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Virtue Ethics

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Virtue Ethics (VE) is a way of thinking about how to behave well which has not received a great deal of attention within the discipline of International Relations (IR) or the practice of international politics. Dominant approaches to international ethics focus on the identification or development of moral rules or duties (deontological approaches) or, to a lesser extent, the consequences of actions (consequentialist approaches). Virtue ethics, in contrast, emphasises the importance of moral character – in particular the possession of some combination of 'virtues', including practical wisdom – in determining right action, and understands right action with reference to concrete conceptions of the good, or human flourishing. The relevance of this for IR is not immediately obvious, as VE focuses on individual character traits rather than on the kinds of ethical concepts more familiar to us in IR and political theory, such as rights, rules and norms. However, both the rejection of rule-based ethics offered by VE, and the key place in virtue-based approaches for virtues, flourishing and practical wisdom, challenge us to think about international politics in new and often radical ways.[1]

Background

One of the most significant developments in contemporary IR has been the revival of interest in arguments concerning ethics. After years in which Walzian realist theory and political science methods dominated the discipline, many scholars are now concerned to discuss not (or at least not only) the ways that states, institutions and individuals *must* behave, given the constraints of the international system, but the ways that they *should* behave. This field of study (which is widely known as International Political Theory or IPT, but can also be described as global ethics, Hutchings 1999, Lang 2014) – has brought focus onto the duties that states have towards each other (Jackson 2000), towards their own citizens (Evans 2009), and towards foreign citizens (Wheeler 2000), as well as the universal rights that human beings may be able to claim against states, institutions and each other (Dunne & Wheeler 1999; Donnelly 2006; Vincent 1986; Shue 1980).

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Many international political theorists ground their work in the liberal philosophy of the Enlightenment – in particular that of Immanuel Kant – or build on the work of the political theorist who did most to bring Kantian thought into the twentieth century, John Rawls. Theorists in this tradition argue in favour of various forms of liberal universalist ethics and imagine various incarnations of a global liberal polity (for instance Beitz 1979; Caney 2005; Held 2004; O'Neill 2000; Pogge 2002). Following Kant's emphasis on the centrality of duty and rules to moral life, these theorists usually support the spread of international law and regimes codifying, in particular, the moral obligations states and individuals have in respect of human rights and conduct in conflict. This work has been tremendously important in putting ethics on the agenda in international politics, but it is based, as explained below, on problematic foundations. These foundations have been contested in numerous ways in recent philosophy and political theory, much of which has found its way into IPT (for instance Cochran 1999; Erskine 2008; Hutchings 1999, 2010). However, virtue-based approaches, which challenge the notion of moral obligation itself, have not yet been fully explored within IPT scholarship.

Before explaining the fundamentals of virtue ethics, this essay first sets out the context of its contemporary form. Interest in virtue ethics was revived in response to the refutations of moral obligation and of particular characterisations of moral arguments employed in modern moral philosophy, set out in the second half of the twentieth century. In response, virtue ethicists (most of whom are not 'theorists', which would be the usual shorthand, as they reject the value of theory in the study and practice of ethics), argue that character, practical reason and human flourishing are central to ethics – that the right question to ask when working out what it means to be ethical is not "what should I do" but "what sort of person should I be?". This position is explained and evaluated, after which the application of virtue ethics and its central concepts to IR, in particular IPT, is explored. The essay finishes with a discussion of possibilities for future research, arguing that virtue ethics offers us original ways to confront the kind of ethical dilemmas that we face in international affairs.

Recanting Kant: the problem of obligation

Virtue ethics is a diverse body of thought, developed over many centuries. Forms of VE were set out by Ancient Greek and Ancient Chinese philosophers and can be found within many religious traditions. Yet despite its prevalence as an ethical approach, VE was usurped in Western philosophy by approaches that judge right action either in reference to moral rules (deontology) or to the likely consequences of actions (consequentialism). Rather than giving equal weight to the various forms of VE which have found favour at different times (chapters by Kamtekar, Ivanhoe and Porter in Russell 2013 give excellent histories of VE), this essay focuses on contemporary VE and its relevance to IR.

The story of the recent resurgence of VE starts in the late 1950s, with attacks on the notion of moral obligation found in secular moral theory, particularly Kantian philosophy, and on the nature of moral claims. In 1958, Anscombe published what transpired to be an enormously influential article attacking modern moral philosophy and calling for a return to ancient concerns. Anscombe argues that modern approaches to ethics (principally Kantian and utilitarian) take a law-based approach – they see morality

as stemming from law of some form, and as centrally concerned with defining duties and obligations. This trend in morality towards a focus on obligation became embedded, according to Anscombe, due to the rise of Christianity, which saw morality as proceeding from divine law. Rather than thinking about morality in terms of the virtues, as the Greeks did, 'we' (Western analytic philosophers, and, following them, Western political theorists) began to think in terms of obligation: "[i]n consequence of the dominance of Christianity for many centuries, the concepts of being bound, permitted or excused became deeply embedded in our language and thought" (Anscombe 1981: 30). However, she argues, law conceptions of ethics only make sense if there is a law-giver – an authoritative agent or place from which the laws emanate and which acts as a foundation to our obligations. In the past, this was God, but in contemporary society we do not share a conception of God that would allow us to view him as an authoritative foundation for moral law. She dismisses the possibility of alternative law-givers, arguing that "the concepts of [moral] obligation, and [moral] duty … and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of ought, ought to be jettisoned if this if psychologically possible" (Anscombe 1981: 26).

Foot, also in 1958, published two articles equally as damning of the moral philosophy of the time (Foot 1958a; 1958b). Just as Anscombe exposed ideas of the 'right' as reliant upon an assumed authoritative legislator, so Foot attacked the idea that moral evaluations could be separated from a robust and shared concept of the 'good', in terms of human wellbeing. She shows that for ethical positions (on duties, rightness, obligations, goodness etc) to be intelligible (rather than simply logical), they cannot just be an expression of preference or approval. Rather, they must observe the commonly understood grammar inherent in each ethical concept, which links whatever it is that is being commended back to human flourishing in some relatively objective way. There is, for Foot, something concrete about morality, such that moral statements are connected to the factual rather than simply the interpretative, and can thus be judged as better or worse rather than only viewed as one among a range of equally plausible attitudes or manifestations of emotion.

