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## PEACE IS NOT PERPETUAL, AUTONOMOUS, OR RATIONAL

*Danielle Poe*

When I write about and teach Immanuel Kant, I am always impressed and seduced by the beauty and neatness of his work. After all, Kant makes morality a science; answers are clear and distinct, black and white. Individuals make ethical decisions by using reason according to universally accessible principles. People should do the right thing, not because it is easy, not because it makes them feel good, and not because they have been raised to do so. People should do the right thing because it is their duty, and they determine their duty by asking, "Can I universalize my action?" If yes, then the act is ethical and one's duty. If no, then the act is unethical and not doing so is one's duty. This philosophy is deeply seductive because it affirms the possibility of doing the right thing even when doing the wrong thing is easier, safer, and tempting. The simplicity of this approach appeals to those of us with a commitment to nonviolence in a highly militaristic society. People can ask themselves, "Can I will that everyone kill other people?" No, then military force is wrong regardless of how often it has been used and how entrenched it is in U.S. society. The moral person will reject violence even if she or he must stand alone.

Kant further seduces philosophers of non-violence in *Perpetual Peace* when he lays out a practical plan for attaining perpetual peace, which for him is the cessation of war (Kant 1983). After laying out the Preliminary Articles and the Definitive Articles for perpetual peace, Kant assures the reader that "Taken objectively, morality is in itself practical, for it is the totality of unconditional-

ly binding laws according to which we *ought* to act, and once one has acknowledged the authority of its concept of duty, it would be utterly absurd to continue wanting to say that one *cannot* do his duty" (Kant 1983, 370). Thus, morality and peace do not depend upon subjective perspectives and imperfect contexts. Peace falls under the umbrella of objective morality and unconditional laws. These laws include abolishing standing armies (Kant 1983, 345), prohibiting nations from forcibly interfering with other sovereign nation's constitutions and governments (Kant 1983, 345), and universal hospitality (Kant 1983, 357-358). I applaud each of these articles, and I admire that Kant turned his philosophical genius to thinking about ways to bring about peace. This paper, though, will defend a position that is both more radical and more practical than Kant's position. The position is more radical than Kant's because it requires perpetual, peaceful revolution that seeks justice rather than merely seeking the absence of war. The position is more practical because it considers the current U.S. conflict with Iran rather than universal ideals.

At the center of Kant's ethics and political philosophy—and his philosophy in general—is a commitment to autonomy and rationality. For Kant autonomy and rationality are necessarily intertwined. After all, autonomy is "*auto-nomos*," giving oneself the law, and the law which we give ourselves is the law of reason, and what is reasonable is that which preserves autonomy. Autonomy and reason are mutually reinforcing. In his ethics, Kant arrives at the centrality of autonomy and reason by searching for a human good and rejecting other contenders. In the opening line of *The Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant uses reason to situate the good will at the heart of morality: "There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a *good will*" (Kant, 393). Material objects, personality traits, and intelligence are not good in themselves because each of these things may very well be used in such a way as to be harmful to oneself or others. The good will is the good of acting purely according to duty, not out of self-interest. Duty, in turn, is determined by universal rationality free of subjective considerations.

In *Perpetual Peace*, the emphasis on autonomy and rationality manifests itself in the article that states, "No nation shall forcibly interfere with the constitution and government of another" (Kant, 346). The rationality that supports this principle is that nothing can justify such interference; although, Kant does stipulate that other nations can aid a country in which two factions are



ving for the whole country. Kant leaves no provision, though, for external countries to interfere in an internal genocide. The consistent application of this principle would result in the conclusion that because the genocide is happening within the borders of Rwanda, then other countries ought to respect Rwanda's sovereignty. Any other conclusions would require countries to appeal to concrete criteria developed in response to the particular disasters that are possible today.

