

# Where would we be without rules? A virtue ethics approach to foreign policy analysis

JAMIE GASKARTH\*

**Abstract.** Recent decades have seen a heightened interest in the ethics of foreign policymaking. This literature has overwhelmingly explored the ethical dilemmas faced by policymakers in terms of situations and the structures – either political/economic, normative and/or linguistic – that shape actions. The subjective experience of ethical decisionmaking in this arena and the character of the individuals making policy choices have been largely neglected. However, the apparently greater scope for moral action in the post-Cold War era, combined with the growth in global institutions designed to enforce individual accountability – such as the International Criminal Court – suggest that more effort should be placed on understanding ethics in terms of the individual. This article seeks to combine the work of political and social psychologists with the philosophical literature on virtue theory to see what new insights these might offer into the ethics of foreign policy. It argues that virtue ethics provide an effective means to critique the morality of foreign policy decisions. This is evinced by an exploration of Tony Blair's decision to go to war with Iraq in 2003.

**Dr. Jamie Gaskarth** is a Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Plymouth and writes on ethics, international society, and British foreign policy.

For over a decade now, we have seen a renewed interest in discussing the ethics of foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Whilst this has led to some fascinating discussion on the structures in which decisions are made and the broader frames of meaning that shape attitudes and behaviour, less theoretical attention has been paid to the subjects making choices in this ethical sphere – specifically, how they construct themselves as moral agents and how their individual characters affect the decisions they make.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> N. Wheeler, N. and T. Dunne, 'Good International Citizenship: A Third Way for British Foreign Policy', *International Affairs*, 74:4 (1998), pp. 847–70; Karen E. Smith and M. Light, *Ethics and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); David Chandler and Volker Heins, *Rethinking Ethical Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2006); Deen K. Chatterjee and Don E. Scheid, *Ethics and Foreign Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Rare exceptions include: K. J. Kille, *The UN Secretary General and Moral Authority* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007); Richard D. North, *Mr Blair's Messiah Politics: A story of inspired government, 1997–2007* (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2006). Robert H. Jackson's essay 'The Situational Ethics of Statecraft' advocates a return to analysing the virtues of leaders in C. J. Nolan, *Ethics and Statecraft: The Moral Dimension of International Affairs* (London: Praeger, 2005),

This absence seems strangely out of keeping with developments in the wider world. The post-Cold War period is seen as one of increasing individual agency in foreign policy decisionmaking.<sup>3</sup> Freed from the structural constraints imposed by the Cold War, many leaders now arguably have a greater range of choices on how and when they act, or fail to act, in response to world events. The UK's decisions to intervene in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq can all be seen as inspired by the personal choice of senior foreign policymakers rather than as compelled by overwhelming necessity.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, the failure to act over Rwanda and Darfur may be criticised as sins of omission since, if the political will had existed and the requisite foresight had been exercised, intervention would have been possible.<sup>5</sup> One might have expected a theoretical shift in this time away from analysing the structural constraints on individual action towards awareness of how individuals do act and how they shape the decisionmaking structures they inhabit in turn.

Taking individuals seriously as agents can be controversial within the wider discipline of international relations.<sup>6</sup> Foreign policies are formed by a complex range of social pressures and decisions are made in social groups. It is not always clear how far any one individual can be seen as the author of a policy. Nevertheless, as Steve Smith notes, individual actors do 'interpret, decide, pronounce, and implement' and for this reason, he argues that: 'Foreign policy analysis is at the very least an arena of individual action, even if that action has structural or social drivers'.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, Ole Wæver has suggested that: 'there is a sense in which choice and agency are ultimately individual, driven by the problematique of reconciling outer and inner existence'.<sup>8</sup> In short, even though leaders make their choices in social groups, the individual has to make a decision and they have to reconcile their choices within their own moral psychology.

pp. 21–38. Its title is rather confusing in that situationists in other disciplines, especially social psychology, are those who emphasise external factors on choice outcomes rather than individual character traits. Jackson deploys the term to note the specific moral constraints under which statesmen and women operate. This article places greater emphasis on the individual as an autonomous moral agent. Michael Walzer seems to move towards a psychological approach to ethics in his chapter 'The Divided Self' in *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*. However, he does not make explicit how internal ethical conflicts can be analysed by other actors. Richard Ned Lebow does discuss virtue in his recent book *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). However, this is more a theory of motives than an exploration of the character traits of leadership *per se*.

<sup>3</sup> C. Hill, 'What is to be done? Foreign Policy as a site for Political Action', *International Affairs*, 79:2 (2003), pp. 233–55. One writer sees the end of the Cold War as bringing forth an era in which 'the world was deeply plunged in "ethical delirium"' (Badiou, 2002, as cited in P. Cunliffe, 'Poor Man's Ethics: Peacekeeping and the Contradictions of Ethical Ideology', essay in Chandler and Heins (2006), p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> J. Kampfner, *Blair's Wars* (London: Free Press, 2004); North (2007), p. 28; Chandler and Heins (2006), p. 55; A. Danchev, 'Tony Blair's Vietnam: the Iraq War and "special relationship" in historical perspective', *Review of International Studies*, 33:2 (2007), pp. 189–203.

<sup>5</sup> P. Williams, *British foreign policy under New Labour, 1997–2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), p. 229, fn. 28.

<sup>6</sup> T. Erskine, 'Locating Responsibility: The problem of moral agency in International Relations', essay in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> S. Smith, 'Foreign Policy Is What States Make Of It: Social Construction and International Relations Theory', essay in V. Kubalkova, *Foreign Policy in a Constructed World* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> O. Wæver, 'Resisting the Temptation of Post Foreign Policy Analysis', essay in W. Carlsnaes and S. Smith, *European Foreign Policy, the EC and Changing perspectives in Europe* (London: SAGE, 1994), p. 265.

Public recognition of this is arguably evident in the way individual accountability is fast becoming an engrained aspect of international society. The international community has increasingly sought to highlight individual responsibility for human rights abuses via the use of targeted sanctions, criminal tribunals and international arrest warrants.<sup>9</sup> To identify someone as individually morally culpable we must first make the assumption that they had a degree of choice and so this move towards holding individuals to account is, I would suggest, an explicit recognition of the possibility of individual agency in world politics.

Yet, when we look at the literature on the ethics of foreign policy, we can see that scholars tend to analyse objective frameworks over the subjective experience of decisionmaking. Like much ethical debate in other areas of human activity this broadly takes the form of a division between those who wish to emphasise rules and those consequences. In the first category, we have moral purists who, following Kant, appear to view ethics as a succession of universal laws, rather like the Ten Commandments, which we must follow.<sup>10</sup> It is always wrong to kill, so selling arms is wrong. If we act in one situation, we should always act that way in similar situations in the future. John Pilger and Noam Chomsky have been described as recent adherents to this position.<sup>11</sup>

Within the rules-based canon, there are also theorists who seek to identify the rules we live by in terms of norms or laws and construct a sense of the ethics of international relations on this basis.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Mervyn Frost proposes a constitutive theory of ethics in international relations, by showing how certain norms have widespread acceptance in global politics. Although Frost does discuss individuality, he does so by focusing on how it is constituted by the state or how individual states are constituted by the society of states. This always leads him away from analysing the individual towards the societal norms that constitute the state system (and thereby the individual units within it).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, whilst Finnemore and Sikkink do highlight the way individuals act as 'norm entrepreneurs', calling attention to ethical problems in world politics and framing the way they are debated, this does not seem to have resulted in theoretical analysis of individual moral character: the capacity for individuals to resist or transform social pressures in their pursuit of ethical goals.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, when constructivism has begun to theorise agency it has been criticised for moving too far from its structuralist roots.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The first international arrest warrant of a serving Head of State was issued on 4 March 2009 by the International Criminal Court against Omar Hassan Ahmad Al Bashir, President of Sudan. See also J. Meernik, 'Victor's Justice or the Law?: Judging and Punishing at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 47:2 (2003), p. 151; S. Roach, *Politicizing the International Criminal Court* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Han-Ru Zhou, 'The Enforcement of Arrest Warrants by International Forces', *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 4 (2006), pp. 202–18.

<sup>10</sup> Kant famously advanced the notion of the 'categorical imperative' – that we should act such that it may be willed as a universal law. In other words, we must consider all actions as establishing a precedent and make sure that we would accept similar behaviour from other actors in similar situations (2002), pp. 33–7.

