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Aleksandar Molnar¹
Faculty of Philosophy
University of Belgrade, Serbia

Boundaries of Enlightened Absolutism: Kant and Frederick the Great

Abstract

This article presents the ambivalent attitude of Immanuel Kant towards Frederick the Great. Although he died before Kant wrote his critical writings in the field of legal and political philosophy, Friedrich left such a strong influence on Kant's ideas that even the French Revolution failed to suppress. Because of this influence Kant was never able to develop all the liberal potentials of his legal and political philosophy, nor to make a consequent distinction, elaborated in the scriptures about eternal peace, between despotism and the republic, especially the best ones – monarchist – over which hovered a permanent shadow of Kant's favourite ruler – Frederick.

Keywords: Kant, Friedrich, Enlightenment, absolutism, liberalism, Prussia

In his influential book from 1840, entitled *History of Kant's Philosophy*, Kantian philosopher Karl Rosenkranz could still note with pride and a certain naiveté: "What Frederick the Great did for organizing the Prussian state, Kant did for its ideal consciousness: he gave it its first fundamental constitution" (Rosenkranz 1887: 109). Later generations associated Kant with Frederick with great discomfort, as it invariably implied judging Kant's own propensity for the absolutistic

1 Professor
amolnar@f.bg.ac.rs

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legacy of the Frederick era. And these views were quite different indeed. In his influential book from 1840, entitled *History of Kant's Philosophy*, Kantian philosopher Karl Rosenkranz could still note with pride and a certain naiveté: "What Frederick the Great did for organizing the Prussian state, Kant did for its ideal consciousness: he gave it its first fundamental constitution" (Rosenkranz 1887: 109). Later generations associated Kant with Frederick with great discomfort, as it invariably implied judging Kant's own propensity for the absolutistic legacy of the Frederick era. And these views were quite different indeed. On one side were theorists recognizing in Kant a pure liberal and disputing any possibility of his identification with the Frederickian state (cf. e.g. Stauber 1979: 282). Others maintained that, because of Kant's resolute advocacy of human rights, it could be stated that assertions on the attachment of his thought to the Prussian state are untenable (cf. e.g. Müller 1954: 42), although it is true that he was the son of an age of absolutism which he could not surpass in his reflections on the state (Müller 1954: 29-30). The most moderate view was supported by theorists who argued that Kant was primarily a "reformist" who simply wanted to carry on with the reforms already accomplished in Prussia by Frederick (cf. e.g. Cavallar 1992: 86) and who, despite his allegiance for Frederick's Prussia, never uncritically worshipped absolutism, not even when it limned itself as "enlightened" (Cavallar 1992: 91), while his struggle against all that remained unenlightened in that absolutism remained "silent (*lautlos*)" (Böckerstette 1982: 348). Finally, the fourth group could include those theorists who thought that Kant's political philosophy was too strongly influenced by Frederick's rule, which is why it constantly overestimated the monarchy and showed a complete lack of sense for the liberal principle of power division (or checks and balances) as a means of limiting the monarchic rule, as had already been conceived by the most prominent thinkers of Enlightenment, Locke and Montesquieu (cf. e.g. Ritter 1971: 295-296).

Common to all these views is that they are based on the perception of Frederick's enlightened absolutism as negative, something that would diminish the greatness of Kant's political philosophy if it were present in it (even in the slightest sense). However, things are far from being so simple, as Kant's political philosophy in its entirety², being so strongly

2 Like the entire Kant's philosophy, the part referring to the politics is based on the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Some of his major political writings were published as short essays in the journal *Berlinische Monatsschrift*: "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" (November 1784), "Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?" (December 1784) and "On the Common Saying: This May be True in Theory but it Does Not Apply in Practice" (September 1793) – while others appeared as separate publications: *On Eternal Peace. Philosophical Sketch* (first edition 1795 and second expanded 1796), *Metaphysics*

marked by pietism, largely lags behind Frederick's understanding of the relationship between politics and religion (i.e. Frederick's radical deism, taken from the English and French Enlightenment), while in its reflection on the state shows a strong ambivalence toward Frederick's legacy. Circling in its solar orbit, it strives to distance itself as much as possible from its blazing absolutistic core, exposing itself to a new risk from falling into a dry and empty pietistic moralizing and dismissing even the sharpest blade of the criticism it inspires. This attitude features most prominently in his writing on the Enlightenment from 1784, in which Kant for the first time succeeded in formulating his political thought relatively clearly: its centrepiece was a basic static element – the state "machine" kept in motion, as some kind of a closed self-perpetuating system, by the ruler and constantly "tested" by three dynamic forces: natural evolution (with strong eschatological charge manifested in its aiming for the development of the mind as its ultimate goal), a nation's history (understood as gradual progression of Enlightenment) and civic development of individual subjects (entailing demands for a dignified life and treatment by authorities).

