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The Motif of War in Kant’s Critical Philosophy

Introduction

The main focus of this book is Immanuel Kant’s account of war and the controversies that have arisen from its interpretation. This interest draws us naturally to the principal writings in which Kant addresses war and international relations: Perpetual Peace and the second part of the Metaphysics of Morals in the Doctrine of Right. These were late publications (1795 and 1797 respectively) that represented the working out of the implications of his critical philosophy. The central chapters of this book deal with the relationship between his views on war and its declaration in the two works. However, despite this necessary emphasis on two of Kant’s final publications, we have to be aware that Kant’s views on war were not simply the outcome of a later interest in concrete issues of world politics; rather they developed over a long period in his intellectual life and are, above all, a reflection of the main ideas of his novel critical account of philosophy, which received its fullest and most authoritative expression in the Critique of Pure Reason (first edition 1781; second revised edition 1787).

The purpose of this chapter is to set Kant’s thinking about war in the context of his philosophy as a whole. I suggest that war plays an important role in his thinking in general, and I outline the dialectic of war that he portrays in his mature philosophical works. In my view we cannot evaluate fully how Kant deals with the questions of the justness of war and the role that war might play in the development of human history, which arise with the fullest force in Perpetual Peace and the Metaphysics of Morals, without assessing how the notion of war enters into his transformative criticism of modern metaphysics, which occurs not only in the Critique of Pure Reason but also in the two other works
of his triptych-style philosophical oeuvre: the Critique of Practical Reason (1788) and the Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790). I believe there is a motif or theme of war that runs throughout these works and also is evident in Kant’s shorter publications, very many of which appeared in the journal of his friend Johann Biester Berlinische Monatsschrift such as the essay ‘What is enlightenment?’ (1784). It is this motif that I want to examine and highlight here as the indispensable background to the evaluation of Kant’s mature ideas on war. War for Kant is not simply a problem for international relations; it is a problem that lies at the heart of human existence.

War constitutes a major problem for Kant’s critical system of philosophy. This is the system of philosophy which emerged in the Critique of Pure Reason (1781) and was developed in two further Critiques and the doctrinal writings of the 1790s. He abhors war above all human failures; yet he cannot deny that it is a prominent part of human social and political life. Although perhaps not as politically and socially troubled as the seventeenth century, war was none the less a highly significant feature of eighteenth-century European life. As a citizen of Königsberg in Prussia, Kant was witness to the reign of Frederick the Great, who for most of his time as monarch was either engaged in or preparing for military conflict. One of the earliest incidences of the citing of war – as opening ‘a dark abyss’ where all ‘the afflictions of the human race are evident’ – in Kant’s Collected Writings (Gesammelte Schriften, 2: 40), occurs at a time (1760) when Königsberg was occupied by Russian troops. From both a general philosophical perspective and a moral perspective war is wholly out of keeping with Kant’s critical stance, which requires that human differences be settled through reason and agreement. However, the historical context in which he wrote was anything but amicable and peaceful; instead of providing an atmosphere in which social and political conflicts were resolved by open debate and the verdict of reason, the historical context was unstable and occasionally very hostile.

The dilemma concerning Kant’s attitude to war comes out in a striking way in his comments in the essay ‘Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’ where he presents his startling claims about the ‘asociable-sociability’ or the ‘unsocial-sociability’ (ungesellige Geselligkeit) of the human individual. Kant takes a highly ambivalent stand in relation to Aristotle’s assertion that the human being is by nature a political animal. Although Kant does not entirely agree with Thomas Hobbes’s view that we are by nature nothing of the sort, he cannot bring himself to assent to the view expressed by Grotius that
we are distinctively social beings. For Kant there is the constant ten-
sion between our tendency to want to be ourselves, and so free from
the limiting influence of others, and our tendency to seek the atten-
tion and approval of others in order to bolster our self-esteem. ‘Human
beings have an inclination to associate with one another because in
such a condition they feel themselves to be more human, that is to
say, more in a position to develop their natural predispositions. But
they also have a strong tendency to isolate themselves, because they
encounter in themselves the unsociable trait that predisposes them
to direct everything only to their own ends and hence to encounter
resistance everywhere, just as they know that they themselves tend
to resist others’ (8: 21/7). This dialectic in human nature does not
unduly alarm Kant though. He thinks it is a means by which the
human race is made to develop its talents, often directly against our
individual inclinations. ‘Without those characteristics of unsociabil-
ity, which are indeed quite unattractive in themselves, and which give
rise to the resistance that each person necessarily encounters in his
selfish presumptuousness, human beings would live the Arcadian life
of shepherds, in full harmony, contentment and mutual love’ (8: 21/7).
Conflict, risk and social disharmony may from a historical perspective
be good for human individuals because they awaken an awareness of
their capacities and talents and oblige them to put them to positive
use. Culture and its advancement are often a consequence of the com-
petitiveness and natural antagonism of humans. War is in good part a
product of this natural antagonism amongst human beings, and can
only properly be countered by the development of a civil society which
places our natural irascibility within the restraining context of the rule
of law.

There is then, from Kant’s perspective, a beneficial side to the enmi-
ties that lead to war. These enmities play their role in the imposition
of culture and its development in the human species. But Kant does not
regard warlike antagonism as the permanent fate of the human race.
Our political apolitical nature has to be harnessed if it is not to lead
to the permanent hampering and ultimate obliteration of the human
species. We cannot live in a condition of ‘wild freedom for very long’
(8:22/8). At the individual level we have to move to the civil condition
to realise the benefits of our competitive and irascible spirits. Although
Kant believes we are destined to attempt to move out of the condition of
unrestrained freedom amongst states at an international level, he antic-
ipates that it will occur slowly only and possibly only after an enormous
number of setbacks.