

**A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION OF KANT'S
CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THOUGHT**

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DOI:[10.13140/RG.2.2.16461.56809](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.16461.56809)

Abstract

The textual analysis of the problem of individual autonomy and the normative justification of the state is fundamental in Kant's contemporary political thought. The themes of non-violent resistance, social order, happiness, freedom, justice, property right, the 'highest political good', and perpetual peace in Kant's political philosophy suggests the need for the normative foundation of the state and the normative possibility of social order. Kant's political philosophy presupposes the normative theory of the social contract. Kant's social contract theory reflects on the universalization of justice, reason and moral principles. His philosophy of right is influenced by Rousseau's conceptualization of the general will as the canon of the 'highest political good' of any democratic state. Kant's metaphysics of right originates from the universal formal law of reason, mutual compatibility and the freedom of human action. This paper therefore, adopts the analytic method in navigating through the murky waters of human democratic society. The normative question of right, action and freedom is the question of mutual compatibility and rational consensus. The freedom of the individual is limited and it connotes the logical consistency of the freedom of others and of the democratic state. Kant's political philosophy connotes outright rejection of violent revolution. This paper concludes that Kant's themes of property right, the highest political good, individual rights, freedom, justice and happiness suggests the need for a normative structure of the democratic state. Kant's moral principle connotes the voice of conscience, moral answerability and the voice of reason. His political philosophy showcases the principle of logical consistency and mutual compatibility. Kant's argument for the absolute prohibition of violent revolution is based on his moral foundation or normative justification of the state, property right

and civil society. Revolution could lead us backward and could return us to the state of nature.

Keywords: Property Right, Freedom, State, Nonviolent Revolution, Society

Introduction

Kant's contemporary political thought entails the normative possibility of the public good of the state and the collective freedom of the individuals. His political thought includes myriads of themes such as freedom, autonomy, happiness, virtue, justice, revolution, resistance or civil disobedience, the `state, the highest political good and property right. His contemporary political legacy presupposes the philosophy of rights and the theory of perpetual peace. His contemporary political philosophy brings about the theory of social contract. Kant's argument of the philosophy of right is understood from the influence of Rousseau's idea of the General Will. His political thought represents elected representatives; he opines that the individual has the right to vote, and the right to vote requires 'being one's own master'. This paper critically examines the Kantian diagnosis of political liberalism and his conservative political stance. Kant's moral principle connotes the voice of conscience and the voice of reason. His contemporary political vision showcases the universal principle of logical consistency. His argument for the absolute prohibition of violent revolution is based on his more general normative justification of property right, social order and civil society. The concept of revolution has been misconstrued by many. Revolution is only necessary when the possibility of change is unrealistic. Revolution becomes necessary when the seemingly forward move towards civil society leads us in fact backwards, that is, returns us to the violence of the state of nature.¹ Furthermore, this paper is compartmentalized into various subsections. It discusses the critical understanding of Kant's contemporary political thought, freedom and the state in his contemporary political philosophy, his idea of non-violent revolution and property rights in the political state, the normative structure of his political philosophy, the lessons and implications of his political thought on the Nigerian democratic states, and the paper climaxes with critical evaluation and concluding considerations.

Understanding Kant's Political Thought: A Contemporary Legacy

Kant was not only a metaphysician or ethicist, he was also known as a political thinker. As observed by Hoffman and Graham, his political theory can be categorized as 'right-based' because the purpose of the state is not to realize

goodness but to ensure that people respect each other's rights and opinions. A political consequence of the priority of the right over the good is that the state's functions are limited.² His contemporary political thought is very similar to Rousseau's idea of the 'highest political good'. Moreover, his philosophy of right is dependent on moral philosophy and moral philosophy is applied political philosophy. According to Kersting, thus, the claim to validity of his political philosophy is also connected to the emphatic concept of reason in his moral philosophy and the reality of transcendental freedom. The fate of the justification of Kant's philosophy of right and his political philosophy therefore lies precisely where Kant's moral philosophy is most vulnerable.³ However, the normative structure of the Kantian practical philosophy reflects the fact that reason is dominant. It has been argued that "only prudence which Kant found compatible, would remain as a normative basis for the reconstruction of political philosophy and the meaner task of calculating foundations for the philosophy of right and political philosophy would have to be cashed out with the small change of hypothetical imperative, good grounds, and shared needs.⁴ He believes that the right of reason is grounded in freedom and freedom demands the need for private property. This conception of the right to property calls for a positive politics of distribution of resources (both human and natural) by the state.⁵

