

ALEKSANDER BOBKO

KANT'S CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL REASON

Although considerations regarding the sphere of politics do not occupy too much space within Immanuel Kant's system, they continue to enjoy unabated interest among commentators,¹ and the influence of his concepts on our contemporary political thinking is enormous.² Kant's philosophy is undoubtedly one of the most impressive systems produced by European thought.³ This system, while establishing the principles of modern philosophy of the subject, resembles in its character and structure the monumental projects of classical metaphysics: like a Königsberg sage, Kant seeks to encompass all conceivable areas of reality and human activity with his interest and research. The revolutionary aspect of his method lies in the fact that he believes all these issues can be reduced to the question "what is man"—so the fundamental task and proper method of philosophy becomes "the critique of human reason." It is reason that distinguishes man from other creatures; it is reason where processes determining the shape of all reality unfold. Kant devotes the most attention to questions such as "What can I know?" to which his theoretical philosophy responds ("critique of pure reason"), and "What should I do?" which constitutes the problem of practical philosophy ("critique of practical reason"). Social-political thought should be placed within

Prof. dr hab. ALEKSANDER BOBKO, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Rzeszów, Institute of Philosophy; correspondence address: Instytut Filozofii UR, al. Rejtana 16c, 35-959 Rzeszów, Poland; e-mail: abobko@ur.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0609-6982>.

¹ See, e.g., Elisabeth ELLIS, *Kant's Political Theory: Interpretations and Applications* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012).

² See, e.g., Philip ROSSI, *Social Authority of Reason* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), where the author interprets Kant's thought as a lively element in contemporary discussions about society and its development in a particularly interesting way.

³ I provide a broader presentation of Kant's system, also in the context of political thought, in my *Myślenie wobec zła. Polityczny i religijny wymiar myślenia w filozofii Kanta i Tischnera* (Kraków: Instytut Myśli Józefa Tischnera, 2007).

the framework of Kant's third question, "What can I hope for?" and it seems that from this perspective we gain its proper understanding.

However, the matter is quite complicated, as rightly noted by one commentator: addressing issues related to political thought "not only requires reconciling two 'areas of philosophy' distinguished by Kant—the domain of concepts of nature and the domain of concepts of freedom—but it is also a problem of linking the transcendental perspective with the empirical one."⁴ Is such a connection possible at all?

In the considerations conducted in this article, I intend to demonstrate that such a connection exists, more specifically, the realization of the political order (eternal peace) can be interpreted as the highest form of expression of that rationality whose source is reason: reason that encompasses both the sphere of theoretical and practical action. Therefore, I interpret Kant's project of political philosophy as a derivative and complement of his entire critical philosophy—as a kind of fullest expression of rationality.⁵ Hence, I allow myself to define it as "the critique of political reason," in which the classical question of transcendental philosophy becomes of paramount importance: how is the highest political good possible, namely eternal peace?⁶

However, it must be noted that this is not the only possible perspective. Many authors interpret Kant's political philosophy as a project independent of his "critique of reason"—in this spirit, for example, Wojciech Buchner's⁷ book is written, which provides an interesting presentation of Kant's political views. Hermann Timm presents the thesis of the inconsistency of Kant's political philosophy with his transcendental philosophy, while Günter. Freudenberg is inclined to remove any aporias in Kant's theory regarding the political sphere and argues that it logically fits into his entire system.⁸

⁴ Manfred ZAHN, "Kantowska teoria pokoju w świetle najnowszych dyskusji," in *Filozofia transcendentalna a dialektyka*, ed. Marek Siemek (Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 1994), 10 (my translation).

⁵ See Aleksander BOBKO, "Polityka jako najpełniejszy wyraz rozumności: Immanuel Kant," in *Koncepcje polityki*, ed. Włodzimierz Wesołowski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2009), 159–71.

⁶ An interesting example of such interpretation can be found, for instance, in Arto SIITONEN, "Transcendental Reasoning in Kant's Treaties on Perpetual Peace," in *Proceedings on the Eighth International Kant Congress, Memphis 1995*, ed. Hoke Robinson and Gordon G. Brittan (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press), 2:865–73.

⁷ Wojciech BUCHNER, *Kant – państwo i prawo* (Kraków: "Aureus": Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, 1996).

⁸ Hermann TIMM, "Wer garantiert den Frieden? Über Kants Schrift 'Zum ewigen Frieden'," in 214; and Günter FREUDENBERG, "Kants Lehre vom ewigen Frieden und ihre Bedeutung für die Friedensforschung," 195; both in *Studien zur Friedensforschung*, vol. 1, ed. Georg Picht and Heinz-

In this work, I strongly lean towards the latter position, that is, I operate with the concept of “political reason,” which is grounded in Kant’s critical philosophy. Justification for such a position must begin with an approximation of the rather complex and ambiguous relationship between theoretical and practical reason, because, as already mentioned, political thinking (“political reason”) appears somewhat “between” the spheres of their interest, that is, between the domains of nature and freedom.

