

VIRTUE ETHICS
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A) INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant developments in contemporary International Relations (IR) has been the revival of interest in arguments concerning ethics. After years in which realist theory and political science methods dominated the discipline, we are now seeing a range of scholars, realists included, who are concerned to discuss not (or at least not only) the way that states, institutions and individuals *must* behave, given the constraints of the international system, but the way they *should* behave. This field of study – International Political Theory (IPT) – has brought focus onto the duties that states have towards each other (Jackson 2000), towards their own citizens (R2P), and towards foreign citizens (R2P, Wheeler 2000), as well as the universal rights that human beings may be able to claim against states, institutions and each other (Dunne & Wheeler 1999, Donnelly 2006, Vincent 1986, Shue 1980). IPT has also reminded us of the importance of philosophical method in political study: answers to ‘ought’ questions (e.g. what ought we to do in such and such a circumstance) cannot be found using social scientific methods to find out what ‘is’ (i.e. the facts of the circumstances in which we need to act). A turn has been made towards the philosophy of the Enlightenment, with cosmopolitan liberal theorists, influenced by Immanuel Kant, drawing up grand accounts of global (liberal) ethics (Beitz 1979, Caney 2005, Held 2004, O’Neill 2000, Pogge 2002). Following Kant’s emphasis on the centrality of duty and rules to moral life, cosmopolitan liberals support the spread of international law and regimes codifying, in particular, the moral obligations states and individuals have in respect of human rights and conduct in conflict. However, as is so often the case in our discipline, IR is lagging behind. The liberal political philosophy predominantly utilised in IPT has been attacked from a number of different directions in the last 50 years, much of which has found its way into IR, but the most interesting critiques from the point of view of international ethics – critiques of the notion of moral obligation itself, put forward by those we can loosely describe as virtue ethicists – have in large part been missed.

To understand why the critiques of virtue ethicists matter for international relations and for International Relations, this essay will first set out the problem they are responding to. These ethicists (many of whom are not ‘theorists’, which would be the usual shorthand, as they reject the value of theory in ethical study) argue that the notion of moral obligation employed in contemporary life is foundationless, and that trying to live by rules without foundations can lead to harm. This position is briefly explored through a discussion of the increasing reliance on rules in the form of law in IR, and some recent criticism of the effect of rule-based international action. The essay moves on to discuss what virtue ethicists offer in the place of obligation: a focus on character, practical reason and human flourishing, all situated in social contexts. There follows an outline of the few attempts that have been made to relate virtue ethics (VE) to IR, and a discussion of possibilities for future research into this innovative approach. The argument throughout is that a concern with virtue offers us an original way to think about the kind of

ethical dilemmas that we face in international relations and IR, by moving away from an unrealistic and ultimately doomed search for universal rules and moral stability and towards the much more challenging, dynamic and rewarding endeavour of developing the practical judgment to answer questions about what it means, as individuals and as groups, located in time and place, to live life well.

A) B) RECANTING KANT: THE PROBLEM OF OBLIGATION

Contemporary virtue ethics led directly from a critique of the notion of moral obligation and conceptions of universalism found in Kantian philosophy. The key features of virtue ethics are explained in the Section C, after the necessity of VE has been established in this section by detailing the arguments against a morality concerned only or predominantly with the 'moral ought'.

The most influential philosophers to attack the notion of obligation and lead us towards a more virtue-centred ethics were analytic philosophers Elizabeth Anscombe and Bernard Williams. In 1958, Anscombe published what transpired to be an enormously influential article attacking modern moral philosophy and calling for a return to ancient concerns. Anscombe (1958, reprinted in 1981) argues that modern approaches to ethics take a law-based approach – they see morality as stemming from law of some form, and as concerned with defining duties and obligations (a moral tradition known as deontology). This trend in morality became embedded, according to Anscombe, due to the rise of Christianity, which saw morality as proceeding from divine law. Rather than thinking about morality in terms of the virtues, as the Greeks did, 'we' began to think in terms of obligation: '[i]n consequence of the dominance of Christianity for many centuries, the concepts of being bound, permitted or excused became deeply embedded in our language and thought' (Anscombe, 1981, 30). However, she argues, law conceptions of ethics only make sense if there is a law-giver – an authoritative agent or place from which the laws emanate and which acts as a foundation to our obligations. In the past, this was God, but in contemporary society we do not share a conception of God that would allow us to view him as an authoritative foundation for moral law. If we wish to maintain a law conception of ethics in the absence of a divine legislator, our only remaining options, which she dismisses one by one, are to see ourselves as legislators (as Kant did in arguing we can perceive universal moral law through use of our reason), or to turn to norms, nature or contracts as the sources of obligation. The idea of every person as legislator to herself is dismissed by Anscombe as 'absurd' as legislation is necessarily external to the actor (Anscombe, 1981, 27). There is nothing inherently moral about norms such as to justify their position as foundational (slavery was, after all, a norm). Turning to the universe as legislator 'might lead us to eat the weaker according to the laws of nature, but would hardly lead anyone nowadays to notions of justice' (Anscombe, 1981, 37). And contracts, according to the concept of contract, can only be entered into knowingly: implied (social) contracts cannot ground obligation. Thus, Anscombe argues, 'the concepts of [moral] obligation, and [moral] duty ... and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of ought, ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible' (Anscombe, 1981, 26).

