Normative Theory in International Relations

Normative theory in International Relations, as it is discussed at present in the framework of the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate, is at a standsill. Cosmopolitan and communitarian positions are generally assumed to be irreconcilable, with no means available for reaching conclusions on ethical questions in world politics. This book pursues three lines of inquiry. First, it aims to examine the nature and the extent of the impasse within this debate. Secondly, it re-evaluates whether the cosmopolitan/communitarian dichotomy offers a complete picture of the most pressing issues at stake within normative international relations theory. The book suggests that a more refined focus on epistemology and questions of foundationalism and antifoundationalism is necessary. Thirdly, it constructs an argument for a new normative approach to international ethics which draws from the tradition of American pragmatism and is attentive to the wider picture of concerns raised in the course of the book.

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Normative Theory in International Relations
A Pragmatic Approach

Molly Cochran
It is Virginia!
And for her Mom, Mimi and Pop
Contents

Acknowledgements  xi
Abbreviations  xiv
Preface  xv

Introduction  1

Part I: Evaluating the impasse

1 Cosmopolitanism: Rawlsian approaches to international distributive justice  21

2 Communitarianism: Michael Walzer and international justice  52

3 Beyond the impasse? Hegelian method in the cosmopolitanism of Andrew Linklater and the communitarianism of Mervyn Frost  78

Part II: Confronting the impasse

4 Poststructuralist antifoundationalism, ethics, and normative IR theory  121

5 Neo-pragmatist antifoundationalism, ethics, and normative IR theory  144
Contents

Part III: International ethics as pragmatic critique

6 International ethics as pragmatic critique: a pragmatic synthesis of the work of John Dewey and Richard Rorty 173
7 Facilitating moral inclusion: feminism and pragmatic critique 212
8 From moral imagination to international public spheres: the political and institutional implications of pragmatic critique 246

Conclusion 273

References 281
Index 292
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Abbreviations

TNT  M. Frost, *Towards a Normative Theory of International Relations*
EIR  M. Frost, *Ethics and International Relations*
MC   A. Linklater, *Men and Citizens*
TPC  A. Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community*
‘DP’ J. Rawls, ‘The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus’
‘KC’ J. Rawls, ‘Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory’
‘OC’ J. Rawls, ‘The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus’
CIS  R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*
‘HRS’ R. Rorty, ‘Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality’
JUW M. Walzer *Just and Unjust Wars*
SJ   M. Walzer *Spheres of Justice*
TT   M. Walzer *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*
Preface

Normative theory in International Relations (IR), as it is discussed at present in the framework of the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate, is at a standstill. Cosmopolitan and communitarian positions are generally assumed to be irreconcilable, with no means available for reaching conclusions. This book pursues three lines of inquiry in relation to this debate. First, it aims to examine the nature and extent of the impasse within the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate. Secondly, it re-evaluates whether the cosmopolitan/communitarian dichotomy offers a complete picture of the most pressing issues at stake within normative IR theory. The book suggests that a shift in focus onto epistemology and questions of foundationalism and anti-foundationalism is necessary. Thirdly, it constructs an argument for a new normative approach to international ethics which draws from the tradition of American pragmatism and is attentive to the wider concerns raised by the book’s assessment of the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate. The three parts of the book take each of these lines of inquiry in turn.

In order to illuminate the nature of the debate between cosmopolitans and communitarians and the extent of its impasse, the Introduction proposes a formulation of three central issues as an analytical tool. These issues are: (1) a concept of the person; (2) the moral relevance of states; and (3) the universal versus the particular. The extent of the impasse is gauged by the degree to which accommodations can be reached on any or all of these three issues. Also, an ‘anchor analogy’ is drawn in the Introduction that is used throughout the book to facilitate discussion of epistemological issues in normative IR theory. This analogy illustrates the foundational claims implicit or explicit in the work of the writers discussed.
Preface

