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Progress with Price?

NICHOLAS RENGGER

School of International Relations, University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, UK

E-mail: njr3@st-andrews.ac.uk

The reach and range of contemporary ethical theorizing concerning international relations²⁹ continues to grow apace. Discussions of the

²⁹ As is, by now, customary I use upper case capitals (International Relations) when I refer to the field of study, lower case when I refer to what is studied.

ethics of force, of global justice, law, constitutionalism, forgiveness, restitution and many other topics multiply; the level of discussion is often admirably high; the seriousness of the interlocutors unimpeachable. There is much to admire.

But at the same time, there remains a concern that much of this discussion is worryingly abstract and/or unconnected with the realities of world politics. For some – often (and misleadingly) called Realists³⁰ – this is simply because the realities of world politics simply do not admit of such high minded discussions, but for a more nuanced and reflective group, the difficulties are of a more complex and more worrying order and require an equally complex and nuanced response.

In his introductory essay to the volume under consideration here, Richard Price puts such questions very well:

At what point does one reasonably concede that the realities of world politics require compromise from cherished principles or moral ends...what is one to do when faced with apparent moral dilemmas in world politics such as the putative tradeoffs between amnesties and criminal tribunals, humanitarian intervention and self determination... how does one know when an ethical limit has been reached or fallen short in ways that deserve the withholding of moral praise.

(Price 2008)

These are, of course, important questions and the thrust of both Price's opening essay and of the volume as a whole is that they can best be answered through an integration of ethical theorizing with the constructivist approach to international relations theory that has been such a marked feature of the theoretical scene over the last few years. Indeed, Price suggests (and many of the essays in the volume seek to demonstrate) that such integration would strengthen both areas of work. But, he further argues, at the end of his introductory essay, that it would also demonstrate something else of real importance: that constructivism itself entails a substantive ethical position.

I shall return to that claim a little later on but before turning to the substance of Price's arguments, which will be my main concern here, let me say something about the book as a whole. It is, I think, without any doubt at all a major achievement and Price, and his contributors, should be congratulated on it. Partly because of the framing essay that Price contributes at the beginning, the whole book has a level of coherence and integration unusual in an edited collection but it should be said also that the level of individual contributions is very high. Price has assembled a first rate

³⁰ But such views are to be contrasted with Realists such as Hans Morgenthau or Reinhold Niebuhr, whose ethical commitments were central to their whole body of work.

team of contributors including some of the leading contemporary constructivist scholars and all of them contribute excellent chapters. This is a major contribution to ongoing debates both in constructivist International Relations Theory and in ethical theorizing about international relations.

But notwithstanding its originality and power *as* a contribution, what about the substance of the arguments? Here I am going to focus on Price's own contribution³¹ both because it sets up the whole and because of its intrinsic interest. Let me first say something about its overall structure before turning first to an assessment of its central claims. I will then conclude with one thought about where it leaves its stated objective – the integration of ethical and constructivist theorizing.

Possibilities

In order to show the relevance of constructivist theory for his topic, Price opens his essay with a discussion of two other ways of thinking through the relevance of the ethical and the empirical, that espoused by critical theory, specifically in the person of Andrew Linklater, and that espoused by the 'constitutive' theory of Mervyn Frost.

In the first case Price argues that, powerful though Linklater's (1998) tripartite framing – ethics, sociology, and praxeology – of the critical project is:

the formulation does not escape long standing suspicions of teleology in progressivist theories; How does one know when something is 'already immanent?'...Despite his otherwise fruitful agenda, Linklater's theoretical account does not provide much of a sense of how these potentials are to be realized other than a progressivist mechanism of assumed evolution.

(Price 2008, 197)

In Frost's case, the problem is slightly different. Here, while offering a thoroughgoing 'ethical' account, he does not offer much by way of empirical validation of the 'norms' that are said to 'constitute' the system. But what about instances where the norms are 'obscure' or perhaps clash (perhaps the aforementioned clash between a norm of humanitarian intervention or one of self determination?). Surely, Price suggests, at this point one would want to draw on the kind of work constructivists have done, yet Frost does not do this.