Bernard Williams also attacks the notion of moral obligation, taking particular aim at Kant and his 'morality system' (1985, 174) and the damage to human ethical lives it threatens. Williams

argues that the morality system is concerned to find general propositions about how to behave, through the ambitious use of the concept of obligation. It attempts to convert all of the ethical considerations that we may face in a situation (for instance, about responses to the situation that would be agreeable, or worthwhile, or heroic, as well as those which would be obligatory or demanded) into the language of obligation (Williams, 1985, 179). But if obligation is central to our theorising, then blame and blameworthiness become central to our morality. One of the fundamental assumptions behind Kantian morality is the freedom of the moral agent to act according to her reason. If agents are free and actions are voluntary, then actors who breach moral rules can be blamed (and, by implication, punished) for doing so. Williams is deeply sceptical about the kind of voluntary agency implied by the 'moral system' as he thinks it impossible to separate out the voluntary features of an action (the 'focused, particularised judgment' that this is that correct action to take) from the character-based or contextual features: '[t]here is a pressure within [morality] to require a voluntariness that will be total and will cut through character and psychological or social determination, and allocate responsibility on the ultimately fair basis of the agent's own contribution, no more and no less. It is an illusion to suppose that this demand can be met...' (Williams, 1985, 194). This point leads to a critique of the 'purity' of morality, 'its insistence on abstracting the moral consciousness from other kinds of emotional reaction or social influence' (Williams, 1985, 195), in order to support the Kantian ideal that human existence can be just. Williams notes that Kant constructed a system (which liberal political theory implicitly leans heavily on now) in which the good things in life which are distributed in a non-just way (happiness, talent, health and so on) are relegated to being secondary concerns: the ultimate value is the value of morality, and one gains moral value by trying to behave morally. Kant effectively denies the role of luck in life – if moral value is the ultimate value, we can control whether we achieve it, as we are all free to follow moral rules if we choose to do so. Pure justice is possible in human affairs. However, as Williams discusses at length and I will come back to below, luck has an enormous impact on our moral lives (1981). We lack control over many of the most ethically central aspects of our everyday lives – close friendships, fulfilling relationships, career success and so on are things we can strive towards, but cannot guarantee. We live fundamentally social lives, and many of the things that we value are only achievable by acting collectively. The individual, voluntary agent acting according to obligation within the Kantian moral system, and the perfectibility of that system in terms of enabling pure justice, are illusions.

Law conceptions of ethics are seen not just to be wrong (in claiming foundations long dead or plain mistaken) but also to have pernicious effects. By resolving personal ethical dilemmas by implied reference to an external legislator, we become unduly concerned with apportioning blame, and deny the role of luck in ethical life. But why might this be something IR theorists should spend time contemplating? Do we have a problem of obligation in IR?

Mainstream international ethics fit without doubt into Anscombe's category of 'law conceptions' and Williams' description of the 'morality system'. The rise of liberalism in IR has led to ethical discourse being dominated by efforts to identify a universal morality in the form of rights that all human beings can legitimately demand from their own states and from foreign states, and by claims about the obligations owed by agents to each other in respect of their rights. The legislation bias is plain to see in international ethics: law is viewed by liberals as a rational and apolitical way to regulate those relationships (between individuals or between states)

traditionally governed by violence (Ainley, 2008). The brutality of the two world wars provoked an unprecedented legalisation of international affairs, to the point where some are now arguing that a 'global constitution' has emerged (Dunoff & Trachtman 2009, McDonald & Johnston 2005, Weller 2009). Certainly we now have a more complex and embedded web of international legislation than ever before. Yet despite the dramatic increase in law concerning human welfare (principally human rights law and laws on conduct in war) during the twentieth century, we also saw a dramatic increase in death and human suffering in conflict, genocide and atrocity.

There is a clear disconnect between international ethics as codified in international humanitarian, criminal and human rights law and the values held by powerful international actors. The universal morality claimed to underlie human rights and humanitarianism is rarely observed in practice. On August 8, 1945, the victors in the Second World War signed the London Charter to establish the Nuremberg tribunal, apparently signalling their intention that international relations in the post war era would be run according to the demands of international justice and basic human rights. Yet two days prior to the signing, the US had dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, killing an estimated 140,000 people (mostly civilians), and the day after the signing, they bombed Nagasaki, killing an estimated 74,000. And the situation has hardly improved since. In 1994, almost one million people were massacred in Rwanda, while the international community did worse than nothing – France, Belgium and Italy effected a rescue of all Westerners in Rwanda and US spokespersons performed verbal gymnastics to avoid labelling the violence as genocide and thereby admitting signatory states had legal obligations to prevent it (under the Genocide Convention). Almost nothing has been done to prevent or punish recent atrocities in Darfur and in the DRC, beyond an increasingly unpopular and unsupported International Criminal Court issuing arrest warrants for those its accuses of bearing the greatest responsibility for violence. The existence of treaties and agreements on human rights has done little to prevent gross violations of such rights in China, in Myanmar, in Iran, in Israel and Palestine, in Russia, in Afghanistan (pre and post October 2001), in Iraq (pre and post March 2003) – the list goes on. This failure is in large part caused by a lack of deep consensus on the meaning of rights, the foundation of the international morality system. Alasdair MacIntyre, about whom more below, argues that rights cannot provide such a foundation, as we cannot find any good reasons for thinking that rights exist. There is no expression in any ancient or medieval language which means anything approximating our idea of a right that attaches to human beings qua human beings until the end of the Middle Ages: 'the concept lacks any means of expression in Hebrew, Greek, Latin or Arabic, classical or medieval, before 1400, let alone in Old English, or in Japanese even as late as the mid-nineteenth century' (MacIntyre, 2004, 69). The fact the concept could not be expressed for most of human history suggests that rights are not self-evident, nor are they the subject of universal intuitions (as philosophers claims to such things are 'always a signal that something has gone badly wrong with an argument') making it unsurprising that the UN Declaration on Human Rights is exemplary in its vagueness: '[i]n the United Nations declaration on human rights of 1949, what has since become the normal UN practice of not giving good reasons for *any* assertions whatsoever is followed with great rigor' (MacIntyre, 2004, 69, emphasis in original).

The rules supposedly codifying a universal international morality fail in practice, in large part because the claimed basis of a universal morality system does not exist, but worse than this, the rules have pernicious effects. Only a small proportion of violent action falls within the remit of

international law (genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity are tightly circumscribed categories) meaning that most violence in international affairs can be narrated as permissible, unavoidable or even required. The universal ethical claims that ground this form of law incentivise states to frame war as a moral crusade, and have been used to justify the infliction of unthinkable suffering. As Carl Schmitt argues, depicting others as morally wrong and, in particular, as an enemy of all humanity can justify extremes of violence towards them: '[t]o confiscate the word humanity ... probably has certain incalculable effects, such as denying the enemy the quality of being human and declaring him to be an outlaw of humanity; and war can thereby be driven to the most extreme inhumanity' (Schmitt, 1996, 54). The results of such framing are clear in statistics of civilian deaths in war since 1900, but have come to the fore in political debate since the attacks of September 11th 2001.