Nevertheless, Kant's political philosophy does not object to the rightful possession of property. But the Kantian principle frowns at the excessive acquisition of private property (Hume shares the same views with Kant). Kant's political conservatism is a variant of political realism and political liberalism in the realm of the philosophy of right. He is of the view that human beings have the world at their disposal and are the masters of their own world.⁶ His political philosophy reflects the juridical regulation of the state that will organize the domination of the will over all things. The Kantian perspective of the state is concerned with the regulation of the empirical possession of things. From the Kantian perspective, human being is the lord of the world; the world as the totality of usable non-human things can be limited only by the formal law of the right of reason. According to Kersting, any juridical regulation that would organize the domination of the will over things, on empirical grounds would be opposed to reason, right and freedom. This would also apply to the communalistic regulation of private property. Kant at the same time places himself in opposition to the entire tradition of the philosophy of property right.⁷ From Aristotle to Locke's theories property has always embedded in pragmatic

context and connected with normative considerations of human ends. The Kantian insight of property right is supported solely on the normative considerations of the formal theory of freedom. Kant's philosophical ingenuity was driven in great measure by a passionate defense of freedom in every domain of human interest, tempered by a sobering recognition of the circuits in all that is human.⁸

Nonetheless, his politics is a pragmatic necessity of human association. Pragmatic has to do with prudence and involves action and skills in achieving human happiness and well-being. The morally-neutral sense of a merely pragmatic 'knowledge of the world' yields to an overarching moral vision of the destiny of the human species. Human beings and their freedom are governed by moral obligation and obligation requires empirical motivating grounds. Kant's position of morality cannot be without moral anthropology; this brings to the foreground the conflation between morality and anthropology. This conflation led Baumgarten to conceive the science of ethics as a unity of morality and anthropology.⁹ Kant's political philosophy is infused in his notion of human nature. His view of human nature is infused with an ambitious moral teleology; the realization of the highest political good in the world; and without the attainment of the highest political good, the social world will be in futility. The specter of futility haunts our motivational grounds having an end sustain our moral commitment and prevents us from falling prey to apathetic indifference. The normative ground of Kant's political objective, therefore, requires that our political objective needs to be psychologically effective.¹⁰ His forceful defense of the principle of republican government makes his work quite imperative in our contemporary socio-political world. Kant's formula of humanity tells us to respect the power of self-determination in others. He calls the laws of morality collectively the laws of freedom; there is a great connection between freedom and morality. Kant's views on political philosophy are mostly founded or embedded in the metaphysical principles of freedom and justice. Property rights are an extension of the innate right to freedom with which every human being is born.¹¹ Kant's categorical imperative reflects ethical principle and utilitarianism. Furthermore, "utilitarianism is an ethical theory with political consequences – it is an ethical theory, in the sense that it tells us what is right and wrong, good and bad. It is politics, in that some of its most central pronouncements touch upon the conduct of public life. Indeed, it provides a complete political theory and a complete normative guide for the conduct of public affairs. The Kantian political theory is at least one of normative theory, and utilitarianism, can be a good normative guide to public affairs without its necessarily being the best practical

guide to personal conduct. There is strong inter-relationship between political theory and public policy, each having much to teach the other.¹² The Kantian political thought reflects the normative structure of the public life as a utility-maximizing principle. Kant holds that the political state presupposes social coordination.

