The Place of Ethical Leadership, Virtues, and Narrative in International Organizations

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Je ne suis pas de ceux qui disent que leurs actions ne leur ressemblent pas. Il faut bien qu’elles le fassent, puisqu’elles sont ma seule mesure, et le seul moyen de me dessiner dans la mémoire des hommes, ou dans la mienne propre; puisque c’est peut-être l’impossibilité de continuer à s’exprimer et à se modifier par l’action qui constitue la différence entre l’état de mort et celui de vivant. Mais il y a entre moi et ces actes dont je suis fait un hiatus indéfinissable.

Marguerite Yourcenar, Mémoires d’Hadrien

1.1 PREMISE OF THE BOOK

International organizations (IOs) were once expected to guarantee the ‘salvation of mankind’ but have increasingly come to be questioned.¹ On the one hand, waves of populism, nationalism, and isolationism threaten the stability of the international legal order and the capacity of IOs to address policy dilemmas.² On the other hand, these policy dilemmas keep piling up – for example, the influx of refugees, climate change, global health issues, cyber

¹ My most sincere thanks to Gonçalo Vilaça, William Kirkland, Michael Schultheiß, and Jan Klabbers for detailed comments and criticism that greatly improved the flow and quality of the argument. I also thank an anonymous referee for the suggestion (and challenge) to sketch the introduction of the book as a full-fledged chapter building a comprehensive narrative linking the complex and disparate available literatures as well as showing the need for an interdisciplinary approach to ethical leadership and virtue in international organizations. All errors remain mine.

² For an overview of the history of IOs from messianic hope to existential crisis, criticism, and calls for reform, see Alvarez, José E. (2006), ‘International Organizations: Then and Now’, American Journal of International Law, 100 (2), 324-47.

wars, growing inequality, and widespread poverty. It appears that what is needed are more global cooperation and leadership, at a time when the mission and capacities of IOs may be at risk. Compounding the problem, the latter are also often accused of corruption, embezzlement, negative externalities, political capture, poor and immoral performance, and so on.\(^3\)

IOs are necessary, but, so it seems, they cannot be trusted, or they may not always be desirable or produce positive results.\(^4\) It is enough to think of Kofi Annan’s son’s involvement in the United Nations’ ‘Iraq oil-for-food plan’ that called into question the quality of leadership and oversight applied by the programme; the different sexual misconduct accusations both in the field – that is, humanitarian interventions and peacekeeping operations – and in offices across the world; or corruption allegations in different missions, such as the one in Western Sahara. Appropriately, the United Nations was portrayed by an IO veteran and former United Nations Deputy Secretary-General, Britain’s Mark Malloch-Brown, like this:

> The institution itself is labyrinthian, hard to penetrate and often apparently immune to tragedy, which it seems from the outside it could do more to stop. Publicly, it has an image of Gucci-shoed bureaucrats taking long lunches. The truth is that it is a Jekyll and Hyde institution: while there are people who work there who just want to get by, there are many others who have a personal sense of commitment to making a real difference. The two live in permanent tension with one another.\(^5\)

This is a rather troubling criticism to IOs – often seen as a ‘force for good’ fulfilling functions necessary to ensure a good, peaceful, healthy and prosperous global order – since their autonomy and legitimacy were and are largely premised on pure, functional, apolitical, and expertise-based operations.\(^6\)

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\(^4\) For an early accusation that the literature on IOs largely ignored their negative effects, see Gallarotti, Giulio M. (1991), ‘The Limits of International Organization: Systematic Failure in the Management of International Relations’, International Organization, 45 (2), 83–220.


Many different approaches have been advanced in order to control IOs, curb their excesses, evaluate their activities, discipline them in case of wrongdoing and instil the right set of incentives to ensure the fulfilment of their missions while respecting integrity and ethical values. The disciplines of international law, international relations, political science, economics, management and organization studies, sociology, and political theory have insisted on human rights, codes of ethics and conduct, legal responsibility, compliance, managerial and accountability frameworks. Yet these have not been able to do the trick.