<sup>11</sup> For a critique of this view see: C. Brown, 'On morality, Self-interest and Foreign Policy', *Government & Opposition* (2002), pp. 173–89.

<sup>12</sup> M. Frost, *Ethics and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

<sup>13</sup> Frost, (1998), pp. 137–159.

<sup>14</sup> M. Finnemore and K. Sikkink, 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', *International Organization*, 52 (1998), pp. 887–917.

<sup>15</sup> See R. A. Payne, 'Persuasion, Frames and Norm Construction', *European Journal of International Relations*, 7:1 (2001), pp. 37–61.

In a second category, consequentialism, we have those who judge actions by how beneficial they are – to our own political community or to international order or society. According to this framework it is the good or bad consequences that follow which are important rather than adherence to moral absolutes or the intentions of the policymaker.<sup>16</sup> In foreign policy circles this has historically been associated with the concept of ‘Realpolitik’ – the practical calculation of material interests and relative power concerns – but more recently has been adopted by those seeking to bring about change in world politics outside existing rules and conventions.<sup>17</sup>

To see how these debates play out, we might consider the issue of humanitarian intervention. ‘Kantian’ moral purists identify the failure to act in all cases of humanitarian need as evidence of hypocrisy or self-interest.<sup>18</sup> Normative theorists examine how humanitarian intervention accords with the existing rules and norms of international society.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, consequentialists either focus on the negative humanitarian impacts or stress that laws and norms may at times be overridden in the most serious cases and where a greater good may be achieved at less cost.<sup>20</sup> What is marginalised by both groups is the decisionmaker and their own individual moral psychology. In an era of greater agency, individuals have the scope to decide what principles should be universalised; individuals have the scope to weigh the consequences of acting or not acting and devise political strategies to defend their position. They do so within social contexts, and often in groups, and these will shape their interpretation of the problem and the choices they make. However, if statesmen or women are to be held responsible for their actions we need to place more weight on them as individuals making decisions.

For this reason, the study of the individual as a moral agent is, I would argue, a fundamental part of foreign policy analysis.<sup>21</sup> In the complex environment in which foreign policymakers operate, it is not possible to reduce the ethics of decisionmaking to simple rule following.<sup>22</sup> Nor, when we consider the myriad

<sup>16</sup> The most prominent recent proponent of this view is Peter Singer, see *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> The Bush Doctrine could be seen as an example of the ideological variant, see R. Jervis, ‘Understanding the Bush Doctrine’, *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays* (London: Pearson Longman, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Brown (2002).

<sup>19</sup> M. Frost, ‘Putting the World to Rights: Britain’s ethical foreign policy’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 12:2 (1999), pp. 80–9.

<sup>20</sup> ICISS (International Commission on State Sovereignty), *The Responsibility to Protect* (2001), available at: {<http://www.iciss.ca/report-en.asp>}; C. Hitchens, ‘A War to be Proud Of’, *The Weekly Standard*, 10:47 (2005).

<sup>21</sup> This is not to ignore the extensive work being done on how individuals make foreign policy decisions (See J. G. Stein, ‘Foreign Policy Decision Making: Rational, Psychological, and Neurological Models’, essay in S. Smith, A. Hadfield and T. Dunne (eds), *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and V. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) for full bibliographies). But, to conceive of individuals as explicitly moral agents provides a different flavour to the discussion, encompassing emotional and value-laden responses to policy problems and colouring all material relations with explicit judgments about right and wrong. Renewing our attention to individual responsibility is also in accordance with developments in international law, from Nuremberg to the International Criminal Court, that refuse to accept the notion that context can explain and excuse immoral behaviour.

<sup>22</sup> D. R. Mapel, ‘Prudence and the Plurality of Value in International Ethics’, *Journal of Politics*, 52:2 (1990), p. 450. In *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), Michael Ignatieff argues: ‘No society can avoid official crimes and brutality

influences on policy outcomes can we make straightforward appraisals of consequences. A good decision now may seem disastrous in a few decades and an expedient choice might have lucky results in the long term. If consequences are the sole guide to ethical action, policymakers may find themselves undermining international order in the pursuit of short term goals or else constructing grand narratives of desirable ends for which they must continually reach.

Instead of seeing moral choices as being decided by objective external forces, the approach I advance in this article stresses the importance of individual moral cognition. As George W. Watson *et al.* note,<sup>23</sup> when appraising the morality of a policy issue, decisionmakers have to undergo a four stage cognitive process, whereby a leader is able to recognise a moral problem, activate relevant moral values to make a judgment, be motivated to act morally and have the courage to see that moral behaviour through.<sup>24</sup> In short, they must have certain character traits, such as commitment to moral values, good judgment, integrity and courage, in order to function as moral agents. Whilst decisions may well be constructed within particular social contexts and influenced by external factors (including rules), they are also the product of the subjective interpretation of ethical problems by individuals.

Scholars in many other fields, such as business and medicine, have sought an alternative to the rules/consequences dichotomy. They have done so through the revival of the study of virtue ethics as a means of fostering and appraising the ethics of leadership. By analysing the individual character of policymakers, how they construct their own ethical space in terms of virtues and how they justify their decisions on this basis gives another way of understanding the ethics of policymaking *in practice*.<sup>25</sup>

Discussion of virtues was once a mainstay of the literature on statesmanship – both in political theory and the more diffuse works categorised as ‘mirrors for princes’.<sup>26</sup> Although this emphasis has declined markedly in recent years, the attention we give to individual agency in foreign policy suggests it is overdue a resurgence. In a recent essay on the lessons of the Vietnam War, David Armstrong calls for a return to the ‘classic virtues of statesmanship [...] wisdom, insight, prudence, common sense, pragmatism, tolerance [...] compromise’ and above all ‘judgment’.<sup>27</sup> Reaching for objective and supposedly rational modes of foreign policymaking has resulted, according to this argument, in ineffective and immoral outcomes.

unless [a] sense of responsibility is widely shared among public officials. Rules and procedures are not enough. Character is decisive’, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> G. W. Watson, R. E. Freeman and B. Parmar, ‘Connected Moral Agency in Organizational Ethics’, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 81 (2008), pp. 323–41.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>25</sup> Martha Nussbaum specifically rejects Virtue Ethics as a separate form of moral inquiry as both Kantians and consequentialists often discuss virtue (1999). However, the primary focus of these approaches is not the internal moral psychology of the decisionmaker but the external forces acting upon him/her.

<sup>26</sup> See C. Brown, T. Nardin and N. Rengger, *International Relations in Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> ‘No end of a lesson: Vietnam and the nature of moral choice in foreign policy’, essay in C. Nolan, *Ethics of Statecraft: The Moral Dimension of International Affairs* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2004), pp. 75–93.

In the following paragraphs I intend to advance virtue ethics as a useful way of understanding and critiquing the moral decisions of individuals in the arena of foreign policy. I begin by outlining what I understand by virtue ethics and identifying positive and negative aspects of this approach to the analysis of human behaviour. I will then seek to show its utility to foreign policy analysis by applying these insights to Tony Blair's Premiership of the UK and his highly personalised decision to invade Iraq. This case study is chosen as Blair has arguably placed a greater emphasis on the ethical nature of his foreign policy than any previous Prime Minister in living memory and the Iraq War of 2003 is said to be the defining foreign policy decision of his period in office. Therefore, it seems to offer considerable scope for understanding the ethics of foreign policy in terms of individual agency.

### *Virtue ethics*

At its broadest, the study of ethics is the study of how we should live. In respect of this, the virtues can be defined as those character traits which will be conducive to our making the right decisions to allow us to live a good life. As John McDowell understands it: 'Virtue is a disposition (perhaps of a specially rational and self-conscious kind) to behave rightly'.<sup>28</sup> The main focus of analysis here will be the agent rather than their acts or consequences. It is the dispositions of the individual that are paramount. That said, the virtues are directly linked with behaviour. They are expected to lead to actions that are likely to have beneficial effects. What kinds of effects? The Aristotelian conception of virtues was that they should be geared towards *eudaimonia*, which MacIntyre translates as: 'blessedness, happiness, posterity. It is the state of being well and doing well in being well'.<sup>29</sup> It has more generally been described as 'human flourishing'.<sup>30</sup> There has been some debate about what constitutes human flourishing, with most theorists conceiving that to be a fully rounded individual we need to consider the good both for us as individuals and wider society. Thus, Julia Driver sees a virtue as 'a character trait [...] which, generally speaking, produces good consequences for others'.<sup>31</sup> Such virtues might include empathy, generosity, or tact. On the other hand, an individual does not have to always put the needs of others first. Otherwise, important virtues such as self-respect, creativity and personal development would be hampered.<sup>32</sup>

What this highlights is the range of characteristics that can be considered virtues and the need for judgment in which virtues are encouraged and how they are applied. For this reason, many theorists of virtue ethics emphasise practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, as the key to the operation of virtue.<sup>33</sup> It is this grounding in the

<sup>28</sup> J. McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', essay in R. Crisp and M. Slote (eds), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 141.