Kant's ambivalence toward Frederick increased particularly after the outset of the French Revolution and saw its culmination in his work on eternal peace. It is therefore not surprising that the views of researchers on this particular piece of Kant's political philosophy diverge perhaps most saliently. While some think that Kant in this work exercised more or less open propaganda of the French Revolution (cf. e.g. Losurdo 1987), others dispute this, arguing that it does not mention France, but only Frederick (Cavallar 1992: 163), although in it (especially in the part dealing with the relationship between morality and politics and criticizing some postulates of the reason of state – *Staatsräson* – theory) Kant indeed initiated a hidden polemic against his foreign policy and its apologists, such as Garve (Cavallar 1992: 94). And finally, the third group consider that by this work, Kant again showed that, "on the one hand, he was close to the ideals of the French Revolution, but, on the other, he remained chained to the absolutistic way of thinking" (Burg 1974: 209). The controversies are, therefore, quite considerable and what is evident at first glance is that Kant did, throughout his life, show particular fascination with Frederick although that this fascination began to dwindle after 1789, making way to a new one – that with the French revolution and its importance in world history. And then

of Morals (1797), *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798). Though having caused a huge controversy and even denials on account of Kant's alleged age-debilitated *intellectual ability at the time when it was written*, his essay *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) gave significant contributions not only to his philosophical system as a whole, but also to its part focused on politics.

again, Kant has managed to reconcile, theoretically, his two fascinations within the concept of progressive Enlightenment that flows through different stages along the course to its ultimate end – the universal ethical republic (elaborated in his essay *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*).

This brings us to the key question: what it was with which Frederick had fascinated Kant so much that even after the onset of the French revolution and his radiating enthusiasm for its ideals, he has remained lodged in Frederick's sphere of influence. Kant, who was just a year younger than Frederick (but outlived him by full eighteen years), had never met him and never talked with him.³ From what he had committed to writing, the impression is that Frederick had fascinated Kant exclusively as an enlightened ruler,⁴ i.e. a philosopher-ruler (who leads his people "from law to virtue"),⁵ as Kant had nowhere declared himself on views that Frederick had advocated in his philosophical writings. Yet this does not mean that Kant was ignorant of Frederick's political philosophy, or completely free from its influence. It can be said, indeed, that Kant had built up a great number of his political stands starting implicitly from corresponding Frederick's stands, which he then tried to temper as much as possible, to liberalize and free them from their susceptibility to the reason of state (*Staatsräson*) theory.

Closest to Kant were the basic premises of Frederick's contractual theory of society, which he upheld in his treatises, particularly in his *Letters on patriotic love* (1779) (cf. Friedrich 1789).⁶ According to this

3 Indeed, there is no evidence that the Prussian king, who followed European Enlightenment literature with great interest and maintained contacts with a great number of French philosophers, had ever heard of Kant. It is interesting in this context that Kant became a member of the Berlin Academy of Science in 1786 – immediately after Frederick had died. According to Frederick's own Enlightenment criteria, nothing that Kant had published till that year – including *The Critique of Pure Reason* itself – recommended him as an interesting Enlightenment philosopher.

4 Based on written testimonies of his contemporaries we can assume that among his friends Kant most often narrated anecdotes about "Frederick the Unique", whose greatness he admired. His most favorite anecdote was about a military shoeing smith who once uttered "Let the old crook ride through" so that the king could hear him. Kant found it much fascinating that thereafter "Frederick the Unique" just inquired about this man, without punishing him, because he respected man's right to his opinion about anything, including about the holder of supreme power in Prussia.

5 Because people can be educated to progress from "law to virtue" only from the positions of authority, Kant argued that "wise men should not teach kings wisdom, but instead *kings should* start philosophizing or philosophers should become *kings*" (Kant 1955: 354). Kant changed this argument, although not substantially, in his essay *On Eternal Peace* (Kant 1998, 7: 228).

6 For more details on Frederick's political philosophy see my book (in Serbian) *Treatise on Enlightenment, Liberalism and Nationalism in Prussia. Vol. 2: The Aporia of Enlightened*

theory, every power is derived – by the means of a social contract – from the people (who hold the original sovereignty), while the basic principle of a social contract is always the rule of natural law (better known as the Golden rule of Christ in the Christian world) which says that a man must treat others the way he wants to be treated by the others. Although he shared, as well, Frederick's belief that the human nature is evil, Kant could not accept a conclusion that, at a certain point in their history, all societies had ceased to be based on a social contract, had lost popular sovereignty and slipped into the auto-destructive cycle of alternating tyrannies and revolutions, from which only rare ones were rescued by absolutistic rulers committed to the Stoical morality. Admittedly, Kant never thought of entering into historical polemics: for him social contract, similarly to popular sovereignty and natural law⁷ (and also to human rights, within its framework),⁸ remained a sheer regulative idea of the reason (cf. Kant 1998, 3: 434),⁹ void of any practical sense, save for the ideological reinforcement of the "general will", which the absolutistic government in the "republican" system

Absolutism of Frederick II (cf. Molnar 2011).

