

# Critique on the Kantian Theory of Perpetual Peace

[ CASEY DUEL ]

**M**any people agree with Kant and propose that international peace can be reached by means of diplomacy rather than war. However, I will support Hegel's idea that international law is significant for current states since international law will always be contingent, and that the only way to harmonize opposing particular wills is through war.<sup>1</sup> I shall go about this by first explaining how states are only actualized by their particular wills, and then I will elaborate on how war harmonizes these wills between states. I will also discuss a minor remedy to this issue because, although international peace cannot be actualized by a universal will between states, a universal agreement can be reached through the universal state of nature that was present before the existence of states.

Since the rights of states are only actualized in their particular wills, a universal will cannot reign supreme over all of the states' particular wills.<sup>2</sup> Each state has its own constitution and laws that differ from other states, and that is not even taking into account government officials of different states with different views pertaining to global affairs; therefore, it would be impossible to make laws that every state's particular will agrees upon. A good example of this can be seen in political affairs having to do with conflicts in the Middle East. For example, the United Nations cannot carry out military action or supply aid to a particular side of the Syrian conflict because of disagreements

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1 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 312-13.

2 Ibid, 312.

between United Nations members. These disagreements tend to be on whose side to take in the Syrian Civil War because Russia is in support of the Al-Assad regime, while the United States is not. Nonetheless, both of these states are just maintaining their sovereignty by enacting their particular wills.

Furthermore, international law would be difficult to maintain since certain countries' particular wills are more aligned with a particular type of government or economic system. As evidence, the United States and other free-market capitalist democracies usually agree with one another on global views and on the methods by which an international problem should be taken care of. On the other hand, Russia and former communist/current communist societies with more restricted/state-run economic institutions tend to agree with each other on international affairs. The world today is roughly separated by two different political ideologies, but only treaties between like-minded states can be plausible. An international bond that Kant envisions can only serve as an illusion to any such federation.

Even powers that would be considered outside of the states' particular wills, like judges and mediators, would lead to contingencies in regulating international law since they themselves have particular wills that would not fit into the universal will.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, states can only be bound by international law through laws of nature that are universal. Therefore, the state of nature can only secure shared ideas that prevail without the presence of states, such as the idea that all societies view murder as wrong. The state of nature cannot secure the maintenance of international law because the purpose of such a global bond would be to settle disputes that are not altogether agreed upon by the constituents. Therefore, international law can never achieve actuality, and because of this, it will forever remain an ought-to-be, only achieved in an ideal world.<sup>4</sup>

Since it has been shown that international law cannot exist without contingencies because each state has their own particular will, how else are disputes supposed to be settled or terms agreed upon? To Hegel, war is the only method by which particular wills can be harmonized.

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3 Hegel, 313.

4 Ibid, 312.

For Hegel, Kant's idea of perpetual peace is not realistic to the current state of affairs in the modern world.<sup>5</sup> For example, Hegel would be in support of the United States going to war with Russia for the sake of pursuing the purpose of its particular will, just as Hegel would support Russia fighting for the advancement of its particular will. In order for a state to maintain its particular will, and thus its sovereignty, it must go to war for its own protection. Therefore, the mediating force in Hegel's thought is war and the mutual recognition of particular wills between states. These wars between states serve the purpose of maintaining the welfare of each state.<sup>6</sup> So, when the welfare of a state is threatened or attacked, it is at that point that war is necessary.

Therefore, from Hegel's understanding of international diplomacy and relations, and from the present disagreements seen on the international scale, it is unrealistic that international peace can be actualized as the Kantian theory of perpetual peace presupposes. The only universal bond that can be actualized between states is the shared laws of nature that predate states and law codes.

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5 Hegel, 313.

6 Ibid, 314.