Moral Limit and Possibility in World Politics
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Abstract At what point does one reasonably concede that the "realities" of world politics require compromise from cherished principles or moral ends, and how does one know when an ethical limit has been reached? Since social constructivist analyses of the development of moral norms explain how moral change occurs in world politics, that agenda should provide insightful leverage on the ethical question of "what to do." This article identifies contributions of a constructivist research agenda for theorizing moral limit and possibility in global political dilemmas.

At what point does one reasonably concede that the "realities" of world politics require compromise from cherished principles or moral ends, and what has been achieved is ethically justified? What is one to do when faced with apparent moral dilemmas in world politics such as the putative trade-offs between amnesties and criminal tribunals, humanitarian intervention and self-determination, the conundrums presented by immigration, or the conflict-inducing "othering" that often seems to accompany the expansion of peaceful security communities? How does one know when an ethical limit has been reached, or fallen short in ways that deserve the withholding of moral praise? In this article I make the case for the centrality of normative theorizing in International Relations (IR), focusing on why the evolution of the constructivist agenda in IR in particular points to the importance of engagement with such ethical questions for both constructivists themselves and those who debate their claims. I suggest why constructivism itself is well positioned to contribute to normative theorizing and practice, then I seek to

I thank the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its support of a workshop on Moral Limit and Possibility in World Politics, held at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver in September 2005. I thank the participants of that workshop for their input into this article; it is part of a collaborative project and their contributions are too numerous to mention by name. Versions of this article were also presented to the University of Minnesota International Relations Colloquium, the University of British Columbia International Relations Colloquium, at the Australian National University, at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting 2006, and at the University of Chicago Program on International Politics, Economics and Security; I am grateful to participants in these venues for their invaluable questions and comments, as well as to the students in my courses upon whom I vetted a number of the ideas in this project. Thanks also to the reviewers and editors of IO for their rigorous comments. Finally, thanks also to Alana Tiemessen and Scott Watson for research assistance along the way.

© 2008 by The IO Foundation. doi: 10.1017/S0020818308080132
outline an agenda of those contributions. Along the way and in the conclusion, I consider the extent to which constructivism itself entails a substantive ethical position.

Talk of the possibilities of moral progress\(^1\)—a term used here in a cosmo-

tan, humanitarian sense to denote the amelioration or elimination of violence and oppression (including destitution) to persons—has long been central to varieties of liberal and critical theories of IR, whose champions in different ways have laid claim to the moral high ground in pointing the ways to possibilities of positive moral change in world politics (against skepticism). Yet both approaches have been the targets of persistent charges of utopianism. Recent constructivist scholarship on the role of norms in IR, I have argued elsewhere, has responded convincingly to such charges with careful empirical research that demonstrates the possibilities of progressive moral change in world politics such as the movements to end slavery and apartheid, the rise of human rights norms, humanitarian intervention, and the effects of humanitarian norms of warfare to name a few.\(^2\) But while this scholarship has thus opened up convincing space for taking seriously the role of positive moral change in the study and practice of IR, for the most part this literature has not offered its normative defenses of particular changes as being in fact good—such positions are often not explicitly articulated let alone rigorously defended.\(^3\) Upon what basis are accounts of moral change, which are presumed to be good, to be accepted as in fact desirable and evidence of claims of “progress”? One cannot claim that progress is possible solely by demonstrating empirically that change occurs or that norms matter, since this presupposes that it is unproblematically accepted that change is indeed morally desirable or that all norms are “good”—neither need be the case. While the challenge of having to offer a convincing defense of the ethical desirability of norms such as the abolition of slavery or torture would not be difficult for most constructivist scholars, constructivist analyses themselves do render many cases of putative progress problematic as will be seen in this article. Moreover, it is hardly the case that all self-designated constructivists agree on what is ethically right in a given situation, which problematizes empirical claims of progressive change in world politics that do not provide a normative defense of what is usually implicitly applauded as morally good.

The evolution of criticisms of constructivist scholarship as well points to explicit engagement with the relation between the “is” and the “ought” as an important next stage of the constructivist agenda, and of IR debate more generally, given the contemporary prominence of constructivism as a leading research program in the field. Much constructivist work was itself a response to skepticism that moral norms matter in world politics. While a few critics still seek to challenge that empirical claim, in the face of empirical scholarship demonstrating the explanatory value of

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1. For an extended treatment of progress in international relations, see Adler and Crawford 1991.
3. There are exceptions, including notably Wheeler 2000.
moral norms, the center of the debate has moved to the challenge of explaining why some norms matter sometimes in some places and not others, and responses to that challenge have occupied much of the norms literature in recent years. The remaining avenue to challenge scholarship that touts the possibilities of moral change in world politics is normative; namely, charges that this agenda (and constructivism generally) has been beset by a normative bias in favor of “good” norms that worked, and challenges to the presumption that such norms are in fact desirable in the first place. While initially couched in methodological terms, such challenges are only coherent with their own normative premises (namely, of what counts as “good” or not). In order to respond, scholars ultimately must turn to some form of normative defense. For all of these reasons, normative theorizing is inescapably involved in making or challenging claims about possibilities of moral change in world politics, and thus ethics is central to practice and intellectual discourse in IR, even as professionally it has not been accorded pride of place in the American academy of IR, which has been dominated by explanatory agendas that have largely excluded normative theorizing as the terrain of “political theory/philosophy,” “normative theory,” or philosophy.

All this raises numerous questions, among them how constructivist scholars might respond to normative challenges to their claims of moral change (including in ways that leverage their theoretical and empirical insights), and how social scientific scholarly agendas might contribute more generally to normative theorizing and addressing moral dilemmas. The premise of this article is that research programs that have shown how moral norms arise and have an impact on world politics should be well placed to contribute to ethics, at least to the extent that (1) normative positions are underwritten at some point by empirical assumptions or claims about the world; and (2) one conceives of the question of ethics broadly, as entailing not solely determinations of the good in the abstract, but as well questions of what should or can justifiably be done about realizing the good in any particular context. Without dismissing a crucial role for ideal theory, providing an answer of “what to do” that turned out to be an avoidable miserable failure would be a curious prescription of rightful action and thus of ethics if one takes the normative to be centrally concerned with right prescription. Since social constructivist analy-

5. See, for example, Anderson 2000; and Snyder and Vinjamuri 2003. While the latter’s empirical argument is that criminal tribunals make conflict worse, it also normatively privileges short-term order over justice.
7. Surveying the top three journals in international relations in North America—International Organization, International Security, and World Politics over the period 1990–2006, at most four articles could be identified that are arguably characterized as engaging in normative as opposed to primarily explanatory analysis. In contrast, international relations scholarship in the UK has accorded a more prominent place to normative theorizing.
8. Cognizant of the apparent contrast with Kant’s criticism of the naturalist fallacy—that the “ought” hinges on the “is”—I would note that Kant himself suggested that the demands of ethics stand inde-
ses of the development and effects of moral norms have been at the forefront of making theoretical and empirical claims about the conditions of possibility and limits of moral change in world politics, that agenda (among others) should provide particularly insightful leverage on the “ought.” Thus, this article seeks to develop how constructivist understandings of the limits and possibilities of moral change might help address the gap between the “is” and the “ought” and provide additional rigorous grounds for judging what might be ethically defensible in particular contexts, drawing at times on more generic contributions of IR as an explanatory or interpretive social science, but most often here for my purposes focusing on contributions by constructivists. Not all critical or normative political theorists may want to make such moves, nor need all constructivists take such a normative turn,9 but for those who do, this article seeks in a constructive spirit to address long-standing charges of irrelevance or utopianism against normative theoretical approaches by providing one theoretical bridge between the empirical and normative.

