

PHILOSOPHY FOR BEGINNERS

MORAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Week 10. Kant and Hegel
14th March 2018

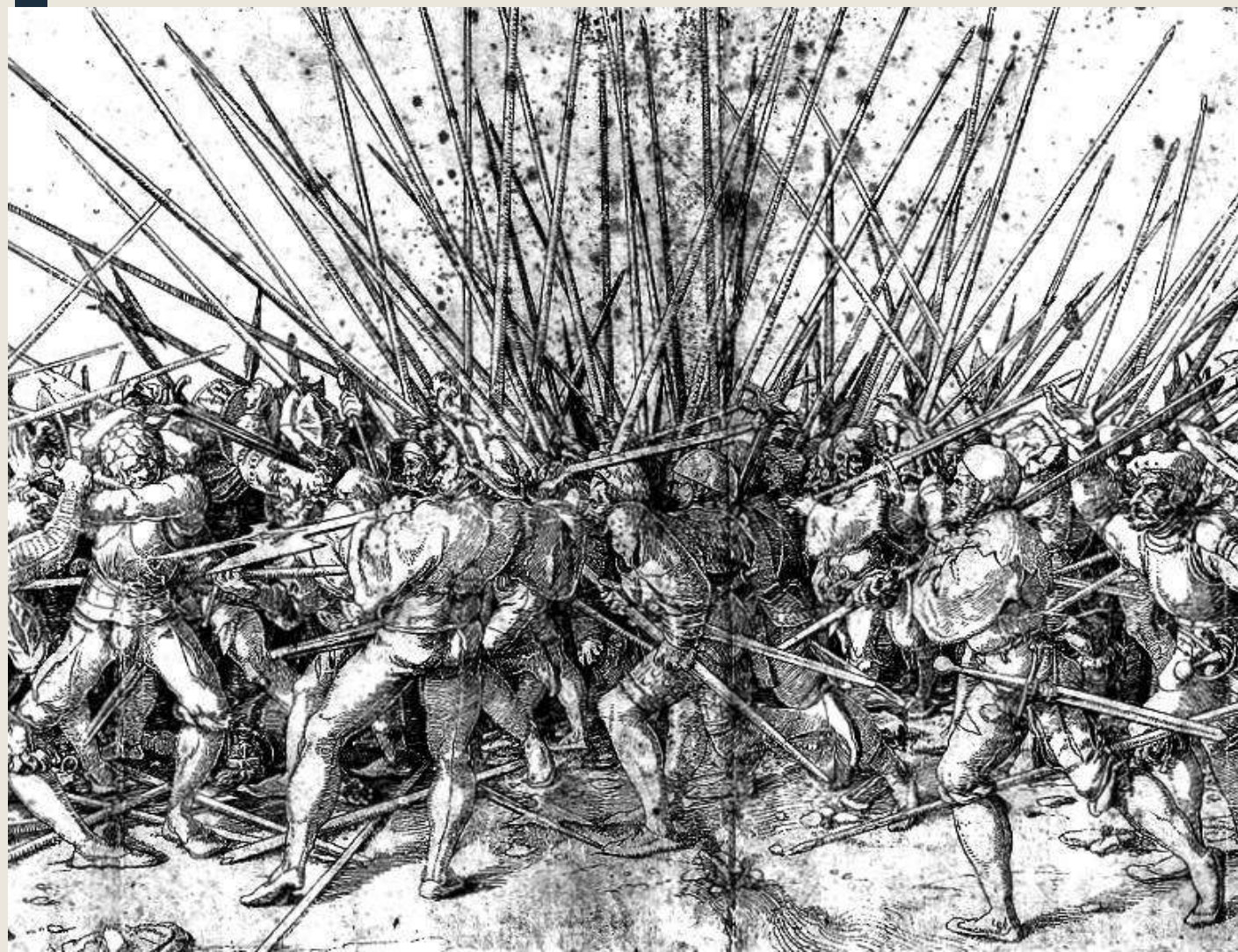












Class aims

- Introduce Kant's politics of right and its relation to the categorical imperative
- Evaluate his contributions to ideas of human rights and international peace
- Explore Hegel's vision of the 'dialectic' running through thought and history
- Investigate the importance of self-determination, community and mutual recognition for political thought

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)



What do we know about Kant?

