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Kant's Project of Perpetual Peace Today

Abstract: The paper is an extended analysis of selected fragments of Kant's essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795). On October 24, 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron, during an official meeting in the Vatican, presented Pope Francis with a copy of the French edition of Immanuel Kant's treatise *Toward Perpetual Peace*. The paper begins by emphasizing the symbolic meaning of this event, which shows the timeliness of the text, which was written almost 230 years ago. Kant appears here as a publicist who comments on the political events of his era and formulates bold normative projects for future politics. In the following, metaphors of war and peace in Kant's philosophy are reflected on and essential ideas in *Toward Perpetual Peace* are analysed. Although today there is no doubt that many international institutions are a practical implementation of Kant's postulates, the concept of 'perpetual peace' may still seem to be utopian. Therefore, the arguments that Kant presents in defence of the reality of his philosophical project are analysed in more detail. Particular attention is given to the so-called 'guarantees of nature' and Kant's project is confronted with the reality of contemporary politics, especially the war in Ukraine.

Keywords: Immanuel Kant, peace, war, philosophical project, philosophy of politics

Abstrakt: Príspevok je rozšírenou analýzou vybraných fragmentov Kantovej eseje *K večnému mieru* (1795). Dňa 24. októbra 2022 francúzsky prezident Emmanuel Macron počas oficiálneho stretnutia vo Vatikáne odovzdal pápežovi Františkovi kópiu francúzskeho vydania tohto Kantovho diela. Príspevok sa začína zdôraznením symbolického významu tejto udalosti, ktorý poukazuje na aktuálnosť textu, ktorý bol napísaný pred takmer 230 rokmi. Kant tu vystupuje ako publicista, ktorý komentuje politické udalosti svojej doby a formuluje odvážne normatívne projekty pre budúcu politiku. Následne text reflektuje metafory vojny a mieru v Kantovej filozofii a analyzuje podstatné myšlienky textu *K večnému mie-*

ru. Hoci dnes už niet pochyb o tom, že mnohé medzinárodné inštitúcie sú praktickou realizáciou Kantových postulátov, koncept „večného mieru“ sa stále môže zdať utopický. Preto sa podrobnejšie analyzujú argumenty, ktoré Kant predkladá na obranu reálnosti svojho filozofického projektu. Osobitná pozornosť je venovaná tzv. „zárukám prírody“ a Kantov projekt je konfrontovaný s realitou súčasnej politiky, najmä s vojnou na Ukrajine. **Kľúčové slová:** Immanuel Kant, mier, vojna, filozofický projekt, filozofia politiky

On 24 October 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron, during an official meeting in the Vatican, offered Pope Francis a copy of the French edition of Immanuel Kant's treatise *Toward Perpetual Peace*. The donated specimen stands as a unique witness to history. The book, before it went to France, was in the collection of the *Academic Reading Room*, the first Polish scientific student society, active in Lviv from the mid-19th century until the outbreak of the Second World War.¹ Lviv and much of western Ukraine were then part of Poland. In 1939, as a result of the implementation of a pact between fascist Germany and the Soviet Union, these territories, including Lviv, fell under Soviet occupation.

Looking more closely at the donated book, it is a French translation of an essay written by Kant. In its contents, the French saw an endorsement of the overthrow of the despotic monarchy and the establishment of the first republic, while the Poles read it as a condemnation of the partitioning policies of Austria, Prussia, and Russia. The copy that Macron offered Francis had been used by Polish students during the brief period when their homeland, after one hundred and twenty-three years of non-existence, was briefly reconstituted within its new borders. This took place in Lviv, a city that, in its turbulent history, had been ruled by Ruthenia, Poland, Austria, the Soviet Union, and Germany. For more than thirty years now, Lviv has been an important cultural and scientific centre of an independent Ukraine.

¹ Lubov, D. C. 2022. Pope meets French President Emmanuel Macron. *Vatican News*. [cited on 2024-05-30]. Available online: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-10/pope-francis-meets-french-president-emmanuel-macron.html>. Almost all Polish reports on this meeting focused only on the consideration of whether we were dealing with plundered Polish property (so-called war loss after World War II). This speculation transpired to be unfounded, but effectively overshadowed the significance of the gesture. (Anonymous. *An International Scandal*. [cited on 2024-05-30]. Available online: <https://www.wiecejnizpolska.pl/en/post/an-international-scandal/>).