These articles brought about something of a revolution in Western moral philosophy, and were followed by a more sustained critique of moral obligation and the relation of the right and the good developed by Bernard Williams. Williams took particular aim at Kant's 'morality system' and the damage to human ethical lives it threatens (Williams 1985: 174). Williams argued that the morality system is concerned to find general propositions about how to behave, through the ambitious use of the concept of obligation. It attempts to convert all of the ethical considerations that we may face in a situation (for instance, about responses to the situation that would be agreeable, or worthwhile, or heroic, as well as those which would be obligatory or demanded) into the language of obligation (Williams 1985: 179), and in doing so both impoverishes ethics as a rich and complex field of human practice, and also leads to an unjust focus on blame and blameworthiness. One of the fundamental assumptions behind Kantian morality is the freedom of the moral agent to act according to her reason. If agents are free and actions are voluntary, then actors who breach moral rules can be blamed (and, by implication, punished) for doing so. Williams was deeply sceptical about the kind of voluntary agency implied by the morality system as he thought it impossible to separate out the voluntary features of an action (the "focused, particularised judgment" that this is

the correct action to take) from the character-based or contextual features: "[t]here is a pressure within [morality] to require a voluntariness that will be total and will cut through character and psychological or social determination, and allocate responsibility on the ultimately fair basis of the agent's own contribution, no more and no less. It is an illusion to suppose that this demand can be met…" (Williams 1985: 194). This point leads to a critique of the 'purity' of morality, "its insistence on abstracting the moral consciousness from other kinds of emotional reaction or social influence" (Williams 1985: 195), in order to support the Kantian ideal that human existence can be just. Williams noted that Kant constructed a system in which the good things in life, which are distributed in a non-just way (happiness, talent, health and so on), are relegated to being secondary concerns. The ultimate value is the value of morality, and one gains moral value by trying to behave morally. Kant effectively denied the role of luck as being important in living a good life – if moral value is the ultimate value, we can control whether we achieve it, as we are all free to follow moral rules if we choose to do so. Pure justice, therefore, is possible in human affairs – a position rejected outright by Williams (1981).

The criticisms levelled at modern Western moral philosophy by Anscombe, Foot and Williams were persuasive to many who worked in the field. The seeds of discontent they sowed, coupled with their equally excoriating rebukes to utilitarianism as the most influential version of consequentialism (Anscombe 1958; Williams 1973; Foot 1983), led to a rejection of modern forms of moral reasoning in favour of a rereading of ancient ethics.

Rejecting rules, reviving virtue

The key difference between modern and ancient ethics, at least in the West, is in their central questions. Ancient Greek (and also Ancient Chinese, though this essay does not engage with Confucianism) thinkers were less concerned with the question "what should I do?" as they were with questions of "how should I live?" or "what sort of person should I be?". These questions suggest a different way to make moral judgments, based on an appraisal of what is 'good' (i.e. leads to flourishing) rather than what is 'right' (i.e. is obligatory from the point of view of a moral law or a calculation of consequences). The implications of this shift in view are substantial and lead (back) to a distinct type of ethics: virtue ethics.

There are as many varieties of virtue ethics as there are of deontology and consequentialism, and the chapter will not attempt to describe them all (see Foot 1978; 2001; Geach 1977; Hursthouse 1999; MacIntyre 2004; 2009; Nussbaum 1993; 1999b; 2000; 2006; Slote 2001; 2007; 2010; Swanton 2003 as a selection of the most important contemporary examples of VE; Sanford 2015 for a typology based on the relation of these approaches to Anscombe's challenge to modern moral philosophy; and Athanassoulis 2004 for a typology based on the relative importance of the good, of the sentiments, or of particular virtues within each approach). Rather, some of the commonalities between virtue-based accounts of ethics will be explored through discussion of the exponent of ancient virtue ethics drawn upon most frequently in recent work: Aristotle (384–322 BCE).

Contemporary virtue ethicists all locate themselves in some way relative to Aristotle, with the key tenets of Aristotelian ethics being broadly as follows: something is

good when it does its function well (so a good umbrella is one that keeps the rain off its owner, a good book is enjoyable or informative and so on) and the function of human beings, what sets us apart from other animals, is our reason. Therefore, the *telos* (purpose or goal) of human life is action in accordance with reason, as this will lead to *eudemonia,* or flourishing. Aristotle built from this an ethics detailing the virtues or character traits a person needs to develop in order to flourish (4th century BC/ 1999). He noted that there are two kinds of virtue: moral virtues, including courage, temperance, pride, gentleness, agreeableness, truthfulness, wittiness, modesty (Books III and IV) and virtues of the intellect: theoretical wisdom, science (*epistêmê*), intuitive understanding (*nous*), practical wisdom (*phronesis* or prudence), and craft expertise (Book VI).

The three concepts in Aristotle's work which define virtue ethics are virtue itself (*arête*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and flourishing (*eudemonia*). All subsequent virtue approaches include comparable concepts, and see a strong relationship between the three, though there are substantial differences between contemporary works only gestured at here. The virtues, in general, are seen as consistent and, once acquired, relatively fixed features of a person's character that lead to action. A person with a disposition towards kindness will tend to be moved by that disposition to act with kindness when appropriate, regardless of the costs of being kind in any given situation, and will be kind across time and to a range of different people. The virtues are acquired by practice – by performing virtuous acts repeatedly until being virtuous becomes habitual – and through processes of socialisation and education to encourage virtuous traits and discourage vicious ones. It is important to note in relation to modern moral philosophy that *arête* can also be translated as 'excellence' rather than 'virtue': virtues are not just those traits that we associate with moral behaviour as controlled by moral systems, but range much more broadly: "we reckon physical, intellectual and psychological qualities as virtues if they typically help people to live well and achieve great things; to create great works of art or scholarship, for example" (Cafaro 1998: fn11).

