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Selected controversies over the political writings of Immanuel Kant

Abstract

The article presents the discrepancies in the interpretation of Immanuel Kant's practical philosophy. First of all, Marek J. Siemek's interpretation emphasising the intersubjective character of Kant's thought is presented. It has been confronted with other contemporary receptions of the Critiques' author's work, including, among others, the socio-political interpretation by Hannah Arendt. While in the end, the criticism made by Theodor Adorno has been outlined, which shows the irremovable contradictions underlying Kant's thought.

Keywords: Progress, dignity, state, society, cosmopolitanism, morality, ethics, imperative

The article presents Marek J. Siemek's reception of Immanuel Kant's political writings and it juxtaposes it with other contemporary interpreters: Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt. In the first part of the article, through Siemek's interpretation, the communicative, autonomous and universalist, and thus modern character of Kant's practical philosophy will be shown. Next, Siemek's point of view will be compared with Arendt's, who explices some inaccuracies in the Koenigsberg philosopher's concept, mainly the heterogeneity of the conviction about human dignity. The last part of the text will be devoted to criticism made by Adorno, who, admittedly, finds numerous antinomies present in the Kantian philosophical system, but at the same time, in my opinion, they do not remove the practical value of the *Critiques*' author's idea.

Siemek assumes that the treatise titled *Perpetual Peace* constitutes the complement of the Kantian philosophical system. In his opinion, this text should not be read literally and selectively. He notes that "the issue of war and peace is a place where, as in a lens, there focuses the entire ethos of rational autonomy and communication dialogue, which the Kantian philosophy of freedom presents".¹ Thus, if in the project of *Perpetual Peace*, the thesis also contained in *Critique of Practical Reason* is explicated, namely, that the basic principle of ethics is the universality of applicability of just law, the question arises: If this law is of *a priori* character, then how does it manifest itself, is it discovered, constructed, or perhaps because of the existence of an overt public sphere – developed? While Arendt warns against treating Kant's

¹ Siemek (2002): 111-112. (author's translation)

political writings as the “fourth Critique”.² In her opinion, the ironic tone of *Perpetual Peace* reveals that the author did not treat these writings seriously.

Siemek takes a different stand, emphasising the convergence of *Rechtsprinzip* (categorical imperative of politics) presented in *Perpetual Peace* with the categorical imperative contained in *Critique of Practical Reason*. Moreover, in the project of *Perpetual Peace*, there is a new approach to categorical imperative that “sets the transcendental framework for the necessary preconditions of both ethical good and political justice”.³ It is to secure “universal ‘form of publicity’ also called by Kant ‘transcendental concept of public right’”.⁴ A breach against universal publicity is an unethical act, because it serves only private and therefore particularist interests, and in Kant’s view, what is individual is of nonrational character. Thanks to the universality of law, it assigns moral duties to the individual, thanks to which one becomes the author of ethically good (rational) actions. And vice versa: if someone deliberately makes an exception to the common, universal rule, then one commits morally wrong deeds, counter to rationality. Kant challenges the existing ethical systems, arguing that they cannot claim the right to universality. For none of them is rational, but based on random, individual emotions, making moral judgment dependent on instincts dependent on laws of nature governed by necessity or accidental conditioning of cultural norms.

Not without reason did Kant give the name of Critiques to his three life works, thus using the negative connotation of the word. Undoubtedly, he attributes to Critiques the task

² Arendt (1982): 7.

³ Siemek (2002): 116.

⁴ Ibidem: 115.

of cleansing the minds of superstitions, pre-judgments and misconceptions, and moreover, wanted to make “his attempt to derive the duty of mutual respect from a law of reason (...).”⁵ Arendt draws attention to the fact that “Kant became aware of the political as distinguished from the social, as part and parcel of man’s condition in the world, rather late in life”.⁶ Perhaps that is why he acknowledged the importance of direct translation of his philosophical concept into political thought. In his opinion, autonomous human reason, deprived of blind faith in authority, as a legislator, sets out the universal rules of action, thereby liberating the human being from the power of nature-bound necessity. This means that the human as a rational being is free, as long as one is subject to the laws of which one is the creator. He saw democracy as legitimate tyranny of the crowd. According to the Koenigsberg philosopher, progress can be achieved through gradual, regular improvement of citizens, raising their level of rationality and morality, *inter alia*, by observing the universal law based on reason. Only then can a culture of developmental character emerge that will supplant tyranny and superstition thus creating a space for autonomous thinking.⁷

