Reuniting Ethics and Social Science: *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*

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If International Relations as a scholarly endeavor is to remain relevant it must speak to today's most pressing dilemmas of political action in world politics: theoretically, analytically, and practically. How should we combat terrorism? When, if ever, is humanitarian intervention justified? How should we address the transborder movement of peoples? What is an appropriate response to global climate change? What should the international community do about "failed states"? How should we respond to persistent global poverty and political alienation? How do we reconcile trade liberalization and environmental protection? Who is the "we" that has responsibility for acting in such situations?

If it is to speak to such questions—if it is to be a practical discourse—International Relations needs to be more than an explanatory project; it has to occupy the difficult terrain between empirical and normative inquiry. In whichever context it arises, the question of "how we should act" requires both an appreciation of the political conditions of action *and* an understanding of the good(s) we wish to achieve. Empirical theory and inquiry contributes to the first of these tasks, but it is normative inquiry that illuminates the second. As E. H. Carr observed long ago, if International Relations as a political science is to speak to the most pressing issues of international political action, it must be a science "not only of what is, but of what ought to be."[1]

The tale of International Relations since the Second World War is a contradictory one, though. On the one hand, the field has lost sight of the practical intent that characterized its early years and of the imperative that a practical discourse must integrate empirical and normative inquiry. Within the (largely American) mainstream, the pursuit of explanatory theory has been privileged, with systematic and self-conscious normative reflection on international politics delegated to

political philosophers. On the other hand, the practical intent of the field has persisted, usually at an implicit, even subconscious level. Whether realists or poststructuralists, constructivists or liberals, international relations scholars have repeatedly proffered answers to the question of how we should act. Often unwittingly, they have been drawn on to the terrain between empirical and normative theory and inquiry. The product of these contradictory trends is a field that champions the pursuit of purely empirical or explanatory theory, but one that is shot through with normative assumptions, propositions, and arguments.

Although we address the problem primarily from the perspective of International Relations, our critique applies equally to those who have pursued normative inquiries of international issues but have neglected the need to root those firmly in empirical and positive knowledge. Insofar as normative theory seeks to contribute to a practical discourse, as opposed to a purely idealist one, it too must engage the other side. Only the combination of normative and positive theory provides a sound basis for action.

The Oxford Handbook of International Relations

The invitation to create the *Oxford Handbook* posed a number of challenges for us. Some were logistical: We had never met and were situated on opposite sides of the globe. Others were more fundamental: While we had worked on some similar topics in international relations theory and international law, we came at the material from what would seem at first glance to be significantly different and even opposed perspectives. Reus-Smit is typically categorized as a "constructivist" whose work is normative and historical; Snidal is typically categorized as a "rationalist" whose work is positivist and model-driven. But neither of us likes the confinement of these categories, and from the beginning we were able to find the common ground that brought our differences together. Moreover, neither of us wanted simply to organize a grand survey without engaging the field in a more critical way. And both of us recognized that many of the field's divisions were dysfunctional, both for scholarship and for its impact on the world. Our early conversations quickly led us to the goal of helping the field rediscover its identity as a practical discourse by showing how quarantining normative from empirical inquiry (or vice versa) undermines its capacity to speak to pressing problems of political action.

Of course, any handbook has to be part reference work, part introduction, and part survey. In International Relations, such works typically focus on a list of

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"isms" and issue areas, with ethics relegated to a final chapter or two on "ethics and international affairs" or "justice and international relations." The implication is that most of what we do is analytical or explanatory, our theories primarily positive or empirical. In reality, however, all of our theories have ethical dimensions, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit. The reason for this, we argue,[2] is that international relations scholars have never fully abandoned their practical ambitions: realists prescribe what rational states ought to do; postmodernists recommend practices of scholarly resistance and deconstruction. And whenever they make such prescriptions, they engage the normative as well as the empirical.

The theme of the relationship between empirical and normative inquiry runs through the entire *Handbook*.[3] It is most pronounced, however, in the section on theoretical perspectives. Here we break decisively with tradition, including not one but two chapters on each theory: the first providing a general overview, the second probing a theory's ethics, drawing out previously hidden (even denied) normative aspects. For instance, the chapter on realism by William Wohlforth is followed by a chapter on the ethics of realism by Jack Donnelly; the chapter on Marxism by Benno Teschke is followed by one on the ethics of Marxism by Nicholas Rengger; and the chapter on feminism by Sandra Whitworth is followed by one on the ethics of feminism by Jacqui True.