Wisdom or reason is central to human life, but it should not, according to virtue ethicists, be employed only to gain theoretical knowledge. It also has a key role to play in guiding conduct, particularly important once the notion of a system of moral obligations or rules which can be relied upon to dictate right action has been called into question. *Phronesis* involves the knowledge and understanding of *how* to act in the right way, which comes about through sensitivity to context and the ability to perceive the morally salient features of a situation, including the good of individuals or groups involved. But *phronesis* must harmonise with emotion or the sentiments – reason does not reign supreme. Perception of the morally salient features of a situation means being empathic as well as rational, and the virtuous person should find that her reasons to act and her desires to act are in accord. This means that a concept of moral obligation is largely redundant in VE, as we should not have to fight our desires in order to act in the right way (Slote 2010 is a major restatement of moral sentimentalism which argues that empathy rather than reason is the foundation of our moral intuitions).

The idea that acting virtuously brings happiness or emotional satisfaction to the virtuous person is central to *eudemonia* or flourishing. But flourishing does not consist in happiness (a subjective state), rather, it comprises an objective standard of a life worth living that is at least partly constituted by virtuous character and action (i.e. ethics and self-interest are not in opposition). Writers in this tradition have diverging ideas of what

human flourishing – the good – consists in, disagree about the extent to which standards of excellence can be divorced from their social context, and have varying views on whether individual flourishing is possible or whether it is the flourishing of groups, for instance families or communities, which should be aimed at to bring about *eudemonia* to the individual. However, all evaluate character traits according to the extent to which they bring about objective or intersubjective conceptions of human flourishing.

The contemporary exponent of virtue ethics whose work is most relevant to international political theory and action is Alasdair MacIntyre (2004; 2009), though his stated concern is with ethics and politics inside the nation-state. In After Virtue (2004), an impassioned attack on the paucity of ethical life in contemporary liberal capitalist societies, MacIntyre explains that modern moral philosophy lacks purchase because it has jettisoned the ideas of a human *telos* or purpose and, grounded on this, justice as a shared conception of social order. This leaves political theorists unable to find procedures to adjudicate between the competing claims of individuals who hold interests and values assumed to be unrelated to those of others. Compounding their lack of firm foundations, modern moral philosophers and political theorists make claims to (varied, often incommensurable) universal values, ignoring the importance of context. Ideas are stolen from past ages to bolster universalist claims without reference to the social and political context in which the theorists were acting: "Kant ceases to be part of the history of Prussia, Hume is no longer a Scotsman" (MacIntyre 2004: 11). Without a conception of *telos* or an understanding of context, ethics becomes empty, and moral claims become incoherent. To remedy this, MacIntyre surveys conceptions of virtue through Western moral philosophy, and argues that a form of virtue ethics centred around ethical practices is necessary to rejuvenate ethical life and enable human flourishing.

As has already been noted, VE is not a unified set of approaches, and MacIntyre's position is among the most radical in the field (Scanlon 2015). He rejects the notion that virtues and or a substantive human *telos* could be universal, and invokes the concept of a practice to build an ethics and a politics that acknowledge the central roles in human flourishing played by communities and particular moral and political traditions. It is precisely this recognition that there exists a plurality of ways of life, across time and space, that makes MacIntyre so relevant to IPT. In place of universals, he examines concrete practices to derive both the meaning of the good and the virtues required to flourish. A practice, for MacIntyre, is: "any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended" (MacIntyre 2004: 187). The links back to Aristotle are clear: excellences of character, or virtues, are required for, and partly constitutive of, flourishing. But flourishing is seen here as mediated through, or facilitated by, participation in social practices, such as playing football or chess, being a historian or a biologist, a painter or a musician. These practices provide two types of goods or benefits to those participating in them: external goods (money, status and power) and internal goods (particular physical, creative or intellectual skills, strategic vision, and types of knowledge). This leads to a definition of virtues as follows: "[t]he virtues … are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices

and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good" (2004: 219). It further leads to the necessity for those who seek to participate in practices to develop three particular virtues – justice, courage and honesty – because the goods of a practice can only be achieved by working together with others. Practices do additional ethical work, according to MacIntyre, providing narrative structure and intelligibility to our lives, reducing alienation and situating the self. And, connecting ethics to politics, practices presuppose the existence of a wider *polis* or community which supports them and values the goods internal to them, and is in turn strengthened as participants in the practices become cognisant of, and loyal to, the communal tradition embodied by those practices.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre rejects Aristotle's biological teleology that saw a substantive human *telos* as stemming from a natural faculty of reason, and makes an argument on sociological grounds in favour of a relatively weak *telos*: constancy or integrity. This leads to some frustration with his work, because despite his lengthy discussions of practices and virtues, there is very little in *After Virtue* that points us towards actual practices and virtues which might lead to actual human flourishing. In his more recent work he has revised his views and now argues it is impossible to entirely separate ethics from biology (MacIntyre 1999). The three key features of human existence that affect ethics, he now claims, are that we are dependent (on other people, particularly at the beginning and end of our lives, but also for the development of our ethics and our rationality), we are rational (a fact usually grossly over-emphasized in moral theory), and we are animals (with significant resemblance to and commonality with members of at least some other intelligent species). These three characteristics are linked, and MacIntyre argues that to flourish as an "independent practical reasoner" (which he now argues to be the human *telos*) we need to understand our deep vulnerability as animals and our mutual dependence with other humans throughout our lives for love, care, teaching, the development of reason and so on. The human condition, in this later work, is characterised as a form of "reciprocal indebtedness" (1999), and this new role for biology in his work enables MacIntyre to give far more content to his idea of the good than he could in *After Virtue,* including arguing in favour of specific virtues to help us grow towards independence (risk-taking, patience, courage and temperateness) and to help us live with our dependence (gratitude, courtesy and forbearance). While this essay does not explore the relation of virtue ethics to an ethics of care (Held 2005; Robinson 1999; Slote 2007), our dependence on others in the latest iteration of MacIntyre's virtue ethics, and the extent to which our good depends on our contribution to the development of the good in others, clearly demonstrates the relation between the two.