THEORETICAL REASON AND PRACTICAL REASON

In the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes about the difference between theoretical and practical reason as follows: “Cognition can relate to its object in either of two ways, either merely determining the object and its concept (which must be given from elsewhere), or else also making the object actual. The former is theoretical, the latter practical cognition of reason.”⁹ Here, two different types of cognition, or rather, different ways of using reason, are discussed. In theoretical use, the focus is on cognition, or the discovery/construction of an image of reality as a rational whole governed by laws (symbolized by the “starry sky”). The same reason that “makes objects actual” presents itself from a fundamentally different perspective. “It is quite different with the practical use of reason. In this, reason is concerned with the determining grounds of the will, which is a faculty either of producing objects corresponding to representations or of determining itself to effect such objects.”¹⁰ In the context of practical reason, which is supposed to produce specific effects in external reality, the concept of will arises. Through this concept, Kant defines the power of the subject, which has the ability to act—this power is to be directed only by reason. With the introduction of the division between theoretical and practical reason, several dilemmas and ambiguities arise that are not easy to interpret.

The difference between theoretical and practical reason is reflected in the formal structure of Kant’s critique of both types of reason. The direction of analysis in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is exactly the opposite of that

Eduard Tödt (Stuttgart: Klett: 1969). A more extensive discussion of this debate can be found in Manfred ZAHN’S article cited in note 4.

⁹ Immanuel KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), B x.

¹⁰ Immanuel KANT, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 12.

pursued in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.¹¹ In theoretical philosophy, the starting point is that humans naturally experience what makes up the surrounding reality—as Kant writes: “Experience is without doubt the first product that our understanding.”¹² These various experiences can be combined into a system, and the critique of reason is supposed to show how this is possible (how is knowledge possible?). Therefore, the investigation begins with sensibility (intuitions), then moves on to understanding (concepts), and ends with fundamental principles of reason. On the other hand, the basic experience of practical philosophy has no connection to human action in so-called everyday life but consists in the discovery of moral law as a “fact of reason.” This moral factuality is entirely beyond the realm of what is accessible to the senses. The *Critique of Practical Reason* aims first to show how moral law is possible at all, and then to determine its influence on human actions. Hence, Kant begins this critique somewhat “from the top,” starting from the highest principle of morality, moving on to present concepts, and finally examine their influence on sensibility.

The crucial point is that Kant’s distinction between theoretical and practical reason leads to the separation of the sphere of what is and what ought to be. This is indicated by, among other things, the following statement: “Here I content myself with defining theoretical cognition as that through which I cognize what exists, and practical cognition as that through which I represent what ought to exist.”¹³ The sense of being-in-the-world is one of the most fundamental human experiences, which has been described by many philosophers. This experience is the source of the obvious conviction that, being in the world, I am subject to limitations resulting from what is: I cannot, for example, jump to any height because I must overcome the overwhelming force of gravity. Kant, without questioning the obviousness of such a conviction (theoretical cognition pertains to what is), outlines the intuition, and even posits the thesis that reason is capable of bracketing these limitations and—regardless of what is—thinking about what ought to be. According to Kant, reason is distinguished quite properly and preeminently from “all empirically conditioned powers”, since it considers “its objects merely according to ideas.”¹⁴

¹¹ Regarding the specific asymmetry of both critiques, Wilhelm Metz writes very precisely in his article “Das Gefühl der Achtung in Kants Kritik der praktischen Vernunft,” in *Normativität und Faktizität*, ed. Gerhard Schönrich (Dresden: Thelem / W.E.B. Universitätsverlag, 2004).

¹² KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 1.

¹³ KANT, A 633.

¹⁴ KANT, A 547.

This turning away of the subject from actuality can be understood as an escape into a world of fantasy and fiction, where free play of imagination allows for the creation of proverbial “castles in the air” or the design of any utopias. However, the intuition presented by Kant goes in a completely different direction—practical reason, thinking directed towards what ought to be, has nothing in common with the frivolity of imagination. Reason, freed from the necessary constraints imposed by empirically available reality, enters a space governed by equally rigorous laws: “Now that this reason has causality, or that we can at least represent something of the sort in it, is clear from the imperatives that we propose as rules to our powers of execution in everything practical. The ought expresses a species of necessity and a connection with grounds which does not occur anywhere else in the whole of nature.”¹⁵ Practical reason is subject to moral legislation, and strictly speaking, it is the source of this legislation (“imposes imperatives on acting forces”), because it generates a specific kind of necessary causality that orders the spontaneous actions of the subject.