- 7 Although Kant had criticized "the ancients" for "mixing natural law with ethics" (Kant 1934: 93), he himself did not do much to separate ethics from natural law (cf. Hochstrasser 2006: 199). Yet, no doubt, Kant deemed that morals (ethics) and natural law are much closer – on the grounds of the categorical imperative – than morals and positive law. Because, as maintained in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, natural law is the one based exclusively on principles, while positive law is the one which stems from the will of empirical legislator and regulates conditions under which unification of arbitrary wills (*Willkür*) of subjects may take place, in agreement with the "general laws of freedom" (Kant 1998, 3: 337). Therefore even in the state of nature there is natural (or private) law, and the only missing there is the public law, which ensures division between Mine and Yours (Kant 1998, 3: 350). Positive law (in the form of civil legislation), on the other hand, "pursues as its essential fundamental principle the realization of the natural right of men, which in the *status naturalis* (before civic alignments) was a mere idea, and this means enacting – via general and appropriate coercion – public regulations, which shall make it possible for each man to have his rights guaranteed or acquired (Kant 1986: 368). Vice versa applies too. Natural law pursues as its essential fundamental principle the establishment of the civil state in which civil legislation will be realized: "Natural law comprises civil state as the one based on any *pactum sociale*. It can be proved that the *status naturalis* is the state of injustice in which it is a legal duty to shift to the *status civilem*" (Kant 1922: 398).
- 8 In contrast to political philosophers in England, America and France, who by the end of the 18th century could problematize human rights not only on the level of natural-law, but also on the level of the positive-law and politics, Kant and other German philosophers kept deducing them from the natural law, completely indifferent to "merely empirically composed history" (Gaile 1978: 51).
- 9 "Social contract is a rule, and not a source of state constitution. Social contract is not the *principium* of the creation of state, but of public administration and comprises the ideal of legislation, government and public justice" (Kant 1934: 503, 504, 506; on the potential anti-voluntaristic edge of such Kant's stand cf. Kelly 2005: 26).

should allegedly turn into statutory laws (Stauber 1979: 302-303, 331-332). Therefore Kant did not find it difficult, already back in 1798 at the end of his essay *The Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, to quote Frederick's judgment on the corruption of the human race and to exempt him from its applicability (Kant 1998, 9: 690). What recommended Frederick for a "republican" ruler, Kant argued, was precisely the fact that, unlike the people he should rule, Frederick was not corrupted and thus was able to impersonally apply both ethical and legal norms. However, by leaving the absolutistic government exempted from those same statutory laws and subject exclusively to moral commands (at least Stoic, if not Christian), Kant intentionally deviated from the liberal postulates of his theory (Williams 1983: 126) and expended them for the sake of Frederick's political philosophy. Even more, if consistently implemented, Kant's own individualistic ethical philosophy applied to political circumstances of the backward Prussia, necessarily led to justifying the absolutistic rule of an enlightened ruler who strives to raise his unenlightened subjects to his own level of rationality (cf. Berlin 1992: 238-239).¹⁰ Precisely this was the reason why Kant concurred with Frederick in insisting on the necessity to have enlightened absolutistic states at the current level of progress of the Enlightenment and, particularly approved all the arguments that Frederick had put up in his youth essay *The Refutation of Machiavelli's 'The Prince'* against the reason of state (*Staatsräson*) theory. The only thing Kant could not do, was to accept (or anyhow justify) Frederick's growing tendency to relativize Stoic (and, particularly, Christian) ethics and supplement it with precisely that same theory of the reason of state (*Staatsräson*), which he had earlier wanted to refute and devaluate. Here again, the liberal component of Kant's thought had prevailed over the Frederickian component.

Altogether, this allows a conclusion that Kant had an utterly ambivalent relationship towards Frederickian philosophical-political legacy. On the one hand he endorsed his theory of enlightened absolutism (on the basis of Stoic ethics) yet, on the other, opposed three important components of Frederick's political philosophy: denial, in principle, of any possibility to reactivate social contract; equating, sweepingly, revolutions with tyrannies, in terms of destructiveness; and the implicit amalgamation of Stoic ethics and reason of state (*Staatsräson*). The same as Frederick, Kant maintained that the republican system of

¹⁰ In his posthumously published lectures on Prussian Romanticism (*The Roots of Romanticism*) Isaiah Berlin showed tendency to oversimplify Kant's attitude towards Frederick: he argued that Kant, when dealing with despotic character of "a paternalistic government", had been actually thinking about Frederick (Berlin 2001: 70).

government was the best and that enlightened absolutism could be the most optimal solution for societies on relatively low level of social-political development (development of "Enlightenment"), yet in contrast to Frederick (who as a matter of fact fostered deep scepticism regarding possibility for "a mob" to be enlightened), he accepted this developmental dimension genuinely and addressed the perspective of further progress of Enlightenment – up to the stage when absolutism will not be necessary any more. *Ipsa facto*, Kant could have not accepted Frederick's laconic discarding of the question of the social contract as something that pertains to forgotten past, but rather accepted, as a realistic one, a possibility that (in foreseeable future) the people will become sufficiently enlightened to negotiate a new constitution with their (for already long enlightened) ruler, and that then they will jointly cleanse moral foundations of their political communion from all the admixtures of the reason of state (*Staatsräson*). Let us now examine more closely Kant's ambivalent relationship towards Frederick.

