

Nature or Atoms? Reframing the IR Curriculum through Ethical Worldviews¹

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ABSTRACT: The international relations (IR) curriculum has long presented a dichotomy between the so-called “realist” and “idealist” positions. Idealists seek to embody universal norms of justice in foreign policy. Realists, by contrast, see competition between states, the balance of power, and relative advantage as basic to international politics. Though considered polar opposites, both the realist and idealist affirm the primacy of the nation state as a sovereign political unit, and so neither embraces cosmopolitanism in the strongest sense, i.e., the transcendence of national divisions as such.

Opening up the IR curriculum to such a radical possibility requires its reframing in terms of underlying, ethical worldviews. Under this lens, it becomes evident that the realist and idealist share far more in common than contemporary policy debates would suggest. It also points us toward the space for an *alternate* ethical worldview, provided by Stoic rationalism, which is more viable for grounding cosmopolitan thought.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY (IR) has perennially been a contest between two opposing tendencies, idealism and realism.² Put simply, idealism seeks to embody universal norms of justice in foreign policy. It further aims to promote international institutions (such as the World Court, EU, and ICC) in order to implement this goal, as well as to mediate the interests of diverse peoples. Realists, by contrast, see competition between states, the balance of power, and relative advantage as basic to international relations. They tend to harbor skepticism about international institutions, seeing them as ineffectual, naively utopian, or even as covertly promoting the interests of some states over others. Though considered polar opposites, both the realist and idealist share a belief in the primacy of the nation state as a sovereign

political unit, and so neither embrace cosmopolitanism in the strongest sense, i.e., the transcendence of national divisions as such.

Opening up the IR curriculum to such a radical possibility requires its re-framing in terms of underlying, ethical worldviews. Under this lens, it becomes evident that the realist and idealist share far more in common than contemporary policy debates would suggest. It also points us toward the space for an *alternate* ethical worldview, one derived from Stoic philosophy. In particular, it is the Stoic emphasis on a common and rational human nature that may well serve as the basis for cosmopolitan thought today. In short, this paper posits replacing “realism or idealism” with “nature or atoms” as the fundamental question of IR theory. This is to say, can a common human nature materially bind diverse peoples together, or will the atomic plurality of states remain an indelible fact of political existence?³

Establishing the intellectual similarities between idealism and realism will require an examination of two of their principle founding figures, Immanuel Kant and Thucydides, respectively. To be sure, these two figures could not at first seem more dissimilar. Immanuel Kant’s major contribution to IR idealism was his famous work, *Toward Perpetual Peace*. This was one of the first systematic programs for the permanent abolition of war, and the creation of a federation of states, presaging the League of Nations and the UN. Thucydides was not a modern figure at all, but rather an Athenian general and historian of the fifth Century BCE. His best known work is *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, which offers a dispassionate account of the conflict between imperialist Athens and the revolting Spartan League. Thucydides’ emphasis on political prudence, before all considerations of justice, led to his enthusiastic reception by certain Cold War-era realists, including E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Leo Strauss.⁴

However, while Kant and Thucydides offer opposing stances on foreign policy, they nonetheless have a great deal in common when it comes to their ethical worldviews. Specifically, each affirm three essential and interlocking principles: 1) Social Pessimism, 2) Moral Formalism, and 3) Political Pluralism. That is, both Kant and Thucydides see human beings as innately self-interested and even as having certain antisocial tendencies. Social interactions are thus akin to an atomistic play of forces—not grounded in any innate affinity, but rather the periodic collision of individual egos. As a consequence of this, both Kant and Thucydides conceive of ethical norms as formal checks on our otherwise egotistical and antisocial natures. They are a way of binding together naturally agonistic elements. This same dynamic is writ large on the geopolitical scale, where international norms of justice stand in opposition to the natural tendency of states to ruthlessly seek their own advantage at the expense of their neighbors.

Kant and Thucydides certainly disagree as to what *extent* considerations of justice can mediate the relations between states. In this, Kant is extremely hopeful that international conventions can reign in excessive national ambitions, while Thucydides and the realist tradition are decidedly less confident. However, in neither case is it imagined that the very plurality of nations, and their disparate

interests, can ultimately be overcome. Human nature cannot be perfected, but at most governed. Never can there be a true unity amongst peoples, but at most a tentative coexistence. For both Kant and Thucydides, and their attendant traditions, the world will forever remain a “political pluriverse.”⁵