A prominent strand of recent constructivist scholarship on norms has analyzed the development of cosmopolitan and humanitarian global norms such as human rights, norms of humanitarian intervention, communities of peace, the protection of innocents in warfare, and the like. This article similarly proceeds to interrogate the implications of constructivist empirical research and theoretical insights for addressing global ethical challenges that arise from such a humanitarian perspective. That is, characterizing as an ethical dilemma the question of whether war can justifiably be waged in the name of human rights only makes sense for a cosmopolitan, not for skeptics or communitarians. Such issues as will be dealt with here need not necessarily be seen as dilemmas for all constructivists, because constructivists need not necessarily be cosmopolitan (an issue I will return to in the conclusion). For now it will suffice to suggest that the contribution of constructivism to normative theorizing developed in this article is not an attempt to instantiate constructivism as a substantive moral theory itself on par with communitarian or cosmopolitan theories. Rather, the task is to delineate how constructivism might enrich such normative approaches by providing more rigorous grounds for key considerations underlying prescriptive claims—in particular, the extent to which normative positions are implicitly underwritten by empirical assumptions—and by identifying otherwise neglected issues for normative assessment that arise from constructivist theoretical and empirical work.

9. Mindful of the vociferous debates distinguishing between the terms ethics and morality, and usage of the term “normative” to refer to an empirical explanation that invokes moral norms, these terms are employed interchangeably and simply here to denote a wrestling with the prescriptive question regarding right conduct—what ought one to do that is just?
I identify six major contributions of constructivism for theorizing moral limit and possibility, and addressing global ethical dilemmas. They include: (1) attention to the relation between the ethical and empirical, including providing a way to help adjudicate the empirical bases of ethical positions; (2) recognition of the empirical importance of the debate between rationalist and constructivist accounts of agency and their relevance for normative theorizing, which includes (3) the identification of different kinds of hypocritical political practice that in turn imply different ethical evaluations of hypocrisy; (4) the illumination of neglected dimensions for ethics and identification of different kinds of dilemmas arising from a focus on the constitutive effects of norms; (5) the relevance of relations of co-constitution for thinking through issues of complicity and co-optation; and (6) a theoretical account of morality that avoids the tendency of many philosophical approaches to ethics to sidestep questions of power, without falling prey to the shortcomings of approaches such as poststructuralist ethics that do highlight power. Before outlining those contributions, I canvas how major relevant works have dealt with these issues to make readily apparent the value-added of constructivism, focusing in particular on several key works and approaches in contemporary critical and constitutive normative theory that have gone the furthest in tackling such an agenda.

**Critical Theory and Normative Theorizing in International Relations**

Critical theory is a tradition in IR that has brought to the fore questions revolving around moral change and its limits. In response to the persistent charges of the utopianism of the critical theory tradition, Cox notably acknowledged that while critical theory necessarily contains an element of utopianism, it is constrained by its sociological understanding of historical processes. As he argued,

Critical theory allows for a normative choice in favour of a social and political order different from the prevailing order, but it limits the range of choice to alternative orders which are feasible transformations of the existing world. A principal objective of critical theory, therefore, is to clarify this range of possible alternatives. Critical theory thus contains an element of utopianism in the sense that it can represent a coherent picture of an alternative order, but its utopianism is constrained by its comprehension of historical processes. It must reject improbable alternatives just as it rejects the permanency of the existing order.¹⁰

Little that is concrete has been forthcoming, however, concerning how one would construct such a theoretical project or what it would look like, specifically in the

sense of how one could tell a political and ethical possibility from an impossibility. Until recently, few explicit clues had been provided by critical theorists as to how to make these imperatives of the desirable and the possible mesh. Indeed, prominent critical theorists themselves have often been explicit that they do not seek to provide “practical” ethics and solutions to substantive moral problems as that would be anathema to the critical theoretical project.\footnote{11} But how then would one know a justifiable ethical limit to change, or recognize a possibility to be realized? How does one justify such limits and possibilities? This has been a particularly acute problem for critical theory, I would argue, since a number of recent initiatives, such as the landmines campaign of the 1990s, that would \textit{prima facie} appear to epitomize a morally progressive critical social movement, were subjected to condemnation from some critically minded scholars in conversations within and outside the academy. This was most surprising not only to this scholar nurtured in the varieties of critical theory, but perfectly bewildering to at least one government official deeply and very importantly involved in the campaign, and who himself had a critical IR theory background and self-identified with the “progressive/critical” side of the political and academic spectrum. Similar critical encounters greeted other initiatives, such as the establishment of criminal tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda and the rise of humanitarian intervention. Even without being the least bit naive about those initiatives, what actually existing or accomplished initiative, one might wonder, could possibly live up to the standards issuing from critical theory?

In the most systematic attempt to address some of these problems besetting critical theory in IR, Linklater in his magisterial work, \textit{The Transformation of Political Community}, has argued that the task of critical theory consists of a threefold agenda of ethics, sociology, and praxeology. For Linklater, normative and sociological advances are incomplete without some reflection on practical possibilities. Reduced to basic distinctions, his “sociology” consists of the identification or explanation of the already immanent; his “ethical” is the formulation of the not already immanent; and his “praxeological” is guidance of how to realize the immanent. Concerning the latter, he explains that “praxeology is concerned with reflecting on the moral resources within existing social arrangements that political actors can harness for radical purposes.”\footnote{12} Linklater’s praxeology seems to consist of teasing out the full implications of principles that have been but partly realized; that is, in identifying the moral capacity of already existing potentials. His method, then, of arriving at the praxeological consists of identifying logical potentials of ideas immanent in society and following their logic to show their intrinsic dialectical development.

\footnote{11}{For a sympathetic overview of critical theory’s contributions to ethics that provides a critical challenge to its reluctance to “do ethics” in the applied sense, see Eckersley forthcoming.}

\footnote{12}{Linklater 1998, 5.}
Schematically, Linklater’s threefold typology of the critical project is a most fruitful architecture and impressive accomplishment. But this formulation does not escape long-standing suspicions of teleology in progressivist theories: How does one know when something is “already immanent”? Linklater’s formulation does not reveal much insight into limits—there are plenty of contradictory and unrealized good ideals out there, others subject to backsliding, and so on. Neither does Linklater’s account contain a theory of agency, nor of power. Thus it does not yet, in the final analysis, provide a clear and complete bridge between the ethical and the immanent: how does the transition from the former to the latter occur? 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, thus undercutting this otherwise promising contribution to ethical theory. To buttress such an approach, there would seem to be a natural marriage with constructivist theoretical accounts of the development of norms and empirical analyses of some of those very same norms. These issues lead us to a key contribution of constructivism to ethics, which is its explicit and particular attention to the relation between the empirical and the ethical.

The Relation of the Empirical to the Ethical

Drawing more from continental communitarian traditions of ethics, Frost has made perhaps the most sustained case to develop an ethical theory of world politics via working through the relationship between the normative and empirical in constructing a constitutive theory of IR, which of course by the very name would seem to offer a project most compatible with a constructivist contribution to normative theorizing. In his important work, Frost deftly shows how any explanation of IR inescapably involves substantive normative theory. Frost’s main criticism of the mainstream of IR, and even much of critical theory, is that it eschews ethical theorizing and presupposes the ability to provide objectively correct descriptions or explanations even as, Frost argues, such exercises cannot escape normative theorizing in the process. But rather than examining the role of ethics in explanation, this article looks at the flip side of this relation—the role of empirical claims in ethics—as this is a neglected side of the equation and where the constructivist research program and other empirical traditions in IR may be harnessed to provide rigorous support for ethics.

Frost’s ethics are a perfect example of this, for while he make his case for the pervasiveness of the normative even in empirical claims in IR, Frost’s constitutive theory, in turn, ultimately and ironically rises or falls depending on the plausibility of his empirical claims about the existence and content of what he terms “settled” international norms that constitute the terrain of ethical possibility. This is so

because to criticize realism, Frost argues that no account of IR is coherent without acknowledging the role of rules and norms, and that might and right “are not conceptually and practically distinct in the way they need to be” to maintain the position that might prevails over right insofar as “power always exists within a practice which is partially constituted by certain normative ideas.”14 This critique of amoralism thus requires Frost to identify the constitutive social norms of world politics; Frost, however, does not himself engage in an empirical defense of those constitutive norms of the international system—as have constructivists and their critics on crucial relevant issues such as the structures of sovereignty, pitting them directly against alternative explanations—nor does he draw on such work to robustly buttress his claims. Rather, for the most part he simply posits them, confident, it would seem, that they are uncontroversial enough as to be unlikely to provide the resources to undo his constitutive theory. To be sure, such an analysis would take him too far afield from his most central purposes, and he certainly chooses those norms cannily in many respects. Still, the result in the end is that Frost’s approach does not give us much leverage in analyzing the limits or possibilities of moral change.

