**Ethics and IPE**

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ABSTRACT

Numerous authors from an array of perspectives have called for the adoption of ethics and ethical approaches to IPE. In full agreement with such sentiments, this article suggests that the move may not be as simple as assumed. Too often, ethics is taken as an unproblematic addition to the theoretical armoury of critical IPE. Instead, we argue that ethics is just as much contested terrain as positivism and/or power politics. In Section 1 we examine how the 'ethical turn' has been invoked in contemporary IPE and identify a number of theoretical and political tensions. In Section 2, we suggest that discourses of 'obligation' can be seen as a key meeting point between IPE and ethics as disciplines, while noting their conflicting approaches to social reality. In Section 3, we argue that a truly integrated ethical IPE requires a new approach that consciously transcends the disciplinary limitations of each component part. To this end, we suggest an ambitious research program that understands agents as conscious and capable of reflexively analysing their own behaviour. Thus, the role of ethics in IPE can start to be seen rather like an ongoing conversation where propositions are made, limits are identified and new resistances are made thinkable. Broad as such a program may appear, we seek to locate the discussion around recent studies of Fair Trade and Global Civil Society in IPE.

Keywords: Ethics; IPE; Obligation; Violence; Resistance

## Introduction

What is the relationship between ethics and IPE? How well placed is IPE to make ethical judgements or interventions in the world? In many ways, such questions have been at the heart of IPE for centuries: classical political economy proceeded with an emphasis on justice and equality and neo-classical political economy always had such concerns implied by the notion of 'maximisation of welfare' (albeit that welfare was circumscribed by the concept of utility). Modern IPE continues this trend with a set of, at least, implicit ethical commitments in its theoretical armoury. However, in recent decades theorists of IPE have started to outline a range of far more explicit ethical commitments. Albert Hirschman anticipated the emergence of this trend as part of the adjustment to post-positivism:

> [O]nce we have become fully aware of our intellectual tradition with its deep split between head and heart and its not always beneficial consequences, the first step toward healing that split has already been taken. Down the road, it is then possible to visualise a kind of social science that would be very different from the one most of us have been practicing: a moral social science where moral considerations are not repressed or kept apart, but are systematically commingled with analytic argument, without guilt feelings over any lack of integration; where the transition from preaching to proving and back again is performed frequently and with ease; and where moral considerations need no longer be smuggled in surreptitiously, nor expressed unconsciously, but are displayed openly and disarmingly. (Hirschman, 1981: 305-306)

Nearly three decades after Hirschman made this call for a 'moral social science', it can be argued that scholars are now beginning to engage with this 'durable tension' between ethics and IPE. In their critique of positivism, neo-Gramscian's have insisted upon "an ethical dimension to analysis, so that questions of justice, legitimacy, and moral credibility are integrated sociologically into the whole and into many of its key concepts" (Gill, 1991: 57). For her part, Susan Strange (1991:171) recognised that the problem as a two-way affair, arguing that globalisation also requires moral philosophers to extend their own purview: "[t]he horizons of moral philosophy, as of the social sciences no longer end at the frontiers of the state." Indeed, this is a view now belatedly echoed in the recent rise of 'global political theory' (Caney, 2005;

Pogge, 2002). And Richard Higgott has noted the importance of working across theory and practice in the evolving politics of global governance. As he argues,

> [p]olitics, in the context of the emerging global conversation about governance, needs to be understood as not only the pursuit of effective and efficient government, but also as a normative, indeed explicitly ethical, approach to the advancement of a more just agenda of global economic management. (Higgott, 2000: 133).

However, and despite such good intentions, this paper will argue that IPE has not yet reflected upon the question of 'ethics', per se? In the race to discredit the 'scientific' assumptions of previous work and usher in a greater reflexivity to the relationship between theory and practice in IPE, morality and ethics have been introduced in a straightforward, if not to say, caricatured fashion. As above, ethics is taken as an 'inherently good thing' that can be applied to the global political economy, a panacea for the ills of hard headed materialism, or a positive increment to the (power) politics of global governance. The central contention of this paper is that ethics – *like positivism and power politics* – should be a subject of critical scrutiny for IPE theorists. While Hirschman is correct that 'moral considerations need no longer be smuggled in surreptitiously', it should be fore-grounded that such considerations do not necessarily act to simplify or improve matters. Ethics, like politics, is contested terrain and it is only by working through ethical arguments critically and sensitively that IPE will benefit. We make this broad point over three sections.

Section 1 identifies the complex and often ambiguous place that ethics has held within IPE. It focuses on those theorists who have noted and explored the importance of the ethical dimension including one keynote intervention by Stephen Gill. While such work is promising, not least because it brings an important reflective moment to IPE, we suggest some reasons to reserve judgement. Drawing on a set of debates which have occurred in IR (Hutchings, 1999; Walker, 1993) we question the use of ethics as a 'supplement' to IPE; a view of ethics as somehow outside IPE, helpful for IPE, *a potential doctor for critical IPE*, leaves unquestioned the content and potential violence(s) of ethics.

Section 2 therefore sets out to develop an immanent critique of the relationship between ethics and IPE by drawing out the central concept of obligation. By examining the fundamental

differences between how obligation is understood in ethics and IPE separately, we argue that a truly integrated approach to ethics-IPE requires confronting the difficult and sometimes paradoxical questions that that such an inter-disciplinary move requires. The deficiencies in both disciplines suggest that such a move is full of potential, but that the unproblematic turn to ethics risks reifying a set of particularly neo-liberal conceptions of the individual, property and the market, albeit couched in the language of ethics. Again such moves are also being aped in the recent emergence of global political theory and we review some of the central economistic fallacies (re-)produced in the work of Thomas Pogge. This analysis points to the importance of a sustained critical analysis of the role and function of ethics and ethical assumptions within IPE if the potential value bestowed is to be realised. In this way, we suggest, a concept of resistance in fundamental.