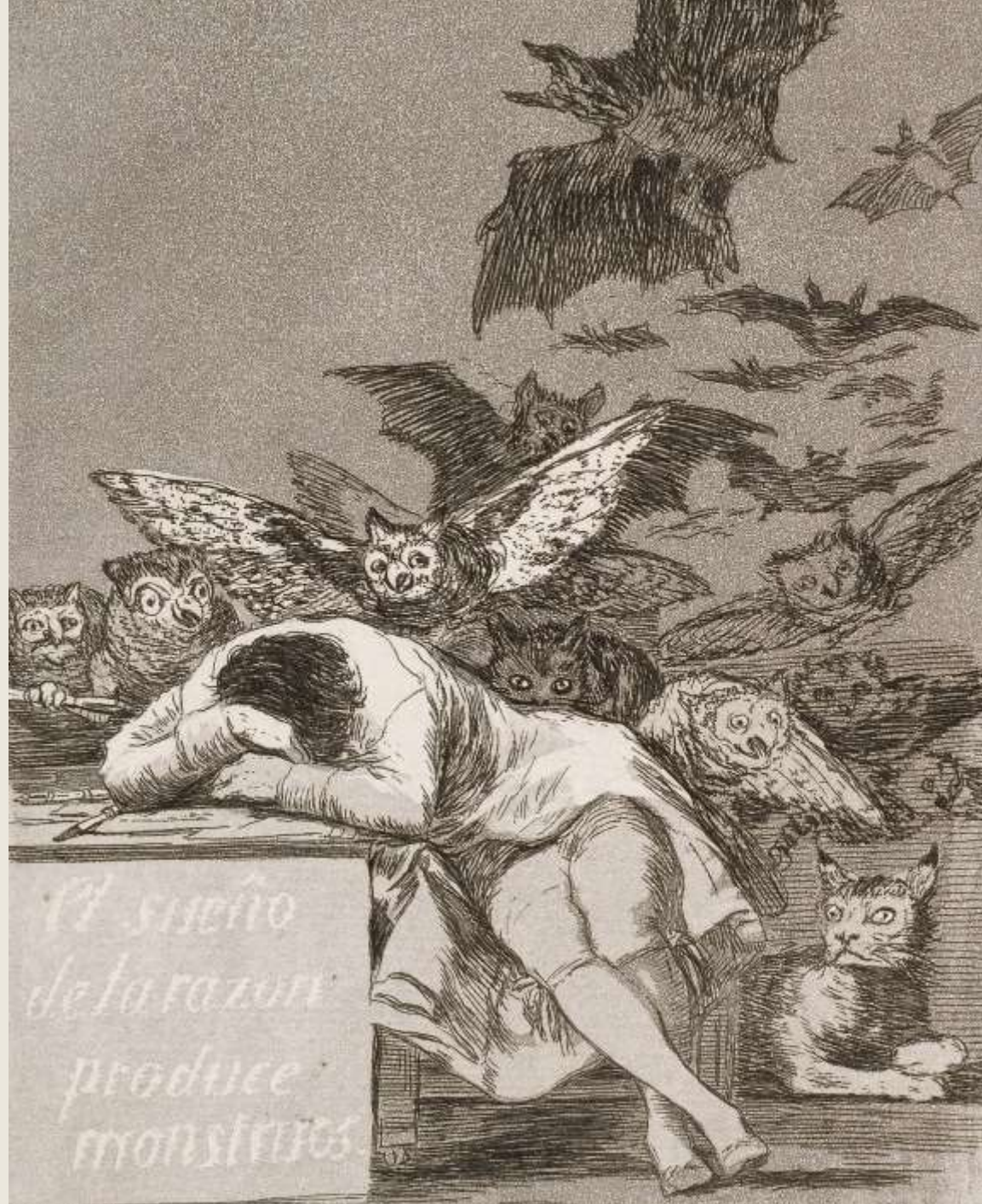
- What do you remember about Kant's arguments about duty?
- How do you think this might play out in his politics?

If then there is a supreme practical principle or, in respect of the human will, a categorical imperative [...] the foundation of this principle is: rational nature exists as an end in itself. Man necessarily conceives his own existence as being so; so far then this is a subjective principle of human actions. But every other rational being regards its existence similarly, just on the same rational principle that holds for me: so that it is at the same time an objective principle, from which as a supreme practical law all laws of the will must be capable of being deduced. Accordingly the practical imperative will be as follows: ‘So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end, never as means only’.

- Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*,

Kant: Politics out of morality

- Kant's political views stem from his account of morality
- The moral law is based on our autonomy in acting according to duty
- His politics is concerned with *right*: what we ought to do in political and social contexts
- Such laws can be universal and necessary (*a priori*) in the realm of politics, and they reflect justice
- *But what kind of political values might come with that?*



El sueño
de la razón
produce
monstruos.