The response of the US to 9/11 starkly illustrates many of the problems of obligation and the moral system in IR. The prohibition on torture was supposed, prior to the 2004 broadcast of pictures taken inside Abu Ghraib prison by 60 Minutes (a US TV news show), to be one of the most heavily entrenched norms of global ethics. Subsequent investigations have revealed that the obligation not to torture failed to constrain not just the 'bad apples' in the US military who carried out the acts at Abu Ghraib, but also US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, Vice President Dick Cheney, commanding military officer in Iraq Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, CIA director George Tenet and possibly even President George Bush, who variously authorized the kind of extraordinary interrogation tactics that led to the abuse in Abu Ghraib and at other US prison facilities in Bagram and Guantanamo Bay. Even the most secure ethical foundations of international rules have been exposed since 2001 as too weak to prevent the breach of these rules by a liberal power, so it is little wonder that moral obligations deriving from human rights law have so little effect on illiberal states. Worse still, the ethics that used to ground laws of war are being worn down as rules are elevated above practice. The laws of war are based in a social tradition of war or 'warrior ethos', but Christopher Coker argues that contemporary culture has denigrated warriors, because of a suspicion that they enjoy war rather too much, and is now seeing the results of this: it is not law, but the warrior ethos that prevents atrocity in war, and as we have lost the warrior ethos, so we are seeing an increase in brutality in conflict (Coker 2007, 2008).

Anthony Lang (2007a and 2008b) has shown that the problem is not just that states and soldiers are no longer constrained by moral and legal rules, but that the rules themselves have led to some of the violence we have witnessed in response to 9/11. The rule-governed international order did not break down when the US invaded Iraq in 2003 – the invasion simply exposed the extent to which the current order still relies on coercion, hierarchy and the violence of enforcement (in this case of UN Security Council resolutions). Lang also shows that the preoccupation with blame outlined by Williams is apparent in contemporary international relations, with contemporary punitive responses to violators of human rights and international law, such as economic sanctions, military intervention and counter-terrorism action violating the very standards they are designed to uphold (Lang, 2008a).

There is no authoritative legislator in international ethics (no God, no agreement over rights or substantive consensus on norms or natural law), just as there is no authoritative legislator in domestic ethics, so when international morality takes the form of ought propositions, or obligations to behave in particular ways, it is ultimately bound to fail.

C) REPLACING RULES, REVIVING VIRTUE

If the notion of the moral ought is empty in contemporary society, thus moral rules foundationless and deontology dead, how should we think about ethics? We could focus not on moral rules but on the morally relevant consequences of actions. Consequentialist ethical theorists (following Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill) argue that right action is not judged by reference to the character of the act (i.e. whether or not it conforms to moral rules) but by reference to its consequences, in particular its effect on human wellbeing. Morally right acts are those that aim at maximising human wellbeing (or utility, in the case of utilitarians). But Anscombe (1958) and Williams (1973) are as critical of consequentialism as they are of deontology. Anscombe objects that no action is disallowed under consequentialism – if judicial punishment of the innocent would bring about the best possible consequences in a situation, then it is the preferred, morally justified choice. Williams argues that utilitarianism, the most prominent form of consequentialism, denies the importance of integrity to human action, as it sees no distinction, for instance, in killing and letting die. If I was able to save 19 lives by killing one innocent person, a utilitarian would see no moral dilemma. I should just kill. But this fails to recognize our self-perceptions as moral agents – we are not just beings through which consequences occur, but moral actors who wish to preserve a sense of integrity in our action (including, for most people, not killing others).

Despairing of modern moral philosophy, in its deontological and consequentialist forms, Anscombe and Williams called for a rereading of ancient ethics, in particular the works of Aristotle. They did this because the ancients were less concerned with the question ‘what should I do?’ as they were with questions of ‘how should I live?’ or ‘what sort of person should I be?’. These questions suggest a different way to make moral judgments, based on an appraisal of what is ‘good’ (i.e. leads to flourishing) rather than what is ‘right’ (i.e. is obligatory from the point of view of a moral law or a calculation of consequences). The implications of this shift in view are substantial and lead to a new type of ethics altogether: virtue ethics.

Contemporary virtue ethicists all locate themselves in some way relative to Aristotle, with the key tenets of Aristotelian ethics being as follows: something is good when it does its function well (so a good umbrella is one that keeps the rain off its owner, a good book is enjoyable or informative and so on) and the function of human beings, what sets us apart from other animals, is our reason. Therefore the *telos* (purpose or goal) of human life is action in accordance with reason, as this will lead to *eudemonia*, or flourishing. Aristotle builds from this an ethics detailing the virtues or character traits a person needs to develop in order to flourish (4th century BC/ 1999). He notes that there are two kinds of virtue: moral virtues, including courage, temperance, pride, gentleness, agreeableness, truthfulness, wittiness, modesty (Books III and IV, 1999) and virtues of the intellect: theoretical wisdom, science (*epistêmê*), intuitive understanding (*nous*), practical wisdom (*phronesis* or prudence), and craft expertise (Book VI, 1999).