Recognition of this common, underlying position allows one to see the need for an alternate worldview for sustaining a true cosmopolitanism. Here the Stoic tradition presents itself as just such an obvious, albeit neglected, alternative. For the Stoics were the original systematizers of cosmopolitan thought.⁶ Crucially, their philosophy denies the moral formalism common to both Kant and Thucydides. For them, there is no stark separation between facts and values, nature and norms. Human nature is indeed egoistic. Yet this egoism is not seen as an obstacle to sociality, but rather its necessary condition. For it accords with our material self-interest to seek out others who share in our rational natures. Human beings have an immediate, innate drive toward community with one another, what later Enlightenment philosophers would call a *sensus communis*.⁷

For the Stoics, a “political monism” thus overcomes the plurality of nations and the dualism between morality and matter. This difference in worldview, though philosophical, is not merely academic. It broadens the horizon of live possibilities when it comes to international relations. For on the Stoic view, cosmopolitanism is not a utopian ideal, but instead a legitimate political goal. It consists not of the impossible binding together of inherently disparate elements, but instead the removing of artificial barriers and divisions imposed upon an innately social human nature. In this, the Stoic alternative at once gives new grounding to the cosmopolitan ideal, while also freeing the IR curriculum from its stifling realist/idealist binary.

Social Pessimism

Certainly, standard readings will resist the claim that Kant and Thucydides share a view of human nature. After all, Thucydides’ realism sees a sort of energetic savagery as basic to human existence. It is on this view, that “the primary or fundamental fact is movement or unrest, and that rest is derivative; that the primary and fundamental fact is barbarism, and that Greekness is derivative; in a word, that war, and not peace, is the father of all things.” Moreover, it was central to Thucydides’ dispassionate realism that human beings operate in a morally inert universe; For the Gods do not avenge injustice (Strauss 1989b: 101). There exists only the natural struggle for dominance and mastery, anticipating a species of social Darwinism.

Kant, on the other hand, considers the lawless freedom of the barbarian to be a “denigration of humanity.” (Kant 2006c: §8:354) He also envisions human beings as operating under a moral teleology, wherein the flourishing of humanity is the final purpose of nature. Ethical intentions are rewarded in the long run, and immoral aims are ultimately self-defeating, whether in this life or the next. Kant’s position appears quite far from the sober diagnosis of the realist; Instead it

embodies the liberal maxim that, “though the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends toward justice.”

A closer look, however, reveals Kant to hold a basic pessimism about human nature no less than Thucydides himself. For if Kant sees barbarism as a denigration of the human ideal, then barbarism is nonetheless an apt description of humanity *as it actually exists*. According to him, the potential for radical evil (i.e., the willful prioritizing of self-interest over moral duty) is inherent in all human beings. And this fact has real world implications, from local acts of personal immorality to mass atrocities on the order of slavery and genocide. History, he says, reveals this evil inclination through a “multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human deeds parades before us.” (Kant 1998b: §6:32–34) Brutality and the readiness to go to war, appears to be an essential aspect of human nature, “and seems even to count as something noble.” (Kant 2006c: §8:365) And while he stops short of endorsing the fact, Kant recognizes that such brutality has indeed been integral to the progress of human civilization itself (Kant 2006a: §7:85–86).

This last point is especially instructive. It suggests that the difference between Kant and Thucydides (and we may extrapolate to the idealist and realist traditions as-such) is not owing to a disparate view of human nature. Nor is it owing to a denial, on the part of the idealist, that violence and force may have ultimately positive effects. Quite to the contrary, the difference lies mainly on the idealist assumption that conflict between peoples leads ultimately to the flourishing of mankind. Indeed, Kant even credits warfare for propagating human habitation throughout the globe (Kant 2006c: §8:364). Natural antisocial interactions, according to Kant, are the very whetstone of human excellence.

For this reason one should thank nature for their quarrelsomeness, for their jealously competitive vanity, and for their insatiable appetite for property and even for power! Without these all of the excellent natural human predispositions would lie in eternal slumber, undeveloped. Humans desire harmony, but nature knows better what is good for their species: it wills discord. (Kant 2006b: §8:21)

Kant does not deny the “survival of the fittest” picture painted by Thucydides, nor his proto-social Darwinism. For him, “the state of nature (*status naturalis*) is not a state of peace among human beings . . . but a state of war.” (Kant 2006c: §8:348–349) Indeed, if Thucydides’ claim is that “war, and not peace, is the father of all things,” then Kant is in full agreement. For even tranquil social order is often the child of war, competition, and anti-social propensities.

It is just the same with trees in a forest: each needs the others, since each in seeking to take the air and sunlight from others must strive upward, and thereby each realizes a beautiful, straight stature. . . . All culture, art which adorns mankind, and the finest social order are fruits of *unsociableness*, which forces itself to discipline itself and so, by a contrived art, to develop the natural seeds to perfection (Kant 2006b: §8:22).