Moreover, the state is the only collective agent capable of providing social coordination. The state as a moral agent requires coordinated social actions.¹³ However, alluding to a more Kantian template, it has been asserted that “where there is a collective responsibility to coordinate individual behaviour in pursuit of some morally important goal, it is legitimate for the collectivity to impose sanctions upon individuals in pursuit of that goal of the public good. It is perfectly true that not all coordination schemes require such enforcement.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the state, for instance, according to the Kantian principle has the moral duty for social coordination. The state has the duty to organize and the power to enforce as necessary various sorts of coordination schemes to aid its citizens in discharging their individual (albeit imperfect) moral duties.¹⁵ The state is built on the beneficial scheme of social coordination or social cooperation.

Freedom and the State in Kant’s Contemporary Political Thought

Kant’s political philosophy from his conception of practical philosophy comprises both ethics and right, moral theology, moral anthropology and the philosophy of history. All these themes are combined into one impressive fundamental theoretical and normative structure. Kant’s work is grounded in the theory of the self-legislation of pure practical reason. In addition, the theory of self-legislation of pure practical reason stands at the center of Kant’s normative system of the political state. His objective ideas are based on a normative constitution of the cosmos, the will of God, freedom and the nature of man. He argues that human reason could only concede absolute practical necessity and moral obligation to norms that arose from its own legislation.¹⁶ In consonance with Goodin’s theoretical position, Kersting, argues that we are subject to the laws of reason alone: with this recognition, Kant’s philosophy frees us from the domination of theological absolutism and the bonds of teleological natural law, and likewise elevates us above the prosaic banalities of the doctrine of prudence. Human beings may and must obey only their own reason; in that lies their dignity as well as their exacting and burdensome moral vocation.¹⁷ Broadly speaking, Kersting further posits that Kant’s anthropological features of the philosophy of right presupposed a metaphysic of freedom. Kant’s normative

consideration of human nature is grounded in the general principles of morality to moral duties. Moral principle is grounded in his philosophy of right and the conception of the highest political good.¹⁸ Kant's political thought is the pursuit of the common good of the people. Politics does not only connote a process but it guarantees the normative possibility of the common good of all in society. According to Mackenzie, politics is best thought of as the pursuit of the common good.¹⁹ Kant's normative ethics is a foundational part and the realm of the systematic differentiation of the pure legislation of reason into right. When one looks at political philosophy in the normative structure of Kant's practical philosophy, one finds it in the realm of "philosophy of rights" and the "philosophy of history. He revoked Machiavelli's separation between morals and politics; and by integrating political philosophy under the authority of pure practical reason re-created the old unity of morals and politics in a revolutionary new conceptual framework and on the basis of a revolutionary new theory of normative justification.²⁰ His thesis reveals the integration of political philosophy under the realm of morality. The presentation of his political perspective requires a task of theoretical cum normative reconstruction; it is a prerequisite for us to reconstruct the path of his argument from the concept of right through the normative foundation of property right. The themes of Kant's political philosophy suggest a principled pragmatism of the civil condition of the political state.²¹ Kant's political theory reflects political correctness.²² He argues that the "political correctness" of human action can be judged through the universally binding principle of right. Kant shares the conviction, common to all variants of natural right theory that there is an objective, timelessly valid and universally binding principle of right, which is accessible to human knowledge, which draws an irrevocable boundary between that which is right and that which is not that obligates everyone and which contains the criterion with the assistance of which the "political correctness" of human actions can be judged. His concept of right concerns the external sphere of the freedom of action. Nevertheless, human beings enter into external relations with others of their kind in space and time and influence the actions of others through their own; they are subject to reason's law of right. However, his concept of right concerns only the external sphere of the freedom of action.²³

Kant's Ideas of Non- Violent Revolution and Property Rights in the State

Kant believes that the state is characterized by coercion. From the Kantian perspective, coercion is justified by the state. His political liberalism is defined by the conception of human history, progress, autonomy and happiness. The

freedom of each action is mutually compatible with the freedom of the other. Freedom is Kant's chief value, coercion is permitted only where it is both necessary to preserve freedom and possible for it to do so. Kant's normative foundation of political philosophy is grounded in the duties of justice which is a more complicated form of the ultimate value of freedom. Coercion is justified when it can prevent a hindrance to freedom, since a hindrance to a hindrance to freedom is itself a means to freedom. The fundamental expression of human autonomy and happiness best defines Kant's liberalism.²⁴ Kant holds that the state is a social creation. The state depends on mutual compatibility and regulative principle. The state exists primarily to make claims to property rights and the claim to property rights thus have both the right and the obligations to join in a state with others. The state is established to prevent hindrance to the freedom of others. The normative foundation of Kantian liberalism is the idea that coercion is justifiable only to prevent hindrances to freedom, and thus to protect personal freedom and regulate property.²⁵ Kant argues that violent revolution should be avoided by the individuals in the state. Kant is antirevolutionary and revolution is antithetical.

