

Working papers



# **The Right and the Good in International Ethics**

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### Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s, as normative theorizing about world politics began to enjoy unprecedented growth within the discipline of International Relations, Robert Jackson drew a clear link between the question of the "good" and the focus of the field of international ethics. International theory, he argued, had traditionally ignored questions about the good life, mainly "because diplomacy and international law, by and large, ignore it".<sup>1</sup> However, affirmed Jackson, changes in world politics were forcing questions of the good life onto the international theory agenda:

Today, political and moral theorising on international relations is expanding, arguably because the good life is affected more and more by events external to states. The growth of interest in international ethics involving such questions as nuclear war, nonintervention, self-determination, human rights, global economic distribution and the environment is an indication.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I want to take up the treatment of the question of the good - or rather, lack of it - within IR theory. Pace Jackson, what I shall aim to show is the way normative theorizing about world politics is contributing, not to critical reflection on the good in the global context, but to the marginalization of such reflection.

Given postmodernism's rejection of universalizing discourse, it can be argued that postmodern IR theory is limited in its ability to promote critical reflection on notions of the "good life".<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, my focus here is on modernist approaches to international ethics. Following Charles Taylor's critique of mainstream ethical theory,<sup>4</sup> I will argue that international

ethics, notwithstanding its willingness to universalize - and indeed, in part because of it - contributes to an "ethics of inarticulacy"<sup>5</sup> which robs ethical reflection of its power to promote emancipatory change.<sup>6</sup>

### Charles Taylor, Identity and the Good

The starting point for this discussion is the germinal contribution made by Taylor in his efforts to outline and defend a view of human beings as active subjects whose moral intuitions and responses must be taken seriously. More specifically, Taylor argues it is necessary to explore the "moral ontology" which lies behind our intuitions and responses, and which makes sense of them. It does this by "offering background assumptions to our moral reactions" and by "providing the context in which these reactions have sense".<sup>7</sup> To phrase the matter in slightly different terms, what Taylor advocates is an exploration of "the frameworks which articulate our sense of orientation in the space of questions about the good".<sup>8</sup>

For Taylor, it is crucial that these frameworks not be seen as some optional extra since they provide "a kind of orientation essential to our identity". In this, he is intent upon countering the naturalist temper permeating modern philosophical thought, both within the academy and in society at large. It is this naturalist temper, he argues, which directs us to think of our moral reactions as being beyond any meaningful sense-making, on par with nausea,<sup>9</sup> or, more sophisticatedly, as values people project onto a neutral world, and within which they live unconsciously, but from which they might also abstain.<sup>10</sup> It is this naturalist temper, moreover, which blinds us to the centrality of "strong evaluation" in assessing ethical claims; an evaluation which goes beyond mere preferences, and

deploys a language of qualitative worth (for example, of justice or injustice, courage or cowardice, nobility or ignobility) of the desires entertained or alternatives under consideration .... [and which] deploys a vocabulary of deeply contrastable ways of life or ways of thinking about alternatives.<sup>11</sup>

As such, "strong evaluation" involves

discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged.<sup>12</sup>

What is particularly relevant for our discussion here is the fact that Taylor's target extends beyond the naturalist temper to include modern moral theory itself. The problem with much of this philosophy, in Taylor's view, is that it "strives to do away with these distinctions altogether, to give no place in moral life to a sense of the incomparably higher goods ...." It does this by conceiving of morality purely as a guide to **action**, concerned exclusively with what it is "right" to do, rather than with what it is "good" to be. As such, the central task of moral theory is identified as defining the "content of obligation" rather than the nature of the good life.

In short, argues Taylor,

A satisfactory moral theory is generally thought to be one that defines some criterion or procedure which will allow us to derive all and only the things we are obliged to do. So the major contenders in these stakes are utilitarianism, and different derivations of Kant's theory, which are action-focused and offer answers exactly of this kind. What should I do? Well work out what would produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number [utilitarian-consequentialist]. Or work

out what I could choose when I have treated other people's prescriptions as if they were my own [Kantian-deontological].<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, qualitative distinctions serve no purpose in this context - they are crucial to the agenda of articulating the contours of the good life, but it is exactly this task which mainstream moral theory holds to be of little relevance. Notes Taylor, "All we need are action-descriptions, plus a criterion for picking out the obligatory ones".<sup>14</sup>

The reasons behind this marginalization of qualitative distinction are mixed. To a degree, Taylor locates them in the pervasiveness of the "naturalist temper" noted above, according to which we should understand human beings in the same terms as the extra-human sciences of nature. As required by the naturalist orientation, descriptions which bear on the significance of things for human beings are rejected in favour of "absolute ones", where human affairs are described in external, non-culture-bound terms. The corresponding orientation in terms of moral theory is one which thinks in terms of action - the "right".<sup>15</sup>

There are, however, also admirable sources for this focus on the "right" over and against the "good". Among them Taylor notes

the defence of ordinary life and desire against the (supposedly specious) demands of "higher" goods, the modern conception of freedom [according to which, for example, individual differences in preference are to be respected], and one reading of the demands of benevolence and altruism.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps most significantly, in terms of the factual diversity of conceptions of the good globally, is the laudable desire for a fully universal ethic. As Taylor notes,

