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Kant's Utopian Imperative and the Global Marshall Plan Initiative

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“A map of the world that does not include utopia is not even worth glancing at”
 -- Oscar Wilde¹

I. Reality

Self-interest is no longer a viable principle to guide us. It has lead to our current state of affairs: a consumerist society based on a “universe of me” that engages in wars to plunder resources and whose over-consumption results in the waste that is sickening us and our planet. We need a new point of orientation to guide us out of our current crisis, and I would like to share with you a very brief sketch of such an alternative point of orientation offered up to us by what I would like to call the *utopian imperative*.

Calling to mind the thought of Immanuel Kant, such an imperative shows us the way beyond the idolatry of self-interest. Repulsed and disturbed by our unceasing habit of repeatedly engaging in the mass murder of each other in wars, Kant's essay “Perpetual Peace” (1795) argued for the creation of a global confederation of nations that would use the rule of law to replace the rule of the sword, thereby elevating the shared interests of the common good above the competing self-interests of individual nation states. Like the concept of inalienable human rights, it took around 150 years for us to even attempt to realize Kant's vision, first in the League of Nations and then in the United Nations.

To expose the dangers of self-interest, Kant examined Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory of the state, resting as it does in the “state of nature” and its eternal curse of a perpetual war of all against all – a terrifying idea

that perhaps informs the choice of words made by the United States administration to characterize the “long war” against “terrorism” which it is currently pursuing. According to Hobbes, such a state of perpetual war was the result of our instinctual drive for self-preservation; an instinct so strong that only the fear of a Leviathan-like, absolute power – which could imprison, torture, or kill us at will – only such a monstrosity could according to Hobbes control our innate drive of self-interest.

Kant objected to this, pointing out that since in the Hobbesian world “the head of state has no contractual obligations towards the people, he can do no injustice to a citizen, but may act towards them as he pleases”; a maxim of action whose results in the political realm Kant found “quite terrifying”, since it inevitably leads to despotism domestically and perpetual war externally.² Moreover, such Machiavellian “political moralist[s]”, who “fashion” their morality “to suit [their] own advantage as ... Statesm[e]n”, remove the possibility of international cooperation, since cooperation requires the surrender of self-interest to the realization of shared activity.³ And for the political moralist, any commitment to work with others will be broken as soon as such shared activity is no longer in their self-interest.

And with this we come to the heart of the matter: a politics of self-interest, at the most basic level, removes the possibility of any form of cooperative engagement. Yet such cooperation is the condition of any form of peaceful and sustainable coexistence. As an alternative what is required is a politics that exceeds self-interest, becoming instead a politics of principle, which necessitates a redirection of interest away from self and towards what is bigger than, and thus transcends, the immediate empirical desires of self. While this redirection of interest does not *ignore* the desires of the empirical self, it does *subordinate* them to that which transcends them, which for Kant is the moral law. For according to Kant it is only through a reorientation of the self, whereby it sacrifices self-interest to the obligations of the moral law, that humans will find the possibility of realizing the project of perpetual peace.

And it is here that today we are all too weak and feeble. Kofi Annan, former United Nations General Secretary, has said regarding the effectiveness of the UN’s member states: “We don’t need any more promises. We need to start keeping the promises we already made.”⁴

To keep a promise demands obligation to the moral law and the categorical power of the verb *ought* expresses this imperative. As a demand, this ought not only implies that we have not yet lived up to the

moral law, it also speaks to the reverence and awe the moral law generates. Together these emotions supply this demand of duty with the binding power that calls us to live up to our obligations. This is an essential point for Kant: the moral law provides this binding power only through the reverence and awe we have for it, since it is only through reverence and awe that the moral law is capable of compelling action without coercing it, thereby preserving our autonomy. This freely chosen compulsion is the feeling of obligation and duty to the unconditioned demand of the ought of the moral law; a feeling of obligation and duty which according to Kant is the necessary condition for all moral acts.

To better understand this distinction between moral acts of obligation and less-than-moral acts of self-interest, Kant suggests we distinguish between the empirical will driven by material desire and the rational and spiritual will that is potentially free from such material desires.

For Kant, obligation to a promise is not conditioned by the empirical will, which, as heteronomous, is driven by the *consequences* of its decisions, and thus obeys only fear and coercion, since only fear is stronger than desire for sensual pleasures. The rational will on the contrary, is autonomous, since it can freely determine itself to act in accordance with the moral law and not the consequences of an action. What motivates the rational will is not fear, but rather reverence, attraction, respect, even love of justice and the good viz. the moral law. It is not the possible consequences of action that determines the rational will, but rather the allegiance and reverence it has to the moral law.