What is Enlightenment?

Take a look at the short extract from one of Kant's most famous writings – *What is Enlightenment?*

Discuss, in small groups:

What kind of political values do you think Kant would champion?

What kind of politics would follow from his call for Sapere Aude?

Key values so far

1. Treat everyone as an end, not a means
2. Self-determination
3. Equality
4. Championing freedom of thought

Anything else?





What do we know about the 'Age of Revolution'?

1775 – War of Independence begins in America

1776 – US Declaration of Independence and Paine's *Common Sense*

1781 – *Critique of Pure Reason*

1783 – Treaty of Paris ends the War of Independence

1787 – US Constitution ratified; *CPR* 2nd edition

1788 – *Critique of Practical Reason*

1789 – Storming of Bastille by National Guard

1790 – *Critique of Judgement*

1791 – Haitian revolt begins among black African slaves

1793 – execution of Louis XVI & Girondists; 'Terror';

Theory & Practice

1794 – Rise and fall of Robespierre, state religion

1795 – *Towards Perpetual Peace*

1797 – *Metaphysics of Morals*

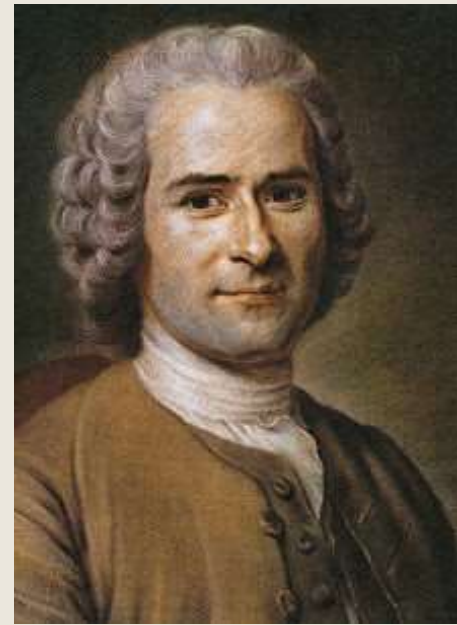
1799 – Napoleon becomes effective dictator of France

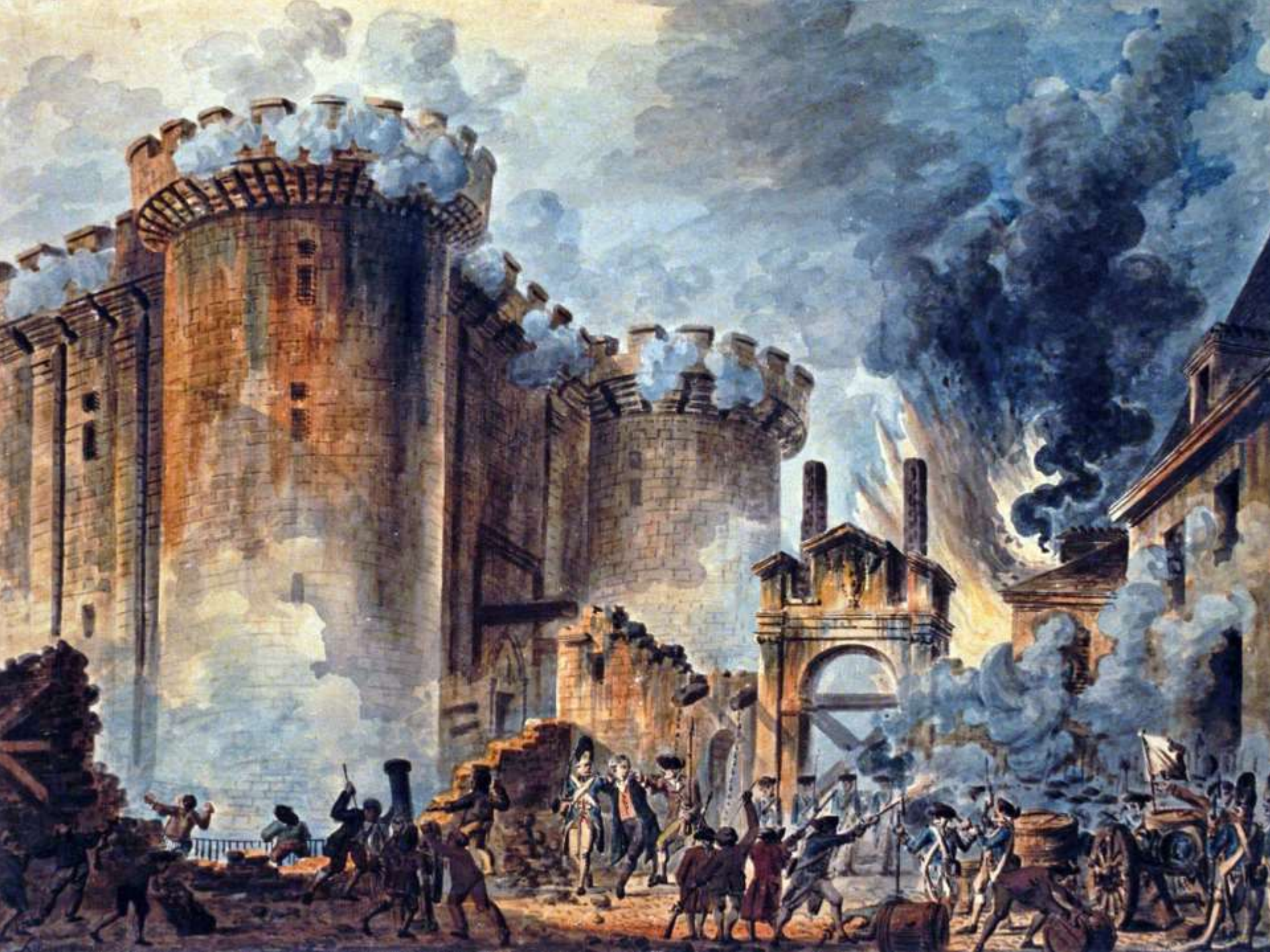
The philosopher of the French Revolution?