The goods that we articulate in qualitative distinctions are frequently those of a particular cultural group and are embedded in their way of life. If the aim is to avoid above all parochial ethical principles, then one has another reason to sideline these distinctions.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, argues Taylor, various combinations of motives and influences serve to bring Kantians and utilitarians, deontologists and consequentialists, together around theories of obligatory action, and a procedural - as opposed to substantive - conception of ethics.<sup>18</sup> In so doing, however, mainstream moral theory - theories of the right - suffer from serious contradictions. First, while displacing qualitative distinctions, and a mode of argumentation to defend and justify them, mainstream moral theory nonetheless retains distinctions in an unexamined form. Utilitarianism, for example, "accords rationality and its corollary benevolence the status of higher motives, commanding admiration", even while the "express theory aims to do without this distinction altogether".<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Kant, in insisting that "our moral obligations owe nothing to the order of nature ... rejects vigorously as irrelevant all those qualitative distinctions which pick out higher and lower in the order of the cosmos or in human nature", even while incorporating as foundational the doctrine of the dignity of rational agents.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the greatest liability of theories of the right, however, is that in suppressing the qualitative distinctions involved in deliberation about the good, they also suppress "the background understanding surrounding any conviction that we ought to act in this or that way ... the peculiar background sense, central to much of our moral life, that something incomparably important is involved".<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, theories of the right have no answer to the question of **why** one should be moral. It is not that they cannot "prove" right and wrong to someone who

does not share their moral beliefs: this is an impossible task for any theory. Rather, they cannot articulate, even in their own terms, what about their injunctions is good, or valuable, or why they should command assent.<sup>22</sup> In short, argues Taylor, theories of the right which dominate in mainstream ethical discourse "have the paradoxical effect of making us inarticulate on some of the most important issues of morality".<sup>23</sup>

### Implications for International Relations

I wish to move now to the core concern of this paper - modernist international ethics. I have gone on at some length about the arguments of Charles Taylor because I believe them to have particular relevance for a field which is, understandably, highly derivative of the ethical traditions of social and political theory more generally.<sup>24</sup>

To begin, it seems readily apparent that the dominant form that normative theorizing about world politics takes is that of a theory of obligation, a theory of right action. When one reviews the significant interventions on international ethics over the last decade or so, they almost invariably break down into some variant of what Taylor has termed "procedural ethics", whether of the utilitarian-consequentialist variety, or efforts in a Kantian-deontological vein.<sup>25</sup> Typical is the following formulation of international ethics, offered in a recent piece aimed at promoting "systematic thinking" about international ethics: "To think systematically about ethics and statecraft is to draw logically valid conclusions from ethical premises about the proper course of action in such a way as to render like evaluations in like cases".<sup>26</sup>

Nor is it only in terms of ethical theory that we see this pattern. The conception of norms and rules in terms of the right is also evident with discipline's study of descriptive ethics - as the case of regime analysis demonstrates. The definition of regimes as

implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations<sup>27</sup>

is, of course well known. Equally significant in terms of the present discussion, however is Krasner's subsequent precision of principles and norms as "beliefs of ... rectitude .... [and] standards of behaviour defined in terms of rights and obligations".<sup>28</sup>

Defining international ethics in this way has important consequences for theorizing the normative in the international realm. Specifically, in a context in which it appears self-evident that normative theorizing about international politics **must** be conceived as a theory of the right - when it becomes difficult even to think in terms of an alternative - the limitations of a right-oriented approach can go unrecognized, the normative content (and liabilities) of a theory of the right unexamined. To sketch out what I mean by this, I will now engage briefly the work of four individuals whose efforts represent a significant contribution to international ethics, both in terms of an analysis of the state of the field as well as in terms of their prescriptions for improving normative theorizing: i) Terry Nardin; ii) Klaus-Gerd Giesen; iii) Chris Brown; and iv) Andrew Linklater.

i) Terry Nardin

Nardin's *Law, Morality and the Relations of States*<sup>29</sup> and his subsequent elaborations on the arguments he made there,<sup>30</sup> have had a major impact on the development of the field of international ethics. His Oakeshott-ian arguments surrounding the nature of "purposive" and "practical" associations have elicited much commentary and discussion,<sup>31</sup> and provided one of the earliest efforts to construct both a meaningful organizing device for ethical argumentation in the international realm, as well as a defence of one particular tradition as superior to others.

The crucial dimension of Nardin's work is, of course, the distinction between "purposive" and "practical" associations. Nardin's starting point is a pluralistic society of states, all pursuing their own goals in accordance with their different conceptions of the good. Such states may join together to pursue common goals in what Nardin terms "purposive" associations - as with defensive alliances or liberal trade organizations. By definition, however, such joinings can only be "contingent" in nature. As such they can never form the basis of morality.