The three concepts in Aristotle’s work which define virtue ethics are virtue itself (*arête*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and flourishing (*eudemonia*). All subsequent virtue approaches include comparable concepts, and see a strong relationship between the three, though there are

differences between contemporary works only gestured at here (see Athanassoulis, 2004, for a typology based on the relative importance of the good, of the sentiments, or of particular virtues, such as masculine, feminine or Christian virtues, within each approach, and Philippa Foot 1978 & 2001, Peter Geach 1977, Rosalind Hursthouse 1999, Michael Slote 2001, and Christine Swanton 2003 as a selection of the most important recent statements of VE). The virtues, in general, are seen as consistent and, once acquired, relatively fixed features of a person's character that lead to action. A person with a disposition towards kindness will tend to be moved by that disposition to act with kindness, regardless of the costs of being kind in any given situation, and will be kind across time and to a range of different people. The virtues are acquired by practice - by performing virtuous acts repeatedly until being virtuous becomes habitual - and through processes of socialisation and education to encourage virtuous traits and discourage vicious ones. It is important to note in relation to modern moral philosophy that *arête* can also be translated as 'excellence' rather than virtue: virtues are not just those traits that we associate with moral behaviour as controlled by 'moral systems', but range much more broadly: 'we reckon physical, intellectual and psychological qualities as virtues if they typically help people to live well and achieve great things; to create great works of art or scholarship, for example' (Cafaro, fn11).

Wisdom or reason is central to human life, but it should not, according to virtue ethicists, be employed only to gain theoretical knowledge. It also has a key role to play in guiding conduct, particularly important if we jettison the notion of a system of moral obligations or rules which will dictate right action. *Phronesis* involves the knowledge and understanding of *how* to act in the right way, which comes about through sensitivity to context and the ability to perceive the morally salient features of a situation, including the good of individuals or groups involved. But *phronesis* must harmonise with emotion or the sentiments - reason does not reign supreme. Perception of the morally salient features of a situation means being empathic as well as rational, and the virtuous person should find that her reasons to act and her desires to act are in accord (meaning that no concept of moral obligation is necessary in VE, as we don't have to fight our desires in order to do our duty and act in the 'right' way).

The idea that acting virtuously brings happiness or emotional satisfaction to the virtuous person is central to *eudemonia* or flourishing. But flourishing does not consist in happiness (a subjective state), rather, it comprises an objective standard of a life worth living that is at least partly constituted by virtuous character and action. There is no fundamental conflict, in virtue ethics, between our desires or self-interest and our ethics - acting well benefits the actor as well as those whom their actions impact upon. Writers in this tradition have diverging ideas of what human flourishing consists in, and disagree about the extent to which standards of excellence can be divorced from their social context, but all see virtuous behaviour as open to objective assessment, loosely defined.

The most influential recent work in virtue ethics is that of Alasdair MacIntyre (1981/2004 & 1999/2009). In *After Virtue* (2004), an impassioned attack on the paucity of ethical life in contemporary liberal capitalist societies, he explains that modern moral philosophy lacks purchase because it has jettisoned the ideas of a human *telos* or purpose and, grounded on this, justice as a shared conception of social order, leaving philosophers to find procedures to adjudicate between the competing claims of individuals who hold interests and values assumed

to be unrelated to those of others. Compounding their lack of firm foundation, modern philosophers make claims to (varied, often incommensurable) universal values, ignoring the importance of context. Ideas are stolen from past ages to bolster universalist claims without reference to the social and political context in which the theorists were acting: ‘Kant ceases to be part of the history of Prussia, Hume is no longer a Scotsman’ (MacIntyre, 2004, 11). Without a conception of *telos* or an understanding of context, ethics becomes empty, and moral claims become incoherent. To remedy this, MacIntyre surveys conceptions of virtue through Western moral philosophy, and shows that we cannot make sense of them until we make sense of the practices, located in particular times and spaces, in which they take place.

The notion of a practice is central to MacIntyre’s virtue ethics, with a practice being: ‘any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended’ (2004, 187). The links back to Aristotle are clear: excellences of character, or virtues, are required for, and partly constitutive of, flourishing. But flourishing is seen here as mediated through or facilitated by participation in social practices, such as playing football or chess, being a historian or a biologist, a painter or a musician. These practices provide some of the goods (particular physical, creative or intellectual skills, strategic vision, types of knowledge) that constitute flourishing alongside the goods external to practices (money, status and power) that have become dominant in contemporary societies. They also provide narrative structure and intelligibility to our lives through participation in them – reducing alienation and situating the self. The practices are communal and co-operative (rather than predominantly competitive) and presuppose the existence of a wider *polis* or community which supports the practices and values the goods internal to them, and is in turn strengthened as participants in the practices become cognisant of and loyal to the communal tradition embodied by the practice.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre rejects Aristotle’s biological teleology that saw the human *telos* as stemming from our faculty of reason, and made an argument in favour of a relatively weak *telos*: constancy or integrity. In his more recent work, he has revised his views and now believes it is impossible to separate ethics from biology. The three key features of human existence that affect ethics are that we are dependent (on other people, particularly at the beginning and end of our lives, but also for the development of our ethics and our rationality), we are rational (a fact usually grossly over-emphasized in moral theory), and we are animals (with significant resemblance to and commonality with members of at least some other intelligent species). These three characteristics are linked, and MacIntyre argues that to flourish as an ‘independent practical reasoner’ (the human *telos*) we need to understand our deep vulnerability as animals and our mutual dependence with other humans throughout our lives for love, care, teaching, the development of reason and so on, and to develop virtues such as honesty, courage, and justice, in order that each person might achieve her good within the *polis*.

MacIntyre’s work illustrates many of the strengths and drawbacks of a virtue ethics approach. VE looks at whole people and whole lives, including all of the areas of life that form our character (relationships with others, participation in practices, performance in social roles and so

on) within its remit, instead of a narrow swathe judged to be ‘moral’ or governed by the language of obligation. Flourishing, including the development of virtues or excellences of character is a life-long task, and the need for narrative unity in human lives is taken seriously: ‘the good life cannot be discussed if the sense of that life is lost in its atomization into a series of unrelated acts’ (Cafaro, 1998, fn6).

VE is also attractive because it enables us to talk about human lives with a vocabulary that extends beyond ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. If we replace unwinnable arguments about what is ‘morally wrong’ with discussions of what counts as just or unjust, loving or cruel, kind or mean, wise or foolish and so on in and across our societies, we will significantly improve the debate and our likelihood of reaching understanding (or even, potentially and contingently, agreement). We should not, however, expect that VE can bring us to substantial agreement over how to act in any abstract or general sense – ethicists in this tradition are clear that human life is too complex and too changeable over time and culture for universal rules or principles generated from abstract notions such as a categorical imperative or utility calculus to apply (human ethics are, it is argued, uncodifiable). The best way to live is the way that a virtuous person lives, but this is not determinable before the lived context is known. We can talk about the nature of virtue, but only by developing *phronesis* and a virtuous disposition can we know how to act. Thus, much VE is anti-theoretical – abstraction is rejected in favour of engagement.

