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Pendulum of Political Ethics
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"Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws."—Plato

Ethical behavior has been swinging over time like a pendulum between opposite poles of Good and Evil. Ethics is a branch of philosophy, and from a distance it may seem that this essay is attempting to answer philosophical questions with regards to ethical behavior; however, as a student of Political Science, what interests me is the relationship between ethics and politics, specifically in international relations (IR) which is my field of specialization. In addition, not only political science students are the only ones concerned with ethical issues in politics, but also students from diverse fields are constantly grabbed by ethical considerations in international politics, on a daily basis. The question that will be raised and explored throughout the essay is whether ethics could be applied in politics? My thesis in this essay is that ethics is compatible with politics and cannot be separated from it. In this essay, I'll challenge the political theorists and scientists for their late development of a formal literature on ethical aspects in international relations and ironically the incompatibility of ethics with IR. In order to forward my argument, I'll explore historical as well as modern views on ethics and its relation with politics.

Ethics and politics are intertwined since every facet of politics includes all sorts of ethical decisions. Aristotle argued that problems of individual morality cannot be separated from problems of political institutions. Recently ideas about the compatibility of ethics to politics were extremely challenged. On the other hand, if one takes a closer look about IR dilemmas and questions, it'll be noticed that most of the questions and arguments revolve around ethical considerations. Examples of these questions is whether belligerent occupation with a moral cause could be justifiable? Are suicide bombers ethically acceptable provided that they are freedom fighters? Are Humanitarian interventions acceptable even if it serves the interests of the intervening state? Is the use of force ethically justified even if it is authorized by the United Nations Security Council? This rising interdependence between ethics and politics is primarily due to the increasing interaction among states and non-state actors. However, both historical and modern philosophers and political scientists were not very successful in linking ethical issues with international politics.

Early philosophic discourse was concerned with the nature of ethics and how self-interest and reasoning are the drive behind immoral actions but they failed to address ethical dilemmas in politics. It is true that moral philosophers tackled practical questions related to public politics since the dawn of philosophy, however there were almost no attempts to coincide ethics with international affairs. Those historical issues ranged from Plato's ideas about the proper behavior of officials, to Augustine and Aquinas' ideas of Just War going all through the way to John Stuart Mill views on liberty and the position of women in society. However, these political issues weren't referred to as being ethical nor encouraged to be moral. Philosophers like Aristotle approached ethics by discussing it in terms of a man's good and not by moral absolutes. Aristotle's views on ethics were teleological; i.e. the theory that judge actions by their consequences. He believed that the highest good is the attainment of common happiness without mentioning the necessity of achieving happiness through moral means. However, Thomas Hobbes in Leviathan argues that human beings are self-interested. In the state of nature, there will be a

devastating competition between men. This marked his famous notion of “war of all against all”, which meant that there was no room for morality and justice in such a state of anarchy and warfare. On the other hand, the early intuitionists such as Ralph Cudworth, Henry More, and Samuel Clarke of the 17th century opposed Hobbes’ views. They argued that morality is objective and holds in all circumstances. In fact, this paved the way for the emergence of a debate that is still a dilemma in moral philosophy: Is morality based on reason or on feelings? Moral theorists such as Hutcheson and Hume argued that reason cannot be the basis of moral judgments. They argue that we are able to detect moral actions by our reason but won’t be motivated to do it unless our feelings want to do what is right.

Despite the fact that there are massive violations of ethical principles in international affairs, ethical considerations in IR are still marginalized by political theorists and scientists. This is not the case in other political science specializations such as International Law; there is a growing interest among international lawyers to tackle and address pressing ethical questions. Stanley Hoffmann stated that it was not until the 1970s that a new literature on ethics and International Relations was formed. Not only was the literature of ethics and IR developed lately, but also the political theorists and scientists that formulated it were arguing against the compatibility of ethics in IR. It is extremely ironic that even within this recent development of the literature on ethics and IR, political scientists were skeptical about the coexistence of ethics in politics. Political theorists and scientists of the new literature have been Joseph Nye (1968), Michael Walzer (1977), and Charles Beitz (1979). I do agree with their methodology but I oppose to interpretation of political ethical behavior and its inconsistency with IR. This new literature on “ethical aspects in international relations, particularly foreign policy, questioned the possibilities of attaining ethical foreign policy. Why was this view dominant in this new literature?

