A Critique Of Kant’s Guarantee Of Perpetual Peace

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ABSTRACT
Liberal theories of International Relations give great importance to Kant’s Perpetual Peace, namely the idea that international conflict will necessarily and indefinitely be eliminated thanks to the appeal of commerce to human nature. This essay argues that this position is highly problematic, both for Kant’s theory itself and for liberal theory in general. Starting with an overview of the current literature on the topic, it proceeds by looking at the rationality of Kant’s argument in light of several aspects of International Relations: human nature itself, domestic politics, as well as the ever-changing character of International Relations. It concludes by calling for a more contemporary approach to liberal theory as its bases need more theoretical strength.

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INTRODUCTION
Can we achieve Immanuel Kant’s Perpetual Peace? This question is highly relevant to International Relations, both empirically and within the scholarship. Indeed, liberal theories in politics and economics use this concept as though it were true, as though the possibility of achieving such a virtue were within reach for humankind, by applying Kant’s propositions to real-world politics. In recognition of the influence of this theory, there is a need to study the primary source and critically analyze its premises.

To address the question of whether Kant’s Perpetual Peace can be achieved, this paper will examine the main aspect that can be seen as problematic with Kant’s thesis: the perpetuity of peace. Specifically, it asks: is the concept of perpetuity applicable to humankind? Is it applicable to the concept of peace? These questions lead the argument to one aspect within Kant’s original piece that is arguably the most debatable: his argument regarding the ‘guarantee’ for humankind to achieve perpetual peace. This paper will argue that perpetual peace, understood through Kant’s lens, is not achievable because of the understanding of nature (especially human nature) that Kant has.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Democratic Peace Theory
The current literature on Kant’s Perpetual Peace is rather divided regarding its feasibility. A small yet highly influential number of International Relations scholars, such as Oneal and Russet (1999), have aimed to adapt Kant’s pillars for perpetual peace to our modern times through the concept of Democratic Peace Theory (DPT), and have argued that it is feasible. Others, such as Shiller (2013), have argued that the precepts of modern DPT do not fit Kant’s principles, or that “DPT appears to have extremely little explanatory power” as a predictor of international outcomes, wherefore its value is negligible (Layne, 1994, p. 7).

Most of the literature finds perpetual peace impossible to achieve for various reasons. One such reason derives from the basic premise of classical realism: conflict is inevitable, as trying to gain power is part of human nature, and brings suspicion and fear among other states worrying about their own survival (Morgenthau, 1948, pp. 13-21). Here, human nature is shown to be understood differently from Kant, as the latter sees human nature as being the driver for perpetual peace, while the former sees it as the...
reason for perpetual conflict. Even liberal scholars of International Relations see human nature as war-prone, and argue that war can be mitigated, rather than eliminated, through work like Kant’s (Grieco, 1988, pp. 492-495).

The Guarantee Thesis

The main concern regarding Kant’s piece, the ‘guarantee’ of perpetual peace, has been found by scholars to be recurrent in Kant’s work (Caranti, 2014, p. 146), hence why it is highly relevant to study its feasibility. However, the literature on this issue is thin. Caranti identified three major concerns in the literature regarding what he calls the ‘guarantee thesis:’ an epistemological concern, an anthropological concern, and a moral concern (Ibid., pp. 147-148). The epistemological concern relates to the fact that Kant essentially assumes that “ perpetual peace is the goal toward which humanity is going,” but he has no assurance of that (Ibid., p. 147). The second concern, the anthropological one, refers to the duality within man and takes issue with Kant’s guarantee that “humans’ propensity to evil” will be ‘controlled’ by nature (Ibid., p. 148). Both the epistemological and anthropological points will be expanded upon later in this essay when examining Kant’s understanding of rationality. As for the moral concern, if nature is what makes humans moral, there would be a moral void within human action (Ibid.). This critique deserves further elaboration elsewhere.

In addition to Caranti, several authors have tried to address these issues. Guyer, for instance, counters the epistemological concern by arguing that the ‘guarantee thesis’ is not essential to Kant’s reasoning, as it relates to an objective for mankind rather than an inevitability (2006). Owing to the centrality in the ‘guarantee thesis’ of Kant’s views on universal rationality and perpetuity, they will be further elaborated upon and analyzed below.

Immanuel Kant’s ‘Guarantee Thesis’

In the First Supplement to Towards Perpetual Peace, called “Of the Guarantee for Perpetual Peace,” Kant elaborates on why he believes that humankind will eventually reach perpetual peace, all over the world, and clearly puts this as though it were within the reach of humankind to achieve such a feat. In his explanation, Kant argues that there are several steps to this process.