<sup>29</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd edition (Kings Lynn: Biddles Ltd, 2007), p. 148.

<sup>30</sup> C. Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> As cited in Swanton (2003), p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> S. Wolf, 'Moral Saints', essay in Crisp and Slote (2006), pp. 79–98.

<sup>33</sup> M. Gismondi, *Ethics, Liberalism and Realism in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 165.

practice of decisionmaking which is often seen as the strongest aspect of virtue ethics. MacIntyre notes that: ‘judgment has an indispensable role in the life of the virtuous man which it does not and could not have in, for example, the life of the merely law-abiding or rule-abiding man’.<sup>34</sup> Instead of viewing policymakers as automatons reacting passively to external structures, this approach puts individual choice and agency centre stage.<sup>35</sup> It is concerned with the actual experience of decisionmaking, the virtues which are exercised and privileged by the powerful and conversely the vices displayed where virtues are absent or misapplied. In this sense, virtue ethics arguably offers a real opportunity to engage with the individuals responsible for decisions. Not only to look over the shoulder of statesmen and women, as Morgenthau desired, but to inquire into the ethical psychology of leaders and the constituent aspects of their character – their virtues and vices.

Since virtues are grounded in practice, it follows that they are also context-specific. For instance, Christine Swanton defines a virtue as ‘a disposition to respond to [...] items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way’.<sup>36</sup> In other words, virtues are the kinds of characteristics that will enable us to flourish in particular fields – patience and emotional detachment for a surgeon, enthusiasm and warmth for a game show host, perhaps. MacIntyre sees a level of socialisation in this ascription of virtues to particular social contexts – what he terms ‘practices’. He states that weighing virtues means subjecting ‘our own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice’.<sup>37</sup> To understand whether a surgeon is virtuous we need to understand what expectations predominate within this practice and how closely the surgeon’s character fits with the ethical ideal in this field. But, this does not mean that individuals forfeit their moral autonomy. MacIntyre argues: ‘the essential function of virtues is clear. Without them, without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions’.<sup>38</sup> On this basis, thinking about virtues encourages us to question and renew our commitment to the ideals inherent in our social worlds.

However, it is also important to note that our appreciation of what aspects of character are viewed as virtuous – indeed, what the ‘good life’ is – has changed over time. MacIntyre notes that, in heroic societies, character was very much seen as a product of one’s social role and the virtues were those qualities which allowed one to discharge this role.<sup>39</sup> Later, Christian societies conceived of virtues such as humility and penitence as important to achieving a greater closeness to God. Victorians stressed emotional restraint and circumspection. By contrast, expressing one’s emotions is now broadly viewed as positive to personal growth. Even recycling has recently been portrayed as a virtue.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, our understanding

<sup>34</sup> MacIntyre (2007), p. 154.

<sup>35</sup> The assumption of individual agency in foreign policy is vital if virtue ethics is to be applicable to this sphere. As John McDowell notes: if we are to think of virtue as guaranteeing action, virtue must consist not in the sensitivity alone but in the sensitivity together with freedom from such obstructive states”, (2006), p. 143, fn. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Swanton (2003), p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> MacIntyre (2007), p. 190.

<sup>38</sup> MacIntyre (2007), p. 194.

<sup>39</sup> MacIntyre (2007), p. 185.

<sup>40</sup> A Catholic Archbishop recently classified the following as sins: Environmental pollution; Genetic manipulation; Accumulating excessive wealth; Inflicting poverty; Drug trafficking and consumption;

of the order of virtues within a particular social practice needs at some point to take into account contemporary ethical attitudes. We can then analyse how individuals interact with and help to construct the ethics of each social sphere – how they are challenging or reinforcing existing assumptions.<sup>41</sup>

In outlining how virtues help to sustain practices, MacIntyre draws a distinction between the external and internal goods that result from individuals' actions. External goods such as fame, power and money may be the rewards for those participating in the practice of foreign policy but these do not ultimately support the practice itself and benefit the individual rather than others. Instead, the virtues are intelligible and of practical importance where they support the internal goods of the relevant practice. Thus, in the case of foreign policy, the internal goods might include the security, prosperity and happiness of the community the leader represents as well as mediation between different actors in world politics such that peaceful and mutually beneficial relations are possible. The virtues applicable to this practice are those that further these internal goods (for example, courage in defending the community's values, justice in interacting with other actors fairly and honestly).

What sets virtue ethics apart from the rules/consequences dichotomy is the central role afforded to the individual as an ethical agent. Discussion of virtue implies an awareness of the rules and norms that pertain within social practices. But, these are seen as underpinned by certain character traits that individuals interacting within these social spheres must display to sustain the values of those practices. Nor can virtue ethics be seen as a subtle form of consequentialism. All human action, if it is to be meaningful, is designed to achieve some beneficial consequences and pursuance of the internal goods of the practice of foreign policy is no exception – the aim is to further the interests of the community the individual represents. Yet, virtue ethics is not a matter of an actor instrumentally calculating the consequences of applying different virtues. Rather it is that where an actor has a full awareness of the internal goods of a practice – and has developed the capacity to exercise the appropriate practical judgment on which virtues are required in achieving those goods – they can truly be viewed as an ethical agent.

To summarise, virtues are characteristics that allow individuals to excel within particular social practices. Consideration of virtues involves practical judgments as to which virtues pertain and what actions would best fit with these virtues and be beneficial for the decisionmaker and the wider community. The emphasis that virtue ethics places on individual ethical cognition seems to accord with the greater level of individual agency apparent in foreign policymaking and the increasing personalisation of the political sphere. Moreover, by locating virtue in specific social contexts we can understand and appraise the ethics of decisions by how closely they follow the expectations of behaviour in those fields.

In this sense, virtue ethics offers the prospect of holding individuals accountable – either for failing to live up to the virtues implied in a particular social

Morally debatable experiments; Violation of fundamental rights of human nature, see: {[http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/ethicaliving/2008/03/have\\_you\\_sinned\\_today.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/ethicaliving/2008/03/have_you_sinned_today.html)}.

<sup>41</sup> North (2007), excuses Tony Blair's emphasis on passion rather than reason because 'He wasn't to blame for the zeitgeist which formed him and which he read so well', (p. 19). Nevertheless, if his actions are reinforcing this to the point that misjudgements are made then we can perhaps see his behaviour as morally culpable.



practice (a soldier not being courageous enough, for instance) or for incorrectly judging the virtues which are required to further the internal goods of that practice (a stateswoman valuing decisiveness over caution). Before seeking to identify the kinds of virtues privileged in foreign policymaking and applying them to the case of Blair, it is important to acknowledge some of the criticisms to which this approach has recently been subject.

### *Criticisms of virtue ethics*

A serious challenge to the idea of individualised moral traits has been offered by psychologists looking at the influence of situations on behaviour. In a famous experiment, Stanley Milgram established a scenario whereby a 'scientist' encouraged participants to ask an unseen interviewee questions and administer (what they believed were) increasingly powerful electric shocks when the interviewee failed to answer questions correctly. It was advertised as an experiment on learning but was really designed to see whether people would resist the pressure of this social setting, and the instructions of an authority figure, in favour of their own moral sensibility. The startling results were that the majority of people who took part continued to administer shocks despite the apparent pain it was causing the other participant. Indeed, a sizeable majority persisted in giving electric shocks even though the dose was apparently fatal.<sup>42</sup>

What many situational psychologists concluded from this was that our individual virtues are surprisingly fragile. Placed in an environment that promotes and legitimises negative behaviour, most of us are capable of evil. Thus, the situation is more of an influence on our actions than individual character. A series of subsequent experiments have seemed to support this idea that our characters are extremely affected by situational variants.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, the fact that we are influenced by our surroundings need not be as catastrophic a blow to the idea of individual virtues as some situational psychologists believe.<sup>44</sup> In the first place, it seems to conceive of virtues in zero-sum terms. Either we are born with the capacity to resist evil or we are entirely the product of our environment. Yet, the point of virtue ethics is to develop the practical wisdom to do what is right. I have already noted that what we consider to be virtues depends on the practice or field under scrutiny. Given this, it becomes less surprising that volunteers faced with the unfamiliar setting of the Milgram experiment failed to resist the pressure of the organisers to act in a certain manner. Rather than express the virtue of compassion, they chose the 'wrong' virtue of obedience. Scientists used to reasoning about the ethics of research, or individuals

<sup>42</sup> S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (London: Pinter & Martin, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> For a summary (and critique) of the main experiments often cited as 'disproving' the relevance of virtues, see M. Alzola, 'Character and Environment: The Status of Virtues in Organizations', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 78 (2008), pp. 343–57.