The offering of this book is deeply symbolic today. More than a century ago, readers of the French translation of the treatise, penned by Kant, still lived in Lviv. At the beginning of the 20th century, people reading Kant's treatise could believe that many of the philosopher's forecasts had come true in their lifetime. Today, with Russian missiles raining down on Lviv, the very same book is expected to give hope that the philosopher's project, although not yet realised, does not cease to be an inspiration to us.

Kant – The publicist

It is to Immanuel Kant that we owe one of the most incisive characterizations of the Enlightenment:

*Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority. Minority is inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! Have courage to make use of your own understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment.*²

With these words begins arguably the most famous of all the essays that Kant published in the last twenty years of his life, in the popular journal *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, one of the most important periodicals of the era. It also shows that Kant, towards the end of his long life, broke his own stereotype of being an exclusively academic philosopher, devoted solely to scholarly work. In fact, Kant did not live in isolation from the contemporary world; he took a keen interest in current political events, commenting on them and proposing bold solutions.

With the publication of his famous essay *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*, Kant not only engaged in the then discussion about the Enlightenment, but also initiated a new area of his research: reflection on history and politics.³ Thus, Kant's earlier treatises on moral

² Kant, I., 1784/1999. *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* (1784), trans. M. J. Gregor. In: Gregor, M. J., ed. I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 17 [8:35]. For a more recent reading of Kant's essay, see: Švihura, L. A., 2022. *Audire aude! Alúzia na Kantovu Odpoveď na otázku: Čo je osvietenstvo?* [Audire aude! An allusion to Kant's Answer to the question: What is Enlightenment?]. *Studia Philosophica Kantiana*, 11(1), pp. 55–60.

³ The essay on the Enlightenment is one of many texts Kant published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. The most important of these were: *Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan sim*

philosophy gained an important addendum in the form of a philosophical theory of state and law. It became evident that it was not enough to indicate what was meant by freedom, but that the question also had to be answered: how could an individual human's right to freedom be reconciled with the same right of all other human beings?

Kant's essays dealt with themes that most sparked the imagination of his readers, inquiring about the source of evil, the beginning or end of history, the relationship between theory and practice. He referred to the most topical events of the late 18th century, such as the French Revolution or the idea of moral progress. Moreover, he did so in such a way that his voice continues to be relevant even today. The most famous example to this day remains the 1795 essay *Toward Perpetual Peace*.⁴

To begin with the place that the essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* occupies in Kant's philosophy will be outlined. Then the most important ideas expressed in this essay will be discussed. Some of the themes will briefly be presented, others will be discussed in greater depth, also referring to other texts by Kant and to some contemporary examples. Finally, there is a reflection on the topicality of Kant's philosophical project.

***Toward Perpetual Peace* in Kant's philosophy**

War and peace imagery permeates all of Kant's philosophy and cannot be reduced to mere concerns of political philosophy or historiosophy. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant describes metaphysics as a battlefield, as a place of endless disputes, most notably disputes between rationalism and empiricism.⁵ The image of a war between conflicting philosophical schools still appeals to our imagination today, but for Kant it must have been particularly natural. The 18th century was indeed an age of perpetual warfare, and 18th century philosophy was an arena of constant rivalry between philosophical currents.

(1784), *Of the radical evil in human nature* (1792), *On the Common Saying: That may be correct, but it is of no use in practice* (1793), *The end of all things* (1794).

⁴ Although this essay was not published in a journal, Kant continues in it the same thematic focus that he had previously presented in the pages of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. The essay generated a great deal of interest, and almost immediately a translation into French was produced, and shortly afterwards, also into Polish.

⁵ Kant, I., 1781/1787/1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and edited by Allen W. Wood, Paul Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 99–101 [A VIII–XII]. For an exploration of the conflict between empiricism and rationalism in ethics from a contemporary pragmatist point of view, see: Švihura, L., 2021. Postmoderná morálka a Kantova etika [Postmodern Morality and Kant's Ethics]. *Studia Philosophica Kantiana*, 10(2), pp. 21–41.

Kant addresses this philosophical rivalry in a special way; he favours neither side but subjects the dispute itself to a procedure of judgement, typical of liberal democracy. Thus, Kant makes it clear that a dispute should not be resolved by force, but on the contrary by law and its public application, i.e. by judicial process. This is precisely what the title word ‘critique’ implies. Kant’s main work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, carries out a formal judicial process over metaphysics.⁶ Thereby, Kant provides an exemplary answer, not only to the question regarding the way in which a theoretical dispute in philosophy can be resolved, but also – indirectly – how liberation from the spiral of violence can be achieved in the real world. The solution that Kant offers as an answer to the conflicts between scholars, and which was labelled “perpetual peace in philosophy,”⁷ became a universal antidote to war in any form.