Again, the only difference is that, unlike the fully naturalistic picture of evolution, these natural mechanisms exist in the context of a teleological end; i.e., the ultimate flourishing of humanity. Thucydides' realism, by contrast, makes no such providential assumptions, no such apology or excuse for the barbarism evident in nature and politics. This is simply the way things are.

Though even on this point, the two positions are not so far apart as they may seem. For Kant never claimed (indeed, he openly criticized) the idea that the mechanisms of nature are themselves fully intelligible, or that the analysis of them can *prove* the existence of a wise, governing God (Kant 1998a: A620/B648). When it comes to the observation of Nature, Kant does not counsel knowledge, but only hope. That worldly mechanisms lead to the ultimate end of human flourishing is not based on an intelligible nature itself, but rather a moral supposition.

[R]eason is not enlightened enough to survey the entire series of pre-determining causes that foretell with certainty the happy or unhappy consequences of humankind's activities in accordance with the mechanism of nature (although it does let us *hope* that these will be in accord with our wishes). (Kant 2006c: §8:370)

Thus, nature, and human nature in particular, is equally brutish in the eyes of both traditions. The moral teleology which the idealist sees as guarantying the good result of such brutality is, properly speaking, something *external* to the material world itself, as is the supposition that personal morality is ultimately rewarded. These are moral suppositions placed on top of nature, rather than seen in nature; they are assumed not because nature or history is empirically good, but precisely because it is empirically fallen.⁸

In the face of nature and history, in the face of the thorough immorality of nature and history, Kant was, like every good German of the old stamp, a pessimist; he believed in morality, not because it is demonstrated in nature and history, but in spite of the fact that nature and history continually contradict it. (Nietzsche 1997: 3)

Pessimism is equally present at the root of both the realist and idealist traditions.

Moral Formalism

The baseness of human nature, in turn, affects the way each tradition conceives of morality. On the realist side, Thucydides' formalism draws a contrast between human conventions of right, "nomos," and human nature, "physis." (Thucydides 2009: 560) Nomos, or convention, is in the final analysis incapable of reigning in human nature entirely. When conventions breaks down, the default patterns of human behavior take over. It is for this reason that Thucydides, always the keen observer of human traits, was especially interested in instances of famine, plague, and other such crises. For it is in these extreme cases, so he thought, that the façade

of our sociality is dropped and our fundamentally self-interested constitutions are laid bare (Thucydides 2009: 48, 162–166, 233–237).

Thucydides, however, was no amoralist, nor should the realist tradition be saddled with the stereotype of amoralism. Rather, Thucydides takes the classical, conservative viewpoint that one ought to respect moral conventions whenever possible (Thucydides 2009: 45–7; Strauss 1989b: 90). Only when it comes to matters of foreign policy, this is indeed possible only within the very narrow limits of political prudence. For in this domain, force and the balance of power are the ultimate guarantors of geopolitical success and security.

It would at first appear that Kant's ethical view completely differs from that of Thucydides. And certainly, there are genuine dissimilarities. Most notably, Kant sees morality as having all priority before political calculation. "Politics must bend the knee before [moral] right." (Kant 2006c: §8:380) Put otherwise, Kant sees morality as the limit to politics, and not the other way around, as with Thucydides. What's more, Kant is no conventionalist when it comes to his ethics. Moral imperatives arise from our ability to rationally access the moral law, and this moral law is said to be both eternal and common to all intelligent beings.

However, once again, drawing a diametrical opposition between the two is also incorrect. For while Kant does not base his morality on human convention, he offers us merely another species of moral formalism. Indeed, from the beginning his goal was to set out a "pure moral philosophy" which abstracts from the material constitution of human beings, neither basing his ethics on innate self-concern, nor the natural seeking out of pleasure (Kant 1996: §4:389). Reason, for Kant, is limited to discovering a moral law, i.e. his "categorical imperative," which is something entirely distinct from the laws determining either human nature or nature at large. The latter are beyond the realm of our sure knowledge, and cannot serve as the basis for identifying what is ethically right. Thus in Kant, no less than Thucydides, there is a conceptual divorce between knowledge of our material natures, and the formal rules which govern our actions in a normative sense.

That morality is conceived as formal convention or imperative has serious implications. Most significantly, it highlights the importance of choice and culpability. For if ethical behavior is cast as a rule, rather than as a manifestation of our innate sociality, then it becomes a genuine matter of volition as to whether we choose to follow such moral strictures or not. Both Thucydides and Kant thus reject the classical rationalist view that we invariably seek the good unless overcome by external circumstances or cognitive limitations, i.e., that even "the most despicable actions of the most despicable demagogue or tyrant can ultimately be understood only as an extreme perversion, due to ignorance" (Strauss 1989b: 100). For them, it is not circumstances or ignorance that explains antisocial behavior, but instead a willful choice to flout the rules of social decency, i.e., to illicitly place one's own needs above those of other people.