<sup>44</sup> S. Arjoon, 'Reconciling situational social psychology with virtue ethics', *International Journal of Management Reviews* (2007), pp. 1–21. The implications of these experiments have been debated vigorously from a range of perspectives, see C. Miller, 'Social Psychology and Virtue Ethics', *The Journal of Ethics*, 7:4 (2003), pp. 365–92.

who cultivated their compassion and scepticism of authority, would perhaps be more likely to resist the pressures of Milgram's scenario.<sup>45</sup>

What is at issue here is the robustness of our individual virtues. Situationists perceive the social setting as key to good or bad behaviour. On a prescriptive level then, to reduce evil and encourage good behaviour we need to change situations. Alternatively, Maria Merritt identifies an Aristotelian idea of 'motivational self-sufficiency of character', seeing 'the structure of virtue to be, in maturity and under normal circumstances, independent of [. . .] particular social relationships and settings'.<sup>46</sup> In practice, neither position offers a satisfactory account of why people lead good or bad lives. People in bad situations sometimes make good moral choices and people in good situations can sometimes be bad.

Influenced by the writings of David Hume, Merritt attempts to steer a middle course through these two extremes by stressing more modest conceptions of the virtues – viewing them as traits that we can aspire to hold and may seek to emulate through reflection on how closely our own behaviour is able to live up to that ideal standard.<sup>47</sup> In other words, as individuals we need to develop and foster critical moral faculties to help us resist situational pressures and retain a degree of independence in our moral judgment. The cultivation of virtues here is important as it builds a level of stability of character over time.<sup>48</sup>

In the process, we need to acknowledge that our social interactions are a fundamental part of the construction of our identity and our moral outlook – what Merritt identifies as the 'sustaining social contribution to character'.<sup>49</sup> At its most positive, this could mean that social support and reinforcement of some virtues in our past could protect us from the negative influence of current or future morally challenging situations.<sup>50</sup> From a more negative perspective, a morally contaminating environment is, over time, likely to diminish our moral sensibilities. What does this mean for virtue ethics? As noted above, the virtues make sense in relation to social practices; but, these practices may be corrupted by institutions. Therefore, it is important for individuals to reflect on how their behaviour accords with the virtues inherent in their particular social sphere – and more widely in society at large.

Two other common criticisms of virtue ethics are propounded and each can be seen to link with this emphasis on situation rather than individual character. In the

<sup>45</sup> For evidence to support this, see E. M. Hartman, 'Socratic Questions and Aristotelian Answers: A Virtue-Based Approach to Business Ethics', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 78 (2008), p. 323. On the other hand, even experts may succumb to the negative consequences of career and personal pressures, as acknowledged by Phillip Zimbardo, architect of the infamous Stanford prison experiment. Zimbardo concedes that he encouraged an evil situation to persist to an unacceptable stage. 'The Lucifer Effect' (London: Rider Books, 2007), p. 173. He has since argued in favour of developing moral reflection and celebrating heroism (ibid).

<sup>46</sup> M. Merritt, 'Virtue Ethics and Situationist Personality Psychology', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 3 (2000), pp. 365–83, 374.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 368.

<sup>48</sup> Merritt (2000), p. 381. In support of this, one could offer Hannah Arendt's observation that 'the one common denominator uniting opponents of Nazi rule in Germany was a capacity to ask, at all times, what kind of person one was or wished to be.' Ignatieff (2005), pp. 21–2.

<sup>49</sup> Merritt (2000), p. 374.

<sup>50</sup> The durability of character traits is suggested by research into people who helped to save Jews from the Nazis during World War II, who were found to be more likely to continue to display positive social behaviour in their later lives, see C. Miller, 'Empathy, social psychology, and global helping traits', *Philosophical Studies* (2007), p. 14, fn. 40.

first place, virtues are sometimes represented in idealised terms and the concept of the virtuous person conveyed as a philosophical construct rather than a practical possibility. Thus, the inevitability of a functioning human being acting unvirtuously at times is seen as a major problem. A virtuous person would by definition only act virtuously so any action of theirs that was contrary to a virtue would automatically exclude that individual from being seen as virtuous. Such a view presents a fundamental difficulty for applying virtue ethics to the sphere of foreign policy since many situations faced by foreign policymakers require taking decisions that go against one or more conceptions of virtue. In this arena, immorality is often seen as an inevitable part of statesmanship – as embodied in the concept that anyone acting in high office will end up with ‘dirty hands’ – and policymakers are represented as compelled by circumstances rather than being creatures of free choice.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, this argument is flawed for the simple reason that no individual can be expected to display all the virtues simultaneously. Some virtues conflict and the practical judgment as to which to favour is dependent upon the context in which it is being deployed. Thus, Robert Jackson cites Churchill’s maxim: ‘in war, resolution; in defeat, defiance; in victory, magnanimity’.<sup>52</sup> A number of different virtues can be favoured in foreign policy at different times and awareness of this allows us to appraise the rightness or wrongness of how policymakers make and defend their choices. The fact that foreign policymakers are not moral saints does not exclude them from virtue theory. Moreover, the increasing evidence of individual agency noted above makes many of the arguments of policymakers that they are acting out of necessity instead of choice rather hollow.

A further criticism of virtue ethics can be found in the aristocratic origins of this line of philosophical inquiry. Aristotle is said to have conceived of individuals at the highest level of society as having a greater capacity for virtue as they had more scope for expressing virtuous behaviour.<sup>53</sup> According to this view, some virtues are unattainable by those who do not have wealth and do not take part in public office. As Susan Collins notes: ‘the clearest constraint on a virtuous person who loves noble giving and yet has limited means is that obtaining the resources for giving on a grand scale would entail actions that are ‘wicked, impious, and unjust’.<sup>54</sup> Following a similar line of argument, it might also be said that seeing virtues as understandable in relation to specific practices could mean that the virtue of an individual can only truly be weighed by others who have occupied a similar position within the same field.

Such a conclusion would seem to run counter to the democratic ethos. Although it no doubt suits the interests of the powerful to suggest that foreign policy is a separate and specialised sphere which is understandable only to a privileged elite, we do not have to follow this path of logic. Justifying the role of the critic, Dr Johnson once opined: ‘You may scold a carpenter who has made you

<sup>51</sup> Stephen A. Garrett, ‘Political Leadership and the Problem of “Dirty Hands”’, *Ethics & International Affairs*, 8 (1994), pp. 159–175; M. Walzer, ‘Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 2 (Winter 1973), pp. 160–80.

<sup>52</sup> Nolan (1995), p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> Susan Collins, ‘Moral Virtue and the Limits of the Political Community in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 48:1 (2004), pp. 47–61.

<sup>54</sup> (2004) p. 50.

a bad table, though you cannot make a table. It is not your trade to make tables'.<sup>55</sup> In a similar vein, for most spheres of social life, it is not necessary to have an absolute mastery of the technical detail of the practice to form an ethical judgment. We can appraise the morality of foreign policy decisions because this social world is inextricably linked with our own lives. Moreover, having the capacity for greater virtue does not automatically mean that an agent will manifest it. As virtue is measured relative to the individual, Aristotle notes that a poor man may be more generous than a rich one, though the amount he gives is less.<sup>56</sup>

Emphasising individual character might at first seem to stop us from holding individuals to account publicly since it involves consideration of the internal world of the self.<sup>57</sup> For instance, because we cannot know whether a policymaker genuinely believes their pronouncements, it is difficult to contradict a politician defending their policy via an assertion of good faith.<sup>58</sup> However, we are still able to assert the irrelevance of a particular virtue to the case in hand. If a policy is decided too quickly or involves too great a cost, whether it is sincerely meant is perhaps less significant than whether it accords with the virtues of prudence or foresight.