Thus, finally, Section 3 develops an outline research program for developing the subject of ethics and IPE. Key questions relate to the constitutive violences contained within discourses of global ethics. This might relate to the problematic market-centrism of much cosmopolitan justice theory, but is also equally relevant in the proliferation of 'ethical' responses to globalisation. For instance, moral economy perspectives have led to formal justifications for the Tobin Tax, Fair Trade and a Minimum Income, etc. Such moves present the possibility of a praxeological engagement, to go back and forth between ethical arguments and the extant circumstances of the campaign/initiative. In this way, the role of ethics in IPE can start to be seen rather like an ongoing conversation where propositions are made, limits are identified and new resistances are made thinkable. Ultimately, then, we suggest the development of a concept of resistance in IPE that emplaces ethics as an ambivalent form, hopeful, promising, but dangerous. In this way we move beyond the shorthand refrain, *we need an ethical approach to IPE,* and practice the ongoing critical question: *how do we do ethical IPE?* The final section therefore elaborates how the triad ethics-violence-resistance can help to facilitate further research in this area.

## 1. Critical Issues with the Demand for Ethics in IPE

The demand for ethics in IPE has grown out of a series of critiques of the limiting nature of previous methodologies of the economy. Tensions related to positivism, post-positivism and

ongoing attempts to theorise and contest globalisation have all led to calls for a greater degree of ethical reflexivity in IPE. In this section, we suggest that each successive call for ethics in IPE has at the same time served to construct a further postponement of any critical engagement with the question of ethics, per se. The effect is to privilege ethics as a pre-discursive realm of 'goodness' which we must value even if we can't realise it in the here and now. Some critiques of the effect of this salvationary view which draw on the work of IR scholars are made.

The first major obstacle for the question of ethics in IPE is the desire to distinguish between positive and normative theory. Within economics for instance, positive theory is held up as correct scientific method while normative theory is portrayed as a laudable but scientifically unhelpful reflex. As Milton Friedman (1966: 4) highlights,

> "Positive economics is in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgements. As Keynes says, it deals with "what is", not with "what ought to be". Its task is to provide a system of generalizations that can be used to make correct predictions about the consequences of any change in circumstances. Its performance is to be judged by the precision, scope, and conformity with experience of the predictions it yields."

Such positive theory is celebrated for its scientific qualities. With the correct specialisation, abstract signifiers like 'land', 'labour', and the 'rational economic actor' can be rendered as quantifiable variables in complex formulae. As William Tabb (1992: 92) comments, "The ability to calculate rates of change using calculus lent a new exactness to economic analysis and started the profession down the road to its obsession with mathematics as the language of its science." Indeed, key texts in Economics still see positivism as a defining feature of the discipline (Lipsey and Crystal, 1995).

While such scientific aspirations are common amongst economists, they are also evident within the positivist paradigms of IPE – Realism, Liberalism and Marxism. During the evolution of IPE as a discipline, positivism became the dominant epistemology and was bolstered by the methodologies of behaviourism and empiricism (Higgott, 2001; Strange, 1991). For those in what might be termed the American wing of the discipline, what is required is verifiable data based on material observation (See Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner, 1998). It is not hard to

see why this approach is problematic for the question of ethics in IPE. Rendering IPE as a predictive or explanatory science that derives legitimacy from objectivity means that 'softer' issues like ethics simply fall outside the scope of the discipline. Indeed, the initial demand for ethics in IPE arises in part from a critique of the privileging of scientific over normative theory.

Critiques of positivism are altogether more optimistic about ethics in IPE. This attitude begins at the root to argue that many of the disciplinary separations we take as normal should be overcome. Susan Strange was explicit that ethics *should* be re-integrated into the study of political economy. In a critique of the dominant paradigms (1991: 171) she argued,

> "…both realism and neo-realism in the study of international relations, and liberalism and neo-classical notions of equilibrium in the study of economics, will prove to be blind alleys and should be abandoned. They are both culs-de-sac, *strade senza uscita*, no through roads – for IPE. Sooner or later, it will be necessary to go back and start at the beginning if we are to achieve a genuine synthesis of political and economic activity.
> […]
> Going back to the beginning, for me, means starting with what used to be called moral philosophy. As I understand it, moral philosophers were concerned with fundamental values – how they could be reflected in the ordering of human society and how conflicts between them could be resolved. They were – some still are – interested in analysing both the mix of values in any society and their distribution. The only difference now is that we have, in some sense at least, a global society and, sustaining it, a virtually worldwide political economy. The horizons of moral philosophy, as of the social sciences no longer end at the frontiers of the state."

This integrationist view has proved influential. Indeed, many now regard IPE's (inter-disciplinary) concern with political and normative reflection as a key reason for its success (Higgott, 2002; Underhill, 2000). In addition, a recent revisionist school of political economy (Tabb, 1999; Watson, 2005) has sought to return to the writings of classical political economists like Adam Smith to recover the moral component of their work. As Smith wrote, "Justice […] is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society […] must in a moment crumble into atoms." (Cit. Tabb, 1999). Thus there is a general feeling from different streams of IPE that ethics can, indeed must, be considered a key element of a reconstructed discipline. However, we must be careful not to produce a further dichotomy between politics and ethics.