The most important source regarding Kant's relationship towards Frederick is the before mentioned essay "Answering the question: What is Enlightenment?" published in 1784 in the December issue of the *Berlinischer Monatsschrift* journal. Although he had rejected the offer by Frederick's minister of education baron Karl Abraham Freiherr von Zedlitz to take an active part in the reform of Prussian universities (event to take over a position at the University in Halle, where his influence would have been stronger), Kant maintained a long and successful cooperation with him (as confirmed by the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* which was dedicated to Zedlitz) and Johann Biester, Zedlitz's secretary, one among the leading "popular philosophers (*Popularphilosophen*)" in Prussia and editor of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* journal.¹¹ One out of a whole sequence of Zedlitz's and

11 In the context of this cooperation came the initiative that Kant teaches physical geography at the University of Königsberg, in order to educate qualified personnel for the newly established Institute of cartography in Berlin, or to teach mineralogy in order to stimulate gold mining in Pomerania, etc. As regards writings, probably the most important result of this cooperation was Kant's essay "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?" published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in October 1786. At that time Prussian philosophers who supported Enlightenment, including Kant himself, feared that after Frederick's death freedom of press might be abolished and censorship imposed. When in June that year, Biester advised him of Frederick's poor health condition and of a possibility that Frederick William II might soon come to the Prussian throne, Kant accepted to join public debate with the aim to defend Enlightenment against "dogmatic fanatic atheism" (Beiser 1993: 115). In this essay Kant popularized his conviction that enlightened critical philosophy is capable of reconciling reason and religion and that only reason reconciled with religion can build up a dam against any (religious and atheistic alike) dogmatism and become the foundation for the freedom of thought.

Biester's requests responded favourably by Kant was related to his writing the essay "Answering the question: what is Enlightenment?," which is why its almost open propaganda style comes as no surprise (cf. Kronin 2005: 260).

To better understand the context of this article, one must go back to the year before, when the Wednesday Society started gathering in Berlin and publishing the *Berlinischer Monatsschrift* journal. Berlin Enlightenment philosophers – with whom Kant shared susceptibility to "the influence of Enlightenment ideas of Frederick the Great" (Dustdar 2001: 158) – were concerned about the fate of Enlightenment, considering that its attainments were not cemented and that the succession on the Prussian throne could bring into the question everything that had been achieved during Frederick's rule. Therefore *Berlinischer Monatsschrift* issues in the first two years of publication abounded in alarming information about religious fanaticism, superstition, quackery and similar tendencies featuring Prussian population. As an illustration, in the August 1783 issue, Biester published a report on rumours that were spreading through Berlin about imminent destruction that will strike the city on 11 July, because of which a not-negligible number of Berliners took headlong flight on the eve of that day (Schmidt 1989: 278). Observing those menacing anti-Enlightenment signs in the light of Frederick's deteriorating health, Prussian Enlightenment philosophers themselves started to feel some sort of threat,¹² that led them into discussions on the meaning and range of the entire Enlightenment project.

The December 1783 issue of the *Berlinischer Monatsschrift* journal published an essay authored by pastor and theologian Johann Friedrich Zöllner, in which he challenged Biester's motions for the reform of religion (aimed at strengthening the "civil religion", contrary to the general course of Frederick's policy, which was self-understood as

¹² Just before he was to write his essay "Answering the question: What is Enlightenment?," Kant received a letter from his former doctoral student (future philosophy teacher in Duisburg) *Friedrich Victor Leberecht Plessing* who was then in Berlin. In his catastrophe-picturing letter he communicated to Kant that "Protestants will act against Enlightenment philosophers (against atheistic, devil's deed, as they put it)" by establishing societies, and that "Catholicism and Jesuitism are spreading their hands over England, Denmark, Sweden, etc" and that "England is on the brink of disaster." Prussia withholds exclusively thanks to Frederick and therefore Plessing blesses him: "Our king looks so great to me! and how much human mind should thank him! May he live twenty more years: despotism, deceptiveness and superstition now threaten to throw the entire Europe down to the ground" (Plessing 1922: 372). Although Kant had answered this letter, his answer was not preserved, so that today we cannot say with certainty whether Kant as well got caught up in panic spread by Plessing, and whether "Answering the question: What is Enlightenment?" was his contribution to the consolidation of Frederick's rule, exposed to such huge threats from abroad.