First, Kant holds that nature has made the world hospitable to men everywhere: “[Nature] has made it possible for human beings to live in all the regions of the earth” (2006, p. 87). Second, he argues that, because of human nature, war has spread humanity all over the globe: “through war, [nature] has driven humankind… into the most inhospitable regions in order to populate them” (Ibid.). Consequently, people will be separated into groups according to linguistic and religious differences (Ibid., pp. 91-92). Third, mankind has, in turn, developed republics – or will eventually do so – in which the people are essentially the rulers. As people now bear the costs of war (fundamentally understanding rulers and people as the same unit), they will decide to avoid war at all costs. Kant admits that this state of peace is not as stable as would be required for perpetual peace: “a permanent universal peace by means of the so-called European balance of power is a pure illusion” (Delahunty and Yoo, 2010, p. 442). However, Kant argues that nature, again, uses human passions and relies on the “spirit of trade, which cannot coexist with war, which will, sooner or later, take hold of every people” (2006, p. 92).

As argued by Caranti, the ‘guarantee thesis’ is both an objective and a subjective thesis: “trade is impossible in wartime, while economic interdependence among states decreases the likelihood of war” and “the habit of bargaining and negotiating habituates people to resolving their disagreements in a non-violent manner” (2014, p. 147). In sum, Kant argues that “nature guarantees perpetual peace through the mechanism of human inclinations” (2006, p. 92).

Analysis: Universal Rationality and Perpetuity

Before going into the core of this analysis, it is important to acknowledge that the goal is not to twist Kant’s words in a way that suggests he would have had a certain and definitive opinion regarding modern issues. Rather, because of the importance of his thinking upon modern theory and ideologies, the aim is to look at the understanding of the notion of human nature according to Kant, especially regarding his view of humankind, or at least human beings, as universally rational. The analysis will start by looking at individual rationality, moving on to leaders and diplomats (also understood as representatives of the people within Kant’s republics), and finishing by applying Kant’s vision onto humankind in general.

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Are Perpetuity And Human Nature Compatible Concepts?

Interestingly, Kant argues in the First Supplement that, “what guarantees perpetual peace is nothing less than the great artist nature” (2006, p. 85). What this entails is that Kant, accepting a dual side to human beings, considers the existence of selfishness within humankind. Regardless of whether it was his intention (especially because structural realism as a school did not exist at his time of writing), this results in an argument that is close to realist premises. Indeed, early classical realism recognized this duality within mankind, and argued that this was a permanent feature of human nature. Early liberalism, in line with Kant’s thinking, also saw this duality, but argued that this ‘evil’ side could be harnessed, that it could become the source of cooperation between individuals as humankind’s selfishness would make human beings inclined to preserve commercial relationships and avoid war. Although this stands in opposition to classical realism, which argues that the ‘evil’ in men leads to war (because of the incapacity to trust one another), the recognition of duality means that the basic premises of both schools are rather similar. This might be an interesting point in trying to reconcile both literatures.

What makes this understanding of human rationality more problematic is the fact that, while Kant holds that it can be harnessed, it assumes that this rationality is similar in all human beings, namely that it is universal. For instance, Kant assumes in several steps towards his perpetual peace that humankind universally wants the same thing, and more importantly that it would aim to achieve it through universal means. Kant posits that:

“… to form a group of rational beings, which, as a group, require universal laws for their preservation, of which each member is, however, secretly inclined to make an exception of himself, and to organize them and arrange a constitution for them in such a way that, although they strive against each other in their private intentions, the latter check each other in such a way that the result in their public conduct is just as if they had no such evil intentions” (2006, pp. 90-91).

Arguably, this is valuable in order to support the attainability of Kant’s theory, and truthfully relates to ideas enshrined in Social Contract theories. However, rationality is, in several respects, a subjective concept. Indeed, in a state of nature, although individuals A and B might want the same thing (e.g., wealth), A might think this would be better achieved by killing B, while B might think this would be better achieved through cooperation.

Also, it is interesting to note the importance assigned by Kant to the ‘republics’ in compelling individuals onto the right path, through means of harnessing individuals’ “selfish inclinations” (2006, p. 90). As mentioned, rationality is different for different people in terms of goals, and in terms of reaching these goals. However, even if one assumes that all members of mankind have similar goals and similar means, for Kant’s thesis to function, we must also assume that the ‘end-product’ of society will universally be a republic. Literature on this issue has already been put forward, particularly regarding the fact that the democracies of today do not fit with Kant’s vision of republics as the ultimate polity. One must also consider the fact that it is irrational to believe that all polities will become republics. Whether this is because citizens do not want such a system, or because it has been imposed upon them, is not the central question. The fact remains that the concept of universality as seen in Kant’s understanding of rational decision-making is inherently paradoxical in relation to his thesis on guaranteed perpetual peace.