There is danger in portraying ethics as an inherently 'good thing' that can be added-on to the study of IPE once we have worked out the 'stuff' of world politics. As Rob Walker (1993: 50) argues for the case of ethics and IR: "Ethics comes to be understood as an achieved body of principles, norms and rules already codified in texts and traditions." And he continues,

> This image is especially troubling because it is sustained by a series of additional dichotomies that are regularly denounced as implausible guides to the subtleties and complexities of human affairs. An opposition between utopianism and realist power politics, the Cartesian divide between matter and consciousness and the positivist injunction to separate the normative from the ethical… (Ibid. 50-51).

On this view, the dichotomy between ethics and politics may be re-enforced by the separation between positive and normative theory. Thus the task becomes one of undermining any such dichotomy. As Chris Brown (2002: 148) argues in the case of IR, "The idea that there is, or could be, a clear divide between normative and positive theory is profoundly misleading; all theories of international relations are, simultaneously, both positive and normative theories." The corollary of this view is that all theories of ethics are at the same time theories of power. Caution is therefore required.

Extending from the weaknesses identified above, critical theorists of IPE have undermined the central assumptions of positivism - the separation of fact and value, observer and observed, and appearance and reality. In the process they have undermined the positive-normative dichotomy and presented new possibilities for developing ethics in IPE. However, the implications of such constitutive theory are not as clear cut as may be supposed. Instead, we suggest that a clear impasse can be identified between neo-Gramscian and post-structural approaches over the status of ethics in IPE.

Neo-Gramscians critique positivism for taking the world as it is found, without first questioning how it was constituted in that way. For instance, Robert Cox (1986: 208) proposes a theory of IPE that "…does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing..." A key theme in critical IPE is the connection between knowledge and interest. As Cox (1986: 207) affirms, "theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose."

Subjects are not separated from objects producing value-free knowledge. Every theory has, implicitly or explicitly, a set of values and norms that tell us which facts are to be analysed. Thus one of the central propositions of critical IPE is to undermine the possibility of a value-free problem-solving theory. In particular, critical IPE has attacked simple dichotomies like 'states' and 'markets' when the two have a complex historical inter-relation (Langley, 2002; Underhill, 2000). Values are implicitly part of theory.

In a similar vein post-structural approaches emphasise the relation between knowledge and power. As Michel Foucault suggests, "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." (cf. Edkins, 1999: 53). For post-structuralists, language is more than a verbal representation of reality. It *constructs* social reality. The positivistic separation between observer and observed is therefore undermined since language - the means for academic communication - is found to be a part of the 'problem' we seek to solve. If ideas like the 'market' are communicated through language, then the resultant discourse will help to construct the 'market' in certain ways. As Cameron and Palan (2004: 45) suggest, "the terms and concepts we use – national, state, global, included, excluded, rich, poor, and so on – are in themselves forms of institutionalization that require considerable energy to maintain even a semblance of continuity". On this view, theory becomes a constitutive element of social reality and infers the possibility for a more sophisticated thinking of its ethics/politics. However, an impasse arises between neo-Gramscian and post-structural arguments over the status of ethics. While neo-Gramscians and other critical theorists celebrate the 'progressive potential' of constitutive theory (Linklater, 1992; Neufeld, 1995; Gill, 1991) post-structural authors challenge the possibility for failing to reflect on the constitutive ambiguities of ethical theory itself (Walker, 1993). The point can be illustrated via a close critique of the neo-Gramscian writer Stephen Gill.

Optimistically, Gill's approach "insists upon an ethical dimension to analysis, so that questions of justice, legitimacy, and moral credibility are integrated sociologically into the whole and into many of its key concepts."(1991: 57). As he states,

> …the normative goal of the Gramscian approach is to move toward the solution to the fundamental problem of political philosophy – the nature of the good society and thus, politically, the construction of an ethical state and a unitary society in which personal development, rational reflection, open debate, democratic empowerment, and economic and social liberation can become more widely available. (1991: 57).

Broadly speaking this recognition of an ethical content to theory and the desire to integrate "justice, legitimacy, and moral credibility" into the sociology of IPE is promising. Gill's "normative goal" to integrate reflection on the philosophical problem of the "good society" with the political question of how to realise it in practice is also promising. However, there are questions that can be raised about the content of these ethical tropes. Justice can be economic or cultural; legitimacy can be rational or ethnocentric, legal or symbolic. At best it might be considered that this proposed ethical turn is poorly developed. At worst, and from a post-structural perspective, it might be argued that culturally specific western assumptions are allowed to masquerade as universal reason? A "unitary society", "personal development", "rational reflection", "open debate", "democratic empowerment", and "economic and social liberation" are historically contingent social democratic ideals. They are not *a priori* universals. Perhaps for these reasons Gill is quick to qualify,

> It is important to emphasize here that this is a rather negative definition, concerning minimum conditions, of the "good society," and it offers neither promises nor prescriptions for the form that such a society might take: historical structures can be changed by collective action in a "war of position" but there is no historical inevitability. The key contrast here would be with teleological Marxism, with its promise of possible utopia(s), or Francis Fukuyama's much-publicized dystopia of the "end of history": the eventual unfolding of the logic and the spirit of liberal democratic capitalism. In Gramscian terms, telos is "myth:

And he includes a note from Robert Cox,

> It is a normative force but not a normative plan or set of normative criteria. It can generate movement but not predict outcome. Thus the normative element is crucial but not as normative teleology. (Ibid: 57).