Compliance\(^7\) and managerial\(^8\) logics are largely technocratic based on efficiency and effectiveness considerations often setting aside the pursuit of normative ideals beyond the mandates and rules of organizations. Recall that, conversely, ethical or moral reasoning is overwhelmingly conceptualized as other-regarding, this being the source of the challenge morality places upon us.\(^9\) Discourses of accountability portraying it as a ‘supervening force’ and premised on ‘better oversight through tougher regulation, combined with harsh penalties as a deterrent’, have proved insufficient too.\(^10\)

These ex post and external discourses crucially depend on monitoring, scorekeeping, sanctioning, and enforcement capacities (and the existence, quality and interplay of rules, norms and standards that have to be administered), which in turn are stretched beyond their powers in highly complex environments such as IOs.\(^11\) Moreover, the specific organizational form and control apparatuses may create strong incentives against ‘doing the right thing’ or exercising independent virtuous judgment.\(^12\)


Human rights standards need to be rendered concrete and actualized through human action, which frequently requires more rules and solving conflicts between the latter, making apportioning and exercising responsibility a difficult matter. By the same token, deontological codes of conduct easily lend themselves to create a new set of broad principles and rules without clarifying which behaviours are actually prescribed or envisioned. As with human rights, this does not mean they do not fulfil a symbolic and normative function – that is, creating an image of the ‘professional’ and establishing a vision of moral excellence – only that little guidance is offered to agents, either trying to uphold standards or evaluating behaviour against them, as the standards need someone to apply them.

The premise underlying this volume is that the way to respond to the crisis of governance and rehabilitate IOs is to go beyond all these discourses and frameworks and focus on ethical leadership, individual and organizational, in IOs.

To be fair, a small group of scholars has abandoned the dominant focus on international norms, mandates and structures and recognized the autonomous impact of individual leadership and personality features of executive heads and staffs on the empowerment, growth, and performance of IOs. The approach is...
often comparative, pitting bureaucracies or particular individuals, for example Boutros-Ghali, Kofi Annan, Robert McNamara, Dag Hammarskjöld, and Albert Thomas, with their personalities, values and biographical details against the contexts they faced in order to draw out potential lessons on the impact of leadership and leadership styles. Selection procedures are also studied even though it is recognized that, given the principals’ interest (Member States) in controlling IOs, the chosen leaders are typically those expected not to rock the boat. Durão Barroso for the European Commission and Kurt Waldheim for the United Nations easily fit the picture. Nevertheless, this does not mean that leaders themselves see their tenure in the same way. Boutros-Ghali, for instance, highlighted the independence, moral responsibility, and importance of his role even if it ought to be performed behind the scenes.

Ultimately, however, this literature concentrates on effective and functional, not ethical, leadership, describing ways in which leaders, personality traits and different modes of leadership help to overcome environmental, political, legal, budgetary, and organizational constraints. Effective leadership is then theorized as needed to enhance IOs’ legitimacy and consequently create an ‘epistemico-discursive’ community in which IOs are transparent, rely on input from external constituencies and revise their own accountability standards.

Against this background, the present book takes a further and original step by explicitly linking leadership and ethics. If leadership matters, we submit that developing ethical leadership may prove essential to improve the way in

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21 This is not a given in leadership studies. See Keohane, Nannerl O. (2010), Thinking About Leadership (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press), Chapter 1.
which IOs exercise responsibility in caring for our common world. If ethics matters, we claim that we need to go beyond the usual ethical frameworks relied upon so far. Indeed, the phenomenon of ethical decision-making by international legal and policy experts and the quest for global justice has relied upon analytic normative ethics, typically deontologism and consequentialism. Instead, we propose that we ought to endorse *virtue ethics* to ground thicker and novel descriptions, judgments, and assessments of the ethical life and action of individuals in IOs. We conceive the deployment of virtues as an indispensable step to stimulate and expand our moral imagination in creating new narratives regarding IOs’ normative and functional worlds. Hence, this edited volume starts a so far unexplored interdisciplinary conversation and examination of ethics in IOs taking as a stepping stone the language of virtues.