In contrast, Nardin's notion of "practical" association is presented as the proper subject matter of international ethics, for only it is both compatible with the inherent plurality of international society and capable of providing a stable basis of rules of conduct. Nardin's use of the word "practical" is meant to signal that it is "authoritative practices" that are meant, understood as "a set of considerations to be taken into account in deciding and acting, and in evaluating decisions and actions".<sup>32</sup> It includes such authoritative practices of diplomacy and international law. As Brown notes, while the content of these practices may be up for debate, what is crucial is that the adjective "authoritative" means just what it says:

... what is at stake is the terms under which autonomous political communities conduct their common affairs and these terms are not optional. Any political

association which considers itself to be a state - and wishes others so to consider it - **must** accept the authoritative practices which statehood entails.<sup>33</sup>

With its focus on rules of action, and its concern to establish the nature of obligation in international intercourse, Nardin's approach clearly conforms to a theory of the right.<sup>34</sup> As such, Nardin's formulation is also subject to the kinds of criticisms advanced by Taylor. The primary difficulty with theories of the right - including deontological theories - is the way they themselves enter self-contradiction with regard to the good. On the one hand, they postulate not just first order goods, understood as desires or wants (for example, the individual purposes of states) but also higher order goods that stand qualitatively above others - in Nardin's case, the higher good of the pluralism of international society within which each state must have the right to pursue "its own ends and its own conception of the good".<sup>35</sup>

At the same time as qualitative distinctions of the good are being made, however, discursive space for a reasoned critique of such qualitative distinctions is denied. Thus when Hoffman endeavours to call Nardin's postulated overall good of pluralism of state purposes in international society into question, by noting that "The important question is ... what kind of society is desirable?",<sup>36</sup> Nardin's response is to accuse Hoffman - in good deontological style - of engaging in a consequentialist form of argument that reduces moral concerns to "desirability".<sup>37</sup>

As Taylor notes, the deontological assertion of the right over the good, which characterizes Nardin's response to Hoffman, has value only when confronted with consequentialist arguments:

Where "good" means the primary goal of a consequentialist theory, where the right is decided simply by its instrumental significance for this end, then we ought

indeed to insist that the right can be primary to the good. But where ... [good] means whatever is marked out as higher by qualitative distinction, then we could say that the reverse is the case, that in a sense, the good is always primary to the right. Not that it offers a more basic reason [in the sense of proof] ... but that the good is what, in its articulation, gives the point of the rules which define the right.<sup>38</sup>

In sum, it is more than possible to ask Hoffman's question in the sense of interrogating the adequacy of the overall good postulated in the terms of "strong evaluation". The problem, however, is that in leaving no space for reasoned debate about such qualitative distinctions, Hoffman's question is one Nardin's approach cannot answer. On this crucial dimension, Nardin's theory of the right must remain, lamentably, inarticulate.

## ii) Klaus-Gerd Giesen

An undeniable strength of Giesen's work on international ethics has been his focus on "sociology of knowledge" issues within the discipline of international relations - that is, the way relations of power and interest can combine to delimit academic discourse in support of particular political projects; the way disciplinary practices can serve to restrict acceptable discourse in such a way to way as to insulate conventional wisdom from critical interrogation.<sup>39</sup> Particularly compelling is his critique of the way in which the dominance of realism has served to drive ethical reflection down paths which are compatible with *raison d'état* - specifically, a utilitarian-consequentialist path, on the one hand, and an empiricist path on the other.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, argues Giesen, the realist-dominated discipline has resisted and marginalized the deontological approach to ethics because of its "subversive" potential in regard to structures of power and privilege:

... realists prefer a greater flexibility of judgement, one which will ensure they do not encounter any "absolutist" obstacles, but rather enjoy the greatest possible room to manoeuvre in their role of advisor to the prince ...<sup>41</sup>

Hence the hostility of the realist-dominated discipline to a deontological approach which, argues Giesen,

by its very nature (**unconditional prohibition of certain acts**) ... can break any bond of cooperation, not to mention collusion, between science and political power.<sup>42</sup>

It can do so, he affirms, because a deontological approach provides criteria to formulate norms which must be respected unconditionally - most importantly, the rights of individuals independent of context:

Accordingly, any deontological theory strives to delimit a field of moral action where the inviolable rights of the individual take precedence over any other consideration.<sup>43</sup>

There is much in Giesen's work that is commendable. His emphasis on sociology of knowledge is a valuable corrective to any temptation to consider ethical theorizing in the discipline in ideal terms, divorced from the reality of disciplinary limit-setting. It is important to be reminded of just how marginalized traditions not consistent with realist assumptions have been, though there may be some opening up in this regard in recent years. It is, of course, also

always agreeable to see a critical orientation with regard to realism as disciplinary orthodoxy, though some might locate the problems of the discipline even more in the dominance of instrumental reason.<sup>44</sup> Finally, one must welcome the obvious commitment to finding some way to defend human dignity in the face of inhumane political agendas.

It is also the case, however, that there is much that is problematic in Giesen's arguments, particularly in light of Taylor's critique of mainstream moral theory. To begin, given the acceptance within many realist circles of Nardin's deontological defence of practical association, the notion that deontology has traditionally be marginalized would have to be modified.<sup>45</sup> Giesen might well respond, with some justification, that in privileging the state as ethical subject, Nardin's formulation represents a fatal concession to realism that undercuts deontological reasoning's critical potential. As such, it could be countered that what is required is an individual-based deontology that makes human rights its focus. And an important part of such a formulation would be the right of individuals - not states - to pursue their conceptions of the good. Indeed, Giesen sees it to be one of the prime strengths of deontology that "it refrains from making statements about the good and just life, and thereby leaves to actors - whether individual or collective - complete liberty".<sup>46</sup>

The response here, however, parallels the critique of Nardin above: specifically, i) Giesen's individual-based deontology postulates a overall good of a society which respects individual rights and autonomy; but ii) in denying any place to reasoned deliberation about qualitative distinctions of the good (e.g., statements about the good and just life), Giesen's human subject-focused deontology allows no means for articulating an answer the most basic of

questions: why should a theory which makes basic human rights and dignity command our assent?