Reading the field in this way challenges many of its ritual characterizations—most notably, the well-worn distinctions between realists and idealists, scientists and utopians. There are many important points of convergence and divergence across the theories viewed from an ethical perspective, as we document in detail in the introductory chapter. Structuralist theories as diverse as Marxism, realism, and English School pluralism share a skepticism regarding the possibility of moral change, whereas agential theories as diverse as new liberalism, constructivism, and English School solidarism are more optimistic. Similarly, radically different understandings of power can lead to quite similar attitudes toward moral change. Thus, its conception of compulsory power leads realism to conclude that the politics of morality is always eclipsed by the politics of power, whereas a conception of productive power leads postmodernism to conclude that all processes of moral signification produce relations of domination; both perspectives end up deeply skeptical of the possibility of moral change, but for very different reasons. There are also sources of value resonance across seemingly opposed perspectives. Most striking is the convergence of critical theorists and new liberals, in that the former's overriding ethical goal of human emancipation (understood as

removing constraints on human autonomy) is not dissimilar to the latter's commitment to human freedom. While such divergences and convergences are not surprising on reflection, they only emerge by both taking ethical issues seriously and by considering the interrelation of positive and normative aspects within and across different theories.

Origins

If the practical nature of International Relations means that positive and normative theory and inquiry are persistent features of all perspectives on world politics, why do we need a *Handbook* to bring them together? Why have they become seemingly separated and, if so, why is this an opportune time to reunite them? Our answer is that the development of the field—especially the "mainstream" American part of it—defined its central problems both substantively and methodologically in a way that has marginalized ethical considerations. While other approaches—feminism, the English School, postmodernism, and so forth—have engaged normative theory more directly, they have often done so to the relative neglect of social science, or for the purpose of deploying normative arguments primarily as a critique of positive approaches. The resulting separation has been aggravated by the field's tendency to exaggerate differences and incompatibilities across approaches.

Changes in both the world and in international relations scholarship make this a particularly propitious time to reengage the normative and positive enterprises. We can see this by laying out three central features of postwar scholarship that help explain the seeming separation of positive and normative considerations. We then discuss how these features have changed in the recent period in ways that open space for explicitly recognizing and strengthening the interrelation of normative and social scientific approaches.

The first feature was the looming presence of the security dilemma during the postwar period and the corresponding dominance of realism in mainstream international relations theory. William Wohlforth points out that although it contains substantial internal diversity, realism is ultimately unified in its view that anarchy makes "international relations, regrettably, largely a politics of power and security,"[4] an implication of which, as Jack Donnelly writes, is that "the pursuit of power marginalizes all other objectives."[5] Realists argue that this has been true back to Thucydides, but it was strongly reinforced during the Cold

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War, when the threat of the unthinkable through MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) underscored "the stubborn amorality of strategic studies."[6] The advent of structural realism compounded these tendencies by suggesting that the structural imperatives of anarchy left little room for moral choice.

A second and related feature has been a heavy focus on the state as the central actor of international politics. David Lake argues that the state is indispensable to international politics "and will remain so" both for substantive reasons and for methodological reasons, including parsimony.[7] However, normative claims are often inadvertently smuggled into the analytic concept of the state. This happens when states are deemed to pursue only their own interests through self-help and to disregard the interests of other states as both a positive and normative matter; it equally happens when rules of "self-determination" are invoked to delegitimize concerns for citizens within other states. Moreover, the state as an abstraction too readily diverts attention from the individual level, where normative issues are often more vivid. Thus, treating states as the key actors obscures issues of international morality even as it rests the analysis on largely unexplored normative assumptions.