Having examined the rationality of human beings, and whether it is possible to argue for some universal condition of human beings in terms of their political reasoning, it emerges that human beings cannot be universally rational for several reasons. Rationality is a subjective notion, as exemplified above, and since political entities are made up of different human beings, rationality itself cannot be assumed to be unitary. As such, Kant’s understanding of the duality of human nature, which suggests that it might be possible to make some reconciliations within modern International Relations literature, fails to adequately account for conflicting human behaviors, perceived as rational in themselves, that make perpetual peace an unlikely reality.

Leaders and Diplomats

Early realism pictured the state as a ‘black box’ in which domestic affairs could not interfere with state actions and state preferences. The latter were assumed to be unchanging and uniform, as though
state survival in the anarchic system were the only thing that mattered. Reaction to external stimuli (or to no stimuli) was also assumed to be the start to any state decision to defend itself or to attack another state.

Thankfully, more balanced notions were introduced within International Relations and the importance of the influence of different domestic conditions upon international decision-making has become a more widely accepted notion. Scholars, such as Putnam (1988), Knopf (1993), Evans (1993), Mansfield and Snyder (1995), Moravcsik (1997), and Ripsman (2000) have all addressed this issue from a range of angles. Similarly, the impact of leaders and diplomats upon foreign policy decision-making regarding vital aspects of International Relations, such as war and peace, has been assessed to be much larger than what was initially expected. Again, there is extensive literature on the issue: Allison (1969), Hermann (1978), Kowert and Hermann (1997), and Byman and Pollack (2001), among others.

However, to come back to Kant’s Towards Perpetual Peace, it is assumed that individuals within republics will act as best as they can to prevent war. One obviously cannot criticize Kant for failing to imagine what the future would be, but it is important to understand how Kant’s view on rational decision-making might be right or wrong, considering his legacy and impact upon later liberal literature and policy-making. As already argued by various authors, such as Shiller (2013), Kant viewed what was to become republics as political entities in which citizens would be the ones bearing the costs of war, which thus constituted the basis for rational decision-making. As seen in the previous section, this reasoning is clearly marred by some issues.

Nonetheless, if we assume that within today’s political societies, the Kantian logic of human rationality applies to representatives of the people as well, his argument could be extended to our modern times. However, the emerging literature on the rationality of foreign policy-making clearly pictures a reality different from Kant’s. Decision-making at the international level is not made by ‘ordinary people,’ the ones that Kant imagined as holding the reins. Diplomats and leaders negotiate on a one-on-one basis, or at least in small groups in relatively closed quarters. The above-mentioned literature regarding the impact of leaders’ differences upon foreign policy-making seems to agree on one thing: the personal characteristics of leaders do differ and these characteristics, in turn, become actual variables of war and peace.

Considering this aspect of International Relations, the main issue here is that there is extensive evidence of irrational behaviour in foreign policy-making (Mandel, 1984). When discussing issues of war and peace, mistakes arising from miscalculations are obviously different from irrational behaviour. Kant assumes a universal rationality within humankind, including for leaders. Again, we cannot criticize Kant for not foreseeing the future. Rather, this critique aims to bring balance to modern DPT, which fails to look at the role of leaders and diplomats. Modern DPT also puts excessive emphasis upon the role of domestic affairs. The literature has clearly shown that human nature, including in leaders, is not constant; instead, it is unpredictable and dependent upon individual characteristics. In essence, the factors of unpredictability and irrationality that accompany political leaders and diplomats make Kant’s Perpetual Peace unhelpful in the search for long-lasting peace.

Another important issue present in Kant’s Guarantee is the argument that the “separation of several independent, neighboring states from one another” is not problematic (Kant, 2006, p. 91, emphasis added). As mentioned earlier, he posits that states will be divided alongside linguistic and religious lines. Here, he acknowledges the fact that there is also a duality within this division; these “differences have a tendency to lead to mutual hatred and serve as a pretext for war, but in the wake of increasing… agreement regarding their principles, they lead to mutual understanding and agreement to peace” (Ibid., p. 92). This is interesting because Kant keeps referring to this divided nature within both men and states, both being equally capable of good and evil. Although Kant seems to be convinced of his argument, the simple fact that he expresses this dual aspect means that perpetuity is not a characteristic that we can attribute to the international system of states unless we assume that they will be locked in an eternal equilibrium that ensures lasting peace. Moreover, he paints a decidedly optimistic picture of religions, arguing that morality is the same regardless of what religion someone follows. According to Kleingeld’s interpretation of Kant’s text, he even goes as far as to say that there is “only one religion that is valid for all human beings and in all times” (footnote by Kleingeld in Kant, 2006, p. 93). This is problematic insofar as
even (arguably minor) differences in religious ideologies have a tendency to increase conflict. In sum, there are concerns regarding the possibility of applying Kant’s interpretation of rationality onto the current international system. It presents several flaws, most notably regarding leaders’ and diplomats’ rationality, as well as regarding the danger of religious and linguistic differences to the prospect of peace.