While empirical research and IR theory may not be able to escape normative theorizing, neither, I would contend, can normative theorizing escape some degree of empirical descriptivism and even explanation altogether—a side of the equation that many works of normative and critical IR theory do not examine systematically, thus limiting such work from offering all it otherwise could for the questions that animate this project about moral limit and possibility. This leaves many normative IR theories undergirded with a postpositivist epistemology in a bind. Acceptance of Frost’s constitutive theory requires that one agrees with the descriptive list of norms he proposes as “settled” norms of world politics that provide the common domain of discourse upon which the search for normative solutions may proceed. But these in turn are even less guaranteed on Frost’s own terms since in Frost’s view, description depends on the normative premises the analyst brings to the table. Frost argues that “there is no objective way of choosing between paradigms.”15 His invocation of a strong interpretivist epistemology obscures the degree to which normative claims do in fact depend in various ways on empirical assumptions or claims about the world nonetheless, even if they cannot be established as objectively true in a positivist sense. Yet, no criteria are spelled out to defend those empirical elements—they are either arbitrary or simply reduced to purely ethical claims. Beitz, in contrast, attempts to harness the ontological grounds of interdependence (as opposed to Frost’s statism) as grounds for a cosmopolitan theory, to cite but one of a large number of alternative international ethical positions underpinned by rival empirical grounds.16

15. Ibid., 24.
It is here, then, where the kinds of empirical validation, including that notably practiced by constructivists among others, could help adjudicate between ethical accounts, at least forestalling premature descent into an endless relativist circle of ethical interpretation without hope of discrimination.\textsuperscript{17} Engaging seriously with mainstream methodological concerns even as many of them embrace a postpositivist epistemology, many constructivist scholars make claims about the (contingent) validity of interpretations or explanations, established in good part by demonstrating the inadequacy of alternative accounts. Constructivist scholarship, often attuned to postpositivist sensibilities even as it has sought to engage in explanation, has thereby provided ways to unpack the dichotomy between relativism and universal objectivism, establishing an epistemological halfway-house by way of the practice of thoroughly adjudicating between alternative accounts to remove error where accounts in fact directly compete with one another, or showing how putative rival explanations may in fact complement one another. This produces a measure of plausibility to the empirical claims implicit in ethical theorizing at least one degree removed from the arbitrariness of incommensurable ethics, and instead offers contingent claims that can at least identify errors, if not establish timeless objective truths. The contention here is that it is these kinds of close empirical analyses and the epistemological status of the claims characteristic of constructivist approaches to IR that can fill in some of the gaps in the otherwise fruitful beginnings charted out by scholars such as Frost and Linklater’s assessments of moral limit and possibility in world politics. In addition to its other proclaimed bridge-building capacities, then, constructivism offers a way to think through the normative-empirical gap, thereby offering an avenue for grounding ethical claims in an additionally rigorous way.\textsuperscript{18}

The method of closely weighing alternatives against one another characteristic of many constructivist accounts points as well to the importance of alternatives that did not happen when considering moral possibility. This intimate relation between empirical explanation and normative possibility thus counsels close attention not just to the empirical grounds underpinning normative positions, but specifically to the kinds of counterfactual grounds invoked or, more often, implied but not explicitly established in claims about ethical possibility. To impugn, for example, humanitarian intervention such as that in Kosovo, or the criminal tribunals such as the one for the former Yugoslavia, typically the event is implicitly compared to some ideal (presumably an intervention in which state interests are not involved and few, if any, are killed) in light of which that which was actually possible is found wanting. Yet the preferable grounds to regard that ideal as even

\textsuperscript{17} For a complementary analysis that seeks to outline how to evaluate key logical and empirical elements of some normative arguments by using standard social science methods such as judging arguments by logical consistency and ability to explain or predict, see Snyder 2003.

\textsuperscript{18} See Adler 1997, for a seminal argument that constructivism bridges interpretive and empirical sciences. Adler 2005 states that constructivism holds promise for a synthesis between analytical and normative approaches.
a remote possibility, let alone politically plausible, is often not persuasively and rigorously established, and it is hardly self-evident that it is ethically superior to counsel a course of action that one has been given no grounds to consider at all attainable. A more rigorous ethical assessment of such situations, then, cannot do without a systematic empirical and/or self-conscious counterfactual analysis of the type often practiced by scholars, one necessary path toward a synthesis of normative and empirical approaches. Many empirical approaches can lend their support here; constructivism’s particular niche, for its part, would lie less in providing leverage in deterministic causal accounts than in its provision of “conditions of possibility” types of arguments.

Rationalism, Constructivism, and Agency

One outcome of constructivism’s engagement with rationalism in IR would seem to be fairly wide recognition that both have something right in their accounts of agency. That is, it would seem just as impossible to deny that some agents of consequence act morally at least some of the time as it is to deny that there are actors who act in resolutely instrumental ways (whether pursuing a relatively straightforward conception of maximizing their self-interests defined as material power, or acting instrumentally upon more thickly socially constructed interests), with negligible capacity or willingness to learn or redefine interests or identities in light of engagement with others. As Risse has convincingly argued,

one should not forget that the various modes of social action—strategic behavior, norm-guided behavior, and argumentative/discursive behavior—represent ideal types that rarely occur in pure form in reality. We often act both strategically and discursively—that is, we use arguments to convince somebody else that our demands are justified—and by doing so we follow norms enabling our interaction in the first place (language rules, for example). As a result, the empirical question to be asked is not whether actors behave strategically or in an argumentative mode, but which mode captures more of the action in a given situation.

Indeed, a finding of a major study was that pure “bargaining” (“strategic action, which is based on fixed preferences and uses threats and promises of reward to coordinate actions”) was the exception, and that “arguing” (which presumes open preferences) was ubiquitous in international negotiations. What is the implication of this latest “great debate” between rationalism and constructivism for normative IR theorizing? Profound, I would contend.

19. See, for example, Tetlock and Belkin 1996.
A problem in some of the most heralded approaches to ethics is that there is little satisfactory engagement with the problem of whether and how to deal ethically with the ubiquity of ruthlessly instrumental actors. The influential work of Habermas is one of the most prominent contemporary approaches to ethics, and one that has been applied to world politics. In the Habermasian account of discourse ethics, the most plausible path to norms that are valid—that is, just and ethical—is if they are attained through a process of unforced truth-seeking dialogue among all agents affected by the norm, and accepted with their consent and agreement; that is, the product of rational consensus. In a Habermasian ethic, those who do not accept “the universal and necessary communicative presuppositions of argumentative speech” are excluded from consideration.22 But what does one do in a situation—indeed, in a world—confronted constantly with agents who do not approach a negotiation or a crisis with the characteristics of the ethical encounter entailed in a dialogic ethic? With actors who do not see themselves as equal, who have no intent to enter the encounter open to learn, to be persuaded, to change their views of others and themselves, but who fully intend to bring their power to bear on the situation to realize their interests, which may well be defined by material interests, or parochial culture and traditions, rather than a self-conscious awareness of their contingency and historical situatedness? With a hegemonic state, for example, which reportedly objected to even making a commitment to engage in dialogue over global climate change in negotiations in 2005? Does this mean that engagement with such actors is consigned outside the ethical realm, that outcomes reached through counterstrategic action or political compromises with archetypical strategic actors, would by definition be unjust, ruled out a priori as inherently unable to carry redeemable potential?

