Enlightenment: Kant’s Philosophical Reflections

Kant’s main explanation to create perpetual peace and a solution for war is morality. To be free is to act ethically in the sense that a person is able to assert their own rational force of their mind over the natural will of their biological instincts and efforts. Only when people are able to fight against their natural instincts of conflict and follow the conditions of peace, do humans have full autonomy. This is where Kant believes humans are in enlightenment, only when they are truly free. Enlightenment was the process where men could free themselves of ‘intellectual slavery’ after eras of captivity. Men could only achieve enlightenment when they become uninhibited of intellectual guardianship, and learn how to freely think. Kant does not support self-government but does support autonomy and being able to govern one’s own mind. In the context of international affairs and war, Kant uses enlightenment as a goal that humans can achieve and applies it also. Kant explains that when people are truly enlightened, only then are they able to treat people with dignity and choose moral decisions. “Meanwhile, voluntary organizations committed themselves to a more peaceful international community, some from religious motives and some working from an enlightenment vision of peace and harmony between nations” (Lineham, 2015). If a leader is not enlightened or has no interest in enlightenment, eventually citizens living in these states will be sick of the unethical decisions and austerity the government is making and rise up against them. If a leader is working towards enlightenment or is enlightened then he is making ethical decisions, in accordance to the law and has full autonomy. “But only a ruler who is himself enlightened and has no dread of shadows, yet who likewise has a well-disciplined, numerous army to guarantee public peace, can say what no republic may dare, namely: ‘Argue as much as you want and about what you want, but obey!’” (Kant, 1784). If one is enlightened then they would attempt to create unity between nations and pacify any conflicts.

When looking at the strengths and weaknesses of Kant’s philosophical reflections, his prediction that perpetual peace can and will be realized is only a more powerful manifestation of the optimism for human progress that marks modern thought from the start. He puts heavy emphasis that this concept of perpetual peace is possible and does give plausible epistemological claims. This is a strength, as Kant is able to apply this to the event in the past and use it as an explanation for how to resolve conflicts. “While Kant accepts that wars will go on for some time, he insists, in the final preliminary article, that war be conducted in such a way that it does not make future peace impossible” (Bennett, 2016). Kant also explains how it is unavoidable for states to go to war and how this is a natural human instinct, however, he also provides an explanation for how to solve it through the articles of perpetual peace and provides a framework where certain articles have been used and succeeded. However, it is argued that Kant’s philosophical practices are now too simplistic for the generation today. “Kant’s political-legal philosophy is better understood in light of the questions concerning human existence as they were understood and discussed in a peculiar way within the public context of his age and society” (Demiray, 2017;171). The world of today has much more complex reasons for conflict and peace is not an easy process, as each nation has a different belief and/or value system. Kant proposed that every nation adopts a form of republican state and this would be easier for states to recognize each other and act in a way that would not intentionally harm other states. However, in the age of today, it is not simple to adopt or implement Kant’s theoretical conditions of perpetual peace.