But this qualification is itself more of a hedge. Ethics is downgraded to a minimal venture – a quest for basic conditions where people can realise their own sense of the good. Gill (and by

inclusion Cox) is comfortable talking about what ethics is not. It is not teleology. It is "not a plan" or "criteria". It can "generate movement" but doesn't "predict outcome". "It" is crucial but definitely not as "teleology". Such qualifications question whether this is ethics or an inspirational underpinning for historical-materialism? A post-structural critic could well be forgiven for feeling that Gill *expresses* rather than overcomes the limitations of constructing an ethical theory of IPE. While the move is promising then, there is more that needs to be questioned about the content of ethics and how this content then infers upon the world we seek to observe/construct. In short, given the impasse identified, one route forward is to focus analysis on the way that ethical discourses within IPE actually constitute particular subjects as part of the field of power relations (Foucault) in which we would like to intervene.

## 2. The Ethics of IPE: Discourses of Obligation

> We bear the imprints of our economic relations in all aspects of our social life. The socializing effects of those relations shape who we are, how we act, how we think before we act, and the broader truth regime within which we locate ourselves as meaningful actors. As such, the economic relations in which we are embedded are imbued with a fundamentally moral character. (Watson, 2005: 33-34)

Watson's assertion that all theory is inherently normative begs us to consider the basic, normative underpinnings of ethics and IPE as disciplines. Like it or not, the specialisation that characterises the modern world has been as influential within the academy as any other area, producing incongruous and obstructive disciplinary boundaries. As these boundaries have hardened over the centuries, specific ontologies have become established within them, turning disciplines into paradigms through which social scientists are able to make knowledge claims. If ethics-IPE is to be understood as an attempt to transcend such boundaries, then it pays to understand the basic normative underpinnings of each and how they conflict. In so doing, we begin to see the limiting nature of such ontologies and start to expose the deep imbrications between the academy and the wider global political economy: between knowledge and reality. In this section, we argue that the conceptual linchpin around which ethics and IPE meet is the *discourse of obligation*: what ethical duties are expected in social relations. The argument

proceeds by first analysing the nature of obligation within political economy and then within global ethics, reading correlations along the way.

*Obligation in Political Economy*

Bar the injunctions covered above, normative claims about the obligations people owe to one another are not usually made explicit within IPE. Rather, ethical obligation is taken as implicit factor of social relations which, while it might be forgotten every now and then and need to be re-energised, is basically straightforward. Thus, ethical obligation tends to be subsumed within a particular conception of justice in modernity. This is the view that individuals can own property, sell their labour and should expect a certain set of 'fair treatments' for themselves and their families. Sometimes this fair treatment is about outcomes, i.e. justice in distribution; sometimes it is about economic trust, i.e. justice in contract; and, more recently, expectations regarding *democratic* rights have been vaunted.

We concur with Strange that understanding the normative basis of such claims requires going back to the most fundamental values implied, and at the very root of these conceptions of ethical obligation is what Schneewind calls 'the invention of autonomy' (1998). In contrast to previous systems of political philosophy (theological, status based etc.), each individual is free to choose and pursue their own set of ends rather than to have ends imposed on them by others. Therefore, if we are to surmise a normative imperative, then it is that the freedom of the individual should be maximised as far as possible with regard to the similar freedom of others. As Schneewind's choice of words suggests, this notion is a construction: an invented ethics. Nevertheless, its intuitive plausibility runs as deep as Western modernity, with perhaps its most definitive statement being Rawls' first principle of justice that "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of basic liberty for all." (1971: 302). As such, it can be argued that normativity – the normative invention of autonomy - collapses into justice understood as the maximisation of freedom of the ability of the individual to self-determination.

But of course, the notion of individual freedom as a moral good is only one half of a binary opposition between freedom and power, where power is the ability of one to obligate another. Modern liberalism has therefore seen itself engaged in a long list of battles to free, or emancipate individual freedoms from one or other coercive power, including religion, the state, slavery, poverty, ideology, etc.. Freedom is thus constituted as the absence of coercive power, and, vice versa, power implies the curtailment of freedom. Therefore, where freedom is a moral good, power emerges as a moral bad, since power exercised by one party will inevitably result in the reduction of freedom for some other party. The key question becomes, therefore, at once how to maximise the freedom of autonomous individuals and how to minimise the power to obligate others coercively. It is the power side of the binary opposition that most critical IPE scholars choose to conceptualise their work around, but it is worth mapping the liberal 'solution' to these questions first.

While liberal economics usually consists of the search for the most efficient way to distribute goods, this is underscored by a specific account of justice and concomitant ethical presuppositions. For those liberal political economists who defend the liberal economic approach, the focus is on establishing conditions under which the freedom of the individual is maximised, where the minimisation of coercive power assumed to follow. Somewhat inevitably, this focus tends towards contractualism, since entering a contract implies the self-determining agency of the parties involved. On this basis, a free market economy is concluded as the most just, most ethical solution to the distribution of goods, since, ideally, it is made up of bilateral contracts. Political economists like Dworkins, Friedman, Hayek, von Mises and Nozick take this ethical imperative to varying degrees of extremity. Any interference with the market is ultimately immoral since it amounts to a reduction in freedom, apart from that which ensures 'that individuals are sufficiently uninhibited by political demands to establish systems of exchange that operate on the basis of free will alone' (Watson, 2005, 22). In other words, it should typically be limited to that which guarantees that contracts will be upheld and the institution of property maintained.

Crucially, such market fundamentalists do not deny that this will result in inequality and power differentials. The point is that such distributional outcomes are legitimated by the procedure.

Outcomes are just to the extent that they are the result of bilateral, contractual arrangements between self-interested individuals. No-one has forced anyone else to do anything, and everyone is free to pursue their interests exactly as they see fit. This logic is impeccable with regard to the autonomy of the individual as sketched above. In principle, each individual autonomously chooses their own obligations and thus their freedom is maximised. Conversely power, understood as the power of one individual to obligate another against their will, is minimised.