One of the most striking findings that engagement tends to bring is that, contra the Enlightenment moral tradition, there is no natural justice or underlying harmony to human life. Human flourishing is vulnerable to events outside our control and luck plays a profound role in ethical life: bad things can happen to good people and acting virtuously cannot by itself guarantee happiness (see Williams 1981, Nussbaum 1986, Statman 1993 and Athanassoulis 2005 for more on Moral Luck). Our vulnerability and interdependence mean that we need the protection of society – the good life is only possible within a good *polis*, with social arrangements that are just and favourable to flourishing.

However, there are many who find it hard to accept that ethics is so all-encompassing, that there are no right answers to moral questions and that life can be hostage to luck. VE does indeed place a heavy burden on the individual to develop ethical skills rather than obey moral rules, and ethics ends up as central to life rather than a side constraint upon the pursuit of interest. It is particularly criticized for not being able to guide action in the way that deontological and consequentialist theories can, because it provides no rules to refer to when faced with a moral dilemma. This objection tends to overestimate the level of agreement within modern traditions on what the morally right action in any given circumstance is, and underestimate the power of the language of vice to guide us not to be lazy, impatient, unkind, hypocritical, dishonest etc, but it is certainly true, and advocates would contend, absolutely to be preferred, that VE does not proffer responses to moral questions before they have been asked, nor offer shortcuts to moral maturity (see Loudon, 1984, Schneewind, 1990 and Swanton 2003 Chapter 13 for more on indeterminacy). VE acknowledges that we may be wrong, much of the time, but sees this as a feature of human life: ‘[i]ndexed as we are to time and place, limited in knowledge and constrained by the need to act, our practical judgments are shot through with fallibility. But trying to be infallible is no more rational than trying to grow wings’ (Davis, 1992, 23). The response to the problem of moral luck is similar: we may wish that life was ordered by a

benevolent creator, and our flourishing under our control, but wishing cannot make it so. The good life is precious in part because it is so fragile and our fundamental vulnerability cannot be reasoned away.

More serious objections to VE are that it is essentialist and self-centred. Aristotle is well known to have had profoundly objectionable views about women and slaves, and MacIntyre's work has been rightly criticised by feminist theorists (Okin 1989 Chapter 3, Gutmann 1985), so how seriously should we take their views on the human *telos*? It is not essential to be essentialist in VE, and certainly not essential to follow Aristotle in his view of humans, but some objective standard of the good is necessary. Objective here does not mean detached and applicable across all space and time, but susceptible to judgment with respect to concrete, embedded practices in particular contexts (across which the notion of human good may be interpreted differently but will not be unintelligible to those outside the practice). Defining these standards is decidedly tricky, and as contentious as any attempt in modern moral philosophy to define moral rules. It is also rather out of fashion to argue there may be some things that are good and bad for humans based on who we are or how we characteristically behave. Theorists tend now to favour methods of implied contracts, imagined dialogue or reasonable consensus to ground moral claims— all hard to sustain for their own reasons, but (marginally) less open to the criticism of being ethical imperialism. Also, it is likely that within these practices and contexts we will find shared ethical standards or principles as well as (we assume) shared ideas of the good, suggesting that VE cannot do all of the ethical work in society. It is hard to imagine an ethics in which there are no principles: we would struggle, quite correctly, to regard someone as courageous for upholding slavery, and yet that judgment would be based on an ethical principle (the principle of equal concern and respect) rather than whether or not the actor was exhibiting a virtue.

Finally, VE can be seen as self-centred, a kind of 'moral grooming and preening' in the words of Jonathan Wolff (2003, 121), because the focus of the moral actor is on his or her own character and the achievement of her own flourishing rather than on the suffering of others. Putting aside the obvious retort that the flourishing life is almost certain to include other-regarding virtues such as kindness, friendship and justice, and claims by thinkers such as Iris Murdoch (1985, 91) that a focus on the virtues actually helps us to see the 'unself', to 'pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is', it is worth considering why we might feel that behaving ethically should not bring us fulfilment and why following our enlightened self-interest (rather than an abstract notion of moral obligation) should not benefit those around us. Kantian philosophy and Christian theology have led us to expect that being good should not feel good, and that pursuing our self-interest is narcissistic, hedonistic or otherwise vulgar. But rather than leading to societies in which being good is common, this kind of moralising has led to an individualist, alienated Western culture in which issues that were central to ancient ethical debate: the definition of the good life, how to achieve fulfilment in relationships, how to be a good friend, parent, citizen and the like (and which have not become any less interesting to us or central to our lives), have been relegated from intellectual debate into the realm of TV talk shows run by self-help gurus, fiction novels and Hollywood films. The denial of self has resulted in an 'extraordinary inarticulacy' about what constitutes our good, which is hard to see as beneficial for anyone (Taylor, 2003, 18).

D) VIRTUE ETHICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

There is no literature on virtue in IR – no body of work that systematically or otherwise applies the insights of virtue ethics to the international realm. Virtue ethicists have been (too) little concerned, so far, with ethics outside borders, in part because of the use of the ubiquitous ‘we’ (and the assumption following from its use that the work speaks equally of and to all humans), and in part because of the importance of the *polis* or the community to VE approaches. Some IR theories and most IR practices do see character, wisdom and human flourishing as important, but they are rarely related to each other in the way we see in VE.

