

Should Kantian Morality be the Aim of International Relations?

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Published: October 31st, 2020



Abstract

To guide actions within their societies, men have equipped themselves with different means: morality, which inscribed in the consciences the values relating to good and evil; the law, which enacts the rules distinguishing what is permitted from what is forbidden and sanctioned; and politics, which organizes and directs the community.

This paper examines the duality between ethics and international relations. The analysis starts by focusing on how the former shapes the latter and raises questions regarding their coexistence and dependency. This is done when questioning whether ethics ought to be the aim of international relations. The paper firstly delves into whether justice can ignore morality and how Kantian ethics influenced the contemporary answer to the question. The paper then examines whether international relations can conform to morality, by looking at logical and societal organization around ethics.

Keywords: morality, justice, law, international relations, politics, ethics.

I. Introduction

To guide actions within their societies, men have equipped themselves with different means: morality, which inscribed in their consciences the values relating to good and evil; the law, which enacts the rules distinguishing what is permitted from what is forbidden and sanctioned; and politics, which organizes and directs the community. These three areas have not always been clearly differentiated, but in modern societies, each are regarded as independent; so that today it is easy to distinguish an immoral political decision from a crime under the law or moral fault. For example, a political leader who has failed to reduce unemployment will respond politically to the electing masses. But if he has committed abuses of power by transgressing laws, he might have to answer them legally in court. As to whether he acted out of lack of respect or as a man inspired by the public good, it is a matter of morality. Yet, it would be difficult to admit that a measure can be justified on one plane and not on another, and in particular, that moral requirements are not always applicable in law or in politics. Yet, should not justice also inspire the law? In fact, the confusion of these domains carries risks of abuse of power which leads to a sort of “separation of powers.” But, if each field has its own objectives and rules, is it necessary to separate them completely and consider that the law does not have to worry about morality, that politics do not have to respect the law, or even that morality cannot judge politics? This article will look at Kantian ethics in international relations and evolve around the central question: should Kantian morality be the end goal of international relations? This article will proceed in two parts. Firstly, it will discuss whether justice can

ignore morality. Then, part two will discuss whether internationality relations can conform to morality. Finally, a conclusion will put together all the findings.

2. Can justice ignore morality?

This question can seem misguided, after all isn't justice a paradigmatic moral term? Justice is here to be understood as organizational justice. The sense of justice is largely based on the ethical assumptions as to how other human beings should be treated. When something is said to be unfair, it is often asserted that the event has transgressed some normative standard of appropriate conduct. Consequently, the perception that an injustice has occurred can trigger a strong emotional response. This raises a fundamental aspect, a judge whose job would be to prescribe a moral decision to satisfy justice is also inclined to emotional responses. As a result, the link between injustice and immorality includes strong emotions and behaviors that at times transcend the interest of justice and may be subject to individual interests. Speaking of organizational justice, this is evident when looking at the US incarceration system for instance, which is the world's largest prison population with 698 people incarcerated per 100,000.¹ The US managed to capitalize on mass incarceration by privatizing prison contracts which generated \$3.5 billion in 2015². The fact that the US prison system has become a profitable industry makes the idea that justice, and the judicial system, always serves morality questionable. Hence asking whether justice can ignore morality is relevant.

¹ Capitalizing on Mass Incarceration: U.S. Growth in Private Prisons, The Sentencing Project, August 02, 2018

² Ibid

The theories of international relations see its dynamics influenced by the different theories often resulting from the zeitgeist. Indeed, theories are in fact directly influenced by the cultural values and belief systems of their times. The paradigm of the interwar period (1919-1939) gives an insight on how society psychologically affected the way in which people saw the world. This historical period is marked by Idealism, one of IR's prevailing theories. This leads to a fundamental question: can international relations ignore morality? It is evident how moral values are at the center of idealism.