When one climbs down from the ivory tower and observes the real economy, as most IPE aims to, this position seems hopelessly idealistic (See *inter alia* Gill, Strange, Underhill, Watson). In order for market fundamentalists to assert that the opportunity to choose according to one's self interest should be maximised, they have to completely ignore the restrictive feedback effects that emergent power structures are likely to have upon those choices. These feedback effects span from membership within a state, the available actors that you are able to engage with in your consumption and production decisions all the way to the specifics of culture and geography that affect preferences and available choices. The more extreme the liberalism, the more systematically liberal political economists ignore the real world and rely instead on abstract economics and dogmatic meta-theory (At the very far end of this continuum, see Rothbard, 1982; Hoppe, 1993).

In order to emphasise the restrictive effects that constrain the options actors are able to take, IPE tends to explicitly re-conceptualise around power. As Nicola Phillips notes, '[t]he study of power has been consistently depicted, in many different guises, as essentially what IPE is all about. Power is everywhere in IPE and runs through virtually all of the work that goes on in the field' (Phillips, 2005, 260). As Murphy and Nelson point out, this is where much IPE is essentially critical and, ultimately, indebted to Karl Marx (Murphy and Nelson, 2001, 405). Indeed, it is a discipline that is now considered to be propelled by critique and an open embracement of normativity (Dickens, 2006, 479).[1]

[1] Both Murphy and Nelson and Dickins' articles discuss the divide between 'British'/heterodox and 'IO' schools of IPE. We retain focus on the 'British' school in this article since it contains all the calls toward openly normative/ethical styles of IPE, in contrast to the IO school's focus on the rational choice method and theorising conditions of global stability.

Where market fundamentalists see the free market, critical IPE scholars see the dominating power of capital. Where orthodox economists see freely chosen contracts, critical scholars see choice as tightly constrained by pre-existent, institutionalized structures of power – property relations, the firm, trans-national class alliances, the historic bloc and the like. This intensive re-description underpins Marx's political economy from his notes on the tendency of capital towards concentration and monopoly, the emergence of class structures and the materialist conception of history. Even if each individual economic decision appears contractually just, even if each individual only follows his self-interest (e.g. the worker seeks a wage, the capitalist seeks a profit) the emergent structures constitute relations of subordination and domination that are unjust towards some (or all) individuals. In other words, capital, in all its various guises, enables people to obligate one another coercively.

The power of Marx's re-description of the economy lives on in contemporary IPE. For example, Stephen Gill embraces the Marxist contrast between the principles of contract, property and freedom on the one hand, and the relations of production, which suggest exploitation, inequality and 'sacred egoism' on the other (Gill, 2000, 8). More usually, IPE tends to draw upon the neo-Gramscian perspective, as developed by Cox. Indeed some worry that this perspective has become so popular that it runs the risk of entrenching itself as a kind of orthodoxy itself (Abbott and Worth, 2002). While the target of attack is broadened through the notion of hegemony, the emphasis is still very firmly on describing relations of power and how they are facilitated by configurations of social forces, as Cox describes (Cox, 1987, 4). Similarly, Gramsci's idea of a historic bloc – a configuration of power where economic, political and cultural elements of society all come together to allow the (exploitative) workings of capital to unfold – looms large, most notably in Craig Murphy's work (Murphy, 2005, 125).

Returning to the binary opposition between freedom and power, within this binary opposition, power is morally bad because it is a restriction of another's freedom through coercive obligation and thus an interference with their autonomy. The key point, though, is that in following this critique of power, the critical approach to IPE is actually predicated upon the same concept of an autonomous individual as market fundamentalist approaches. For market fundamentalists, self-interest, is the very expression of autonomy and freedom of the individual to choose his or her

ends, and is thus cast as a moral good. However, to make this assertion, they have to simply ignore the other side of the binary opposition: if people are free, then they are free to group together and exploit one another and hence reduce freedoms for others. And critical IPE makes exactly this point by re-describing all economic interaction as power relations. Since power implies the reduction of freedom, power should be minimised as a moral priority. In other words, IPE has a strongly negative view of obligation rooted in an ontology of autonomous, self-interested individuals. Normatively speaking, power – the power to obligate – should be minimised at all costs.

However, by buying into the other side of the binary opposition so fully and re-describing the economy as consisting of power relations through-and-through, critical political economists cannot help but rely on a philosophy of emancipation from power relations in their entirety. This fact is obvious in Marx's work prompting some to note that Marx's philosophy amounts to a kind of religious salvation (Tucker, 1961). Communism is not an economic order for Marx, but a place where the means to enforce coercive obligations – capital and the private property relation – simply do not exist; it is an absence of power. As Virginia Held sums up 'Marx's vision … sees human beings as having progressed beyond the self-interested pursuit of individual satisfactions that conflict with the satisfactions of others' (Held, 1980, p9).

Similarly, while the word itself is often conspicuously absent, contemporary critical IPE is essentially underscored by the same normative commitment to some form of emancipation; it hardly makes sense to talk about Gramsci's historic bloc if the ultimate aim is not to transcend it in some fundamental way. Indeed, the concept of hegemony implies an even more demanding emancipation, since it emphasises the depth and extensity of false consciousness through the consensus and complicity built up by the reproduction of specific sets of knowledge, social relations, morals and institutions (Cox, 1981, 39). The meta-theoretical debate between critical and post-structural ontologies may be irresolvable one, but the basic critique of emancipation is simple and persuasive: a world without power relations is probably a world without humans in it (Foucault, 1990). Occasionally, critical political economists have also pondered on this problem, from Karl Polanyi, who recognised that 'power and economic value are a paradigm of social reality' (1944, p267), to Christopher Farrands, who in discussing IPE remarks that we may never

know enough to establish grounds for economic action that are not, if only implicitly, based on relations of power (Farrands, 2002, 31). However, this is not the norm. Despite its trademark heterodoxy, most IPE work has steadfastly refused to open up this debate. As Murphy and Nelson note, IPE has rarely invited post-modern or post-structural positions into the fray (2001, 405).