MacIntyre's work, while only one of a range of contemporary virtue-based approaches, illustrates many of the strengths and drawbacks of virtue ethics. One of the principal advantages of the approach is that whole people and whole lives are understood as relevant to ethics – not just the narrow range of choices or actions judged to be within the field of 'morality' or governed by the language of obligation. This fits more accurately with our everyday sense of flourishing – living well is not just about doing right or wrong, but incorporates all of the areas of life that form our character

(relationships with others, participation in practices and politics, performance in social roles and so on). Flourishing, including the development of virtues or excellences of character is a life-long task, and the need for narrative unity in human lives is taken seriously within a virtue-based approach, because: "the good life cannot be discussed if the sense of that life is lost in its atomization into a series of unrelated acts" (Cafaro 1998: fn6).

VE is also attractive because it enables us to talk about human lives with a vocabulary that extends beyond 'right' and 'wrong'. Using 'thick concepts' to guide action, such as what counts as just or unjust, loving or cruel, kind or mean, wise or foolish and so on, can significantly improve the quality of our ethical understanding within and between cultures or traditions (Williams 1985: 140-143).

We should not, however, expect that VE can bring us to substantial agreement over how to act in any abstract or general sense – there is nothing akin to the utility calculus or the categorical imperative within virtue ethics, nor methods to ground abstract moral claims such as implied contracts, imagined dialogue or reasonable consensus. The right thing to do in any situation is whatever it is that a virtuous person would do, but this is not determinable before the situation – the lived context – is known. We can talk with some abstraction about the nature of virtue, but only by developing *phronesis* and a virtuous disposition can we know how to act. Flourishing, however, is potentially a much more generalizable concept. There is a great deal of difference between virtue ethicists in terms of how objective they regard human flourishing to be – someone like Alistair MacIntyre, at least in *After Virtue,* saw flourishing as entirely dependent on the contexts and cultures (or, in his term, 'traditions') in which we find ourselves living and the practices in which we participate. Others, such as Martha Nussbaum (2000, discussed in more detail below) see flourishing in a way that is closer to Aristotle – something that can be read off the human condition rather than varying according to context. This position still does not deliver abstract guides to action, but it is grounded on a significant claim to objectivity that lends itself to rather more abstraction than most virtue ethicists are comfortable with.

One of the most striking consequences of a rejection of the Enlightenment moral tradition in favour of virtue ethics is the recognition that there is no natural justice or underlying harmony to human life. Human flourishing is vulnerable to events outside our control and luck plays a profound role in ethical life: bad things can happen to good people and acting virtuously cannot by itself guarantee happiness (see Athanassoulis 2005; Nussbaum 1986; Statman 1993; Williams 1981 for more on moral luck). Our vulnerability and interdependence mean that we need the protection of some form of society: the good life is only possible within a good *polis*, with social arrangements that are just and favourable to flourishing.

However, there are many who find it hard to accept that ethics is so all-encompassing, that there are no right answers to abstract moral questions and that moral life can be hostage to luck. VE does indeed place a heavy burden on the individual to develop ethical skills rather than obey moral rules, and ethics ends up as central to life rather than a side constraint upon the pursuit of interest. The 'action-guiding' objection tends to overestimate the level of agreement within modern traditions on what the morally right action in any given circumstance is, and underestimate the power of the language of vice to guide us not to be lazy, impatient, unkind, hypocritical, dishonest and

so on. It is, however, certainly true, and, advocates would contend, absolutely to be preferred, that VE does not proffer responses to moral questions before they have been asked, nor offer shortcuts to moral maturity (see Louden 1984; Schneewind 1990; Swanton 2003: Chapter 13 for more on indeterminacy). The response to the problem of moral luck is similarly plain: we may wish that life was ordered by a benevolent creator, and our flourishing under our control, but wishing cannot make it so. The good life is precious in part because it is so fragile and our fundamental vulnerability cannot be reasoned away.

Another objection to VE is the biological essentialism that Aristotelian versions of VE tend towards. Aristotle based his ethics on an essentialist vision of human nature. But the nature he ascribed to various humans – women and slaves in particular – we now find to be profoundly objectionable. So how seriously should we take Aristotelian views on the human *telos*? It is not essential to be essentialist in VE, and certainly not necessary to follow Aristotle in his views of particular types of human, but some objective standard of the good, however thin, is necessary. Objective here does not have to mean detached and applicable across all space and time, but susceptible to judgment with respect to concrete, embedded practices in particular contexts (across which the notion of human good may be interpreted differently but will not be unintelligible to those outside the practice). Defining the good, whether within practices or more generally, is as contentious as any attempt in modern moral philosophy to define moral rules. And even relaxing the requirement of objectivity of the good by linking it to practices does not ameliorate the problem: MacIntyre's work has been rightly criticised by feminist theorists for valorising misogynist traditions in which the common good is bad for women (Olin 1989: Chapter 3; Gutmann 1985). The role of tradition in flourishing within MacIntyrean VE has opened him up to the criticism of conservativism – reflecting the debates in political theory between Burkean or Oakeshottian positions on the inherent value to societies of tradition, and the views of more revolutionary thinkers such as Thomas Paine who recognised that traditions can become outdated or even harmful. Few would now defend slavery, or corporal punishment, or various forms of celebratory cruelty to animals, yet they were long-embedded traditions in numerous societies.

Linked to the issue of whether there is anything we can know to be true of human beings in terms of their flourishing, are questions about what we can know to be true about human behaviour. Virtue-based approaches assume that once a person has developed virtues, these dispositions will be constant and fixed (though sensitive to context), driving their bearer's actions even in the most difficult circumstances. Social psychologists argue, in contrast, that behaviour is determined more by situational factors than by stable character traits or virtues (Doris 2002). More recent research builds on this situationist critique to argue that even if stable character traits do exist, they are developed not because agents strive to develop them (as virtue ethicists argue), but in response to cultural norms, personal tastes or self-perception. If this is true, then virtues cannot have the kind of normative status required by virtue ethics - they have no more moral value in driving behaviour than a sweet tooth or an appreciation of jazz music (Prinz 2009). These are extremely powerful, and possibly devastating, critiques of virtue ethics, but they rely on answering empirical questions about behaviour about which there is deep disagreement (Sreenivasan 2013). Until the questions have been answered, there

remain good reasons to pursue a virtue-based approach, not least if the development of virtues can be shown to help actors resist situational pressures (Merritt 2000).