To summarise, I have so far suggested that virtue theory has been largely ignored in recent discussion of the ethics of foreign policy. However, its emphasis on the constitutive aspects of the moral psychology of leaders arguably offers a means of evaluating the attitudes and decisions of foreign policymakers. I have identified criticisms of virtue ethics as merely a product of situations, hopelessly idealistic, or a product of an aristocratic age. But, to talk of virtues is in reality to consider how practical judgments can be made about how to lead a good life.

For foreign policy analysts, virtue ethics offer numerous new modes of understanding and critiquing the ethics of decision in this sphere. It is not possible to identify or explore these in any depth here for reasons of space. However, it is perhaps worth noting that, in other disciplines, virtue ethics have been deployed by feminists to analyse moral problems without reference to masculine norms and rules.<sup>59</sup> They also offer the tantalising prospect of incorporating apparently 'irrational' or 'emotional' inputs into foreign policy.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, given the diversity of moral challenges facing statesmen and women in international relations, it is arguable that developing (or critiquing) moral character traits is a more effective mode of promoting ethics in this sphere than the observance of abstract rules or the loose estimation of consequences.

For the purpose of this article, virtue ethics are seen as a way of engaging in reasoning about how statespeople position themselves as moral agents reacting to their surroundings. In this sense, my use of virtue ethics is more conscious of the dialectic between the individual and their social environment than some forms of virtue ethics focussing solely on the internal moral self. Given the way MacIntyre

<sup>55</sup> J. Boswell, *The Life of Dr Johnson* (London: J. Davis, 1820).

<sup>56</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics [The Nichomachean Ethics]* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 144.

<sup>57</sup> Nomi C. Lazar, 'The Ethics of Order: Moral Reason of State and Emergency Powers in Liberal Democracies', paper for MidWest Political Science Association (2003).

<sup>58</sup> In a similar vein, Ignatieff (2005) suggests: 'human beings can justify anything as a lesser evil if they have to justify it only to themselves', p. 14.

<sup>59</sup> A. Baier, 'What do women want in a moral theory?', essay in Crisp and Slote (2006), pp. 263–77.

<sup>60</sup> P. Bloomfield, 'Virtue Epistemology and the Epistemology of Virtue', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 60:1 (2000), p. 34.

and others locate virtues within particular social contexts, I see the study of virtue ethics as offering the prospect of analysing how policymakers represent their decisions in terms of certain virtues and seeing how these accord with the virtues inherent in the practice of foreign policy. We might then assess whether the ordering of these virtues is appropriate to the practical situation the statesperson is confronting. What follows is an attempt to synergise the notion of virtue ethics with an analysis of the language used by a foreign policymaker to defend their choices. In doing so, I hope to show that a focus on the individual need not mean that we either are overindulgent to the statesperson's errors or recklessly ignorant of the fact that this is a human being trying to make difficult decisions in a highly complex moral environment.

### *Blair's virtues*

No British Prime Minister since Gladstone has placed as much emphasis on the moral basis of their foreign policy as Tony Blair.<sup>61</sup> His speeches represent a significant resource for analysts wishing to understand which virtues it is possible to advance within this social practice. The Downing Street website has an archive of all the Prime Ministerial speeches deemed important between 1997 and 2007 and it is this collection which I have used to get a sense of the virtues Blair privileged in his rhetoric.<sup>62</sup> What I seek to argue in the rest of this article is that Tony Blair emphasised a rather idiosyncratic set of virtues in relation to foreign policy; that these perhaps contributed to the policy misjudgment he made with regard to Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capabilities; that alternative virtues might have enabled him to avoid this mistake; that the virtues he privileged were a function of his wider goals for international society.

Although Blair does not explicitly use the term virtues in these texts, he clearly promotes certain characteristics as contributing positively to the functioning of this field and so we can understand them as virtues from our earlier definition. A number of virtues are advanced by Blair during his terms of office as crucial to effective leadership. These include: belief or conviction, responsibility, decisiveness or courage, an empathy with the values of the community, honesty, awareness of consequences and foresight. However, one virtue is paramount above all others in Blair's rhetoric: political will. This was arguably not as prominent before the issue of Iraq came to a head in 2002. In the early part of his Premiership, Blair does use language implying a willingness to act – as when he declares in his Chicago speech that: 'we cannot let the evil of ethnic cleansing stand'.<sup>63</sup> But the major focus of his moral rhetoric is on values and constructing some sense of community in the international realm.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> N. J. Wheeler and T. Dunne, *Moral Britannia? Evaluating the Ethical Dimension in Labour's foreign policy* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2004). John Lanchester has asserted that: 'Thatcher never claimed to be Good, just Right. Blair's political personality has always been predicated on the proposition "I am good"' (as cited in North (2007), p. 15).

<sup>62</sup> See {<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page5.asp>}.

<sup>63</sup> T. Blair, 'Doctrine of the international community', speech at the Economic Club (Chicago, 1999).

<sup>64</sup> Blair (1999); T. Blair, 'Values and the power of community', Prime Minister's speech to the Global Ethics Foundation (Tubigen University, Germany, 2000).

There is a noticeable shift in the way leadership is framed by Blair after 9/11, particularly in relation to the issue of Iraq. From this period on, the virtue of political will becomes increasingly prominent. For instance, in his declaration in November 2002 he asserts: 'the international community must act to enforce its will. Failure to do so would mean, having stated our clear demand, we lacked the will to enforce it'.<sup>65</sup> Later that month, he describes the UN Security Council Resolution 1441 as evidence of 'a willingness to act matched by a willingness to act together'.<sup>66</sup> On 3 February 2003, he urges the international community to 'take a decisive stand now'<sup>67</sup> and on 15 February he argues: 'let the UN mean what it says, and do what it means'.<sup>68</sup> Here, political will is conveyed as a virtue and one that demonstrates the meaningfulness of the international community.

This emphasis on political will becomes more frequent in the run up to war. Thus, in January 2003, Blair's New Year message to the country states: 'we must push on [...] we must continue to take a leading role [...] we must continue to play our full part [...] we must hold firm'.<sup>69</sup> In addition, his personal position as the leader attempting to enforce his political will is increasingly to the fore. In the same month he admits in a press conference: 'I tell you honestly what my fear is, my fear is [...] these weapons [...] fall into the hands of these terrorist groups [...] Now that is what I have to worry about [...] it is a matter of time unless we act'.<sup>70</sup> In February 2003 he suggests that: 'Every time I have asked us to go to war, I have hated it' and that 'I do not seek unpopularity as a badge of honour'.<sup>71</sup> Implicit in this rhetorical shift is that the political will is not simply that of the international community but also of him as an individual responding to a political problem. This was solidified in Blair's speech in the House of Commons moving the motion for war. In it he says: 'Let me tell the house what I know' and then repeats the refrain that he knows proliferation is occurring and a network exists that is increasing its activity.<sup>72</sup> He then appears to threaten to resign, as in his declaration that: 'Tell our allies, at the very moment of action, at the very moment when they need our determination that Britain faltered? I will not be party to such a course'.<sup>73</sup>

This seems to me to be a different tone to the one he adopted towards the action in Kosovo, for example. His Chicago speech in 1999 offers no sense of any individual motivations for action and does not privilege action over reflection. Indeed, its framework for decisionmaking suggests that reflection is favoured over any immediate response. In contrast, in July 2003 he posits that: 'if [...] we do not act [...] we will have hesitated. [...] when we should have given leadership. That is something history will not forgive'.<sup>74</sup> Blair himself has attributed this change of tone to the events of 9/11: 'The moment I saw what was unfolding and realised the scale of it and realised the likely cause of it I did feel a really deep sense of

<sup>65</sup> T. Blair, 'PM statement on Iraq following UN Security Council resolution' (8 November 2002c).

<sup>66</sup> T. Blair, (2002b).

<sup>67</sup> T. Blair, 'Prime Minister's statement to Parliament following his meeting with President Bush' (3 February 2003c).

<sup>68</sup> T. Blair, 'Let the United Nations mean what it says and do what it means' speech (Glasgow, 15 February 2003d).

<sup>69</sup> T. Blair, 'Prime Minister's New Year Message' (1 January 2003a).

<sup>70</sup> 'Blair Terror Speech in full', *BBC* (5 March 2004), available at: {[www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)}.

<sup>71</sup> T. Blair, (2003d).

<sup>72</sup> T. Blair, 'Prime Minister's statement opening Iraq debate' (18 March 2003e).

<sup>73</sup> Blair (2003e).