- Asserting the independence of the individual in the face of authority
- The American and French revolutions sought to realise the 'rights of man' – universally, philosophically understood
- Kant was opposed to revolution in itself, but sympathised with the French revolution
- They appealed to a secular natural order and broke with the past
- They opposed prejudice and superstition, and appealed to reason and self-mastery
- *Sapere aude!*

Rousseau (1712-1778)

- Admirer of Rousseau, the ‘Newton of the moral realm’
- Possessed one artwork, a portrait of Rousseau, and forgot his walk once while reading *Emile*
- A state is only legitimate if it is guided by the ‘general will’ of its members
- Nature is good and humans are naturally free, but corrupted by unequal societies
- Because the authority of the good state is invested in the general will of all its members, who will obey it freely, citizens are ‘forced to be free’





Did Kant support the French revolution?

- Take a look at the excerpt on the ‘Social Contract’...
- We’ll be using this to answer the question above

Read through and discuss in pairs:

- *What actually is this ‘social contract’?*
- *How does Kant relate to the previous social contract theorists we have covered?*

Did Kant support the revolution?

- In theory, yes...
- When Louis XVI convened the Estates General, he transferred sovereignty to the people, so did not illegitimately rebel later
- But rebelling against a government is incoherent, as it embodies all the right of the existing state – the ‘general legislative will’
- Rebelling against the state forfeits the *social contract*...
- This is not a real event in nature, but rather an Idea of reason, which justifies and limits state power and individual obedience to it
- At the same time, Kant allows for passive civil disobedience, particularly where it conflicts with one’s ‘inner morality’

Social contract

- The social contract is based on a general will and possible consent
- The sovereign must 'give his laws in such a way that they could have arisen from the united will of a whole people and to regard each subject, insofar as he wants to be a citizen, as if he has joined in voting for such a will'
- But with rights come duties to the sovereign
- This social contract, like in Hobbes, is not voluntary nor based on actual consent
- But whereas Hobbes bases the social contract on individual self-interest, Kant grounds it in the principle of *right*, freedom for all persons in general rather than just the individual



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– Hegel, letter to
Niethammer, 13
October 1806

Theory and Practice

- In groups of 2-3, please read through the excerpt and discuss the following questions:
- What is the nature of *freedom* Kant describes?
- In what ways are human beings equal?

If time, what problems do you find with his account?