Therefore, the way practical reason is defined introduces a lasting rift within the universe with which humans deal. On the one hand, humans discover phenomena subject to obvious necessity, but at the same time, they find within themselves a persistent claim to create and inhabit a reality governed by different laws, where one can think in terms of what ought to be. Unfortunately, Kant does not present a coherent theory that would unequivocally explain the relationship between these two spheres. Most directly, he writes about this in the introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*: “There are, however, only two kinds of concepts, which [thus) allow for two different principles concerning the possibility of their respective objects. These are the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom. Concepts of nature make possible a theoretical cognition governed by a priori principles, whereas the very concept of freedom carries with it, as far as nature is concerned, only a negative principle.”¹⁶ The spheres of nature and freedom are essentially investigated independently of each other, and Kant seems primarily concerned with demonstrating the possibility of their non-contradictory coexistence: the unconditional necessity of natural laws, which constitutes nature as a chain of unambiguously determined causal relationships (the realm of phenomena), does not exclude the possibility of the existence of freedom (in the realm of

¹⁵ KANT, A 547.

¹⁶ Immanuel KANT, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 10.

things in themselves): “For just as the concept of nature has no influence on the legislation through the concept of freedom, so the latter does not interfere with the legislation of nature.”¹⁷ Translating this thought into contemporary language, it would be appropriate to say that the universe can be interpreted in two non-contradictory ways: firstly, as a series of elements in which a specific cause always entails the same necessary effect; secondly, as a space in which undetermined and spontaneous processes can occur.

As a result, humans turn out to be beings who live on the border between “two worlds”. On the one hand, they are obviously subject to biological and physical conditions, possessing certain abilities and predispositions that tightly determine their actions. In this dimension, they are forced to understand themselves as elements governed by the necessary laws of the natural world. On the other hand, humans find within themselves something that transports them into a completely different reality. For example, Kant writes:

For his natural predispositions, not only his talents and the drives to make use of them, but chiefly the moral law in him, go so far beyond all the utility and advantage that he could draw from them in this life that the latter teaches him to esteem above all else the mere consciousness of a disposition to rectitude, even in the absence of any advantage, even of the phantom of posthumous fame, and he feels himself called inwardly, through his conduct in this world, and the sacrifice of many advantages, to make himself a suitable citizen of a better one, which he has in its idea.¹⁸

Practical reason and the consciousness of moral law embodied within it carry with them the idea of a “better world” that humans should strive to create. This alternate world is perhaps closer to what ought to be than to what actually is. In this way, a special perspective for the action of “political reason” opens up.

Speaking of the ambiguities pervading the relationship between theoretical and practical reason, attention must be drawn to yet another aspect. One of the conclusions of Kant’s theoretical philosophy was the thesis that knowledge—as a set of lawful and properly grounded propositions—does not answer all the questions posed by human reason. Beyond the boundaries that can be constituted in knowledge, there exists a whole range of problems that we are able to treat only hypothetically—there are things we can scien-

¹⁷ KANT, 13

¹⁸ KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 426.

tifically know and those we can only believe. Kant considers the demarcation between these spheres a significant achievement of his theory.¹⁹

However, it turns out that in developing his system, he allows practical reason to increasingly penetrate domains closed to theoretical reason. Already in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, when discussing the discipline of reason in making hypotheses, he writes that “in regard to its practical use reason still has the right to assume something which it would in no way be warranted in presupposing in the field of mere speculation without sufficient grounds of proof; for all such presuppositions injure the perfection of speculation, about which, however, the practical interest does not trouble itself at all.”²⁰ Practical reason thus has “specific liberty” in formulating hypotheses. This entitlement applies only to “practical use,” meaning that which consists in “the determination of the will with respect to the final and complete end.”²¹ Keeping in mind the ultimate goal guiding reason’s actions, certain strictures imposed by theoretical reason on the process of scientific knowledge can be somewhat relaxed in practical reasoning. The culmination of this intuition is the recognition—in the final part of the *Critique of Practical Reason*—of the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason. The essence of this primacy is somewhat imprecisely delineated, but the intention seems clear: even if the capacity of theoretical power of reason “does not extend to establishing certain propositions affirmatively, although they do not contradict it, as soon as these same propositions belong inseparably to the practical interest of pure reason it must accept them—indeed as something offered to it from another source.”²² The message expressed here can be generally interpreted as follows: due to its “practical use”—meaning the goal that reason as such has to achieve and realize—reason should be attributed certain special entitlements. It seems that to some extent, this demand is realized in the sphere of political thinking.

MAN AS A LEGISLATOR AND THE “KINGDOM OF ENDS”

The analysis of the relationship between theoretical and practical reason has shown that before man (as a thinking subject) lies the task of realizing

¹⁹ Let us recall his well-known statement: “I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (KANT, B xxx).

²⁰ KANT, A 776.

