

The Marginalization of Ethics in International Relations

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Introduction

We are living in times of unprecedented moral and ethical crisis. We are surrounded by ethical questions and also with an equal number of ethical dilemmas. Our moral and ethical deprivation is to the extent that we are either oblivious of it or we have cast it aside as insignificant in today's world. The other side of the picture, however, is that we have moral issues transcending decades and centuries, like migration and refugees, racism and human rights, genocide and poverty, war and destruction. Critically speaking, in reality, these ethical issues are symptomatic of an 'ailment' prevalent in the collective cognition and behavior of individuals and states that form the basis of international relations today. It is impossible to make moral arguments about international relations without countering the claim that moral judgments have no place in the discussion of international relations or foreign policy. And ironically, more often than not, one finds their international relations professors preaching that the highest morality of the state is to protect and safeguard its interests whereby restricting the morality of state to its interests or rather sacrificing international ethics at the altar of the state's interests.

This article puts a single question on a complex problem: how the field of international relations that is predominantly and inescapably concerned with ethical issues, such as how the political events, social forces, the conduct of one state towards the other impact the life of communities, societies, more so humanity at large, became a field where ethics are largely misunderstood and marginalized. Given various constraint this article is a window to the debate and deals majorly with questioning the foundations and dominant perspective prevalent in the studies of international relations today.

Ethics and international relations

Generally, ethics is the study of the moral code of conduct or the ideal behaviour to be sought by human beings. It provides guidance to the realm of international relations as well. The discipline of ethics begins with pertinent questions: How should one live? What values guide us? What standards do we use? What principles are at stake? And how do we choose between them? An ethical approach to a problem will inquire about ends i.e. the goals and means i.e. the instruments we use to achieve these goals and the relationship between the two. The philosopher Simon Blackburn writes that ethics takes as its starting point that: "Human beings are ethical animals. We grade and evaluate, and compare and admire, claim and justify...Events endlessly adjust our sense of responsibility, our guilt and our shame, our sense of our own worth and that of others...."

In international relations, ethics is a set of universal values that governs the actions and behaviors of states and broadly includes protection of human rights and prohibition of violations of human rights. It implies that all state action should be moral meaning that state's national aims are paramount ethical end and are followed by an increasing emphasis on the liability of the state to interests in addition of its own.

Significance of ethics in International Relations

In retrospect, the good we see in this world is the outcome of ethical behavior shown by the states.

Ethics grants or withdraws legitimacy to different customs and practices and hence promotes the right ones. History shows that the mitigation and cessation of unjust practices ultimately comes from the assertion of core values. The end of slavery began with various revolutions and rebellions—yet the source of its ultimate demise was its loss of moral legitimacy. Ethics encourage adherence to human rights, for example, the lack of ethics in the international relations has been the cause of wars and genocide many times in history like the First World War. On the other hand, ethics reduces tensions between countries and avoids war-like situation such as the Doklam crisis between China and India. Ethics lead towards accountability, for instance, Netherland accepts the brutal killings of the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1999 by the Dutch Battalion of UN Peacekeeping force and will pay reparation to the families of victims. Ethics helps to avoid the ego clash and ideological clash between two or more nations. For instance, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 between the US and the former USSR came to an end when they both realize the massive destruction their ego can cause to the world. Ethics aim at a peaceful world, respect for all and equality while forming international organizations, declarations and forums. Ethics increase the chances of cooperation in the issues like combating law and order problems, with cross-border impacts, during natural disaster and refugee crisis, forming a transparent system for international financial administration.

The world today requires an empathetic view, a view that provides guidance to the people in their international affairs and helps to avoid undue wars, conflicts and provide an ecosystem where there is mutual trust, goodwill, and confidence among all the countries and helps to foster international relations. Moreover, with globalization, there is increasing interaction at various levels especially state level. The difference in the value systems and diversity makes ethics in international relations imperative. And not just that, the increasing trade imbalance between developed and underdeveloped countries leading to exploitation of the latter's resources is the cause of concern.

How ethics have been marginalized: A theoretical perspective

“Morality, then, as the channel to individual self-fulfillment—yes. Morality as the foundation of civic virtue, and accordingly as a condition precedent to successful democracy—yes. Morality in governmental method, as a matter of conscience and preference on the part of our people—yes. But morality as a general criterion for the determination of the behavior of states and above all as a criterion for measuring and comparing the behavior of different states—no. Here other criteria, sadder, more limited, more practical, must be allowed to prevail.” – George Kennan, Realities of American Foreign Policy.