While Kant's commitment to autonomy, universal rational laws, and perpetual peace appeals to philosophers' desire for systems that can respond to every situation, this system relies on static understandings of subjectivity, law, and peace. Philosophers might want a universal rule and duty that will require countries to respond to genocide, but the world does not accommodate that desire. Instead, individuals develop communities, even as they develop in response to their particular communities. A more practical approach to politics entails situating people within a context. The political philosopher Chantal Mouffe offers such a description by describing how people develop their subjectivity in relation to other people,

To be capable of thinking politics today, and understanding the nature of these new struggles and the diversity of social relations that the democratic revolution has yet to encompass, it is indispensable to develop a theory of the subject as a decentered, detotalized agent, a subject constructed at the point of intersection of a multiplicity of subject positions between which there exists no a priori or necessary relation and whose articulation is the result of hegemonic practices. (Mouffe 1993, 12)

Whereas Kant founds autonomy on a universal plane in which the moral subject is understood by and grounded in reason, Mouffe argues that a subject has no universal dimension. Rather, subjectivity happens within a context of diverse practices among diverse groups. The practices and groups that make up an individual's subjectivity are not determined by her or him; the practices and groups influence the individual and the individual influences the practices and groups, but no particular individual is the sole determiner of meaning. Morality, laws, and actions have their source and motivation within these contexts rather than in a purely objective realm.

Another significant aspect of Mouffe's definition of subjectivity is that she gives up the Enlightenment emphasis on individual-



ism: "It is necessary to theorize the individual, not as a monad, an "unencumbered" self that exists prior to and independently of society, but rather as a site constituted by an ensemble of "subject positions," inscribed in a multiplicity of social relations, the member of many communities and participant in a plurality of collective forms of identification" (Mouffe 1993, 97). Whereas Kant emphasizes a universal subject who makes decisions based on a formulation of universal laws, Mouffe emphasizes the situatedness of being a person. People do not make decisions outside of their situation and their situation provides the rules and the context for what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. Moreover, people are part of many communities, each of which influences their decisions, judgments, and abilities to act. Some subject positions come with power and influence. Other subject positions are marginalized, oppressed, and excluded from power. The self is always in these contexts; it does not first exist as a purely rational being.

A concrete example of this can be illustrated by considering my own subject position, which is composed of being a woman, Caucasian, middle-class, a United States citizen, a Roman Catholic, a feminist, a mother, a spouse, a teacher, a scholar, a daughter, a sister, and so on. To answer the question, "who am I?", I do not rely on some universal attribute shared by all humans since no universal attribute exists that explains subjectivity. Subjectivity is instead composed of the many overlapping, layered, and heterogeneous positions that I occupy in relation to other people.

Now, consider the description that any other person might offer to describe his or her subjectivity. One can imagine that in comparison to the description of my subjectivity other descriptions could have significant overlap, some have very little overlap, and some have no overlap, but it is not possible to have an identical subject description since each subjectivity is determined in part by relationships with particular people in addition to more encompassing groups. In the above description of subjectivity, each community is composed of people who are irreducible. That is, our communities are made up of people with differences. Within our communities, we organize ourselves and form collective identities. As Mouffe explains, "One of the crucial questions at stake is the creation of a collective identity, a 'we.' In the question 'What shall we do?', the 'we' is not given but rather constitutes a problem" (Mouffe 1993, 50).

Creating a collective identity, a 'we,' happens in a context and as a process. 'We' might be a group of people who are opposed



to a particular war, such as the Vietnam War or the Iraq War. In another context, we might be a group of people who are opposed to all wars. The first “we” comes together in response to a particular event and will lose its collective identity after the event concludes. The second “we” is likely to retain its collective identity much longer because it defines itself in opposition to an ideology rather than to an event. That both of these examples come from groups who form their identities in opposition to other groups is significant. ‘We’ depends on a constitutive outside, those who are not like ‘us.’ How ‘we’ is defined, though, will change in different situations, and seeking justice means that we can never be satisfied with current conditions. A society that values democracy, difference, and justice should reject Kant’s perpetual peace as an ideal.

Peace is not perpetual because no permanent, static, ideal of peace can ever or should ever be reached. Peace is much more than a simple absence of conflict. Peace is the presence of just relations in the world. If peace were simply the absence of conflict, then peace could be maintained by the threat of violence, or by oppressed groups of people acquiescing in their oppression. Peace requires that people recognize the dignity of other people, the interconnections between people and the world, and the value of diversity in societies. In order to achieve peace, we must engage in what Emmanuel Levinas calls a “perpetual revolution.” The perpetual revolution requires that we constantly re-evaluate the institutions that are responsible for maintaining justice in our society, guarding against the evil that can lurk in good intentions, and always looking for new ways to include marginalized people and groups.