²¹ KANT, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 96.

²² KANT, 98.

rationality, which means building the world based on rational ideas. The concretization of this task becomes the vision of creating a political order at the level of a community of rational beings. Practical reason, freed somewhat from the rigors to which theoretical reason is subject, takes on this task. Already within practical philosophy, two ideas can be identified that are particularly applicable in the realm of political thought.

The first of these is the idea of the rational subject as a moral legislator. Practical philosophy shows that reason itself is the source of moral duty, which manifests itself as a sense of obligation. Awareness of the importance of moral law is, for Kant, simultaneously the decisive argument regarding human freedom—an entity understanding the requirements of moral law must be free to submit to this law. Man is both a moral legislator—law emanates from the very center of autonomy—and a subject contingent upon the rigor of this law. This mechanism is of crucial importance in Kantian philosophy. Establishing rational, universal law and acting in accordance with its demands is essentially a kind of “prototype” of all order. This mechanism applies to every individual human being, but it should also function within the entire human community.

As a result, every human being is faced with the demand for moral self-improvement. The state in which the free will of man would perfectly agree with the law dictated by reason Kant calls “good will”, which he considers the highest and absolute good.²³ The formation of such a will can occur through internal, individual work of reason, through total subordination of the will to moral law, which is discovered in the realm of thought. Good will essentially consists of the ability to fulfill moral duty regardless of one’s inclinations, and even at the cost of natural desire for happiness. The call to selflessly create good will is the paramount command of reason; possessing the ability to meet this demand is a noble factor for man—only a rational being can act selflessly, and thereby possesses an incomparable dignity that cannot be exchanged for any other value. This understanding of man as a rational being and as the source of moral law is further developed in political philosophy and in the vision of a rational society.

Another idea that appears in Kant’s ethics and is significant for thinking in political terms is the idea of the “kingdom of ends”. It is directly derived from the concept of rational beings: “The conception of the will of every rational being as one which must consider itself as giving in all the maxims of its will universal laws, so as to judge itself and its actions from this point

²³ KANT, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Moral*, 11.

of view—this conception leads to another which depends on it and is very fruitful, namely that of a kingdom of ends.”²⁴ Here the concept of kingdom (state) does not yet have any political connotations. It simply denotes the community of rational beings, or even more broadly, a structure in which individual elements form a certain unity by adhering to the same laws. This is evident from the fact that Kant uses the same term “kingdom” (Reich) in reference to both the community of rational subjects and to the world of nature, drawing far-reaching consequences from this analogy. In establishing bonds between individuals (individual elements), law plays a crucial role: “By a kingdom I understand the union of different rational beings in a system by common laws.”²⁵ The “kingdom of ends” is made possible by common legislation; it is a system governed by rational laws, and its specificity lies in the fact that a rational being as a citizen of such a “kingdom of ends” is simultaneously a legislator and a subject—it establishes laws and is subject to them: “A rational being must always regard himself as giving laws either as member or as sovereign in a kingdom of ends which is rendered possible by the freedom of will.”²⁶ Here, we see a reference to the same principles informing the theory of morality. The source of law is the autonomy of the subject; freedom endows a rational being with incomparable dignity, whereby the individual as a person is always to be treated as an end in itself, never merely as a means to some end.

However, the category of the “kingdom of ends” reveals a dimension that is inherently contained in the idea of a moral legislative subject—by establishing a law that obliges me as a rational being, I appeal only to reason, to what is universal, and thus in essence address every rationally thinking subject. The role of the sovereign (legislator) and the subject, who must obey the law, mutually penetrate each other—“Therefore every rational being must so act as if he were by his maxims in every case a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends.”²⁷ Such a rational space of the “kingdom of ends” opens up the prospect for thinking about the possibility of realizing the highest political good.

²⁴ KANT, 50.

²⁵ KANT, 50.

²⁶ KANT, 51.

²⁷ KANT, 55.

ETERNAL PEACE AS THE HIGHEST POLITICAL GOOD

A more concrete yet universal shape of this highest good emerges from texts concerning political matters. Kant defines the essence of the “highest political good” as perpetual peace.²⁸ The perspective of achieving this good is also clearly outlined. In the conclusion of the Doctrine of Right in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, we read that the attainment of the highest political good “should not be made by way of revolution, by a leap, that is, by violent overthrow of an already existing defective constitution. But if it is attempted and carried out by gradual reform in accordance with firm principles.”²⁹ Kant gives significant expression to his understanding of eternal peace in another context, in the concluding fragment of the third part of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*: “Such, therefore, is the activity of the good principle, unnoted by human eyes but ever continuing—erecting for itself in the human race, regarded as a commonwealth under laws of virtue, a power and kingdom which sustains the victory over evil and, under its own dominion, assures the world of an eternal peace.”³⁰ The realization of the “highest political good” must be a laborious and protracted process, which consistently moves in one direction—toward the good. In what realities, then, does this process of progress take place, culminating in the establishment of eternal peace?

