Review Essay

Kant's politics and its contemporary meaning: Recent approaches

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Kant's Political Legacy: Human Rights, Peace, Progress
Luigi Caranti
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Kant's Cosmopolitics: Contemporary Issues and Global Debates
Garrett Wallace Brown and Áron Telegdi-Csetri (Eds.)
Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2019, xv+232 pp.,
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At no time in the past seventy years has the liberal democratic order found itself under such serious political and intellectual challenge. The two volumes under review thus appear at a particularly opportune moment. For if there is one thinker who has defined the 'new world order' that emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall, including both trends toward 'globalization' and the integration of Europe under the banner of the European Union, it is Immanuel Kant. Both as a theorist of a global, increasingly democratic world order, and as the explicit source of actual constitutions from the UNCharter to that of the post-war Federal Republic of Germany, Kant might well be called the beacon of our age. It is thus especially welcome to have two books that devote themselves not only to close textual exegesis of Kant's political works but also to the application of his thought to a wide range of contemporary political issues.

Luigi Caranti's *Kant's Political Legacy: Human Rights, Peace, Progress* is a lucid and ambitious contribution to the growing critical discussion of Kant's political thought. Wide-ranging in its scope, it aims to combine hermeneutic fidelity (and accompanying attention to the recent scholarly literature) with practical applications likely to be of interest to a wider audience. In the author's words:

> Hermeneutical work has thus been carried out without much attention to the thorniest issues of our world at least those that could be treated through Kantian lenses with reasonable hope of intellectual and practical progress. Conversely, those who have focused on these concrete issues using Kant as a guide, have done so with very scant hermeneutical care. Rarely is it ever highlighted how Kant, properly understood, can do more than propose

> abstract norms. His concrete guidance for political action has remained underappreciated (p. 2).

The result of the author's dual effort is a more moderate, politically attractive Kant than the common caricature of a rigid moralist and/or political naïf – a philosopher, that is to say, who seems well positioned to provide much needed concrete guidance in today's troubled world. Caranti successfully lays to rest a number of common misconceptions about Kant, including those associated with Democratic Peace Theory (DPT), which has much concerned International Relations and related fields in recent years. Indeed, one of the most valuable features of the book, especially for political scientists, may well lie in Caranti's painstaking consideration of the varieties of DPT that have proliferated in the professional literature, along with their various limitations, both as an accurate reading of Kant, and as an informative guide to international politics.

Caranti's book is divided into three parts: 1. Human Rights; 2. Peace; and 3. Progress, with a final section on both the what and how of what Kant calls 'moral politic[s]' (as distinguished from 'political morali[ty]' and 'moralizing politic[s]'), i.e., Kantian political practice rightly understood.

Part 1, on rights, consists of three chapters that are, respectively, devoted to a reconstruction of Kant's own derivation of human rights, the contemporary debate about rights, and the author's proposed correction – here called 'the dignity approach' – of the original Kantian model. For the purposes of this review, I will concentrate on chapters one and three, notwithstanding the useful taxonomy that is provided in chapter two of the varieties of 'rights talk' that have dominated recent scholarly discussion.

In contrast with utilitarian or status quo foundationalists, not to speak of other approaches, Kant, on Caranti's account, grounds human rights on human agency of a peculiar kind: namely, 'autonomy' understood as implying not only a capacity for (prudential) end setting (as with some theories of agency) but also moral responsibility. Being autonomous, in his words, 'entails the ability to act in *complete* independence from inclinations,' or positively put, 'being able to find sufficiently strong motivation in a very special kind of non-empirical interest, which is respect for the moral law' (p. 26). Unlike those who insist on separating Kant's theory of right and his ethics, or juridical principles and moral ones, Caranti locates the ultimate ground of Kantian right in moral principle and the dignity that follows from it – dignity being the ultimate basis of human rights, which otherwise reduce themselves to nothing more than arbitrary rules (as in the rules of chess) or customary practices subject to challenge whenever customs change.

Caranti's ultimate claim regarding human rights differs from Kant's in two respects: first, autonomous agency, on the author's account, need not be performed under the specific auspices of the categorical imperative (other moral rules, such as the 'golden rule,' will do as well). Somewhat more provocatively, autonomous

agency, as he understands it, is not peculiar to human animals, but may apply, in lesser degree, to other animals as well – a claim I shall return to shortly.

Caranti is especially good, here and throughout the book, at both taxonomizing alternative approaches to his own and/or that of Kant and showing the weaknesses, both theoretical and practical, of those approaches. And both here and throughout he exhibits an unusual judiciousness and economy that readers looking for an incisive overview of recent critical disputes will find especially helpful.