<sup>74</sup> T. Blair, 'Prime Minister's speech to the US congress' (18 July 2003f).

mission'.<sup>75</sup> Certainly, a review of his speeches prior to, and after, this event indicates a significant rhetorical move towards accentuating characteristics that may be seen as virtues.

Regarding the weight which Blair places on political will, this is interesting for the way it may have contributed to political outcomes. Firstly, its repetition clearly suggests that Blair views this as the primary virtue in this period. No other individual character trait is cited as often as this one throughout his Premiership.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, this virtuous political will is directed towards confrontation with Saddam Hussein. When combined with his increasing personalisation of this virtue, as something he cannot be separated from, it is possible to see an emerging conflict between his own political stake in arguing that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction and the suggestion that Iraq may not have the capabilities which policymakers previously believed. In peace studies, theorists often argue in favour of depersonalising conflicts and attempting to focus on the issues.<sup>77</sup> That Blair increasingly places his personal will at stake in this case arguably made conciliation less likely.

A second and obviously linked virtue observable in Blair's speeches is belief. Prior to 2001, belief is referred to in abstract terms – as in his description of the 'equal worth of all' as 'the central belief that drives my politics' and his assertion that: 'we are better out in the world, fighting for what we believe in'.<sup>78</sup> Post 9/11, Blair's belief becomes far more focused around the specific policies of confronting terrorism and preventing the proliferation of WMD. Thus, in November 2002 he argues: 'I believe that we are absolutely right to tackle terrorism'.<sup>79</sup> In early 2003, he notes that he was aware of the problem of WMD before 9/11 but argues that this is now 'the key issue facing the world community. I believe that even more today'.<sup>80</sup> His justification for confronting Iraq is given as: 'the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction and its link with terrorism. And I believe it'.<sup>81</sup>

Blair's rhetoric implies that belief is a virtue in two ways. Emphasising his personal belief suggests that this will resonate with his audience as conveying the integrity with which he is advancing these policy objectives. This sense is reinforced in a recent retrospective TV interview in which Blair identifies 'a view which is that I did not really believe in this action'. In contrast, he stresses that: 'It was what I believed. And I still do believe it. The trouble is, and I can't answer this, maybe some others didn't believe in it. I believed in it [...] I believed in it. I believed in it then. I believe in it now'.<sup>82</sup> The continual reference to the sincerity of his belief

<sup>75</sup> T. Blair, Interview in 'The Blair Years: Blair at War', BBC TV programme aired on 25 November 2007.

<sup>76</sup> Volker Heins has suggested: 'New Labour reasserted the elitist element of the British political tradition which stresses strong decisive leadership at the expense of public deliberation', 'Crusaders and Snobs: Moralizing foreign policy in Britain and Germany, 1999–2005', essay in D. Chandler and V. Heins (eds), *Rethinking Ethical Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 55.

<sup>77</sup> Roger Fisher and William Ury, 'Getting to Yes', essay in David P. Barash (ed.), *Approaches to Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); B. I. Spector, 'Deciding to Negotiate with Villains', *Negotiation Journal* (1998), p. 44.

<sup>78</sup> Blair (2000).

<sup>79</sup> Blair (2002c).

<sup>80</sup> T. Blair, 'Prime Minister's speech at the Foreign Office conference' (7 Jan 2003b).

<sup>81</sup> Blair (2003d).

<sup>82</sup> Blair (2007).

in this interview is striking and gives an indication of the extent to which he perceives this as a fundamental aspect of his leadership.

Secondly, his framing of belief as contributing to the effective functioning of foreign policy firmly identifies it as a virtue. With regard to the divisions over his Iraq policy, he posits that: ‘We will come through by holding firm to what we believe in. One such belief is in the UN’.<sup>83</sup> In other words, the fractures created by his policy stance will be ameliorated by their shared belief in the UN. Once this institution is engaged, foreign policy as a practice will be able to continue and flourish. The importance of a slightly different form of belief – in terms of the credibility of UN resolutions is also a significant part of Blair’s argument for war. In his speech to Parliament on the eve of war he asks what will happen if they fail to act: ‘when the threat returns from Iraq or elsewhere, who will believe us?’<sup>84</sup> The effectiveness of the UN is hereby associated with belief in its willingness to carry out its resolutions.

So far, I have suggested that political will and belief are the main virtues which Blair cites in his rhetoric and that these are promoted in more explicit terms post-9/11 and, specifically, in relation to Iraq. To privilege belief as a virtue goes against the empirical bias of most foreign policymakers.<sup>85</sup> In the dominant realist imagining of world politics it is the material world and the brute realities of power that are the primary foundation of policy. In contrast, Blair appears to be advancing belief as a legitimising factor in policymaking and as a virtue guiding policy construction. Once Blair had come to believe something, this became an integral part of his moral understanding on which future policies would be predicated. The problem inherent in this focus on belief is that if it turns out it there is a disconnect between the belief and reality, the entire structure of the foreign policy is in danger of crumbling.

A third virtue highlighted by Blair – albeit obliquely – is that of foresight; specifically, the ability of statespeople to foresee the possible negative consequences of a failure to act. Again, it is a virtue that is more prominent after 9/11. On 10 September 2002, he draws parallels between Afghanistan and Iraq, and suggests that if he had warned about the danger *Al-Qaeda* had represented and urged intervention before they attacked the World Trade Centre: ‘Your response and probably that of most people would have been very similar to the response of some of you yesterday on Iraq’ – that is, a reluctance to act.<sup>86</sup> On that logical premise, Blair constructs a sense of the virtue of foresight as being about seeing future dangers and pre-empting them. Thus, he argues later that same month: ‘would the world be wise to leave the present situation undisturbed?’ and conveys the negative possible outcomes of Iraq using WMD by stating: ‘there is no way that this man [. . .] could begin a conflict using such weapons and the consequences not engulf the world’.<sup>87</sup> Not acting in the face of this possibility is described by Blair as ‘failing in our duty’.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Blair (2003d).

<sup>84</sup> Blair (2003f).

<sup>85</sup> Indeed, Blair at one point asserts: ‘I only know what I believe’ (as cited in North (2007), p. 18).

<sup>86</sup> T. Blair, ‘Prime Minister’s Speech to TUC conference in Blackpool’ (10 Sept 2002a).

<sup>87</sup> T. Blair, ‘Prime Minister’s Iraq Statement to Parliament’ (24 Sept 2002b).

<sup>88</sup> Blair (2003a).



Thus, foresight is depicted as a virtue by Blair through its association with other positive character traits such as a sense of duty and wisdom. It is also notable that it is the ability to foresee a wholly negative possible consequence to failing to act which sets the statesperson out as virtuous – according to this argument. Accepting more cautious assessments of the threat would by extension leave the statesperson open to charges of being unwise and failing in their duty.

What is curious about this perception of the virtue of foresight is how loosely Blair applies it to the consequences of his own actions. Before the invasion of Iraq, Blair asserted that: ‘we should be as committed to the humanitarian task of rebuilding Iraq for the Iraqi people as we have been to removing Saddam’.<sup>89</sup> Yet, this is not elaborated. Later, in advocating war, he offers a brief outline of his post-invasion plans – including the need to lift sanctions, provide for democracy and gain UN authorisation for a relief effort and to redistribute oil revenues.<sup>90</sup> Yet, he displays no appreciation of the possible difficulties of his own policy. Whilst he does state that: ‘We must face the consequences of the actions we advocate’, this is only in relation to ‘the dangers of war’ and not the massive challenge of taking on the administration of an entire country against the will of its elite.<sup>91</sup>

In this regard we can suggest that Blair contravenes his own perception of the virtue of foresight. It remains astonishing that in his motion for war he dedicates almost the entire speech to a historical account of Iraq’s relations with the UN, and an explanation of the current threat it constitutes, but expends only a few short sentences on what his future plans for Iraq would be. There is no acknowledgement of the problems he may encounter and how he intends to overcome them. Having gone to war on the basis of a worst-case scenario reading of the future, he suddenly shifts to assuming that the post-conflict environment will be uniquely benign.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, the Iraq Inquiry has revealed that Blair was informed of serious weaknesses in the planning for the post-war environment before the invasion. Damningly, Maj Gen Tim Cross notes that he warned the Prime Minister that: ‘I do not believe that we are ready for post-war Iraq’,<sup>93</sup> and when asked by the Inquiry if any actions flowed from these warnings to the Government noted: ‘the simple answer is no’.<sup>94</sup>

Before going on to discuss alternative virtues Blair might have prioritised – either in justifying his policy or reaching a different one – it is worth noting how

<sup>89</sup> Blair (2003d).