Idealism seeks to transcend the international anarchy and to create a sort of cosmopolitan and harmonious world order.³ Moreover, idealism emphasizes the importance of growing interdependence amongst nations as well as the unity of mankind. For idealists, the power of reason overcomes the prejudice and counteracts the machinations of "sinister forces".^[1] Idealism sees war as a disease of the international body politic and believes the crude power search can be eliminated from international relations when substituting national armies by "research, reason and discussion."⁴

Now, the history of political theory is written in light of the hypothesis stating that theories of politics are themselves a part of politics. The theories do not refer to an external reality but are produced as a normal part of the social milieu in which politics itself has its being. As such, the idea that moral ideas are part of political justice, and to the grander scheme of international relations, makes sense since the overall hope and moral leaning of idealism first resulted from its spirit of the times.

The horrors of WWI emphasized the impossibility of ignoring ethics in political decision-making processes for elected and electing minds.

Idealism believes that "the struggle of power could be tamed by international law" and that "the pursuit of self-interest could be replaced by the shared objective of promoting security for all."⁵ Drawing on Kant's Perpetual Peace published in 1795, idealists believe that humans are fundamentally altruistic, and that collaboration is achievable through reason. Human concern for people's welfare hence making progress possible. At its core, this general principle of idealism lies on two core ideas – solidarity and generosity, which emerge from Immanuel Kant's theory called "social unsociability."⁶

According to Kant, the unsociable sociability of men is the natural instinct of men to gather together because it is easier to live, evolve and develop in a group than alone. This however comes with a natural desire in men to dissociate from the social group and to do things alone. For Kant, this natural disposition to associate allows men to develop their natural dispositions, that is, teamwork, but also the fundamental human qualities: fraternity, sharing, the ability to like etc. Moreover, by associating with his fellow men, a man feels more man because he is surrounded by his peers. It also allows him to observe himself through others, something that is impossible for him in the state of nature where he lives and evolves alone. However, this sociability of men is inevitably linked to an unsociability that pushes men once associated with a group to detach from it through desire for independence and autonomy. According to Kant, the

³ Wilson, Peter. "Idealism in International Relations." *LSE Research Online*, 2012

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Immanuel Kant, Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch, 1795

⁶ Allen W. Wood, Unsociable Sociability: The Anthropological Basis of Kantian Ethics, 1991

“unsociable sociability of men” is a natural disposition that pushes men to enter society while pushing it away. Although this antagonism seems to be negative, it is not. On the contrary, it is the source of social progress that leads men to develop their own abilities. Indeed, this unsociability that drives men to do everything on their own creates an individualism and desire for success. The latter will consequently lead to a competition pushing men to give the best of themselves, motivated by the desire to climb the social ladder. Without this, says Kant, all the excellent natural dispositions that are in humanity would slumber forever without developing: “Without social competition, men would not be worth more than sheep”.⁷ For him, reason and thought will push him to surpass himself, in order to surpass others. Thus, men first develop their reason as intelligence and search for efficiency, before this same reason, further developed, allows them to think of laws, then moral values. By doing so, mankind transcends the roughness of nature. The ruse put in place by nature is hence what the author calls “the unsociable sociability of men.”⁸

It is evident how Kantian philosophy is at the roots of idealism as their own core principles emerge from Kant’s essay Idea of a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Purpose (1784). The idea of justice and equality for all seems to be applicable, even at the early beginnings of civilization in the Kantian model. The human essence results in being a determinant factor and gives an insight on how human instincts and behaviors seem to shape international relations due to decision-making processes encoded in the human condition. This

⁷ Immanuel Kant, Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch, 1795

⁸ Immanuel Kant, Ideal of a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Purpose, 1784

oversimplified representation of society stated above is for Kant the beginning of how the State and laws came to life. Idealism seeks to transcend evil institutions and the violence they engender. Idealists believe war and anarchy are avoidable as long as political reforms are inspired in morality, human rights and liberties. As a result, the State needs to be moral for international relations to be moral, as “a state should make its internal political philosophy the goal of its foreign policy.”⁹

Now, the State is the authority of the law, it prescribes justice, in a positive sense, applies it and ensures its respect – it is said that the State is first the positive law, that is to say the set of rules that govern it. A positive right will then be just in accordance with natural law, it will be recognized as moral with respect to the dignity of man. Moreover, in a democratic state, the men constituting the elected government remain equal to any citizen before the law. According to Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, democracy is the power of the people, for the people and by the people.¹⁰ It is this state that Rousseau advocates for. He defines the state as a “social contract to restore to men the lost freedom”¹¹, in which the people would give themselves their own law. Therefore, following Rousseau’s vision of the state, it would be a vision with positive rule of law, not only because the people are sovereign: “The state must be all citizens”¹² and that the law applies to all, but also because “we must respect the law because violating it is immoral.”¹³ Moreover, for Rousseau, the law is the tool of liberty, if it is equal for all, equality would then be the