religiously neutral). Reverend Zöllner deemed that Biester's reform motion would cause weakening of the Christian morals, which is otherwise necessary for any society, including the most enlightened one, and that "men's hearts and reasons would go wild under the name of Enlightenment", which by no means can be its goal. After all, in one passage in his essay reverend Zöllner asks himself: "What is Enlightenment? This question, that is almost equally important as the question what is truth, should be answered first, before starting with the enlightening! And I have still not found an answer to it". At the same time he had thereby opened a question that prompted Biester to ask Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant to offer their answers to it – which they shall both do in their essays published, respectively, in September and December issues (Schmidt 1989: 270-271). While Mendelssohn unequivocally took the side of Biester (and other hard-liners within the Berlin Enlightenment movement),¹³ Kant's position was not that simple. On the one side, he wanted to protect position of the church in the domain of the "private use of one's reason" (cf. Schulz 1974: 64-65; Schmidt 1989: 288-291) and give the "public use of one's reason" the "appearance of an individual right, if only a negative one" (Kronin 2005: 255; Peterson 2008: 224), but, on the other side, he left the boundaries of the "public use of one's reason" completely at the disposition of a ruler who has "well-disciplined and numerous army ready to guarantee public peace" (Kant 1998, 4: 61). Thereby Kant positioned himself between the Berlin hard- and soft-line enlighteners, practically leaving to Frederick himself the liberty to dictate the pace of Enlightenment, the same as before, relying on his ruler's assessment which disturbances of the public order he could prevent with the help of his "well disciplined and numerous army", and which not. Ruler's power has thus remained the arbitrator of Enlightenment.

In the famous passage in his essay "Answering the question: What is Enlightenment?" in keeping with this logic, Kant proclaimed Frederick the symbol, or even the quintessence of the entire Enlightenment era: "this age is the age of Enlightenment, the century of Frederick. A prince who does not regard it as beneath him to say that he considers it his duty,

13 Enlightenment scene in Berlin became additionally polarized after 17 December 1783 when Johann Karl Wilhelm Moehsen read to members of the Wednesday Society an announcement on "What ought to be done for the Enlightenment of citizens?" Much the same as Biester in his reform motion, Moehsen requested that open problems of Enlightenment in Prussia be responded by strengthening the Enlightenment course and intensifying fight against religious backwardness. However, this "hard-line" in the Enlightenment movement immediately encountered resistance, and the opponents started assembling on the line established in Zöllner's essay, driven by a fear that the exacerbation of the Enlightenment would lead to a morale collapse.

in religious matters, not to prescribe anything to his people, but to allow them complete freedom, a prince who thus even declines to accept the presumptuous title of tolerant, is himself enlightened. He deserves to be praised by a grateful present and posterity as the man who first liberated mankind from immaturity (as far as government is concerned), and who left all men free to use their own reason in all matters of conscience. [...] Men gradually work their way out of barbarism so long as artificial measures are not deliberately adopted to keep them in it" (Kant 1998, 4: 59-60). According to Kant, Frederick was "the only one in the world" who formulated enlightened policy towards subjects in the following way: "Argue as much as you want and about what you want, but obey!" (Kant 1998, 4: 61), where, accordingly to the preface to the first edition of the Critique of Pure Reason, both religion and laws bore the burnt of (critical) thinking (cf. Kant 1998, 1: 13). If taking into account that under the term "popular Enlightenment" Kant implied teaching people, publicly, about their rights and duties in regard to the state to which they belong (Kant 1998, 8: 362), then Frederick was even something more than a "popular enlightener": he invited people to critically think about their rights and duties.

How much this Kant's stand clashed with Frederick's view on real "popular Enlightenment" testifies best the order which the latter had signed at the same time when Kant had finished his essay "Answering the question: What is Enlightenment?": "A private person has no right to judge on activities, acts, laws, measures and orders of rulers and royalties, their state officials and courts, or concerning these matters to publish or spread through the media information that would reach him. A private person is not capable of such judgement because he lacks complete knowledge of circumstances and motives" (cit. acc. Habermas 1969: 36). For Kant such orders were of secondary importance compared to smooth-tongued formulations from Frederick's philosophical essays, so that in Kant's final interpretation it turned out that Frederick was inviting his subjects to develop their intellectual (critical) abilities, that he instructed them to think as much as possible and about as many things as possible, even about his laws, and had laid foundations for the public "use of one's reason". However, also Kant had to conclude that Frederick had added invitation to unconditional subjugation in order to enable functioning of the big state "machine", operated by the "government" (i.e. Frederick himself) and whose "parts [...] must act only passively" (Kant 1998, 4: 55-56.) – or, in other words, remain in the state of political minority. Indeed, one of the main premises of Kant's concept of Enlightenment (i.e. of his century as the era of the Enlightenment of people who are in the state of self-incurred minority) was that spiritual

