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Pax kantiana: Kant on Perpetual Peace in Philosophy¹

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ABSTRACT The paper investigates Kant's usage of the legal-political symbolism of war and peace in his self-interpretation of the historical role of the critical philosophy. The focus is on Kant's late essay, "Announcement of the Imminent Conclusion of a Treatise on Perpetual Peace in Philosophy" from 1796. The essay is placed in the contemporary context of Kant's controversy with the historian and publicist, Johann Georg Schlosser, who had reduced Kant's transcendental philosophy to the mechanical operations of a "manufacturing industry for the production of mere form" and had misread Kant's moral philosophy as requiring complete cognition of nature for arriving at the formation of the categorical imperative. Kant's reply to Schlosser places the refutation of the latter's charges into the broader context of the cultural function of philosophy as an area for intellectual warfare. On Kant's view, neither dogmatic

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pseudo-victories nor skeptical pseudo-truces are able to assure a lasting peace in philosophical debates. Only the critical balance between the theoretical restriction of reason to possible experience and its practical enlargement to unconditional principles of action is able to pacify the world of thought into a peace of mind armed with strong arguments.

In addition to providing extensive reflections on the morality and legality of war and peace in his ethical and political writings and his work on the philosophy of history, Kant employed the terminology and conceptuality of war and peace metaphorically in order to indicate and assess strife, harmony and disharmony in cognitive matters. A particular such usage can be found in Kant's self-interpretation of the critical philosophy as an attempt to end the perennial strife in metaphysics.

Rather than obliterating the pre-critical, dogmatic mode of doing philosophy, the appearance of the *Critique* in many ways had resulted in a revival and reinvigoration, albeit a short one, of the old philosophical currents. Among the anti-critics of the first generation was Johann Georg Schlosser (1739-1799), whose *Platonic Letters on the Syracusean State Revolution, Together With a Historical Introduction and Notes* (1795) contained two lengthy notes on the critical philosophy,² whom he chided because of its abstract separation of reason from the actual world and because of the inherent danger of transcendental idealism to degenerate into a mere "form-giving factory" in relation to some amorphous material. Schlosser's particular criticism concerned what he

² See *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Prussian Academy of Sciences and its successors. Berlin, later Berlin/New York 1900ff. (henceforth "AA") 8:512f. In what follows, the summaries and quotations of Schlosser's works, which are fairly obscure and hard to procure these days, are based on Hans Saner, *Kants Weg vom Krieg zum Frieden. Bd. 1. Widersteit und Einheit. Wege zu Kants politischem Denken*. Munich 1967, 146f. and 378-381 (note 144).

perceived to be Kant's sublimation of the traditional metaphysical and moral doctrines regarding God, immortality and virtue into indeterminateness and indifference.

Kant's metacritical answer to Schlosser's anti-critique was the polemical essay "On a Recently Adopted Elevated Tone in Philosophy" (1796),³ in which he charged Schlosser's pseudo-Platonic way of doing of philosophy on the basis of "inspiration", "feeling", "divination" and "intellectual intuition" with "putting on airs" and "enthusiasm", pitting against it the honest "labor" of discursive thinking.⁴ Schlosser replied in turn with his *Writing of a Young Man Who Wanted to Study the Critical Philosophy* (1797), in which he charged Kant with "intentional obfuscations and misrepresentations of simple matters" and claimed that the "thoroughgoing anthropomorphism" of Kant's moral philosophy had obscured "higher faith". Schlosser also charged Kant with "dishonesty". In view of Kant's critically reduced and sublimated moral theology, it would have been more honest, so Schlosser, if Kant had declared openly, "that for him (sc. Kant) the entire Christ, the entire revelation is a lie".

Schlosser's maneuver of implicating the critical position, by means of which Kant had intended to bring peace to philosophy, into the persistent strife of philosophical factions, combined with the accusation that Kant had given up on philosophy's deeper claim to wisdom and truth and had deceived his readers about this matter by retaining a theological language, occasioned Kant's duplicity, which appeared under the title "Announcement of the Imminent Conclusion of a Treatise Toward Perpetual Peace in Philosophy" in 1797.⁵ In it Kant places his specific answers to Schlosser's charges into the larger framework of general reflections on the cultural function of philosophy. He portrays

³ See AA 8:387-406.

⁴ AA 8:389f., 394f., 397 and 404.

⁵ See AA 8:411-422.

the natural history of doing philosophy as a spiral of intellectual violence, beginning with the "inclination" or "urge" to use the faculty of reason for "*arguing*", progressing to "arguing by means of mere concepts, i.e., *philosophizing*", going over to "polemically hassling others with one's philosophy, i.e., *disputing*", moreover employing affect for "*quarreling* on behalf of one's philosophy" and ending up "rallying in masses united against each other (school against school like army against army) and *conduct open warfare*".⁶ Rather than bemoan this natural development of reason toward polemics, Kant views it as a healthy means for invigorating the human being. Put in terms of the teleology of nature favored by Kant in his philosophy of history, the penchant for doing philosophy polemically is "one of the beneficial and wise arrangements of Nature [...] by means of which it seeks to avert the mishap of rotting away alive".⁷

Given the enlivening function and task of philosophy in general and of doing philosophy in controversial manner in particular, Kant rejects all lasting states of peace that only confuse eternal peace with eternal rest. The false pacifications of philosophy cited by Kant include "dogmatism", as in Wolff, which provides a "cushion for falling asleep", "skepticism", as in Hume, which thwarts reason because it "puts aside everything without making use of it", and "moderatism", which substitutes sufficient reason with disparate and insufficient reasons and is satisfied with subjective probability rather than objective truth.⁸