<sup>90</sup> Blair (2003e).

<sup>91</sup> Blair (2003e).

<sup>92</sup> This arguably seems to go against the virtue of prudence, which would normally assume that action must be justified more than inaction. This is because prudence, at times rendered as practical wisdom, requires some level of contemplation and so caution. In Aristotelian terms, it seems to lie closer to the extreme of over-caution than its opposing vice of rashness/impulsiveness, Aristotle (1976), p. 108.

<sup>93</sup> T. Cross (2009), ‘Oral evidence to the Iraq Inquiry’ (7 Dec 2009), p. 34. Gen Cross was the UK’s Joint Force Logistic Component Commander embedded with the US military and responsible for coordinating the logistical aspects of the theatre of operations – particularly in relation to the UK’s contribution.

<sup>94</sup> Cross (2009), p. 58. Blair did acknowledge the importance of planning for the postwar situation in evidence to the Liaison Committee in January 2003 – as cited by Baroness Prashar in T. Blair (2010), ‘Oral evidence to the Iraq Inquiry’ (29 January 2010) available at: {<http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/>}, p. 169. But, Prashar characterises this as ‘inadequate’ and it is clear from Blair’s testimony that he assumed the UN would take charge of this – despite problems with the war’s legal basis (Blair, 2010, p. 176).

often weakness recurs as a paramount vice in foreign policy for Blair. In September 2002 he cautions against displaying a ‘weakening will’.<sup>95</sup> This becomes almost a mantra in his arguments for action the following year: ‘unless the world takes a stand on this issue of WMD [...] we will rue the consequences of our weakness’;<sup>96</sup> ‘show weakness now and no-one will ever believe us when we try to show strength in the future’;<sup>97</sup> ‘if we show weakness now, if we allow the plea for more time to become just an excuse [...] The menace [...] will grow’.<sup>98</sup> Thus, to allow oneself to appear weak is portrayed as eroding the virtue of belief, exposing one’s community to greater danger and preventing the future enforcement of threats.

### *Alternative virtues?*

As an analyst of foreign policy, it is easy to fall into the trap of assuming a greater wisdom than the statesperson under scrutiny and pointing out seemingly obvious errors that only really can be seen as a problem in hindsight. Thus, Blair’s emphasis on the virtues of political will, belief and foresight could well be viewed as inspiring leadership and in some circles, particularly the US, it appears Blair is still viewed in this way. On the other hand, the invasion of Iraq was clearly based on a false premise – the supposed existence of weapons of mass destruction. Thus we can see this as a policy error – whatever the positive or negative outcomes may be. With this knowledge, it is possible to criticise the prioritisation Blair gave to certain virtues and suggest that the cultivation of alternatives might have prevented this misjudgment.

Favouring will power, belief and imagination can regularly be seen to override the mastery of technical detail and factual accuracy in Blair’s arguments for war. A number of examples stand out which perhaps demonstrate this, the most public was his assertion in the September dossier of Iraq’s ability to mobilise its ballistic missile capability in 45 minutes. In reality, this related to battlefield weapons – something Blair conceded he did not know at the time.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, in an interview with the BBC’s *Newsnight* programme, Blair asserts that ‘the truth is the [weapons] inspectors were put out of Iraq’ in 1998.<sup>100</sup> When he is challenged by the interviewer on this point of detail with the fact that they actually withdrew, he argues: ‘They were effectively thrown out’.<sup>101</sup> Yet, these are rather different claims and to say, as Blair does, that it is ‘ridiculous’ to acknowledge this is arguably disingenuous. In his evidence to the Iraq Inquiry chaired by Sir John Chilcot, Blair asks the panel to look back at Resolution 1441 but ‘leave aside there are issues to do with the precise interpretation of some of the provisions’ – in other words, requesting that the committee overlook important details such as whether the

<sup>95</sup> Blair (2002b).

<sup>96</sup> Blair (2003b).

<sup>97</sup> Blair (2003d).

<sup>98</sup> Blair (2003e).

<sup>99</sup> N. Morris and B. Russell, ‘Blair admits he did not know 45-minute claim referred to battlefield weapons’, *The Independent* (5 February 2004).

<sup>100</sup> ‘Transcript of Blair’s Iraq Interview’, *Newsnight* (2003) available at: {<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/2732979.stm>}, 2003.

<sup>101</sup> *Newsnight* (2003).

wording of the resolution allowed for military action to follow non-compliance.<sup>102</sup> Since Blair's conception of leadership appears founded on believing something and having the will to act accordingly, qualifications and contradictory evidence only stand in the way of virtuous behaviour.<sup>103</sup>

The larger point here is the lack of self-reflection and self-correction in Blair's political outlook.<sup>104</sup> A prominent aspect of virtue ethics is the notion of self-mastery, whereby: 'People in positions of responsibility have an obligation to control their passions and overcome temptations'.<sup>105</sup> For instance, J. Patrick Dobel asserts that the virtue of prudence means: 'a person's emotions and perceptions are trained and aligned with moral purposes so that they support rather than subvert responsible judgment'.<sup>106</sup> In Blair's case, the virtues he puts forward were only likely to reinforce his tendency to overlook the details and fail to reappraise prior assumptions in the light of new information. A practical example of this tendency is apparent in Blair's failure to convene the Ministerial Committee on the Intelligence Services for his first seven years of office – against the advice of the Intelligence and Security Committee. In other words, despite making the decision to go to war with Iraq in 2003 on the basis of intelligence, he failed to convene 'the most senior Whitehall committee dealing with intelligence matters'<sup>107</sup> throughout this period. Indeed, Blair's approach to government was itself arguably not conducive to proper reasoned decisionmaking. There was no formal ministerial group responsible for Iraq policy, no papers were circulated beyond the members of various ad hoc meetings, and no Minister was appointed to oversee the UK's Iraq policy and report its progress to the Prime Minister – either before or after the invasion.<sup>108</sup>

This can be justifiably criticised on an ethical basis since, as Coll notes: 'Deliberation is intrinsic to moral reasoning'.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, Coll asserts that such deliberation has to be based on 'gravity and modesty: enough gravity to recognize a moral dilemma, and enough modesty to realize one's limited capacities to deal with it'.<sup>110</sup> Blair appraised the implications of 9/11 very soon after the event.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Blair (2010). Blair here argues that the overall sense of the resolution is more important than the specific wording – a position which has been highly controversial in debates over the legality of the war.

<sup>103</sup> For a fuller treatment of Blair's emphasis on will power and belief, see S. B. Dyson, 'Personality and Foreign Policy: Tony Blair's Iraq Decisions', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2 (2006), pp. 289–306.

<sup>104</sup> In fairness to Blair, this has been identified as a common characteristic of human beings in general. Janice Gross Stein cites experimental evidence that: 'people strongly prefer consistency [...] they are made uncomfortable by dissonant information, and [...] they consequently deny or discount inconsistent information to preserve their beliefs', 'Foreign policy decisionmaking: rational, psychological, and neurological models' essay in S. Smith, A. Hadfield and T. Dunne, *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 104–5.

<sup>105</sup> J. P. Dobel, 'Political Prudence and the Ethics of Leadership', *Public Administration Review*, 58:1 (1998), pp. 74–81, 75.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Richard J. Aldrich, 'Intelligence and Iraq: the UK's four enquiries', in Christopher Andrew, Richard Aldrich and Wesley K. Wark (eds), *Secret Intelligence: A Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 239.

<sup>108</sup> See Cross (2009), p. 55; D. Bowen, (2009), 'Oral evidence to the Iraq Inquiry' (7 December 2009) available at: {<http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/>}, pp. 42, 51; Blair (2010), p. 227.

<sup>109</sup> Alberto R. Coll, 'Normative Prudence as a Tradition of Statecraft', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 5 (1991), pp. 33–51, 37.

<sup>110</sup> Coll (1991), p. 37.

<sup>111</sup> A. Seldon, *Blair* (London: Free Press, 2004).

Although he has asserted that his response was formulated from earlier reflection on the nature of Islamic terrorism and the problem of WMD proliferation, it is clear he felt he had resolved any dilemmas that may have existed into a specific world view after 9/11. With regard to modesty, the emphasis on belief and political will arguably runs counter to this virtue.