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, De l’Esprit des Loix, 1748

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The social contract, 1762

¹² Ibid

¹³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The social contract, 1762

condition of liberty, and in the democratic and sovereign republican state that Rousseau preaches, all men are equal. As a result, the state is neither above nor violating the law because it advocates equality, which is the first condition of the law. Since the representatives of the state are equal to every citizen, the state is similarly equal before the law and must itself abide by it. Hence following these principles, Rousseau's vision of the state would be one where the law and morality meet and coexist. Moreover, in the modern Republican State Rousseau advocated for, any citizen can drag the State to justice before the Constitutional Council if it judges that its law is not constitutional, that is to say, that this law does not conform to the principles of equality between rulers and ruled.¹⁴

According to Kantian philosophy, without laws and a state, men naturally return to conflict and violence ensues. Thus, a natural need arises to create laws capable of changing the customs and little by little rationalize the behaviors. Thus, according to Kant, politics must become moral, and to do this no one can disobey the law, hence the famous quote: "Contest as much as you want but obey."¹⁵ Indeed, according to Kant, respect for the laws, even by the State, does not mean submission to it, because to challenge and obey are the pillars of democratic life, but on the contrary: the State must guarantee the expression of public disagreement with the law without suffering personal reprisals. But the state has the right and the duty to demand obedience to the law, because it protects individuals from the violence of the state of nature. It allows the change of customs, the rationalization of behaviors, the development of culture and refinement.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, An Answer to the Questions: What is Enlightenment? 1784

Kant does more than promote a republican state, i.e. a state of law, where citizens and public authorities must all respect the law; he also prescribes the need for international law to avoid the violence of the state of nature between states. It would then be necessary to govern by stabilizing conflicts not only within states but also between them.

3. Can international relations conform to morality?

The human condition naturally shapes international relations as one's natural instincts appear to be at the roots of foreign policy behaviors. As a result, a fundamental problem arises – the human nature does not seem to be moral by nature. This is evident as idealism took a turn only once WWI occurred. The grossness of human nature and its violent tendencies result in being as determinant in international relations as any other instinct. This leads to idealism's mortal enemy – realism. By 1945, the world political situation was at its worst, no one believed in idealism and the pragmatism of realism dominated¹⁶. Realism is the oldest theory of international relations. Departing from Hobbes' "Homo homini lupus"¹⁷ and The Prince (Machiavelli, 1532), realism believes that men are bad by nature. Their selfishness and desire for power result in natural conflicts, due to the ethically flawed components of human nature.

Conflicts between men have existed throughout all recorded human history. What changed however, was the focus of these conflicts. From 1648 onwards, conflicts

¹⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, E.H. Carr vs. Idealism: The Battle Rages On, 2004

¹⁷ Thomas Hobbes, The Leviathan: Or the Matter, Form and Power of the Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil, 1651

were between Princes and their kingdoms. In 1789, according to R.R. Palmer “the wars of kings were over; the wars of peoples had begun.”¹⁸ 1919 was a shift as conflicts evolved around ideologies – the world started splitting in two, torn between capitalism and socialism. Finally, as argued by Huntington, 1989 marked a tipping point as conflicts changed their focus onto civilizations, i.e. cultures and religions. In his essay Clash of Civilizations, Huntington exposes the new dynamics of world conflicts; and on September 11th, 2001 history seemed to unfold like some sort of self-proclaimed prophecy.