If one were to concede that many, even most, perhaps virtually all, important political situations will contain elements of such strategic practices and instrumental actors, is the realm of the ethically acceptable thereby confined to the scraps insofar as so little, if anything, would seem to be able to approximate the standard of what is ethical? Is the implication to consign strategic action and instrumental actors to the realm of immorality, that which must fall short, and would this not be an impoverished political ethic serving less as a positive ideal toward which to strive and more to confirm a deep contemporary cynicism of politics—and politicians—as inherently disreputable? Is that unattainable reminder indeed the indispensable function of an adequately critical ethic? Or, on the contrary, would not a workable political ethic be one that can more readily incorporate the everyday mix of forms of action? Indeed, almost any international treaty dealing with subjects such as human rights or war would seem to be a mix of the brutal bargains of national interests and coercion sprinkled, if not always enveloped, with other, including moral, considerations.

Constructivist accounts of moral agency do not necessarily claim that moral
entrepreneurs act “irrationally,” nor that members of transnational advocacy net-
works do not also act instrumentally in pursuit of their ethical goals.23 Import-
antly, constructivist empirical findings suggest that it is not only communicative
dialogue that may provide justifiable grounds for a workable global humanitarian
ethic, but indeed forms of counterinstrumental action. To date, just what that might
mean has not yet been well developed in the literature. Deitelhoff and Müller simply
note of the failure of even reasonably approximating ideal speech situations in world
politics that “[o]nly when challenges occur, ‘normal’ communication is hampered and
needs to be suspended. Actors can either accept the breakdown of communication
or they might decide to make an effort to rebuild agreement at a higher discursive
level.”24 Their empirical findings importantly point the way to several strategies
to contribute to the latter; namely the role of institutions and publicity in creating
common life worlds and fostering approximations of ideal speech situations, as
well as the importance of cultivating the reputational legitimacy and authority of the
interlocutor in a given situation. Thus, even if one agrees with the desirability of
the Habermasian answer to the question of “what to do”—namely, seek truth toward
a consensus—this article points to the necessity to elaborate on what additional
ethically justifiable strategies might be available, rather than resting with “suspension”
or attempting to reconstruct the elusive ideal speech situation in its absence.

An implication of the empirical engagement of constructivism with rationalism,
then, is that the only pathway for a viable ethics lies not in positing how to respond
as if myopically instrumental agents did not exist or were not who they were, nor
with smuggling in a hidden premise hopeful of reforming unreconstructed instru-
mental interlocutors. Such tacks would themselves ironically constitute forms of
exclusion, something antithetical to the core of dialogic ethics itself. Indeed, such
approaches would be a manifestly inadequate way to think of how to deal with
actors such as those who have animated the George W. Bush administration with
their coming to power in 2001, a regime whose most powerful members would
seem to exemplify—hardly uniquely, though unabashedly—the instrumental mono-
logical actor par excellence, rather impervious to learning and redefining their inter-
ests and identities in light of dialogue and engagement (not to mention evidence),
instead constantly deploying every conceivable means at their disposal to reinforce
the pursuit of their already-decided-upon goals from a position embraced explicit-
ly as one of dominance, not equality. Such actors’ approach to international inter-
action embody the antithesis of Linklater’s characterization of genuine dialogue
as “not a trial of strength between adversaries who are hell-bent on converting
others to their cause; it only exists when human beings accept that there is no a
priori certainty about who will learn from whom and when.”25

The ethical problem, then, is whether and how to deal morally with the existence of such powerful actors and their instrumental logics. Thus, the debate in IR between rationalism and constructivism opens a contribution to one of the most prominent strains of contemporary ethical thought. What will not do for those seeking to draw on constructivist insights for ethics, then, is a conclusion to an ethical problem whereby the author sighs, “if only government such and such had not been so obstinate in insisting upon maximizing its power/pursuing its narrow interests…” and the like. Rather, 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. Perhaps there is no answer on the same level of abstraction of this question as posed, meaning that the ethical response will typically rely on a close contextual analysis, and constructivism points to some key considerations in that regard, as will be developed in below sections.

For now, might one not contend that rationalist analyses of institutions provide what one needs to know about the constraints of action and, by implication, moral possibility? If rational actor assumptions are taken to imply that all actors act in narrowly instrumental ways all the time, constructivist work reveals the assumption to be simply false. More challenging for those who reject ethically skeptical IR theories, however, is the “bad apple” thesis: do not instrumentalist power-seeking agents force others to engage them on their own terms lest they be taken advantage of, even perish in extremis? Constructivism points to an important structural dimension of ethical action that underlies the potentially justifiable instrumentalism of moral entrepreneurs noted above. Crucial here is Wendt’s argument about the tipping points when cultures of friendship, rivalry, or enmity come to be seen by actors as constituting properties of the system as a whole rather than particular agents. The implication of Wendt’s argument is that there is no one single static structure of friendship or enmity among all agents in world politics, but fluid and cross-cutting subcultures, meaning there is scope for moral practice. That is, it is one thing to say that engaging with a particular actor in a given situation precludes a dialogic ethic, and quite another to contend that the system as a whole precludes such moral action. Concomitantly, however, practices engaging with such strategic actors do have constitutive effects, the cumulative effects of which determine whether the cultural system tips at some point from dominant cultures of amity or enmity. Thus, in providing potential justification for the ethics of strategic moral action in confronting other instrumental actors, constructivism would highlight the constitutive effects of such action on the normative structures of world politics as will be developed in the next section.

26. Recognizing that sometimes there may not be a fully ethically justifiable solution.
27. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point that is put rhetorically to invite a response from an institutionalist perspective.
Constructivism and Hypocrisy

Important for moral judgment and practice is the constructivist emphasis on the role of legitimacy, which in turn offers significant ethical purchase on the practice of hypocrisy, a phenomenon rather familiar to students of politics including IR. Hypocrisy figures importantly in constructivist accounts as a mechanism on the road to compliance with norms, such as the literature that stresses the ultimate impact of holding governments to account, even if they only rhetorically profess adherence to human rights norms. Yet, while the rhetorical entrapment and shaming involved in hypocrisy can offer real power and tactical benefits for those championing the spread of cosmopolitan moral change such as human rights, if hypocrisy becomes too endemic then it may undercut the power of the moral legitimacy more generally that is required for hypocrisy’s piggy-back effects. Somebody has to believe that enough others believe morality matters to make hypocrisy intelligible as a political phenomenon. A constructivist position takes the legitimacy effects of moral language seriously, thus positioning the analyst well to uncover the nuances of progressive and regressive effects of even strategically moral uses of morality, including hypocrisy, that are prone to be missed by other approaches.

Another important implication of the focus on hypocrisy arises from the basic structurationist ontological insight that grounds constructivism, which explains that what may be constraining or productive social structures at one historical juncture or cultural space may not be so at another. If one is to take these effects seriously, it raises the possibility that one may morally justify a given course of action in a particular context but then judge an alternative course of action morally justifiable in another place, or, in that same situation at a later time, when conditions of possibility may have changed. Thus, might it not be mere hypocrisy (nor unjustified duplicity) but defensible morality to defend the granting of amnesties to the perpetrators of atrocities in an ongoing conflict to put a halt to the terror and then justify the later withdrawal of that amnesty when the threat of civil war had receded? Would not the structural conditions have changed so much that a moral assessment of genuine possibilities and limits (say, from a cosmopolitan perspective) must itself be altered? A constructivist analysis of the possibilities of normative action in world politics would seem to imply that such situations typically castigated as mere hypocrisy may at least in principle be subject to moral defence. Could not, for instance, a cosmopolitan defend the hypocrisy of a state’s toughly worded legal restrictions against illegal immigrants that are nonetheless weakly applied in practice (at least in the short term, perhaps provided that more humanitarian longer-term resolutions are simultaneously sought) as preferable to adver-

31. Conversely, Snyder correctly notes that careful attention to empirical context might reveal that "unsuccessful attempts to apply the norm to areas where it is unworkable would tend to undermine adherence to the norm in areas where it might otherwise have held firmly"; Snyder 2003, 369.
tising a more open-door policy that would quickly produce backlash, or to harshly enforcing the rules to avoid the taint of hypocrisy?