Thus, the human being gains the rank of an autonomous legislator inhabiting the realm of ends, is able to act in accordance with the moral law, thanks to which one has an inalienable dignity. As Siemek observes , “the thought that every violation of the moral law consists, in the final count, in the internal self-contradiction that occurs in the very person, as a result of which one’s maxims and norms ‘annihilate’ or ‘lift’ each other and the connections of meanings

⁵ Horkheimer, Adorno (2002): 67.

⁶ Arendt (1982): 9.

⁷ Kant (1989): 54-60.

they unite disintegrate, remains the unchanging leitmotiv of Kant's transcendental ethics".⁸ Importantly, reason and its rules, without referring to subjective factors, inherent in feelings, provide a criterion of purposefulness and generality for the moral law. Therefore, reason does not only give the human being the freedom⁹ to self-determine, but also gives one dignity, bypassing one's random social status.

Abstracting political rights from the random ones, entangled in the culture as well as economic and social condition of the state, makes Kant's philosophy universal, thus making it a fertile ground for the perspective of cosmopolitan politics. The inalienable asset of this politics is giving the person a rank as a human being and not as a representative of an ethnic group. For Kant, external freedom in the form of the law "is the right through which I require not to obey any external laws except those to which I could have given my consent". In exactly the same way, external (legal) equality in a state is that relation of the subjects in consequence of which no individual can legally bind or oblige another to anything, without at the same time submitting himself to the law (...).¹⁰ Only in a state, thanks to a universally valid law, what is ethical becomes political and the will gains autonomy. Thanks to a legal status, an individual gains "mature" communication competence of every individual entity, because of which one voluntarily subordinates the spontaneity of one's free actions and failures to the immanent logic

⁸ Siemek (2002): 118.

⁹ Adorno believes otherwise, stating that the Kantian idea of freedom is irrational, because it "becomes (...) incorporated into the causality of the world of appearance, which is incompatible with its Kantian concept", he even notices the explicated in *Foundation for a Metaphysic of Morals* oxymoron: "causality through freedom", Adorno (1970).

¹⁰ Kant (1917).

of common rules of the game based on universal *reciprocity*".¹¹ A unitary, individual ethical entity co-exists with others in society, creating intersubjectivity.¹² Kant believes that "In Man (as the only rational creature on earth), those natural capacities which are directed towards the use of his reason are such that they could be fully developed only in the species, but not in the individual".¹³

In Kant's view, the natural, intrinsic purpose of development does not lead to a predetermined goal, like in the teleological Hegelian dialectics of history, but rather to the full development of the predispositions of individuals. This is, perhaps, where a discontinuity in the progress of the human being comes from; on the one hand, "if nature is not to be accused of having failed, by permitting descent from different ancestors, to take the most appropriate measures to promote sociability as the principal end of human destiny",¹⁴ on the other hand, the antagonisms already present at the beginning of human history allowed for the development of universal rights and, consequently, intersubjective communities. Thus, the conflict was constructive and ultimately led to the condition that enabled the existence of sociability as a purpose. In this context, it is important that a person is dependent on other people not because of biological condition, but by innate sociability, which is indispensable, because of the needs of the mind – the power of judgment, which needs the environment of others, the perspective of another person. This aspect is clearly explicated by Kant in *Critique of Judgement*: "Empirically the Beautiful interests

¹¹ Siemek (2002): 119.

¹² Ibidem: 120-121.

¹³ Kant (1989): 42.