Broadly speaking, violent revolution does not bring about reforms but rather it disrupts the perpetual peace of the state. Violent act disrupts the sense of our humanity. Violence could only breed violence and destructive tendencies. Violence does not portray anything good. Kant's liberal doctrine in his World Federation Republic or theory of perpetual peace reflects a denial of any right to violent revolution which has seemed surprising to many.²⁶ Violent revolutions do not give room for genuine reform in principles and that people revolt for the sake of greater happiness, which is an illegitimate reason for the overthrow of the state.²⁷ His political ethics admonishes the state to pursue the greater happiness of all individuals. His thesis reveals the need for social reforms and moral obligation. The state is therefore established by a strong legal framework and regulative principle. The Kantian claims of violent revolution asserts that "these are empirical claims, and do not prove that people cannot revolt solely to remove illegitimate constraints to their freedom. The fitting conclusion to his philosophy of autonomy is that the moral law emerges from freedom.²⁸ Furthermore, the state is not demanded by prudence and utility alone, but is called for by reason and thus equipped with the property of juridical necessity. Kant connects property right with the state. However, no philosopher ever connected property and the state as closely as Kant did.²⁹

Furthermore, his political philosophy reveals a clear cut principle of mutual harmony among individuals in the state. Rousseau's notion of the 'General Will' seems to exert so much influence on Kant. Rousseau's political philosophy is about creating social harmony. According to Asouzu, harmony is deeply rooted in complementary reflection.³⁰ Property right forms the normative justification of the state, and the state forms the justificatory basis of property right. Property forms the justificational basis of the state, and the state forms the justificatory complement of property. The voluntarism of the Hobbesian, Lockean and Rousseauian social contract theory of legitimation lies beneath the metaphysical level of unconditional practical necessity of Kant's philosophy of right and politics.³¹

In addition, Kant's social contract is defined by the lawfulness of the state and pragmatic necessity of the principle of reason. He employs a contract that is conceived as a practically necessary principle of reason and this stripped off all connotations of voluntarism in order to illustrate the form of the rational state, the state 'in the idea of how it ought to be according to pure principles of right, which serves every real union in a common wealth as a guideline or norms.³² The history of the origin of states in particular is a history of usurpation and subjection. It is, however, germane to assert that Kant's contemporary relevance of social contract is defined by the principle of social reconstruction and rational constitution of an ideal state. Every individual in the ideal state is bound by the contract of rational rights and property right. His contract theory forms a rational constitution that is equally constitutive and obligatory for all forms of domination that have arisen from force. Every empirical legislator is bound by the contract of right. The norm of the contract is obviously the counter part to the categorical imperative in political ethics just as the categorical imperative as a moral principle allows for the evaluation of the lawfulness of maxims, so does the original contract as the principle of public justice serve to measure the justice of positive laws.³³ His contemporary political legacy is anchored on the formal characteristics of equality, justice, freedom and mutuality. The form of political justice that can be known by means of the contract is procedural. The contract is the valid rational constitution of every political community and the political consequence of the right of freedom is the right to be subjected only to laws that are capable of receiving universal assent.³⁴ His political thought reflects legitimate expectations.

Kant's Political Philosophy and the Normative Structure of Society

For Kersdting, Kant's political thought illustrates the ideal fundamental, compositional, foundational and the normative structure of the social world order. However, aspects of the social world are accentuated and contrasted to illustrate both how the whole actually operates and ideally should be organized.³⁵ His political philosophy reveals the conception of good society and it is not inappropriate to view society as a permanent battleground between rival systems of beliefs.³⁶ His political philosophy is the metaphysics of rights, and it is characterized by a purely rational principle of political co-existence and rightful political order of human history. Everyone's right to freedom is affected by property claims.