Two conclusions may be drawn from this. First, Kant believes that the achievement of durable peace is attainable. Secondly, that the achievement of durable peace in any field can only be achieved by peaceful methods. Hence, Kant not only sides with legal and judicial procedures, but also formulates a secular response to the long tradition of the religious way of understanding ‘perpetual peace’ merely as a supernatural gift of grace.

Already the first sentences of the essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* reveal Kant’s polemical intention. The text begins with irony. Apparently, a Dutch innkeeper, the owner of the inn “Towards Perpetual Peace,” was said to have painted a cemetery on his signboard. The ingenious innkeeper thus made known what he thought of the efforts of politicians, rulers, and, above all, the military, who keep promising peace and can never permanently secure it. The radical understanding of peace as the result of total war, after which all life disappears, is one that we must completely reject as a blind alley that cannot be pursued. Kant also rejects such a way of resolving conflicts, exposing himself to accusations of utopian pacifism. These accusations need to be confronted, especially today, in the face of a new war in Europe, and raise questions about the effectiveness of the institutions that are tasked with guarding world peace. This thread will be revisited at the end of the text.

To emphasize again: true peace, according to Kant, is not the peace of

⁶ Ibid., p. 622–623 [A 703]; Höffe, O., 2022. Der wahre Weltbürger: zur philosophischen und politischen Aktualität Kants. In: Gerhard, V., Weber, M., Schepelmann, M., eds. *Immanuel Kant 1724–2024. Ein europäischer Denker*. Oldenburg: De Gruyter, p. 108.

⁷ Kant, I., 1796/2009. Proclamation of the imminent conclusion of a treaty of perpetual peace in philosophy (1796), trans. and edited by Peter Heath, in: I. Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the burial ground, but the peace resulting from law.⁸ Kant's proposal in 1795 was the radical opposite of what the reality of the late 18th century offered. Most European states, including Prussia, Kant's homeland, were autocracies embroiled in endless wars. During this time, some nations were fighting wars of independence, like the United States of America; others were struggling to change their political system, like France; and still others were losing their sovereignty completely through annexation, like Poland. Most European states pursued an imperial policy, reaping immoral benefits from colonies and conquests. Meanwhile, Immanuel Kant, a loyal subject of the King of Prussia, urges the universal introduction of a republican system. With nearly all European states engaged in war, Kant calls for a perpetual peace. In the face of ever-expanding European imperialism, Kant explicitly condemns colonialism.⁹ Given all this, Kant's philosophical project must be either utopian or visionary.

The key tenets of the perpetual peace project

The direct reason that prompted Kant to publish the essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* was the conclusion of the peace treaty between France and Prussia in Basel on 5 April 1795. This treaty was of symbolic importance, because in it the monarchy acknowledged for the first time the right of the new republic to exist.¹⁰ Kant not only speaks on the actual events of the French Revolution, but also refers to the diplomatic practices that permeated the entire political life of Europe at the time. If, therefore, one was looking in *Toward Perpetual Peace* merely for Kant's commentary on the Peace of Basel, one would be disappointed, as instead of a position on current political events, Kant formulated a strictly philosophical proposal. In other words, Kant saw the Peace of Basel as an opportunity to utter what he thought it would be if reason (rather than simply politicians) was in charge. Any reader of the essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* could, on their own account, compare reality with the ideal Kant presented. At the cost of historical actuality, Kant's treatise gained a timeless, universal value.

Kant's essay, in its formal layers, retains the semblance of a genuine treaty, as it contains preliminary and definitive articles, supplements, appendices, and even one secret article. However, ultimately the text is

⁸ Kleingeld, P., 2022. Kant über Freiheit und Frieden. In: Gerhard, V., Weber, M., Schepelmann, M., eds. *Immanuel Kant 1724–2024. Ein europäischer Denker*. Oldenburg: De Gruyter, p. 117.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lefebvre, G., 1964. *The French Revolution*, vol. II: *From 1793 to 1799*, trans. J. H. Stewart and J. Fruglietti. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 153.

not a proposal for a solution to any particular political problem, nor is it a polemic against any particular political stance. Rather, Kant's essay is a travesty of political practice and an ironic exposure of its dark side. On the one hand, Kant presents with seriousness the rational conditions for a permanent peace between states; on the other hand, he exposes to ridicule the game of appearances played by politicians. It could be said that *Toward Perpetual Peace* is a manifesto in which Kant enunciates a series of principles, almost all of which are the opposite of those proclaimed by the treaty concluded in Basel.