Again, Taylor's remarks about modern moral theorizing seem very much on the mark:

The more one examines the motive - what Nietzsche would call the "genealogy" - of these theories of obligatory action, the stranger they appear. It seems they are motivated by the strongest moral ideals, such as freedom, altruism, and universalism.... And yet what these ideals drive the theorists towards is a denial of all such goods. They are caught in a strange pragmatic contradiction, whereby the very goods which move them push them to deny or denature all such goods. They are constitutionally incapable of coming clean about the deeper sources of their own thinking. Their thought is inescapably cramped.<sup>47</sup>

In sum, even if successful, the strategy of strengthening individual-based deontological reasoning in international ethics would be of limited use. Put simply, such a strategy would offer only an expansion of the dominant orientation in ethical theorizing - a fixation with the right over and against the good. As such, it represents little in the way of a break with dominant theorizing, or with the debilitating inarticulacy that such an approach produces.

iii) Chris Brown

I want now to turn briefly to a consideration of the work of Chris Brown. Brown's *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches*<sup>48</sup> represents one of the most influential efforts to sketch out the state of the field of international ethics. Combined with his other contributions,<sup>49</sup> his work represents a compelling case for the importance of international

normative theory. At the centre of his work stands the distinction between cosmopolitan and communitarian approaches to international ethics. The difference between these two approaches, respectively, centres upon three points: i) the concept of the human subject (pre-social versus socially constituted); ii) the ethical significance of states (no normative relevance versus necessary context for ethical action); and iii) the scope of ethical judgment (universalist versus community-bound).<sup>50</sup>

This is, in many ways, a superior organizing device, allowing contending approaches to international ethics to be compared on a variety of crucial dimensions. Of course, as with any organizing device there are also problems. How is one to classify Mervyn Frost, for example?<sup>51</sup> His neo-hegelian efforts would certainly seem to correspond to the communitarian approach, but what then do we make of his efforts to universalize ethical judgements.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, where is one to place Terry Nardin, whose work combines a communitarian emphasis on the state as primary and ethically significant with a deontology typical of cosmopolitanism to justify the respect of basic normative practices in interstate relations?

In terms of the focus of this paper, however, it is the space allowed for treatment of the good that bears noting. On the one hand, it can be argued that the categories themselves - especially that of communitarianism - allow for the possibility of ethical theorizing oriented to the good and not just to the right. This is to be welcomed, and can be taken as evidence of the superiority of framing ethical approaches in the way that Brown does.

At the same time, it can be argued that some of Brown's key formulations are more likely to accommodate than challenge conventional assumptions about ethics. One sees this, for example, in his acceptance of the highly problematic distinction between "normative" and "non-

normative" theory.<sup>53</sup> And in terms of the concerns of this paper, one sees this as well in his insufficiently critical adoption of categories central to modern theories of the right, as is evidenced in his engagement with Martin Wight's well-known "Why is There No International Theory?"<sup>54</sup>

Brown targets, quite legitimately, Wight's contentious definition of political theory as "speculation about the [sovereign] state".<sup>55</sup> This definition has as its major effect the limiting of international theory to "speculation about relations between states" - a derivative category characterized by second-rate contributions which look all the worse when contrasted with the substantive achievements of political theory proper. Brown challenges Wight's problematic definition of political theory - a definition Wight characterizes as the "traditional meaning" of political theory "from Plato onwards" - noting that such definition "is particularly bizarre since one of the things we know for sure about Plato is that he had no experience of a `state', much less a `sovereign' state". In its place, Brown offers a decidedly less state-centric formulation: political theory as "the study of the search for justice in society".<sup>56</sup>

There is no question that Brown's alternative definition of political theory is a vast improvement over that of "speculation about the state", allowing, as it does, for a much broader and far richer understanding of international theory as a discourse not separate from - but rather a part of - political theory. This revised understanding continues to allow for "speculation about relations between states" without limiting international theory to consideration of this dimension of world politics alone. What must be highlighted as problematic, however, is the way that Brown's definition of political theory counters more than just the notion of political theory as "speculation about the state". Significantly, it also reinforces the tendency to marginalize Wight's

second definition of political theory, which he contrasts with that of international theory as the "theory of survival": political theory as the "theory of the good life".<sup>57</sup>

Just as Wight's notion of political theory as "speculation about the state" (as opposed to justice in society) limits thinking about world politics, so a notion of political theory/ international theory as oriented to the question of justice (as opposed to the good life) limits our thinking about ethics. As was already noted, modern theories of justice are theories of right action, of obligation, which develop and refine their notions of the former as they exclude and marginalize deliberations about the good.

The point can be made in terms of the classical origins of political theory. Brown is certainly correct to point out that Plato was a stranger to the modern notion of the "sovereign state". It is also true, however, that Plato would have been equally mystified by the modern notion of justice, not simply because of the fact that "over time the scope of 'justice' has steadily widened, coming more and more to incorporate international as well as domestic concerns",<sup>58</sup> but because of the modern limitation of ethics to procedural morality, separated from discussions about qualitative distinctions about the good. As Taylor notes, the broader notion of ethics which does not separate, but rather links the just and good also allows for a consideration of more than right action in regard to others. It includes as well what, for want of a better term, he calls "spiritual" questions relating to human identity - "what underlies our own dignity, or questions about what makes our lives meaningful or fulfilling....", in short, what makes our lives worth living.<sup>59</sup> It was these questions no less than those of right action that were central to classical political thinkers, even as they have been expunged from so much modern ethical discourse.

