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Enlightenment, Democracy, And Cosmopolitanism:
Reflections on Unfinished Projects

I want to use this occasion to commemorate, albeit rather loosely, the two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*. This work strikes me as the most defiant in tone of any of his writings on politics, for it is here that Kant celebrates the French Revolution and the sympathetic response of disinterested onlookers to that event as dear evidence of the moral progress of humanity. Therein one finds the following, rather remarkable passage:

All forms of state are based on the idea of a constitution which is compatible with the natural rights of man, so that those who obey the law should also act as a unified body of legislators. And if we accordingly think of the commonwealth in terms of concepts of pure reason, it may be called a Platonic *ideal* (*respublica noumenon*), which is not an empty figment of the imagination, but the eternal norm for all civil constitutions whatsoever, and a means of ending all wars. A civil society organised in conformity with it and governed by laws of freedom is an example representing it in the world of experience (*respublica phenomenon*), and it can only be achieved by a laborious process, after innumerable wars and conflicts. But this constitution, once it has been attained as a whole, is the best qualified of all to keep out war, the destroyer of everything good. (Reiss 1977: 187)

What is most striking to me about this passage is the concise manner in which it expresses the core vision of Kant's politics: a fundamental commitment to the achievement of democracy through the collective efforts of a multitude of human beings struggling rationally to reconstruct their own societies over the course of history.

In my remarks tonight, I want to pursue this vision in terms of the conceptual progression of enlightenment, democracy, and cosmopolitanism as elaborated in Kant's many works of moral and political theory. My thesis is that the political project of enlightenment, as enunciated by Kant, is the establishment of cosmopolitan democracy. In concluding, I shall indicate the tasks that remain, unfinished in the continuing struggle to realize the ideals of liberty, equality, and solidarity.

I. Enlightenment

I begin with Kant's oft-quoted, opening statement from the short essay "What is Enlightenment?":

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude* "Have courage to use your own reason!" – that is the motto of enlightenment. (Beck 1988: 03)

For Kant, then, enlightenment is simply the development among persons of their capacity for the self-legislative exercise of reason—the gradual realization of autonomy. The public exercise of reason plays a critical role in this process. As with any other capacity, one's reason must be exercised if it is to develop at all. Only individuals are free publicly to discuss and debate can they employ their own reason, correcting it and purging it of inevitable error. Consequently, Kant maintains that "the public use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men." Kant's conception of the public use of reason is admittedly rather limited, consisting as it does in "the use which a person makes of it before the reading public" (Beck 1988: 05). But nonetheless, through such exercise, persons are able to liberate themselves from the unthinking and mechanical acceptance of the proclamations of established authority. Further, members of the reading public come to consider themselves as participants in a "society of world citizens," a Republic of Letters that transcends national boundaries.

At work here is a conception of human reason as essentially social and intersubjective. Kant discusses this intersubjectivity in the short essay "What is Orientation in Thinking?" There Kant argues that thinking itself

is impossible without the ability to communicate one's thoughts to one's fellow citizens:

Freedom to think is first opposed by civil restraint. Certainly one may say, "Freedom to speak or write can be taken from us by a superior power, but never the freedom to think." But how much, and how correctly would we think if we did not think in common as it were with others, with whom we mutually communicate! Thus one can well ask that the external power which wrests from man the freedom publicly to communicate his thoughts also takes away the freedom to think – the sole jewel that remains to us under all civil repression and through which alone counsel against all the evils of that state can be taken. (Beck 1949: 303)

Without the ability to communicate our thoughts, we lack the corrective of criticism from others and the access to information of which we are ignorant. Without open, public examination, thinking itself becomes impossible. Consequently, without freedom of communication, there is no freedom of thought, or alternatively, freedom of communication is a necessary condition of freedom of thought. This necessity is not causal but logical in character, which is to say that communication is a constitutive component of thought itself, *i.e.* it is part of the nature of thought.

The epistemological basis for these remarks is provided by "The Transcendental Doctrine of Method" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, specifically Chapter 2, Section 3 on "Opining, Knowing, and Believing." In his remarks here, Kant maintains that the recognition of truth is a function of a public consensus that arises through the intersubjective exercise of reason:

But truth depends upon agreement with the object, and in respect of it the judgments of each and every understanding must therefore be in agreement with each other (*consentientia uni tertio, consentiunt inter se*). The touchstone whereby we decide whether our holding a thing to be true is conviction or mere persuasion is therefore external, namely, the possibility of communicating it and finding it to be valid for all human reason. For there is then at least a presumption that the ground of the

agreement of all judgments with each other, notwithstanding the differing characters of individuals, rests upon the common ground, namely, upon the object, and that it is for this reason that they are all in agreement with the object—the truth of the judgment being thereby proved. (Smith 1965: 645)

Without communication among rational agents, we are unable to purge errors arising from purely subjective elements and thereby to establish that a judgment rests on objective grounds, common to all knowers. Under such conditions, the acceptance of a judgment as true, that is, as holding objectively, becomes impossible. Thus, the autonomous exercise of reason in a public sphere free of external constraint is critical to the construction of human knowledge.

