

# THE FIFTH ANTINOMY IN KANT'S PHILOSOPHY

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## Abstract

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Contrary to generally accepted opinion that politics plays no important part in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the paper offers evidence of his permanent preoccupation with the political issues. Present practically in all his writings, including most metaphysical book Critique of Pure Reason, taken together with Kant's Perpetual Peace, this paper creates a solid base for plausible plea that the "Philosopher from Königsberg" has formulated coherent and consequently developed system of political philosophy. But it is exactly in this system where, apart from four generally known antinomies of pure reason, the fifth antinomy appears, this time in the realm of practical reason. Namely, his optimistic trust in possibility of successful introduction of the World State of Freedom and Eternal Peace, stood in unexpected but evidently antinomic contradiction to Kant's resolutely formulated pessimism concerning the capacity of human kind to get rid of its immanent anthropological shortcomings.

**Key words:** *Kant, Antinomy, Politics, Philosophy, Justice, Freedom, Categorical imperative, Perpetual peace, World constitution*

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It is well-known that political philosophy is not the most significant part of Immanuel Kant's oeuvre (Immanuel Kant; 1724-1804), nor it is his theoretical *forte*, but it does have an important place in it, as it has a pronounced influence on the philosophy of cosmopolitanism, the theory of the World State and the conception of Perpetual Peace. To this extent, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), is flagrantly wrong when she writes that: "Unlike many other philosophers – Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, Hegel and others – Kant

did not write about political philosophy.” (Arendt, 1982, p.7) (It is difficult to imagine how such a distinguished author as Hannah Arendt could have uttered such irresponsible and inaccurate misinformation, especially considering that Kant’s theses on political philosophy were known and had received wide publicity during his lifetime. For example, Kant’s fellow citizens-contemporaries even considered the great “Recluse of Königsberg” to be obsessed with politics. Thus, in a benignly sarcastic intoned text published in 1784 in the newspaper *Gothaische gelehrte Zeitungen*, it is stated, among others: “As everyone knows, Herr Professor Kant’s favorite idea is that the highest goal of the human race is to write and put into practice a perfect constitution.” (Qvortrup, 2022) And indeed, at one time in his life, especially in his mature years, according to his own admission and due to his phlegmatic temperament with unexpected passion, Kant seriously dreamed of introducing a universal cosmopolitan constitution, valid for the entire human race: “How sweet it is to dream of introducing a world constitution written in accordance with reason and introduced throughout the world!” (Kant I. , 2012, p.159)

Although Kant did not actually write a systematic presentation of his political philosophy, practically all of his works contain philosophical-political comments and passages that testify to his lifelong interest in the problems of politics. In particular, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), and the twelve years before it, *Towards Perpetual Peace* (1785), as well as the essay *The Idea of a Universal History* (1784), are entirely devoted to issues of political theory. Even in the undoubtedly dominant theoretical-philosophical (epistemological) context of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant occasionally touches on several topics of political philosophy. For illustration, it is in this work that one can find his commentary on Plato, with an undisguised bitter taste of disagreement: “Plato’s *Republic*, which is considered a strong example of dream-like perfection... could only have arisen in the mind of a spoiled thinker,” – adding that it is “...ridiculous the claim of the philosopher (Plato) that a ruler will not rule well and justly if he does not follow the knowledge from the world of ideas.” (Kant, 1970, p.377)

The logic of personal projection is clearly recognized in probably Kant’s most famous political stance and certainly one of the most frequently quoted political passages in general, which is also the key argument for his optimistic belief in the possibility of establishing eternal peace in the world:

“Since the spirit of commerce (*der Handelsgeist*) cannot coexist with war, it will sooner or later necessarily be accepted by all people (as the only model of social life)” (Kant, 1996, p.38) At that time, neither Kant nor anyone else took into account the results of research in the field of **Ethology**, which, almost 180 years later, would experimentally prove the existence of an innate and ineradicable drive for aggression, present in practically all species of animals (even in pigeons, generally accepted as the bird-symbol of peace!). The worst news for Kant's optimism regarding the establishment of a state of eternal peace came from research into aggression in the human race, as its exclusive specialty: the existence of *intra-species aggressiveness*. The founder of the scientific discipline of **Ethology**, Nobel laureate Konrad Lorenz, writes in detail about the phenomenon of intra-species aggression and its implications for human society (Konrad Lorenz: *Das sogenannt Böse. Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression*, 1963, English translation: *On Aggression*, 1966).