maturity should not be accompanied with the political maturity. In the era of Enlightenment people were doomed to stay, at least for some more time, politically minor. In his unpublished works Kant envisaged in one passage that in the state, in addition to sovereign, there should be also "tutores of the people (because of its minority)" (Kant 1934: 567). Yet Kant regarded that neither tutores, nor summus imperans can be equalled with a father, who supports his children as long as they are minor and, accordingly, exercises power over them. "Each subject can satisfy his interests by himself, and people are minor only in regard to mutual interests, concerning state relations. Yet here a ruler is not a father but a representative" (Kant, 1934: 506-507). These were paradoxes of a situation when people make their first steps on the way out of the self-incurred minority: as regards their interests, common people were recognized to be of age and capable of taking care of their interests independently, while as regards state interests they were not authorized to know anything and the presumption of their minority was still applicable. However, although minor, they did not have tutors, but instead – as if they already had business capacity – they were represented in state affairs by the sovereign, whom they have never authorized to represent them, who was unaccountable and whom, accordingly, they could not replace should his performance become inadequate.

Without giving a thought to these controversies or their due consideration, and just insisting that the spiritual maturity (to be reached in a distant future, under some unforeseeable circumstances) will lead to the political maturity, Kant glorified Frederick in his writings – particularly till the onset of the French revolution – and praised him as the champion of enlightened absolutism, who understands that it is in his own interest to enlighten himself and his subjects (cf. Clarke 1997: 62ff), but who grants his subjects, in his state "machine" just as much freedom of thought and consciousness as they need in order that they do not start thinking about the destructive freedom of political action.¹⁴ Therefore Kant concludes his essay on Enlightenment with

14 There is an odd remark by Kant indicating that he had regarded that the freedom of thought is as a matter of fact most important for the wise and pragmatic ruler himself (such as Frederick), who thereby allows vent to his subjects and deludes them regarding the actual state of freedom that they enjoy. "Saying *Mundus regitur opinionibus* is not just a jest against stupidity of people but a maxim on ruler's wisdom. Perception of freedom and of a certain importance, that people believe to possess, makes them fail to see coercion in other matters. It is also possible that they, while kept dependant on certain things, still believe that they enjoy full freedom in respect of their personality" (Kant 1934: 516). One may not tell with certainty whether Kant had Frederick in mind while writing these lines and whether he was aware to what extent he had thus relativized freedom of thought in his (as well as in any other) enlightened absolutism. However, these lines quite clearly

a big natural-historical "paradox" revealed by the most enlightened state in the world, headed by its ruler-philosopher: "A greater degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to people's spiritual freedom yet it also sets up insuperable barriers to it; conversely, a lesser degree of civil freedom gives spiritual freedom enough room to expand to its fullest. Thus, once nature has removed the hard shell from this kernel for which she has most fondly cared, namely, the inclination to and vocation for free thinking, it gradually reacts on a people's mentality (whereby they become increasingly able to act freely), and it finally even influences the principles of government, which finds that it can profit by treating man, who is now more than machine, in accord with his dignity" (Kant 1998, 5: 61). Spiritual progress (in the era of Enlightenment) hence requires low degree of civil freedoms (and that subjects be treated by "government" as parts of a "machine"), all until once (and for ever) the era of Enlightenment would prevail, when subjects would deserve that the "government" treats them in accord with their dignity and when the "basic principles" of that same (for already long enlightened) "government" would – automatically? – change. This entire evolutionist concept – the concept that has utterly failed to anticipate the advancing epoch of "democratic revolutions" (Volkman-Schluck 1977: 82) – suffered from a naive belief that, with Frederick, Prussian "government" had reached the ultimate degree of Enlightenment and that it was just a matter of time when each individual Prussian would rise to that level and when it would be possible to relinquish Prussian absolutism to the mutual satisfaction of the "government" and subjects.

That Kant proclaimed his own century "the age of Frederick" is comparable to Voltaire's glorification of the "century of Louis XIV". Voltaire completed his essay "The century of Louis XIV" in Berlin, at Frederick's court, and published it in 1751, at the time when their relationship was on the decline. Voltaire marked as the century of Louis XIV the time period starting from Louis's childhood (i.e. at the "time of Richelieu"), and ending "in our days" (i.e. in mid 18th century, during the rule of Louis XV), when France played a leading role in the general progress of human soul and when, particularly, science and literature were brought to perfection (Voltaire 1901: 286). Voltaire's glorification of the century of Louis XIV reflected, among others, his own growing ambivalence towards Frederick. While in the 30s, at the acme of his anglophile phase, Voltaire regarded Louis XIV to be, at best, the successor of the legacy laid down by Francis I, the genuine "father

indicate that Kant was aware of relatively small importance of freedom of thought for the substantial state of freedom enjoyed by citizens in a state.