¹⁴ Kant (1989b): 222.

only in society. If we admit the impulse to society as natural to man, and his fitness for it, and his propension towards it, i.e. sociability, as a requisite for man as a being destined for society, and so as a property belonging to humanity, we cannot escape from regarding taste as a faculty for judging everything in respect of which we can communicate our feeling to all other men, and so as a means of furthering that which every one's natural inclination desires".¹⁵ Therefore, what is also important for the Koenigsberg philosopher is for "a right of visitation. This right to present themselves to society [which – K. Z.] belongs to all mankind" to be inscribed even in the international law.¹⁶

In Kant's philosophical system, there are two orders: accidental, subjective, individual, and hence unreasonable, nature facts, and a universal, ethical and political order based on the system of laws. As it was mentioned above, the conflict makes people strive to develop a universal law, the Koenigsberg philosopher states that "the means which nature employs to bring about the developments of innate capacities is that of antagonism within society, in so far as this antagonism becomes in the long run the cause of a law-governed social order".¹⁷ Even a war, despite its destructive power, can have a constructive character, in *An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?* Kant states: "However, the painful consequences of the present war can compel the political prophet to confess a very imminent turn of humanity toward the better that is even now in prospect".¹⁸ In this respect, Kant's views seem to be almost inspired

¹⁵ Kant (1914): 173.

¹⁶ Kant (1917): 138.

¹⁷ Kant (1989): 47.

¹⁸ Kant (2001): 309.

by Hobbesian or even Machiavellian conviction that it is not the human who is good, but the law that compels one to be so.¹⁹ He notes: “A good political constitution, however, is not to be expected as a result of progress in morality; but rather, conversely, the good moral condition of a nation is to be looked for, as one of the first fruits of such a constitution”.²⁰ In modern civil society, it is not morality that is the most important thing, but autonomous freedom, reason that is able to reduce particularistic motives for the sake of the common good. According to Kant, “the problem of the formation of the state, hard as it may sound, is not insoluble, even for a [p. 154] race of devils” because “it deals, not with the moral reformation of mankind, but only with the mechanism of nature; and the problem is to learn how this mechanism of nature can be applied to men, in order so to regulate the antagonism of conflicting interests in a people that they may even compel one another to submit to compulsory laws and thus necessarily bring about the state of peace in which laws have force”.²¹ Even beings with such a flawed nature as humans and exactly thanks to it, through universal law, can create a kingdom of freedom. The inclination of people to take a privileged position while having to live in one society, this famous Kantian “unsocial sociability” is not an obstacle to the creation of a political community but is indeed rooted in it.²²

What also is important from this perspective, Kant calls nature “the great artist”, because its work is embodied

¹⁹ Kant’s view also seems to coincide with Aristotle’s conviction that a good person can be a good citizen only in a good state.

²⁰ Kant, (1917): 154-155.

²¹ Ibidem: 153-154.

²² Kant (1989): 44.

in a republic, for which the legal system is essential, substantially universal, and therefore rational. Therefore, the republican system can be the cornerstone of a perpetual international peace. It should be based on three principles: the freedom of members of society, the subordination of all subjects to one legislation and their equality as citizens.²³ These principles exclude anachronisms, such as state privileges and those that prevent the development of human predispositions and abilities.²⁴ According to Siemek, in this structure one can see “the antique unity of ethics and politics described by Aristotle”, moreover, in the categorical imperative of morality, in contrast to practical-technical hypothetical imperatives, Aristotelian distinction can be noticed between *praxis* (occupying the public arena of “beautiful deeds”) and *poiesies* (existing in the private sphere).²⁵ In this context, it is worth mentioning that in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the Kantian categorical imperative has been identified with the Nietzschean will of the overman, because both are despotic in seeking to make people independent of external powers, and thus allowing to reach maturity which is the essence of enlightenment.²⁶

²³ Kant (1917): 143.

²⁴ Adorno emphasises that in Kant’s ethical system “every individual is to be respected as the representative of the socialised species humanity, no mere function of the exchange-process. The decisive distinction urged by Kant between means and ends is social, that between subjects as commodities of labour-power, out of which value is economically produced, and the human beings who even as such commodities remain subjects, for whose sake the entire operation, which forgets them and only incidentally satisfies them, is set into motion” – Adorno (1970): 256.

²⁵ Siemek (2002): 126.

²⁶ Horkheimer, Adorno (2002): 90.