**Are Perpetuity And Peace Compatible Concepts For Humankind?**

Beyond polities and their leaders, Kant’s understanding of rationality regarding the concepts of perpetuity and peace has consequences for humankind in general. Over the course of history, different philosophers and ideologies have attempted to prove that civilization (defined here as the totality of humankind) was moving towards a certain point, which would somehow be the end (understood here as final goal) of civilization. Coming from extremely different standpoints on the political spectrum, and at two very different times in recent history, Marx and Fukuyama have made claims regarding the end of humankind. Marx essentially argued that capitalism would ‘destroy itself’, automatically leading to communist uprisings, in turn leading to the establishment of communist societies. Fukuyama, in his *The End of History and the Last Man*, argued that the defeat of communism at the end of the Cold War constituted “the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 4). However, both authors have been proven wrong in terms of empirical evidence, but their respective work has had heavy influence on ideology, hence why it is critical to consider the notion of perpetuity.

Kant made a claim similar to Marx and Fukuyama by saying that humankind will eventually achieve perpetual peace, but what makes it even more interesting is his position on human agency. He assumes that nature itself is driving humanity towards perpetual peace, regardless of whether humankind is making actual efforts to achieve it: “If I say of nature that she wills that this or that occur, I do not mean that she imposes a duty on us to do it, for this can be done only by free practical reason; rather I mean that she herself does it, whether we will or not” (Kant, 2006, p. 90). When authors like Marx pictured the establishment of communism as the end of humanity, they most frequently argued for an active role of humankind in achieving such a thing (although Marx believed that historical materialism made Communism an inevitable feat, he still argued that people had an active role in taking steps toward this goal). Kant diverges from this as he argues that, simultaneously, humankind can have an active and passive role in achieving perpetual peace. This partially shields him from criticism as he acknowledges the role of human agency, yet his unswerving faith in nature’s intrinsic power to achieve peace has, to put it mildly, been difficult to observe. History has shown that nothing is finite, or infinite, and as Guyer argued, it is much more relevant to talk about a probability than a guarantee, when speaking about perpetual peace (Guyer, 2006, p. 298).

**CONCLUSION: HOW PROBLEMATIC IS THE ‘GUARANTEE THESIS’ FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND HOW CAN IT BE USEFUL?**

Exploring the guarantee thesis put forward by Immanuel Kant bears value for two main reasons; first, because it is under-studied in comparison to other works by the philosopher; and second, Kant’s basic premises are essential since his thought is so prominent within modern political theory in domestic as well as international fields. A few conclusions can be drawn, and insights had, from the present analysis.

First, his understanding of human nature has been shown to be problematic because the assumption that perpetual peace will occur, often present in liberal International Relations theories, is essentially not as strong as it is pictured and assumed to be. Although Kant might be correct in some cases regarding human nature, he himself admits that there is a duality to humankind, and natural rationality supposedly forces a person to be a good citizen even if not a morally good person (2006, p. 90). The simple fact that this duality exists within Kant’s work forces one to dismiss the possibility of perpetuity as a characteristic of humankind. Indeed, Kant’s thesis requires nature to continuously ‘enforce’ rationality, both within individual human beings and republics. It would be much more relevant to speak of a possibility of achieving peace, rather than a guarantee of achieving a perpetual one.
Moreover, the critique of liberal theories’ assumptions can also include the growing importance of transnational networks, NGOs, and sub-state regions; they are all linked to the retreat of the state (Strange, 1996). This clashes with any attempt to adapt the ‘guarantee thesis’ to present times because of its conceptualization of the state as a unitary actor. Thus we can conclude that, although the ‘guarantee thesis’ has always been problematic for the reasons identified above, it would continue to lose relevance and applicability were the international arena to continue to become less state-centric.

As evidenced throughout this analysis, it is also unfair to be wholly dismissive of Kant’s Perpetual Peace. Most importantly, this is because Kant, in his role as a key theorist that influenced the liberal International Relations scholarship, used premises rather similar to those of realist International Relations scholars, particularly regarding the selfish nature of humankind and the absence of considerations about leaders and diplomats in ‘making’ International Relations (rather conceiving of the state as a ‘black box’). As such, Kant’s Guarantee of Perpetual Peace can provide useful guidelines as to how institutions can be arranged as to promote perpetual peace (especially regarding commercial interests) but should not be taken as an actual guarantee. Indeed, perpetuity is a concept that cannot be readily used in the context of International Relations, especially when combined with universal rationality. Nonetheless, Kant emphasized that economic and commercial interests are at the core of human interests in general. It should be noted that Kant’s seemingly universal appeal might be included within peace accords, for instance, in order to invoke humanity’s attachment to economic power with a view to preserving peace, but employed as a temporary solution amongst others rather than an infinite safeguard against war.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