Theory and Practice

- All individuals are free as human beings to pursue happiness in their own way, so long as it doesn't infringe on others
- Members of a state are formally equal in terms of the law. Each has equal right to invoke the power of the state to enforce the laws on their behalf, with the exception of the head of state
- Success and rank should be acquired by skill and effort, not inherited
- Whilst all are free and equal under the law, only citizens (male adults with property) are entitled to an equal vote

Kant: Politics out of morality

- Kant's political views stem from his account of morality
- The moral law is based on our autonomy in acting according to duty
- His politics is concerned with *right*: what we ought to do in political and social contexts
- This is grounded on *laws* which regulate our relationships with others
- Such laws can be universal and necessary (*a priori*) in the realm of politics, and they reflect justice
- Whilst individual morality is concerned with subjective will and obligations, laws are concerned with actions themselves objectively, and can be enforced

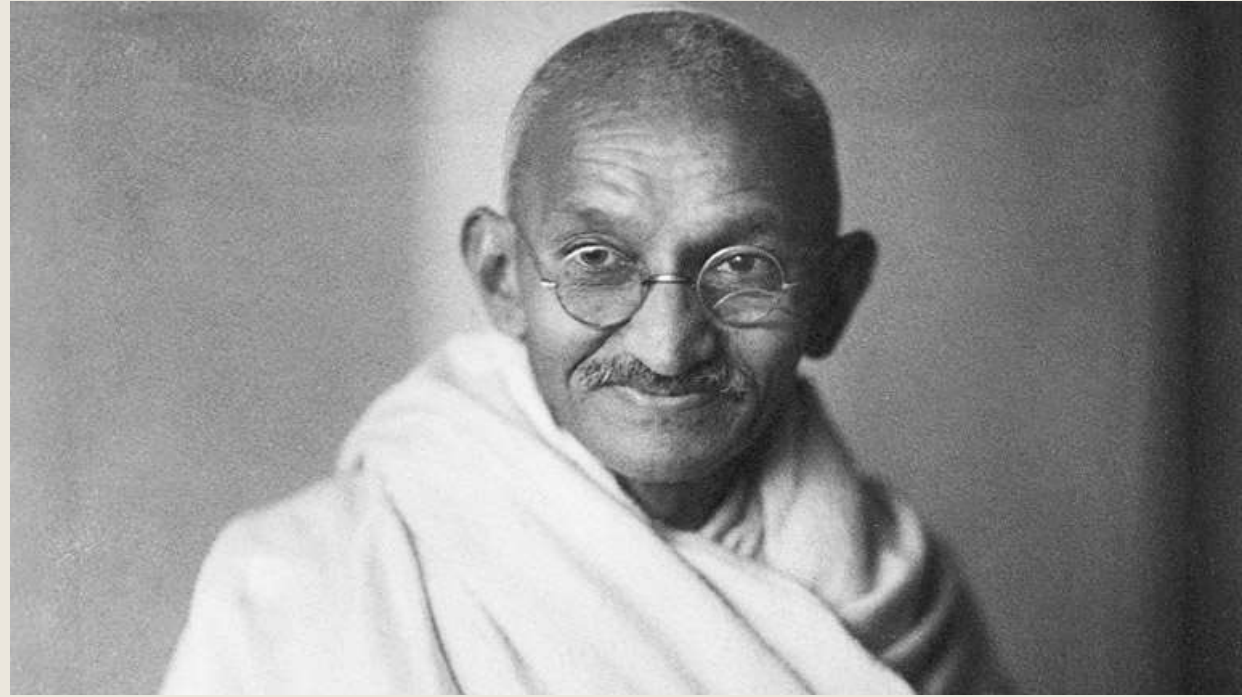
The Philosophy of Right

- Kant builds his politics out of universal moral principles
- Take a look at some of the core tenets on the handout
- *Right* 'ought never to be adapted to politics, but politics ought always to be adapted to right'.
- Politics should never interfere with the inner life of another person; but rather establish a universal law, making external freedom possible

Politics concerned with law

- ‘Every action which by itself or by its maxim enables the freedom of each individual’s will to coexist with the freedom of everyone else in accordance with a universal law is *right*’
- ‘let your external actions be such that the free application of your will can coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a universal law’.
(From “Introduction to the Theory of Right”)

But can morality influence politics?



- 'Be the change you wish to see in the world' (Not Gandhi)
- 'If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. ... We need not wait to see what others do.' (Actual Gandhi)

Round-up so far

- His politics reflect his categorical imperative
- Seeks conditions for what is universal and necessarily valid, independent of experience, through notion of *right*
- They place external limitations on human freedom to prevent conflict, so that human beings may cultivate the freedom of moral action
- His politics is therefore premised on a view of human nature as rational and moral, and human history as directed by a natural plan for mankind to realise its essence, through becoming rational
- ‘Be ye therefore as wise as serpents, and harmless as doves’ (*Perpetual Peace*)
- An idealist, or a principled, consistent philosopher?