One may say that Kant proposes a *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective. The peace he contemplates is not a temporary one but is an eternal peace. On the grounds of Kant's philosophy, this means that *Toward Perpetual Peace* discusses the necessary conditions whose fulfilment will make it possible for war as such to be altogether eliminated. 'Perpetual peace' is not just a rhetorical phrase with which we decorate the ceremonial end of this or that war but is the idea of the definitive end of war in general. In other words, Kant lays out the rational conditions that are necessary for perpetual peace to be truly realised. He calls these conditions preliminary articles:

1. "No treaty of peace shall be held to be such if it is made with a secret reservation of material for a future war."
2. "No independently existing state (whether small or large) shall be acquired by another state through inheritance, exchange, purchase, or donation."
3. "Standing armies (*miles perpetuus*) shall in time be abolished altogether."
4. "No national debt shall be contracted with regard to the external affairs of a state."
5. "No state shall forcibly interfere in the constitution and government of another state."
6. "No state at war with another shall allow itself such acts of hostility as would have to make mutual trust impossible during a future peace; acts of this kind are employing *assassins (percussores)* or *poisoners (venefici)*, *breach of surrender, incitement to treason (perduellio)* within the enemy state, and so forth."¹¹

¹¹ Kant, I., 1795/1999. *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795). In: I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. M. J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 317–320 [8: 343–347].

All preliminary articles take the form of negation or restriction. They prohibit something in the relationship between states or eliminate something in the sphere of facts. Kant's intention is to create conditions in which peace ceases to be only a temporary *interbellum*. This can only be achieved by eliminating all motives for beginning a war in the future. It must be done in the sphere of law and in the sphere of facts. In the sphere of law, the first step is to formulate a treaty in such a manner as to leave war out of consideration at all as a possible future solution. In short, thinking of war as a possible option must be abandoned. The second step is to stop the practice of treating any state and its citizens merely as objects. The catalogue of unacceptable practices is long: the succession of states typical of former monarchies, all colonial policy, but also the annexation of territories, or even selling them or exchanging them for others, if this is done with complete disregard for the will of the inhabitants. Examples of many of these practices are provided by the events of recent years and for that matter of recent months. Another condition, the abolition of standing armies, is not just an expression of Kant's naive anti-militarism. Maintaining a standing army not only implies enormous expenditure that deprives us of resources for other purposes. It is known from history that this situation always leads to an endless arms race. Besides, a standing army means consenting to an extreme form of purely instrumental treatment of human beings. Kant sees this as a grave violation of the law of nature. At the same time, Kant is not a utopian and realistically accepts the temporary existence of what can be called a voluntary civil service to which people voluntarily mobilise in defence of the fatherland. The fourth condition concerns the loans taken out for armaments. Just as in Kant's time, this practice today drags poor countries into a spiral of debt, prevents their development, and, as a consequence, deprives them of their sovereignty. This article hardly requires any comment. Article five is equally unequivocal. No state may, under any circumstances, intervene by force in the internal affairs of another state. The allusion embedded in this article was clear to the people of the late 18th century. The Poles, for instance, may have believed that Kant was referring directly to the policy of Prussia, Russia, and Austria, which, exploiting Poland's political and military vulnerability, partitioned its territory and, in 1795, led to the complete erasure from the map of Europe of one of its largest states.¹² Regrettable examples of such

¹² *Toward Perpetual Peace* was the first treatise by Kant translated into Polish. As early as 1797, a Polish translation of this treatise was published in Warsaw, based on the French version published in Königsberg in 1796. According to historical sources, even before 1802, the same

practices continue to occur and are still justified by deceitful excuses similar to those used by the propaganda of Prussia and Russia at the time. The last preliminary condition describes in quite some detail the unacceptable behaviour to be eliminated from political practice and from social life in general. The examples listed by Kant (employing assassins or poisoners, breach of surrender, incitement to treason) certainly do not exhaust all the forbidden practices that impede the restoration of trust. Many of these behaviours are currently prohibited by various international conventions. Certainly, the catalogue of behaviours that we do not accept even in war-time is longer than that of Kant. It is not a matter of detail, but of principle: even during conflict, it is not permissible to go too far. 'Too far' means any such act that makes it impossible to rebuild future relations and renders hope for peace in the future impossible. Unfortunately, the modern world has greatly expanded our awareness of what can indeed be an obstacle to mutual trust between states. Kant does not preach naive fair play, as if borrowed directly from medieval romances of chivalry. The matter is serious and requires the realisation that human beings simply cannot go as far as engaging in certain behaviours.