The field of study of international relations, taking shape largely after the World War II, is dichotomous about ethics. On the one hand, it is concerned with normative issues such as war and peace, trade and production, laws and rights; on the other hand, its theories, principles and precepts taught in the classrooms and practiced and implemented in the corridors of power suggest that ethics are marginal to the international relations.

In the discipline of international relations there are contending general theories or theoretical perspectives, among which realism and liberalism are the most common perspectives. Realism, also known as political realism, is a view of international politics that stresses its competitive and conflictual side. It is usually contrasted with idealism or liberalism, which tends to emphasize cooperation. As the discipline of international relations was evolving mostly in the western countries as in the United Kingdom and the United States, as said before in the first half of the last century, a number of prominent scholars, figures referred to as classical theorists of the international relations such as Thomas Hobbes, Hans J.

Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and E. H. Carr, holding a realist view on questions of ethics came to dominate the field.

Realists consider the principal actors in the international arena to be states, which are concerned with their own security, act in pursuit of their own national interests, and struggle for power. The negative side of the realists' emphasis on power and self-interest is often their skepticism regarding the relevance of ethical norms to relations among states. According to them, national politics is the realm of authority and law, whereas international politics is a sphere without justice, characterized by active or potential conflict among states, leaving states dependent on self-help.

Human nature is a starting point for classical political realism. Realists view human beings as inherently egoistic and self-interested to the extent that self-interest overcomes moral principles. Together these factors contribute to a conflict-based paradigm of international relations, in which the key actors are states, in which power and security become the main issues, and in which there is little place for morality.

Realists, and especially today's neorealists, consider the absence of world government, literally *anarchy*, to be the primary determinant of international political outcomes. The lack of a common rule-making and enforcing authority means, they argue, that the international arena is essentially a self-help system. Each state is responsible for its own survival and is free to define its own interests and to pursue power. Anarchy thus leads to a situation in which power has the overriding role in shaping interstate relations.

As realists envision the world of states as anarchic, they likewise view security as a central issue. To attain security, states try to increase their power and engage in power-balancing for the purpose of deterring potential aggressors. Wars are fought to prevent competing nations from becoming militarily stronger.

Realists are generally skeptical about the relevance of morality to international politics. This can lead them to claim that there is no place for morality in international relations, or that there is a tension between demands of morality and requirements of successful political action, or that states have their own morality that is different from customary morality, or that morality, if employed at all, is merely used instrumentally to justify states' conduct. In a nutshell, realists criticized what they saw as the misplaced moralism of earlier scholars who put their faith in the power of law and institutions to reform international relations. To them, ethics is promotion of national interest whereas peace is created through the fear or deterrence.

Countering realists' arguments against international ethics

As we have seen ethics have been accorded a marginal position within the academic study of international relations. If we critically examine the reasons, they do not withstand and here some counter arguments for realists' skepticism are presented. Moral skepticism or skepticism about political ethics represent a refusal to accept moral arguments as sources of reasons for action. Moral skepticism might take a variety of forms, including a denial that moral judgments can be true or false, a denial that moral judgments have meaning, or a denial that the truth of moral judgments provides a reason for acting on them. However, the idea that morality or ethics can be taken with skepticism or doubted, or it can be overridden, for instance, by desires, interests, is in direct contradiction to the very nature and principle of ethics. Ethics are supposed to be held supreme, at all costs without even reciprocal compliance. The very characteristics of ethics imply that they cannot be ever disregarded, subordinated or sacrificed.

For realists, most people are incapable of being motivated by moral consideration, or that moral judgements are so subjective that they are rendered vain in resolving conflicting claims and in fulfilling the other social functions usually assigned to morality. For them, man is a rational being and egoism and anarchy are the basic factors binding the behavior of persons and states respectively and thus, describing people and state as crude, power-obsessed sovereign actors in the world. While asserting this, at the least, the theory of realism must distinguish morality from egoism and discuss the concept of egoism as discursive rather than as a universalized theme concerning human nature and political behavior. Also, the theory of realism must also explain how it can be rational to act on reasons that are or might be inconsistent with considerations of prudence.