If virtues do indeed drive behaviour, isn't that behaviour self-centred, a kind of "moral grooming and preening" in the words of Jonathan Wolff, because the focus of the moral actor is on her own character and the achievement of her own flourishing rather than on the suffering of others (Wolff 2003: 121)? Responses to this objection to VE include the observation that a flourishing life is almost certain to include other-regarding virtues such as kindness, friendship and justice. Thinkers such as Iris Murdoch also show that a focus on the virtues actually helps us to see the "unself", to "pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is" (Murdoch 1985: 91). It is also worth considering, in response to objections of this kind, why we might feel that behaving ethically should not bring us fulfilment and why following our enlightened self-interest (rather than an abstract notion of moral obligation) should not benefit those around us. Kantian philosophy and Christian theology have led us to expect that being good should not feel good, and that pursuing our self-interest is narcissistic, hedonistic or otherwise vulgar. But rather than leading to societies in which being good is common, this kind of moralising has led to individualist, alienated Western cultures in which issues that were central to ancient ethical debate: the definition of the good life, how to achieve fulfilment in relationships, how to be a good friend, parent, citizen and the like (and which have not become any less interesting to us or central to our lives), have been relegated from intellectual debate into the realm of TV talk shows run by self-help gurus, fiction novels and Hollywood films. The denial of self has resulted in an "extraordinary inarticulacy" about what constitutes our good, which is hard to see as beneficial for anyone (Taylor 2003: 18).

Finally, and bringing us back to the rejection of the notion of moral obligation that stimulated the development of contemporary virtue ethics, can we really jettison moral rules entirely? Any empirical assessment of practices and contexts will show shared ethical standards or principles within them, suggesting that VE cannot do all of the ethical work in a society. It is hard to imagine a shared ethical life in which there were no principles: we would struggle, quite correctly, to regard someone as courageous for upholding the practice of slavery, and yet that judgment would be based on an ethical principle (the principle of equal concern and respect) rather than whether or not the actor was exhibiting a virtue. It would likely as not also be impractical to build a society in which there were no moral duties, as these can act as shorthand references for how to act virtuously in common situations. Sympathetic critics of VE argue not that rule-based moral theories should trump virtue-based accounts, but rather that the useful insights of virtue ethics are already incorporated into the best deontological approaches (Schneewind 1991; Nussbaum 1999). Onora O'Neill (1996a, developed more fully in 1996b), for instance, argues that virtue ethicists reject Kant too quickly, and that if we reread him, in particular the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1996), we are offered a vision of how duty and virtue can combine. However, even if virtue ethicists will admit that principle and duty play some role in ethical life, their position remains fundamentally distinct from that of the deontologist, given their commitment to the view that life cannot be lived well without character, situated reasoning and some conception of flourishing at its core.

Virtue ethics and international politics

As interesting as this approach to ethics is, the compendium project of which this essay is a part is concerned with international studies. What implications does the revival of virtue ethics have for the ways that states and people interact across borders? Answering this question is something of a challenge as there is virtually no literature on virtue in IR – no body of work that systematically or otherwise applies the insights of virtue ethics to the international realm. Virtue ethicists have been too little concerned, so far, with ethics beyond borders, and very few international theorists have made any attempt to think through virtue ethics as a specific approach to international problems.

Despite the dearth of publications on virtue ethics and international relations, there is more potential for constructive engagement than might at first sight be expected. The rejection of moral obligation that inspired contemporary VE sheds light on the failings and perverse effects of rules in the international sphere. And there are various ways in which flourishing, character and virtue appear in IR scholarship – sometimes in a way which explicitly draws upon virtue-based approaches, sometimes more tangentially.

Anscombe's critiques of 'law conceptions' of ethics and Williams' critiques of the 'morality system' highlight particular tensions in contemporary international affairs. The rise of liberalism in IR has led to ethical discourse being dominated by efforts to identify a universal morality in the form of rights that all human beings can legitimately demand from their own states and from foreign states, and by claims about the obligations owed by agents to each other in respect of their rights (Ainley 2008; Gaskarth 2012). A great deal of work has been done to turn these obligations into international law – an unprecedented legalisation of international affairs took place post 1945, to the point where some now argue that a 'global constitution' has emerged (Dunoff & Trachtman 2009; McDonald & Johnston 2005; Weller 2009). Certainly we now have a more complex and embedded web of international legislation than ever before. Yet despite the dramatic increase in law concerning human welfare (principally human rights law and laws on conduct in war) during the twentieth century, we also saw a steady swell of death and human suffering in conflict, genocide and atrocity. As Geoffrey Robertson notes: "[t]he twentieth century ended much as it began, in a world of small wars and occasional genocides combated by great powers if it suited their national interest" (Robertson 2006). The identification and codification of moral obligations has not, it appears, led to an improvement in human welfare. Despite claims of ethical progress in international politics – most notably the establishment of the International Criminal Court and the development of the Responsibility to Protect, almost nothing has been done to prevent or punish recent atrocities in Darfur, Syria and elsewhere (Ainley 2015). The existence of treaties and agreements on human rights has done little to avert gross violations of such rights in the US and the EU, let alone in Syria, Afghanistan, Burundi, China, Central African Republic, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, Nigeria, Yemen – the list goes on (Amnesty 2015-16). And one of the most heavily entrenched norms of international relations – the prohibition on torture – was breached extensively by liberal states post 9/11 (Blakely and Raphael 2016; Senate Select Committee on Intelligence 2014). These failures are in large part caused by, in Anscombe's terms, the lack (and impossibility) of an authoritative legislator, meaning no deep and motivating consensus on the foundations of the international morality system is possible. The quantity of international law in existence belies its lack of secure and authoritative grounds (Gould 2010; Koskenniemi 2006).