When we step back from this picture, we see that both Kant and Thucydides, the idealist and realist, engage in a sort of double formalism, that is, a double

departure from naturalistic ethics. For not only is morality separate, even opposed, to natural human tendencies. It is also the case that the domain of human morality is, itself, divorced from nature at large. For the part of humanity which concerns moral duty is precisely the part which is wholly free and culpable—a moral conscience, transcendent of the intelligible, deterministic laws which govern the rest of nature. As Kant unequivocally put it, “if there is no freedom and no moral law . . . and everything that happens or could happen is a mere mechanism of nature,” then “the concept of right is an empty thought” (Kant 2006c: §8:372). In both Kant and Thucydides, the human race is not part of nature entirely, but rather set apart as an *imperium in imperio*, a special “state within a state,” replete with its own set of distinct ethical laws. Basic to both the realist and idealist traditions is this formalism, which not only severs human morality from nature, but as a consequence of this, conceives of all notions of right as *opposed* to our natures. Ethics is a rule to limit, or be limited by, our natural self-interest; but in no case are they ever identified with one another.

Political Pluralism

At its base, moral formalism asserts that what actually exists is a play of interests, and that appeals to unity and accord are not grounded in nature, but rather imposed upon it. This has not only personal, but also global, implications. Namely, whatever accord there is between the various nations of the world cannot be seen as the product of a common, humanitarian impulse, but rather the mutual assent to certain formal conventions of justice. Yet this mutual consent amongst nations already presupposes the continued independence of these states from one another, that is, their continued existence as both separate and sovereign entities. For norms of justice, being formal, cannot transform the political pluriverse into a unity, but at most seek to facilitate the coexistence of irreducibly diverse states and interests.

Thucydides, for his part, is quite explicit on this point. Basic to his outlook is the notion that “politics is impervious to philosophy.” (Strauss 1989b: 99) Speculation, including speculation as to the good, is wholly parasitic upon the real-world dealings of prudent actors. This, indeed, is the intellectual basis for his moral conventionalism. Politics is not, as Plato assumed, predicated upon a search for “the good life” or the best form of state. The inverse is in fact true: What is good is simply the particular national interest, and those commonsensical conventions which allow for the regulation of daily life within the polis. Conceptions like “the good life” or the best state have no reality unto themselves, but are mere abstractions from a political landscape which is, itself, always concrete and particular. Such high-flown and universal notions are mere reflections of what is typically considered the “low” art of practical politics. But it is precisely this sort of local prudence which exists for its own sake, independently, and in all its concreteness. “The lower is independent of the higher, but the higher is dependent on the lower. The high is weak; the low is strong.” (Strauss 1989b: 100)

On this view, the realist perceives a “universal world ethos” as something with only the faintest connection to reality as it actually exists. Universal sociality can never be a truly animating force in the world, but only an impotent generalization of parochial ties and mores. For moral convention is simply the codification of cultural norms. In the absence of a genuine world culture, notions such as the “human community,” or the attendant belief in “universal human rights,” are nothing more than parodies of local social customs, deracinated from their proper contexts.

It is thus the plurality of cultures which, in the final analysis, nullifies the cosmopolitan hypothesis in the eyes of the IR realist. This, to be sure, is a highly contentious claim to make. For the orthodox understanding of IR realism, especially in Anglophone countries, has generally been one which totally abstracts from all cultural considerations whatsoever. The classic view of realism is that it conceives the various countries of the world as akin to chess players, each basically identical to all the others in their singular pursuit of national advantage. Fuzzy things like culture and ideology are really window-dressing on what is actually a global exercise in game theory.

Nonetheless, this standard reading neglects the inner logic of Thucydides’ work, as well as those modern IR realists who follow its lead, Leo Strauss first among them. The plurality of political states is, on their view, predicated on a plurality of distinct cultures or “ways.” What’s more, these folkways are not mere examples of some universal “form of the good,” as Platonic rationalism would have it. They are instead *sui generis*, and the fidelity to them by the inhabitants of a given polis is not speculative, but rather emotive and pre-critical. As Strauss would put later put it:

there is one way, among the many ways, which is particularly important, and that is the way of the group to which one belongs—our way. Now, our way is, of course, the right way. And why is it right? The answer: Because it is old and because it is one’s own. (Strauss 1989a: 254)

Here we have not only a realist denial of cosmopolitanism, but also an early doctrine of “national exceptionalism” as its true basis.