In the second part, Kant outlines the conditions that make it possible to maintain the peace that has been achieved and indeed cause it to transform into perpetual peace. The three definitive conditions are as follows:

1. "The civil constitution in every state shall be republican."¹³
2. "The right of nations shall be based on a *federalism* of free states."¹⁴
3. "Cosmopolitan right shall be limited to conditions of universal *hospitality*."¹⁵

Kant believes that the most important guarantee for maintaining peace lies in the internal political system of states. It is also clear for us that certain types of political system can be an effective obstacle to starting a war (e.g. a liberal democracy), while others can facilitate the decision to commence a war (e.g. an authoritarian or totalitarian system). In Kant's view, the republican system offers the greatest guarantee of peace. This observation is extremely pertinent. Kant was probably one of the first philosophers to link the question of the internal system of states with the

treatise by Kant was translated from German into Polish and published in Königsberg by one of the then students of the University of Königsberg, Józef Władysław Bychowiec (1778–1845).

¹³ Ibid., p. 322 [8: 349].

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 325 [8: 354].

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 328 [8: 357].

international order and to point out serious arguments in favour of the strong interdependence of the two orders.

What Kant writes about the republican system requires some clarification. First and foremost, the expression 'republican system' in contemporary usage can be misleading. Kant does not have in mind a form of government, but a manner of governance. For Kant, a monarchy can also be a 'republic' as long as the citizens themselves, through their representatives in the legislature, make laws independently of the executive. In short, a republican system is one in which the three powers (legislative, executive, and judicial) are separated, the freedom of the citizens is guaranteed, and the equality of all before the law is ensured. Kant did not believe that democracy could guarantee the same. Like many other philosophers before him, Kant regarded democracy as a form of despotism. This may seem shocking, but it is true of direct democracy, in which the will of the majority becomes law. Thus, we cannot instantly dispute what Kant has to say about this, as in the general sense one might be in agreement with him. Of course, today's democracy is different from what Kant had in mind when he wrote about it. On the other hand, certainly what Kant wrote about the republican system is in many respects in line with what is understood by liberal democracy today.

The second definitive article introduces the condition underpinning international relations. Kant does not postulate the establishment of some worldwide superstate whose structure would completely reproduce the structure of states as we know them today. Just as in relations between human beings, relations between states must accommodate freedom and refrain from violating it. That is why, in addressing the sovereignty of states, Kant proclaims the need for a federation of free states. This is one of the best elaborated and most commented upon points of Kant's philosophical project. Today, there is no doubt that this idea found its realisation in the League of Nations in 1920 and continues to be emulated in all international institutions that provide a legal framework for free cooperation between autonomous states. Of course, one can always complain about the inadequacies of current legislation or point out the weaknesses of international organizations with examples of their ineffectiveness during conflicts. However, the benefits of international organizations cannot be overlooked, while hoping that, in the future, the validity of the best practices can be extended and their effectiveness enhanced.

The final, third definitive article concerns the so-called law of hospitality and constitutes further development of the idea of cosmopolitanism.

Kant warns us, however, not to understand hospitality naively, as philanthropy devoid of an instinct for self-preservation. Like all things, hospitality too must have a certain framework. The context in which Kant's essay was written makes the restrictions on the rights of the newcomer apply completely differently as compared to contemporary times. Kant, in fact, cites European colonialism as an example of a violation of the law of hospitality and appreciates with understanding the cautious policies of Japan or China, which consistently restricted foreigners' access to their territory. Today, the law of hospitality is viewed almost entirely from the perspective of mass economic migration. In response to this problem, we are seeking solutions to avoid paradoxes that we could not foresee years ago when the international regulations in force today were introduced.

Nature knows better, or guarantees of perpetual peace

Compared to political practice, the Kantian project of perpetual peace offers radical demands of revolutionary significance. They were difficult to implement at the end of the 18th century, and are no less demanding today as well. Kant uncompromisingly prohibits war, except for necessary self-defence;¹⁶ he recommends the universalisation of the republican system (in essence, the prototype of modern liberal democracy); he encourages global cooperation and the federalisation of free states, but one that is limited by respect for the specificity of national communities and does not seek to create a monolithic superstate. In addition, Kant demands adherence to the principles of universally applicable law, and the enabling of free and public discussion; he demands openness in public life and in international relations and expects scrutiny of every legal regulation with respect to its intrinsic fairness. The list of conditions is long and demanding. The bar has been set high, but the goal is also more ambitious than before.