The Kantian idea of progress seems to be in a sense a reflection of Rousseau's thought. In the view of the philosopher from Geneva, the course of history begins with "one's release from the womb of nature", which is tantamount to a person being "from the harmless and secure condition of a protected childhood (...) thrust (...) out into the world, where so many cares, labours, and unknown evils awaited him".²⁷ However, in Kant's approach, moving from childhood into adulthood is a "transition from a rude and purely animal existence to a state of humanity, from the leading-strings of instinct to the guidance of reason",²⁸ which means that a human can only enter the state in which one gains freedom, unlike in the Rousseau's concept, in which in this situation an individual loses this freedom. With the reservation that Rousseau, of course, also does not exclude the possibility of regaining freedom by establishing a political system in which the universal will can be realised.

For Kant, the change is positive in itself – in *The End of All Things* he notes: "Even assuming a person's moral-physical state here in life at its best – namely as a constant progression and approach to the highest good (marked out for him as a goal) –, he still (even with a consciousness of the unalterability of his disposition) cannot combine it with the prospect of satisfaction in an eternally enduring alteration of his state (the moral as well as the physical). For the state in which he now is will always remain an ill (...)"²⁹ The pursuit is good because it is the forging of reason and universal legislation. Even the fact that an individual or nation realises the desire to pursue something – is the use of reason. Recognising

²⁷ Kant (1989b): 226.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Kant (1794): 227.

the necessity of respecting universal legislation based on reason is in itself a qualitative leap, from barbarity and infancy into adulthood.

In the text of *The Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, Kant anticipates the rational development of nature, up to a “situation in which all germs implanted by nature can be developed fully, and in which man’s destiny can be fulfilled here on earth”³⁰ In this passage, it is clear that the Koenigsberg philosopher thinks about progress in terms of the whole humanity, not just an individual. The sphere of the individualism permeates with universality, the subjects persist in the relation of reciprocity. It is impossible to think about an individual in isolation from the whole, also the progress, in order to be fully realised must concern the whole species, not an individual. Citizens, members of the community, despite their autonomy, remain with each other in close relationships. As Siemek observes, “this is a thoroughly *political* ethics. Kant’s ‘realm of ends’ as a model of the intersubjective system of ethical freedom has its roots (...) in the civic ethos of Greek *koinonia politike* or the Roman *res publica*”³¹. The evolution of national states towards cosmopolitanism is the next necessary stage in the development of history. Because for Kant what is important is autonomy, which is also a guarantee of equality before the law, which does not only fit into the tradition of the Enlightenment, but thanks to the theoretical basis for deriving it from the rules of reason is extremely progressive. Proportionally, like individual progress on the whole society, the maturity developed by autonomous nations translates into an international community,

³⁰ Kant (1989): 52-53.

³¹ Siemek (2002): 125.

and categorical imperative refers to a nation (having its dignity) exactly to the same extent as to an individual. What is more, the establishment of a perfect civic system depends on the rule of law in the relations between states.³² Hence, annexation, occupation, the peddling of nations by rulers or taking decisions on their behalf without their consent is not a political barbarism.³³

The Kantian peaceful union of nations *foedus pacificum*³⁴ assumes autonomy and political sovereignty, which is why it must support itself on international law. As I mentioned above, it is important for the states that belong to it to have a republican system, because it guarantees social control over the authority and the superiority of law over the particularism of an individual or a group. Violence in international relations to the same extent as in relations between people appears as barbarity which should be exited voluntarily by complying with international law. Just as in social ethics, also in a cosmopolitan perspective, being subject to law is an expression of political freedom, because it is rational as it has been co-created and adopted by every rationally organised nation.

However, ambiguity arises: if the federation of states is to be free from the authority of an international government, for what reason should its members observe the pan-national law? What helps to solve this dilemma might be the idea of progress which fits in Kant's philosophy in the aspect that cosmopolitanism combines with the evolutionism typical of the Enlightenment, assuming that humanity in its essence has a moral predisposition, and the task of rational

³² Kant (1989): 47.

³³ Kant (1917): 143.