Violence seems to be intrinsic to the human condition. The notion of violence itself is key as, unlike morality, the law must use constraint to achieve its objectives. This is what Hobbes advocated for with his famous saying “Auctoritas nec veritas fecit legem”¹⁹ – Authority makes law not truth, which became a political dictum of the Modern State. Hence, can violence always serve the law? Is it possible to avoid that political powers, under the pressure of particular interests, make an arbitrary use of this force if it is the holder? Worse, is it possible to remove the suspicion that the law is nothing but the disguise of force? Étienne de La Boétie warns the public against the State and more precisely against the tyranny, another form of the state where the tyrant and his “tyrannos” abuse their political power. Indeed, according to La Boétie, tyranny is not the government of one, but a system of hidden pyramidal corruption. The tyrant, wishing to place himself not only at the head of the state but above all the laws, will establish himself by corruption. He will give power, a right pass to a handful

which in turn will give power to some others, in order to remain in power and so on.²⁰ Corruption will give undeserved power to someone who will be indebted to him and who will be fond of it, enslaved to his own passion for domination. Hence, the moral aspect that accompanies the legitimacy of the state does not apply when the corrupted wrongfully use force.

However, if it is admitted that it is in people’s rights to defend their rights in the face of the oppression from their State, who may feel empowered to intervene when another State oppresses its own people? Shouldn’t this be a valid right beyond the borders of States?

The vices of human nature exposed by global conflicts raise an underlying question – can international relations conform to morality? To this query, the philosopher Sartre seems to offer a solution: “the essence precedes existence”²¹ – hence international law would appear by necessity to give the world the power needed to regulate the naturally violent human behaviors that prevail in the international realm, *such as genocides and other crimes against humanity*. If the law has been able to be i.e. a peace-making in some societies, why can it not do it on a whole-of-humanity scale? Like all rights, a supranational right would presuppose three conditions: common legislation, independent tribunal and effective police. The first condition is partially fulfilled with the conventions that regulate the facts of war, the UN resolutions and the 1948 Human Declaration of Human Rights. The second condition is put in place with the international criminal tribunals, including the Court of The Hague. As far as an international police force is concerned, Interpol is still far from the mark.

¹⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, Clash of Civilizations, 1996

¹⁹ Thomas Hobbes, The Leviathan: Or the Matter, Form and Power of the Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil, 1651

²⁰ Étienne de la Boétie, Discours de la servitude volontaire, 1577

²¹ Jean Paul Sartre, L’existentialisme est un humanisme, 1946

But it is the very project of a “cosmopolitan” right, which would make the whole world a single city, which meets with objections of principle.²² This project is old: The Stoics, especially Epictetus (50-130), considered that each man was a citizen of the same world ordained by divine reason. Proponents of the absolute sovereignty of states contest the principle of foreign interference in their internal affairs; they believe that people must solve their own problems, as it has always been the case in history, through clashes and compromises; especially as the “interventionist” states who present themselves as the advocates of the law are suspected of being self-proclaimed vigilantes and in fact pursue their personal, i.e. national interests. According to Kant: “The problem of establishing a perfect civil constitution depends on the problem of establishing a legislation that regulates the external relations of states and cannot be solved without it.”²³ As a result, is it necessary to conclude that each state must remain master at home when it flouts the requirements of law and morality, or think with Kant, that history is necessarily heading towards the reign of law over states? According to Rousseau: “laws are the expression of the general will.”²⁴ To conclude, an international rule of law could then emerge if the global community wants and asks for it, that is, if there is a global community and a global state.

4. Conclusion

To guide actions within their societies, men have equipped themselves with different means: morality

which inscribed in the consciences the values relating to good and evil; the law, which enacts the rules distinguishing what is permitted from what is forbidden and sanctioned; and politics which organizes and directs the community. Since Montesquieu first advocated for the separations of powers in *Spirit of the Laws*, justice has enacted as moral guardian for human behaviors. Can justice ignore morality? Morality cannot exist in practicality without the establishment of a justice system. It is through the rationalization of human behaviors defined by customs and laws that society maintains core foundations as to keep its sense of morality. Asking whether international relations can conform to morality seems like diplomacy’s million-dollar question. And although this hasn’t been attained in practicality it doesn’t mean it isn’t something to aspire to and work towards. According to Kant’s theories, moral international relations between nations is achievable through international cooperation and unison. To some, global governance seems like a socialist ideal, yet in some ways contemporary actions have enacted taken the first steps towards it. International institutions such as the EU or the International Court of Justice of the Hague are in a way pieces of a puzzle yet to be completed.

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²² Epictetus, *The Enchiridion of Epictetus*, AD c.125

²³ Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, 1795

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