Thus only those nations who have such a reverence for the moral law would be capable of keeping the promises of which Kofi Annan so eloquently speaks. Such nations would be guided by leaders who are capable of transcending their self-interest. Unlike the *political moralists* who, in good Machiavellian fashion, understand “the principles of political prudence” according to their own self-interest, Kant called those statesmen “moral politician[s]” who interpret and apply the principles of political prudence so “they can be coherent with morality”.⁵ A deeply difficult and almost otherworldly task that forces us to move to consider the *utopian dimension* in Kant’s project.

II. Utopia

As we have seen, Kant argued that the moral law which directs us beyond the interests of the self is sacred, and should therefore be revered. Why? Because for Kant, only by obligating our life to be guided by the moral law

can we realize the *telos* and purpose of our existence, which is none other than to be worthy of happiness, where happiness is understood in the Aristotelian sense of *Eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. In order to be worthy of becoming fully human, we must obligate our life to be guided by the moral law.

For this to work, Kant acknowledges that we must have reason to **hope** that this is possible. And for this we require what I call a *utopian vision*, for as Kant argues, for us to have the hope of this possibility of becoming worthy of happiness we must see our empirical world as if it were a moral world, which he describes “as a *corpus mysticum* of the rational beings in it”; a world which he further defines as a world in which “the free will of each being is, under moral laws, in complete systematic unity with itself and with the freedom of every other”.⁶

This idea of a moral world – of a *corpus mysticum* -- applies only to the world of our imagination and thoughts, since it is a “mere idea” whose function is to help us bring the real world “as far as may be possible, into conformity with the idea”.⁷ And it is only to the extent that this idea helps us achieve this that this idea has objective reality.

This practical idea of reason provides the metaphysical infrastructure for the rational order and co-operative unity that is the necessary condition for the type of reciprocal political rights and freedoms, which, externalized into the world of global affairs, provides the conditions for a moral world of international right and perpetual peace.

In brief, political rights externalize the moral law as a political law requiring duties to others. Here laws are given and enforced by others, they are designed to guide and judge actions, and demand mandatory participation. Consequently, legal systems and social sanctions must be used to make the demands of political law real. Power must be used, but only in accordance with law. This application of power is not a moral problem (of internal self-determination), but rather a political problem (of external determination). Our rights can only be guaranteed by our agreeing to submit to external guidance through laws.

Extrapolating to the global level of international relations, in the same way that an individual freely submits to live by the just laws of a nation, Kant’s idea of political rights demands nations to freely agree to submit to the binding force of a similar external code, namely that of international law. If the autonomous individual ought freely to submit their self-interest to the dictates of the moral law, then so too ought the nation state freely submit to the requirements of international law. And please note that just as

voluntary participation in the laws of a nation is unworkable, so too is the voluntary participation of nations in international law: there must be some form of law enforcement viz. global organization to enforce its dictates.

And it is here that Kant's longing for a truly human and humane civilization, in which justice holds sway over brute force and destruction, joins harmony with a longing as old as our species.

Among the many such works we can look to are Dante's *De Monarchia* (1313), where he called on a benevolent king to wisely enforce peace among nations; or Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis* (1627), and Leibniz' *Corpus Juris Pentium* (1693). More directly related to our theme, we must not forget the first plan for an international court and league of states, outlined by Abbe de Saint Pierre's in his *Projet de Paix Perpétuelle* (1713) -- a writing that was closely studied and imitated by none other than Rousseau, in his own essay entitled *The Plan for Perpetual Peace* (1761).

All of these writings dared to advance imaginative renderings of possible future societies and states, based on principles clearly at odds with the power principles that ruled the real world of historical peoples and lands. Yet with the American and French revolutions the possibility of a new and concrete form of government, determined and guided by the rational principles of the moral law, presented itself to the world; a possible form of government and society which, given reason's universality and necessity, must be capable of extending its reach and influence to all nations. And it is this possibility of making real what had heretofore always been merely political fantasies of ideal republics that leads us to the idea of the utopian per se.

The term *utopia* was coined by Thomas Moore as a key element in the title to his work of 1516, *On the best kind of state and the new island utopia* – a work otherwise referred to today simply as Thomas Moore's *Utopia*.

Moore was ingenious in crafting this term, since his Latin transliteration of the Greek renders its etymological roots perfectly ambiguous: while the *topos* of place is clear, the prefix can be read positively as *eu*, meaning good, and thus “good-place”, or it can be read negatively as *ou*, meaning no, and thus “no place”. But in either sense, it remains clear that utopia speaks to an ideal world so far removed from our real world that no one knows precisely how to transition from the later to the former.