³⁴ Ibidem.

politics is to spark them off. Arendt states that “one judges always as a member of a community, guided by one’s community sense, one’s *sensus communis*. But in the last analysis, one is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being human; this is one’s ‘cosmopolitan existence’.³⁵ Leo Strauss, in turn, perceives in such an approach, the idea which assumes that history is a continuum – what comes later must be more mature, rational and wiser than what happens earlier. It is, therefore, historicism replacing the philosophy of politics with the history of politics.³⁶ Strauss also believes that “modern thought is in all its forms, directly and indirectly, determined by the idea of progress. This idea implies that the most elementary questions can be settled once and for all so that future generations can dispense with their further discussion, but can erect on the foundation once laid an ever-growing structure. In this way, the foundations are covered up”.³⁷

It must be admitted that Kant fits into so captured historicism, since indeed the individual, due to one’s mortality is not able to fully reveal one’s innate intellectual and moral endowment during one’s fragile life, so it is indispensable for a person to develop their predispositions in the generational dimension.³⁸ Kant hopes that “after many revolutions, with all their transforming effects, the highest purpose of nature, a universal *cosmopolitan existence*, will at last be realised as the matrix within which all the original capacities of the human race may develop”³⁹. On the other hand,

³⁵ Arendt (1982): 75.

³⁶ Strauss: 33.

³⁷ Ibidem: 49.

³⁸ Kant (1989): 44.

³⁹ Ibidem: 51.

however, Arendt thinks that “In Kant, the story’s or event’s importance lies precisely not at its end but in its opening up new horizons for the future”.⁴⁰ What is equally important for the philosopher, “progress is perpetual; there is never an end to it. Hence, there is no end to history”,⁴¹ and humanity develops proportionally to the individual’s personal development. In this sense, it is important that the Koenigsberg philosopher does not exclude the creation of a philosophy of history,⁴² which will be not so much a collection of empirical data, information about events, but history captured in the context of the historical process of the development of rationality – searching for the very essence of history, and not collecting historical data, which later Hegel used so effectively, criticising already in the introduction to *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* the previous historiography as a barren collection of detailed data devoid of intuition about the purpose of history.

According to Arendt, “the very idea of progress (...) contradicts Kant’s notion of man’s dignity (...). Progress, moreover, means that the story never has an end. The end of the story itself is in infinity. There is no point at which we might stand still and look back with the backward glance of the historian”.⁴³ If it is acknowledged that dignity belongs to the individual as a rational and free being, simultaneously the same individual as a rational and free being is subject to development, a doubt arises about at which point and at what stage this dignity is realised. Dignity then reveals as something potential, dormant, unattainable, even though people have

⁴⁰ Arendt (1982): 56.

⁴¹ Ibidem: 57.

⁴² Kant (1989): 53.

⁴³ Arendt (1982): 77.

the ability to acquire it and start enjoying freedom. Since the idea of progress develops in infinity, it is difficult to talk about the final stage. So, how is it possible to judge whether an individual and a community of which one is a part use reason to a degree to be entitled to dignity, and thus autonomy in intersubjective space? The weaknesses in the concept of the Koenigsberg philosopher apart from Arendt are also emphasised by Adorno who points out Kant's "freedom, to be established in its full dimensions solely under social conditions of an unfettered plenitude of goods".⁴⁴ Therefore, it is not immanence but externality, i. e., society that determines whether an entity is free or unfree, the entity is thus determined, dependent on contemporary social conditions. In this context, the following question is important: "whether society permits the individuated to be as free, as the former promises the latter; thereby also, as to whether the former is itself so".⁴⁵ This, in turn, entails another antinomy: "The more freedom the subject, and the community of subjects, ascribes to itself, the greater its responsibility, and before the latter it fails in a bourgeois life, whose praxis has never vouchsafed the undiminished autonomy to subjects which it was accorded in theory". However, Adorno concludes that this leads to a situation in which the entity feels guilty,⁴⁶ so it can be concluded that this fact has undoubtedly prosocial consequences.

Apart from the inconsistency in Kant's assumptions on a purely speculative plane, such as deriving the universality of metaphysics conceived after all subjectively (by a concrete, individual mind), which Adorno emphasises, he also

⁴⁴ Adorno (1970): 218-219.

⁴⁵ Ibidem: 129.