One of the few scholars to explicitly apply a virtue approach to IR is Martha Nussbaum (1993 with Sen, 2000). While working as a consultant at the World Institute for Development Economics Research, Nussbaum became frustrated with the crude methods used to judge living standards (which tended to measure aggregate welfare, so ignore the specific, unequal conditions of women) and a development community so nervous of seeming to privilege Western values that they were left without a language with which to criticise harmful practices (again, in particular to women). In response to this, Nussbaum sought to develop a cross-cultural and essentialist account of human flourishing. Her initial description of flourishing is heavily influenced by Aristotle: ‘Everyone has some attitude, and corresponding behaviour, towards her own death; her bodily appetites and their management; her property and its use; the distribution of social goods; telling the truth; being kind to others; cultivating a sense of play and delight, and so on. No matter where one lives one cannot escape these questions, so long as one is living a human life’ (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993, 245). Nussbaum sees in common human attitudes and behaviour a baseline from which to critique cultural practices, compare living standards and build an objective account of flourishing. She fleshes it out (and shifts it significantly towards Rawlsian liberalism) in *Woman & Human Development* (2000), with the main argument is a response to her observation in her 1986 work on moral luck that much of the suffering in human life that appears to be outside our control is actually preventable by a just political order: a good state or *polis*. She presents the ‘philosophical underpinning for an account of basic constitutional principles that should be respected and implemented by governments of all nations, as a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires’ (2000, 5), and produces a list of human ‘capabilities’ (Life; Bodily Health; Bodily Integrity; Senses, Imagination and Thought; Emotions; Practical Reason; Affiliation; Other Species; Play; Control over ones Political and Material Environment) which are objectively valuable from an ethical standpoint (because they contribute to humans being able to live lives ‘worthy of a human being’ 2000, 73) and as the object of an overlapping consensus or reflective equilibrium among people with divergent conceptions of the good. It is at this point that she loses her connection to Aristotle in favour of Rawls, and begins to look increasingly liberal. Her liberalism is also apparent in the move from seeing functioning as more valuable in 1993 to promoting capabilities in 2000 – she argues that it is inappropriate for any particular comprehensive conception of ethical value to be endorsed by politics and therefore does not see the production of virtuous functioning as a legitimate end of the state. Thus Nussbaum establishes the conditions for a just political order based, at least to some extent, not on human rights or fair procedures, more usually petitioned for by global ethicists, but on human flourishing.

Nussbaum’s work has sparked a great deal of criticism, based in part on her smash-and-grab

raids into philosophy. She claims to be influenced by Aristotle, the Stoics, Kant, early Marx, Rawls and feminism, and seeks to ‘appropriate the Greeks as allies of an expanded version of Enlightenment liberalism’ – thereby seeming to commit the sin decried by MacIntyre, but common in IR, of treating historically disparate theorists as participants in a single conversation. Her work is also criticized for its methodology – she gives no method by which overlapping consensus will be generated, so must assume that her earlier essentialist position (that there are certain functions particularly central to human life, and something that it is to do these functions in a truly human way) still holds true, despite her move towards political liberalism. However, her (limited) application of VE to IR does serve to highlight, after a period of sustained cosmopolitan attack, the role of the *polis* in flourishing. She incorporates into her work the communitarian intuition that, because of the centrality of the capability of sociability or affiliation, the good life is to be found in an active engagement in the community, rather than in protection from it, and suggests that as flourishing can only take place in a social context, then the state (or some kind of political organisation) is necessary to the provision and protection of capabilities, rather than being simply an institution of potential oppression.

Feminist thinking about ethics does not all approach questions of flourishing in such a liberal fashion. An ‘ethics of care’, often seen as a type of virtue ethics despite little influence from Aristotle, focuses less on individual lives and more on interdependence (Held 2005, Slote 2007). Mainstream ethical positions remain inside a discourse of sovereignty (either looking to defend it, as political realists and communitarians do, or to devolve it downwards and upwards, to individuals and to international institutions, as cosmopolitans often do), but theorists who take an ethics of care approach dispute the centrality of sovereignty and borders to our ethics, without denying the importance of communal life. Annette Baier (1994, 4) argues that obligation, or the ‘justified limitation of freedom’ is a preoccupation of (mostly) male modern theorists and that starting and finishing morality by thinking about limitations to freedom leads us to overlook the need for love, for trust and for deep interdependence in human life. She draws on Carol Gilligan’s 1982 study ‘In a Different Voice’ in which Gilligan finds that men and boys tend to see morality as concerned with finding ways not to interfere with each other (a clear parallel can be drawn here to the obsession in IR with sovereignty and non-interference) and women and girls tend to see morality as concerned with preserving valued ties to other people. This work (now largely understood in terms of gender rather than sex) challenges the tendency in international ethics as well as in IR to begin our enquiries by thinking about sovereignty – where it should reside, when it can be breached and so on – and instead suggests new ethical positions generated from a starting point of ‘valued ties’ (e.g. Robinson 1999).

Returning to the Greeks, while few IR scholars have taken Nussbaum’s work on virtues forward (see Brown 2000a and 2000b as an exception) many have revisited ancient Athens. After a 50 year or so hiatus, realists (usually of the ‘neo-classical’ variety) returned to the texts of Thucydides (Lebow 2003, and, via Morgenthau, Lebow 2007) and Aristotle (via Morgenthau, Lang, 2007) and found the contemplation of tragedy, wisdom and character still relevant to contemporary IR. Morgenthau, heavily influenced by Aristotelian thought, argues that in the prerationalist age there was an appreciation of ‘the tragic sense of life, the awareness of unresolvable discord, contradictions, and conflicts which are inherent in the nature of things and which human reason is powerless to solve’ – an awareness lost in the Age of Science, to the detriment of men and of politics (Morgenthau, 1946, 206). These unsolvable conflicts must be

faced in IR, and they are best faced by a prudent person (prudence being a translation of *phronesis*, although realist conceptions of prudence tend to diverge significantly from the Aristotelian conception of a virtue used to identify and understand the good in situations, and focus instead on the effective): ‘To act successfully, that is, according to the rules of the political art, is political wisdom. To know with despair that the political art is inevitably evil, and to act nevertheless, is moral courage. To choose among several expedient actions the least evil one is moral judgment. In combination of political wisdom, moral courage, and moral judgment, man reconciles his political nature with his moral destiny’ (Morgenthau, 1945, 11, quoted in Lang, 2007, 29).