Kant, however, was not naive. He was familiar with all the major political and legal theories developed by Western philosophers: Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Kant interlinked the various conceptions of peace and divorced them from theological elements. In particular, he rejected purely religious apocalyptic thinking and laid the

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 318–319 [8: 345]. Steven Pinker believes that we owe one of the most important changes in our thinking about war to the Enlightenment: war is simply illegal (Pinker, S., 2018. *Enlightenment now*. New York: Viking, p. 163).

foundations for philosophical chiliasm.¹⁷ When Kant speaks of 'perpetual peace,' he has in mind neither the Christian promise of a transcendent paradise, nor a temporary truce that ends any particular war. Kant is considering the rational conditions that make possible the end of 'war' in general. Whatever is to be created between states is not meant as a provisional covenant: "so there must be a league of a special kind, which can be called a *pacific league* (*foedus pacificum*), and what would distinguish it from a peace pact (*pactum pacis*) is that the latter seeks to end only one war whereas the former seeks to end all war forever."¹⁸ One might say that Kant considers the philosophical conditions of the possibility of peace philosophically. His conception is transcendental rather than empirical. 'Perpetual peace' is an eschatological project.

The impermanence of all previous treaties that promised 'perpetual' peace must have given rise to the suspicion that in Kant's philosophical project an idea detached from reality can be found, in short, a utopia. With such an attitude, one might wrongly assume that the expectation of the realisation of everlasting peace is an illusion in which only devotees of divine providence are inclined to believe. Kant does not share this theological pessimism, although, like theologians, he believes that the guarantor of 'perpetual peace' cannot be any human being. The answer given in *Toward Perpetual Peace* is different. Kant writes explicitly: "What affords this *guarantee* (surety) is nothing less than the great artist nature (*natura daedala rerum*) from whose mechanical course purposiveness shines forth visibly, letting concord arise by means of the discord between human beings even against their will".¹⁹ How are we to understand this? Quite simply: there exist such natural conditions of human life that cause people to constantly be forced to confront each other (examples include

¹⁷ "And if we are not satisfied yet, we need but consider a state wondrously compounded from both the others, namely that of a people in its external relations, where civilized peoples stand vis-à-vis one another in the relation of raw nature (the state of constant war) and have also firmly taken it into their heads not to get out of it, and we shall become aware of fundamental principles in the great societies we call *states* directly in contradiction to official policy yet never abandoned, principles which no philosopher has yet been able to bring into agreement with morality or else (what is terrible) suggest [how to replace with] better ones, reconcilable with human nature: So *philosophical chiliasm*, which hopes for a state of perpetual peace based on a federation of nations united in a world-republic, is universally derided as sheer fantasy as much as *theological chiliasm*, which awaits for the completed moral improvement of the human race" (Kant, I., 1793/1996. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. G. Di Giovanni. In: Wood, A. W., Di Giovanni, G., eds. *I. Kant, Religion and Rational Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 81 [6: 34]).

¹⁸ Kant, I., 1795/1999. *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795), p. 327 [8: 356].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 331 [8: 360].

limited resources and even the sphericity of the globe²⁰). In turn, in order to minimise the distressing effects of rivalry, they must make an effort to impose legal limits on their activity. In brief, people are forced to cooperate with one another.

By this means, Kant brilliantly incorporates into his theory what many authors have hitherto regarded as obstacles to the realisation of the idea of peace. This is pointed out by Norman Davies, who argues that Kant:

[L]ike his contemporary, [a great historian Edward – T.K.] Gibbon, [...] was impressed by the ‘tissue of folly,’ the ‘puerile vanity,’ and the ‘thirst for destruction’ which filled the historical record. At the same time, he strove to find sense amidst the chaos. He found it in the idea that conflict was a teacher which would extend rationality from a few noble individuals to the conduct of all mankind.²¹

In his most famous historiosophical treatise, titled *Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim*, published a decade before the essay *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant wrote: “The human being wills concord; but nature knows better what is good for his species: it wills discord. He wills to live comfortably and contentedly; but nature wills that out of sloth and inactive contentment he should throw himself into labour and toils, so as, on the contrary, prudently to find out the means to pull himself again out of the latter.”²²

It seems that war, as the most extreme form of antagonism of which man is capable, paradoxically has the potential to bring out those qualities of human character that have become corrupted by an overly comfortable lifestyle. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Kant wrote something that may leave us stunned: “Even war, if it is conducted with order and reverence for the rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, and at the same time makes the mentality of the people who conduct it in this way all the more sublime, the more dangers it has been exposed to and before which it has been able to assert its courage; whereas a long peace causes the spirit of mere commerce to predominate, along with base selfishness, cowardice, and weakness, and usually debases the mentality

²⁰ Kant, I., 1797/1999. *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). In: I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. M. J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 489 [6: 352–353].