The effort to create a positive "science" of international politics is a third feature that has marginalized the normative. Values have been treated as something that could and should be carefully quarantined from research. The ambition to be scientific also has often been tied to particular empirical approaches— especially statistical methods, the search for "objective" measures, and an emphasis on falsification. This squeezes out alternative empirical explanatory approaches, such as historical, interpretive, and case study methods, that are sometimes better equipped to highlight normative processes and issues.[8] Similarly, the development of formal "positive" theory offers a powerful tool of inquiry, but it is often incorrectly presented as independent of normative theory. As Andrew Kydd argues, however, rational choice has the "normative stance and biases . . . of its parent ideology, liberalism," even as it introduces normative elements of its own through its emphasis on efficiency as a goal.[9] Finally, a perverse result of the move to social science has been that taking ethical considerations into account became seen as a sign of weakness or sloppiness rather than as an essential and integral part of the analysis.

Fortunately, changes in the world and in the academy have brought us to a point where good empirical research and normative issues can be brought back together. First, the traditional security dilemma has receded and been replaced

by different security problems and other issues. Security studies are increasingly organized around such topics as terrorism and internal ethnic conflict, whose solutions lie not simply in the logic of coercion but also in addressing fundamental, often domestic, causes. Political economy issues of trade and finance are now firmly established as central to international politics,[10] and new issues from human rights to corruption to global warming present different challenges that cannot be addressed by traditional thinking. Whereas the predominance of security concerns often made ethical choices seem straightforward, these new issues entail difficult distributional and ethical questions that bring normative considerations to the fore.

Second, a set of new actors has taken an important place in the formation of international politics. Looking from the "bottom up," the new liberalism argues that globalization has produced a new set of societal interests and domestic actors whose conflicting goals are essential to understanding state preferences.[11] Looking from the "top down," the global society[12] and English School[13] approaches emphasize the importance of global and international society rather than simply anarchy; they find a corresponding role for civil society, including activists, NGOs, and corporations. International institutions, including legalized arrangements,[14] have assumed a new importance, while intergovernmental organizations have emerged as actors sometimes managing international issues.[15] Even if states remain the most important actors in international politics, their autonomy is bounded and they cannot achieve their goals acting alone. These changes raise new ethical questions and problematize old ones. What authority ought these new actors command? What is the scope of sovereignty and authority that states can rightly claim? For these reasons, we now see institutional scholarship circling back to the ethical considerations that it once tried to set aside.[16]

Third, advances in scholarship leave the international relations field poised to take advantage of these new opportunities. Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil point to the possibility of more question-oriented "eclectic theorizing" that engages multiple research approaches to "make better use of the innovative and creative scholarship produced within these traditions . . . and [be] responsive to normative concerns."[17] Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman likewise point toward the emergence of "more pluralistic attitudes toward methodology . . . [reflected] in the increasing use of sophisticated multi-method research designs," which also means that this broader array of concerns can be better accommodated.[18] This general spirit of eclecticism is reflected in a broad range of approaches. It is

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evident in the more direct engagement of constructivists with questions of ethics in addition to the politics of norms.[19] It is evident in the more sustained engagement of critical theorists with sustained empirical inquiry.[20] And it is latent in a shift that has occurred in rational choice, where the emphasis on actors' beliefs and problems of equilibrium selection gives (normative) ideas a much more prominent place. While there will always be extreme positivists who eschew the role of normative factors, as well as extreme postpositivists who are equally hostile toward "social science," the large center of the field is increasingly aware of the need to join systematic empirical inquiry with normative reflection to better understand and engage with international politics.

The final spur to self-consciously reengaging normative and empirical inquiry comes from what we encounter daily in the classroom. For a variety of reasons, our students are ever more internationalized, even globalized, in their perspectives, concerns, and ambitions, something reflected in the boom that international relations programs are now experiencing. Even if scholars forget that their field is, and should be, ultimately concerned with how we should act, our students are deeply concerned with such questions and press them upon us constantly. If the field is not about finding reasoned responses to the most pressing problems of political action in contemporary world politics, what is it about? Each day at the University of Chicago and the Australian National University, our students bring us back to the field's raison d'être. And the purposes they imagine, and the questions they ask, are those that demand the reengagement of empirical and normative inquiry.

Implications

An important theme of the *Handbook* is "progress" in the study of International Relations. The *Handbook* chapters clearly document that the quality of our theoretical argumentation, the diversity and insights of our methods, and our general level of understanding are markedly better than a generation ago. At the same time, however, this progress has been driven by a division of labor with increased specialization that has led each part of the field to become narrower. Our hope is to spur further progress in our understanding by increasing awareness of this separation, of its inherent limitations, and of the possibilities for remedying it.