If enlightenment is the gradual development of this autonomous exercise of reason, then the political project of enlightenment is a profoundly democratic one. It is simply incompatible with the injunction: "Argue about what you will, and as much as you will, only obey!" Eventually, enlightenment requires that we argue as much as we will and about what we will, and then legislate, for otherwise we would be consigned to a permanent state of heteronomy, or tutelage. Kant makes this point quite explicitly in the *Conflict of the Faculties* when he declares, in contrast to the more deferential treatment in "What is Enlightenment?," that "a being endowed with freedom, aware of the advantage he possesses over non-rational animals, can and must therefore follow the formal principle of his will and demand for the people to which he belongs nothing short of a government in which the people are co-legislators" (Reiss 1977: 184).

This brings us to the point of contact between Kant's elaboration on the historical and social character of reason and his practical philosophy. In the fourth thesis of the "Idea of History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," Kant maintains that

[T]hrough continued enlightenment the beginnings are laid for a way of thought which can in time convert the coarse, natural disposition for moral discrimination into definite practical principles, and thereby change a society of men driven together by their natural feelings into a moral whole. (Beck 1988: 15)

This moral whole is the ideal community of rational agents, that is, the realm of ends.

II. Democracy

Kant's conception of the realm of ends derives from the third formulation of the categorical imperative as "the principle of autonomy of the will" according to which we are to consider the will as "not only subject to the law but subject in such a way that it must be regarded as self-legislative and only for this reason as being subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author)" (Beck 1980: 49). In turn, Kant defines the realm of ends as follows:

By "realm" I understand the systematic union of different rational beings through common laws. Because laws determine ends with regards to their universal validity, if we abstract from the personal difference of rational beings and thus from all content of their private ends, we can think of a whole of all ends in systematic connection, a whole of rational beings as ends in themselves as well as of the particular ends which each may set for himself. (Beck 1980: 51)

The realm of ends is essentially a synthesis of universal law with the conception of persons as ends in themselves. In it, two distinct dimensions emerge that correspond to the two parts of the *Metaphysics of Morals*: justice and virtue. The theory of justice is devoted to the law-governed external relations among persons as objective ends within civil society, whereas the theory of virtue concerns the particular subjective ends members set for themselves.

In the realm of ends, all rational agents are united under common laws governing external relations among persons. Participation as co-legislator in the promulgation of these common laws is a requirement of moral autonomy, and hence such participation is an essential feature of membership in the realm of ends: "a rational being belongs to the realm of ends as a member when he gives universal laws in it while also himself subject to those laws" (Beck 1980: 55). In its absence, one is reduced to a state of heteronomy, subject to laws that are not of one's own making. In short, law within the realm of ends is the product of a collective exercise of autonomy on the part of a "unified body of legislators" established through the social contract.

For Kant, right is the practical analogue of truth. Thus, just as the standard by which evaluate the truth of judgment is its ability to generate

intersubjective consensus on its behalf, similarly the standard of right is universal agreement established through public discourse and is captured by the social contract's requirement of unanimous agreement among rational agents with respect to the laws governing their external relations. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant argues that the formal attribute of publicness itself yields what he calls the "transcendental formula of public right:" "All actions affecting the rights of other human beings are wrong if their maxim is not compatible with their being made public." The significance of this principle of publicity depends upon the role of public discourse in the collective self-legislation of rational agents in political community, and its compatibility with such a discourse is determined by whether such a maxim is capable of attaining the assent of rational agents:

For a maxim which I may not declare openly without thereby frustrating my own intention, or which must at all costs be kept secret if it is to succeed, or which I cannot publicly acknowledge without thereby inevitably arousing the resistance of everyone to my plans, can only have stirred up this necessary and general (hence *a priori* foreseeable) opposition against me because it is itself unjust and thus constitutes a threat to everyone. (Reiss 1977: 126)

The critical point here is the idea that we "think in common as it were with others, with whom we mutually communicate." Though the ideal civil constitution is constructed *a priori*, in order to be guided in our conduct by this idea, we must apply it to existing circumstances, which can only be known empirically through the communication of public discourse. As Kant states in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, though "the concept of justice [*das Recht*] is a pure concept," it must also take "practice (*i.e.* the application of the concept to particular cases presented in experience) into consideration" (Ladd 1965: 03). Consequently, "a metaphysical system of justice would have to take into account the empirical diversity and manifoldness of those cases in order to be complete in its subdivision," which is impossible, and thus, we can only expect to attain only an approximation of a system, not a system itself" (Ladd 1965: 03 - 04).¹ Civil society, however, requires a system of law that takes into account just this "empirical diversity and manifoldness," the understanding of which can only be generated by public discourse, and thus the legislation of specific laws within such a system must be the outcome of the collective deliberation on the part of the members of civil society.

