

Irony in Kant's *Zum ewigen Frieden**

Karel Mom

1.

In his introduction to a French edition of Kant's *Zum ewigen Frieden*, Lemonnier, a champion of the International Peace Bureau remarks that nowhere in that essay, except perhaps for the deduction of the cosmopolitan right from the right of the communal possession of the surface of the globe, due to its spherical form (cf. *Frieden*, 358), Kant touches 'the social question' (1880, XIII). Given his concern with the issue with which he had dealt extensively (Lemonnier 1871) he should have been embarrassed by this silence. After a brief discussion Lemonnier concludes that Kant had solved the question without having posed it (o.c., XIII).

Such a 'solution' by a dissolution would indeed be a miraculous achievement of the *Freiheit der Feder* (*Aufklärung*, 304). It might however as well be diagnosed as a symptom of the 'double bind' in which many a philosopher, according to Williams, finds herself when she reflects on the historical contingency of her outlook. For though this would enable her to learn that "such projects as deriving our concepts a priori from universal conditions of human life (...) leave unexplained many features that provoke philosophical enquiry" it could also interfere with her philosophical enterprise, in a way that varies with her beliefs. Either it is believed that the history of an outlook is vindicatory, and one might to that extent ignore it. Or the history of the outlook is not believed to be vindicatory. Understanding it might in that case seem to interfere with one's commitment to an outlook. This engenders a problem "of reflection and commitment, or of an external view of one's beliefs as opposed to an internal involvement with them, (...) of historicist weariness and alienation."

* Paper presented at the 21st World Congress of Philosophy, Istanbul, August 10-17 2003

Williams is not satisfied with Rorty's irony as a remedy for this double bind. It presupposes a fission of someone *qua* political actor who is involved in her outlook and *qua* reflective person. Contrariwise "once one goes far enough in recognizing contingency, the problem to which irony is supposed to provide the answer does not arise at all". So we should abandon the illusion that our political and ethical ideas must be the best from an absolute point of view and we will, according to Williams, find out that the first-order activities of working within a framework of ideas are continuous with the second-order reflective activity upon those ideas and with the third-order historical activity of tracing their origins. This helps to define both intelligence in political action and realism in political philosophy. (Williams 2000, sects. 5-6.)

I will argue that Lemonnier's coping with Kant's silence and his appreciation for Kant's irony reflect the discontinuous relation of transcendental idealism and political realism in the text. A comparison, for heuristic purposes, of Kant and Plato will produce textual evidence that Kant believed the history of his outlook to be non-vindictory. A hypothesis along Williams's lines, that the irony of the sage of Königsberg in *Zum ewigen Frieden* like in some other *opuscula* shows that he has not gone far enough in recognizing the contingency of his outlook, is put to a test. I will, in defence of Kant and Rorty criticise Williams's claim that we should do without irony. Kantian irony, it will turn out, is preferable to manifesting no irony at all.

2.

Kant proclaims the primacy of formal (based on freedom) principles of practical reason above material (utilitarian) principles. The former have unconditional necessity, the latter are conditioned by empirical contingency (Frieden, 377). It is precisely because philosophers would govern by principles that Plato, as Hegel recalls, made Socrates to assert ironically that there will be no end to human misery as long as philosophers do not govern or the so called kings and authorities do not seriously and adequately philosophize (De Republica V, 473, cited in Vorl., 32; cf. Epistula VII, 326b). The foundation of both morality and justice on the postulate of freedom (cf. Frieden, Anhang I, 372) entails that the rigour of the categorical imperative in the moral sphere, where it prohibits a lie for humanistic purposes (Lügen, 430), is mirrored in the rigour in the political sphere of the transcendental principle of publicity (*Prinzip der Publicität*) where it prohibits revolt against bad governments (Frieden, Anhang II, 382; cf. Gemeinspruch

299). As a corollary of the universal scope of that postulate Kant distinguishes, in line with Rousseau's *volonté de tous* and *volonté générale* (Contrat, 66) the distributive (or analytic) will of all individual people, to live in a lawfull constitution according to the principles of freedom, from the collective (or synthetic) unity of the unified will, the latter being a prerequisite for a civil society. (Frieden, Anhang I, 371). By this, the Platonic republic, that idea of a πολίς (Vorl. 109), resembles, except for its lack of subjective freedom (113), the state with a republican constitution inasfar as both have a representative government and the individual has a substantial relation to the state, i.e. he is accidental to a *sittliche Substanz* (112) and its rule of law prohibits despotism in its autocratic or democratic form (Frieden, 352).

