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## Kant, Immanuel

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Kant's main writings on issues of global justice are found in three different works: "On the common saying: 'That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice'" (hereafter "Theory and Practice"), "Toward Perpetual Peace" (hereafter "Perpetual Peace"), and the Doctrine of Right in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (hereafter "Doctrine of Right"). In each of these texts, there are certain core passages that writers on Kant's conception of global justice want to address. Because the passages are puzzling in their own right and do not immediately appear to yield an internally consistent position, together they provide wonderfully engaging textual and philosophical challenges for Kant scholars.

To begin, in each of the three texts we find some passages in which Kant appears to be arguing that global justice is in principle impossible without a global public authority. In these passages, Kant appears to affirm the need for some sort of a global public authority in order to ensure a "lawful settlement" of disputes arising between states, such as disputes concerning borders and trade. Consequently, Kant seems to be arguing that not having a global authority is equivalent to staying in the state of nature. And since remaining there is "to do wrong in the highest degree," states can be forced to accept a "cosmopolitan constitution" ("Theory and Practice") or a "universal state" ("Perpetual Peace"). These three passages, therefore, have often led to interpretations that Kant condoned or ought to condone a world state with a global monopoly on coercion.

Enigmatically, however, despite these statements seemingly advocating a world state, in all three texts Kant also clearly appears to argue the contrary, namely that global justice cannot require a world state, but only requires a voluntary world republic (or "league of nations"). In these same texts, Kant appears to give several

reasons why global justice cannot require a world state. Some of these reasons clearly appear principled or ideal in nature, whereas others seem to be merely pragmatic.

Consider four principled or ideal reasons Kant appears to give to substantiate the conclusion that global justice cannot require a world state. First, puzzlingly, and without much explanation, in the "Doctrine of Right" Kant seems to go straight from the claim that staying in the state of nature is to do wrong in the highest degree – meaning that it is something you can be forced not to do – to the claim that the global public authority cannot involve establishing in perpetuity a world state with a monopoly on coercion. Rather, the global authority should consist in a voluntary world federation.

Also in the "Doctrine of Right," we find a second, possibly related, principled reason. Because only the citizens themselves can decide whether or not to go to war, global justice cannot involve the establishment of a world state with a global monopoly on coercion. That is to say, since the decision to maintain the global public authority's monopoly on coercion remains with the citizens of the world, the global public authority cannot establish a monopoly on coercion in perpetuity. The global public authority cannot command the citizens of the world to take part in wars around the globe, and hence it cannot establish a permanent monopoly on coercion.

In "Perpetual Peace," we find a third ideal reason why the world state should not be coercively established. Here Kant argues that global justice cannot require a world state, since the very concept is incoherent. The reason is that the concept of a world state (a "state of nations") involves the idea of several nations, each with its own sovereign, as well as the idea of one sovereign and one people only. No single entity can instantiate the appropriate relation between states and at the same time instantiate the appropriate relation between a sovereign and its people.

"Perpetual Peace" also provides the fourth reason why global justice cannot in principle involve the coercive establishment of a world state. Since a just state enables rightful domestic interaction for its people, the people and its public representatives cannot be under an enforceable obligation to abandon the condition in which they have

rightful relations in order to establish a world state. Because states enable domestic justice, Kant seems to be saying in this text, the principles of the right of nations cannot require states to demolish themselves and create a world state with a global monopoly on coercion.

To add to these interpretive puzzles regarding Kant's ideal arguments, there are some passages, in which Kant seems to say that a world state is in theory necessary, but in practice it is impossible and, consequently, in reality, all we can establish is a voluntary world federation. We find such "in theory necessary, but practically impossible" passages in all of the three aforementioned major works by Kant. For example, both in the "Doctrine of Right" and in "Perpetual Peace" Kant appears to be saying that the difficulty of maintaining rule over "vast regions" of the globe entails the likelihood of either dissolution of the global authority into anarchy and ultimate war or the deterioration of effectiveness and a "soulless despotism." In "Theory and Practice," we find similar pragmatic considerations against the establishment of the world state. After Kant has said that in theory the only way to end expansionist wars is to establish a "cosmopolitan constitution," he seems to argue that in practice pursuing the theoretically correct option may sometimes be too dangerous. So, instead, we must seek only to establish a voluntary federation of states. Finally, in "Perpetual Peace," Kant seems to be saying that pragmatic considerations can explain, but not justify, states' actual rejections of a global public authority. Here, Kant famously argues that states, due to their mistaken understanding of the right of nations, will in practice ("in hypothesi"), albeit wrongly, reject what is true in theory ("in thesi"). That is, states will oppose the establishment of a world state ("state of nations"). As a result, what is likely to happen is merely the establishment of its "negative" surrogate, namely a "league" of nations, which operates mostly to avoid the outbreak of wars.

To sum up, it is hard to establish conclusively exactly what Kant's conception of global justice is since his texts are not in any obvious way internally consistent. The three major philosophical writings of Kant's on the issue of global justice appear to present both ideal arguments or segments of ideal arguments, according to which it is wrong to stay in the international state of nature and we can be forced to leave it by becoming subjected to a global public authority, as well as ideal arguments, according to which membership in the global public authority must be voluntary. The question naturally arising is how can Kant or the Kantian position simultaneously argue that states, in principle, can be forced to accept a global public authority as this is necessary for justice and, at the same

time, argue that they should only pursue a voluntary association of states or a so-called world federation? Alternatively, if the arguments for and against the establishment of a global authority cannot be reconciled, which view should the considered or best Kantian position adopt? What is more, the analysis is complicated by the fact that many of the ideal arguments as found in the texts are not complete. For example, exactly why is it necessary to establish a global public authority, that is, exactly which problems, in principle, cannot states solve themselves through appropriately constructed foreign policies? Finally, in addition to the above ideal considerations, there is the puzzle added by the pragmatic considerations. In which sense should we see them as undermining the ideal arguments – in principle or only in practice? For some of the current takes on these puzzles – both philosophical and textual – see the entry ► [Kant, Immanuel: Contemporary Kantian Responses to](#) in this encyclopedia.

## Related Topics

- [Charity](#)
- [Duties, Perfect and Imperfect](#)
- [Duties, Positive and Negative](#)
- [Kant, Immanuel: Contemporary Kantian Responses to](#)

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For a relatively long time, most scholars turning to Kant for input on issues concerning global justice focused primarily on his earlier and shorter works, "On the common