Price takes these opening remarks not as a full blown critique of either critical theory or constitutive theory – indeed he goes out of his way to

³¹ I should perhaps say first contribution. He also has an excellent and thoughtful concluding essay in the book, 'Progress with a Price', to which I will briefly turn in my conclusion and from which I have shamelessly borrowed my title.

heap praise on both – but to suggest that what they reveal is the need for ethical theorizing to engage with constructivist scholarship. And the manner and the matter of that engagement constitute both the bulk of the remainder of Price's article and the developing agenda of the book as a whole. In this respect, Price is both contributing to, and developing, a more general trend in contemporary constructivist scholarship, perhaps most obviously manifested in the work of Christian Reus-Smit (who, appropriately enough, has an excellent chapter in Price's book),³² but Price's version of it is distinctive and original. He himself characterizes six major contributions of constructivism for theorizing moral limit and possibility – the relation between the ethical and the empirical, the significance of the rationalist/constructivist debate over agency, specifically thinking through the significance of hypocrisy, the different kinds of ethical dilemmas that arise from the constitutive effects of norms, the significance of issues of co-constitution, and the centrality of power for ethics.

Finally, as mentioned above, he concludes by suggesting that constructivism itself carries a certain normative charge. To wit, humility towards the conclusions we reach coupled with new and neglected dimensions of ethics, which could help us.

Limits

So what are we to make of this? I think that at one level, Price puts his finger on one very real problem with much (though not all) contemporary ethical theorizing about international relations: to wit, its resolutely abstract character. The Rawlsian division of theory into 'ideal theory' and 'non-ideal theory' is indicative of this; indeed the very notion that the alternative to 'ideal theory' is called 'non-ideal theory' rather gives the game away, in that it at least implies that 'real theory' is ideal theory and that 'non-ideal theory' somehow falls short (it is simply not 'ideal theory').³³ And Price is surely right to say that considered ethical reflection on international politics must take the empirical circumstances of real world politics much more to heart than this division allows. In as much as constructivist International Relations theory does this, it can indeed help to build a more robust and a more nuanced ethical account of contemporary world politics.

But, of course, one does not need to suppose that only 'constructivist' accounts do this. The history of international political thought provides

³² Reus-Smit (2008) has pressed this case most recently and it is a theme in virtually all his work (see especially Reus-Smit 1999).

³³ This division is everywhere in the Rawls industry. For Rawls' own version of it, in connection with international affairs, see Rawls (1999).

plenty of examples of people doing just this, without the theoretical *patina* provided by contemporary constructivism. Scholars like Han Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, to whom I have already alluded would qualify, as would (for example) Arnold Wolfers, Martin Wight, Herbert Butterfield, Hedley Bull, and Carl Schmitt. So one might ask, what is the specific value added by a ‘constructivist’ bridge between ethics and empirical reality? What, in other words, does ‘Constructivism’ in any or all forms bring specifically to the table in terms of a bridge between theoretical reflection and the concrete realities of the world that is not there in (say) classical Realism? Price does not really tell us and that surely is a problem. My own view would be that there is nothing specific that Constructivism brings to the table – which is not to deny that Price is right to say that to do what many (including Constructivists) wish to do, the bridge has to be established and sustained in a more robust way than is currently the case.

A second area of questioning might be generated if we focus, for a moment, on what seems to be a certain ambiguity in the understanding of ‘ethics’ deployed in the argument. In the middle section of his introductory essay, Price discusses how ‘some of the most heralded approaches to ethics’ approach the topic of ‘whether and how to deal *ethically* with the ubiquity of ruthlessly instrumental actors (Price 2008, 201)’. He argues, perfectly reasonably, that ‘many, even most...important political situations will contain elements of such ...instrumental actors’ and asks if this poses a problem for ‘ethical’ accounts of international relations. His answer – in his view *pace* Habermassian influenced thinkers like Linklater – is that constructivism teaches us that ‘a central challenge and necessary component in answering the question of “what to do” in global politics is to consider whether and what is ethically justifiable when faced with instrumental actors relentlessly pursuing their interests, armed with a variety of sources of power (Price 2008, 203)’.

But one might surely raise a question here. Price seems to be assuming that pursuing ethical ends cannot be squared with pursuing your interests; that, in other words, and in a broadly Kantian sense, ethical decision making is *disinterested* decision-making and that, as a result, the ‘ruthless’ pursuit of your interests is not, by definition, ethical action. But, of course, there are many conceptions of the ethical that have little problem in assuming that even the ‘ruthless’ pursuit of your interests could be ethical, *if the interests were themselves ethical to begin with*. Virtue ethics would assume this, for example, as, of course, would utilitarianism.³⁴

³⁴ Virtue ethics is associated with the work of, *inter alia*, MacIntyre (1981) and others and has its central concern the role of certain conceptions of the virtues – however understood – in moral and political theory. Not accidentally, of course, both Virtue ethics and Utilitarianism have strongly teleological accounts of our interests.