As an example of the need for perpetual revolution, which guards against evil that taints the good, Levinas describes Stalin’s communism, which begins with just intentions and becomes corrupt by elevating an ideal above the worth of individual people. Stalin begins with a legitimate critique: people are suffering under capitalism. He continues with a legitimate means of addressing suffering: a more just society requires that resources be held in common. Obviously, though, Stalin’s initial good intentions led to widespread suffering, intolerance, and political tyranny because the ideals of communism were elevated above the lives of particular individuals (Burggraeve 2005, 86-90). For Levinas, every good idea, principle, and institution carries a similar risk. Even an institution and system that aims to alleviate suffering must be evaluated to ensure that no individual person is sacrificed for a greater good.



Here, Levinas and Mouffe will agree to Kant's practical imperative: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means" (429). Some may accuse me of forfeiting my postmodern aims at this point because I am relying on a universal principle. The crucial distinction, though, between Kant's modern description of this imperative and my postmodern use of this imperative is that for me a person can never be understood by any universal formula. For Kant, the practical imperative to never treat a person simply as a means but also as an end is derived from the universal description of people as rational beings. For Levinas and Mouffe, the imperative to never treat a person as an end is derived from the interconnection between people who live in particular contexts. For Kant, the implications of this imperative lead to universal rules of conduct. For Levinas and Mouffe, the implications of this imperative lead to particular acts determined within a context. Universalizing imperatives, refusing to consider challenges, and failing to account for particular differences carries the danger of sacrificing people to an ideal.

Roger Burggraeve, one of Levinas' commentators, writes, "Realized justice does not suffice; it is in constant need of correction, revision, and reform. Only in this way can it avoid petrifying its own ethical quality and suffocat[ing] in its own opposite. Only thus can it counter the transformation of the good into evil" (Burggraeve 2005, 84). From this perspective, justice is a project that begins in the relationships between individual people. However, Levinas recognizes that our obligations expand far beyond the people that we meet each day. Even among those we meet each day, we cannot always respond to the needs of each person. Thus, every society must have social and political systems and institutions that respond to the concrete needs of people in a society. But, it will never be the case that we have created a society that is sufficiently or completely just. As part of the nature of being human, our institutions are finite, or limited. To maintain justice, we must continually question institutions. We must seek out those who have been excluded so that their voices can be heard and their needs can be met.

In order to continually redefine who is included in 'we' and to bring those who are part of the constitutive outside into the political process it is important to practice democracy throughout our society. As Mouffe states, "That is, we should proceed from the democratization of the state to the democratization of society;



the task is to struggle against autocratic power in all its forms in order to infiltrate the various spaces still occupied by non-democratic centers of power” (Mouffe 1993, 94). When Mouffe states that we should democratize society, she is making an important point. Power in a society is held in many places outside of formal politics. Yet, even in these places democracy is desirable.

For Mouffe, democracy has a very specific meaning. First, it is founded on the liberal tradition of equality and liberty. Second, democracy has come to value and protect pluralism. Equality, liberty, and pluralism are values that ground our current democracy, but they are values that exist in tension. How do we protect groups’ and individuals’ rights to pursue their own projects and desires while also making sure that their diversity is respected and their equality is not compromised? The challenge is to continually revise social and political institutions so that groups are not marginalized, but we also want to avoid a stifling consensus among groups. For Mouffe, too much consensus indicates apathy and a lack of pluralism and choices. (Mouffe 1993, 6)

The dangers of too much consensus are evident in Burggraeve’s reading of Levinas in which evil shadows that which was initially good. The paradigmatic example of the good becoming evil for Levinas is Stalinism. Stalinism began in a critique of capitalism, specifically a critique of the exploitation of the working poor by the rich owners of factories. However, Stalinism became evil as it elevated one system of distribution above all others, and this system became the Good. Once this system became the Good, it became possible to sacrifice individual people—political critics, artists, lawyers, intellectuals, anyone who might question the absolute authority of the system—to the overall good. Thus, an initial concern for the well-being of people is perverted in its attempt to install a permanent and unchanging system (Burggraeve 2005, 86-90).