Describing the sphere of political action, Kant refers to a classical model in the modern tradition: “A state of peace among men who live side by side is not the natural state (*status naturalis*), which is rather to be described as a state of war: that is to say, although there is not perhaps always actual open hostility, yet there is a constant threatening that an outbreak may occur. Thus the state of peace must be *established*.”³¹ Here, we have an image of the state of nature akin to Hobbes’ description—the selfishness of individual beings is the source of natural conflict of interests, and only the undertaking of certain common actions can mitigate this unfavorable situation. In contrast to most political thinkers, Kant sets forth a maximalist goal in the process of

²⁸ Immanuel KANT, *Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 161.

²⁹ KANT, 161.

³⁰ Immanuel KANT, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore Green and Hoyt H. Hudson (Chicago: Open Court, 1934), / *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, [137] the unpaginated online version I use is from <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/kant/religion/religion-within-reason.htm>.

³¹ Immanuel KANT, *Perpetual Peace*, trans. Mary C. Smith (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1903), e-book, p. 118, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/50922/50922-h/50922-h.htm>.

creating an artificial, political reality—political actions are not only to prevent conflicts as they arise but consistently aim at establishing conditions for eternal peace. In this sense, Kant's political thought can be distinguished on two parallel levels: the first, realistic (based on the acknowledgment of what is), dominated by an awareness of human weaknesses and the inevitability of conflicts; the second, idealistic (appealing to what ought to be), treating humans as rational beings engaged in creating a universal order of things.

How does Kant envision this eternal peace as the highest political good? Through what actions can humanity effectively approach the realization of this cherished goal?

We can deduce this primarily from a statement in which he defines the highest aim of humanity's existence: "The greatest problem for the human species, the solution of which nature compels him to seek, is that of attaining a civil society which can administer justice universally."³² In another passage, Kant writes: "It can be said, that establishing universal and lasting peace constitutes not merely a part of the doctrine of Right but rather the entire final end of the doctrine of Right within the limits of reason alone."³³ The means to achieve political good is law—the gradual establishment of peace can only be achieved through the enactment of rational laws. The space in which abstract and "intangible," moral law of reason transforms into something tangible—concrete in a sense "embodying" elusive rationality—is the human community. Thus, the real means of acting for political good is contributing to the construction of community.

A community of rational beings must be based on agreement. The basic mechanism of such a political community is founded on a schema we have already discussed: the subject is the source of law (it must consent to the law binding within the community) and simultaneously is subject to that law out of necessity.

A new element, however, is that the good, which was previously associated with the structure of the individual subject, is now somewhat transposed to the level of the community: "In a man (as the only rational creature on earth), those natural capacities which are directed towards the use of his reason are such that they could be fully developed only in the species, but not in the individual."³⁴ The intuition expressed here suggests that the poten-

³² Immanuel KANT, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, in *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd ed., trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Hans S. Reiss (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 45.

³³ KANT, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 161.

³⁴ KANT, *Idea for a Universal History*, 42.

tial power inherent in reason comes to full fruition not so much in the individual as in a qualitatively new subject. That subject is humanity understood as a community of rational, individual persons. However, the fundamental driving force behind the process of creating community and realizing political goals remains reason, whose legislation essentially has a moral character.

What can and should be done to contribute to the slow realization of political good, therefore, is the creation of rational laws that constitute specific communities. In his *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant analyzes the structure of such laws functioning at various levels: ranging from private law to public law; based on these laws, communities such as the state, nation, and humanity are successively established. Let us pay attention to what is most significant in these analyses: the source of law is everywhere one and the same—it is reason. The mechanism through which reason acts on humans, prompting them to spread the laws of reason, is also one—duty. This peculiar “rationalistic monism” expresses the basic law of pure practical reason, whose formula is the categorical imperative—one must act in such a way that the individual subject could regard themselves as the creator of the principle of universal legislation. Reason demands only one thing—the conformity of subjective maxims determining the will with universal law. The sense of duty, saying that in every situation a person should be guided by such a principle and even contrary to their own benefit remain faithful to universally valid rational laws, is, according to Kant, the most fundamental experience of a human as a rational and free being. Thus, politics as the establishment of the rule of law ultimately relies on a firm foundation of morality. Politics constitutes the fulfillment of the moral imperative on a more general, communal level and in this sense is akin to building a higher degree of rationality.