²¹ Davies, N., 1996. *Europe: A History*. New York: Harper Perennial, p. 686.

²² Kant, I., 1784/2007. *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* (1784), translated by Allen W. Wood. In: Louden, R., Zöller, G., eds. I. Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 112 [8:11].

of the populace.”²³ There is no doubt that Kant commends here only a defensive war in which a nation at risk of annihilation sees its only chance of preserving its identity. Contemporary events in Ukraine bring to our mind an example of a war that Kant would consider justifiable. Nor can it be doubted that in the heat of this war the idea of a free nation, whose identity was still contested until very recently, is being forged.²⁴ If we look at Kant's ‘praise of war’ from this perspective, it becomes clear that it cannot be seen as an obstacle to the idea of perpetual peace.

However, it is difficult not to detect a certain ambiguity here, which is easily exploited by sceptics doubting the feasibility of eliminating war from human life. Norman Davies, mentioned earlier, on another occasion quotes a statement by the Prussian general and Field Marshal Helmut von Moltke, illustrating such scepticism: “Perpetual peace is a dream, and not even a beautiful dream. War is part of God's order. Without war, the world would stagnate and lose itself in materialism. In it, Man's most noble virtues are displayed—courage and self-denial, devotion to duty, willingness to sacrifice oneself, and to risk life itself.”²⁵ Kant would have agreed with this view, but on one condition, namely that we reject the thesis that war is part of God's order. The viewing the history of mankind as one of war does not have to be accepted, nor does it have to be considered that war cannot be eliminated simply because it has not been thus far. Of course, war is part of the natural world, and in a variety of ways. An example of this naturalistic justification of war can be found in Charles Darwin's natural selection, which was termed the struggle for existence by Thomas Malthus (1763–1834). However, I think Kant's position is that nature has placed much higher demands on man, as a rational being, than it has imposed on animals. The assumption that all social human life is to be reduced to a struggle for existence is a spurious simplification that calls into question the difference between nature and culture.

Without denying the obvious, it must be acknowledged that man has

²³ Kant, I., 1790/2002. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. P. Guyer, E. Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 146 [5: 263]. If we are anxious to soften the sense of this statement, we may draw our attention to the publication dates of Kant's writings. Evidently Kant's view of war evolved (Kleingeld, P., 2022. Kant über Freiheit und Frieden, pp. 118–119).

²⁴ Cf. Timothy Snyder's lectures titled “The Making of Modern Ukraine” available on YouTube. Snyder, in one of his first columns following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, cited some of the arguments used by Russian propaganda (Snyder, T., 2022. We Should Say It. Russia Is Fascist. *The New York Times*. [cited on 2022-05-18]. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/opinion/russia-fascism-ukraine-putin.html>).

²⁵ Moltke, H. von, 1892. *Gesammelte Schriften und Denkwürdigkeiten*. Mittler und Sohn: Berlin, p. 194, cited after N. Davies.

the potential to subject the life of his species to such regulations as transcend purely instinctive animal behaviour. As a rational being, man can be guided by law as the sole motive for his conduct. Of course, Kant certainly believed that humans are compelled to compete with one another. It is equally obvious that rivalry has advantages that can hardly be overestimated. Kant listed many of them.²⁶ However, this by no means indicates that it must be accepted that rivalry is to take the form of war as the most extreme struggle for existence. The misconception that rivalry and war are only quantitatively different must also be abandoned. War is not rivalry, but its absolute negation. Rather, rivalry is a form of cooperation and one of the main drivers of prosperity and development. It is easy to see that Kant's view of human nature is more complex than many one-sided notions and perhaps understands antagonism between human beings in a more nuanced fashion.²⁷

According to Kant, society is not just any association of individuals, as the idea of a social contract seems to imply. Such an interpretation of social contract would be a complete distortion of its meaning. Instead, society is a work of nature through which the natural predispositions of each individual are developed, while the social contract implies an implicit agreement on the rules of social coexistence: "One can regard the history of the human species in the large as the completion of a hidden plan of nature to bring about an inwardly and, to this end, also an externally perfect state constitution, as the only condition in which it can fully develop all its predispositions in humanity."²⁸ Consequently, society is not merely a safeguard against violence and suffering (Hobbes), nor is it only the source of new sufferings that nature has not known (Rousseau). Rather, society is a means for the collective attainment of goals that man cannot achieve alone.²⁹ Hence, Kant does not describe the state as a security with which man fences himself off from nature, but as an opportunity for the development of hidden human potential. Taking all this into account, one must conclude that perpetual peace is not an alternative to war. Perpetual

²⁶ Whatever positive things Kant wrote about war in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is nothing compared to the romantic militarism of authors such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Emil Zola and John Ruskin.