Part I of the book critically evaluates the work of authors who contribute to the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate. It traces chronological developments in the positions of the authors discussed as they respond to their critics, and notes that accommodations are evident. However, a structural opposition remains. This opposition rests largely in the third issue of the debate, but the opposition, I will suggest, is not what it may at first glance seem. The universal versus the particular is a tension about the scope with which moral claims can be made in international practice, yet several of these authors are interested in bridging the universal versus the particular gap, albeit, unsuccessfully. I will argue that this is because the nature of the impasse does not concern the scope of moral claims on the behalf of individuals or states, but how in fact they are made. It involves how claims to ethical judgement in IR are grounded or justified: that is, how we choose whether individuals or states should be the subject of justice. My contention is that the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate is principally concerned with ontological questions and leaves untheorized the rival foundational assumptions upon which these ontologies stand. This analysis of the reasons for the impasse in the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate indicates that epistemology needs to be brought to the foreground of concern within normative IR theory.

Would normative IR theory benefit by temporarily shifting the axis of inquiry away from ontological questions regarding cosmopolitan versus communitarian claims, to epistemological questions which center upon the issue of foundationalism versus antifoundationalism? Part II examines antifoundationalist approaches and asks what they might have to offer for ethical theorizing in IR. Part II demonstrates that such approaches open out the parameters of normative IR theory, enabling a better consideration of the interplay within and between the issues of the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate than that which is available to the writers participant in that debate due to their particular foundationalist tendencies. However, it is also clear that a shift in focus onto epistemology cannot and does not abandon ontological questions. In fact, it is evident from the approaches discussed in part II that a turn away from foundationalism actually shifts the burden of an ethics back onto ontology, since it requires an account of the necessities of relationships between individuals and communities in order to offer a criterion for ethical judgement.

So have we simply come full circle? I will suggest that we have not.

xvi
Preface

The cosmopolitan/communitarian debate has been a useful framework for drawing our attention to a central issue for ethical theory in IR and outlining its contours: how we determine our ontological priorities when moral problems arise in the relations between individuals and states. However, the communitarian/cosmopolitan debate has served its purpose and normative theory must now move on from this narrow oppositional framing, a framing which no longer (if it ever did) accurately represents the movement in the authors' own positions within the debate. Nor, however, can we slip into the same dichotomous thinking with regard to epistemology in focusing upon a foundational/antifoundational divide. New normative approaches must examine how the axes of ontology and epistemology intersect, keeping in mind a notion of a range and not an opposition: there is a range of ontological positions on the individual and the community, and of epistemological positions on foundational claims and their strength or degree.

Part III develops an approach to normative IR theory attentive to the interconnection of epistemological and ontological questions. It is an approach to international ethics derived from American pragmatism, which is designed to suggest a promising way of interrogating the epistemological quiet of cosmopolitan and communitarian approaches. It also has something constructive to propose, by offering an understanding of international ethics as pragmatic critique which works towards as thorough-going an antifoundationalism as is possible, yet grapples with the central ontological question of the relationship of the individual to community in international ethics. The result is a new normative approach that is politically engaged, since it professes a concern for expanding moral inclusion and social reconstruction. The capacity of pragmatic critique to facilitate moral inclusion and social reconstruction is illustrated through an engagement with feminist theory and the concept of international 'public spheres' in the concluding chapters. It is an approach that is aware of the ranges in which fall ontological positions on the individual and the community and epistemological positions regarding foundational claims and their strength or degree.

Chapter outline

The chapters in part I of the book fill out the parameters of the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate by examining the three issues of
Preface