While we shy away from the strongest post-modern conclusions about the feasibility of social analysis, we do see the critical epistemology of IPE as limiting in terms of normative claims about ethical ideas. Where ideas are emphasised in IPE, they tend to be thought of as shot through with power relations. Most obviously, hegemony accounts for systems of norms and moral codes that shape economic action, but understood only as a means to coercively obligate people within an exploitative capitalist system. But what about ideas that people might hold about social justice, the human condition or 'the good life'? What about people's personal ideas about ethics? With its focus on power relations, critical IPE does not systematically include the ability of people to *reflexively analyse* their behaviour in light of *ideas* that they hold about ethics, social justice and obligation. In other words, the ethical subject – an agent capable of thinking about his or her obligations in light of normative ideas – remains conspicuously absent. Later, we will argue that resistance is a suitable concept through which to begin to unpack these possibilities. But for now, it is time to examine how global ethics deals with obligation.

*Obligation in Ethics*

The invocation of ethics-IPE demands an openness towards questions of obligation. In contrast to the implicit accounts of justice latent in market fundamental and critical IPE, literature on ethics implies, by its very nature, thinking first and foremost in terms of obligation. It asks us what obligations do we owe one another? What are the bases of these obligations? And what social order might best actualise those obligations? The key (if rather stale) debate in this respect is between cosmopolitan and communitarian approaches.

As with all good academic debates, the communitarian vs. cosmopolitan debate has been marked by many attempts to 'overcome, 'transcend' or 'go beyond' the terms of the debate itself. The

first and most prominent effort was by Simon Caney, who makes the point that most cosmopolitans do indeed have a recognition of the importance of community, while staunchly defending the former position (Caney 1993). On the other hand, many communitarians maintain deeply liberal views, which tend to temper the relativism that cosmopolitan critics suggest is latent in communitarian accounts of justice (Morrice, 2000, 235). Indeed, many actively endorse the idea of global responsibilities (Brock and Brighouse, 2005, 3). Despite this, there remains a fundamental difference in how obligations are derived in each account.

On the one hand, communitarians emphasise the idea that obligation is borne of solidarity. For example, Richard Rorty emphasises that moral progress depends upon 'the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of "us" (Rorty, 1989, 192). Similarly, Walzer emphasises that there is no *a priori* plane from which to adjudicate justice claims (Walzer, 1989, 312). Rather, "a given society is just if its substantive life is lived … in a way that is faithful to the shared meanings of its members" (Walzer, 1989, 313). The obvious criticism of this logic is presented by Caney: "communitarian morality relies on an extremely naive view of the generation of moral values and overlooks the fact that norms are often influenced through manipulation, ignorance, advertising and political machinations" (Caney, 1993, 287). In other words, communitarians are apparently oblivious to power relations. This marks the first possible violence between accounts of obligation in IPE and ethics. Where IPE takes a dim view of human nature as essentially self-interested and consequently an equally dim view of obligation as a coercive power relation, communitarianism seems to imply the opposite. The moral force of the community is forged precisely in the obligations that people owe towards one another. Therefore obligation is bound up in discourses of solidarity and thus cast as moral good.

Is cosmopolitanism perhaps more compatible? Cosmopolitans emphasise the equal worth of all individuals across the globe and re-iterate the liberal creed of contract outlined earlier. However, in order to 'thicken' the concept of contract and make global liberalism explicitly ethical – i.e. to give it a positive spin on the idea of obligation – cosmopolitan authors emphasise the idea of a global community of equally morally worthy individuals. This leaves behind the empty self-interest of a Hobbesian contract for a more Kantian view of contract as legitimated by our

common stock in humanity (Kant, 1784[1963]; Byrd and Hruschka, 2006, p73). As such, it is just as dependent upon a conception of community as communitarianism, but at a global level. As David Held suggests, cosmopolitanism is predicated on the idea that we are, first and foremost, members of the global community (Held, 2005, 11).

Even though, as Thomas Pogge notes, cosmopolitanism does not require a notion of positive obligation as opposed to negative obligation (Pogge, 2005, 93), this distinction seems to be less important than the positive characterisation of obligation itself in normative terms. Just like communitarianism, the underlying assumption is that obligation is a moral good that is to be elaborated in theory and sought in global politics (whether in Held's vision of a global democracy [1997] or Caney's more realistic suggestions about fostering international order [2006]). What is important in terms of the relationship between ethics and IPE is the fact that both communitarian and cosmopolitan perspectives have a *positive view of the notion of obligation* that comes from the idea of global community. As many have suggested, the recent strong reiteration of communitarian divides through war, terrorism and the like, tend to make cosmopolitan claims look more utopian than ever (Bohman, 2006, 127). However, even if some semblance of global community were achievable, the cosmopolitan outlook cannot help but downplay the possibility that the necessary institutions could be as systematically shaped by interests and power as any other community. Needless to say, the economistic nature of the most important international institutions – not only private companies, but also the World Bank, IMF, the EU, NAFTA, Mercosur, OPEC etc. – iterates this possibility in a very real sense.