²⁷ "I understand by 'antagonism' the *unsociable sociability* of human beings, i.e. their propensity to enter into society, which, however, is combined with a thoroughgoing resistance that constantly threatens to break up this society" (Kant, I., 1784/2007. *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* (1784), p. 111 [8: 20]).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 116 [8: 27].

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113 [8: 22].

peace is an idea whose realisation is a true affirmation of the unique potential that is contained in humanity.

This is not a utopia. Conclusion

The essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* was not the only text in which Kant spoke on perpetual peace, but it was certainly Kant's most important voice in defence of this idea. In this essay, Kant proposed a thoughtful conception of a global legal order that remains inspiring today and provides philosophical arguments for any project of an international order, but one that is devoid of the shortcomings of globalisation.

Can it be hoped that a plan such as that outlined by Kant will be realised? Above all, one must reject the erroneous accusations of utopianism and pacifism with which attempts are sometimes made to question the relevance of Kant's project. Pacifism disregards systemic issues in its aspirations and does not reckon with social realities. This cannot be said of Kant's project. Kant sets out a series of concrete systemic and political solutions, which he sees as milestones in the pursuit of perpetual peace. His project is not utopian, but normative. However, yet no one considers every norm to be utopian simply because it requires the existence of something that does not currently exist.

Now that the main ideas of *Toward Perpetual Peace* are more familiar, one can wonder whether Kant's text is merely a collection of wishes detached from reality. It seems that in order to answer this question, new facts must be taken into account, especially the new war in Europe that Russia is waging against an independent Ukraine. These doubts can easily be challenged. First of all, the preliminary articles, which Kant regards as the necessary conditions for perpetual peace, have not been fulfilled so far. Kant would be wrong if wars were to break out under the conditions he describes as conditions for perpetual peace. Thus, we can still believe that once the preliminary conditions are fulfilled war will not break out. It can still be seen that history has not taught avoidance of making old mistakes.

From the point of view of reason, war is something illegal. War cannot be justified by any arguments. Of course, the force of rational arguments cannot be contrasted with the physical force of armies and weapons, but one should weigh up various arguments with one another. The justification that the aggressor proffers to justify war contradicts what Kant propounds in defence of peace. Here is one such example. The Russian Federation openly demands the surrender of the territory of the state and

its inhabitants, invoking the right of the empire to exist within whatever borders it chooses from its own past.³⁰ It is already known all this and how it should be judged in the light of the second and fifth preliminary articles to perpetual peace.

Realists will surely ask: isn't it better to have an army and weapons? It seems that the war in Ukraine and the heroic defence with which the Ukrainians have astonished the world confirms the old principle, "if you want peace, prepare for war."³¹ It should be remembered, however, that this is a maxim of the age to which Kant counterposes his project. Kant would probably argue that the establishment of a republican system, along with other preliminary conditions, would create a reality that would not lead to war. Kant would therefore rather say: "if you want peace, ensure justice."³² The only thing that keeps deferring the project of perpetual peace is the fact that the preliminary conditions are not universally realised. Of course, Kant, when writing his treatise, gave no date for the realisation of this project. All the more so, it cannot naively be stated that we have waited long enough for its realisation and, since it has not yet happened, it will probably never happen. Such an approach would compromise us as overly impatient students of Kant. It must not be concluded from the fact that we still have not yet realised the conditions of perpetual peace that they are not attainable at all.

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³⁰ Steven Pinker aptly observed that Russia's 2014 aggression against Ukraine could not challenge the optimistic ideology of the Enlightenment because it was essentially motivated by the anti-Enlightenment ideology of Russian nationalism (Pinker, S., 2018. *Enlightenment now*, p. 164).

³¹ "Si vis pacem, para bellum." Sentence by Publius Flavius Vegetius, a Roman historian and military theorist from the 4th century AD.

³² "Si vis pacem, para justitiam" (Höffe, O., 2022. Der wahre Weltbürger: zur philosophischen und politischen Aktualität Kants", p. 114).

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