

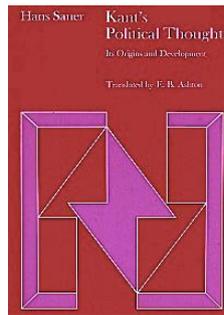
Kant's Way to Peace

A Review of Hans Saner's *Kant's Political Thought: Its Origin and Development*, transl. by E.B. Ashton, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973; originally published as *Kants Weg zum Frieden, Vol. 1: Widerstreit und Einheit*, Munich, Germany: Piper, 1967.

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ABSTRACT. In a trilogy of short reviews, the author presents three books that he considers essential reading for approaching Kantian practical philosophy today. This first contribution is dedicated to a book that, despite winning the Hans Hesse Prize in Germany in 1968, is almost unknown now, Hans Saner's analysis of the basic motives and patterns of Kant's political thought. The book shows how these motives and patterns

emerge in Kant's pre-critical, metaphysical writings and subsequently develop throughout his critical writings up to his late political thought on the foundations of peace and on a cosmopolitan vision of world order and world citizenship.

KEY WORDS: Immanuel Kant, Kant's political philosophy, Kant's metaphysics, history of ideas, critique of pure reason, Kant's practical philosophy, peace, perpetual peace, Kant's cosmopolitan theory of law and peace, cosmopolitanism, world order, civil society, global citizenship, political thought, Kantian ethics, participatory culture

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Introduction: Kant's Political Thought

Saner's (1973) rather neglected book on Kant's political thought must be the most detailed and careful exegesis ever written of the roots of Kant's political thought as it developed throughout his work, from the pre-critical writings to the three *Critiques* (Kant, 1781/87, 1788, and 1793) and on to his late anthropological, historical, juridical, and political writings. To be sure, Kant did not write about politics in the way we would understand it today; he is not a modern-day political theorist.

Except for his treatise on "Perpetual Peace" (Kant, 1795), systematic political analyses are rare in his work and they have received scant attention in the literature; exceptions such as Karl Jasper's chapters on Kant in the first volume of *The Great Philosophers* (1962, German original 1957) confirm the rule. Yet as anyone knows who has read Kant, political and judicial figures of speech can be found throughout his writings. Saner (p. 3) refers to them as basic "thought structures" or "thought forms," patterns of analysis and argument that Kant consistently employs to describe the nature and scope of his project of a systematic (self-) critique of reason.

A major political thought structure that Saner uncovers is what he describes as "the basic problem of Kantian thought" (p. 4), Kant's persistent attempt to find in all fields of philosophical reflection a way from *antagonism* (or diversity and disorder) to *unity* (or consistency and order) of thought and action.

Kant makes reason the guardian of this way. As Saner (pp. 5-68) demonstrates in considerable detail and elegant prose, although perhaps not always as systematically as one might wish (I found it difficult at times to relate his accounts to the respective passages in Kant's writings), this basic line of thought slowly emerges as a figure of speech in Kant's early natural-scientific and metaphysical writings and subsequently gains

importance in the three *Critiques*. A mere analogy at first, it helps Kant to analyze the two interdependent problems of order in nature and order in human thought – interdependent, that is, because reason is involved in analyzing nature as well as thought – and consequently also in the self-constitution of reason's own order. The theme keeps recurring and slowly becomes a *basic scheme of progress* from "diversity" (antagonism in nature, antagonism in society) via a "road to unity" (physical community and reciprocity in nature, a law-governed social order in society) to final "unity" (e.g., of the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, of the universal history of nature and of human culture, and of a cosmopolitan constitution of government and civil society that would secure peace, freedom, and justice for all; cf. Saner, pp. 5, 7, 26, and 49).

In nature, for example, we find a universal antagonism of basic forces such as the attraction and repulsion of matter, or the observation that each moving force necessitates a counterforce; yet to understand nature means to look for its sources of order and unity. Similarly, in human history, we find conflict and struggle among individuals and societies to be a pervasive force of destruction; yet it is also a major force that drives cultural and political progress.

I'll limit myself to hinting at just two among Kant's many writings on natural

and human history in which this theme of a universal struggle between disorder and order, or between conflict and unity, plays a prominent role. Early on, in his *Universal History of Nature and Theory of the Heavens*, Kant (1755) formulates a bold account of the material world's creation out of destruction and chaos that is now known as the "Kant-Laplace theory" of the origin of the universe and which actually anticipated today's Big Bang theory.

Later, in his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, Kant (1784) describes the motivating force of human cultural and political progress in terms of "the *unsocial sociability* of men, that is, their tendency to come together in society, coupled, however, with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break society up" and which therefore leaves humans no choice but to develop forms of social order and cooperation that overcome the destructive forces of antagonism. In such antagonism Kant accordingly sees "the means which nature employs to bring about the development of innate capacities [in humans], in so far as this antagonism becomes in the long run the cause of a law-governed social order." (4th proposition, A 392; cited in Reiss, 1977, p. 44, cf. Saner's comment on p. 14f).