Of course, it is not only that the realist finds cosmopolitanism to be an unlikely outcome of world politics; it is also a highly undesirable one. It would mean the coming of a “universal and homogenous state,” the death knell of both political life and culture. (Strauss 2000: 146, 168, 175) For the displacement of individual nations as the basic political unit would have to be predicated upon suppressing the various, distinct cultures which gave rise to them in the first place. Cosmopolitanism is thus not the liberation from parochial ties, or the transcendence of national antipathies, but instead a negation of the distinct national spirits which are indispensable for animating political life to begin with. The underwriting of a world ethos by actual power could only amount to a stifling despotism.

Once again, one may resist any comparison of the realist’s view to that of Kant, so often painted today as the standard-bearer of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism. To be sure, Kant rejects the notion that there are as many “goods” as there are

nations. He also rejects the sort of “political existentialism” which sees the affirmation of one’s people as more basic than any universal moral criterion. The tradition of IR idealism, which Kant inaugurated, is based squarely on the notion that there is one, universal form of justice to which diverse peoples can, and indeed *should*, voluntarily pledge themselves. In this, Immanuel Kant is rightly considered a major intellectual forerunner of the idea of universal human rights.

Indeed, Kant invokes the idea of cosmopolitanism numerous times throughout his writings. Nonetheless, he appears to have a surprisingly limited sense of what the term actually amounts to. To begin with, he denies that cosmopolitanism involves the manifestation of a universal state, or that individual nations be displaced as the premier political units. Kant advocates instead for the creation of a voluntary federation of sovereign states, committed to abolishing war (a *foedus pacificum*) (Kant 2006c: §8:356). Cosmopolitan right entails, not the vaunted idea of “world citizenship,” but rather the limited notion of safeguarding an individual’s right to hospitality while in foreign lands. However, this stricture is also quite limited, as it does not include the right to seek citizenship in one’s country of choice, nor even permanent residency (Kant 2006c: §8:358). Of course such a “cosmopolitan” right does not conflict with, but rather presumes, the persistence of distinct and sovereign states with potentially conflicting national interests and foreign policies.

Ironically, given that his manifesto is entitled *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant appears to argue that the potential for war is wholly unavoidable in all cases. For either a multiplicity of nations persist, or else they are subsumed within a world state. If multiple nations do exist, then war is always a possibility. For no voluntary pact between them, i.e., no formal agreement, could necessarily exclude the possibility that any one of them could renege at any time (Kant 2006c: §8:367). Yet, asserts Kant, the emergence of a world government is *also* a state of war, since it entails that one coercive power would exist to assert force upon all others (Kant 2006c: §8:349 footnote).

Thus war, or the potential thereof, is in all cases unavoidable. Kant nevertheless argues that the former scenario of a multiplicity of nations is far preferable to a universal state. In this, his reasoning is quite similar to the “culturalist” strain of IR realism outlined above. For it is Kant’s view that the very design of nature involves “keeping peoples from intermixing and of separating them,” one from the other. Specifically, differences in language and religious custom ensure that the earth is populated by a plurality of distinct cultures. It is owing to these cultural differences, themselves often predicated on varying geographies and climates, that different internal political constitutions emerge (Kant 2006c: §8:361–368).

Thus Kant, no less than Thucydides or Strauss, sees “the political” as emerging from distinct cultures based on highly local and concrete factors. A world state, therefore, can only be destructive to political life. The persistence of a plurality of nations, he claims, is “better than the blending of these states into a power that overgrows the existing ones and ultimately turns into a universal monarchy.” A

“soulless despotism” would emerge since it would involve negating the original, vital contributions of the distinct peoples which originally made it up (Kant 2006c: §8:367–368). Abhorrence of the “universal homogenous state” is then a feature of Kant’s idealism, every bit as much as the realism of a Strauss or Thucydides.

However, it is at this point that, true to form, Kant’s moral teleology takes over. Through this supernatural mechanism, Kant seeks to reconcile the agonistic picture just laid out with the moral aim of world peace. Nature does divide humanity through differences in culture, religion, and language, and yet this is supposedly owing to an ultimately good and wise design.