Thus, for both Levinas and Mouffe a certain amount of consensus is necessary and desirable in order to accomplish just projects, but too much consensus leads to stagnation, which undermines any possibility for forming a just society. Just as it was necessary to constantly define and evaluate who “we” are, societies must also define and evaluate who “they” are. Mouffe defines “they” in two ways: those who have different perspectives but play by the same political rules and those who refuse even the political rules by which we operate. The U.S. political divide between republicans and democrats illustrates the first category of those who have different ideas but are within the same political con-



text. Republicans and democrats run for political offices on different political platforms. During this process, Americans expect to hear different ideas about how to manage social problems such as poverty, healthcare, and education. U.S. citizens vote in order to choose one set of ideas over another. The differences that candidates manifest help to keep democracy vibrant, and a lack of distinction between the candidates and their ideas undermines the democratic process. After the election, both sides abide by the decisions reached in the process.

For example, Al Gore and George W. Bush ran for president in 2000. Gore and Bush mapped out very different visions for the U.S. A majority of people voted for Gore, but Bush won the votes in the Electoral College and decisions of the Supreme Court to become president. Gore continues to give a very different perspective than the one offered by Bush, but both remain committed to the election process. As Mouffe states, "One should not hope for the elimination of disagreement but for its containment within forms that respect the existence of liberal democratic institutions" (Mouffe 1993, 50). Disagreement provides an opportunity for choice, provides critiques of unjust institutions, and illuminates new paths to pursue justice. Problems develop when disagreement becomes antagonism such that disagreement becomes violent or prevents any action.

While disagreement between groups is desirable in the proper context, another division exists between groups within a liberal, democratic context and groups who refuse this context. This distinction is the friend and enemy distinction. Another group becomes an enemy rather than "they" when the group operates outside the rules by which "us" and "them" play and when the group defines itself in opposition to the identity of us and them (Mouffe 1993, 2-3). For this paper, "enemy" will define those whose actions threaten the flourishing of other groups. Many philosophers argue that the friend/enemy distinction can be overcome. For some, friend/enemy is overcome by distinguishing between people and their beliefs or actions in order to fight the actions but not the person. This approach is especially helpful in adhering to the imperative to treat all people as end-in-themselves. Gandhi follows this approach when he cites the Christian imperative to, "Hate the sin and not the sinner" (Fischer 2002, 83). From this perspective, action against injustice, violence, and oppression is aimed at both the oppressed and the oppressor. Ideally, the nonviolent action will convert the oppressor and free the oppressed. Others argue that the distinction between friend and



enemy should be overcome through political institutions that transform antagonisms into agonistic politics. Theorists of agonistic politics reason that people will always divide themselves into diverse groups with conflicting interests and ideas that will transform into violent conflict unless processes and institutions are in place to resolve the conflicts. The resolution will follow the example that I outlined above: society will adopt one side's beliefs, ideas, and policies, but the different ideas will still exist to challenge and reform current institutions.

My own position is that the friend and enemy distinction is as irresolvable as the us and them distinction. The challenge is to address the split between friend and enemy with nonviolent actions. In this context, enemy refers to those who oppose another group's beliefs, ideas, and actions and refuse to participate in institutions in which those differences could be resolved. While Gandhi's affirmation of separating others' identities from their beliefs helps to maintain the focus on all people's humanity, it fails to recognize that people are known through their words and actions. A deeper sense of identity does not manifest itself politically. While one group might refuse to use the term enemy to describe another group, the friend/enemy distinction is already in place if one of the groups applies the description to the other.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s description of the biblical imperative to "love your enemy" helps to focus on how the friend/enemy distinction can focus nonviolent practices. King's description begins with a distinction similar to Gandhi's distinction between the person and her or his actions. King writes that one should love "the person who does an evil deed while hating the deed that the person does. I think that this is what Jesus meant when he said 'love your enemies.'" His next words, though, make clear that even if King makes a distinction between a person and her or his actions, the group that he is struggling against is not using such a distinction. King writes, "I'm very happy that he didn't say like your enemies, because it is pretty difficult to like some people. Like is sentimental, and it is pretty difficult to like someone bombing your home; it is pretty difficult to like somebody threatening your children; it is difficult to like congressmen who spend all of their time trying to defeat civil rights" (Washington 1986, 46-47).