The theory of realism invokes the case of national interest to justify disregard of moral principles that can limit choices among alternative foreign policies. Thus, for example, Morgenthau writes that "the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation . . . get in the way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival." This statement, if interpreted is ambiguous regarding the scope of national survival. When national survival implies "the survival of the state's citizens," it seems to be acceptable and obvious, but this is because we generally assume that persons, and not states, have rights of self-preservation. However, state constitutes more than persons and has border, territory, economy, institutions, etc. When "national survival" extends, for example, to the preservation of forms of cultural life or to the defense of economic interests, its justification diminishes, rather dwindles, because the survival of persons is no longer at stake. In such scenario, the demand of the protection of the national interest does not necessarily warrant disregard of other moral standards. What is required is a balancing of the rights and interests of all actors involved.

Another important justification for international skepticism of realists is cultural relativism. International relations theorists, practitioners, lawyers and cultural anthropologists have documented wide inconsistencies in the concepts of rationality and of the good prevalent in the world's cultures. These differences are reflected in the structures of various legal systems and in the attitudes customarily taken by different cultures toward social rules, collective ideals, and the value of individual autonomy. Since principles adequate to resolve such conflicts are fundamentally insecure, the skeptic claims, no normative international political theory is possible. If anything, this argument by realists must make them more stringent about morality and ethics. It should be a reminder and reinforcement of the necessity of ethics in an unordered anarchical system devoid of honesty, justice or restraint. Moreover, instead of resulting in abjection of morality, cultural relativism can also lead of acknowledgement that some conception of morality is the most reasonable one available under the circumstances.

At the core of the modern realism, the question of ethics is effectively reduced to egoism-anarchy thematic. In this way, what is ethically possible are established within a rigid power politics logic, which not surprisingly gives politico-ethical legitimacy to great power dominance and hegemonic systems of global order. However, to assert ethics in the realm of human affairs, the basic principle is that they cannot be overridden by self interest, note which is different from the self-preservation. The moral point of view requires us, which may seem stranger in international relations and stronger than it is, to regard the world from the perspective of one person among many rather than from that of a particular self with particular interests and that our interests would be acceptable to any impartial person or entity.

Recommendations

International ethics is a rapidly expanding field within the discipline of International Relations; this growth has been driven partly by developments in related fields of moral and political philosophy, as well as by the evident moral urgency of many contemporary global problems – including questions of poverty and inequality, and the ethics of war and conflict.

The foremost need is to integrate this moral urgency within the academic study of the international relations. In simple words, it needs reconciliation between ethics and political behavior. In reality, it is far more complex, holistic and tedious and goes beyond the length of this article. But in an effort to put it briefly, it requires pondering on two set of questions. The first is regarding the underpinning of the inherent evil in the state system in the logic of the inherent evil of human kind which has resulted in the removal of ethical responsibility from the temporal actors caught in an evil system. The second is concerned with ethical behavior itself, for instance, foundational questions such as what does it mean to think and act ethically in the world? What role do 'ethics' play in international relations? What is the relationship between ethics, politics and power? How should we think about moral problems in global politics?

Islamic perspective on international ethics

The Islamic perspective on international ethics is in sharp contrast to the realist theme and logic of egoism-anarchy. It puts emphasis on ethical behavior based on its epistemology which provides powerful foundational meaning to its ontological framing of human nature and world system. The human nature is not inherently evil as assumed by realism; rather Islam characterises human nature as essentially dual incorporating both good and evil, albeit competing and struggling with each other. Hence, based on this logic, it attaches moral responsibility to human behavior and thus holds it accountable instead of defining it as inherently evil and relinquishing it of moral responsibility. On this basis, in contrast to realism, the Islamic perspective distinguishes between egoism and morality and defines interests, both personal and state, within moral jurisdiction and constraints as opposed to realism which defines interests ranging from self-preservation to security and power maximisation. Taking this logic further, the Islamic perspective on the sovereignty of state has limits especially on questions of ethical infringements such as issues detrimental to humanity. Moreover, extending this further, the world system is not in the state of anarchy or without a government as claimed by realists. Rather, the people, the state and world system are under the supreme and sovereign authority of the most powerful, most aware and most just God. Yet, the basis and implementation of this perspective, at the core of its heart, requires a strong relationship between man and God.