These kinds of difference have the tendency to lead to mutual hatred and serve as a pretext for war, but in the wake of increasing culture and humankind’s gradually coming within reach of an agreement regarding their principles, they lead to mutual understanding and agreement to peace. Yet this peace is not . . . despotism . . . brought about and secured by the weakening of all energies, but rather by means of the liveliest competition among the same. (Kant 2006c: §8:367–368)

This is to say, it is the very divisions among humanity which, in animating interactions between peoples, will ultimately lead to their congress with one another. Differences may lead to war and conflict, but Kant hopes that in the wake of conflict there can be a greater understanding amongst peoples than if they had been left in a state of peaceful isolation from one another. Analogous to this, for Kant, is economic competition and trade. In this, he can be seen as a forerunner of the modern “capitalist peace theory” predicated on the notion that narrow material self-interest can, as if through an invisible hand, yield peace dividends (Kant 2006c: §8:364–368). Once again, we see Kant accepting the Thucydidean position that competition and war are “the father of all things,” albeit with a far more providential tone. For he sees discord and competition as increasing the regular contact between peoples to the point where, eventually, cosmopolitan norms can emerge to police their common affairs.

Critical to note in all this is the vitalism implicit in both the realist and idealist positions. Namely, it is the particular *national spirit* which gives life to a political state. Hence the displacement of individual states entails a sort of violence against culture itself. For the realist, this implies a conservative nationalism; that is, a pre-critical faith in the simple and irreducible goodness of one’s own nation. For the idealist, it implies a liberal internationalism where norms of justice can regulate the exchanges between diverse nations which, nevertheless, remain irreducibly self-interested and distinct. In neither case is the transcendence of individual states envisioned as plausible, let alone desirable.

The Stoic Alternative

If neither realism nor idealism embrace cosmopolitan thought to its fullest extent, the Stoic worldview stands as a promising alternative. The reason for this can be

found in its fundamentally differing views of human nature and sociality. We have seen that both Kant and Thucydides accept a moral formalism which sees natural self-regard and social norms as opposing forces. We have seen, moreover, that this formalism is what blocks the thought of a true cosmopolitanism, and the notion of “world citizenship” based on genuinely common interests. It is precisely on this point, though, that the Stoic worldview stands in clear contrast. For the Stoa agree that human beings are ineluctably self-interested and egoistic; yet this self-interest is not the negation of sociality, but rather its very basis.

Central to Stoic ethics is the notion of “*oikeiosis*.” This term is sometimes translated as “appropriation” or “familiarization.” The doctrine of *oikeiosis* holds that each individual has an original, necessary impulse toward her own self-preservation, and also those things which will aid in this self-preservation. What’s more, all animate beings in seeking their own welfare both appropriate the world around them, and in so doing, project themselves outward into the world. One may say, we “make ourselves at home” in the world as a condition of our very survival.⁹ The Stoa, being always the ethical naturalists, held this process to be common to not only human beings, but all animate creatures and even plants, e.g., in the taking in of air and sunlight and the spreading of roots as a precondition of their growth. However the doctrine has special import for humans, since it is also the basis for our sociality and concern for others.

An immediate reason for this is that people are, by their constitution, highly dependent beings (a point traditionally deemphasized by much of Western political thought). We require, not only food and shelter for our survival, but also the care, companionship, and cooperation of others. Indeed, the more we desire to assert ourselves in the world, the greater will be our familiarization and interdependence with other individuals. Hence the Stoic philosopher Hierocles imagined each person as having many concentric circles drawn around them, each representing a segment of the human race to which one could feel ethical concern. The smallest, and most proximate circle includes only oneself and one’s immediate household, while larger circles would include one’s extended family, and then friends, then people of one’s region, nation, and finally, humanity as a whole. (Ramelli 2009: 91) The process of *oikeiosis*, then, involves the steady collapsing of these circles into oneself, or what is the same, the steady expansion of one’s self-concern to include ever greater sections of humanity.

One must immediately note here that this picture is in contrast to the accidental coordination of interests as proposed by Kant and the idealist tradition. For it is not that the narrow pursuit of one’s welfare may lead, as if by some providential force, to the congress of people through mechanisms like trade or conquest. Rather, the Stoic picture asserts that mutual interdependence and direct cooperation are the necessary requirements for our very survival, not to mention our flourishing (Seneca 2011: 4.18.2–4). Human beings are innately social, that is, social not by accident but by essence.

However, even this fact of interdependence is not enough to explain the bold universalism of Stoic ethics. For though we may be dependent creatures, very few of us truly require the comradeship of unknown people living across the globe, at least on a daily basis. Our requirements of mutual care and support are more likely limited to those we interact with on a local level. Yet Stoic ethics asserts something bolder than this sort of pragmatic coordination of local interests; it affirms instead that the interests of one are well and truly the interests of all. Indeed, their claim is that for individual acts of cooperation to occur at all, for there to be any confluence of interests ever, this must be predicated upon something indelibly common to all humanity in the first place.