One possibility that presents itself is a more nuanced approach than regarding all hypocrisies as created equal. An implication of a constructivist view regarding the possibilities of change of social structures is that those practices that continue to seek to ameliorate the moral dimensions of a dilemma that are sacrificed in the short term for the sake of other moral values are different from those that sacrifice such moral goods for, say, more venal objectives and cynically manipulate them as a diversion from the latter. In this way constructivism would underscore that the very practice of hypocrisy in turn creates its own moral imperatives that themselves serve to raise the bar; failure to reach for that bar engenders cynicism, which in turn undercuts the ground for even genuine subsequent moral action. Hypocrisy, in short, hardly always needs to be condemned from a constructivist perspective, though condoning it must be delicate, lest it contribute to a culture that undercuts the very ontological basis of moral change itself.

The Constitutive Effects of Norms

A fourth contribution of constructivism to normative theory is, at first blush, to complicate the moral challenge—which, of course, might not seem an advance at all—in the sense of identifying previously underappreciated dimensions of moral regress that may accompany progress, or that may even be the condition of possibility that accompanies erstwhile positive moral change. A contribution of constructivism for normative theory inheres in the focus on the constitutive and not just restraining effects of norms on agents and identities: the contention that structures do not merely constrain already existing agents who have pregiven interests but also constitute those very agents and their interests themselves. In IR, Wendt has provided the most thorough theoretical treatment of this phenomena, but Wendt’s account, like the security communities and democratic peace literatures, downplays a dark side of the constitutive processes of identity and interest formation. What if the very condition of possibility of establishing a peaceful regional security community such as the European Union (EU) or liberal democratic peace—within which the thought of interstate war fades to insignificance—is the exclusion and othering of outsiders and all that such processes may imply? As Rumelili has argued, “the discourses on the promotion of democracy and human rights are inevitably productive of two identity categories, a morally superior identity of democratic juxtaposed to the inferior identity of non-(or less) democratic,” thereby “constructing the very differences that transformation would ostensibly eliminate.”

The additional theoretical ethical challenge raised by constructivist analysis for normative theory then is: What does one make of moral change whose own condition of possibility seems to involve the production of the very (unjust) phenomena

that are supposed to be overcome? To state this more positively, the achievement of constitutive analysis here is to make one more aware of and sensitive to both the consequences of recursive relations of structures and agents, as well as the link between identity construction and normative development, processes that have tended to fall outside of the lenses of many prominent moral theories, which have tended to black-box sociological descriptions or explanations of identity formations. This attentiveness to the constitutive effects of norms can provide an important supplement to prominent traditions of ethics such as utilitarianism or agent-centered Kantian approaches, or to efforts such as Gibney’s splendid analysis of the ethics of asylum, in which he similarly seeks to integrate ethics with a careful appreciation of empirical possibilities but does not engage such constitutive dimensions of ethics.33

Communitarian and identity-based political theory is conspicuously different on this score, of course, yet in turn such projects have tended to struggle with the difficulty of how to deal with transcommunity morality as demanded by the search for internationally acceptable answers to ethical challenges. Without wading into that enormous literature and its particular debates here, I confine myself for my purposes to noting that a constructivist focus on the exclusionary practices that often accompany the securing of community identities (which in turn are at the base of any moral construction) constitute vital elements of a constructivist contribution to normative theorizing and practice. This involves the illumination of previously unidentified moral problems that arise from a focus on the constitutive properties involved in the development of new international norms (including, that is, even putatively progressive moral change in world politics). This agenda then pushes that analytical strategy further into normative theory, asking us to consider: What does one make of practices that at once contain elements of progressive change that are not to be summarily discounted—such as peaceful relations among the powerful industrialized democracies—yet at the same time are predicated on or produce the conditions of possibility for other forms of exclusion, hierarchy, inequality, repression, or violence? Such an analytical awareness bears the potential of preemptively designing prescriptions more sensitive to a multidimensional ethical sensibility, building in protections for the novel moral challenges raised by attempts to deal with the old. Thus, rather than resting with a postmodern account of identity that seems to suggest othering is both inherently dangerous and endemic, Rumelili harnesses constructivism to normative theory and explicitly identifies community building practices such as those in the EU that can be ethically justified as distinct from those that cannot, assessing them by criteria such as their effects—for example, whether shaming techniques induce positive changes or produce conflict or even legitimize violence—or whether the nature of the collective identity allows for an ethical relation with the other.34

34. Rumelili 2008.
Complicity and Co-optation in Moral Change

Attention to the constitutive nature of social and political relations as identified above has implications that run in several different directions (in terms of assessing moral progress). It can make what prima facie might seem like an unproblematically humanitarian development appear much less so on further analysis by underscoring new sources of exclusion or repression opened up by new social structures. This operation is one sense in which a constructivist normative agenda may respond to the criticism that constructivists have, to date, mostly studied the origins and operation of “happy” international norms (such as the abolition of slavery) rather than “bad” norms (such as, say, slavery itself)—constructivists themselves are well placed to identify some of the morally undesirable implications of erstwhile progressive developments as described above. This includes identification of the complicity of humanitarian developments with the oppressive. But at the same time, this agenda also points toward the humanitarian potential in social structures that some critical theorists may condemn for their repressive effects or potential.

Thus, to take an example, I would contend that the effort to ban antipersonnel (AP) landmines represents a progressive intervention in world politics insofar as it has already notably reduced the numbers of innocent lives and limbs lost to these weapons for no justifiable military purpose. This stands against conservative claims that reject civil society infringements on the security requirements of the state, or the critical legal argument that initiatives based upon just war concepts have been co-opted into the war convention that legitimates warfare.35 Contrary to the latter, I find that the landmines ban has in some respects crucially depended on just war categories for its realization, and with humanitarian results. In particular, without the powerful connection made to the norm of civilian discrimination—that is, the argument that AP mines are inherently indiscriminate—the taboo against any use of antipersonnel landmines would not have been widely accepted by states if at all.

Such divergences points to a potential theoretical disagreement between some variants of critical theory and constructivism on the question of ethics. Reliance on existing social structures such as just war norms for critical change should come as no surprise to constructivists—theorists who take discourse, structure, culture, norms, and institutions seriously. For if such phenomena are to have any significance, one would expect that they could not simply be jettisoned at every whim, and that efforts, for example, to instantiate a new paradigm of human security (which places the security requirements of individuals as the priority rather than that of states) could not start anew. Yet the insistence of some critical theorists amounts uncomfortably close to just that, lest critical change be tainted with undue

35. For the former, see Anderson 2000. The latter charge the author has heard numerous times by critical international relations scholars.
complicity with previous social structures beset by forms of domination, statism, and the like. Norms of warfare, notably, have been excoriated by critical theorists as ineffective at best and complicit in state violence at worst: “despite noble rhetoric to the contrary, the laws of war have been formulated deliberately to privilege military necessity at the cost of humanitarian values. As a result, the laws of war have facilitated rather than restrained wartime violence. Through law, violence has been legitimated.”  

Claims about the violence-legitimizing effects of the laws of war are not altogether misguided insofar as they are grounded on a brutal correlation: the twentieth century witnessed the flourishing of elaborate laws and codes of war, and yet it was the bloodiest century of warfare in history. But it is precisely the dilemma of how to judge such double-sided developments that a constructivist normative agenda seeks to address, rather than rest with one-sided critique. Critics of just war norms importantly underscore that these norms suffer from inadequacies in restraining the character of contemporary large-scale violence—but, one must ask compared to what? It must be noted that there are difficulties with the one-sided critique of these claims, not the least the lack of consideration of plausible counterfactual scenarios and assessment of the implications of empirical cases to the contrary. To cite one obvious but telling example, what would the destruction of Iraq in the Gulf War of 1991 have looked like in the absence of norms that constrained the blatant targeting of civilians enough to prevent any bombing of Iraqi cities after the well-publicized bombing of a Baghdad air-raid shelter, let alone the use of nuclear weapons?

