Morality, Ethics, and Globalization: Lessons from Kant, Hegel, Rawls, and Habermas

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Abstract

This chapter critically examines the separation of political theory from international theory and argues that a return to the former is essential if IR scholars are to help provide answers to the urgent moral and ethical questions facing world politics in an era of globalization. An examination of the political philosophies of Kant and Hegel demonstrates the importance of political theory for the analysis and practice of global politics today, while the tension between the universal and particular, emerging from Kantian morality and Hegelian ethics, is traced in the recent work of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas.

Introduction

In an important yet underappreciated book, Mervyn Frost (1966) has written that “although normative questions regularly arise in the day-to-day practice of international politics the discipline of international relations [IR] has not accorded ethical theory a central place within it” (p. 1). Some of the more significant reasons for this marginalization include pervasive moral skepticism associated with the characterization of international politics as a Hobbesian state of nature (Beitz 1979); the positivist bias characteristic of what Hoffman (1977) has called “An

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By this term I refer to the institutionalized hierarchy of legitimate claims to knowledge and truth dictated by an academic community’s most reputable journals, whose editorial policies shape the work of scholarship by privileging—either implicitly or explicitly—certain types of inquiry over others.

To be sure, a handful of works bridging the concerns of international and political theory have followed the seminal works of Walzer (1977) and Beitz (1979). For a review of work in this tradition, see Schmidt (2002). While such developments are welcome, scholarly interest in this work is confined to specialized journals and continues to be marginalized in mainstream (read: American) IR. This chapter contributes to this literature by emphasizing what political theorists have to say on issues pertinent to normative IR.

While most questions that are motivating research in IR are fundamentally normative in nature, scholars diligently keep such normative commitments in the background for the sake of appearing as “objective” and “scientific” as possible (Frost 1998). This practice is reinforced by the editorial policy of the field’s leading journals, which emphasize scientific analysis over prescription. The subject matter of “ethics” in IR is thus left to political theorists or else remains at the margins of the discipline.