of sciences and arts” in France (Voltaire 1897: 1),¹⁵ two decades later, at Frederick’s court, Voltaire felt growing wish to give prominence to French royal greatness that could throw a sufficiently dark shadow upon controversial champion of enlightened absolutism at the Prussian Court. On the other hand, Voltaire stressed that the century of Louis XIV saw the spread of ”philosophical spirit” throughout European cities and that it was a process that not only could not harm rulers, but instead could additionally consolidate rulers’ rights provided that they know how to meet their obligations towards a growing number of philosophers among their subjects. ”One would not believe that sovereigns had obligations to philosophers. It is, however, true, that this philosophical spirit, which has gained ground among all ranks except the lower class of people, has very much contributed to give a due weight to the rights of princes. [...] It has been said that the people would be happy had they philosophers for their kings; it is equally true, that kings are the more happy, when many of their subjects are philosophers” (Voltaire 1901: 284-285). Although the century of Louis XIV had undoubtedly passed and although new, ”more enlightened” times came, Voltaire believed that this harmonization of relations between the rulers and their subjects will be continued in future as they become increasingly more imbued with this ”philosophical spirit” and as they increasingly more communicate in a philosophical way – or, in other words, in an enlightened way – without problematizing in any way the old absolutist government itself.

When Kant proclaimed his time – time that followed after the conclusion of the century of Louis XIV – the age of Frederick, he followed Voltaire’s logic, as a matter of fact, unaware of all its subtle ambivalences – which had, eventually, forced Voltaire to leave Berlin, on 26 March 1753 and renounce Frederick’s ”philosophical” hospitality. Kant would have to wait for his awakening until Frederick William II came to Prussian throne and dispelled his both delusions: that Enlightenment of one ruler drags along Enlightenment of his successors and that Enlightenment itself is a single-direction process in which augmentation of the sum of ”free thinking” (i.e. of private and restricted public ”use of one’s reason” by subjects) concurrently means spread of social consensus (which at a certain moment easily throws off hurdles of authoritarianism as obsolete anachronism). This may have

15 In *Philosophical Letters* Voltaire complained that once long ago (at the time of Francis I?) ”leading men of a country were engaged in arts”, while in the 18th century this was not the case. ”However, in view of immense absolutism in France, the good old times may well come back” – Voltaire noted ironically – ”all it takes is that the king so wishes, because one can do with this nation whatever one would want” (Voltaire 1992: 96).

prompted Kant to write down a reflection that could be understood as well as a particular subsequent criticism of Frederick and his absolutistic rule: "A state is an automaton. It is a sacred duty, imposed by the taking care of human kind and the essential conditions for their welfare, not to obstruct this artificial organization. But woe to the prince, who leaves it without a starter or driving-force, which keep everything in motion, and who allows himself to govern all with his courageous hand. Even if he had angelic wisdom, he should be accountable first for all the misfortunes that would be suffered by the state because of the internal disloyalty of his servants and inability of his successor" (Kant 1934: 514). "The first servant," Frederick, had that "angelic wisdom" – and what is more, knew how to protect rights as "the most sacred thing the God has on earth"¹⁶ – and organized his state as the "automaton", yet did not resist from taking into his own hands all its levers, because of which the moral corruption of other servants ("internal disloyalty") started and because of which, after his inevitable death, he was succeeded by "an inapt successor". Kant's admiration of Frederick, while he was alive, did not protract after king's death in 1786, because he could quite clearly see for himself all the limitations of the very concept of enlightened absolutism. However, Kant was not ready for a substantial revision of his stand on Frederick, and rather opted for a strategy of increasingly more extensive inclusion of liberal substance into the Frederickian political legacy.

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, thus, without mentioning Frederick expressly, but quite clearly referring to him, Kant extensively interpreted his general understanding of ruler's duty towards his people -- as the foundation of the right of subjects to be consulted in important matters such as the declaration of war, where their lives and property are drastically jeopardized. Here Kant regarded it important to stress that "this right is derived from sovereign's duty towards his people (and not the other way round)" and that "free determination" can only be of "passive" nature (Kant 1998, 3: 469) or, in other words, it cannot under any circumstances jeopardise the position and status of the sovereign himself. This implies that the ruler could accept with a clear conscience this opinion as advisory, but could by no means be compelled to obey it (if expressed against the declaration of war), whereby the levers of

16 In his essay *On Eternal Peace* Kant argued that Frederick called himself "the first servant" of the state because he knew to what extent the service he discharged surpasses man's aptitude and how many rulers are degraded by all those flattering titles bestowed on them by subjects, and which just reminded them that they have undertaken the most ungrateful task in the world – protection of rights "as the most sacred thing God has on the earth" (Kant 1998, 7: 207).

absolutistic government would remain intact. In another passage, Kant expressed hope that only state debts in future may weaken rulers as much as to make them ready to recognize people's right to binding opinion on the declarations of war – specifically as the expression "of the realization of that idea of original contract" which until then remained in the sphere of natural right (Kant 1998, 6: 170).¹⁷ From Frederick's perspective, of course, the existence of such a right in his state would be unimaginable: there is no chance that he would ever think of consulting people before declaring a war (particularly not as a contractual party to the "original contract"), because he would see in this only a disturbing factor of the reason of state (*Staatsräson*). Kant, as well, must have known this, yet it did not prevent him from making a theoretical innovation, supposed to provide more humanity to Frederick's gloomy state "automaton" and open way to limited forms of interaction among all "servants" (i.e. between the ruler and the people).