A view of politics as involving tragic choices between evil (or at least unpalatable) actions also takes inspiration from Niccolo Machiavelli, and, less challengingly, Michael Walzer (1973), who each saw that politicians needed to get their hands dirty to carry out their role well. For Machiavelli, seemingly in line with Aristotle, the character of the politician is critical – she should be able to exercise good judgment, adapt to context or the ‘quality of times’ and cope with the accidents or contingencies of political life. So far, so virtuous, but Machiavelli believes that the greatest statespeople are those capable of the greatest moral viciousness in the service of political goals. *Fortuna* (fortune, or luck) is a malevolent force, always ready to threaten the state, and the Prince must be prepared to dominate her by any means necessary: ‘it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because *Fortuna* is a woman and it is necessary, in order to keep her under, to cuff and maul her’ (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter 25). Few, thankfully, follow either Machiavelli’s casual misogyny, or his view that the best politicians are those with the least moral restraint. However, the problem of ‘dirty hands’ – of there being no right answers to some moral questions in politics, just wrong answers that cause varying degrees of harm – is alive and well post 9/11. The argument in Walzer’s 1973 article, which states that in extreme situations political leaders may face choices where the only actions they can take to guarantee the safety of their people are ethically impermissible, has been used to justify the torture of detainees and excessive civilian casualties in the War on Terror. However, Walzer makes clear in the piece that the right thing to do here remains wrong, and the leader should bear a heavy ethical burden for doing it – a position criticized as philosophical incoherence, but illustrating neatly the implications of admitting that the world is not morally well-ordered or in underlying harmony. It is also a good illustration of how complicated ideas with roots in particular contexts can be misused when wrenched from those contexts: for Aristotle, ethical and political life were inseparable, and the life of a politician was second only in terms of flourishing to the life of a philosopher. The idea that a concept of dirty hands could be used (not by Walzer, but by the ‘torture team’ or other supporters of extraordinary tactics in the War on Terror) to justify state representatives behaving with such vice is inimical to his thought. The concepts of tragedy and tragic choice here are lifted out of context in a broader way too: tragedy for the Greeks was arguably an aesthetic form without political purchase, but their use in contemporary theory reflects a new sensitivity to disorder and the lack of right answers to all ethical questions (International Relations, 2003, 2005 & 2007).

A renewed interest in character is also discernible in IR, as theorists show the importance of the identity, or character, of a state to its behaviour in international relations (Neumann 1996, Hall 1999, Reus Smit 2009). But in international relations practice, concern with character has rarely diminished. States are narrated as evil or friendly, greedy or generous, civilized or barbarian and

the everyday business and discourse of international politics is heavily weighted towards character judgments: will Obama (voted in, surely, on the basis of voters' perceptions of his character, wisdom and quality of judgment rather than on his past political actions) be courageous enough to institute trials for US government lawyers and officials who sanctioned torture post 9/11? Can Ahmadinejad be bribed, threatened or flattered into an agreement on limiting Iran's nuclear capacity? Does the UN need a more charismatic leader than Ban Ki-moon to extend its influence in international politics? Considerations of the character strengths and flaws of politicians (and of military commanders – see Clausewitz On War) have long been at least as important as considerations of the moral or instrumental justification of political actions in structuring the practice of international relations.

E) VIRTUE AND THE POSSIBILITIES FOR POLITICS

The final section of this essay explores some of the possibilities that a VE approach offers to IR theorists, in particular in the field of international political theory. The most important insights for IR to register are the dangers of rulemaking and of unfounded claims to universal principles. If the ethics or ethos behind rules have diminishing or no resonance in the societies they are applied in or to, their effect will be perverse. The existence of rules can cause us to lose sight of the priority of ethics, and the enforcement of rules *qua* rules is violence. It is hard to see how *phronesis* can be cultivated among international actors (though Mervyn Frost 2009 suggests some possibilities), but the denigration of judgment in favour of legislation should, at least, be halted. Grady Scott Davis (1992) shows that a legalist approach to war and peace (exemplified by Walzer, 1977) closes down space for ethical argument just as we need to open it up. Walzer's reliance on the primacy of rules to restrain war, but lack of foundation for those rules (beyond a general claim about individual rights) and acceptance that the rules can be set aside in times of 'supreme emergency', leaves us with little scope for ethical consideration of killing and war. It also incentivises warring parties to make Schmittian claims to be fighting for humanity, to justify the use of 'any means necessary' to win. Walzer, according to Davis, slides into 'the false belief that difficult choices aren't choices, that at the extremes I cease to have control over my actions' (Davis, 1992, 107). In contrast, Davis argues that if we discuss war in Aristotelian terms – in terms of virtue – then we see that even a serious breach of the laws of war does not permit mayhem – there is no 'necessity' in war, in which the ethical evaluation of conduct must cease. He is shocked that Walzer describes a soldier who refuses to shoot civilians and as a consequence is himself shot as 'a man of extraordinary nobility' (Walzer, 1977, 314, quoted in Davis, 1992, 87) and excuses the soldiers who did carry out their murderous orders. To the virtue ethicist, justice may be more important than survival, character more important than continuity, and even without the promise of an afterlife, there remain some acts that we should die rather than do.

This is not a call for rules to be jettisoned entirely, as organising principles are necessary in large-scale, complex societies (including international society). MacIntyre (2004, 263) may believe that the only way we can survive the barbarism and darkness of modernity is to bunker down into small communities in which 'civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained' but there are few signs that anyone is heeding his call. Regardless, the point to be taken from the story of virtue ethics is not that we should do away with all ought propositions or

rules, but that we need to beware the 'moral ought' and rules that are grounded on moral perspectives we know to be dead or have good reason to think are nonsense. We should also beware the underlying assumption of morality systems that rule-following can bring ethical harmony. The problems presented by humanitarian crises highlight the impotence of rules: if we cannot agree on a set of rules to use to decide when to intervene in a sovereign state to end human suffering, and we are unwilling to give up the idea that ethical action must be guided by moral rules, then the only logical conclusion is to infer a rule not to intervene, a conclusion with which many are deeply dissatisfied (Brown 2003). Only by developing and respecting context-sensitive judgment can the cruelty or failure of rules be ameliorated.

