The Short Story: Kant is trying to describe how a real and permanent peace might be instituted despite the irrational and immoral behavior of mankind that, either through selfishness or chicanery, frustrates practical reason and makes conflict possible. He has, through the use of his own moral reasoning, determined optimal reforms for a civil, international, and cosmopolitan constitution, that could install a perpetual peace, and goes further to suggest that such reforms are inevitable as humankind gradually develops a rational social order, where politics and morality are intertwined.

The Somewhat Longer Story: Kant defines war as “a regrettable expedient for asserting one’s rights by force within a state of nature, where no court of justice is available to judge with legal authority” (96). His goal in the “philosophical sketch” is to design and/or inspire political institutions that would remove the need for such expediency. To Kant, human beings in a state of nature are in a state of war. Peace is a constructive project, a phenomenon that must be “formally instituted” (98). To that end, Kant proposes that a legal constitution be adopted, in three stages, which he lists on page 98:

1. a constitution based on the civil right of individuals within a nation (ius civitatis)
2. a constitution based on the international right of states in their relationships with one another (ius gentium)
3. a constitution based on cosmopolitan right, in so far as individuals and states, coexisting in an external relationship of mutual influences, may be regarded as citizens of a universal state of mankind (ius cosmopoliticum)

The following is a breakdown by section of Kant’s argument:

I: “Preliminary Articles”

In this first section, Kant lists six “prohibitive laws” that must be enacted in order to obtain a Perpetual Peace, some at once, others more gradually. First, treaties that end hostilities must be permanent, rather than simple truces. To be effective, the agreement must “[nullify] all existing reasons for a future war” (93). Second, states, which are “[societies] of men” and, therefore, not to be “used and misused as objects to be manipulated at will,” cannot be “acquired” by other states “by inheritance, exchange, purchase or gift” (94). Third, standing armies should be phased out over time because their very existence can create war or hostilities by engendering arms racing. (But also because using human beings as killing machines is inconsistent with Kant’s notion of the rights of man.) Fourth, national debts should be paid down because they are too often used to finance armies and can ultimately lead to national bankruptcy (which itself could lead to war when creditor nations demand their money back). Fifth, Kant would prohibit a state from interfering in the constitutional or governmental affairs of other states because this would be “a violation of the rights of an independent people… struggling with [their] internal ills” and would also “make the autonomy of all other states insecure” (96). Sixth, Kant would outlaw any “dishonourable” wartime practices that would “make
mutual confidence impossible during a future time of peace,” such as employing assassins, or breaking good faith agreements, or espionage (96).

II: “Definitive Articles”
   A: “1st Definitive Article: The Civil Constitution of Every State Shall be Republican”

   Here, Kant argues for the merits of republican constitutional government, where all citizens are free, dependent upon common legislation, and legally equal. Laws are enacted by the consent of the governed and apply to all citizens equally, according to the concept of civil rights. Kant believes that republics would not fight wars because the state’s citizens (who bear the costs of war) would never declare war, whereas despots would never have such a disincentive to conflict.

   B: “2nd Definitive Article: The Right of Nations shall be based on a Federation of Free States”

   In this article, Kant argues that states should join into a common constitution that would preserve each member’s rights, in a federation of states. The organization would aim “to preserve and secure the freedom of each state in itself” (104). When it encompasses all the world’s states, and they have all “renounce[d] their savage and lawless freedom, adapt[ed] themselves to public coercive laws,” then an international state can exist, informed by a concept of international right (105).

   C: “3rd Definitive Article: Cosmopolitan Right shall be limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality”

   Finally, Kant reaches the “necessary complement” of civil and international rights, a universal right of humanity share its environment. It would be fostered if states would allow for the free movement of peoples across borders. As a world community develops, “violation[s] of rights in one part of the world [will be] felt everywhere” (108). A constitution of cosmopolitan rights would result, as “peaceful mutual relations… eventually be[come] regulated by public laws” (106).


   Kant believes that the alignment of constitutions described in the Perpetual Peace is a “mechanical process of nature,” influenced by divine providence. Human beings, if they were to use their “practical reason,” might sense their moral duty to institute the proscribed constitutional reforms. However, human nature compels men with selfish motives towards warfare. Nevertheless, “nature irresistibly wills” that political, international, and cosmopolitan right will eventually develop and bring about the Perpetual Peace. Human beings’ “self-seeking inclinations” will compel them “to create a good organisation for the state,” with a system of checks and balances to eliminate the effects of human selfishness (112). Furthermore, increased cross-border cultural interaction will promote understanding and peace. Finally, “the spirit of commerce” will
eventually develop a universal sense of shared self-interest, compelling states towards peace.

**E: “2nd Supplement: Secret Article of a Perpetual Peace”**

Kant says that rational philosophers should be allowed to advise kings of how best to achieve peace. In contrast to Plato’s philosopher-kings, Kant believes that political leaders are invariably corrupted by their power and unable to use their reason freely.

**III: “Appendix”**

**A: Part I: On the Disagreement Between Morals and Politics in Relation to Perpetual Peace**

Kant believes that morality (“absolutely binding laws by which our actions ought to be governed”) is practical, meaning that one can actually act in accordance with moral reasoning. Therefore, politics are not in conflict with morality. However, it is unfortunate that human beings do not collectively act morally to obtain peace, despite the fact that individuals may act morally. Because of this shortcoming, moral politicians are necessary to correct our institutions to bring them into accordance with natural right. Unfortunately, all we’ve got are political moralists, who possess “political principles which are contrary to right,” and they are guilty of disguising this by arguing that “human nature is incapable of attaining the good which reason prescribes as an idea” – all for their own private political gain (119). Instead, they employ immoral maxims to justify their activities. The cardinal sins which they commit are rooted in their philosophy that the “ends justify the means.” In contrast, Kant argues that political leaders “should be influenced only by the pure concept of rightful duty, ie. by an obligation whose principle is given *a priori* by pure reason,” such as the concepts he outlined in the Perpetual Peace (124).

**B: Part II: On the Agreement Between Politics and Morality According to the Transcendental Concept of Public Right**

In this section, Kant outlines two formulae that must be satisfied if an action is to be considered “right in relation to others.” They are:

“All actions affecting the rights of other human beings are wrong if their maxim is not compatible with their being made public.”

“All maxims which require publicity if they are not to fail in their purpose can be reconciled with right and with politics.”

When these two criteria are met by a given constitution, whether public, international, or cosmopolitan, then they can be said to be moral.