In sum, from one perspective what we have in international ethics is a rich plurality of contending traditions offering radically different answers to the question "what is justice?" From another, however, international ethics is characterized by a limited discourse which is grounded in assumptions about the "good and just life", but which does not provide a vocabulary for a reasoned assessment of those assumptions. Accordingly, what is required is a re-definition of international theory which not only goes beyond the limits set by the notion of "speculation about the society of states" but which also challenges the constraints imposed by modern conceptions of ethics as theories of the right.

iv) Andrew Linklater

Andrew Linklater's *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations* was a path-breaking work when it first appeared and remains a major contribution in the effort to articulate a vision of a more "humanized international relations".<sup>60</sup> His concern with developing a self-consciously critical approach to world politics - an approach making human emancipation a central preoccupation - has been a challenge to the mainstream and an inspiration to theorists on the margins. And his conception of critical theory as one affirming that "the normative purpose of social inquiry should be considered before all else"<sup>61</sup> has helped to promote both reflexivity and ethical reflection in a discipline not noted for its attentiveness to either.

Linklater's work offers important resources for addressing the question of the "good life" in global terms. To begin, he is highly critical of the utilitarian ethics of neo-functional thought - an ethics, it should be stressed, which prides itself on its rejection of the "myth of the common good".<sup>62</sup> Rather, Linklater takes his cue from neo-hegelians such as T. H. Greene,

orienting his work in support of the project of the "extension of the area of the common good".<sup>63</sup> Additionally, one notes an explicit concern to link the classical emphasis on the good as indispensable to discussions of ethics to modern discussions of international justice.<sup>64</sup> Finally, his work evidences a concern both with the material conditions of life,<sup>65</sup> as well as a commitment to expose false universalizations and to resist unnecessary exclusions of difference.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, there are limitations in Linklater's arguments. For despite explicit reference to the centrality of the good, Linklater develops his arguments in support of ethical universality and the "extension of moral and political community"<sup>67</sup> beyond the state in terms very much derivative of theories of the right. One sees this in his contrasting of the notions of internal and external **obligation**,<sup>68</sup> in his promotion of a conversation of moral claims leading to the formation of "community expectations about **right action**",<sup>69</sup> and in the fact that his discussion of the "good international citizen" is largely limited to explicating the notion of "citizenship" while saying surprisingly little about the "good".<sup>70</sup>

Formulating ethics in terms of a theory of the right is hardly surprising, given Linklater's heavy - though not uncritical - reliance on Kant. However, it can be argued that it is in Linklater's attempt to outline an explicitly "critical" approach - and his attending efforts to integrate the work of contemporary critical theorists such as Habermas<sup>71</sup> - that one can identify a reinforcement of the traditional Kantian privileging of the right over the good. As Taylor notes, the concern to define some criterion or procedure which will allow us to derive all and only the things we are obliged to do typifies Habermas' communicative ethics as well, where one is enjoined to

think what norm would be agreed by all the people affected, if they could deliberate together in ideal conditions of unconstrained communication.<sup>72</sup>

The difficulty with formulating questions of ethics in this way parallels arguments made above. For example, Linklater may be right to conclude that our obligations are prior to the state; but what of the rejoinder that a conception of the good life is, of necessity, prior to notions of obligation? Furthermore, the weakness of deontological ethics of the Kantian (or Habermasian variety) is not just that they risk devolving into empty formalisms, (a weakness Linklater notes),<sup>73</sup> but that they cannot provide an answer to the question of why we should respect our obligations without assuming some notion of the good.

The problems attached to inarticulacy about the good become even more acute in light of Linklater's promotion of Habermas' solution to the problem of defending universals in the absence of ultimate foundations: what Habermas has termed the "unforced force of the better argument".<sup>74</sup> As Brown has noted, in the present context it is imperative that critical theorists "resist unnecessary obscurity"<sup>75</sup> - a minimal requirement, to be sure, for any approach trying to achieve the position of "better argument". Yet it is just such obscurity on matters of the good that is entailed by formulating questions in terms of theories of the right. To the extent that conceptions of the good/ good life are unreflectively smuggled in and not subjected to critical review, the danger of falsely universalizing and unnecessarily excluding difference becomes that much the greater.

Inarticulacy about the good is also a liability in terms of Linklater's efforts to promote a reflexive orientation on the part of students of world politics. In the face of incommensurability of theoretical traditions, scholars must expand their criteria of reasoned assessment to include the

politico-normative content of contending interpretations and prescriptions.<sup>76</sup> This, in turn, touches upon the question of the identity of international relations scholars: the answer we give to "which interpretation of world politics is most persuasive" and "what shall we do in response" cannot be divorced from the question of "who we are" and "who we want to be". To answer these questions requires that we be at least minimally articulate on matters of the good as well as the right.