Within this context, the quest for ethical leadership in IOs provides a platform for new normative, conceptual, and policy considerations. To what extent can the ethical standing and character of individuals and organizations provide an answer to IOs’ current predicament? How does a focus on virtues expand our powers of description of classical moral scenarios and choices? And if it offers a credible response, then how can ethical leadership be conceptualized, what are its sources of inspiration, what kind of new standards does it generate and how can it be assessed? In this context, the various case studies that are examined by the contributors offer a revealing picture of the potentials and limits of an aretaic theory of ethics that focuses on human agency and the quest for virtuous judgment. Specifically, the book illustrates the potential of virtues to inform descriptive, explanatory, normative, evaluative and decision-making analyses, diversifying the ways in which

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23 For a rare work connecting the (different) ethical frameworks, biographies, and mandates of select United Nations Secretaries General, see Kent J. Kille (ed.) (2007), *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press).


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the virtues can play a role in shaping discourses on responsible or otherwise ethical leadership and reformulating the future of so-called global governance.25

Overall, we believe that a focus on ethical leadership and the vocabulary of virtues promotes an *ex ante*, preventive and internal approach to IOs and their leaders—an approach that emphasizes responsibility (the internal side of conduct) more than accountability (the external side of conduct)26—and acknowledges that ruling is always *ruling by persons* as laws, rules, principles, and values are not self-applicable. This largely forgotten point, but rich in consequences for ethical and legal thinking in organizations, is developed by Sanne Taekema in Chapter 3. She uses it to argue that, understood like this, the rule of law ideal ought to guide IOs but does not need to be pursued through law, opening the possibility for virtuous leaders to be the drivers of the process.

The recovery of the virtues’ moral vocabulary also enables external *ex post* scrutiny of IOs’ leaders’ behaviour and organizational forms of life by the public sphere, though its main contribution is the internalization of the need for agents to exercise prudence and judgment, as a *performative*, not theoretical, activity, in the pursuit of IOs’ missions and activities irrespectively of the existence of pre-existing, applicable and enforceable rules, economic incentives, and sanctions.

The book is also innovative in the *interdisciplinary approach* it adopts to the study of ethics in IOs. Indeed, contributions to the volume come from disciplines as disparate as anthropology, international law, political science, philosophy, ethics, and international relations. This is no mere fancy. As will be argued later in detail, interdisciplinarity and a multi-method approach are required by the sheer level of added complexity that the adoption of a virtues-based robust research programme on ethical leadership in IOs, as sketched in this chapter, imposes. Taken seriously, this shift makes it unfeasible to do (international) ethics solely at the ideal theory level in philosophy departments. Instead, ethical analysis, imagination, and criticism must be embedded in concrete factual, legal, and normative scenarios mobilizing a plethora of different academic disciplines. A useful metaphor of the paradigm shift at

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stake here comes from Siqueiros, one of the great classical Mexican muralists, and his explanation for the methodological changes that moving from easel to muralist painting triggered – that is, the need for group work, spatial thinking and the fact that virtuous technique in easel painting did not translate into superior mural works. Likewise, in this book, the reader should not expect to see this complexity reflected in each individual chapter. Rather, the book works holistically because only by going through the whole book can the complex task of doing justice to the problem of ethical leadership in IOs be fully grasped.

In the remainder of this chapter, I map two different narratives that are central to identifying and justifying (i) the manifold contributions of the book; (ii) the nature of the challenge it advances against established thinking; and, (iii) the power of virtue ethics to attract, agglutinate and deploy a number of disciplines and approaches that have so far remained disparate and yet can reshape the study of international ethics in IOs.