In Part 2, on peace, Caranti seeks to establish the superiority of Kant's own recipe for perpetual peace to the various versions of DPT theory often proffered in Kant's name. The key differences, as the author sees it, between Kant's position and DPT in its several forms include a more expansive understanding, on Kant's part, of republicanism (to include both active participation and widespread civic/moral formation), a more inclusive federalism, and a cosmopolitan right that extends beyond the economic internationalism and free trade policies to which conventional DPT theory typically confines it. Throughout, Caranti stresses the necessarily normative character of Kant's formula for perpetual peace, which cannot succeed without the proliferation of a broadly moral civic culture and – equally crucially – 'moral politicians' at the helm to nudge history in the right direction. Above all, Caranti claims, recurrence to a more orthodox Kantian formula would preclude the sorts of intrusive 'crusades for freedom' (e.g., the war in Iraq) which conventional DPT theory generally ignores if not actively justifies.

In Part 3, on progress, Caranti argues – correctly in my view – for a more practically geared understanding of Kant's 'idea' of history, from the relatively early *Idea for a Universal History* onward. The idea of history, on such a view, is not only a 'regulative' hermeneutical device intended to advance theoretical research but a practical goalpost-lending guidance and support to political actors in the here and now. Discarding Kant's appeals to natural 'predispositions' and to 'providence,' Caranti reduces the pertinent facts of human nature from which a progressive history can be gleaned to two: namely, 'limited benevolence,' and 'an ability to see [one's own] best interest through experience' (p. 210). As Caranti sees it, given these factors, along with 'relatively constant objective factors in the external world' (p. 210), a progressive march toward perpetual peace can be reasonably assumed; a claim he rests both on the power of self-interest rightly understood and on the dynamic relation between increasingly peaceful and prosperous civil conditions and 'the growing moral capacity of individuals.'

Caranti's account of Kant's recipe for perpetual peace is not only more attractively modest, both politically and metaphysically, than the view with which he is frequently taxed; it also furnishes a smooth moment of transition to the final, and in many ways most original (and provocative) portion of the book, in which the author attempts to spell out both what it means to be a 'political moralist' in Kant's sense, and why that understanding might represent a plausible source of guidance for real-world actors.

Caranti's proof text is the famous, and in many ways perplexing, Appendix to *Toward Perpetual Peace*, which contrasts Kant's preferred 'moral politician' to the 'political moralist' (a contradiction in terms), the 'despotizing moralist' (who is at least capable of learning from experience), and the 'moralizing politician' (who makes progress impossible, inasmuch as it lies with him). The author proceeds to discuss the various paradoxes that arise in the course of Kant's argument, beginning with the familiar tension between the dictates of moral principle and the prudential requirements of an effective politics. Caranti's effort to work out Kant's resolution, along with potential responses to a series of potent objections, is as searching as it is unusual among contemporary commentators.

To briefly summarize the author's argument: the moral politician, unlike his merely prudent counterpart, makes compatibility with moral principle a sine qua non, promoting reforms wherever empirical evidence suggests them to be possible, while holding back whenever the facts suggest otherwise. Additionally, teleological history gives the moral politician confidence in the long game, without substituting for more fine-grained factual analysis in the shorter run. Third, the moral politician has the advantage of steadiness born of a principled goal sustainable over time. But fourth, the moral politician also requires judgment, a reflective capacity that cannot be taught and is, unfortunately, rare. Accordingly:

> the moral politician must merely make sure that the reforms are what right requires and which are not evidently premature and/or only realizable by violent means. If the envisaged reforms pass this preliminary test, she should not hesitate to try to implement them even if it is impossible to foresee all repercussions of such an attempt. Their intrinsic justice is a sufficient justification for doing all in our power to realize them (p. 247).

Finally, if, in the end, the moral politician fails in his or her attempt, disinterested spectators will at least be on hand to notice and be inspired to similar efforts in the future.

This gloss does not do justice to the author's perspicuous attempts to make sense of Kant's claim that morality is not only 'the indispensable condition' of sound politics, but that principles of right 'lead straight to their goal,' provided they are carried out with prudent caution. Still a number of questions arise, both for Kant and for Caranti's sympathetic and judicious reconstruction.

That moral politics, unlike moralizing politics, does not make progress impossible, assuming that the latter is indeed the case, does not in itself establish that such a politics is the most effective way to bring about the desired end – eternal peace, or the near approach thereto – nor that the latter's delay, if so it be, is worth the price.

If political judgment is indeed both necessary and 'rare,' should not this fact dampen progressive hopes, even assuming the dynamic mutual reinforcement of self-interest and growing moral capability that Kant/Caranti here supposes?
Unlike the Aristotelian phronesis with which Caranti here compares it, Kantian judgment takes its ultimate bearings from formal rules whose ethical sufficiency as such Aristotle would dispute. This difficulty is most evident in Kant's refusal, on the one hand, to countenance exceptions, and his endorsement, on the other, of 'postponement,' at least in certain cases. But how distinguish those rules which must be executed immediately and those whose execution may be deferred? If lying is always wrong, as Kant elsewhere insists, may the moral politician 'defer' telling the truth, e.g., to those with which his country is at war? And if lying is sometimes allowed why not interference in another state's internal affairs? Is there a 'rule' for distinguishing such rules? Or must we rely on the potentially slippery slope of 'judgment' to decide?

