6 Kantian Ethics and International Relations

Grotius, Pufendorf, Vattel – miserable comforters all of them. (Kant)

Kant’s savage criticism of his immediate predecessors within the rationalist tradition supplies the key to his distinctive type of international political theory. Neither Pufendorf nor Vattel had shared Kant’s aspiration of paying ‘the Stoic–Christian ideal of the unity of mankind the supreme compliment of taking its political consequences seriously’; each had failed in Kant’s opinion to appreciate that rationalism required a progressivist interpretation of international relations which conceived the perfectibility of world political organisation as a sublime historical goal. Rationalism had been severely compromised by the toleration of that condition in which obligations to humanity were second to obligations to the state. Under these circumstances, the deceptively simple supposition that wholly free states could produce a just and stable international order among themselves was as naive as it was dangerous.

Kant held that all men were bound together by the necessary obligation to so arrange their social and political lives that they could gradually realise a condition of universal justice and perpetual peace. These goals were not hypothetical goals, ones which men would be obligated to pursue if they were to satisfy the contingent ends they had set for themselves. On the contrary, they were essential or categorical ends which men were under an unconditional obligation to promote by virtue of their rational nature. There was an unconditional obligation to further a ‘systematic harmony of purposes’, to create a condition in which each person’s freedom to promote his purposes was compatible with the
equal freedom of all others. Reason legislated that if this universalist objective was ever to be attained, the entire human race had to submit its social and political affairs to governance by a world-wide system of law.

A radically different statement of human purposes separates Kantian theory from its immediate predecessors. For Pufendorf and Vattel, men in pursuit of their self-regarding ends resorted to the establishment of political societies. Their capacity to promote their purposes without forming a universal political association explained the separation of humanity into sovereign states. And although there is a natural morality which survived this division, it does not demand that citizens should consider the gradual formation of an international civil society as a matter of intrinsic importance; nor is the state obliged to relinquish gradually that freedom of action at its disposal for the purpose of satisfying the interests of its members. While there is an obligation to respect the moral framework which exists naturally, morality is only properly effective within the boundaries of sovereign states. Had it been necessary for men to associate at the global level a more determinate system of moral rights and duties would have existed universally. The degree to which man’s natural morality is made effective depends upon the calculations which determine the precise boundaries of political community.

One of the recurrent features of Kant’s thought is his opposition to those approaches which make the effectiveness of morality dependent upon various assessments of how individuals can best advance their interests. Although it is undeniable that individuals choose to promote different goals, it is equally true for Kant that as moral beings they have rational ends which they ought to respect. According to Kant, man is a member of two worlds – a world of desire in which he seeks satisfaction of his inclinations, and a world of rationality in which reason determines the moral ends which men must pursue. The preservation of his life and the satisfaction of his desires are ends which man shares with the rest of nature. But through enactment of a morality, whereby he acts in accordance with principles which are true for all, man curbs his animal inclinations and affirms his freedom and dignity. By acting in accordance with moral principles prescribed by his