Accordingly, Moore's *Utopia* – and others of the genre – are not a political

guide detailing the tactical steps required to create such an ideal society, but rather only a strategic vision of what such a society might look like. Such a utopian vision generates a surplus of meaning that goes beyond itself, and is thus capable of attracting and sustaining the interest of others, in that it provides hope that we might be capable of making real what is offered in a utopia, but is absent in our existence.

In doing this, utopia confronts us with a vision of life and the world that is far more robust and pregnant with meaning than the sober and boring reality of the everyday; indeed, its relation to this reality of the everyday is that of fulfillment to longing. It tests human possibilities and sustains our demand for happiness and beauty. Utopia's point of reference is a future that doesn't yet exist; its power is that of the imagination to critically reject an inhibiting reality in favor of a vision of what could become a reality. And indeed it is precisely this dimension of irreality in the utopian vision that has a subversive and *emancipatory power*, and it is precisely this anticipatory illumination of a reality not yet made real that is a fundamental category of what I call utopian philosophizing.⁸

The denigration of the utopian vision in our own society illustrates the values of our ruling order, which embraces the concrete and positivistic restrictions of the empirically real and politically powerful. In contrast to this, I would like to suggest that the utopian imperative is the demand of reason to cultivate the "utopian conscience" that realizes the value and necessity of imagination and yes, even *illusion*, in creating a future different than our past.⁹

As such, this utopian imperative serves a purpose parallel to that served by *hope* in Kant, which, like the utopian imperative, is the opposite of certainty and naive optimism, since it entails risk and possible disenchantment: hope must be capable of disappointment for it to be hope.

Thus do we demand the idea of a moral world that does not yet exist, for it is only through the belief in the possibility of such a morally perfect world that we can have the "hope" required for us to fulfill our duty to the moral law; a law which demands we believe the human race can make progress towards making "the moral end of its existence" a reality.¹⁰ "I base my argument", Kant writes, "upon my inborn duty of influencing posterity in such a way that it will make constant progress (and I must assume that progress is possible), and that this duty may be rightfully handed down from one member of the series to the next".¹¹

Following the contours of the categorical imperative, we can say that the

utopian imperative is the duty to envision a more perfect world and act in such a way as to make such a vision real. It is the imperative to refuse to live in world where, as Andre Breton put it, the imagination has been reduced “to a state of slavery”, for to do so, as he wrote in the first Manifesto of Surrealism, “is to betray all sense of absolute justice within oneself. Imagination alone offers me some intimation of what *can be*”.¹²

III. Bridging the Divide

And with this I would like to move to a very brief sketch of the utopian imperative as it applies to the Global Marshall Plan Initiative, for here the utopian imperative manifests itself as prophetic call for a transformation of consciousness, whereby interest of the self is directed toward that which transcends its own empirical, short-term interests. As with the evolution of human rights, we stand at the beginning of an age when self is guided not by tribe, ethnicity, identity, creed or nationality, but by an obligation and commitment to the principles that animate and focus the Global Marshall Plan. To push this process forward requires a new way of thinking about both ourselves as individuals and as citizens of a world community; a transformation of consciousness that will result in a new player and force in the political arena, namely that of civil society. This new political force will be the result of interconnected associations of citizens who know no limitations such as national identity, religious creed, or ethnic identity. As such, civil society will become a political force on a par with the established powers of business and government, but will refuse to be guided by the self-interests of profit and power, choosing instead to act in accordance with the dictates of the moral law. Only the conviction and action of civil society can displace the interests of business and governments, by providing a utopian vision for a world ordered according to moral principles, and not by profit or the power interests of individual nations.

This brings us to the first central task of the Global Marshall Plan: to internationalize the dialogue for global action by cultivating and engaging a global network of citizen organizations. Today, at this conference, this is happening right now. And this is the most crucial component of the Initiative: all the elements called for in this initiative are either already in place -- either in part or as voluntary programs -- or we have feasible plans for realizing them. What is lacking is the collective will -- the transformation of consciousness and redirection of self-interest -- to begin making this utopian vision real. And this can only be done by us working

to grow our organizations. Concretely, here we call for the establishment of a World Parliament that would serve as the third legislative body of the UN, thereby allowing citizens – regardless of nationality – to articulate the concerns of civil society.