**3. Ethics/Resistance: an outline for the contours of future research**

By now, it is clear that the idea of ethics, obligation and indeed normativity, is complicated for both IPE and the global ethics literature. Each has a particular approach to social reality that generates claims about obligation that are difficult. Critical IPE, by virtue of its disciplinary heritage, tends to take a rather dim view of human nature as shot through with power relations. This inevitably leads to an account of emancipation, which is theoretically difficult to say the least. Furthermore, it tends to ignore the ability of humans to think beyond self-interest and reflexively analyse their behaviour in light of normative ideas about justice and morality. Even in

the most reflexive account considered in section 1, Stephen Gill left values like justice, democracy, and equality underspecified. On the other hand, global ethics is optimistic about human nature, assuming the idea of moral community. However, this seems to be a very optimistic assumption for both communitarian and cosmopolitan perspectives, since it relies upon downplaying the extent to which power relations and naked self-interest determine the form and function of obligations in the global economy.

To borrow a metaphor, each discipline looks at different sides of the same coin in terms of obligation. Indeed the symmetry is so close that one might be tempted to suggest simply combining the two in order to perceive the whole of obligation and thus clarify ethics as an object of analysis. However, we would ward against such a 'conceptual mash-up'. The issues of ethical life are not resolved by inter-disciplinary engagement alone, despite what the major funding bodies might think. Instead, we argue, ethics-IPE presents a chance to strike out beyond the paradigmatic confines of ethics and IPE as paradigm-disciplines and towards a post-disciplinary praxis. Outlined below are three inter-connected areas that make up one such praxis, which seeks to hold onto the 'possibility' inscribed within ethics to think and imagine differently, 'better' ways of being with others, while retaining a sensitivity toward the violence of ethics. On our reading the 'violence' of ethics is both conceptual and empirical and herein lies the necessity of a back-and-forth methodology. Retaining a sensitivity to the co-constitution of knowledge and ethics in IPE requires us to map the web of power relations and identify sites of possible resistance. Such a triad ethics-violence-resistance is offered as the most promising avenue for continuing research on ethics and IPE.

*Ethical Possibility*

By far the clearest attraction in ethics, for IPE theorists, is the imaginative possibilities offered up by a discourse so, apparently, untrammelled by the analysis of complex and power laden social relations. Ethical arguments are rarely sought out for the power they add to critical analysis. Critical political economists are quite comfortable with this kind of work. Indeed many such calls for inter-disciplinary engagement go the other way with senior global political theorists, such as Michael Walzer, championing the credentials of political economy for

identifying what the 'real' problems are.[2] Instead, we would argue, what is best in ethical discourse is that it offers up the possibility of seeing things differently. As Richard Rorty suggested

> We remain profoundly grateful to philosophers like Plato and Kant, not because they discovered truths but because they prophesized cosmopolitan utopias – utopias most of whose details they have gotten wrong, but utopias we might never have struggled to reach had we not heard their prophecies. (Rorty, 1998: 175).

Such an account may not please those attracted by the perceived 'depth' of philosophical analysis, who want to seek firm foundations for the ethical 'dimension' of their analysis. Indeed, such authors may already be put off by the apparently negative view of ethics developed in this paper. But such a view would conflate two subjects – 'ethics' and 'certain knowledge' – which do not necessarily have to be combined. That is to say, it is only by taking a dogmatic view of the portrayal of Reason (capital R) within the Enlightenment that we might be tempted to treat arguments which don't rest on Truth (capital R) as 'unethical'. If, as Rorty suggests, we drop such criteria and instead get on with working through ethical suggestions in a pragmatic, back-and-forth sense we can take what's best in ethics, *inspiration* and *imagination*, while remaining sensitive to what is perhaps worst: a universalism that potentially circumscribes ethical possibility (Brassett, 2009).

Reading back this account to IPE we might, for instance, retain a sense that global civil society *is* an important locus for promoting ethics in the global polity. But we would also be ready and able to engage with the limits of such forms, be it in the promotion of an essentially western liberal model of political agency, or with reference to the points made in section 2, by suggesting piecemeal reforms of global capitalism – like the Tobin Tax, or Debt Relief – which of themselves do very little to question the foundational structures of global capitalism (Brassett, 2008, 2009). For instance, the principle of debt relief so vociferously championed by the UNDP, the G8, Make Poverty History and Jubilee 2000 is very seldom geared, in practice, towards anything other than the cancellation of debt for countries that cannot pay in order that they might

[2] http://eis.bris.ac.uk/~plcdib/imprints/michaelwalzerinterview.html

take on new loans. In this sense, ethics can foster a form of violence which should be a central research question in an IPE analysis.

*Ethical Violence*

We can begin to think about the potential violence of ethics in very fundamental terms. One way of thinking about ethics is to posit responsibility and indeed, responsibility towards the other as the question, *par excellance* of ethics. Responsibility underpins many ethical approaches to poverty, migration, and democratic recognition, to name but a few subjects. However, when we begin to think through this concept of responsibility it immediately becomes clear that it embroils us in tough, perhaps unanswerable questions like 'which others?' and 'how?' Dan Bulley expresses the point as one about the fundamental politics of ethics:

> If every other we have a responsibility to protect is every bit demanding of that responsibility, we can have no justification for choosing one responsibility over another. This is a genuine eternal moral dilemma and it reveals the truly *political* nature of [ ethics] – the fact that it can only ever be *ethico-political*.
>
> By political, I mean that we do not *know* what to do. We cannot be sure what is the right thing to do. The fact that the conundrum is not resolvable or decidable, what Derrida calls its 'undecidability', is virtually a definition of politics and the political. (Bulley, forthcoming)

In recognising the fundamental politics of ethics, Bulley also provides a quandary for thinking about Ethics and IPE. In all those moments where such politics, such undecidability has been overlooked – by choosing to defend one 'other', be it the poor, the fellow citizen, women, etc. - it can be seen that ethics enacts a violence. This is a violence to the 'subject' who may be quite different from the way they are portrayed (Butler, 2005). It is also a violence towards whoever is left out.