By the time Kant embarks on his late writings on practical, legal, and political philosophy, the scheme has become more

than a means to the end of analysis; it now is part of the end itself, that is, of reason's self-set task of securing both cognitive and political order (compare on this theme the second review in this trilogy, Ulrich, 2015). Reason has no choice but to work towards *cognitive and political peace* at once. Only then can it be *at peace* with itself and unfold its unforced force in the two domains with which it is concerned, that of theoretical (or speculative) thought and that of practical (or ethical) action. In either domain, reason needs peace if it is to thrive, just as peace needs reason as a source of unity. Both in his theoretical philosophy (metaphysics and science) and in his practical philosophy (ethics, law, and politics), Kant therefore makes reason the big peacemaker that paves the difficult way to unity of thought and action.

Reason as a Peacemaker

Unity is always in danger of being pursued in the wrong ways, by shortcuts that rely on coercion or other non-argumentative means of securing order.

In both politics and metaphysics there are forms of peace that cannot mean peace at all, forms which [mean] the end of justice, of liberty, and of reason. (Saner, 1973, p. 253)

For Kant, thus-achieved unity is worthless. The only kind of unity he wants is *unity in freedom*; a unity that is compatible with human dignity, that is, with free will, free argument, and mutual fairness – essential conditions of true

peace – as well as with reason's peace with itself (cf. pp. 215-313).

Kant rejects all forms of peace that do not spring from reason itself and cannot aim at a worldwide expansion of reason. He confronts them with the one peace which reason prepares for itself – gradually, but never definitively – in its self-knowledge. This peace is possible solely when reason has the will to be itself, when it is continually enlightened from its own sources and perpetually expanded in freedom. In this peace we give up no knowledge other than a pseudo-knowledge, and we accept no faith other than the rational faith.... It is the peace that can be reconciled with human dignity – in fact, it is the peace required if man as *homo politicus* is to win his proper dignity by the union of politics and ethics. (Saner, 1973, p. 252f)

This is the "way to peace" that Saner (pp. 3, 253, and 312) identifies as a major political theme in Kant's thinking.

Peace itself remains a way to peace. In that sense it always remains conflict, but no longer a lawless one in quest of victory and destruction; it is a lawful conflict seeking judgment and lasting community. (Saner, 1973, p. 253f)

Since peace is always *en route*, never complete, it follows that within the bounds of some legitimate (or "lawful," as Kant puts it) cognitive and political order, conflict – all forms of *argued* debate or reasonably negotiated controversy – must remain possible; suppressing it would undermine the quest for genuine peace, which, as we have noted, depends on freedom. To express this deep connection between cognitive and political order,

Kant often uses a *judicial metaphor*: reason, to make sure that its claims are "lawful," must subject itself to its own, self-established "*tribunal*" of *pure reason*. Reason is called upon, as Kant famously puts it in the Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*,

to undertake anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge, and to institute a tribunal which will assure to reason its lawful claims, and dismiss all groundless pretensions, not by despotic decrees but in accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws. This tribunal is no other than the *critique of pure reason*. (Kant, 1781/87, Axif).

The theme of peace, with its underlying metaphor of the road from antagonism to unity, thus unfolds into the other grand theme of Kant's philosophizing, *critique*, the metaphor of which is that of a tribunal of reason. Saner describes the metaphor vividly:

In *Critique of Pure Reason*, variants of this metaphor appear so often that it may well be said to encompass the whole work. Putting its several elements together, we find the roles, assigned about as follows. Pure reason is the tribunal; critical reason sits in judgment; accused are the searching intellect if it has passed the bounds of immanence [i.e., if it ventures beyond what can be known empirically], and reason as a designer of ideas if it has invaded immanence with constitutive statements [i.e., if it claims substantial knowledge rather than mere ideas]. Judicial reason adjudicates their cases according to laws it has imposed on itself in taking its own measure. The laws are on file in *Critique of Pure Reason*. What goes on, as in every legal proceeding, is not an awarding of victories but a pronouncement of verdicts. They have

absolute legal force, since judicial reason, relieved of all bias, can recognize the root of the transgressions. (Saner, 1973, p. 255, hints in brackets added)

The task of such adjudication is a perpetual one, *for reason is always on the way*. To find its peace, it must always again find a new balance between its two diverging requirements, of securing its freedom and its discipline at once. This, it seems to me, is the deeper meaning and challenge of reason's eternal quest for peace with itself, or at least this is how Saner's book inspires me to see this quest.