And now on to the more nuts and bolts elements of the Initiative:

The Global Marshall Plan Initiative – and here I am speaking specifically about the European version -- seeks to create a Worldwide Eco-Social Market Economy. (1) The first step in doing this is realizing the UN's Millennium Development Goals, outlined in the flyers for the Global Marshall Plan. (2) The second step is to establish and meet Global Environmental Targets. A possible model here are the World Bank's Equator Principles, currently followed – voluntarily -- by 80% of private bank lending for all development projects. Here too the world Bank's Inspection Panel provides a paradigm for a global judicial body to hear *individual citizens'* complaints, investigate and issue rulings. And some have even suggested that if the World Trade Organization's jurisdiction were expanded, we would then also have a mechanism to begin enforcing this Court's rulings.¹³ (3) The third step is to restructure global economic rules and institutions to provide both fairer trading conditions, as well as generating the funds required to execute the development projects of the Global Marshall Plan. Ultimately this will require the retooling of existing institutions so that they can be integrated into a global coherent system capable of --- leading to our fourth step -- (4) creating new sources of finance and allocation of resources. Here the goal is to raise at least \$100 billion dollars a year beyond current foreign aid levels to fund the actual development projects of a Global Marshall Plan. And again here we have real solutions such as:

A) Expanding the International Monetary Fund's 'Special Drawing Rights' to include all countries. As outlined by George Soros, poor countries pay into the 'currency basket' using their undervalued currency, and withdraw in stronger currencies of the 'basket' (Euro, dollar, yen, etc.) according to a quota determined by how much they donated. George Soros' plan of the expansion of Special Drawing Rights forecasts net benefit for developing lands at 30-40 billion per year.¹⁴

B) Utilizing the World Trade Organization to institute and administer a Terra Tax on the \$8.5 trillion dollar market of global trade. Such a terra tax would support fair trade as well as raising \$30-40 billion based on a tax rate of .35-.5%.¹⁵

C) The World Trade Organization could also be used to administer a

Tobin Tax, which would consist of a .01% tax on transactions in international capital markets. Based on the current annual figure of a \$480 trillion market, a Tobin Tax would generate \$30 billion a year towards \$100 billion goal.

Finally, the last step called for by the Global Marshall Plan is 5) the creation of international mechanisms to support and demand good government through the review, investigation and enforcement of standards of transparency and accountability in government.

In closing, a UN evaluation of the Millennium Program has shown that while some significant progress has been achieved, we have fallen far short in reaching the majority of the program's goals. Indeed, in some cases things have gotten worse, demonstrated by the increase in the number of people in many parts of the world surviving on less than a dollar a day.¹⁶ The problem is not that we do not have solutions for the challenges that face our globe, the problem is that, as pointed out by Kofi Annan, the nations of the world have morally failed, at the very least, in not living up to their promises and commitments of assistance.¹⁷

The European Global Marshall Plan Initiative hopes to gain support from the German Presidency of both the European Union and the G-8. But regardless of how effective Germany may be in leading the governments of these organizations to embrace the Initiative, the ultimate success of realizing the utopian vision of the Global Marshall Plan will depend on the number of we citizens of the world, who are capable of reorienting our self, effecting an inversion of perspectives as dramatic and revolutionary as Copernicus effected in moving us from a geocentric to heliocentric universe. And just as the radically different view of the natural universe initiated by a Kepler, Galileo and Copernicus helped birth the emergence of a new social and political order, a similar inversion of the self, whereby it sacrifices self-interest to the obligations of the moral law, will reveal a new spiritual order, where we become capable of realizing our utopian hopes, becoming capable of meeting our obligation not only to the moral law, but to each other and to creation.

Endnotes:

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, (Boston: J.W. Luce and Company, 1910), 27.

² Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, trans. By H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 84).

³ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴ Cited in the *Secretary-General's Message For New Year, 2004*.

⁵ Kant, (1991), 128.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Smith (London: Macmillan and Co., 1964), (B 836).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), xxxv.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰ Kant, (1991), 128.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² André Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto* (1926).

¹³ Franz Josef Rademacher, *Global Marshall Plan: A Planetary Contract* (Hamburg: GMPI Imprint, 2004), 135.

¹⁴ Soros, George: *On Globalization* (Public Affairs, LLT 2002). See also his "Special Drawing Rights for the Provision of Public Goods on a Global Scale" (Remarks at the Roundtable on "New Proposals on Financing for Development" - Institute for International Economics, February 2002).

¹⁵ A concrete and specific account of what a Terra Tax entails is difficult to find. Following Rademacher's account, such a tax would be strategically devised to a) help realize the goals of Fair Trade, while also b) raise funds for development projects. See Rademacher, (2004), 135-142.

¹⁶ Human Development Report 2003: Millennium Development Goals, United Nations Development Programme (New York: Oxford University Press) 2003.

¹⁷ Case in point: whereas the OECD nations pledged 0.7 per cent of GDP to realize the goals of the Millennium Project, only a handful Scandinavian countries have fulfilled their pledged amount of development assistance.

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