Brian C. Rathbun argues against the prevailing wisdom on morality in international relations, both the commonly held belief that foreign affairs is an amoral realm and the opposing notion that norms have gradually civilized an unethical world. By focusing on how states respond to being wronged rather than when they do right, Rathbun shows that morality is and always has been virtually everywhere in international relations – in the perception of threat, the persistence of conflict, the judgment of domestic audiences, and the articulation of expansionist goals. The inescapability of our moral impulses owes to their evolutionary origins in helping individuals solve recurrent problems in their anarchic environment. Through archival case studies of German foreign policy; the analysis of enormous corpora of text; and surveys of Russian, Chinese, and American publics, this book reorients how we think about the role of morality in international relations.

“This exciting book rejects realist, moralist, and constructivist accounts of international ethics in favor of a biology-based conception of evolutionary ethics that, even if it does not convince readers, will fundamentally challenge them. And the extended exploration of the ‘hard case’ of Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany is of great substantive and methodological interest.”

Jack Donnelly, Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver

“Scholars have long argued that international politics are fundamentally amoral – if not immoral. Brian Rathbun’s outstanding book should put a stop to those claims. Drawing upon evolutionary theory and psychology, he shows us how political communities act to protect their own deeply held moral beliefs and condemn the actions of others. He relies on a wealth of empirical evidence, including quantitative content analysis, contemporary surveys, and deep archival work, to back his ambitious claims. This book is likely to become a necessary reference for any serious student of morality and international politics.”

Stacie E. Goddard, Political Science Department, Wellesley College

“Complementing deep scholarship with a healthy dollop of humor, Rathbun skilfully applies the modern interdisciplinary science of morality to international relations. The result is both surprising and profound, and will be of immense interest to readers well beyond the academic fields synthesized in these pages. This remarkable book manages to craft an understanding of international conflicts with eyes wide open to the full range of human nature, from the morally horrific to the morally sublime.”

Jesse Graham, Eccles School of Business, University of Utah

“Brian Rathbun has produced an important book on how the spread of ethics has changed the nature of international relations. The argument is novel, clearly stated and developed, and rooted in psychological research. Rathbun’s treatment of Germany will be controversial but cannot be dismissed.”

Richard Ned Lebow, Department of War Studies, King’s College London

“This new approach to morality and international relations is provocative and insightful. Rathbun’s book should be widely read and debated.”

Scott D. Sagan, Freeman Spogli Institute, Stanford University

“An excellent contribution to the literature on the role of morality in international politics, arguing that morality is everywhere, even in places where we might least expect it. This book will have wide impact, not only in international relations (IR) theory but also in political theory, evolutionary ethics, moral psychology, philosophy, and history.”

David Traven, Department of Political Science, California State University, Fullerton
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Right and Wronged in International Relations

Evolutionary Ethics, Moral Revolutions, and the Nature of Power Politics

BRIAN C. RATHBUN

University of Southern California
For Jay
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For a long while, I suppose if you had asked me why I had become a political scientist as opposed to some other type of social or natural scientist, I would not have known the answer. I would have likely attributed the choice to various happenstances and chance encounters, and that is undoubtedly true. But I had no significant interest in politics as an adolescent and even less in international relations. When I began my undergraduate studies, I am quite sure I would have insisted that Marx was Russian. I was placed in my introduction to international relations course at university because cultural anthropology was full, and I stayed because the instructor had a good reputation. I got a B in the course.

Now I know the answer. Politics inevitably invokes morality, and morality has always been a central preoccupation of mine. I am sure this has to do with my Catholic upbringing. For four years, grades four through seven, I attended parochial school and as a consequence six masses a week, as Monday through Friday does not give you a pass on Sunday. But my parents are liberal Catholics; they think that the Pope should be a woman, priests should marry alongside same-sex couples, birth control is fine, the death penalty is more sacrilegious than abortion, and good Catholics should spend more time helping others in duress than chastising them for their moral failings. So I think I was raised thinking about how to determine what is right and wrong when various values conflict and that the voices of authority can be wrong, leading me to wonder why we spend so much time listening to them.

Morality is the thread that runs through all of my books. I began with humanitarian intervention, trying to figure out why some are more willing than others to help those beyond their borders. I then took up the role played by trust in international relations, but trust of a particular type – moralistic, the belief that others have good, ethical intentions. My book on diplomacy locates the sources of how decision-makers negotiate in their underlying moral codes.

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The more I thought about politics, the more I realized that virtually every political issue and controversy is a moral one, or at least the public debate is inevitably ethical in tone. Even the tax code is inherently moral since it implicates issues of fairness, which can be interpreted in different ways. I should keep my million dollars because I worked hard for it and hard work is an indication that I do not free ride on others. Or I should take your million dollars because there are so many who do not have a hundred dollars. I would issue readers a challenge. Try to find a salient political issue within or between countries that is not cast in ethical terms. I cannot find one. Sometimes people distinguish between legal and moral justifications. We have to obey the law because it is the law and not because it is right in a particular instance. But even in those instances, there is concern for the respect of law, and law is inherently moral; laws allow a social stability that better allows societies to prosper, and that is a morally good thing. There is no escaping morality.

The study of international relations, more so than political science more generally, is preoccupied with the most basic moral questions, and now I know that this was why I inclined in this direction. Under what circumstances can we justify the use of physical violence? To what extent do we have an obligation to those outside of our local communities? All I had to do was to learn something about history, which has taken me about twenty years.