Perhaps most critically, however, is the importance of articulacy about the good to Linklater's efforts to develop a mode of theorizing oriented to promoting human emancipation. Put simply, international ethics may have no more vital task than to articulate visions of the good that the wider human community can draw upon as they deliberate about the world in which they live - both to understand it and to change it. For as inarticulacy cramps our ability to make sense of ourselves and our world, so articulations of the good "can bring us close to the good as a moral source":<sup>77</sup>

To come closer to them, to come to grasp what they involve, is for those who recognize them to be moved to love or respect them, and through this love/respect to be better enabled to live up to them. And articulation can bring them closer. That is why words can empower; why words can at times have tremendous moral force.<sup>78</sup>

In short, notes Taylor, "Moral sources empower."

## Conclusion

The contrast between moral theory oriented to the right as opposed to the good challenges many of our most basic assumptions about the field of international ethics. If it is true that most theorizing about international ethics is done in some variant of a theory of the right, then it places the established debates between Kantian-liberals and utilitarian-realists in a new light. Specifically, it directs us to see that this debate, while a real debate, is also a limited one. Indeed, it might even be suggested that the debate parallels the real but also limited debates between neoliberals and neorealists that mark so much mainstream American IR discourse.

Accordingly, efforts to expand the realm of theoretical-empirical discourse in the discipline more generally must have their parallel in the field of international ethics. Expanding ethical discourse to create room for contending articulations of the good - for reasoned deliberations about qualitative distinctions of the good - is imperative if international ethics is not to blunder about in the same fog of inarticulacy that has plagued normative theory generally. It is doubly imperative if international ethics is to be reconstituted as a truly “critical” discourse about world politics.

## References

1. Robert Jackson, "Martin Wight, International Theory and the Good Life", *Millennium* Vol. 19, No. 2 (1990), p. 263.
2. Jackson, p. 270.
3. I do not mean by this the narrowly Kantian notion of universalizability, but rather the more general notion, common to utilitarianism as well as Kantianism, that the moral point of view is one which aims for maximum generalizability of its standards and conclusions. For a similar use of the notion of "universalism", see Chris Brown's discussion of cosmopolitanism in his *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 24.  
This is not to argue, of course, that postmodernism has nothing to contribute in this regard. For a fuller discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of postmodern ethics, see Mark Neufeld, *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), chapter five, as well as M. Neufeld, "What's Critical About Critical IR Theory?", in Richard Wyn Jones, (ed.), *Critical Theory and World Politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Press, 2001), pp. 127-45.
4. In particular, his *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). Part I of *Sources of the Self* is entitled "Identity and the Good", the obvious inspiration for the title of this paper. See also Charles Taylor, "Le juste et le bien", *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, No. 1 (Janvier-Mars 1988), 33-56.
5. The phrase is Taylor's. It is perhaps important to note here at the outset that where I follow Taylor is in his arguments regarding the marginalization of discussions of the good, and the need for our (contending) conceptions of the good to be brought into the open and made the subject of critical reflection. I do not follow him to his proffered solution - i.e., the positing of an objective, theistically-derived "hypergood" to orient human thought and practice.
6. Attentiveness to conceptions of the good, while a necessary condition of any truly "critical" international ethics, does not suffice on its own. A consideration of other elements that are also necessary may be found in "Thinking Ethically, Thinking Critically: International Ethics as Critique". In Maria Lensu and Jan-Stefan Fritz, (eds), *Value Pluralism, Normative Theory and International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 41-58.
7. *Sources of the Self*, p. 78.
8. *Sources of the Self*, p. 41.
9. As does sociobiology.
10. *Sources of the Self*, p. 78. I take "naturalist temper" to be analogous to the generalized notion of "positivism" I have critiqued in *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory*.

11. Michael T. Gibbons, "Interpretation, Genealogy and Human Agency", in Terence Ball, (ed.), *Idioms of Inquiry: Critique and Renewal in Political Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 142, 143.
12. *Sources of the Self*, p. 4. See also "What is Human Agency?", in Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), as well as Daniel M. Weinstock, "The Political Theory of Strong Evaluation", in James Tully, (ed.), *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). As Taylor notes, a good test for whether an evaluation is "strong" or not "is whether it can be the basis for attitudes of admiration and contempt". *Sources of the Self*, p. 523, note # 2.
13. *Sources of the Self*, p. 79.
14. *Sources of the Self*, p. 80.
15. *Sources of the Self*, pp. 80-81.
16. *Sources of the Self*, p. 85.
17. *Sources of the Self*, p. 85.
18. *Sources of the Self*, p. 85.
19. *Sources of the Self*, pp. 78-79.
20. *Sources of the Self*, pp. 83-84.
21. *Sources of the Self*, p. 87.
22. *Sources of the Self*, p. 87. As Taylor notes, right-oriented theories leave us with nothing to say to someone who asks why he should be moral.... But this could be misleading, if we seemed to be asking how we could convince someone who saw none of the point of our moral beliefs. There is nothing we can do to "prove" we are right to such a person. But imagine him to be asking another question: he could be asking us to make plain the point of our moral code, to articulate what's uniquely valuable in cleaving to these injunctions. Then the implication of these theories is that we have nothing to say which can impart insight. We can wax rhetorical and propagandize, but we can't say what's good or valuable about them .... (p. 87)
23. *Sources of the Self*, p. 89. For an argument that parallels Taylor's in many respects, see Paul Ricœur's critique of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, *International Social Science Journal*, 126, (1990), pp. 553-64. I am indebted to Manuel Orozco for this reference.