Those who bomb homes, threaten children, and refuse civil rights to others view those against whom they commit violence as enemies. King cannot control the understanding that this other group has of him and other African-Americans, but he can control his response and he can refuse to cooperate with these enemies.



Many people believe that people such as King and Gandhi were heroes and charismatic leaders, but nonviolence has no relevance in today's violent world. This skepticism about nonviolence reflects a belief in much of what has been stated. People think nonviolence cannot work because they believe that local conditions determine what can and cannot be effective; they do not believe that universal rules of reason and morality exist or are effective. Further, people believe that enemies exist. In our own global situation, I would suggest that we determine the categories of friend and enemy by working through international organizations. Two examples of documents already in place to frame these discussions are the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions. Both of these documents were created through wide consultation with countries from around the world and endorsed by countries from around the world. These documents draw out very clear standards for acceptable and unacceptable conduct, and they do so without reference to static, universal principles.

Although treaties and declarations exist, others violate the standards that these documents put forth. Those who violate the standards are enemies, but those violations can be upheld without resorting to war. One of the most persuasive articulations of this point comes from the work of David Cortright who is the President of Fourth Freedom Forum, a Research Fellow at the Kroc Institute for International Peace at the University of Notre Dame, the author of *Gandhi and Beyond: Nonviolence for an Age of Terrorism* (2006), and, with Howard Zinn, the author of *Soldier in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War* (2006). Cortright has offered non-violent options for withdrawing from Iraq without compromising U.S. security, for confronting global terrorism, and for opposing Iran's aspirations to have nuclear weapons (Cortright 2003, 11-13; Cortright 2004, 14-17; Cortright 2005, 62-64; Cortright 2005, 7-7; Cortright 2006, 12-14; Cortright 2006, 18-22; Cortright 2006, 24-27; Cortright 2006, 7-7; Cortright and Lopez 2004, 30).

As democrats and republicans seem intent on beating the war drums to gather support to invade Iran, I will focus on Cortright's arguments that non-military strategies will be more effective than a military invasion to keep Iran within the constraints of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that it has signed. At this point, Iran is in compliance with the NPT. Cortright's argument has seven points. First, the U.S. ought to work with the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency to encourage Iran to give up building nuclear weapons. Two, the U.S.



should focus on keeping Iran in the NPT. This will keep inspectors in Iran; these inspectors will find traces of activity long before Iran can develop weapons. Nuclear technology leaves dramatic radioactive traces in soil and in the water that inspectors can easily find. Third, the U.S. needs to engage in a diplomatic surge, instead of a military surge. This would entail a summit between the U.S. and Iran with no preconditions. Fourth, the U.S. could offer incentives rather than threats. Iran has billions of dollars in the U.S. that has been frozen since 1979. This money could be turned over to non-state entities. Sanctions could be lifted; open exchange could be implemented. Fifth, the U.S. could offer a security assurance by pledging not to use military force against Iran. Sixth, the U.S. can connect diplomatic efforts in Iran to NPT efforts in the Middle East in order to create a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. Finally, the U.S. could take force off the table completely and pledge to work through diplomatic means (Cortright 2006, 24-27; 2006, 7; 2007).

When this paper began, I noted that Kant's philosophy appeals to me by virtue of its philosophical neatness: answers are clear, rational, and universal. Throughout the paper, I have argued that the world does not operate in such a way as to accommodate clear, universal answers that will be binding on all rational people. To quote Jean-Francois Lyotard from *The Postmodern Condition*, "But our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies . . ." (Lyotard 1984, xxiv). The complexity and diversity of the world is such that people may choose to act in ways that they clearly would not wish to be universalized, and they may choose to believe in rights even though they have no universal ground from which these rights can be derived or from which others can be convinced to respect these rights. These truisms do not indicate a position of despair; rather, they indicate that people must continually define what they mean by democracy, rights, equality, justice, and peace. The process of defining these terms requires that people disagree, argue, and defend diverse definitions in order to produce definitions that will include people and groups who have been marginalized and reflect the needs of a particular context.

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