We identify two broad senses in which ethics and ethical-IPE can be seen to enact a form of violence: conceptual and empirical. In conceptual terms, as we have been suggesting throughout this paper, theory and knowledge of any kind must inevitably make certain ontological and epistemological moves in order to even 'speak'. This is what Derrida refers to as iter-ability, or ipseity, such that the ethical subject is both produced and frozen at the point of utterance

(Brassett and Bulley, 2007) Therefore when Thomas Pogge, for instance, invokes ethical arguments to reform the global market, a degree of sensitivity is required. His suggestion of a Global Resources Dividend (Pogge, 2002: 205) to ameliorate the "ordinary centrifugal forces" of the global market place is a move which reifies and instantiates just as much neo-liberal theory as it challenges. Of course, one might argue, that this is just words on a page. However, when an academic of Pogge's stature has the ear of UNDP and World Banks economists, the praxeological imperative is surely much greater?

In empirical terms, it could be argued that IPE is well placed to critically engage. The point would be that with the profusion of ethically motivated 'agents' in the global polity – be it individuals, civil society, or even 'celebrities' – the critique and reform of globalisation has increasingly come centre stage. This presents a vast array of potential ethical studies for IPE to address. For instance, in a masterful analysis of Fair Trade, Mat Watson finds that this apparently ethical intervention shores up the structure of global accumulation which, to some extent at least, fosters the growth of global poverty in the first place (Watson, 2006). Such arguments can be read as proffering a new set of questions for thinking through the question of ethics and IPE. To whit, if ethical arguments from within IPE enact a violence which is identifiable from within IPE research, then it suggests the further question of how we might resist.

*Ethical Resistance*

Thus finally, it is incumbent to provide an account of what an ethical resistance to ethics might look like. Here we turn to the thought of Michel Foucault:

> …there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case […] by definition they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or a rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination, an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat. Resistances do not derive from a few heterogeneous principles; but neither are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed. They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. (Foucault, 2005: 88)

What is to be done? Foucault suggests that Lenin's fundamental problem should remain as such, a fundamental and eternal invocation to resist. In some instances, the resistance will be straightforward, when, for instance, power/knowledge relations are structured so as to cause death, destruction, or suffering. In others the role of critical reflection is paramount. For instance, as is the case with fair trade, an apparently straightforward intervention is unavoidably imbricated in the power/knowledge relations, which made the problem possible. Thus the search is on for what Foucault refers to as the 'odd term' in the relation, to trace the lines of fragility in the logics that produce concepts of trade, fair trade and to understand how this process of knowledge production structures the conversation possible between the two. This might require the kinds of imaginative interventions now common within the global civil society such as the use of parody or satire (De Goede, 2005). Or else, we might intervene more systematically via the deconstruction of the discourse of fair trade. For example, Alex Hughes (2002) has argued that fair trade imperatives actually accentuate a form of governmental control over the poor farmer collectives who increasingly face the burden of meeting (ethical) accountancy directives. Equally, it has been suggested that the use of images of smiling black people in the adverts of fair trade companies is a clear sign that the discourse of a 'white man's burden' lingers on, (and in our local shopping centre) (Wright, 2004). The tensions, ambivalences and unintended consequences of particular forms of resistance thus require careful analysis.

However, along with these ambivalences come opportunities. By re-privileging the ethically reflexive individual as a worthy object of analysis, we are afforded a much wider sense of what might actually constitute an act of resistance. Radically speaking it may still include throwing a Molotov cocktail into the nearest available Nike store, but it might also include the everyday actions of individuals that challenge particular configurations of power relations, intended or not. In the same way that apparently ethical injunctions can turn out to have less ethical side effects, might we be able to read the reverse effect in other examples? If Smith was correct in suggesting that justice is the glue of society, always-there by definition, then it is incumbent upon the social scientist to ask how the myriad representations of justice that the reflexive agent produces through their actions and utterances are formed. What do they mean? How do they conflict with other representations? Can we arbitrate between them?

We do not want to provide a firm definition of resistance, indeed such a definition would negate the term as we have constructed it. The point is that such questions lead us away from straightforward logics of 'Ethics + IPE = 'good' and vaunt the possibilities of a praxis focused on the ethics-violence-resistance triad.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the paper has engaged critically with the important themes suggested by the demand for ethics in IPE. After first outlining the possibilities and critical limits with the debate, as far as it has gone, we turned to an immanent critique of the notion of obligation in IPE. Obligation has underpinned by an 'invention of individual autonomy' such that IPE has been a foster-home for the neo-liberal logics of contract, labour and market. Even the critical injunction to reign in certain 'abusive' power structures was shown to perform an extension of such logics via a perpetuation of the dichotomy freedom/power. In lieu of clear foundations on which to proceed then, the paper outlined a praxeological approach to these questions which took the lack of foundations as potentially creative tension in the *politics of ethics*. A focus on the triad ethics-violence-resistance was suggested as a way forward for theory/practice beyond the dichotomy ethics=good/politics=bad. In this way, our contribution should be read as a critical reconstruction. It is critical insofar as it traces the lines of contradiction (and confirmation) in the current discourses of ethical IPE to be found in the literature. It is reconstructive insofar as it attempts to draw out the kernel insights from within that same literature to sustain an innovative research agenda.

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