We do not call for International Relations scholars to reject specialization. Given the magnitude and complexity of our subject matter, specialization is

inevitable and desirable. We need scholars who are deeply learned in the dynamics of Great Power competition, in the way in which moral values structure political action, in the political economy of international money, in how gendered assumptions shape everything from the conduct of war to diplomacy, in the ethical conundrums that surround politics within and beyond borders, and so on. Furthermore, while probing our most basic epistemological and ontological assumptions is essential to ensuring sound foundations for our scholarship, and often exposes significant limitations in how we see world politics, not all good scholarship needs to work at this level. Indeed, much of what we recognize as excellent research proceeds without researchers constantly worrying about the broader picture but simply doing what they do best, rather than diverting their efforts into talking about how to do good research.

Specialization becomes a problem, however, when scholars confuse their fragments—their parts of the general inquiry into world politics—with the whole, when they forget that their foci are partial and simply pieces of a larger picture. We are particularly concerned in the *Handbook* with specializations that deny the interconnection between empirical and normative inquiry. We do not expect every piece of research to actively engage both the normative and the empirical simultaneously; indeed, that would sacrifice many of the benefits of specialization. Good individual research can be (and has been) done by positivists who take normative assumptions as given and unquestioned, just as good normative work often fails to appreciate and investigate its social scientific underpinnings.

But at a disciplinary level we need a clearer recognition that normative and empirical theory are inextricably intertwined, as they must be to address the pressing problems of political action in contemporary world politics. Individual authors need to periodically revisit this interconnection, reflect on how it fits within their own scholarship, and ask how their primarily empirical or normative work can engage with the primarily normative or empirical work of others. Those adopting positive approaches must recognize that their favored models and techniques are better at studying some problems than others, and let normative theory guide them in engaging systematically questions of how we should act. Those whose project is primarily normative must recognize that the value of their analysis depends on "what is possible" and equally must let positive theory guide them in understanding how the world works.

Similarly, the field as a whole needs to recognize and embrace the centrality of this interconnection. This will take more than tipping a hat to such issues.

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If International Relations is to evolve further as a practical discourse, movement will be needed in at least three areas. First, we must modify how we teach the subject, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Within the United States, curricula treat the field almost exclusively as a realm of empirical or positive inquiry, with systematic engagement with issues of ethics and international affairs left aside. Elsewhere, normative theory is often paid greater attention, but the more social scientific approach is sometimes relatively neglected. Bringing these approaches together in a more balanced fashion within the curriculum is essential if we are to speak to the very real demand that is coming from our students today, and if we are to give the next generation of scholars the skills required to work systematically at the intersection between the empirical and the normative. With the publication of the *Handbook*, educators will have a resource that gives the empirical and normative aspects of our theories and approaches equal billing, making serious dialogue between ethics and social science harder to avoid.

Second, we must adjust our hiring practices. Political science departments in the United States have historically given preference to recruiting international relations scholars whose focus is empirical inquiry and positive theory, seldom appointing those who do explicitly normative work (as opposed to the empirical study of norms). Conversely, many politics departments in Britain and elsewhere emphasize philosophical and historical approaches, and they need to also include the full range of social scientific approaches. If we take seriously the need to bring empirical and normative inquiry into more systematic dialogue, then we need to bring scholars onto the faculty who address the neglected dimensions of this relationship. The best solution is to find and encourage scholars who are explicitly committed to bringing normative and empirical inquiry together. Recent examples include Allen Buchanan and Robert Keohane's work on cosmopolitanism and intervention and Robyn Eckersley's book *The Green State*.[21] Their work testifies to the diverse theoretical quarters from which can emanate inquiry that engages the empirical and normative.