The theoretical argument here is that the normative ground of the critical theoretical perspective in the hands of practitioners such as the above threatens to betray its constructivist ontological underpinnings by not taking social structures seriously enough. Pushed too far, this ultimately results in a critical theory that seems inadequate to recognize progress, leaving it in a state of ethical paralysis because the demand seems to be for some ethical tabula rasa that bans all forms of complicity in violence, domination, or exclusion, without in turn engendering new forms (yet such power relations are at the same time seen as inherent in all social relations and political communities).

This ontological-ethical tension derives from several sources. First is the relentless critical tendency to engage in the unmasking of each and every political practice as being inevitably complicit in forms of domination, present in the works of IR scholars such as Campbell who have “gained inspiration from the critical themes of continental philosophy.”  

This relentless identification of every new social formation as yet another form of domination, because relations of domination can never be eliminated, seems no less applicable toward those developments that would seem to have a prima facie case for being progressive and hence ethically praise-

worthy. To the extent that this is so leaves critical theorists so inclined in something of a bind. Since there must be some hidden agenda of complicity with domination in every political practice—for power is everywhere—it is almost as if progressive developments that have been achieved, because they have become reality, cannot be praised, because their very realization then resets the ethical bar of possibility. To be sure, this might be more a matter of analytical focus insofar as the practice of such scholars is typically to identify hidden forms of exclusion and domination to prepare the way for further expanding the realms of autonomy and freedom and respect for diversity and difference. Yet there is a risk of disjuncture between the ontology of the diagnosis and the practice of critique as an adequate ethical response for those critical theorists who recoil from offering alternatives grounded in a plausible account of the achievable.

In the process, an effect of this neglect is a perpetual ratcheting up of ever more stringent litmus tests that political action seems to almost always necessarily fail to meet, because the goal posts are constantly being moved else the critical enterprise have nothing to critique, and because some form of domination is never precluded. In one sense the ontological underpinnings of this position are entirely consistent with constructivism; one calls something progressive moral change if it represents a moral improvement on the current social and political constellation, so in that sense the present—and the standards of ethics situated in the present—always form something of a contingent historical-cultural baseline from which change is judged. As such, this may not be a position that constructivist informed international ethics can wholly shake, even as it cannot fully realize it either. Perhaps this is the space that critical/utopian theory is destined simultaneously to be condemned and celebrated to occupy, necessarily sacrificing itself between realists and progressives upon the Scylla of irrelevance and Charybdis of paralyzing critique.

More positively, an ethical stance flowing from this engagement between critical theory and constructivism would not be critical of, but rather open to, efforts to reach even farther for humanitarian ideals. However, at the same time this stance might understandably approach exasperation when such a disposition is not reciprocated; that is, when criticisms from the ideal point of view—usually implied but not demonstrated counterfactual alternatives as above—target (to the point of dismissing) the smaller victories along the way that do effect meaningful change in real human lives if not whole systems. The danger of the critical tack for the causes it champions is fostering cynicism to a point that undercuts moral action more broadly. In contrast, constructivist scholarship’s contribution has been to demonstrate how sometimes initially small developments open wedges to wider change, from genealogical studies of unintended consequences of shifts in language to the ultimate boomerang effects of small rhetorical concessions to human rights activists.

38. Or perhaps just a reflex to avoid undue self-congratulation.
39. See George and Campbell 1990.
Varieties of critical positions would counter that such reformist gestures simply facilitate the perpetuation of larger systems that are fundamentally unjust and that call for more revolutionary action. This is not a position easy for constructivists to deny on their own terms, insofar as scholars documenting change and processes such as learning in world politics have often emphasized the crucial importance of a “crisis” as a catalyst for major change. The ethical prescription that follows is to foment the conditions for crisis rather than abate them. I am skeptical there is a grand resolution at a sufficient level of abstraction to match this problem. But one implication of constructivism here would be to suggest that if one weighs demonstrable human gains against the failures of an ideal (let alone making things worse in the hopes of more fundamental change), then those gains come out rather well. This is especially so if such gains cannot be demonstrably shown to render impossible, or even more unlikely, further progress toward more fundamental change, and it is such empirical claims that constructivism is well positioned to deliver for its ethics, whereas traditions that epistemologically reject empirical research in favor of interpretivism would be rather hard-pressed to respond persuasively.

Thus, while constructivist and other scholars have shown just war norms to have had meaningful effects in restraining death and atrocity that would otherwise have taken place, Jochnick and Normand level stinging criticisms that “the basic fact that nations purport to respect the rule of law helps protect the entire structure of war-making from more fundamental challenges.”40 Yet the alternatives are not stated and remain mysterious, apart perhaps from an implied banning of all war itself, a proposal that has been the only alternative this author has heard on the issue by critical scholars, and one that is rather ripe for the critical theorists’ own skeptical scalpel, among just a few others. The main point here is not to discourage such criticism, which is indispensable at one level, but to point out nonetheless that critical accounts that do not in fact offer constructive alternatives in the aftermath of critique ironically lend themselves to being complicit in conservative agendas opposing erstwhile progressive change in world politics.41

Constructivism offers a way out of the potential critical trap by taking the prevalence of power seriously without precluding the possibility of meaningful humanitarian change nonetheless. It does so by recognizing that some degree of complicity in previous social structures is inherent in social change, whether regressive, reformist, or even (putatively) revolutionary, and that some forms of co-optation of some agents of change to forms of domination is common, or perhaps even pervasive rather than the exception, for political action that amounts to more than self-sacrifice and defeat. Pointing out the presence of co-optation, complicity, hypocrisy, and the like does not at all remove the grounds from claims of positive moral change, unless accompanied by a more plausible alternative: compared to what?

41. For further debate is the extent to which the position suggested here imparts any conservatism beyond that implied in translating any ideals into practical ethics.
Power and Ethics

The section above points to a final contribution of constructivism to normative theorizing and practice in world politics; namely, pointing a way to avoid what has often been an undue divorce of ethics from power. Constructivists tend to understand the moral norms they study as embodying forms of power, which provides a way to avoid a chief liability of many previous versions of liberal- and critical-minded scholarship in IR, and to deal with a long-standing criticism of the real-world relevance of numerous philosophical approaches to ethics that do not sufficiently contend with the obstacles to ethics that may lie in power. Constructivist accounts of moral change as a form of real-world politics that both confronts other forms of power and embodies their own forms of power provides a way toward a synthesis of the “is” and the “ought.” Here I confine myself to engaging how constructivism could address the ethical problem of power that arises from the prominent Habermasian and Foucauldian poles of contemporary political and social theory.

There remain important respects in which the critique of utopianism still haunts approaches such as Habermas’s that would assess ethical outcomes by the force of the better argument between interlocutors divested of the dialogically corrupting accoutrements of power, since such situations would seem to be empirically rare, if not indeed theoretically impossible, for some versions of constructivism. Applying such an approach to world politics, Linklater’s dialogic ethic requires that all participants “stand back from authority structures and group loyalties” in which they are embedded, to willingly treat all other human subjects as equals, and to engage in dialogue problematizing practices of privilege and subordination. But just as with the communitarian critique of Rawls’s famous original position thought experiment, the procedural dimension of the ethic that Linklater proposes is strikingly at odds with the constructivist ontology underpinning most contemporary critical theory, including Linklater’s own, which sees every agent and every moral position as unavoidably embedded in a historical and cultural context.