Quite expectedly, for such a pronounced individualist as Kant, Plato's authoritarian totalitarian utopia was a repulsive and absolutely unacceptable solution. But, quite surprisingly, instead Kant himself proposes a (no less totalitarian!) liberal utopia!? As Kant says, “..the constitution of that state (the world state, F. M.), will guarantee the greatest freedom in accordance with laws that will ensure the coexistence of each specific type of freedom, with all other types of freedom.” (Kant I. , 1970, p.374B) Among others, it is important to emphasize that the concept according to which the purpose of laws is to ensure respect for the greatest individual freedom, also confirms that the most radical formulation of European liberalism originates from Immanuel Kant and not, as is generally believed, from John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Indeed, J. S. Mill in many places advocates the same maximalist concept of individual liberalism, for example when he emphasizes that, “The only thing for which coercion is justified against any member of a civilized society against his will, is to prevent him from doing harm to others” (Mill, 2011, p.15), but with a reminder that Kant formulated an essentially identical position, 66 years before him.

As we have already seen, even in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, his most abstract philosophical-theoretical work, Kant also debates topics of eminent social and political importance. Referring to his position in the discussion *What is Enlightenment?* (Kant I. , 1996, p.17), in which he emphasizes that absolutely all questions, without exception, should be subjected to rational-critical discussion, with Kant also reminding that “by seeking to exempt religion and legislation from

such criticism... they have only aroused suspicion and lost the serious respect that is gained by the support of free and open rational inquiry.” In addition, it is often forgotten that in this same eminent philosophical-theoretical work, Kant for the first time explicitly and in written form poses the three great questions, which are addressed upon in practical life and, to that extent, are inseparable from politics: 1. “What can I know?”; 2. “What can I do?”; 3. “What can I hope for?” All the more understandable is Kant’s intention in each of these spheres of practical action to open a debate on issues with political implications.

For example, when he relates the concepts of the morally desirable and the morally good, Kant lucidly states that the fundamental good has its justification in itself and therefore cannot depend on anything else. Specifically, this means that someone who lives honestly and in accordance with ethical principles can neither demand nor expect financial rewards (Belohnungen) for it. In other words, you cannot ask to be paid for being honest, that is, for not stealing, not lying, not slandering, because “...that would be like bribing someone to live a moral life.” (Kant I., 1983, p.521) Instead of the categorical imperative, on which the moral system of every society should be constituted, such a society would be founded on a hypothetical imperative, which means that “...the actions of all actors in it would be motivated by selfishness, and not by moral virtue, which would inevitably immediately corrupt such a society.” (Kant I., 1996, p.4) We quote this example to point out some serious misunderstandings resulting from a mistaken and/or superficial reception of Kant’s philosophy, which is far more complex and consistent than is commonly thought.

That even some of the most representative contemporary thinkers who consider themselves Kantians are not immune to the corrosive influence of impermissibly superficial interpretations of Kant’s philosophy is confirmed by the example of the contemporary philosopher from the United States, John Rawls (1921-2002). Generally classified as a Kantian, Rawls received this qualification after the publication of his most famous work, *A Theory of Justice*, (Rawls, 1971) in which he promotes the thesis that people evaluate their actions according to certain ethical principles. The phrase “ethical principles” was enough for Rawls and his theory to be placed without hesitation in Kant’s camp – the first that came to mind by philosophers who, in their social theory, relate human action with ethical assessment. To the possible sarcastic objection that Kant might have been the only philosopher of this provenience that they knew, one must add: If they only knew Kant!

Then they would have to notice that the principles Rawls is talking about are not moral ideas, as in Kant, but that they are simply – barely disguised self-interest(??). Namely, Rawls departs from a kind of hypothetical zero point (“Original Position”). The idea is for the reader to ask himself the question: “What kind of society would he like to live in, in a situation in which he would not know whether he himself would be rich or poor, white or black, socially privileged or handicapped, etc.”? Then Rawls himself concludes that every person would agree without hesitation that he would like “..in that hypothetical society people with equal abilities and talent... to have equal chances for success, regardless of their position in the given social system.” (Rawls, 1971, p.63) It is simply incredible that commentators and critics have not noticed at all that this, as well as the other principles that Rawls refers to in this particular work, are all classic examples of a “hypothetical imperative” – as Kant calls the instances that, unlike the “categorical imperative,” do not fall within the sphere of moral behavior at all!?