Confirmation of such an interpretation is, for example, that within political thought, we encounter a repetition of the requirement of selflessness, which was characteristic and crucial within Kantian moral philosophy. Contrary to the modern liberal tradition, Kant does not treat the introduction of political order as a process that is intended to serve the greater utility of citizens and ultimately contribute to their happiness. Significantly, writing about the “healthy state,” he states,

By the well-being of state must not be understood the welfare of its citizens and their happiness; for happiness can perhaps come to them more easily and as they would like it to in a state of nature (as Rousseau asserts) or even under a despotic government. By the well-being of a state is understood, instead, that condition in which its constitution conforms most fully to principles of Right; it is that condi-

tion which reason, by a categorical imperative, makes it obligatory for us to strive after.³⁵

The only task of humans is truly to realize rationality, that is, to shape the surrounding world according to the law dictated by reason. Kant remains faithful to this principle in all areas of his system, both in theoretical and practical philosophy. The highest level of rationality is to be found in the political sphere. Politics is the establishment of the rule of law, it is the gradual incorporation of what is real into rational structures extracted from reason. The primary task facing humans is therefore to realize pure rationality, rather than striving for utility or happiness.

THE POSSIBILITY OF ACHIEVING ETERNAL PEACE

In Kantian transcendental philosophy, fundamental issues are tied to the question of “conditions of possibility”: how is knowledge, ethics possible? Analogously, the question now arises: is eternal peace possible, and if so, how?

Kant acknowledges that in the realm of political action, pure reason alone may not be effective enough—reason, or nature, must also employ other means: “The history of the human race as a whole can be regarded as the realization of a hidden plan of nature to bring about an internally—and for this purpose also externally—perfect political constitution.”³⁶ In this sense, political thinking and action are a kind of game—in the realm of real events, where emotions, ambitions, and conflicts of interest prevail, it is difficult to find any ultimate goal in the struggles between people. From the perspective of pure reason, these seemingly random events can be interpreted as means leading to the concretization of law, replacing chaos with rational order, and ultimately realizing eternal peace as the supreme good.

This highest level, where eternal peace can truly be concretized, is the space of international relations: “The problem of establishing a perfect civil constitution is subordinate to the problem of a law-governed external relationship with other states, and cannot be solved unless the latter is also solved.”³⁷ Kant names the law prevailing at this level “Weltbürgerrecht”, which can be rendered as cosmopolitan law, law of citizens of the world, or

³⁵ KANT, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 129.

³⁶ KANT, *Idea for a Universal History*, 50.

³⁷ KANT, 47.

global civic law. The word “cosmopolitan” may evoke someone not bound by any obligations (for example, to their own nation) and who, retaining full freedom, acts solely according to their own preferences. A “citizen of the world” in the Kantian sense is someone entirely different. They are bound by a sense of duty to act in accordance with the laws of reason and are accountable to all humanity for it.

How would this “law of citizens of the world” function? For now, we can only imagine it, we can only outline a philosophical—and indeed somewhat utopian—project (as Kant does in one of his final treatises *Perpetual Peace*) of such a global civic society, which constitutes a kind of teleological idea. It would be a society where conflicts are resolved by recourse to law rather than by resorting to violence; where thinking dominates over emotions and desires, and the sense of duty is a stronger motive than the desire for personal gain. The notion of a global community is thus not a closed category, which would be formed as a result of some finite synthesis. It is an idea, which opens up the perspective of an infinite synthesis, which—given the finitude of our cognitive abilities—we understand in such a way that certain partial concepts and postulates are subject to only one unifying principle, which is the universal law of reason.

We must also be aware that the eventual realization of this project of the highest good—a fully rational political order, in which eternal peace reigns—is extremely complicated and for now should be placed in an unpredictable future. Kant writes: “This problem is both the most difficult and the last to be solved by the human race.”³⁸ Creating a rational society is the most refined work that humanity can create.

At this point, the question arises: is the realization of the highest political good possible at all? Is the attempt to base politics on some abstract rational mechanism that obliges humans to altruistic actions in the name of universal justice a complete misunderstanding and utopia? Does eternal peace, as the goal of human and humanity’s existence, have any reality whatsoever? The answer to this question has a similar character to resolving dialectical issues in critical philosophy—the problem of eternal peace fits precisely into that specifically Kantian logic of hypothetical thinking “as if” (“als-ob”). For example, when we consider the small probability of a situation in which humanity renounces wars and therefore does not undertake the obligation that would require us to act for perpetual peace too seriously, then according to Kant “now, morally practical reason pronounces in us its irresistible veto:

³⁸ KANT, 46.

There is no to be no war... So the question is no longer whether perpetual peace is something real or a fiction, and whether we are not deceiving ourselves in our theoretical judgment when we assume that it is real. Instead, we must act as if it is something real, though perhaps it is not; we must work toward establishing perpetual peace."³⁹ Despite the fact that the idea of eternal peace is a kind of "product" of reason, its realization appears rather vaguely, and it can only be discussed in hypothetical terms: humanity should act as if the concretization of eternal peace in the realm of international relations were possible.