Kant shares his high esteem for philosophy with Plato. The polemic distinction between its insights (γνώμην) and common opinion (δόξα) (cf. Vorl. 41) and Socrates's irony when he contrasts those insights with common opinion, everyday politics and active politicians (32) are paralleled in Kant's continuous contrasting philosophy with *Staats-* and *Weltklugheit* (cf. Frieden, Anhang I; *Gemeinspruch*, *passim*) and his militant expression of the rising to arms of the activity of reason against those that distort phenomena (*Erscheinungen*) with things as they really are (*Sachen an sich selbst*) (Verkündigung, 416) and his irony concerning the relation of philosophers with political power (Frieden, 368-369) respectively.

Lemonnier's coping with Kant's silence illustrates the embarrassment in which a politician finds himself, who purports to use Kant's text for his external and internal pacifist purposes.

On the one hand, he adheres to the ethical foundation of external peace, calling Kant the greatest moralist humanity has produced (1880, II). The intelligence of the political action he proposes in his 1871-report, also is highly indebted to the ethical basis of Kant's political philosophy. He argues that the principle of personal autonomy is the basis of morals, politics and the economy (1871, 12) and propagates it to be taken as the basis of social science (9). He calls the habitual disregard of political reformers of the fatal distance between factive and rightful society a terrible paralogism when, having sprung from the pen, is completed with the machine-gun (13). The austere morality of the essay has undoubtedly fostered its political influence, serving as the intellectual basis for contemporary liberal internationalism (Fukuyama 1993, 281) as well as the acceptability of Lemonnier's social proposals.

On the other hand, assuming that Lemonnier's embarrassment with Kant's silence illustrates the urgency of his concern with this topic, he might have considered it to be less politically correct to play down that silence by committing himself uncompromisingly to the philosophical rigour of the essay. Anyway, he offers, in Kant's defence, an argument in two steps, the first being an explanation, the second a justification. He first reminds us of some mitigating historical evidence ranging from Kant's having composed his essay before the great socialists had appeared to the absence of a proletariat at the time, though there had been poor, miserable and exploited people. This circumstantial evidence though does not suffice him for an exculpation. With a supplementary justification he tries to discharge Kant further. This justification however, is a curious *petitio principii*. Lemonnier qualifies the political and social problem as envelopped in the moral problem, arguing, that the concepts of liberty, equality and fraternity would be empty if that would not be the case. (Cf. Frieden 372.) Those concepts now, are for Kant, in Lemonnier's somewhat Jacobinic extensive interpretation, the principles of a republican constitution, i.e. the only constitution that is comprised in the idea of an original contract (cf. o.c. 349) and therefore is based on the principle of justice. The latter principle is, as rooted in the postulate of freedom, a moral principle. Hence political and economic principles can, via the principle of justice, be reduced to the moral principle (Lemonnier 1880, VIII).

To pre-empt any reproach of partisanship in his proposal for the peaceful solution for the social question Lemonnier borrows from Kant's text, he underscores the irony, even pleasantry of its diplomatic format, which he highly appreciates as a characteristically German caprice (III). This irony now, which among many other passages is expressed in its subtitle: *Ein philosophischer Entwurf*, alleviates the rigour of the far-reaching consequence Lemonnier derives -presumably as an analogy with Kant's denial of the right to revolt- from the ideas it contains: political and economic problems are governed by the moral principle; hence they cannot be resolved by brutal force, for that would, self-refutingly, vitiate the principle of justice (XIII).

3.

The rigour of Kant's moral obligation has been compared with the rigour of the sadistic perversion (Horkheimer 1984, 85 ff.; Lacan 1969, 123; id. 1992, 80). Accordingly, Deleuze has determined the irony that pops up in the context of the rigour of the law as a move to transcend the law in the direction of a supreme principle, be it, like in antiquity, the idea of the good, or, in modernity, a second nature, the sovereign state, conformity with which would render the law superfluous. A second nature indeed, for the first nature coerces but does not impose an obligation (Frieden, 365). Contrariwise, humour is a move to transcend the law in the direction of its consequences, by which the conformity with the law is motivated. (Deleuze, 1980, 231 ff.). The conversion of the ironic principle of freedom as a principle of justice in the liberal state to a legitimation of the perpetuation of the economic dependency of women, children and *Schutzgenossen* from those who enjoy *sibisufficiencia* (Gemeinspruch, 294-295) in the welfare state is humorously depicted in Spengler's assessment of the categorical imperative: it is the formulation of the Prussian king's Friedrich Wilhelm I socialist programme for the happiness of all (1910, 42). Marx's polemic against Kant's separation of thoughts and material interests (1956, 328), Horkheimer's scorn at his optimism, purportedly rooted in his dismay of barbarism (1984, 78) and Habermas's criticism of the ambiguity in the constitutive function of morality and nature for civil society, giving rise to his distinguishing an official version of philosophy of history from an unofficial one (1975, 141) contrast sharply with Lemonnier's reverent adaptation of Kant's political philosophy to the social antagonisms of his epoch.