It has already been noted above that Blair's appraisal of the consequences of his decision was partial at best. This in itself runs contrary to a genuinely consequentialist ethic, which should consider the effects of one's decision in the round. The consequences of a failure to act, for the world, were asserted in apocalyptic terms. In addition, he also emphasised the implications for the Iraqi people of a non-decision: 'if the result of peace is Saddam staying in power, not disarmed, then I tell you that there are consequences paid in blood for that decision too.'<sup>112</sup> However, as David Mapel notes: 'states have been inclined to calculate the costs of warfare almost exclusively in terms of the destruction of their own side. In major conflicts, they also tend to set the utility of their own victory at close to infinity'.<sup>113</sup> Blair is certainly guilty of that, with no substantial discussion of possible negative consequences for the Iraqi people – beyond a brief recognition that innocent people will be killed.<sup>114</sup> From this perspective, Blair arguably has shown a lack of foresight – a virtue highly prized by virtue theorists.<sup>115</sup>

A further virtue which is perhaps downplayed as a result of Blair's focus on action is that of caution. According to Coll, this is advocated by Thomas Aquinas as a result of the imperfectability of human affairs and the fact that: 'not all situations are clear-cut cases of good pitted against evil'.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, Aquinas asserts: 'human deeds are multiform; rights are often entangled with wrongs, and wrongs wear the air of good'.<sup>117</sup> What this harks back to is the continuing need to check our emotional responses to situations and reappraise both our assumptions and our actions. Faced with complex problems, decisionmakers need to allow themselves time to understand the moral choices available and to critically assess the rightness or wrongness of each course of action. Acting on the basis of a belief in pressing danger, as Blair does, militates against the virtue of caution as to delay is to expose oneself to increasing peril. By contrast, exercising caution in this case might have allowed the weapons inspectors a greater period of time to report on Iraq's capabilities with greater accuracy than speculative intelligence. This would have avoided the error of seeing the danger as existent and substantial.

In sum, after 9/11 Blair privileged the virtues of political will, belief and foresight. Although these would seem to be admirable character traits, in the case of the decision to invade Iraq, they can be seen to have contributed to the resulting policy error. Within the literature on virtue, the alternative characteristics of self-mastery, reflection, foresight (to see the likely consequences of acting as opposed to not acting), and caution would arguably have made this mistake less

<sup>112</sup> Blair (2003d).

<sup>113</sup> Mapel (1990), p. 436.

<sup>114</sup> Blair (2003d).

<sup>115</sup> Dobel (1998), p. 77.

<sup>116</sup> Coll (1991), p. 44.

<sup>117</sup> As cited in Coll (1991), p. 44.

likely. Thus, it might be possible to argue that Blair gave the wrong virtues priority – or, in the case of foresight, did not apply them properly.<sup>118</sup>

It is at this point that the relevance of the internal goods of foreign policy comes to the fore. Many commentators have noted Blair's lack of awareness of, and respect for, the historical processes that shape the way we practice contemporary politics. Indeed, in his speech to Congress in 2003, he lamented that: 'a study of history provides so little instruction for our present day.'<sup>119</sup> In addition, bureaucracies, conventions and institutions often seem to be viewed by him as impediments to effective and innovative policymaking.<sup>120</sup> This is perhaps understandable when we realise that such structures are designed to maintain and support the internal goods of the relevant practice whereas Blair sought to change these goods. From his speeches, it appears that what Blair desired for foreign policy were the goods of 'progressive' change and a new framework for international society and these were seen as requiring the virtues of political will, belief and optimistic foresight.<sup>121</sup> In contrast, the practice of foreign policy, arguably, usually seeks the internal goods of stability, order, acceptance of difference, mediation and compromise and these require the virtues of caution, prudence, foresight, and judgment.

For reasons of space, it is not possible to develop this point any further. To give a full account of how the virtues Blair privileged, his style of leadership, decisionmaking machinery and world view interrelate would require a much broader study. At this point, it is perhaps sufficient to suggest that Blair's character and his ethical goals for foreign policy are intimately connected and helped to shape the tone and content of his policy. Thus, a leader wishing to promote ethical awareness within a practice needs to acknowledge their own role as an individual moral agent and how their character is likely to affect their capacity to realise the goods they seek.

## Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the literature on the ethics of foreign policy has failed to address the subjective nature of ethical decisionmaking. To remedy this, I have attempted to outline an alternative line of ethical inquiry to the rules/consequences modes that predominate: virtue ethics. What consideration of virtue ethics reminds us is that foreign policymakers and analysts shouldn't simply

<sup>118</sup> MacIntyre highlights the difficulty in constructing a rational typology of the virtues since they are located in practice and practices alter; as such: 'there is necessarily a kind of empirical untidiness in the way that our knowledge of the virtues is ordered' (2007), p. 178.

<sup>119</sup> See O. Daddow, 'Playing Games with History: Tony Blair's European Policy in the Press', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9:4 (2007), p. 590.

<sup>120</sup> In a famous speech in 1999 railing against the 'forces of Conservatism', Blair stated that he wished to 'liberate Britain from the [...] old structures, old prejudices, old ways of working and of doing things that will not do in this world of change'. The text is available at: {[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/460009.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/460009.stm)}.

<sup>121</sup> For evidence of Blair's vision of a new framework for international politics, see his 'Chicago' speech, T. Blair (1999) and his valedictory address T. Blair, 'A Global Alliance for Global Values' (2006); 'Clash of Civilisations' (2006); 'Reform of the Global Institutions' (2006) all three are available at: {<http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page9549>}.

think about ethics as abstract rules, or the objective calculation of consequences, but also as a matter of individuals making ethical decisions. From a virtue theory perspective, the ability to make good choices in the field of foreign policy is founded on the development of certain character traits.

Deciding which are appropriate in which situations is a matter of practical judgment. For this reason, reflection and self-correction should be an integral part of the ethics of any statesman or woman's attempt to construct an 'ethical' foreign policy. Furthermore, for academics, falling back on analysing objective structures and the constraints that contexts place on policymakers should not obscure the fact that individuals are capable of making choices within this social practice and should be held accountable accordingly.

In keeping with this view, this analysis has made only minimal reference to the wider norms of foreign policy or the objective categories and rules that pertain in the international community whilst discussing Blair's Premiership. It has also sought to avoid judging the ethical consequences of Blair's foreign policies in terms of their results in the wider world (it may be that Iraq in a decade's time is a much better place to live as a result of the invasion). Instead, by focusing on Blair as an individual moral agent, constructing his ethical understanding in a highly subjective fashion, it has suggested that he can be held to account on an ethical basis for the weaknesses and limitations of his view of leadership.

On the other hand, virtue ethics offers far more possible avenues for inquiry than the limited one presented here. For example, one could explore how specific individuals construct their policies in terms of the virtues in relation to a whole range of policy problems and thereby analyse how consistent their character traits have been, how appropriate they were to the problems they faced, and how these may have influenced the ethics of policy outcomes. Remaining at the individual level, one could compare how some individuals emphasise particular virtues whilst other individuals privilege alternatives. Or, we might focus on the social practice itself – which virtues are advanced in foreign policy circles, which denigrated. In the process, we can appreciate how the ethics of this sphere are constructed. The individual remains important as it is their speech acts that form the building blocks of moral understanding. However, comparative analysis of how statesmen and women from different cultures and countries discuss the virtues offers the potential of seeing common conceptualisations as well as divergences. In this sense, looking at virtue ethics allows us to identify the values underpinning international society. At each of these levels of analysis, one might also see how our understanding of virtues changes over time or persists.

In sum, virtue ethics can be useful to foreign policy analysts in a number of ways. They can be used to restore the individual as moral agent in foreign policy analysis. In this respect a range of disciplinary fields, from poststructuralist scholars of identity to psychological accounts of decisionmaking could utilise the concept of virtue to understand how individuals formulate and justify their actions. Virtue theory could also be deployed to gain a fuller understanding of the social construction of foreign policy ethics – both locally and globally. Underlying the authority of leaders are certain conceptions about their sincerity, wisdom and motivations for action. Such conceptions are virtues and support the practice of foreign policy. Similarly, further investigation into international norms – especially those related to war – are likely to lead to examination of the virtues associated

with this practice. In short, exploration of virtue allows us to highlight the pervasive ethical content to political practice. Furthermore, the study of virtue, from its earliest origins, has had the aim of promoting the kinds of behaviour and attitudes likely to lead to morally good outcomes. Analysing and then promoting character traits that are likely to support the internal goods of a practice such as foreign policy will hopefully contribute, in a modest way, to keeping statesmen and women good.