24. For another discussion of the work of Charles Taylor which provides a useful summary but fails to address adequately the relevance of this thought to the field of international ethics, see John E. Becker, "'The Vision Thing': Charles Taylor Against Inarticulacy", *Ethics and International Affairs* Vol. 5 (1991), pp. 53-71.

25. See Joseph S. Nye, *Nuclear Ethics* (New York: Free Press, 1986); Stanley Hoffman, *Duties Beyond Borders: On the Limits and Possibilities of Ethical International Politics* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981); Robert Keohane, "Closing the Fairness-Practice Gap", *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 3 (1989), pp. 101-116, for examples of the former; Charles R. Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979) is a good example of latter.

Thus, for example, after surveying no less than twelve putatively distinct traditions of international ethics Nardin and Mapel conclude that all traditions can be classified as either "consequence-oriented traditions" or "rule-oriented traditions" - that is, as one or another variants of a theory of the right. See Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel, "Convergence and Divergence in International Ethics", in Mapel and Nardin (eds.), *Traditions of International Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 297-322.

26. David Welch, "Can We Think Systematically About Ethics and Statecraft?", *Ethics and International Affairs* Vol. 8 (1994), p. 24.

27. Stephen D. Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables," in S. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 2.

28. Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences", p. 2.

29. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983).

30. See T. Nardin, "International Ethics and International Law", *Review of International Studies* Vol. 18 (1992), pp. 19-30; T. Nardin, "The Problem of Relativism in International Ethics", *Millennium* Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 1989), pp. 149-161, as well as his contributions to Nardin and Mapel, *International Ethics*. For an interesting discussion on Nardin in terms of the question of relativism, see Roger Spegele, "Political Realism and the Remembrance of Relativism", *Review of International Studies* Vol. 21 (1995), pp. 211-236.

31. See, for example, Nicholas Onuf's review of *Law, Morality and the Relations of States*, in *The American Journal of International Law* Vol. 78 (1984), pp. 939-42, as well as Chris Brown, "Ethics of Coexistence: the international theory of Terry Nardin", *Review of International Studies* Vol. 14 (1988), pp. 213-22.

32. *Law, Morality and the Relations of States*, p. 6. See also Brown, "Ethics of Coexistence", pp. 214-15.

33. "Ethics of coexistence", p. 215.

34. What is striking about Nardin's work, his realist-derived "state-as-actor" assumption notwithstanding, is the decidedly deontological - even Kantian - cast to his argument. For example, the notion that authoritative rules much be respected if a state is not to enter a state of self-contradiction - that the practices of international society are "equivalent to rights that cannot logically be claimed for one's own state without extending them to other states ("Brown, "International Theory and International Society", p. 193.) - could easily be taken as a statist reformulation of *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

35. *Law, Morality and the Relations of States*, p. 19.

36. Mark Hoffman, "States, Cosmopolitanism and Normative International Theory", *Paradigms: Kent Journal of International Relations* Vol. 2 (1988), p. 66.

37. Nardin, "International Ethics and International Law", p. 27, note #15.

38. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 89.

39. Giesen's major work on international ethics to date is his *L'Éthique des Relations Internationales: Les Théories Anglo-Américaines Contemporaines* (Bruxelles: Établissements Émile Bruylant, 1992). See also Giesen, "Corporatisme paradigmatique, théories déontologiques et nouvel ordre mondial", *Études Internationales*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1993), pp. 315-29, as well as Giesen, "Entre décisionnisme et structuralisme: la précarité de l'éthique individuelle dans les théories des relations internationales", in Michel Girard (ed.), *Les Individus dans la Politique Internationale* (Paris: Economica, 1994), pp. 25-38.

For an interesting review of francophone literature on international relations that displays a similar sensitivity to "sociology of knowledge" issues, see Giesen, "French Cancan zwischen Positivismus, Enzyklopädismus und Historismus: Zur Struktur und Geschichte der vorherrschenden französischsprachigen Ansatzforschung", *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1995), pp. 141-70.

40. "Corporatisme paradigmatique", 318-20. Giesen also discusses a third realist-inspired path - that of scepticism - but notes this orientation has been abandoned with the advent of neorealism. There would seem to be some parallel here with Brown's felicitous observation that realist-inspired scepticism is no longer a serious option - if indeed it ever was - because "few people actually live down to their lack of belief in international ethical standards". See Chris Brown, "The Project of International Ethics: Fad Fantasy or Field?", *Paradigms: The Kent Journal of International Relations* Vol. 8, No. 1 (1994), p. 3.

41. "Corporatisme paradigmatique", p. 325, my translation.

42. "Corporatisme paradigmatique", p. 325, emphasis added, my translation.

43. "Entre décisionnisme et structuralisme", p. 37, my translation.

44. See *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory*, as well as Mark Neufeld, "Who's Afraid of Meta-Theory?", *Millennium: Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer 1994), pp. 387-93.

45. Curiously, Giesen does not acknowledge the unmistakably deontological dimension to Nardin's work, classifying his work as "neo-realist empiricist" ethics. "Corporatisme paradigmatique", p. 326, note #38.

46. "Entre décisionnisme et structuralisme", p. 37, my translation. In this he is paralleled by Michael J. Smith, who affirms that one of the greatest strengths of the liberal approach is that it respects the right and the capacity of the individual to define his own conception of "the good". Only in this way, when individuals ... have the liberty to set their own goals - and, when necessary, to bring them into harmonious co-existence with the goals of others - can a true conception of the common good emerge.