And indeed, perhaps the oddest aspect of this discussion is the implication – not really explicitly stated, but present throughout, that consequentialist or utilitarian styles of reasoning cannot be considered ‘ethical’.

The upshot of this is merely to say that perhaps there needs to be a rather more developed account given of what constitutes ‘ethical’ action, in order for constructivist accounts of politics to contribute to it. It might be that Price does indeed think that ethics requires a high degree of disinterestedness – it is after all a tradition with a fine pedigree – but it might also be true that the kind of ‘ethics’ he has in mind is more capacious than this. But either way more needs to be done I think to make this clear.

This leads to a third, and related, point. The whole tenor of the discussion, both in Price’s essay and in the book more generally seems to imply that the problem with contemporary ethical theorizing is its divorce from practice – in other words the problem ethical theory has is how it relates to practice – how do we say what we should do in circumstances *x* or *y* – how to make that tradeoff between ‘amnesties and criminal tribunals’ and so on. And in this respect, of course, Price is agreeing with a wide range of contemporary normative theory, which seeks to be (in the words of Stephen White) action coordinating rather than world disclosing (White 1991).³⁵

There are two points that one might make here, I think. First, as very ably demonstrated by Toni Erskine in her contribution to this symposium, there is already a good deal of contemporary normative theorizing in IR that is directly tied to a close attention to empirical reality and practices on the ground, so again it is hard to see what precisely ‘constructivism’ in the abstract adds, in terms of linking ‘theory and practice’ here.

Second, in as much as some ‘ethical theory’ is indeed ‘world disclosing’ *rather than* ‘action-coordinating’, it is again not clear to me how constructivist theorizing will help *this* form of ethical theorizing. And one might add there are at least reasons for supposing that ethical theory is *better* understood as world disclosing than action-coordinating. Hermeneutic versions of philosophical ethics (as in Charles Taylor), Dystopic liberal versions (as in, e.g., Bernard Williams) and philosophically Idealist versions (as in Michael Oakeshott) would all claim that (Oakeshott 1962; Taylor 1992; Williams 2006). Of course, that only begins the debate, it does not close it, but at the very least Price might want to tell us *why* we should see ethics as primarily ‘action-coordinating’ and why, therefore, the constructivist engagement outlined in his book should be pursued in the way he suggests.

³⁵ White understanding ‘world disclosing’ theory to be theoretical work that illuminates and evaluates the shape and character, we might say, of the moral world, rather than recommending particular actions in that world.

A final point here touches on the extent to which, according to Price, constructivist accounts of power can give purchase to ethical and normative reflection but do so in ways that merely generate, to use the title of his final essay in the volume, ‘Progress with a price’. This, in a sense, is also the point he makes in his conclusion, where he suggests that constructivism itself entails a certain ethical commitment, to wit the humility to recognize neglected or hidden dimensions of analysis (ethical as well as empirical), which can help us to ‘navigate between the denials of realism and the paralysis or morally corrosive cynicism induced by at least some trajectories of critical approaches (Price 2008, 218)’.

This last point is chiefly aimed at some post-structurally inclined scholars (Campbell 1994) who seem, at least on some readings, to assume, with Foucault (Foucault 1966, 1998), that there cannot be a realm of knowledge that is not also a realm of power and that therefore all conventional accounts of ethics are bound to be, to an extent at least, self serving. Price is rightly critical of this reading but again it seems to me that the manner of his critique would be better served by a more nuanced account of how ethics might be understood. As Foucault himself realized, at least towards the end of his life, the root of ethics is *ethos* – a manner of being – and this is not then to be equated with *moralitat*, but could, much more interestingly be seen as a form of *sittlichkeit*.³⁶

Conclusion

None of the above should be taken to nullify the very real challenge that Price’s book poses to alternative accounts of the significance of ethical concerns for international relations and of the role constructivist work might play in that. It announces a potentially enormously fruitful (and very well carried out) development of both constructivist theorizing and ethical reflection on international relations and deserves a wide audience.

Let me conclude, however, with one final point. Underlying almost the whole of critical and constructivist theory, I think, sometimes very explicitly but much of the time below the surface, is a strong and deeply felt progressivism. It is perhaps at its most explicit in the work of critical theorists like Linklater, and it is Linklater (1990) who traces with exemplary skill its historical and philosophical foundations in the philosophy of history, especially in that of Kant and Marx. One central assumption of this narrative is made most apparent in the third section of

³⁶ These terms are taken of course from Hegel, for whom, *Moralitat* is the substance of the moral – rules, obligations commands, etc. – but *sittlichkeit* is the ethical framework in which such substance nests.