Reason's way to peace with itself thus becomes the essential leitmotif of the three *Critiques* and of Kant's plea for reason in human affairs in general. We may see in this motive the common denominator of Kant's post-critical writings on anthropology, the history of philosophy, politics, law, and pedagogy. In all these writings, the tension between reason's simultaneous needs for controversy and diversity ("freedom") and for discipline and consistency ("unity") – or, as Saner (p. 215) puts it: the problem of "how to achieve unity on adequate principles which simultaneously assure the greatest possible freedom" (Saner, p. 215) – emerges as a central issue.

The Cosmopolitan Turn

In some of the writings of Kant in which the theme of antagonism and unity is particularly important, particularly in

Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose (1784) and in *Perpetual Peace* (1795), reason's aim of achieving unity takes the bold form of a *cosmopolitan vision*, a vision of world citizenship and world governance that was quite extraordinary in Kant's epoch and which continues to look extraordinarily foresighted today (which is not to say it is without its difficulties or needs to be shared by everyone).

Indispensable as reason's quest for peace with itself is in this vision – Kant does not confuse means and ends. Reason is a means, not an end. The end is to achieve the kind of cognitive *and political* order of which we have been talking, but now at a world-wide level; and the means is to handle conflicts at that level "with reason," that is, according to the principles uncovered by reason's self-tribunal; principles such as those of consistent thought, moral action, and due process in settling arguments.

Perhaps the most basic among these principles – the *conditio sin qua non* – consists in the requirement of a free, *public use of reason* by all those concerned with an issue. In Kant's cosmopolitan ideal, this requirement entails the need for a *worldwide expansion of reason*; for a world order grounded in the free unfolding of reason. We are talking about an ideal, to be sure, but it is an unavoidable ideal; for the unhindered unfolding of reason at all levels of thought

and action not only *presupposes* peace (or at least: peaceful, argumentative ways of handling conflict), it also embodies *the only possible way to reaching genuine, worldwide peace* (pp. 252-261). This double implication makes Kant's search for the "peace of reason" – reasoned peace – such a difficult, yet necessary way.

Kant is the philosopher of that way. He is not a pacifist of metaphysics – after all, he rejects certain forms of peace – but in a profound sense he, more than any other thinker, may be the philosopher of peace. (Saner, 1973, p. 312)

Reading Kant as a Propaedeutic for Political and Philosophical Reasoning

Kant's philosophizing thus becomes for Saner "a propaedeutic for political thinking," although, to be sure, "not merely such a propaedeutic" (p. 312f). Indeed, isn't Kant's philosophizing at the same time also the most meaningful kind of general philosophical propaedeutic we might imagine; a primer to the proper use of reason – not only by philosophers but also by citizens – that has nothing to do with the narrow rationalism and formalism of which Kant is so often accused quite superficially? As Saner's remarkable book suggests to me – and the evidence it compiles is strong indeed – Kant's entire philosophizing, drawing on its political root metaphor but reaching far beyond, may ultimately be subsumed under the one central theme of *reason's quest for peace with itself and the world*.

"All his philosophizing," Saner writes, "is understood by him as being en route to the peace of reason." (Saner, 1973, p. 312).

Saner's book is an inspiring guide for anyone who wishes to explore Kant's understanding of reason thoroughly, both in theoretical and practical philosophy, in ways that reach far beyond the more common accounts of Kant as a narrow formalist of reason.

Concluding Comment

For obvious reasons, Saner's book does not say anything about the revival of Kant's thought in contemporary political and moral theory, and particularly in Jurgen Habermas' (1990, 1993, 1996) work on "deliberative democracy" and "discourse ethics." In this respect it may be considered outdated. But what it has to offer is far from being outdated: it offers, in the best sense of the word, a *basic* introduction to the political roots of Kant's concept of reason.

If you are looking for a more up-to-date exploration of some of the political roots and implications of Kant's thought, particularly in his practical philosophy, I would recommend Onora O'Neill's (1989) *Constructions of Reason* to begin with (see my separate review of this book in Ulrich 2011b and 2015). In a way though, Saner's book still goes deeper; it really goes to the roots of Kant's political thought, whereas O'Neill's equally admirable book deals more with its

contemporary relevance and application. I found Saner's book to be an outstanding propaedeutic and companion to O'Neill's account. Note that both books require some prior familiarity with Kant's writings, otherwise they might provide tough and unproductive reading. In any case, studying either book will demand quite some perseverance. Saner's book, due to its detailed and partly almost biographical account of Kant's personal way from metaphysics to critical philosophy and on to cosmopolitan thinking, demands a particular effort; but in the end the reader is rewarded by valuable insights into the deep affinity of Kant's concept of reason to his political thought.

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