THE IDEA OF ETERNAL PEACE AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

However, the political idea of perpetual peace, which would be achieved solely through rational (moral) laws, does not fully express Kant's view on the subject. The possibility of effectively realizing the highest good must confront the question of evil—it is very significant that Kant considers the possibility of real victory of good over evil within the philosophy of religion, rather than morality or politics. What is the reason for this?

The transition from writings on moral and political philosophy to a treatise on religion has a certain dramatic quality in Kant's work. It is characteristic that only after concluding his exposition of critical philosophy does he address the problem of evil. In the writings dedicated to moral and political issues, the concept of evil appears only sporadically. Symbolically and significantly, this is expressed in the beginning of *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Moral* which starts with the famous sentence about the good will: "Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a good will."⁴⁰ On the other hand, the opening sentence of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*—the statement "the world lieth in evil"—sets a completely different tone. Where did this surprising change in perspective come from?

In the treatise *On the Radical Evil in Human Nature*, which was subsequently included in the book on religion as its first part, Kant's very complex considerations boil down to seeking an answer to a simple question: How is it possible that a rational human being with a sensitivity to moral law—an entity possessing all the tools to do good—is the perpetrator of such

³⁹ KANT, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 160.

⁴⁰ KANT, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Moral*, 11.

great evil, which is clearly visible in the world around us?⁴¹ Despite great efforts to explain this matter rationally, the above question does not find a satisfactory answer. Kant thus acknowledges that the essence and origin of evil remain incomprehensible to us, and the mystery of evil is best expressed by the story from the Book of Genesis, where the serpent-tempter appears as a symbol of the power of evil lying beyond humanity.

Such a statement, which Kant expressed at the beginning of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, could not remain without influence on his attitude towards ethics. In the “critical period”, Kant considered ethics as the fullest expression of rationality, as the most perfect tool that, when properly used, allows humans to achieve their full potential. This idea, as we have seen, also occupies a central place in his political conception. The highest perfection consists in cultivating within oneself a good will—a will that is selfless and completely subservient to reason. Initially, Kant, captivated by the rational “moral law within me”, believed that to achieve this goal, the individual needed no additional means beyond reason dictating the law and self-discipline, which would allow the will to be subordinate to the moral law. However, reflections on evil significantly corrected this optimistic view. Kant noticed with some surprise that evil is not only committed by evil and immoral people. To understand how much evil can occur in the complex space of interhuman relationships, Kant had to reconsider his approach. “it is not even necessary to assume that these are men sunk in evil and examples to lead him astray; it suffices that they are at hand, that they surround him, and that they are men, for them mutually to corrupt each other’s predispositions and make one another evil.”⁴²

On this basis, Kant formulates a thesis that is in obvious contradiction with what he previously said about the good will. Reflecting on the possibility of ultimately eliminating evil from the world, he writes: “Men (as was noted above) mutually corrupt one another’s moral predispositions; despite the good will of each individual, yet, because they lack a principle which unites them, they recede, through their dissensions, from the common goal of goodness and, just as though they were instruments of evil.”⁴³ It turns out that a person possessing a good will—previously considered a good that is unrestricted—can be a tool in the hands of evil. The mere awareness of moral

⁴¹ Kant expresses this vividly: “How can a bad tree bring forth good fruit?” *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, online [48].

⁴² KANT, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, online [100].

⁴³ KANT, online [104].

law and the willingness to adhere to its obligations, or, in other words, the solitary pursuit of moral perfection by the individual, does not guarantee the realization of moral good. Rationality, of which ethics is a particular form and subsequently politics, seems to be powerless against evil. A person of good will cannot be sure that their rational actions will not produce outcomes contrary to their intentions and will not inadvertently serve evil.

Is there any way out of this situation? Note that according to Kant, the reason for humans remaining in the hands of evil is the “lack of a unifying principle”. How so?

Kant writes that “the highest moral good cannot be achieved merely by the exertions of the single individual toward his own moral perfection, but requires rather a union of such individuals into a whole toward the same goal—into a system of well-disposed men, in which and through whose unity alone the highest moral good can come to pass.”⁴⁴ To address vulnerability to evil, people of good will must combine their efforts, that is, form a community. The duty to enter such a community is a special kind of obligation. Moral duty is something within the power of the individual to fulfill, whereas the duty to establish an ethical community pertains to the whole, over which the individual has insufficient control. It is therefore an exceptional obligation—“Now here we have a duty which is *sui generis*, not of men toward men, but of the human race toward itself.”⁴⁵ The possibility of meeting this extraordinary obligation also requires an extraordinary assumption. Kant argues: “We can already foresee that this duty will require the presupposition of another idea, namely, that of a higher moral Being... But this is the concept of God as moral ruler of the world. Hence an ethical commonwealth can be thought of only as a people under divine commands, i.e., as a people of God, and indeed under laws of virtue.”⁴⁶

Rational thinking contains a dialectical contradiction, so achieving the ideal proclaimed by it—the realization of universal good free from the destructive force of evil—requires some extraordinary means. Kant sees this in the formation of a community because even the most moral individual can become “an instrument in the hands of evil.” However, creating such a community exceeds the capabilities of both the individual and all of humanity, thus requiring the assumption that it is God who is its creator. A community of rational agents, which sounds quite surprising especially to the modern individual, is indeed a religious community, which furthermore—as it is

⁴⁴ KANT, online [105].