Nonetheless, Kant's version of the social contract as influenced by Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau is deeply rooted in compromise-readiness or mutual understanding.³⁷ He argues that the realization of right, freedom, and reason is only feasible in our contemporary socio-historical world order. The contemporary significance of Kant's political thought is the critical aspects of ensuring the public happiness of all individuals in society. His normative political philosophy is grounded in the realization of the rational consensus of mutual compatibility, compromise-readiness and gradual reform. However, as a philosophy of compromise and reform, Kant's political philosophy forms a pragmatic synthesis of Hobbes' sense of political realism and Rousseau's ideal of optimistic justice. His pragmatic necessity of political philosophy as a compromise-readiness presupposed the normative possibility of republicanism. His political philosophy reveals a form of political liberalism that reveals the fact that violent revolution is not allowed. His political thought is conservative. Conservatism simply means a kind of a political ideology that holds on to the status-quo or to tradition. For him, violent revolution is evil. His metaphysics of right reveals that the freedom of the individual is limited because he argues that violent revolution is disallowed. This limited conception of the freedom of the individual makes his political philosophy complex and controversial. His normative justification of the state through the prohibition of violent resistance is often misunderstood by many. His concept of republicanism unites experience, prudence and hope. His philosophy can only recommend that the citizens who are so limited in their right to freedom wait for better times, for forceful resistance and revolution are not allowed. With forceful resistance and the right to violent revolution, violence breaks into the order of the democratic state.³⁸ His prohibition of violent revolution is also misunderstood if one uses it to attack the legitimacy of civil disobedience. As observed by Lawhead, the term "revolution" is frequently used in reference to Kant's philosophy.³⁹ However, the concepts of

civil disobedience and resistance have become part and parcel of contemporary political thought. His critique of resistance is also misunderstood if one uses it to attack the legitimacy of civil disobedience. For Kersting, civil disobedience and violent resistance are two distinct forms of political opposition, the concepts of which must be sharply distinguished. He interprets the transition from the natural condition to the civil condition of right and the state as the transition in which right is secured and completely based on the normative dimension of world historical order. His political thought reveals the need for the theory of international peace and world order of right. His conception of the 'highest political good' reveals the normative justification of a just order of world peace.⁴⁰ His political perspective must, therefore, build the theory of the republic into a theory of the international order of right and justice. He took political philosophy beyond the borders of states and saw its foremost objective in the 'highest political good; an essential condition of an enduring condition of peace among states is that all states become Republics.⁴¹ Moreover, he does not base the order of international peace on a balance of terror but on an order of right. His concept of international peace is a secularized version of the traditional connection of peace and justice, which characterizes classical as well as medieval political thought. Nevertheless, perpetual peace is a necessary guiding idea for politics.⁴² Accordingly, Hayry however posits that, Kant's political philosophy combines the methods of applied ethics and the ideals of universal equality and human well-being.⁴³

Kant's Contemporary Political Thought: Lessons and Implications for the Nigerian Democratic States

Nigeria as a country has a lot to learn from the Kantian template of normative ideal social order. Nigeria has been characterized by certain ethno-religious and socio-political crises due to tribal sentiments and lack of people-oriented programs by the Nigerian government. The contemporary situations in Nigeria can be addressed with a humane consideration of problem solving mechanism. Our life situations in Nigeria are moral issues. There should be the spirit of oneness among Nigerians. Nigerians should respect the freedom of others and the Nigerian state. The recent end Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) protest was caused by lack of people-oriented programs by the Nigerian government. The protest was actually peaceful until it was hijacked by violent acts. Nigeria's quest for the Kantian perspective of peaceful atmosphere is quite fundamental for its socio-political and economic growth or development. He admonishes us as individuals to cooperate with other fellow Nigerians. Philosophy is about real