Linklater is, of course, not unaware of this potential paradox, disclosing that “individuals cannot escape the moral language embedded in the social conventions that have previously constituted them as moral subjects . . . [therefore] absolute foundations for the assessment of the merits of different cultures or historical epochs will necessarily elude them.” A better expression of the social constructivist ontological position would be difficult to find. It does, however, seem deeply at odds with an ethic that requires what, for the constructivist, would seem to be the impossible. Namely, how to square the ethical shedding of the effects of power and identity inherent in actors necessarily being embedded in time and culture and

42. Though see Crawford 2002.
44. Ibid., 64.
society and politics, with an ontology whose premise is that such a move is in practice and if not intellectually impossible? The problem for Linklater’s critical theory then, is that the more deeply true the critical ontological diagnosis of the human condition—the more socially constructed people are, the more language constructs their very agency—the less able they could ever hope to be to extract themselves from the subtleties of its clutches, imbued as they always are with the tendrils of power relations. Thus discourse ethics remains frustratingly elusive even on critical theorists’ ontological terms.

Here constructivist research methods can make a contribution to the kind of ethics as outlined by Linklater. If interventions in Kosovo or Iraq, for example, presented ethical dilemmas for Western policymakers or scholars, they did so in a particular way for those with cosmopolitan sensibilities who might have been torn between the imperatives of saving lives and upholding the international law of war. But rather than simply ordain an ethical evaluation from a perspective one might defend on deontological or utilitarian grounds, constructivism would additionally encourage the empirical embodiment of a dialogic ethic to open up and buttress the grounds of such assessments. That is, as against exercises in ratiocination such as utilitarianism, Kant’s categorical imperative or Rawls’s thought experiment of the original position, communicative ethics of the sort championed by Habermas calls for procedures of consensus through deliberation without coercion among all concerned as the most promising path for justice. Some scholars have thus sought to investigate empirically the extent to which such practices are actually approximated in world politics (bringing politics and power into ethics). Risse has importantly responded to the empirical critique of idealism of the communicative action model—namely, proving the actual existence of situations characterized by actors who recognize each others as equals engaged in truth seeking toward consensus—by persuasively contending that “the ideal speech situation is not meant as a statement about the empirical world or—even worse—some utopian ideal; instead it constitutes primarily a counterfactual presupposition” to be analyzed for its influence in any given situation against other forms of action such as bargaining (as strategic action) and rhetoric that themselves are ideal types rarely uncontaminated by the other forms of action. Risse concedes that his “counterarguments to various objections raised against the possibility of an ‘ideal speech situation’ in international affairs only help to some extent. The Habermasian condition of ‘equal access’ to the discourse, for example, is simply not met in world politics.” Yet in empirical terms he is surely right that “[t]he real issue then is not whether power relations are absent in a discourse, but to what extent they can explain the argumentative outcome.”

Deitelhoff and Muller for their part argue that while their systematic research attempt to discover instances of authentic persuasion suggests that it does occur in

46. Ibid., 18.
world politics, the project was “unable to methodologically and empirically prove
this assumption: it is a theoretical paradise that is empirically lost!” Deitelhoff and Muller argue that this is so because one cannot adequately prove methodologically “whether it was the better argument that carried the day, or other factors such as material power.” While they thus abandoned the search for actor orientations (were actors truth-seeking in the Habermasian sense or instrumentalist?), one could note that in the absence of convening or finding such an actual procedural ethic via the discovery of intentions, other alternatives might be useful. For example, scholars could examine a dilemma empirically and ask, say, in the case of an intervention: how did it look not just from the perspective of potential interveners, which is the common ethical referent for debates over Kosovo, for example, but how did it look from the perspective of the intervened, and indeed all concerned? What is the position of the marginalized and those of diverse political theoretical persuasions in any given dilemma? How broadly acceptable are given responses to dilemmas, and how legitimate are the voices of those in contestation? Constructivist research methods, as Deitelhoff and Muller show, can provide an empirical complement and indeed analogue to dialogical ethical theory. Sikkink argues, for example, that the contemporary ethic upholding human rights norms is powerful precisely because such a moral position is not merely the abstract ethical ideal of a limited range of culturally bounded thinkers, but has been produced as a set of consequential social facts through intensive negotiation and politics among so many of the world’s states and numerous nonstate actors for decades. Whether through a recognition of the empowering effects of identity politics or the real-world power of progressive moral norms themselves, international normative theorizing informed by a constructivist ontology can thus be inoculated from what has been at the heart of most critiques of moral theory in world politics in their various forms—idealism in the form of the divorce of morality from power, and failure to face up to the problem of translating ideals into practice in the face of power.

This is a crucial contribution of constructivism because it simultaneously provides a response to two critiques that could emerge from the Habermasian and Foucauldian poles of contemporary political and social theory. On the one hand, the accounts of ethics and politics in thinkers such as Habermas or Linklater privilege, as those outcomes that issue from deliberation, argument, and consensus, “the force of the better argument” as free as possible from what they see as the distorting influences of power. Constructivist analyses have demonstrated that ethically progressive change has been attained in other ways, and indeed that confirmation of the Habermasian ideal as applied to world politics may be methodologically

47. Deitelhoff and Müller 2005, 177.
48. Ibid.
and empirically next to impossible.\textsuperscript{50} This suggests that the Habermasian account of justice, conceived of mainly in a communitarian context, may not provide as viable an account of a workable cosmopolitan global ethic as do others highlighted by social constructivism in IR that point to other mechanisms such as socialization, shaming, boycotts, sanctions, and the like.

On the other hand, another vein of self-declared critical scholars have insisted on placing power front and center in their analyses of world politics, while contending against the mainstream of explanatory positivism that IR is all about ethics. Campbell notably has centrally engaged the question of ethics, though his work in the end does not yet provide workable responses to the kinds of questions of ethical judgment and practice being posed here. Campbell’s invocation of Derrida and Levinas for ethics is deeply problematic as a basis for ethics insofar as it ultimately delegates one’s own ethical responsibility to the Other without providing any grounds for distinguishing when that other is morally reprehensible and not deserving of such moral consideration as opposed to ontological recognition. Campbell himself is forthright enough to acknowledge this: “We may still be dissatisfied with the prospect that Derrida’s account cannot rule out forever perverse calculations and unjust laws.”\textsuperscript{51}

One analytical task for a constructivist contribution to ethics that takes power seriously is to unpack and identify the sources and different kinds of moral dilemmas. As the tragic realist view of politics, among others, reminds us, there simply may be genuine dilemmas not subject to ethically satisfying resolution. Constructivists stand at varying points along a continuum in their willingness to grant the existence of immutable realities, from Wendt’s “rump” materialism to a poststructuralist denial of any political reality outside of discursive practices. Within this space, putative dilemmas may be revealed to be the product of social practices amenable to long-term transcendence if not immediate resolution, and whose irresolvable character evaporates upon further analysis. Towns demonstrates that while gains in gender equality in Sweden were achieved by defining gender equality as “Swedish” culture and setting it apart from “immigrant/non-Western” culture, the key to gender equality does not have to be found in culture conceptualized this way. Thus a politician is not forced to choose as if in a genuine and immutable moral dilemma, particularly since viewing immigrants in terms of a cultural frame (as opposed to labor) and defining Swedishness in terms of progressive women’s rights are both recent and not immutable constructions.\textsuperscript{52}

The dilemma between humanitarian intervention and norms of self-determination is illustrative in this regard. The world constructed the practice of self-determination in no small part to solve one set of moral problems, but this has now created a series of consequences including new moral dilemmas. This kind of insight points

\textsuperscript{50} Deitelhoff and Müller 2005, 170–71.
\textsuperscript{51} Campbell 1994, 51.
\textsuperscript{52} Towns 2008.
to an important difference with realism—the dilemma much of the world now wrestles with is not some universal problem due to the anarchic system, it is not due to material power, it is not due to human nature or biological givens. Rather, it is the product of human agency, of moral change, rather than the realm of recurrence and repetition.