Virtue approaches reject universal moral claims presented as ought propositions, and they emphasise context, but they do not automatically lead us to the particular or the communitarian. MacIntyre does tend to be categorised as communitarian, but Kelvin Knight (2005) argues that MacIntyre's work is in fact strongly opposed to oppressive communities that are part of the dominant order and polluted by the search for power and wealth. Community is not valued for its own sake and in any form, but for its (necessary) contribution to human wellbeing. Cosmopolitans have less to fear from this kind of approach than they may expect, as virtue ethics emphasises universal human characteristics (our rationality, animality, interdependence, sociality and so on) as well as the ways that these characteristics must be protected within (political) communities, and the ways in which they find different expression across time and place. Essentialism is tied (perhaps uncomfortably – more work is certainly needed here) to immanence. Virtue ethics offers a language in which to have an enriched ethical debate within and across communities, practices and ethical positions, in which conceptions of justice, flourishing and the good life are explored in a located rather than abstract way, using thick concepts of virtue (kindness, care, fairness, honesty and so on) instead of impoverished and hierarchical concepts of right and wrong.

The other significant barrier cited to using virtue ethics to think about politics is the failure of the approach to provide straightforward ethical principles to apply to political questions. Beyond suggesting that virtuous people have better judgment than the non-virtuous – hardly in line with contemporary democratic principles – can virtue ethics speak to politics? Crisp and Slote suggest that there may be scope to develop a VE, following Hume or Hutcheson, which postulates 'natural' ethical attitudes or motives such as benevolence and trust, and builds claims about political ethics and social justice from these (2007, 24). But we can go further than this – and, if we follow the views of Aristotle on the inseparability of politics and ethics, we must. This inseparability has been hidden for some time in international ethics, with '[t]he idea of international ethics ... premised on the acceptance of a gulf between politics (nature, reality, particularity) and morality (reason, ideality, universality)' (Hutchings, 1999, 47). Recent work in feminist and post-structural theory challenges this dichotomy, but contemporary virtue ethics offers a concrete way to consider politics and ethics together, in the form of practice.

Once we see politics as a practice, according to MacIntyre, we understand how to escape the ethical desert of modernity. As long as politics is engaged in in order to gain goods external to the practice (goods of effectiveness such as power or status), in a fragmented society with no shared aim or sense of the collective, it will remain alien to many. But if politics is recognised as part of the good life and as a necessary activity through which to debate and provide collective

goods, then the internal goods of the practice, or goods of excellence, such as behaving with justice, generosity, honesty and integrity, will be given higher priority. Instead of an activity centred on competing interests, 'civil war carried on by other means' (2004, 253), politics would be a collective project. Instead of the quest for a power by an oligarchic elite, it would become a search for truth or a unifying vision of the good. MacIntyre would go so far as to reject all modern systematic politics, liberal, conservative, radical or socialist on the basis that 'modern politics itself expresses in its institutional forms a systematic rejection of [the] tradition [of the virtues]' (2004, 255). But even if we do not retreat with him into village idylls small enough to allow for 'shared deliberation [and] shared critical enquiry concerning that deliberation and the way of life of which it is a part' (1999, 161), the concepts of internal and external goods and the identification of the inability of modern politics to debate the wider good are useful additions to contemporary critique.

Williams also sees practice as central to ethics and politics, and his position can be used to extend or improve MacIntyre's. Williams argues, following Aristotle, that there is no pristine position outside of politics from which to make universal statements. Political debate happens 'now and around here' (2005, 8): we start by being in the situation, and proceed from there. Thus, engagement in and reflection on our own historical period is a more likely to bring ethical understanding and political progress than abstract theorising (see also Hutchings, 1999). By focussing on the situatedness of ethics and politics, the 'now and around here', Williams is resolutely not suggesting (as MacIntyre perhaps does) that we cannot have conversations between communities. He sees that, particularly in modernity, the existence of homogenous, non-interacting communities is highly unlikely. Communities everywhere bump into each other with great frequency, and, for all the differences between local practices, communities share the practice of criticising local practices (2005, 24-25).

A virtue approach will therefore engage with the individualism of contemporary liberal (domestic and international) politics, the acquisitiveness and status-seeking it promotes, and the relationship of mutual reinforcement between law conceptions of ethics, which abstract people from their social contexts and from ideas of the good, and liberal capitalism: 'perhaps the greatest madnesses of all are – and they stand in vicious interrelation – first, the world is increasingly made such as to make these theories [law conceptions of ethics] seem correct [through increasing individualism and increasing focus on material wealth as our main source of pleasure]; and, second, we take these theories to be correct and thus come to see love, friendship, and the like only as possible, and not very certain, sources of pleasure... We mistake the effect [pleasure] for the cause [good] and when the cause-seen-as-effect fails to result from the effect-seen-as-cause, we devalue the former, relegating it, at best, to good as a means and embrace the latter, wondering why our chosen goods are so hollow, bitter, and inhumane' (Stocker, 1976, 466). VE exposes how the claim that liberalism is neutral with respect to the good (so does not favour any particular way of life) just re-locates debates about the good into the private sphere (onto the TV shows and films mentioned earlier), and by doing so devalues them, and privileges those whose interests accord with the ruling elite.

F) CONCLUSION

Within the remit of International Relations, we find some of the most ethically significant events in human life – killing and dying for the survival or expansion of our political communities and our states; debating what aspects of being human might be common or worth protecting; deciding how (if at all) to share our resources with people in other societies who seem less able to fulfil the basic needs of human life. Yet much IR theory is stuck in a rut of devising rules for coexistence based on empty universals, and much international relations practice is fixated on turning these rules into international agreements and laws. Philosophical arguments concerning the problem of obligation have largely been missed, and the ethics resulting from these arguments, ethics of virtue, have not been systematically applied to international political theory or practice. This essay has attempted to set out the reasons why virtue ethics approaches are relevant to IR, and to suggest some fruitful avenues for future research.

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