Without such grounds, law, norms and rules can offer little constraint on the pursuit of interest by powerful actors (Hopgood 2013).

Even when rules succeed in guiding behaviour in international affairs, harm can result. Lang and Beattie (2007a; Lang and Beattie 2008b) argue, for instance, that the rule-governed international order did not break down when the US invaded Iraq in 2003 – the invasion simply exposed the extent to which the current order still relies on coercion, hierarchy and the violence of enforcement (in this case of UN Security Council resolutions). Critical lawyers agree, arguing that law can be used to legitimise violence rather than restrain it (af Jochnick and Normand 1994), though Brown (2003) shows that in those instances when the use of force, in the form of humanitarian intervention, might be justified, a reliance on rules can delegitimise violence in the rare circumstances when it might be warranted. Lang also shows that the preoccupation with blame outlined by Williams is apparent in contemporary international relations, with punitive responses to violators of human rights and international law, such as economic sanctions, military intervention and counter-terrorism action violating the very standards they are designed to uphold (Lang 2008a). And Coker (2007; 2008) argues that contemporary culture has denigrated warriors and the idea of a 'warrior ethos', which has led, perversely, to increased brutality in war. He wagers that this is because it is not law, but the warrior ethos, that prevents atrocity in war – the character of soldiers rather than the rules that they are supposedly bound by.

The critique of modern moral philosophy which led to the rejuvenation of virtue ethics can shine light on some of the problems faced in international politics. But does virtue ethics itself have anything constructive to offer? One of the few scholars to explicitly apply a virtue approach to IR is Martha Nussbaum (1993; 2000), though she is reluctant to label it as such (1999). While working as a consultant at the World Institute for Development Economics Research, Nussbaum became frustrated with the crude methods used to judge living standards (which tended to measure aggregate welfare, so ignore the specific, unequal conditions of women) and with a development community so nervous of seeming to privilege Western values that it was left without a language with which to criticise harmful practices. In response to this, Nussbaum sought to develop a cross-cultural and essentialist account of human flourishing. Her initial description of flourishing was heavily influenced by Aristotle: "Everyone has some attitude, and corresponding behaviour, towards her own death; her bodily appetites and their management; her property and its use; the distribution of social goods; telling the truth; being kind to others; cultivating a sense of play and delight, and so on. No matter where one lives one cannot escape these questions, so long as one is living a human life" (Nussbaum 1993: 245). Nussbaum saw in common human attitudes and behaviour a baseline from which to critique cultural practices, compare living standards and build an objective account of flourishing. She fleshed it out (and shifted it significantly towards Rawlsian liberalism) in *Woman & Human Development* (2000), in which the main argument is a response to her observation in her earlier work (1986) on moral luck that much of the suffering in human life that appears to be outside our control is actually preventable by a just political order: a good state or *polis*. She presented the "philosophical underpinning for an account of basic constitutional principles that should be respected and implemented by governments of all nations, as a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires" (Nussbaum 2000: 5), and produced a list of human

“capabilities” (Life; Bodily Health; Bodily Integrity; Senses, Imagination and Thought; Emotions; Practical Reason; Affiliation; Other Species; Play; Control over ones Political and Material Environment) which are objectively valuable from an ethical standpoint (because they contribute to humans being able to live lives “worthy of a human being” Nussbaum 2000: 73) and as the object of an overlapping consensus or reflective equilibrium among people with divergent conceptions of the good. It is at this point that she lost her connection to Aristotle in favour of Rawls, and began to look increasingly liberal. Her liberalism was also apparent in the move from seeing *functioning* as more valuable in 1993 to promoting *capability* in 2000. She argues that it is inappropriate for any particular comprehensive conception of ethical value to be endorsed by politics and therefore did not see the production of virtuous functioning as a legitimate end of the state. She has moved even closer to Rawlsianism in her most recent work (2006). However, Nussbaum has succeeded in establishing the conditions for a just political order based, at least to some extent, not on human rights or fair procedures, more usually petitioned for by international political theorists, but on human flourishing.

Nussbaum’s work has sparked a great deal of criticism. She claims to be influenced by Aristotle, the Stoics, Kant, early Marx, Rawls and feminism, and sought to ‘appropriate the Greeks as allies of an expanded version of Enlightenment liberalism’ (1986: xvi) – thereby seeming to have committed the sin decried by MacIntyre of treating historically disparate theorists as participants in a single conversation (Nussbaum 1986). Her work is also criticized for its methodology – she gave no method by which overlapping consensus could be generated, so must have assumed that her earlier essentialist position (that there are certain functions particularly central to human life, and something that it is to do these functions in a truly human way) still held true, despite her move towards political liberalism. However, her application of VE to ethics beyond the nation state does serve to highlight the role of the *polis* in flourishing. She incorporated into her work the contention of virtue ethicists that, because of the centrality of the capability of sociability or affiliation, the good life is to be found in an active engagement in the community, rather than in protection from it. She also suggests that, as flourishing can only take place in a social context, then the state (or some kind of political organisation) is necessary to the provision and protection of capabilities, rather than being simply an institution of potential oppression. For those of us introduced to international political theory via the ‘cosmopolitan-communitarian’ debate, this complication of the distinction between universalist and particularist moralities is a welcome development. Virtue approaches reject characteristically cosmopolitan universal moral claims or approaches that purport to be neutral between ideas of the good. However, they do not automatically lead us to the particular or the communitarian. MacIntyre does tend to be categorised as communitarian, but he has explicitly rejected this label and Kelvin Knight (2005) argues that MacIntyre’s work is strongly opposed to oppressive communities that are part of the dominant order and polluted by the search for power and wealth. Community is not valued for its own sake and in any form within VE, but for its (necessary) contribution to human wellbeing. Virtue ethics emphasises universal human characteristics (our rationality, animality, interdependence, sociality and so on) as well as the ways that these characteristics can only find expression and be protected within (political) communities.