⁴⁶ Ibidem: 130.

sees practical cracks, such as the repressiveness of a seemingly conflict free concept of freedom. Firstly, the concepts that appear in *Critique of Practical Reason*, related to freedom, i.e. law, violence, respect, duty are of a repressive nature, moreover, its fragile internal ethics requires the use of punishment. The imperative imposes coercion, which excludes freedom.⁴⁷ Adorno sees antinomy in Kant's doctrine of freedom also in that "the moral law counts as rational for it and as not rational; rational, because it reduces itself to pure logical reason without content; not rational, because it would be accepted as a given fact".⁴⁸ What is important in the political aspect, "in the realm of socially existent subjects unfreedom is preponderant over freedom to this day. (...) as schizophrenia, subjective freedom is something destructive, which only incorporates human beings under the bane of nature that much more",⁴⁹ so the aspect of maintaining the well-being of the community comes first in Kant's ethics.

Secondly, Adorno sees repression also in Kant's hegemony of universality over individuality. He notes that one cannot talk about freedom "in the countries which today monopolise the name of socialism, an immediate collectivism is commanded as the subordination of the individual to society".⁵⁰ Moreover, unlike Siemek, Adorno notes that "the moral categories of the individuated are more than only individual. What becomes evident in them, in keeping with the model of the Kantian concept of law, as what is universal, is secretly something social".⁵¹ In addition, conscience derives

⁴⁷ Ibidem: 231, 257-258.

⁴⁸ Ibidem: 152.

⁴⁹ Ibidem: 140-141.

⁵⁰ Ibidem: 164.

⁵¹ Ibidem: 163.

its objectivity from the objectivity of society, and more precisely from its repressive character: the coercion and idea of solidarity heteronomously dormant in society. Namely, the rule which the conscience absorbs from society in an unconscious way, thanks to the repressive form of conscience, runs from particularity to universality. In other words: "only in its [conscience's – K. Z.] repressive form does the solidaristic one form, which sublates the former".⁵² This would mean that even the theoretical grounding of Kant's ethics does not free it from being entangled in accidental, because time- and territory-dependent, culture norms.

From among many antinomies in Kant's thought, which Adorno presents in *Negative Dialectics*, special attention should be paid to the one based on giving privilege to practical reason with regard to the pure one; namely, *praxis* (necessary to realise the idea of freedom) cannot exist without theoretical consciousness. Logic, as pure consciousness in a sense imposes the negation of will, it is an autarkic field requiring a contemplative attitude, i.e. a behaviour that does not want anything, and so theory and practice become antagonistic towards each other.⁵³ Furthermore, this contradiction, according to the Frankfurter, is also based on a different field: "the epitome of acts which would satisfy the idea of freedom, requires indeed full theoretical consciousness. The decisionism which cancels out reason in the transition to the action delivers this over to the automatism of domination: the unreflective freedom, which it adjusts to, becomes the servant of total unfreedom". This is evidenced by the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, for instance, Hitler's realm.⁵⁴

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ Ibidem: 134-136.

⁵⁴ Ibidem: 134.

However, Arendt's questions, which cannot be answered by reading Kant's political writings literally and Adorno's doubts, do not undo the Koenigsberg's philosopher project, but decide about its importance for modern and contemporary philosophical anthropology and political philosophy. In addition, they clearly show the path on which humanity can progress towards achieving peace, harmony and prosperity, while maintaining a constant, gradual development of moral predispositions of the human being, which translates into a social ground, then the condition of the nation, and finally the world order, what often accent Siemek. Adorno himself, while criticising Kant's concept of freedom, in which the repressive element is inscribed, finally admits: "The horizon of a condition of freedom, which would need no repression and no morality, because the drive would no longer have to express itself destructively, is veiled in gloom".⁵⁵ Despite the controversies and cracks or unprovable assumptions, the concept of Kant's philosophy of morality and politics has a unquestionably practical value. Its proof is even the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, still valid today, and containing assumptions, articles and postulates based on Kant's philosophical thought. This testifies to its being up-to-date for over two centuries, but also to the fact that the concept of the Koenigsberg philosopher is undoubtedly guided by the idea of progress.

⁵⁵ Ibidem: 164.

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