Many modern theorists and scholars argue that ethics are incompatible with politics for several reasons. However, I reject the idea that politics is mainly a set of “dirty handed” actions, which Stephen Garrett extensively argued for in his book Ethics & International Affairs. Definitely, international politics contain unethical behavior but this doesn’t deny the possibility of incorporating ethical actions within IR. This idea of the incompatibility of ethics in politics stems back since the early days of old philosophers. In *The Prince* Machiavelli stated that a prince should follow his own ideas about ethics even if it was regarded as an amoral by the public. Machiavelli stressed that the morality of statesmen is very different than that of the public. This reminds me of proponents of *raison d'état* who believe in a “dual moral standard”, in which a statesman could act immorally and unethically on the international level to preserve state interests but the citizens domestically are required to abide by moral norms and regulations. I regard leaders acting amorally abroad and ethically only at home not operating under the notion of “dual moral standard” but carrying out “double standards”. The main reason why late twentieth century scholars argue against the compatibility of ethics and politics is a result of the realist tradition. Those modern scientists were inspired by the realist school of thought, which argues that there is no room for ethics in the Hobbes-ian world in which states must act on the basis of their own self interest disregarding ethical conduct. Realists from Thucydides and Machiavelli to E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and George Keenan ruled out moral behavior in the “state of nature,” in which states compete for power. Another vivid example of a modern political scientist’s regressive view on ethics and IR is Charles Beitz and his book *Political Theory and International Relations*. He claims that morality and

self interest are basically incompatible since he questions the limits of ethical behavior in foreign policy, and he also argues that it is a realm of rational decisions and not moral values. However, I believe that since ethics can be applied between individuals, it can definitely be applied between statesmen and nations. There should be a social moral contract between states similar to the one existing between individuals. The question is: Then how can we determine that a political decision is ethical or not?

The evaluation of ethical conduct in politics is a controversial task; there are different competing courses for measuring ethical behavior in IR. The first route is to apply teleological theories when evaluating political behavior by deciding whether a political decision is ethical or not on the basis of its consequences. It was claimed by utilitarian philosophers such as John Stuart Mill that a political ethical behavior is the activity that is in the best for the greatest number of people. While, the second way is to follow the egoist approach by evaluating whether this political action is in the interest of the person doing the act or not, and the third course is to see whether it is in the interest of all others –i.e. altruism. Then we can see another course by applying deontological theories such as Kant's ideas that an act is naturally either bad or good. However, I refute all of these approaches, from utilitarianism to Kantianism, since general ethical principles within these approaches are abstract, isolated, and almost impossible to evaluate. In light of that, how can ethics be included in statesmen decisions in international affairs?

Ethics should be applied in IR by adhering to new approaches in the field of applied ethics. There are two similar approaches within the field of applied ethics that are gaining weight: "contextualism" and "casuistry". The former approach argues that it is unnecessary to search for a universally valid ethical theory; moral problems should be resolved within concrete circumstances by appealing to relevant historical and cultural traditions. In addition, the latter, which is a revived ancient practice, attempts to establish a plan of action to respond to particular facts — a form of "case-based reasoning". Casuistry focuses on action and not the rationale, and at the same time it reduces influence of prior bodies of precedent and explicit moral codes. Both approaches are unsystematic ways of evaluating ethical behavior.

However, there are two more dilemmas in being ethical in politics. First, the interpretation of ethical political behavior varies according to a statesman's interests and environment. The problem is that ethics do not only entail principles, but also need interpretation, choice, and action. Second, the implementation of ethical behavior in politics is extremely problematic since being ethical goes against a country's self-interest. Political ethics is like a pendulum that doesn't stop swinging between immorality and morality. This problems need to be addressed in the literature on the relation between ethics and IR, and also in the field of applied ethics. I challenge the field of practical ethics for mainly focusing on Biomedical, Environmental ethics, and political issues of public policy, being only limited to few outdated issues of IR, such as ethical concerns for the use of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, and neglecting pressing issues in IR. The field of applied ethics needs to be more concerned with current political on the international sphere.

I believe all human beings are endowed with the capabilities to lead an ethical life; they are rational creatures and when statesmen act immorally, they choose to take unethical decisions but not because ethics cannot be applied in politics. From my previous statement, it can be deduced that regardless of the amount of regulations and laws created to enforce statesmen to abide by ethical norms in inter-state relations, they'll only be ethical if they are willing to take this leap forward. Of course, being ethical in politics is a leap since their reasoning and all the conditions surrounding politicians stimulate them to pursue their national interest regardless of other ethical considerations. Politicians are under an obligation to act ethically in conformity with international ethical norms and principles. Statesmen should acquire moral as well as political awareness on ethics as an integral part in foreign policy.

The Pendulum is still swinging, and it will remain fluctuating until more progress is achieved in addressing IR ethical dilemmas by political theorists. Despite the fact that for a long time ethical considerations were ignored and neglected in international relations, I still do believe that ethics can be applied to politics in general and international relations in specific.

Notes

Stanley Hoffmann, is the Chair of the Center for European Studies at Harvard University since its creation in 1969 to 1995.

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