While few IR scholars have taken Nussbaum's work on virtues forward explicitly (see Brown 2000a; 2000b as exceptions) many have revisited ancient Athens to assert the importance of some form of practical wisdom and/ or to explore the impact of moral luck in the form of tragedy. After a 50 year or so hiatus, realists (of the 'neo-classical' variety) returned to the texts of Thucydides (Lebow 2003; 2007) and Aristotle (Lang 2007), mostly by way of Hans Morgenthau. Morgenthau, heavily influenced by Aristotelian thought, argues that in the pre-rationalist age there was an appreciation of "the tragic sense of life, the awareness of unresolveable discord, contradictions, and conflicts which are inherent in the nature of things and which human reason is powerless to solve" – an awareness lost in the Age of Science, to the detriment of men and of politics (Morgenthau 1946: 206). These theorists (see also Brown 2007; 2010; Gould 2014) share with virtue ethicists the sense that the world is not morally well-ordered or in underlying harmony, and that unresolvable discord is best faced by political leaders in possession of the virtue of prudence. While prudence is a translation of *phronesis,* it is important to note that realist conceptions of prudence tend to diverge significantly from the Aristotelian conception of a virtue used to identify and understand the good in situations, and focus instead on the effective. "To act successfully, that is, according to the rules of the political art, is political wisdom. To know with despair that the political art is inevitably evil, and to act nevertheless, is moral courage. To choose among several expedient actions the least evil one is moral judgment. In combination of political wisdom, moral courage, and moral judgment, man reconciles his political nature with his moral destiny" (Morgenthau 1945: 11, quoted in Lang 2007: 29). Even further from an Aristotelian view, but also emphasising the importance of politician being able to be exercise good judgment, adapt to context or the 'quality of times' and cope with the accidents or contingencies of political life, is the work of Machiavelli (1965). There is, therefore, in more classical and conservative international political thought, a recognizable tradition of emphasizing the importance of the virtues and vices of political agents, even if this literature does not explicitly draw upon VE.

A more radical approach to the role of prudence in international affairs was developed through the 1990s, when a group of scholars sought to challenge conventional rules of international politics and identify where responsibility lay to ameliorate harms caused (or allowed) by state action. These scholars (including Brown 2001; Jackson 1993; Linklater 1998; Wheeler 2000) were concerned principally to establish the limits of state sovereignty and to interrogate the ethics of state action in the face of human suffering. Again, they rarely drew on VE, but they were centrally focused on the exercise of *phronesis* in situations in which states were called upon to intervene in the domestic jurisdiction of others.

More recently, some significant work on character, drawing directly upon virtue ethics, has been carried out in the field of foreign policy analysis. This work focuses on the virtues exhibited (or not) by individual leaders in practice – in the ways that they make and justify political decisions (Gaskarth 2011). Using MacIntyre to postulate a practice of foreign-policy making within which decision-makers seek particular goods, Gaskarth argues that policy decisions cannot be made only in accordance with rules of international relations. There is significant room, therefore, for decisions to be affected by the character of decision-makers – a position he explores with relation to the values (in particular political will, belief and foresight) espoused by ex-UK Prime Minister Tony

Blair in his justifications of decisions about the 2003 war in Iraq. The values (or virtues) Blair privileged mitigated against the use of other virtues such as self-mastery, reflection and caution, and led to what is seen by many as a serious (and immoral) policy error in the decision to invade. Gaskarth concludes that a virtue-based approach would view reflection and self-correction, in particular, as essential traits to be developed by foreign-policy decision-makers who wish to act ethically. The focus on character in this type of academic work is seen more centrally, though less rigorously, in biographies of political leaders, which almost always make great play of the virtues and vices of the individuals they profile. Finally, more tangential to virtue ethics, but worthy of mention are the theorists who have shown the importance of the identity, or character, of a state to its behaviour in international relations (Neumann 1996; Hall 1999; Reus Smit 2009). Without much mention of the virtue ethics literature, there has nevertheless been a broad range of work within IR, and a more limited range in IPT, concerned either with the critique of rule-based morality offered by virtue ethicists, or with the three characteristics of virtue approaches: flourishing, practical wisdom and virtue or character.

Potential contributions of virtue ethics to international political theory and practice

The final section of this essay outlines some of the possibilities that a more sustained engagement with VE approaches offers to theorists and practitioners of international politics and international law. One of the main difficulties in applying virtue ethics is the lack of a clear bridge from virtue ethics to politics. It is not entirely clear what kind of political system/s would be supported by VE, how political authority and political institutions could be justified with reference to virtue, or how to apply VE to political issues (Lebar 2013). Beyond suggesting that virtuous people have better judgment than the non-virtuous – hardly in line with contemporary democratic principles – can virtue ethics speak to international politics? Outlined below are moderate and more radical research agendas suggesting that it can.

Gaskarth (2012) recognises the importance of rules, norms and structures in international political practice, but argues to extend the focus of IPT to include analysis and evaluation of the morality of the individuals who create and sustain them. These individuals both interpret their structural and ideational environments, and also impact upon these environments through their own character traits and moral projects. Following Jackson (2000), Gaskarth argues that global politics constitutes its own ethics through its practices – an ethics of statescraft – which is underpinned by virtues such as prudence, patriotism, public-spiritedness, forbearance and toleration (Jackson 2000: 21; 139). But Gaskarth believes that for the new solidarism evident in international affairs to flourish, different kinds of virtues will be required. Instead of the more conventional virtues which underpinned an international politics of co-existence or pluralism in the past, Gaskarth argues that virtues of, for instance, tolerance, respect, responsibility, empathy, justice, diligence and impartiality (2012: 444) will be necessary to sustain solidarist projects such as the expansion of international criminal law. Future research is needed to extend his study of the role of virtues in the rhetoric of international statespeople, diplomats and decision-makers within international organisations and non-governmental organisations, and to test his contention that particular virtues are necessary for the successful operation of international norms (2012: 448).