Finally, for the preceding changes to succeed the major journals in the field must be receptive to work that treads the difficult terrain between the normative and the empirical. *Ethics & International Affairs* has been a pioneer in addressing this intersection. The new journal *International Theory* is designed to showcase such work for a largely scholarly audience, bringing together as it does international theory, international legal theory, and international political theory. It is important, however, that existing, premier journals open their doors to such

work. Precedents have been established here in the way such journals have encouraged work that reaches beyond the conventional bounds of international relations scholarship to draw insights from economics, law, and sociology.[22] To be sure, these borrowings have been in the service of ostensibly empirical theory and inquiry. But if we take seriously the idea that the field should embrace its identity as a practical discourse, and that this necessarily demands a more systematic dialogue between empirical and normative reflection and analysis, then it is hard to see why we should not open the doors to more explicitly normative research.

If international relations scholars can move in these directions, we will be better placed to improve international public policy.[23] The field is fundamentally about understanding how we should act in world politics, and this is a juncture in world history that simultaneously offers new options for action—with traditional security constraints lessened and globalization creating new connections—and throws up new political challenges. Both positive and normative theories have important things to say about how we should act in such a world. The point of the *Handbook* is that these voices are only effective when they speak together. Ironically, it is precisely this need to combine normative and empirical inquiry that is often lost on those who most vigorously advocate policy-relevant research, their position often being similar to that of the old schoolmaster in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*: "Teach those children facts and facts alone—weed everything else out." International Relations is often excoriated for having limited impact on public policy, but this has less to do with its emphasis on theory (the standard reason given) than its loss of identity as a practical discourse and the associated forgetting that this requires us to bring ethics and social science together.

NOTES
[1] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 6.
[2] Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, "Between Utopia and Reality: The Practical Discourses of International Relations," in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, eds., *Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[3] The *Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (hereafter *OHIR*) provides a comprehensive overview of the field. Its major sections address, respectively: different ways of imagining the discipline; the major theoretical perspectives; contending methodological approaches; the boundaries between International Relations and related fields, such as international law and strategic studies; the relationship between the scholar and the policy-maker; the issue of the field's diversity; and a selection of visions by eminent and new voices regarding how the field ought to be developing.
[4] William Wohlforth, "Realism," *OHIR*, ch. 7.
[5] Jack Donnelly, "The Ethics of Realism," *OHIR*, ch. 8.
[6] Robert Ayson, "Strategic Studies," *OHIR*, ch. 32.
[7] David Lake, "The State and International Relations," *OHIR*, ch. 2.
[8] Joel Quirk, "Historical Methods," *OHIR*, ch. 30.
[9] Andrew H. Kydd, "Methodological Individualism and Rational Choice," *OHIR*, ch. 25.
[10] John Ravenhill, "International Political Economy," *OHIR*, ch. 31.
[11] Andrew Moravcsik, "The New Liberalism," *OHIR*, ch. 13.

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[12] Michael Barnett and Kathryn Sikkink, "From International Relations to Global Society," *OHIR*, ch. 3.

[13] Tim Dunne, "The English School," *OHIR*, ch. 15.

[14] Michael Byers, "International Law," *OHIR*, ch. 35.

[15] Arthur A. Stein, "Neoliberal Institutionalism," *OHIR* ch. 11.

[16] James L. Richardson, "The Ethics of Neoliberal Institutionalism," *OHIR*, ch. 12.

[17] Peter J. Katzenstein and Rudra Sil, "Eclectic Theorizing in the Study and Practice of International Relations," *OHIR*, ch. 6.

[18] Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, "Case Study Methods," *OHIR*, ch. 29.

[19] Richard Price, "The Ethics of Constructivism," *OHIR*, ch. 18; see also Richard Price, ed., *Moral Limit and Possibility in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[20] Robyn Eckersley, "The Ethics of Critical Theory," *OHIR*, ch. 20.

[21] Allen Buchanan and Robert O. Keohane, "The Preventive Use of Force: A Cosmopolitan Institutional Proposal," *Ethics & International Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2004), pp. 1–22; and Robyn Eckersley, *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

[22] Friedrich Kratochwil, "Sociological Approaches," *OHIR*, ch. 26; and James Goldgeier and Philip Tetlock, "Psychological Approaches," *OHIR*, ch. 27.

[23] Henry R. Nau, "Scholarship and Policy-making: Who Speaks Truth to Whom?" *OHIR*, ch. 36; and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "International Relations: The Relevance of Theory to Practice," *OHIR*, ch. 37.