systematic analysis of his thought and do not engage with his argument. The ambitious endeavour of Molloy's book is to address directly Kant's writings on international politics placing them in the context of his systematic philosophy. The methodology grounding this work is 'the humanist ideal of returning *ad fontes*', through a direct engagement with Kant's texts (pp. 15-16). From this work it emerges that Kant's thought on international affairs is based on theological concepts such as that of providence, which are often disregarded by contemporary readers because of their controversial nature.

The core of Molloy's argument lies in the identification of a continuity between *Perpetual Peace* and the three *Critiques*, as well as on his writings on anthropology and religion. According to this reading, Kant's criticism does not reach only the sphere of pure knowledge (where human knowing power is limited to the sphere of appearances), but also that of politics and international affairs. The dichotomic approach animating all of Kant's thought – which separates phenomenon and noumenon, the world of sense and the world of understanding, reason and understanding, materiality and freedom, human beings and humanity – is also the ground of his theses on perpetual peace and cosmopolitanism. At the ground of his views there is indeed the contrast between human beings as they currently are in the pursuit of their ends, and how they ought to be as rational beings. If we look at political history, we can really see that a man is a wolf to the other man and that negative visions of world politics are confirmed. For this reason, international politics is based on prudence and expediency. However, when human will becomes rational, politics will be based on (absolute) morality. The possibility of the passage to a fully rational and moral human interaction is not demonstrated by Kant (and even less experimented), but merely presupposed in line with his ideas on the teleology of nature as presented in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. According to Molloy, Kant's International Relations is grounded on a political theology: just like when we look at the natural world we must

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presuppose its purposiveness, also in our practical life we must think and act as 'if there is a rational ordered plan' (p. 75) and an author of both natural and moral laws. However this is not the God of the Bible, but a critical, post-scriptural deity that ordered the universe according to a telos leading human history towards more rational stages (pp. 130-136). Even though this may seem unacceptable from a secular and rationalist perspective, for Molloy, Kant's ideas on cosmopolitanism and peace are based on hope and faith and not on empirical statements about republican or democratic governments and their relations.

With this book, Molloy offers a useful resource for students of International Relations and International Political Thought who want to study Kant's complex thought. The book highlights the centrality of critical theology and of the concepts of God and providence in Kant's work. Even though known to the most careful of Kant's readers, it is never put at the centre of debates over Kant in IR. Another merit of this work is its contribution to contemporary debates in international political theory (see the Epilogue of the book, pp. 165-175). According to Molloy, despite their promises and success, contemporary cosmopolitans such as Pogge, Beitz and Held, do not reach the real political world beyond academia. The reason for this is that they fail to give an account of the ways in which international politics should become different from what they are now. For example, they do not explain on what grounds gross distributive injustices would give way to fairer policies and to a different world order. Why, Molloy asks, are the same 'vicious, uncaring, and exploitative creatures' acting unfairly and committing crimes towards the poor and the weak supposed to reform a 'political system of which they are the beneficiaries' (p. 170)? For Kant the answer was in the belief that 'nature has an end or purpose' and that, therefore, we can submit our nature to rational morality and duties. Not equipped with Kant's political theology and philosophical reflection on teleology, contemporary theorists seem unable to answer this question and therefore to fully justify their views.

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