And yet international relations – paradoxically, I would say – still often characterizes itself as the study of the amoral sphere where right and wrong know no place. At its extreme, the contention is not that conceptions of right and wrong differ beyond territorial borders but that they do not exist there at all. To put it bluntly, this book makes the case that such a claim is simply preposterous. I do so by showing that the processes and phenomena associated with the basest power politics – conflict duration, status-seeking, crisis signaling, territorial expansion – are all inextricably intertwined with morality. And we see this in the countries most identified in the Western mind with amoral Machtpolitik: Wilhelmine Germany in its time and Russia and China today. What we are missing has been imagination. First, we have to understand that morality involves not just doing good for others, but also the way by which we respond to others who do bad, what is called moral condemnation. Second, we have to realize that we often feel special moral obligations to our groups. Once we widen our
understanding of morality to the extent that it is experienced in the real world – which requires a willingness to see morality through the eyes of others – we see morality everywhere in international relations.

That alone would have been a book, but in thinking about morality’s ubiquity I found myself going deeper into the literature on human evolution and the role that morality played in human success (if, at this point, you can call it that). I had a superficial knowledge of this field based on earlier projects on reciprocity and altruism, and I cannot remember the point at which I actively decided I was going to make a commitment to an ultimately material case for the origins of ethics. I am sure that my close friendship with Rose McDermott made me more open to it. Like most of us, however, I had an allergy to the ultimate implication of this literature – that morality is not the transcendence of material reality but rather the reflection of it. It seems to cheapen it, and my wife certainly disagrees with where I have come down. But I realized that such a position on ethics is not at all as pessimistic and deterministic as its reputation. If anything, it tells us that the nature of human beings is deeply cooperative and caring, but that this is accompanied by tendencies toward destructive behaviors that are themselves driven by competing moral impulses. We’re complicated.

We’re also full of it. To say that morality is everywhere is not to say that everyone is moral all the time. In fact, if we were, we wouldn’t have the concept of morality at all. Morality helps us regulate our social relationships. It requires that we respond negatively when we or others are wronged. Everyone is therefore always acting in the shadow of morality; even when acting instrumentally we have to put our behavior in a different light. Congressional advocates of corporate tax breaks do not admit that they are taking campaign contributions with the implicit expectation that they benefit some small constituency. They have to make a moral argument about the just desserts of job creation. My personal theory about why Donald Trump drives so many of us so crazy is that he doesn’t seem to feel that pressure. But of course, he is the narcissistic exception that proves the rule. And even he has to wrap his transactionalism in the flag, making America great again. So much of his foreign policy consisted of complaining about how the United States was treated unfairly by others, which is a moral argument.

This is a pandemic book, written mostly in the first twelve months of this global catastrophe. I fielded my survey in Russia the same week
that California locked itself down (I must thank Evgeniia Iakhnis, my research assistant, profoundly for her translation of the instrument). As such it was written in relative isolation. I did not share drafts with colleagues as much as I had with previous projects, so I do not have an extensive list of people to thank, although Katy Powers and Rose McDermott were kind enough to provide some thoughts. It was, however, a time of deep collaboration with Caleb Pomeroy, who as I write this is just about to complete his dissertation at The Ohio State University. I brought him in, with a cold email, to help me implement the word embeddings analysis that became Chapter 4, and it has sparked one of the most fruitful partnerships in my career. Caleb and I have had many garage jam sessions, which sounds much cooler than it is. I have a finished studio in the backyard, without facilities, where Caleb has bunked down at several points.

As always the person who read everything was my wife, Nina Srinivasan Rathbun, and as always I owe her everything.

I dedicate this book to a close friend who passed away in November 2020. I met James “Jay” Mitchell during what was one of the most formative and transformative periods of my life. In the fall of 1992, I was part of a wind ensemble that spent the semester in Vienna. It is there that I first tried out my elementary German, learned about the European Union, and in general discovered there was a wide world that I had never really thought about. Part of the ensemble was Jay, who, although at a different university, came along for the semester after his close high school friend told him about it. Jay had an infectious and impish sense of humor, and I liked him instantly. He was one of the few people I have ever met who I wanted to be like, who made me want to change things about myself. And I think I did as a result.

At the time, I had no idea how incredibly smart Jay was. He went on to study molecular and cell biology at Berkeley, and when I arrived there, a year after he did, he was the only person I knew. He became my best friend. Jay worked long hours in the lab, and often I would just head over there in the evening to have a beer while he waited on his sample cells to do something or other. We had something of a standing date at his place to watch Saturday Night Live. We shared a deep affection for Norm MacDonald. Jay was there as I began my relationship with Nina, and he was a groomsman at my wedding. I went back to Vienna to attend his own marriage to Elisabeth, who
had organized our wind ensemble’s travel arrangement while we were there before, and who Jay had begun secretly seeing at the time.

After he and I left Berkeley, I lost touch with Jay. He was very much of the moment. If you were in his presence, you were the most important person in the world – but out of sight, out of mind, I came to realize. It turns out he was having a fabulously successful career, a trailblazer at Harvard in the study of diet’s effect on aging. But I only found this out after he had died at forty-nine, and I did not know that he had passed away for many months after it happened. It makes me angry and sad of course to think about the opportunities I missed to rekindle the friendship.

When Jay and I were together, we never talked about our research. I couldn’t really understand what he was doing and vice versa. But he came, at his insistence, to my very first large lecture when I, as a teaching assistant, subbed for our traveling professor. It seems fitting that I dedicate this particular book to him, given its heavy reliance on biology, even if at a much more macro level. I would love to talk to him about it someday. Maybe now we could do more than crack jokes. But maybe not, and isn’t that better anyway?

The online appendix referred to in the book can be found at: www.cambridge.org/9781009344715 or directly from the author.