In his essay on eternal peace, Kant went furthest in developing this logic. The morale duty towards people he rules required an enlightened ruler to improve state constitution, in case of its "breakdown (*Gebrechen, Verderben*)"; in accordance with the (republican) idea of reason and provisions of natural law (even at the cost of surrendering his "egotism"). Should there arise an external threat or should "state wisdom (*Staatsklugheit*)" so impose, a ruler could postpone changes – which was Kant's only concession to the reason of state (*Staatsräson*)¹⁸ – yet such postponement could not last long and lead to turning an emergency into a permanent state. Even for a certain time after the establishment of the new ("republican") system, a ruler could maintain enlightened absolutistic government, but here again he would be limited to a period until people become sufficiently enlightened for "their own legislation" (Kant 1998, 7: 233) – when finally all traces of earlier (unenlightened and enlightened) absolutism would disappear. Frederickian Prussia, such as featuring in the 18th century, would then actually be irrevocably gone.

It should be noted here that Kant showed a more benevolent stand, than commonly, on constitutional changes in Prussia – particularly after Frederick's death – which was, *ipso facto*, very liberal, but implied

17 There is no consensus in literature on how Kant saw the execution of thus (reductionally understood) original social contract in Prussia (cf. e.g. Fuko 1995: 233; Kronin 2005: 254).

18 In his ethical learning Kant made a sharp distinction between morality and "wisdom" (*Klugheit*) which is, as "empirically conditioned reasoning", directed to happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) and welfare (*Wohlleben*), and therefore can be even identified with egoism (cf. Kant 1998, 2: 148; cf. Sullivan 1989: 45-46).

also corresponding difficulties. To begin with, Kant failed to note that in his time Prussia did not have any constitution (Cavallar 1992: 17)¹⁹ and that it needed to be constitutionalized first, in order that the question of constitutional changes may be placed on the agenda at all. Secondly, Kant looked at the constitutional changes – otherwise obligatory in any (“republican”) government – in Prussia (and in general, as well), through the Frederickian prism of ruler’s duty towards his people, established on the Stoic ethics (but also on the Christian morality, to which Kant himself was more inclined, in contrast to Frederick). Thereby – as explicitly stated in the *Conflict of the Faculties* – no actual constitutional changes could arise if not initiated by wisdom “from the top”, which included as well that “invisible” wisdom that exceeds the ruler himself and which is called “providence” (Kant 1998, 8: 366-367). The consequence of such stand would be that the peak of Enlightenment of the absolutistic rulers would be their voluntary and self-initiated self-disempowerment – in accordance with the natural law, rules of reason and “providence”. However, should an enlightened monarch refuse to make this last step, the entire constitutional evolution would come under question, opening a state crisis irresolvable by the means of Kant’s political philosophy. That is precisely what happened in Germany in 1848 and 1918 and what put liberals that followed Kant’s line of thinking into the position of reluctant revolutionaries (Krieger 1972: 124-125). This justifies Leonard Krieger’s claim that Kant has ended in the state of virtual political paralysis: rational individualism, that made him refute any corporative, national or organic mediation between the collective of free persons and the monarch, stuck him amid the “republican” system, without a possibility to advance further – from enlightened absolutism, that he had accepted, to balanced government, that he wanted (Krieger 1972: 124).

Admittedly, in the mentioned passage in the essay “On Eternal Peace”, Kant also envisaged a case – which has actually happened in the meantime in France – that a revolution breaks up because of a deficient constitution. Instead of following Frederick’s animosity to revolutions and automatically attributing them to dangerous passions and blind fanaticism, Kant regarded that after a revolution nothing could any more be the same as before (Kant 1998, 7: 234): revolutions couldn’t be any more answered by tyranny (as it “necessarily” followed from Frederick’s position), and even more – if revolutionary forces would be defeated and enlightened absolutism re-established – the enlightened

19 In any case, this should have been clear to Kant himself, considering that he knew very well that “a constitution is no good when only one enacts laws, and the other passively abide” (Kant 1934: 592).

ruler couldn't any more turn a deaf ear to the need for constitutional change. In this case, the duty of an enlightened absolutistic ruler would not any more have anything in common with the Stoic ethics, which Frederick all the time kept in mind in his political philosophy, but would instead become almost revolutionary: it would now practically imply ruler's obligation to continue revolutionary changes, started by rebellions. Yet, Kant failed to provide an answer to the questions what would happen if enlightened absolutistic ruler would not defeat revolutionary forces and succeed in restoring its power. Although he was completely right that after a genuine modern revolution nothing can remain the same as before, Kant failed to take into account the option that had been vaguely anticipated by Frederick and thoroughly demonstrated by Jacobins in revolutionary France: that the power be assumed (and new constitution – although for the post-revolutionary society only – proclaimed) by new revolutionary tyrants who would tread upon freedom in its own name.

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