Kant's famous essay on 'Theory and Practice (Reiss 1970)'. In this essay Kant seeks to show that it is not implausible for a man to believe in the progress of the species, rather than merely (as his adversary Moses Mendelsohn suggested) progress within individuals. This assumption, however modest his expression of it, was meant to secure the *possibility* of moral progress, which is central to the claims that Kant wants to make in the political sphere. But the point is to see that Kant uses this argument (and his disagreement with Mendelsohn) not to suggest that we can *prove* that progress is a fact but to show that accounts that throw doubt on it are essentially irrelevant. As long as we can say that human progress is *possible in principle* (i.e. is not obviously impossible) Kant argues we have a moral duty to work for it.

Critical theory, in the person, for example, of Linklater makes much of this broadly Kantian position (Linklater 2011). Indeed, one might argue that much of his recent work (on harm in world politics) is driven by it and by some of the same concerns that drive Price; to relate the empirical circumstances of world politics to the possibilities of ethical progress in world politics. But in Linklater's case it is buttressed by an acknowledged and clear commitment to progressivism and cosmopolitanism and by dialectical norms of practical reason that can, in principle act as the motor of progressive social change.

Price too, it seems, is committed to something like a cosmopolitan and progressive position, but, as we have seen, is critical of Linklater's argument and wants to supplement it with 'Constructivism'. Yet he acknowledges at the same time that 'all constructivist ethics need not be cosmopolitan (and)... the approaches and arguments broached here are but one possible way to harness constructivism (Price 2008, 217)'. But if this is true, then surely it is not *constructivism as such* that needs to engage ethical reflection but a certain sort of constructivism, or perhaps put better, that for the sorts of – progressive, cosmopolitan – concerns Price has, a certain sort of – broadly constructivist – theory is an important ally. This may well be true but it is surely a rather different claim from the one he stated at the outset, where 'ethical reflection' *in general* and 'Constructivist IR theory' *in general* were to be integrated.

Of course, critical theory may well be problematic, may well indeed, be wrong, but it is also clear about what it is seeking to do and what is at stake. It understands, as Kant did, the centrality for any progressive cosmopolitan project of an understanding of moral progress and how it might be delivered (though as I have argued elsewhere, I am not convinced that critical theory, at least in its Habermasian/Linklater form, has wholly satisfactory answers to these questions; Rengger 2001). While Price too seems committed to that project, his 'constructivism', if it is

understood as a *general* form of constructivist theory surely obscures the manner in which such progress can be delivered, since not all forms of constructivism must be progressive or cosmopolitan. It is not ‘constructivism as such’ that Price needs to wed to practice to achieve his sought for ends, but rather a particular form of constructivism that is, as critical theory itself is, clear and explicit about its normative commitments and the reasons it has for them. Yet this is not what we have outlined, in this book at least.

In sum, the exact connection between a progressive conception of politics and the forms of constructivism in IR that Price and his contributors favor need to be made much more explicit. Constructivist thought, in IR as much as elsewhere in the human sciences, is not limited to a broadly progressive form, even if that is the form it tends to take, but that is why it is even more important I think, to specify how and in what ways the versions of constructivist thought that are so inclined might be elaborated and defended and how they are different from other versions not so wedded. If this task remains undone, the suspicion will surely grow that the much vaunted meeting of ethics and constructivism will resemble, as Maurice Cowling once remarked about a not dissimilar project, nothing as much as ‘the Whig interpretation of history, on a slow wicket (Cowling 1984)’.

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On the pragmatic and principled limits and possibilities of dialogue

RICHARD M. PRICE

Department of Political Science, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

E-mail: Richard.Price@ubc.ca

One of the key themes to emerge from this forum is the dangers of an overly stark contrast between empirical and normative scholarship, a distinction that is presupposed of course in raising the question of their relationship. While *Moral Limit* invoked that and other related distinctions as analytical devices rather than incompatible ontological and epistemological positions, I concur that such a dichotomy (along with other contrasts) can easily become problematic, not the least if (1) it is taken to imply an epistemological distinction that 'empirical' research does not always involve interpretivism; and/or (2) it entails insufficient recognition of the ways that various kinds of normative theory engage a range of what ought to be recognized under a broad banner of 'empirical' considerations as Erskine truly most usefully underscores in her response. The caution that so many forms of what we may understand as international political theory (IPT) are better seen as lying on something of a continuum of different forms and degrees of self-conscious engagement with the empirical 'real world' is thus an appreciated corrective to be well