Two further questions arise, for this reader at least, with regard to earlier chapters: first, vis-à-vis Caranti's extension to non-human animals of 'autonomy' in the sense on which he draws in grounding innate right. For if a capacity for moral accountability is the hallmark of autonomy, as Caranti seems to suggest, it is hard to see how non-human animals qualify, for all the other ways they may warrant moral consideration. Second, I wonder if in his efforts to demystify Kant's idea of history, Caranti does not simplify it beyond what would be necessary to show that the arc of history indeed bends toward justice. I have in mind the rather more complex psychology that Kant elaborates in such works as the *Anthropology* and *Religion within the Boundaries of Bare Reason* – and that would arguably yield a more plausibly comprehensive rendering of 'human nature' than that here provided.

These and similar questions – inevitable in a project of such scope – take nothing away from Caranti's accomplishment, beginning with his willingness to go beyond hermeneutical exploration to attend to the practical uses to which Kant's work might be put at a time of increasing challenge to the world order that he helped create. Nor do they qualify the attractions of the moderate and judicious Kant that is here set forth.

Unlike Caranti's study, *Kant's Cosmpolitics: Contemporary Issues and Global Debates*, edited by Garrett Wallace Brown and Áron Telegdi-Csetri, is a collection of disparate essays focused loosely on the related issues of cosmopolitanism and publicity in Kant's thought with specific application to the present. Like many collections that grow out of conferences, this suffers from the advantages and disadvantages of long and often serendipitous gestation, in this case tragically punctuated by the deaths of Gary Banham, an organizer, and B. Sharon Byrd, an original participant, to both of whom the volume is dedicated.

The essays are organized around four themes: Part One addresses the interplay between state sovereignty and cosmopolitan institutions, with essays by Banham and Kjartan Koch Mikalsen. In Part Two Heather Roff discusses the relation between the principle of publicity and Kant's notion of provisional right, while Kosas Koukouzelis looks to civil society to mediate between republican states and cosmopolitan citizenship. Part Three looks at applications of Kant's thought in both theoretical (Sorin Baiasu) and practical (Barrett Wallace Brown, Dilek Huseyinzadegan) contexts. Finally, Part Four takes up cosmopolitan culture with respect to pedagogy (Georg Cavallar) and aesthetics (Stefan-Sebastian Maftei).

Among these essays, those by Roff and Baiasu stand out both for exegetical rigor and, in the case of Roff, with respect to its contribution to the broader issue of Kant's contemporary political bearing. Roff skillfully applies an original analysis of the meaning of 'provisional right' in an international context to resolve the seeming contradictions between parallel provisions of *Toward Perpetual Peace* and the *Doctrine of Right*, including, most notoriously, their respective treatments of preemptive war. In so doing, she not only reveals a more hard-headed Kant than is common either in the general scholarship or the popular imagination; she also shows Kant's 'transcendental principle of public right' to have greater relevance than is commonly thought for practical policy makers under less-than-perfect international conditions (like the present). Her interpretation has the added virtue of reconciling two seminal political texts, close to each other chronologically, whose apparent divergence has perplexed many prominent Kant scholars. The essay also includes an unusually insightful discussion of the audience(s) to whom the transcendental principle of right, and hence the publicity principle, properly applies.

Baiasu addresses the question of realizability in a different, and largely theoretical vein – including a critique of Marcus Willaschek's appropriation of Kant's idea of the highest political good to undermine Kant's own arguments for the postulates of practical reason (Willascheck, 2016). Baiasu contends that Willascheck's argument depends on a false conflation of the feasibility of progressively approximating the political highest good with that of realizing the supreme ethical good (or virtue plus happiness) whose achievement is both more complex and in greater need of supernatural support. The upshot of Baiasu's analysis is a political highest good whose realization seems to depend on human choice alone. One might wonder whether this is strictly true for Kant – especially given appeals to providence in the *Conflict of the Faculties* and elsewhere. But, however, one ultimately comes down (and this is not the essay's primary focus), the essay makes a nuanced case for the systematic distinctiveness of Kant's political ideal both practically and systematically.

One question touched on by both volumes but not fully explored in either is in what way or ways feasibility matters to Kant. Does it bear mostly on issues of motivation (e.g., if we lose hope we will not try, or try hard enough)? Or is it,

rather, out of a prudent concern, given a just and righteous end, with achieving that end by the most expeditious and effective means? If the former is the case, any progressive scenario that is not implausible on its face may do; if the latter, a more exacting inquiry into the causes of human behavior, along with the obstacles likely to be encountered, would seem to be necessary. One might even need to consider whether hope, especially insofar as it proves to be false hope, might be counterproductive (as with the false hope that arguably contributed to Chamberlain's disastrous conclusion at Munich of 'peace for our time').

A final word on the importance of studies of this sort under present conditions of political distress across the liberal/republican world: Kant is too often treated as the secular saint of liberal cosmopolitanism with little to contribute to the hard-nosed policy-maker. The volumes under review do much, albeit in different ways, to vindicate Kant's claim that politics must combine justice with a prudent regard for the less pleasing features of our nature.

Reference

Willascheck, M. (2016) Must we believe in the realizability of our ends? In: T. Höwing (ed.) *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter: 223–244.

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