On the Stoic worldview, this common possession of humanity is our faculty of reason. Stoic rationalism holds that reason (*logos*) is not merely a common, formal procedure employed by people. Nor, as with Kant, is it something we project onto the world. It is rather a material force. Reason not only governs the world as natural law, but at the same time constitutes the very intellects of all human beings, regardless of their culture, gender, or geography. This fundamental compatibility amongst all rational beings is why we can have a genuine ethical identification with all members of the human race, regardless of their proximity to us (Marcus Aurelius 2011: iv.4). It explains why Hierocles' concentric circles extend to all of humanity, and not just those we meet face to face. In sharing a common rationality, we necessarily see ourselves in each other. Insofar as we ineluctably desire our own welfare, so we desire the welfare of all others just as immediately and directly.

A crucial implication of this worldview is that, strictly speaking, there can be no conflict of interests between rational actors. For there are countless diverse passions and appetites, but there is only one Reason. Questions of taste and aesthetics may be eternally insoluble. Traditional mores and customs may violently clash. Yet the counsels of reason are the same for all in guiding their actions. As Cicero put it, "those who have reason in common must also have right reason in common" (1971: 11). The rational pursuit is that one which seeks the best for humanity as a whole, and so on this view there can be no such thing as rational conflict.

This ethical stance may have a certain plausibility when it comes to personal morality. Yet it will be met with extreme incredulity if applied to the domain of international relations. Consider, for example, the ongoing conflict between China and Vietnam over control of the South China Sea. Here we evidently do have a struggle between two rational state actors, not overcome by irrational emotion, but instead guided by the prudent pursuit of such things as shipping lanes, fishing rights, natural resources, and strategic defense positions. This, and countless other examples, seems to thwart the Stoic view that rational actors cannot conflict, and support instead the realist position that the international scene is a play of irreducible interests and rivalries.

However, such a realist diagnosis clarifies nothing. For the mere "irreducibility" of diverse interests not only fails to explain how nations can sometimes

cooperate; it equally fails to explain the bases for conflict. That national interests are merely self-encapsulated and diverse could only explain the total indifference of one state toward another, or at most their chance encounters with one another, as if atoms in a void. However, what IR theory is meant to elucidate is, rather, the regular and often predictable conflicts between states. Simply pointing out the clash of national interests is not sober theorizing, as it may seem, but an abdication of theory itself. For theory is meant to uncover the underlying reasons for phenomena, and this merely points out the most obvious and superficial appearance of things, or what's worse, merely reproduces the subjective self-assessment of the political actors themselves. If IR theory *is* to identify the ground for international conflict, then we paradoxically come full circle to the monistic and rationalist vision of the Stoa. For conflict can only ever happen when there is, in a manner of speaking, an identity of rational interests. That is, it is only possible to speak of "rational conflict" if the objects of that conflict are held in common by both actors, in this case, the desire for material resources and security.

However, since rational contests such as this one are based on some intelligible end, they are in fact resolvable. As we saw, the perfectly rational Stoic sage would simply counsel us to subordinate our narrow interests to the objective interests of the whole of humanity. As Seneca put it, "we assign to the wise man a state worthy of him, that is, the whole world." (Seneca 2015: Ep. 68) There must be some maximally good way, from a universal perspective, for maritime rights to be divided, or natural resources to be allotted between nations.

The very odd implication of this, however, is that the Stoic sage would in some cases desire a foreign policy which disadvantages his own nation, should this policy benefit humanity more generally. This is consistent with the view that each individual is merely a constituent part of an organic whole, that "humanity" is not a mere abstraction, but something more real and persisting than individual states themselves. On this view, subordinating national ambitions to the greater good is not truly self-sacrifice, but rather a form of enlightened self-interest. As Chrysippus put it, "For my foot too, if it had intelligence, would have an impulse to get muddy." (Sedley 2003: 175) As such, it may count as virtue for a general to sabotage his own military campaign in order to shorten the war and save lives, or for a country to cede territory and natural resources should this benefit more people overall.

Yet, nations are not, as a rule, in the business of such altruism. Thus, a Stoic ethics appears to be totally inapplicable to the modern domain of IR, and forever a relic of antiquity. Indeed, even in antiquity, the universalism and equanimity of the Stoic sage was often derided as wholly impractical, and the Stoa themselves considered their sage to be "as rare as the phoenix." (Brouwer 2014: 106) But if our Stoic sage is so rare, what application can Stoic wisdom possibly have to mass politics or foreign affairs?

Perhaps, actually, a great deal. The reason for this is primarily technological. For the first time in human existence, our global productive capacity has outpaced

what is needed for human subsistence. We have begun to solve the problem of scarcity. (Even if the fruits of this progress are hardly felt evenly throughout the world.)¹⁰ We can, as of this date, produce more than enough food, clothing, and other necessities for each person living on the planet. What's more, the limits to producing most consumer goods and medicines has become, not a problem of productive capacity, but rather profitability. From a strictly technological perspective, for the first time as a species, we can now speak of the rational administration of capital, land, and resources, without this involving a specific detriment to some large section of humanity.