the debate I have identified, and exploring possibilities for accommodation on these issues with respect to cosmopolitan and communitarian writers in normative IR theory. Chapter 1 looks at two cosmopolitan writers, Charles Beitz and Thomas Pogge, each of whom uses a Rawlsian framework in his effort to establish a theory of international distributive justice. Neither Beitz nor Pogge is interested in seeking possible reconciliations with a communitarian position on an idea of international justice. For this reason, I turn to an extended analysis of the relationship of their work to Rawls, who in his later writings has accommodated objections raised by his communitarian critics. Chapter 2 examines a communitarian approach, represented by the work of Michael Walzer. Walzer is clearly frustrated by a similar condition of stasis in the liberal/communitarian debate, and (unlike Beitz and Pogge) seeks reconciliations which overlap with concerns in the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate. Chapter 3 takes a different tack and examines two writers, a cosmopolitan (Andrew Linklater) and a communitarian (Mervyn Frost), in order to compare and contrast their concerted efforts to reconcile the core tension of the debate. Linklater and Frost differ from other writers in part I because their projects start from the identification of a problem in the ethical relationship between individuals and states in international practice, and they work to resolve this tension. None the less, part I concludes that there is indeed a significant structural opposition that cannot be bridged, or at least will not be bridged, as long as these writers proceed as if the ethics which results from their weak foundationalist claims has a non-contingent, universal and fixed application.

The chapters in part II of the book inquire into whether antifoundationalism can offer an alternative approach to ethical theory in IR, unencumbered by the dichotomous thinking and impasse of the present normative framework. Here, I discuss two lines of antifoundationalist thinking in political and normative IR theory. The first flows out of the discourse of French poststructuralism and the second out of the tradition of American pragmatism. Chapter 4 examines the work of poststructuralist writers in IR theory and focuses upon the writings of Richard Ashley, R. B. J. Walker, William Connolly, Jim George, and David Campbell. Chapter 5 looks at the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty. I continue to use the formulation of the three issues of the debate as an analytical tool to evaluate the relation of their work to the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate and to assess any implications of their work for confronting its epistemological impasse. While I
conclude that these approaches open up the parameters of normative theorizing in IR and help us confront the epistemological nature of the cosmopolitan/communitarian impasse, they none the less, in their will to offer an ethics, fail to relinquish recourse to weak foundations or universals which are linked to ontological priorities in justifying their ethical claims. Thus, parts I and II suggest that we cannot entirely divest ourselves of foundationalist or universalist thinking in the effort to offer principles of ethical judgement in international practice. I conclude that if it is the case that these are unavoidable aspects of normative theorizing and ethical critique, then normative IR theory must find a way to proceed that is aware of the weak foundations and universals invoked in its ethical criteria, such that we might work to avoid the normative impasses and possibilities for oppression and moral exclusion which can result from foundationalist and universalizing tendencies.

Finally, the chapters in part III aim to offer a response to the dilemma of normative theorizing identified through the analysis of the ethics that results from both foundationalist and antifoundationalist approaches: that is, how to employ weak foundations and universals in a way that is not absolutizing, yet can still effectively offer an international ethics that would provide for wider moral inclusion and social reconstruction. Chapter 6 develops a notion of international ethics as pragmatic critique, a synthesis of the pragmatism of John Dewey and Richard Rorty, that works to be as thoroughly antifoundationalist as is possible, yet has a will to universalization that seeks the growth of human capacities and the expansion of ‘we’ feeling. These ambitions are facilitated through its notion of ‘fallibilism’, which takes the absolutizing edge off its ethical claims, and through its use of ‘moral imagination’ to project alternatives to problematic ethical/political situations. Chapter 7 introduces a case study that aims to demonstrate how this notion of international ethics as pragmatic critique is adequately political, critical and imaginative to provide for the moral inclusion of feminist ethical/political concerns in IR. Chapter 8 addresses a difficulty in problematizing the authority of the ‘we’ of community which is raised in pragmatic critique’s engagement with feminist concerns in the previous chapter. Here, I provide more detail on the workings of moral imagination and its capacity to think beyond the power of the ‘we’ and offer both discursive and institutional possibilities in the notion of ‘public spheres’ for expanding moral inclusion in international practice.

xix
Preface

Pragmatic critique cannot supply normative IR theory with lasting solutions to its ethical dilemmas. However, it provides a method and a weak ontological vision that works with sympathy and persistence to facilitate better ways to cope with and make meaningful the worlds we live in and the moral situations we face.