International relations

- Kant approaches international relations from the same premises as his moral and philosophical beliefs
- In *Perpetual Peace* he also offers six articles aimed at reducing the likelihood of war, without themselves ensuring peace
- How would you go about reducing war among countries?
Discuss!



International relations

- Forbids making temporary peace treaties when preparing for war;
- Abolishes standing armies;
- Forbids the interference of one state into the internal affairs of another;
- Bans annexation of one state by another;
- Forbids taking on national debt for external affairs;
- Limits conduct of war to disallow acts that make peace impossible
- He also gives three definitive articles for this international order:
 - 1) Every state shall have a republican civil constitution
 - 2) Each state shall participate in a union of states
 - 3) Cosmopolitan (individual) right is one of universal hospitality



Property and right

- Cosmopolitan right is one of being ‘citizens of a universal state of human beings’, and for Kant we should respect this basic equality
- This gives all people the right to travel to other lands for sake of commerce
- Kant had supported European colonialism, and his anthropology produces a racial classification, but the 1790s he becomes critical of European abuses and exploitation of indigenous peoples capable of governing themselves
- ‘a violation of right on one place of the earth is felt in all’ – *Perpetual Peace*

Kant's politics round-up

- How would we evaluate his politics in terms of his broader philosopher and morality?
- It emphasises the individual and the subject, but also the relations between individuals
- It is republican and anti-monarchical whilst also being non-democratic
- Attempts to understand humanity within nature, but also re-asserts the primacy of the moral law and the value of freedom
- The philosophy of right is concerned with the universal and necessary conditions for freedom for all persons in general

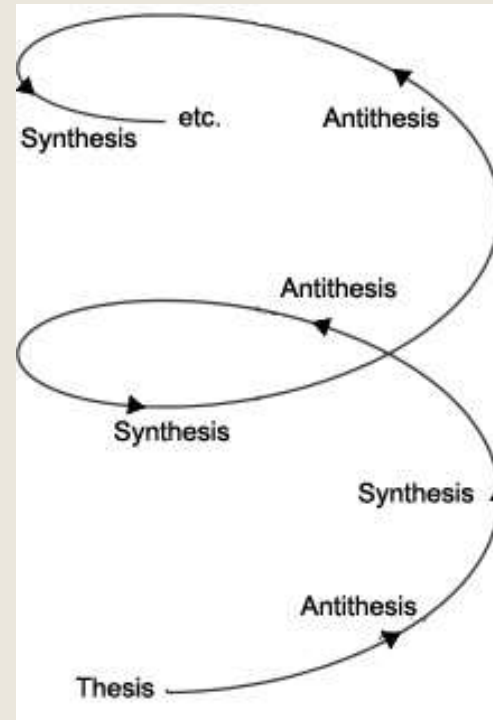
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel



Hegel in a nutshell

- German philosopher, 1770-1831
- Drew on Kantian critical philosophy and Romanticism to become the most systematic figure of 'German Idealism'
- Produced a systematic but notoriously difficult philosophy, both in terms of its concepts and its language
- View of the dialectic running through history
- Major influences on Marxism, existentialism and subsequent thought
- Few modern philosophers have attracted more vitriol
- Before condemning him, our task will be to read and understand him

The Dialectic



What is the dialectic?

- Hegel establishes a new way of thinking, the dialectic, in which thinking advances by overcoming and incorporating its contradictions into a greater whole
- Hegel is concerned with how thought strives towards progress, totality through a continual, dynamic activity of thinking through and beyond its contradictions
- Thus a concept collides with its negation, resulting in its overcoming and resolution through the process of *sublation* (*aufhebung*)
- Progress travels by way of failure, and failure has a positive role: not just wrong or right, but ‘one-sided’, ‘incomplete’

What is the dialectic?

- The dialectic applies to human politics and history: earlier social models give way to more progressive ones
- What potential problems are there already with this view?



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What is the dialectic?

- The movement whereby we develop our understanding of ourselves is “Absolute Spirit”
- Previous moments are not complete failures: the internal contradictions in our conception of ourselves are revealed through error, but the content of these is not just negated but preserved in the next stage – “the negation of negation”
- This development is *geist*, and refers to us – our understanding of ourselves
- The ‘dialectic’ is the process of us working out what we are for ourselves – this is why he will say the essence of *geist* is freedom
- Freedom is the process of self-determination

Class recap

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Next week: Marx, Communism and Anarchism