To the contrary, a global economy which rationally produces for human need, and is freed from the artificial requirement of profit-making, may greatly increase the material standing of all. These gains may far outweigh whatever relative advantage one class currently has over another under our condition of self-imposed scarcity. By way of analogy, we may consider the fact that the material wellbeing of a feudal lord of the twelfth century was paltry compared to the middle class denizen of the twenty-first. If this hypothesis were to be proven true (a question for the political economist no less than the ethicist), then the "maximally good" could now mean not only what would be marginally better for most, but instead what is actually best for each. This, ironically, makes a Stoic ethics uniquely applicable to modern mass politics. For our superlatively rational Stoic sage, concerned only with the good of the whole, could possibly have lived in any place and at any time. (Though he would be an eccentric anywhere.) Yet only in the last century or so has the "global interest" been an immediate and material fact, popularly accessible. For today, one needs only a mortal degree of human reason to recognize it.

This, then, presents a Stoic politics, and a Stoic theory of international relations, as something both viable and different from the realist's hawkish nationalism, or the idealist's liberal internationalism. Instead of the irreducibility of conflicting interests, or the indirect coordination of these interests through trade and economic competition, it counsels a third option: That is the direct cooperation between rational agents beyond state boundaries, the rational direction of production for human need, and the rational management of both territory and global resources for the same. This, to be sure, has immediate implications for cosmopolitan thought as well. For states as they exist now are (externally) the guardians of a particular national interest, and (internally) the guardians of particular class interests. Perhaps such parochial interests are now outdated. If so, then the nation state itself is now a fetter upon the realization of the global human interest, which is today not only an abstract idea, but an emerging, social reality. A twenty-first-century stoic politics is thus not only cosmopolitan, but cosmopolitan in a way not even imagined by the ancient Stoa themselves. A recognition of their ethical worldview may well serve to expand the IR curriculum beyond its traditionally accepted dichotomies.

Notes

1. An early draft of this paper was presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Ethics Across the Curriculum, Clemson University, Greenville, South Carolina, October 8th, 2015. The paper in its present form benefited greatly from the comments received at this presentation.

2. This contest between IR realists and idealists reached its initial peak during the “First Great Debate” of the 1930s over the appropriate response to Nazi Germany. Since then, there have been other “great debates” and other proposals for escaping the idealist/realist binary. Yet the staying power of these labels is evident even in contemporary discourse, such as Henry Kissinger’s May 2005 New York Times opinion piece, titled simply “Realists vs. Idealists.”

3. The binary “nature or atoms” was one frequently posed by the Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (2011: iv.3, vi.24, vii.32, vii.50, viii.17, ix.28, xi.39, x.6, xi.18).

4. Indeed, this paper is primarily concerned with the modern reception of Thucydides’ work, rather than its ancient context. In particular, Thucydides’ *History* will be read through the influential appropriation by Leo Strauss, in the latter’s “Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History” (1989b).

5. This term “pluriverse” to describe the political world is borrowed from Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*. Its use by Schmitt, an arch realist and jurist for the Third Reich, is prima facie evidence that “political pluralism” as an idea is not necessarily identical to liberal toleration or idealism in foreign policy (Schmitt 1996: 53).

6. They were not the first cosmopolitans of antiquity. It was the cynic Diogenes who, after all, first spoke of “world citizenship,” or *kosmopolitês*. However, this was a rather negative concept having mostly to do with the rejection of local custom. It was only with the Stoa that cosmopolitanism became a richer, more positive idea, and one self-consciously based upon an overall metaphysics, ethical theory, and psychology.

7. The original Greek term, *koinonoëmosunē*, can be found in Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*. “Sensus communis” has been adopted by moderns to denote such varied ideas as common aesthetic taste to a common sense of humor. However, a strain of Enlightenment philosophy clearly identifies it with “moral sentiment” and “fellow-feeling” as in Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (2001: Vol. 1, Part III, §1).

8. For an analysis of Kant’s conception of fallen nature in relation to Lutheran theology, see Dennis Vanden Auweele’s “The Lutheran Influence on Kant’s Depraved Will” (2013).

9. This is fitting, as the root of this ethical term is “*oikos*,” which originally denoted the hearth of the ancient Greek home. (Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon 1996 ed: s.v. oikeosis).

10. The surplus of food production has often been emphasized by those NGOs currently combatting world hunger. See for example, Oxfam Canada, “There is Enough Food to Feed the World.”

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