

# Should Kantian Morality be the Aim of International Relations?

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## 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.

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## 1. Introduction

The first reflections on ethics and morality appeared from the birth of philosophy in the fifth century BC. At that time, many philosophers disputed any form of disobedience. Socrates, for example, saw in disobedience “the vigorous beginning of tyranny” and refused even to disobey by fleeing to escape the death penalty to which he is unfairly condemned and ended up drinking the Ciguë. Questioning ethics is not only applicable to individuals but also to foreign policy and

international relations themselves. 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 has become independent; so that today it is easy to distinguish a bad 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 his constituents. 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 the law in law or in politics. What is right would not be so in absolute terms? Should not justice also inspire the law? In fact, the confusion of these domains carries risks of abuse 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 submit to the law, or even that morality cannot judge politics? This essay will look at Kantian ethics in international relations, and evolve around the central question: should Kantian morality be the aim of international relations? This essay 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?

International relations see its dynamics influenced by the different theories 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.<sup>1</sup> 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”.<sup>[1]</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> The history of political theory is written in light of the hypothesis stating 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.

The horrors of WWI emphasized the impossibility of ignoring ethics in political decision-making processes for elected and intellectual minds. Building on Kant’s Perpetual Peace published in 1795, 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

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, Peter. “Idealism in International Relations.” *LSE Research Online*, 2012

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

objective of promoting security for all.”<sup>3</sup> Idealists believe that humans are fundamentally altruistic, and that collaboration is achievable through reason. Human concern for people’s welfare hence making progress possible. The general principle of idealism lies on two core ideas – solidarity and generosity. It emerges from Immanuel Kant’s theory called “social unsociability.”<sup>4</sup>

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 is linked to a selfish desire 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 an unsociability that pushes men once associated with a group to detach from it through desire for independence and autonomy. According to Kant, the “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 a selfishness, an individualism. 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”.<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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 central, 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 oversimplified representation of society is for Kant the beginning of how the State and laws came to life. Idealism seeks to transcend evil institutions and the violence

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<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch, 1795

<sup>4</sup> Allen W. Wood, Unsociable Sociability: The Anthropological Basis of Kantian Ethics, 1991

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch, 1795

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, Idea of a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Purpose, 1784

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.”<sup>7</sup>

Now, the State is the authority of the law, it prescribes justice, 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.<sup>8</sup> It is this state that Rousseau advocates for. He defines the state as a “social contract to restore to men the lost freedom”, 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”<sup>10</sup> and that the law applies to all, but also because “we must respect the law because violating it is immoral.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, for Rousseau, the law is the tool of liberty, if it is equal for all, equality would then be the 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 Rousseau’s Republican State, 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.<sup>12</sup>

According to Kantian philosophy, without laws and a state, men naturally return to conflict and emulation 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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. Kant does more than promote a republican

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7 Ibid

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

9 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The social contract*, 1762

10 Ibid

11 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The social contract*, 1762

12 Ibid

13 Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Questions: What is Enlightenment?*

1784

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 – 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 dominated<sup>14</sup>. Realism is the oldest theory of international relations. Departing from Hobbes' "Homo homini lupus"<sup>15</sup> 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 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."<sup>16</sup> 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 11<sup>th</sup>, 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"<sup>17</sup> – 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

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<sup>14</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, E.H. Carr vs. Idealism: The Battle Rages On, 2004

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Hobbes, The Leviathan: Or the Matter, Form and Power of the Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil, 1651

<sup>16</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, Clash of Civilizations, 1996

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

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.<sup>18</sup> 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, let it be physical or political.

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”<sup>19</sup> – 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. If the law has been able to play a peace-making role in every society, 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.

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.<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> To

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18 Étienne de la Boétie, *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, 1577

19 Jean Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, 1946

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

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

22 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The social contract*, 1762

conclude, an international rule of law could then only emerge if the global community wants and asks for it.

#### 4. Application: US Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Now, taking a look at a practical and contemporary example with the US and more specifically its intervention in the Middle East since the beginning of the century; one can arguably say that their foreign policy had little to nothing in common with Kantian morality. The US led military interventionist missions namely in Libya, Iraq, and Syria in response to local geopolitics both in adherence and against UN recommendations. For the sake of clarity this paper will take interest into the Iraqi example. The US Hawking intervention started in 2014 under the Obama administration against the rebel group ISIL. Using ground military forces airstrikes in northern Iraq, US intervention built up over the years resulting in thousands of deaths on both sides of the conflict. According to the PLOS Medicine Survey, the war caused around 460,000 deaths in Iraq as direct and indirect cause of the war.<sup>23</sup> In this case, it is obvious that Kantian ethics were not a foreign policy option for the US. This comes to show how far away international relations are to the Kantian utopia. Whether ethics will ever be a goal let alone a reality for international relations is hard

to predict. Nonetheless, this certainly doesn't mean it cannot be worked on and achieved.

#### 5. Conclusion

To conclude, the conceptions of the role of the state seem to be multiple, and the conceptions of justice as complex as the "fog" described in Seneca's silences. It seems like justice cannot possibly be blind to morality. The Enlightenment raised questions that were left out of politics and provided a solid base for liberalist authors to build on. This comes to light when ethics are at the foundations of the mother of all impacts – idealism. However, when looking at the past and current crude reality of the international realm, Kantian ethics seem far from being the ultimate goal. Making it an absolute truth results in being achievable but requires a colossal structural work. In Revelation 3:15-16, a verse of the Bible says, "God vomits the lukewarm." Changes only happen in the face of adversity, not passivity. Henceforth, if one follows Rousseau's doctrine, it appears ethics could become a reality in international relations only and only if such is the will of the global population.

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