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The Philosophy of
Immanuel Kant

The Guarantee of Perpetual Peace

Wolfgang Ertl

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Elements in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant

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THE GUARANTEE OF PERPETUAL PEACE

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The Guarantee of Perpetual Peace

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Abstract: This Element addresses three questions about Kant's guarantee thesis by examining the "first addendum" of his *Philosophical Sketch*: how the guarantor powers interrelate, how there can be a guarantee without undermining freedom and why there is a guarantee in the first place. Kant's conception of an interplay of human and divine rational agency encompassing nature is crucial: on moral grounds, we are warranted to believe the "world author" knew that if he were to bring about the world, the "supreme" good would come about too. Perpetual peace is the condition that enables the supreme good to be realized in history.

Keywords: Kant, Immanuel, philosophy of history, theory of peace, postulates of pure practical reason, Molinism, history of

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1 Introduction

In his book, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*¹ (1795), Kant develops a normative account of politics based on the three pillars of state law, international law and cosmopolitan law which, together, when generally obeyed, he thinks sustain perpetual peace, the “highest political good” (MM 6: 355).

The precise nature of the institutional framework within which this is supposed to happen has been the topic of intense debate. At times, Kant seems to hold on to an ideal of a world republic (see TPP VIII, 8: 358, 379), which is basically a higher-order state consisting of particular states as its members. However, in other passages it seems as though he backtracks toward a mere, albeit constantly expanding federation of states (see TPP 8: 354, 357).²

Kant also presents a number of considerations, in the broadest of terms, on how to make perpetual peace a historical ‘reality’ while doing justice both to political craftsmanship and the demands of morality (TPP 8: 368–386). In fact, for Kant it is crucial to integrate political craftsmanship into a moral mindset of political agents.³

His suggestions amount to something like a gradualist or reformist approach, with an emphasis on not endangering the existing legal conditions in their as yet imperfect state, while improving them in the direction required by his normative legal considerations.

When Kant outlines the special role he reserves for philosophy in this process, he stresses that philosophers need to be granted a safe space for their investigations regarding peace (TPP 8: 368–369). In line, presumably with his mature account of public reason,⁴ which focuses on the philosophical faculties at the universities as its institutional home, he regards philosophy as providing the intellectual resources required for political agency committed to perpetual peace.

On top of these normative considerations, however, Kant includes a surprising “addendum” (TPP 8: 360–368) and switches to what looks, on the face of it, like a descriptive statement about the certainty of the ‘desired’ as much as morally required outcome of perpetual peace.

¹ I suggest this translation of the original title *Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf* leaving the amalgamated form “zum” untranslated since, as far as I can see, the equivocation in German making the meaning oscillate between “toward,” “on” and “(dedicated) to” cannot be preserved in English. Perhaps the most widely known rendering of the title is Mary J. Gregor’s *Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Project* in Kant (1996b), 311–351. A list of abbreviations can be found at the end of this Element.

² See Höffe (2004), Kleingeld (2004) and Pogge (2009) among many others. The correct reading of the passage in TPP 8: 357 is, however, highly contentious.

³ For an account of Kant’s theory of politics, see, for example, Gerhardt (1999).

⁴ As laid out in CF of 1798. See Ertl (2017a) for details.

The section is puzzling in many respects: It abounds with material seemingly pertaining to the kind of epistemologically overambitious metaphysics that was to be overcome through a critique of pure reason. Understanding the peculiar status of this material, however, is crucial since it provides the clue to the following important questions that arise in connection with the guarantee thesis, namely: (i) What is the relation between the various powers Kant names as guarantors of perpetual peace and in particular providence and nature?; (ii) How is the presence of these guarantor powers compatible with human freedom?; (iii) Why is there a guarantee of perpetual peace in the first place?

As I am trying to show, the material under consideration belongs to what we can call “Kant’s practically grounded metaphysics”, that is, a set of doctrines about objects that transcend the bounds of sense. According to Kant, we are warranted in subscribing to these doctrines by virtue of his moral philosophy, without having the tools required to vindicate these claims from the point of view of theoretical knowledge.

To be sure, while the guarantee claim is not something belonging to theory, as Kant emphasizes (TPP 8: 362), even from the point of view of practical reason his move generates a number of problems, especially with regard to the double-faced character of perpetual peace as an allegedly certain outcome of world history and as something we have the duty to work towards.

In this Element, I shall focus on this ‘guarantee addendum’, as I shall call it, in order to better understand Kant’s seemingly contradictory claims and to show how they can be rendered coherent. Of particular interest will be the almost two Academy pages long first footnote of this section (TPP 8: 361.5–362.39)⁵, the ‘guarantee footnote’, a much neglected and sometimes even maligned piece of text. As I shall argue, this footnote is not at all a foreign body in a treatise essentially concerned with political, legal and historical topics.

Rather, it is instrumental for outlining at least parts of Kant’s practically grounded metaphysics on the basis of which his normative and descriptive claims can be shown to fit together.⁶ As we shall see, this metaphysics involves but is by no means restricted to doctrines based on Kant’s first postulate of pure practical reason.⁷ Instead of dismissing these passages, the way forward

⁵ To facilitate referencing, I have added the line numbers of the Academy edition pagination wherever convenient and helpful.

⁶ “Metaphysics,” however, does not by itself refer to a discipline concerned with transcendent objects in Kant. For a recent discussion of alternative notions of metaphysics, including a metaphysical reading of transcendental idealism, and their importance for Kant’s political philosophy, focusing on its normative dimension, see Baiasu, Pihlström and Williams (2011).

⁷ This doctrine is of course highly controversial in its own right. In large part, the pertinent debates boil down to a fundamental disagreement with regard to what is nowadays called the ethics of belief. While evidentialists deny that it can ever be rational to believe something without evidence, pragmatists endorse this claim. Kant’s position is clearly close to that of the pragmatists