⁴⁵ KANT, online [105–7].

⁴⁶ KANT, online [105].

a structure uniting people—absolutely requires some external form. For a religious community, such a form can only be the church—“An ethical commonwealth under divine moral legislation is a church.”⁴⁷ Moral improvement, the struggle against evil, and ultimately the establishment of eternal peace are tasks that humans as rational agents have to accomplish in the sphere of morality and politics. However, in order to realistically consider the realization of the goals set by reason, it is necessary to assume the existence of God—in this sense, politics, like ethics, must be connected to religion. This surprising thesis expresses Kant’s final message, as he seemed convinced that it is in the political realm that one should seek the good, which represents the most perfect form of rationality.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the passage of 300 years since Kant’s birth, his thought remains a vibrant element of European science and culture. This applies particularly to Kantian political philosophy, although the impact of this fragment of the Königsberg sage’s legacy has its specificity. While Kant’s political thinking, as I have attempted to show in this article, can be interpreted in relation to his entire critical philosophy, it does not constitute a unified and coherent political doctrine that unequivocally sets principles for political action. His considerations, in which he presents political thinking as the highest form of rationality and political good as the ultimate and most complicated goal of all human actions, operate on a different, almost meta-political level. Nevertheless, the categories he employed (the rule of law, civil society, eternal peace) have retained their vitality to this day and belong to a distinct canon of political concepts.

Also, the message stemming from Kant’s philosophy of religion seems very interesting, but has not yet been properly interpreted, neither by numerous Kantians nor by political philosophers seeking Kantian inspirations elsewhere. The surprising formula that “ethics inevitably leads to religion” is not easy to interpret. Kantian moral and political philosophy is regarded as a flagship manifesto of the Enlightenment, emphasizing human autonomy, and the independence of the political sphere from all ideological and religious factors is almost a canon. At the same time, however, Kant anticipates problems that may befall a person who appeals solely to their own reason and is

⁴⁷ KANT, online [109].

convinced of their high moral qualifications—“people of good will can be instruments in the hands of evil.” It follows the hope for the ultimate victory of good over evil can only be conceived within a community whose creator is God. The demand for the realization of “eternal peace” turns out to be synonymous with the demand for the existence of God. From our contemporary perspective—given our experience of totalitarian systems, which cannot be denied a degree of rationalism and which have dramatically revealed the faces of people under the sway of evil—Kant’s message should strongly appeal to reason and political imagination

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KANT'S CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL REASON

Summary

Although considerations regarding the political sphere do not occupy much space within Immanuel Kant's system, the influence of his concepts on our contemporary critical thinking is enormous. The coherence of Kant's political concept also remains a problem, where the highest good to be achieved by humanity is eternal peace, within the entirety of critical philosophy. In this article, I attempt to show that such a connection exists, and the vision of political order can be interpreted as the highest form of realization of rationality, whose source is reason. The realization of such a goal can only be thought of hypothetically, but most surprisingly, it is conditioned on the assumption of the existence of God as the creator of a universal community of people of good will.

Keywords: Kant; reason; political thinking; eternal peace

KANTA KRYTYKA ROZUMU POLITYCZNEGO

Streszczenie

Choć rozważania dotyczące sfery polityki nie zajmują w ramach systemu Immanuela Kanta zbyt wiele miejsca, to oddziaływanie jego koncepcji na nasze współczesne polityczne myślenie jest ogromne. Problemem pozostaje też spójność Kantowskiej koncepcji politycznej, w której najwyższym dobrem do zrealizowania przez ludzkość jest wieczny pokój, z całością jego filozofii krytycznej. W tym artykule próbuję pokazać, że taki związek istnieje, a wizja ładu politycznego może być interpretowana jako najwyższa forma urzeczywistnienia racjonalności, której źródłem jest rozum. Realizacja takiego celu daje się pomyśleć tylko hipotetycznie, ale co najbardziej zaskakujące, warunkowana jest przyjęciem założenia o istnieniu Boga jako twórcy ogólnoludzkiej wspólnoty ludzi dobrej woli.

Słowa kluczowe: Kant; rozum; myślenie polityczne; wieczny pokój