The first narrative focuses on ethics. It starts by mapping the use of deontologism and consequentialism in global ethics debates and showing how they legitimated highly abstract accounts of international responsibility (Sections 1.2 and 1.3). It then describes how concentrating on virtues radically changes the questions being asked (and the knowledge we need making pragmatism a surprising ally), highlights the role of persons and characters, can be fashioned to apply to organizations, puts into stark relief different salient features of moral scenarios, emphasizes judgment and moral imagination, fits some basic common moral intuitions, and allows us to engage in ethical analysis in much greater complexity and detail (Sections 1.4 and 1.5).

The second narrative traces a recent convergence towards virtue ethics in different fields such as leadership, psychology, organization and business studies, all emphasizing the importance of practical wisdom and ethical leadership (Section 1.7). This is important because these disciplines offer lessons and resources that impact research on ethical – virtuous – leadership in IOs, notably on the following questions: ‘What is virtuous leadership in organizations?’, ‘How is it exercised?’, and ‘What is its impact?’ Throughout these two narratives, I also forge an innovative account according to which, from a virtues perspective, there is a natural link between ethics and narrative given that ethical analysis (and criticism) requires considering concrete normative and factual materials from agents, organizations, environments, and situations. For this reason we need to mobilize resources from a plethora of disciplinary traditions that can

provide us with such elements, for example, narrative studies, anthropology, biographical research and casuistry, not to mention those invoked previously that deal specifically with organizations (Section 1.6).

I close the chapter by tackling the challenge of thinking about ethical leadership and virtues in postmodern times (Section 1.8) and providing a chapter breakdown (Section 1.9).

1.2 AN OVERVIEW OF ETHICS IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Focus on IOs, leadership, character, and virtues is not, and has not been, common when imagining the desirable design for the world. Indeed, and after the long-standing realist and neorealist emphasis on power and material interests, international ethics has developed robustly after the 1990s with the global justice literature discussing the idea of cosmopolitanism. The latter became a hot topic in international political and normative theory mostly following Charles Beitz’s seminal work.28

In a nutshell, the mainstream version of cosmopolitanism postulates universality. In its moral bent, it aims at pushing forward the idea that all human beings are owed the same in virtue of their sharing the same human nature and, thus, irrespectively of arbitrary distinctions triggered by concepts such as gender, culture, nationality or religion.29 Debate then rages around identifying which rights do we all have and which duties do we owe towards our fellow human beings.30 Issue areas include global inequality and poverty, open

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29 The sparring partner here was communitarianism with its emphasis on human beings’ historical, linguistic, political, and social rootedness. For a classical statement, see Walzer, Michael (1983), Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality (New York: Basic Books). The leading recent account is Miller, David (2007), National Responsibility and Global Justice (New York: Oxford University Press).

borders, climate change, just war, humanitarian intervention and fair trade, among others. Politically, cosmopolitanism imposes the need to transcend states and state-based institutions and move towards models of global or transnational governance. Discussions and proposals revolve around the duties, scale, and level of the institutional arrangements needed to uphold the common moral status of human beings. Other attempts searched for ways of legitimating and articulating global forms of politics and society.\[31\]

As Delanty argued,\[32\] however, many of these writings presuppose(d) a scission between the political and the social world given the fact that the latter is an arena of boundaries, cultures, political choices, and other taxonomies – the arena from which cosmopolitanism, the herald of universalism, wished to free human beings and thinking alike. Logically, the articulation of a universal moral or political view does violence to alternative visions leading to a critique of the mainstream cosmopolitan account. Critical cosmopolitanism, normative\[33\] and sociological,\[34\] eschews a single world and cosmopolitanism, focusing instead on discourse and its capacity to mediate encounters between different agents which produces forms of cosmopolitanism that are open to difference. This shift takes its cue from: (i) the historical realization that world-making projects were typical of empires combining;\[35\] (ii) the normative point that cosmopolitanism’s universalism (and democracy) is Western and thus accepting it would amount to having a part of the world determining a universal blueprint for the whole world; and, (iii) the empirical point that there is no single humanity, since human experience and products are always embedded.


Shapcott, Richard (2005), Justice, Community and Dialogue in International Relations (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press).