Klabbers (2013a; 2013b) opens up the possibility of a role for virtue ethics in international law – specifically through the concepts of a "culture of formalism" and "constitutionalism as mindset" advocated by Martti Koskeniemmi (2004; 2006). He argues that Koskeniemmi's approach to indeterminacy in law is a form of virtue ethics (despite not being acknowledged as such) which entreats us to critically review action by politicians or lawyers by asking more profound questions than simply whether something is right or wrong. Klabbers acknowledges that many international lawyers would feel distinctly uncomfortable at the introduction of virtue ethics to their field, as international law (and law more generally) is founded on the notion that right action can be judged according to its relation to certain rules, rather than by the character of the interpreter of those rules. But Klabbers shows that positive international law already recognises that certain character traits (integrity, good faith and so on) are desirable in those who apply it, so sees significant potential to develop a substantive idea of a culture of formalism with reference to the kind of virtues it would require. He also sketches what the practice of such a culture in international law and, by extension, international politics might involve: "carefully retelling examples of both virtuous and non- virtuous leadership in global governance … [which] might not only draw on real-life events, but … could also let itself be inspired by literature and other forms of art" (2013b: 435). The filling out of this sketch would be a promising next step in the application of virtue ethics to international relations. This would complement work done by, for instance, Williams (2005), Sen (2009) and Frost (2009) on the role of engagement in and reflection upon our own histories and politics, on situated public reasoning, and on the development of 'ethical competence' to produce better political decisions than result from abstract reasoning or rules.

These approaches have in common (along with attempts in IPT to list the virtues that might be necessary to be a good cosmopolitan, e.g. Appiah 2006; van Hooft 2007) an acceptance, by and large, of the rules of the game in international politics. They use virtue ethics to advocate reform, but not revolution. But other, more radical, applications of VE suggest a different route. Work on virtue in conflict calls into question the laws and norms of 'just war' (Chan 2014; Davis 1992), arguing that legalist approaches to war and peace (exemplified by Walzer 1977) close down space for ethical argument just it should be opened up. Walzer's reliance on the primacy of rules to restrain war, but lack of foundation for those rules (beyond a general claim about individual rights) and acceptance that the rules can be set aside in times of 'supreme emergency', leaves us with little scope for ethical consideration of killing and war. In contrast, Davis challenges any notion of necessity in war and starts to think through the implications of a virtue-based approach for war-fighting. Rengger (2002) makes broader points about the need for a return to casuistry and judgment in favour of rules, when lamenting the legalisation of the just war tradition and its change from being a discourse concerning statecraft, the purposes of political community and the ethical character of action, to a discourse limited to the morally tawdry and illiberal business of determining how much and what kinds of violence might be justified to achieve one's ends. There is much scope for further research on the ways in which judgment and case-based reasoning can be used in place of rules to guide actors in international politics faced with decisions about whether and how to fight.

More revolutionary still, MacIntyre (2004; 2009) offers a profound critique of

contemporary politics (domestic and international) which suggests significant changes are necessary to effect real ethical change. He sees politics as too often perverted in order to gain goods external to the practice (goods of effectiveness such as power or status), in fragmented societies with no shared aims or sense of the collective. He advocates not just a discussion of which virtues might improve public life or legal or political decision-making, but the development of a shared idea of the good through a practice of politics that aims at internal goods, such as behaving with justice, generosity, honesty and integrity. The implications of his approach are weighty, including the casting aside of modern systematic politics, on the basis that "modern politics itself expresses in its institutional forms a systematic rejection of [the] tradition [of the virtues]" (2004: 255). The recognition here that structures can prevent particular kinds of ethical behaviour is important – and should be factored into analyses, including those from a VE perspective, which suggest that harm in world politics can best be ameliorated by concentrating on the actions or characteristics of individuals (Ainley 2011; Hoover 2012). MacIntyre is not an obvious resource for international political theorists – he does not believe that the common good can be established at the level of the nation state, let alone at the global level. But even if we do not retreat with him into village idylls small enough to allow for "shared deliberation [and] shared critical enquiry concerning that deliberation and the way of life of which it is a part" (1999: 161), research on the implications of the internal and external goods available through particular international political practices would be enlightening. Hoover (2016) does some of this work, building on Dewey and Connolly to demonstrate the potential of the virtues of agonistic respect and critical responsiveness to build an emancipatory politics of human rights. Beardsworth (2015) also notes the necessity for political leaders to develop virtues such as the ability to judge when to delegate sovereign power for the good of the citizenry, and the willingness to assume the risks of doing so, in an argument about the importance of political responsibility in contemporary statecraft. In a world of populist politics, increasingly divided (at least in the West) about values (Drum 2016; Lord Ashcroft polls 2016), invocations to use politics not just to gain power but to construct and defend a wider good are critical additions to contemporary critique.

Virtue ethics offers resources to enrich ethical debate within and across communities, practices and ethical positions, and the central concepts of virtue-based approaches (virtue, practical wisdom and flourishing), along with the critique of rule-based approaches to morality which inspired the recent revival of virtue ethics within moral philosophy, resonate with existing IR scholarship in ways which suggest more attention is due.

SEE ALSO: Cosmopolitanism; Deontological International Ethics; Feminist Ethics in International Relations; The Global and the Local; International Law and Armed Conflict; International Law and International Relations; The Millennium Development Goals and the Politics of Global Poverty; Universals and Particulars in International Relations Theory; Utilitarianism and International Ethics.

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Online Resources

Excellent extended introductions to major ethical positions and thinkers, including substantial bibliographies, are available in online searchable encyclopedias of philosophy, for instance:
'Virtue Ethics'. At http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/. [Accessed June 29 2016]. Essay by Rosalind Hursthouse, first published in 2003 and substantively revised in 2012.
'Aristotle'. At http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle/. [Accessed June 29 2016]. Essay by Christopher Shields, first published in 2008 and substantively revised in 2015.
'Care Ethics'. At http://www.iep.utm.edu/care-eth/. [Accessed June 29 2016]. Essay by Maureen Sander-Staudt.

‘Chinese Ethics’. At http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-chinese/ [Accessed June 29 2016]. Essay by David Wong, first published in 2013.