By contrast, Kant defends the "true compatibility" of critical philosophy and perpetual peace in philosophy as being based on the complimentary relationship, established in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, between reason's theoretical restriction and its practical expansion. According to Kant, there is a precise match between the impossibility to

⁶ AA 8:414.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See AA 8:415.

establish the reality of the concepts of reason ("ideas") *theoretically* - in the mode of "knowledge" - and the possibility to realize those very ideas *practically* - in the mode of "faith" as requirements for attaining the complete purpose of human acting. The completion the theoretical (self-)restriction of reason with its practical (self-)expansion rests on the reality of the concept of freedom, which provides a non-empirical immediate basic certainty regarding moral obligation. It is the very conjunction of the "incapacity of theoretical proofs of the opposite" with the "strength of the practical grounds for the assumption" of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul that furthers the prospect of a perpetual peace in philosophy.⁹ To be sure, the lasting peace to be brought about by critical philosophy must be envisioned as an "armed state". For there is always to be expected the confusion of "appearances with things in themselves", due to which the differential treatment of knowledge (regarding appearances) and faith (regarding God and the soul) would be rendered ineffective. With its armed character, the philosophical peace established by the critique of reason contributes to the "continuing enlivening" of the human being and thereby serves to "guard off the sleep of death by means of philosophy".¹⁰

The critical delegation of supersensible objects (God, soul, freedom) from impossible knowledge to possible rational faith also enables Kant to address Schlosser's charge that the critical philosophy neglects the search for wisdom. For Kant, too, philosophy's "final purpose" is the "search for wisdom" and the "doctrine of wisdom".¹¹ Yet, on Kant's view, Schlosser takes too easy a recourse in his appeal to higher insight. He bypasses philosophy as a "doctrine of knowledge", overlooking that the latter first creates the conceptual space for philosophy as a doctrine of

⁹ AA 8:416.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ AA 8:417, 420f.

wisdom. Moreover, Schlosser fails to recognize the distinction undertaken by Kant between the theoretical part of the doctrine of knowledge, which consists in the limitation of the theoretical use of reason to possible experience, and the practical part of philosophy as a doctrine of knowledge, which amounts to a "metaphysics (of morals) as a sum total of merely formal principles of the concept of freedom".¹² Instead, Schlosser assimilates moral philosophy to natural philosophy and hence to the theoretical part of the doctrine of knowledge.¹³

Commenting on Schlosser's premature bypassing of knowledge and science in favor of wisdom and faith, Kant explains that only on the twofold basis of the theoretical rational cognition of the appearances and the practical rational cognition of the moral duties can the step be taken beyond philosophy as a doctrine of knowledge to philosophy as a doctrine of wisdom, viz., as the doctrine of postulatory thinking regarding those metaphysical objects (God, freedom, immortality) the reality of which can be neither proven nor disproven by theoretical means.

After having critically revised Schlosser's conception of philosophy as a doctrine of wisdom, Kant sees but one further obstacle to perpetual peace in philosophy, viz., the *lie*, in the two main forms in which it is practiced in philosophy. Either one passes something off as true which one knows not to be true, or one passes something off as certain which one knows to be uncertain. In both cases one philosopher deceives another one, rather than to admit honestly what one knows and what one does not know. The dishonesty bemoaned by Kant, which is a retort to Schlosser's charge of dishonesty raised against Kant, includes intentionally overlooking the distinction between actual knowledge of objects and the mere presupposition of those objects on moral-practical grounds. Under the condition of honesty in philosophy - and of the free

¹² AA 8:420.

¹³ See AA 8:420f.

admission of the deflation of alleged metaphysical knowledge to rational faith -, Kant sees himself entitled not only to the "announcement of the imminent conclusion of a *treatise* toward perpetual peace in philosophy" (my emphasis) but also to the "announcement of the perpetual peace in philosophy" itself.

The peace in philosophy offered by the critical philosophy - and only by it - concerns the formation of theories about supersensible objects in a doctrine of wisdom. The critical philosophy itself - as a transcendental theory that "is concerned not so much with objects but with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as the latter are to be possible a priori"¹⁴ - does not properly belong to philosophy so pacified but serves as the latter's methodological presupposition. The same exempt status holds for the twin metaphysical doctrines of the principles of nature and of morals, developed on the basis of the critique of speculative and practical reason, which address the conditions of the possibility of nature and freedom, respectively, and therefore are part of the doctrine of knowledge. Hence the perpetual peace in philosophy envisioned by Kant presupposes, in addition to the universal observance of the prohibition of lying, also the acceptance of the critical standards of doing philosophy along with their doctrinal results. It should come as no surprise then that the philosophical peace forecast and declared by Kant failed to occur - chiefly because no unanimity could be established about the prior requirement of philosophy as a self-limiting science. Things remained as in the poem by Abraham Gotthelf Kästner cited by Kant, according to which the philosophers may be able to address the conditions of possible peace and even might help bring about a general peace on political matters, but remain in a protracted state of nature with respect to each:

¹⁴ *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 26.

Of Eternal Peace.
Forever war is avoided,
Once we follow what the wise one says;
All human beings then keep peace,
But for the philosophers.¹⁵

¹⁵ AA 8:417.