See Michael J. Smith, "Liberalism and International Reform", in Nardin and Mapel, *Traditions of International Ethics*, p. 210.

47. *Sources of the Self*, p. 88.

48. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

49. Most recently, "International Theory and International Society: the Viability of the Middle Way?", *Review of International Studies* Vol. 21 (1995), pp. 183-96.

50. See also Cochran, "Postmodernism, ethics and international political theory", p. 242-3.

51. See Mervyn Frost, *Towards a Normative Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

52. As he does with regard to human rights standards (albeit, absent the positing of an external standpoint). Brown notes this desire to universalize, but does not comment on the difficulty this poses for his communitarian-cosmopolitan distinction.

Giesen also deals less than successfully with Frost in this regard. Having understood correctly that Mervyn Frost's neo-hegelian work does not conform to realist scepticism, consequentialism, or empiricism, Giesen classifies Frost as a deontological theorist along with Beitz and Linklater. See "Corporatisme paradigmatique", p. 327, note #41. Questions can also be raised regarding Giesen's classification of "natural law" as a deontological approach when it, like Aristotelianism, is more properly seen as a theory of the good in contrast to modernist ethical theorizing's general conformity to a theory of the right.

53. For a fuller discussion of this point, see Neufeld, *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory*, chapter five.

54. Wight's piece is contained in H. Butterfield and M. Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).

55. Wight, p. 17.

56. Brown, *International Relations Theory*, p. 7.

57. Wight, p. 33. One can, of course, raise questions about whether Wight's notion of the "good" is similar enough to that of Taylor to allow for the kind of inference being drawn here. One might well object that in discussing ethics, Wight, like Brown, regularly made use of the word "justice" (for example, in *International Theory: The Three Traditions* and in *Power Politics*). In defence of the inference being drawn here, however, it should be noted that it is possible to give Wight's talk of justice an Aristotelian reading: i.e., justice, not in the abstract (procedural ethics) but issuing in judgements based on phronesis (substantive ethics). Thus, in *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, Wight grounds the rationalist's political theory in Aristotle's understanding of the state as making possible the good life (p. 22), and in the notion that there is a purpose or realm - in Aristotle's case, "virtue" (p. 99) - higher than the political. See M. Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, edited by Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter, (Leicester: Leicester University Press for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1991).

Of course, it is also possible that Brown's conception of political theory/ ethics as "the study of the search for justice in society" should be understood, like Wight's, in Aristotelian terms. In this case, the critique made here of Brown is misplaced. A demonstration of equal indebtedness to Aristotelian notions would have to be provided, however, before such a reading of Brown's formulation is fully plausible.

I am indebted to Roger Epp for this reading of Wight. See also R. Epp, "Martin Wight: International Relations as Realm of Persuasion", in Francis Beer and Robert Hariman (eds.), *Post-Realism: The Rhetorical Turn in International Relations* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press).

58. *International Relations Theory*, p. 7.

59. *Sources of the Self*, p. 4

60. A. Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*, 2nd edition, (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 203.

61. A. Linklater, "The Question of the Next Stage in International Relations Theory: A Critical-Theoretical Point of View", *Millennium* 21, no. 1, (1992), p. 91.

62. E. B. Haas, *Beyond the Nation-State* (Stanford, 1964), p. 34, quoted in Linklater, *Men and Citizens*, p. 7.

63. See *Men and Citizens*, p. 228, note # 20.

64. See, for example, Linklater's linking of the concerns of Aristotle and Kant in his "What is a Good International Citizen", in *Ethics and Foreign Policy*, edited by Paul Keal, (Canberra: Allen & Unwin, 1992), pp. 23, 26.

65. See, for example, *Men and Citizens*, p. 200.

66. See his "The Question of the Next Stage".

67. "The Question of the Next Stage", p. 93.

68. *Men and Citizens*, pp. 38-41.

69. The phrase is Richard Falk's, quoted in *Men and Citizens*, p. 196 (my emphasis).

70. "What is a Good International Citizen?".

71. See, for example, Linklater's discussion of Habermas' notion of "social learning" in the moral-practical sphere, in "The Question of the Next Stage", p. 95. See as well his discussion of Habermas and Foucault in the "Postscript" to *Men and Citizens* (2nd edition). See also his elaborations on this theme in A. Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations of the Post-Westphalian Era* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1998).

72. *Sources of the Self*, p. 79. See also Charles Taylor, "Language and Society", in *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's The Theory of Communicative Action*, edited by Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, translated by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991).

73. *Men and Citizens*, p. 104.

74. There is a clear parallel here with what Taylor has termed "interpretive dialectics" - a form of reasoning which, in contrast to the claim of "strict dialectics" (which makes claims to an undeniable starting point), posits no such foundation and yet still aims to convince us by means of reasoned arguments: "by the overall plausibility of the interpretations [it] give[s]". See Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 64.

75. Chris Brown, "'Turtles All the Way Down': Anti-Foundationalism, Critical Theory and International Relations", *Millennium*, 23, no. 2 (1994), p. 236.

76. James Der Derian makes this point with regard to realism. See James Der Derian, (ed.), *International Theory: Critical Investigations* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 6. For a defence of this argument in terms of any and all theoretical approaches to world politics, see Neufeld, *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory*, chapter three.

77. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 92.

78. *Sources of the Self*, p. 96.