Let's remember: unlike the situation of a hypothetical imperative, in which we choose for ourselves how we would act in each specific situation, when quite naturally we all choose the most favorable one for us – the categorical imperative leaves us no room for any choice, or even an assessment of what is better or worse for us! The categorical imperative binds me as an objectively necessary position, independent of my decision and regardless of the consequences of that decision for me, because it categorically obliges me to act as if my action is a universal natural law.” (Kant I. , 1996, p.52) At the same time, as one argument against the assessment of Hannah Arendt and all other authors who overlook the strong, sometimes even dominant presence of political themes in Immanuel Kant's oeuvre suggests, Kant applies the categorical imperative as a moral instance on every occasion and to all forms of human life, from the private sphere, through the relationships of parents and children, to his own politically bold and relevant indications according to which, “the categorical imperative requires that the legislator cannot be the ruler at the same time, but that the people themselves should choose the government through freely elected representatives.” (Arendt, 1982, p.A171)

Besides missing the fact that he preceded the English philosopher J. S. Mill with his liberalism, commentators on Kant's philosophy also failed to point out that in modern philosophy Kant was the first to emphasize the key role of egotism in the development of society. Namely, Kant explicitly reminds us that

“human history is driven by an insatiable appetite for wealth and power, which brings people into a relationship with each other that they can neither endure nor survive outside of it.” (Kant I. , 1991, p.394)

Elsewhere, Kant, several decades before Adam Smith and more emphatically than him, formulated the “Adam Smithian” idea that egotism, *self-loving* (*amour propre*), is the dearest and most precious thing that people see before their eyes, their most important point of reference around which all things revolve in personal interest.” (Kant I. , 1991, p.395) Exactly twenty years after this text (1784), Kant published his ‘Universal History’ (“Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht,” English translation “The Idea of a Universal History on a Cosmopolitical Plan”), where he further develops the idea of selfishness as the driving force of history. According to him, “.. without this selfishness and *unsociability*, which are not at all attractive in themselves... people would live like Arcadian shepherds, in complete harmony, content, in mutual love... but thus all culture with all that adorns humanity, as well as all its best sides, become the fruits of precisely that unsociability which disciplines oneself and encourages human creativity. Just as the trunks in the forest, striving to deprive all other plants around them of air and light, grow tall, straight and proportionate, while the trunks that sprout and grow lonely and to the side, spread their branches in all directions and grow wry and bent.” (Kant I. , 1991, p.396)

However, society must check, control and limit the selfishness and unscrupulousness of the competitive spirit. In order to succeed in this, it is not enough to educate, nor to remind of the moral obligation arising from the formulation of the categorical imperative as a general guideline in life that binds everyone: “that which is humane, neither in ourselves nor in others, should not be treated only as a means, but always as an end too.” (Kant I. , 2002, p.36) According to this, the stability of a society composed of “unsocial” individuals can be ensured only in accordance with Kant’s allegory of the forest trunks. The progress of humanity will best flourish in a social system with the highest degree of individual freedom that will allow constant free struggle and competition between all individuals, but under conditions in which that freedom is specifically determined and legally defined... with a just civil constitution.” (Kant I. , 1991, p.395) Kant, without hesitation and without fear, does not fail to emphasize that such a legal order could not function in an absolutist monarchy (regardless of the fact that he himself lived in such a system!), nor with

only one ruler, because, „if there is no authority higher than the ruler, he will always abuse his power.” (Kant I. , 2006, p.12)

Kant was convinced, or rather – he sincerely believed! – that a republican constitution, conceived as a kind of original contract on which all laws and the entire legal system are based, could lead to lasting stability in any society, without stifling its freedom, as well as ensuring eternal peace for humanity. Kant based his belief in the possibility of adopting such a constitution, and what is more important, his belief in the power of authority that such a constitution would have, on the expectation that “such a constitution would be able to formulate the natural hostility and mutual distrust of people into such a system of laws that would force everyone to submit to the laws.” (Kant I. , 2006, p.59)

By its basic motives, Kant's political philosophy represents a link in the golden chain of eminently humanistic concepts of world history, forged from two premises: 1. That humanity as a whole has a task, common to all people and nations; 2. That this task is axiologically defined as the attainment of the highest virtue. The definition of virtue varies from thinker to thinker. For Kant, it is freedom. For Plato, it is justice. Therefore, his ideal of society is a totalitarian utopia founded on the principle of the rule of justice; reason rules justly. For Kant, the historical task of humanity is to achieve a world state of freedom and eternal peace. Therefore, his ideal society is an abstract liberal utopia composed of free individuals who accept no concrete loyalty, except loyalty to the ideal of personal freedom.