III. Cosmopolitanism

In the Fifth Thesis on history, Kant declares that "the greatest problem for the human race, to the solution of which Nature drives man, is the achievement of a universal civil society which administers law among men" (Beck 1988: 16).² In doing so, they promote the ultimate end of politics and history, which is the abolition of war and the establishment of a just peace among rational agents. This is achieved by replacing the arbitrary violence of the state of nature with a juridical condition in which disputes are settled by appeal to law, that is to say, by the establishment of civil society as defined by the social contract. Now under a juridical condition, the rights of individuals (most importantly, rights of property) are established, and all interpersonal disputes are adjudicated on the basis of a publicly promulgated law. But, so long as an international state of nature exists, no lasting peace can be secured. An internally-just civil order is always susceptible to the injustice of violence committed against it by other states with whom it has no law-governed relations, while the pressure of defending itself against such threats, real or imagined, constantly threatens to restrict the legal rights of its own citizens. Consequently, Kant concludes that "the problem of establishing a perfect civic constitution is dependent upon the problem of lawful external relations among states and cannot be solved without the solution of the latter problem."

Kant's basic claim that states must leave the state of nature and enter into a condition governed by "a constitution similar to the civic constitution" in accord with "the idea of the original social contract" suggests a high degree of political integration. One might expect Kant to espouse some conception of world republicanism; instead, he proposes the establishment of a league of sovereign states that would be dedicated to the maintenance of peace among its members and their defense against external aggressors. This league would have no legislative authority over its members and would be forbidden to interfere in their internal affairs. Membership in the league would be purely voluntary, with each state retaining the right to quit the league "at any time" (Ladd 1965: 116).

The absence of real unity in the form of the authority to promulgate a truly cosmopolitan law is both a practical and a conceptual problem for Kant's program. As a simple matter of practical politics, it poses a threat to the effectiveness and long-term viability of the federation by decreasing its capacity for concerted action. At the conceptual level, it preserves the state of nature among states and hence fails to meet the moral requirements of the social contract.

Kant does present two arguments against the establishment of a universal civil society. First, as a matter of political practicality, sovereign states will simply not relinquish their authority over their own internal affairs. Second, Kant argues that, because of the vast extent of the territory it would cover, a world republic would eventually degenerate into a world tyranny subversive of the principles of right and from there slide into anarchy:

Although this condition is itself a state of war (unless a federative union prevents an outbreak of hostilities), this is rationally preferable to the amalgamation of states under one superior power, as this would end in one universal monarch, and laws always lose in vigor what government gains in extent; hence a soulless despotism falls into anarchy after stifling the seeds of the good. (Beck 1957: 31; see also Ladd 1965: 124)

The more remote the government is from the individual citizen, the less responsive and accountable and the more burdensome it is to him or her. On the other hand, since republican regimes treat their citizens as ends and are inherently inclined against war, the gradual spread of republicanism among nations and their incorporation into his proposed federation serves to advance progress towards world peace and universal respect for basic human rights. In addition, a cosmopolitan public sphere would presumably infuse individual republican regimes with a cosmopolitan spirit.

IV. Concluding Remarks

In concluding, I want to call attention to certain problematic elements in Kant's account and thereby point to those projects that remain unfinished. In particular, I shall focus on issues of political economy arising from the emergence of the globally integrated capitalist market.

First, Kant himself was concerned with war, which he understood in the limited terms of the eighteenth century, and was quite optimistic about the pacifying effects of commerce. However, he failed to appreciate the potential of markets to undermine the capacity for self-governance on the part of republican regimes. In the face of the operations of financial markets and the profit-seeking activities of transnational corporations directed by unaccountable elites, sovereign nation-states find it increasingly difficult to regulate economic activity within their own borders. Thus, while economic integration has proceeded apace, international political integration has lagged

behind to the point where it is slowly losing the ability to accommodate global economic and environmental unity. The functioning of markets is structured by their legal or juridical context, and a global market requires a global juridical condition.

Now Kant's concerns about the prospect of world despotism are certainly legitimate. What we require is a tiered system of governmental institutions or state structure in which political will formation proceeds in a democratic manner from the bottom up, local to global. The capstone of such a system would be a world republic administering cosmopolitan law. Just as the conceptualization of the nation-state has dominated political philosophy for the past four centuries, so the conceptualization of this cosmopolitan democracy ought to set the agenda for the coming centuries.

Notes

1. Ladd translates the German word "*Anfangsgründe*" as "elements," though it can also be translated as "first principles." This word is actually a plural compound noun composed of the nouns "*Anfang*" (meaning "beginning") and "*Grund*" (meaning "ground"). Literally, then, it means "beginning grounds," which I think captures better the incompleteness of Kant's moral theory.
2. "Idea for a Universal History," p. 16. My emphasis on the theoretical necessity of a universal civil society for Kant is further bolstered by his claim that the whole world can be conceived of as an original community of land: "any piece of land that is possessed by an inhabitant of the earth and on which he lives is only a part of a determinate whole, and as such, everyone can be conceived as originally having a right to it" (Ladd 1965: 125). Since property is only possible in civil society, then all inhabitants ought to enter into a universal civil society with each other. Until that time, all claims to property represent nothing more than arbitrary usurpations on the part of individuals and their respective states.

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