life situations; and it is about problem solving mechanism. Moreover, Hayry posits further that “Kant’s political philosophy reveals the philosophical study of real life moral issues.⁴⁴ However, the rightful legislation of pure practical reason categorically demands that we ought to work for perpetual peace and world historical order. However, we must keep the radical, aprioristic parsimony of Kant’s philosophy of right in check.⁴⁵ According to Rose, freedom is understood as freedom in itself. A person is free if he or she can satisfy personal wants and desires even if the wants are immediate inclination or blind obedience to the dictates of reason or authority. For Rose, freedom requires responsibility.⁴⁶ The Kantian perspective of freedom reveals the need for moral responsibility. Accordingly, Rose posits that, responsibility requires that subjects self-consciously know and freely choose their purposes for the predicate ‘mine’ to be attached to the action requires no real notion of freedom, but an evaluation of one’s own action. The idea of intentions and obligations resonates with Kant’s goodwill and the voice of conscience. Freedom requires moral reciprocity.⁴⁷ Kant’s metaphysics of rights resonates the need for moral conscience and moral consciousness or responsibility.

Evaluation

Kant’s contemporary political philosophy is complex, aprioristic, humanistic, controversial, problematic and holistic. His conceptualization of revolution and the political state reflects the normative possibility of conservative ideological structure. His entire philosophy is fundamentally historical and designed for the supreme principle of rational autonomy and the common good of society. The Kantian diagnosis of moral philosophy reflects the normative paradigms of modern democratic society. He holds that in the political state, reform is possible and our human sociality and historicity is grounded in the need for civil society. His political ethics is a normative structure that encourages the beneficial scheme of social cooperation and tolerance. It encourages human beings to govern their own lives through the power of reason and cognitive principle. Nevertheless, the theory of human freedom is however, a limited one. His universalization of reason is grounded in moral obligation.⁴⁸ Wood, however, argues that Kantian ethics is supposed to be a theory of autonomy, a theory that encourages human beings to govern their own lives through reason and think for themselves. Yet Kant seems to be opting for the critique of theological morality over rational morality.⁴⁹ In consonance with Wood, Reath posits that, Kant’s basic idea can be grasped intuitively by analogy with the idea of political freedom and moral autonomy. Consider how political freedom in liberal theories is thought to be

related to legitimate political authority: a state is free when its citizens are bound only by laws in some sense of their own making created and put into effect, say, by vote or by elected representatives.⁵⁰ Society fundamentally demands that individual freedom should be checked and limited by the state defined by a social balance, political order and force in order to check human excesses. For Kant, reason is seen as an instrument of emancipation. The state is an ethical issue in the modern democratic society as far as the Kantian diagnosis of politics, freedom and the political state are concerned; man is at the center stage of the society; hence, ethical issues in the society is quite fundamental, normative and inevitably political to man. Kant's political philosophy is exclusive and inclusive; it also entails the existential relationship of man with others which has remained the instrument of self- fulfillment and self-transformative moments of existential reflection.⁵¹ Kant's contemporary legacy reminds us of the importance of the attempt of the individual to critically examine and understand himself properly in the world of irrationality and cruelty. His political theory has both strength and weakness; progressive social movements and conservative limitations. Kant's political philosophy represents the fact that society is characterized by fundamental wholeness.⁵² For Kant, the guiding premise is that the state is governed by a peaceful atmosphere and it must be formally constitutive and guarantee normative peace.⁵³ His political philosophy is grounded in the regulative principle of the state. Human reason reflects the cognitive principle of ensuring normative ideal world order.

Concluding Reflections

Kant's political philosophy suggests the need for the normative foundation of the democratic state and the possibility of social order or an emancipated global order. His political philosophy presupposes the theory of contemporary social contract. The social contract theory reflects reason and moral principles which are governed by the voice of reason and the voice of conscience. His ethics is deeply rooted in his political perspective. His political thought reveals the need for the 'highest political good' of all in the democratic state. His metaphysics of right resonates from the universal formal law of reason. The freedom of the individual is limited. There is no absolute freedom. The individual freedom is logically consistent with the freedom of the other and the freedom the state. His argument for the absolute prohibition of violent revolution is based on his transformation of civil society. Revolution could lead us backward and could return us to the state of nature. His contemporary political thought has a conservative stance.

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