Contrary to Fukuyama's contention however, that he had to leave the composition of a universal history to his successor Hegel (1993, 59) Kant's irony, and his mockery with philosophical presumptuousness (Ton, *passim*) indicate that he did not pretend to dispose of a vindictory 'final vocabulary'. That would amount to a disregard of the necessary inexhaustiveness of any determination of natural teleology, given its limitation by empirical conditions, that has to be taken into account to secure the practical reality of the objectives of pure, practical, teleology (Teleologie, 182-183). Kant's optimism concerning the real possibility of perpetual peace, is based on the critical scrutiny of the worldly theories that purport to demonstrate the opposite, combined with the practical plausibility -as he sees it- of its principles

(Verkündigung, 416). It is therefore, not an illusionary optimism. One cannot predict future with certainty (Frieden, 368). Kant stipulates that his cosmopolitanism is a philosophical point of view (*Standpunkt*; cf. his use of '*Gesichtspunkt*' in: Verkündigung, 416). His critical philosophy does not build systems (l.c.) let alone interfere with history (Idee, 30). It is not descriptive but normative (Gemeinspruch, 313). His irony is sincere, like Socrates's, not condescending or boastful (cf. Aristotle, NE IV vii,15). Kant's minor political texts have a conversational, subjective, not a dialogical style, which would be, like in Plato, a vehicle of showing the dialectical movement of concepts (cf. Vorl, 25, 61). Kant has not sought to "join the others (the outlook that Rorty calls 'common sense')" and forget about historical self-understanding altogether. In that case he could have done without irony. (Williams 2000, sect. 6.) On the contrary, in all this he has *pace* Rorty, ironically in the best Rortyan sense (1991, 456; 1979, 391) outlined the limits of reason and shown that, faced with contemporary contingency, one can only gesture at solutions for our needs.

Literature

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (transl. Rackham, R.) Cambridge (Mass.) and London: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Deleuze, G. (1968) Sacher-Masoch und der Masochismus. In: *Venus in Pelz. Mit einer Studie über den Masochismus von Gilles Deleuze*. (transl. Müller, G.) Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1980.

Habermas, J. (1962) *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. Neuwied-Berlin: Luchterhand, 1975.

Hegel, G.W.F. (1817) *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie II*. Werke in 20 Bänden. vol. 19. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970.

Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, Th. (1944) *Die Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1969.

Fukuyama, F. (1993). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Avon Books.

Kant, I. (1784) *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* Kants gesammelte Schriften vol. VIII, Berlin 1902 ff.: Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. (AA) (Aufklärung).

- (1784) *Idee zur einer allgemeinen geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*. AA vol. VIII (Idee)
- (1788) *Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Principien in der Philosophie*. AA vol. VIII (Teleologie)
- (1793) *Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis*. AA vol. VIII (Gemeinspruch)
- (1795) *Zum ewigen Frieden*. AA vol. VIII (Frieden)
- (1796) *Von ein neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie*. AA vol. VIII (Ton)
- (1796) *Verkündigung des nahen Abschlusses eines Tractats zum ewigen Frieden in der Philosophie*. AA vol. VIII (Verkündigung)
- (1797) *Über ein vermeintes Recht aus menschenliebe zu lügen*. AA vol. VIII (Lügen)

Lacan, J. (1966) Kant avec Sade. In: *Écrits 2*. Paris: Seuil, 1971

- (1986) On the Moral Law. In: *The seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, ed. by Miller, J.-A.(transl.Porter, D.) New York- London: Norton & Company , 1992

Lemmonnier, Ch. (1871) *La Question Sociale. Rapport présenté au Congrès de Lausanne le 27 sept. 1871*. Paris: Librairie de Cherbuliez.

- (1880) *Préface* in: 'Essai Philosophique sur la Paix Perpétuelle'. Paris: G. Fischbacher.

Marx, K., Engels F.(1933) *Die deutsche Ideologie. Kritik der neuesten deutschen Philosophie in ihren Repräsentanten Feuerbach, B. Bauer und Stirner, und des deutschen Sozialismus in seinen verschiedenen Propheten*. MEW vol. III Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1956 ff., Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED.

Rorty, R. (1991). Private Irony and Liberal Hope. In: Appleby, Joyce c.s. (eds.), *Knowledge and Postmodernism in Historical Perspective*. 456-463. London: Routledge

Rorty, R. (1980). *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Princeton.

Rousseau, J.-J. (1762) *Du Contrat Social. Ou Principes du Droit Politique*. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966.

Spengler, O. (1920) *Preussentum und Sozialismus*. München

Williams, B. (2000) *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* Annual lecture for the Royal Institute of Philosophy London http://www.royalinstitutephilosophy.org/articles/williams_lecture.htm (visited on 22-1-02).