The postulate that humanity has an ethically lofty task, and that history is a process of implementing that task, is authentically philosophical and deeply humanistically inspired in its character. If we assume that it was known to the rulers of Plato's time (and long before him, of course), and if we accept that the majority of them seriously and sincerely sought to rule on the principle of justice (Plato), or freedom (Kant), as the highest virtues and social values, the fact that they never succeeded in doing so and that even today, in the time of the so notoriously imposed mantra “This is the 21st century!”, in parallel with the incredibly spectacular technological gains, injustice reigns in the world more than ever and, at the same time, there is less freedom than ever in history!?

In his most famous work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the section “Transcendental Dialectics,” Kant lists four antinomies of pure reason: 1. Space-time; 2. Parts-whole; 3. Freedom-causality. 4. Necessary Being, God. However, in Kant's political philosophy there is also a fifth antinomy, which Kant himself

failed to note, although he had unequivocally hinted at it. This is directly evidenced by the fact that, as a political thinker, on the one hand, he had an unreservedly optimistic belief in the unlimited progress of society in realizing the ideal of freedom and eternal peace, while on the other hand, as a philosopher, he had an unreservedly pessimistic attitude towards the progress of humanity (??) – which is best seen from his famous aphorism that: “Nothing straight can be carved from the wry wood of humanity.” (Kant I. , 1991, p.398)

And the solution of the riddle of the inversely proportional relationship between the technological development of the modern world and its ethical multiple atrophic Sclerosis is found precisely in the fifth *aporia!* Namely, the introduction of justice, as a substantively equal legal system in all societies in the world, is possible only as an octroyed, forcefully imposed legal model formulated in one specific center, namely in the society that proclaims the established standards of justice as the highest and universally valid, thus giving them an ultimate character. However, the ultimatum that a just system of one society must be accepted by all other societies in the world means *de facto* the abolition of the principle of freedom and the right of each society to live in concordance with its traditional matrices of justice. On the other hand, the affirmation of freedom as the right of everyone to act in accordance with their own interests and possibilities, given the striking disproportion between the military, economic and political power of states in the modern world, leads to the abolition of the principle of justice, as it privileges the most powerful and totally discriminates against the weakest.

Accordingly, the fifth antinomy is confirmed as an insuperable internal contradiction between the principle of justice and the principle of freedom. A world in which one and the same system of justice will rule, imposed as obligatory and valid for all, will necessarily become a world in which freedom is abolished. A world in which freedom is promoted as the highest principle and the general right of all, will inevitably become a world of octroyed, legitimized, canonized injustice!

Does this mean that justice and freedom, the highest ideals for the realization of which the smartest and noblest individuals have thought, dreamed, lived and died for generations, killed and perished countless unknown and known individuals, are simply not achievable? That we should give up on them, abandon them, forget them? Could they be forgotten at all, and if we they could, would it be worth living without the dream of freedom, without

the belief in justice! Of course, justice and freedom are necessary, indispensable, both as real contents and as ideals of every person and every society. And this is precisely where the riddle of the antinomic character of Kant's fifth antinomy lies: "To every person... to every society!" The antinomy is activated at the moment when these ideals are monopolized, appropriated and then imposed on everyone else as concrete contents, defined and prescribed by only one person or by only one society!

Every being is free only if he is free in its own way. Every society is just only if it follows the highest standards of justice formed in its own tradition. Universal justice, uniform in content and the same for all societies, is the end of the freedom of each of them and the negation of the principle of justice. The world of unlimited freedom in which everyone does everything that suits him if he can, when he can and to whom he can, is the world of tyranny of the strongest and the negation of the principle of freedom!

Justice and freedom exist only as long as they are respected as universal abstract principles and trans-historical ideals of every person and all societies, which are realized only in concrete, substantially different historically determined legal projections and ethical systems. Then and only then, the antinomic relationship between the "wry tree of humanity" and its ideals of justice and freedom is lost, which not only make humanity what it is, but also raise it from a *Degraded mass of animated dust*, (George Gordon Byron, 1808) into a single eschatologically defined being capable of permanently harmonizing his life with the two highest ideals.

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