These dilemmas only arise if these norms are social facts, which they have become. Illumination of this feature of dilemmas differentiates a constructivist approach to ethics from a classical realist ethic of prudence (not to mention skepticism), insofar as it allows for more change and opens the door to more critical interventions in world politics than most realists would seem to be willing to concede. Progress may well be had, and even though it may be at the price of the generation of yet new dilemmas, this in itself points to a different ethic than that premised on world politics as a realm of recurrence and repetition devoid of possibilities of humanitarian moral change.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that even as constructivists embrace an ontology that posits real possibilities of moral change in world politics, there are situations even from this perspective, and particularly from this perspective (which takes morality as social structure seriously), that cannot be changed willy-nilly by those charged with realities of political decision making or judgment. Sometimes something of moral value cannot be realized and has to be sacrificed in a situation of acting or deciding—that is, of choice. But if some situations share this affinity with the tragic realist vision of politics, where the approach articulated here differs at least from contemporary realists is in not assigning the unrealizability of humanitarian moral goods as the unchanging lot of world politics, or as only the causes rather than sometimes the solutions to problems. Humanitarian progress can be had, even if in achieving it new problems and conflicts are produced by the concomitant restructuring of moral standards of possibility and impossibility that moral change itself makes possible. But this form of ever-present moral conflict denies the presumption of realism that humanitarian moral improvement in world politics can be presumptively dismissed as ethically dangerous and ontologically implausible, as a project that “sounds nice but regrettably is not the world we live in.”

Problems even of the most wrenching kinds are sometimes addressed in ways such that the label of humanitarian progress is reasonably assigned, though this is not to say that victory is had in some unidirectional or irreversible way. At a minimum, a constructivist agenda for ethics emphasizes that even successes in addressing moral dilemmas, indeed by virtue of that very success, breed new moral contexts that thus challenge humanity with novel moral dilemmas. In that sense, morality is always a “problem.” Material factors structure moral contexts too; advances in communications technology and the ability to transport goods and people quickly
across the globe are a crucially important enabling factor for even considering humanitarian rescue in ways that were literally not possible in epochs past. Thus, it might be precisely small consolation indeed for those torn by the agony of contemporary dilemmas that their wrenching with such dilemmas may indicate from a historical perspective an improvement of humanity’s lot. For example, the agony of 500 innocent civilians killed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)’s war against Yugoslavia in 1998 may pale with the scale of its antecedents, and thus it is not inappropriate to remind ourselves of the infinitely greater inhumanity with which such developments have too routinely been dealt. Same with reflecting on the sense in which current indignation at some facets of the contemporary treatment of immigrants is a moral luxury in the narrow sense of comparing problems today to previous eras, even in the same country when millions were summarily deported or worse, something for which Gurowitz judges that the world’s largest immigrant target state today no longer has the stomach as it wrestles with a just solution to immigration.53

Thinking through the relation of constructivism to realism on the question of ethics and change raises the question of the ethics of constructivism more generally. Quite to the contrary from the conservative critique that constructivism is biased toward the study of “good” norms that “worked,” the opposite challenge could also be marshaled: does constructivism entail a political or ethical position at all? It has frequently been contended that constructivism is an approach, a method, an ontology, or a social theory, but that it is not a substantive political theory or theory of IR as such.54 This position implies the understanding that constructivism is best understood as not itself constituting a normative theory, that it is neutral concerning the preferred outcomes of political life and whether, for example, to privilege the individual over the community.55 Is this the case, and what are the implications for thinking about the potential contributions of constructivism for normative theorizing in world politics?

On the one hand, this agnostic dimension of constructivism helps explain the varieties of constructivism and how constructivism has lent itself to being harnessed to numerous more obviously substantive theories, some with no small differences between them. Thus have so-called conventional and critical or Marxian constructivisms, “thick” and “thin” constructivisms, modernist, postmodernist and holist constructivisms, feminist and postcolonial constructivisms, and so on. While it may be the case that to this point in the English-speaking academy of IR, a predominantly left-of-center cast has characterized constructivist scholarship, on this reading there is nothing to preclude realist or other illiberal constructivisms.56

54. See Wendt 1999; and Ruggie 1998.
At the same time, the historicist underpinnings of constructivism would seem to make its proponents hard-pressed to maintain a strong view of its alleged neutrality, given the premise that all theories as cultural artifacts embody a perspective from somewhere and for something, as put famously by Cox. Indeed the analytic of constructivism does seem to foreclose key contentions of some political theories. This is particularly the case with materialist theories, which would locate all the explanatory leverage one needs in the likes of military or economic power or in unalterable givens of nature. Furthermore, constructivism’s emphasis on the possibilities of social and political change that are not confined to the realm of the domestic polity does seem to preclude conservative international political theories that, as a matter of presumption, discount the possibility of humanitarian moral change across borders as enough of an anomaly that initiatives to those ends can be reliably dismissed as “unrealistic.”

This article has revolved around ethical issues that mostly arise from and theorize toward a humanitarian or cosmopolitan perspective. To be sure, all constructivist ethics need not be cosmopolitan, and although constructivism can provide powerful grounds for cosmopolitan ethics as mostly analyzed here, the approaches and arguments broached here are but one possible way to harness constructivism. What they would have in common is a diagnosis that takes seriously social processes missed by alternative theoretical perspectives such as materialist or rationalist approaches, which thus run the danger of the wrong prescription. Wendt is right to underscore that claiming that a phenomenon is a social construction does not mean it is easy to change; indeed, if it were that easy to change, skeptics might be right in disregarding it as epiphenomenal to other mechanisms of social and political life. But calling something a social construction does entail that it is possible to change, as opposed to supposedly immutable realities such as hard-wired biological givens.\(^{57}\) Those who do not take morality seriously as a force in world politics understandably offer little in the way of serious diagnosis of just how it operates; critical theorists who do take the ethical dimensions of political life seriously have too often failed to provide plausible alternatives to hypocrisy, complicity, reform as opposed to revolution, or processes such as othering and their injustices that are seemingly inherent in identity politics. This article has sought, among other things, to demonstrate how constructivism can fill in precisely these gaps, and as such its ethics as structured by a concern with the question of moral limit and possibility would lie somewhere between skepticism and the more utopian poles of critical theory.

Still, it is crucial to note that the ethical position that would follow from the analytics here is a contingent one, one in particular open to empirical challenge. If

\(^{57}\) Noting that biological phenomena are subject to no small change, even in relatively short terms for certain species, though meaningfully major changes in human biology typically manifest themselves over time horizons much more vast than to be of consequence for the immediacy of human agency and choice in resolving ethical dilemmas.
in fact, for example, humanitarian interventions can be shown to make things worse than plausible and actually existing alternatives (as opposed to implicit comparisons to counterfactual ideals), then cosmopolitans should be prepared to revise moral support for such an agenda. This is a most important point for the agenda outlined here, and it is the ethical corollary of the explanatory agnosticism of coming down where the evidence lays, which for many constructivists has translated into a rigorous and self-reflexive working methodology of carefully weighing alternative accounts against one another. This contingency, doubled by the potential social malleability of the world in which sometimes anything does seem to be possible, ought to make one modest in one’s claims, and underscore the necessary humility in one’s ethics, whether as practitioners and especially as observers.

Humility comes also from the proposition that moral progress almost invariably results not in simple resolution but rather comes at the price of creating new moral dilemmas. It comes further still from recognizing that the very processes diagnosed and implicitly heralded as avenues of moral progress in one context may have very different effects in another. Thus, the shaming techniques identified as so important for progress in human rights and other issues pushed by transnational advocacy networks may be regarded as inappropriate and likely to engender backlash in an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) context that trumpets an “Asian way” of consensus building and quiet diplomacy as opposed to confrontation.

Even more, humility is engendered by recognition that the standards people may uphold now, those same people would have run afoul of in the past. As Finnemore rightly points out, “citizens of the western states who are pushing these norms and doing most of the intervening were not able to “self-determine” without a great deal of violence, yet we now are expecting others to do so.”58 rarely reflecting on “what if” such standards had been applied to their own civil wars or the colonizing of indigenous peoples. Yet, for all these reasons for humility in one’s ethics, constructivism at the same time identifies otherwise neglected dimensions of ethical concern and provides additional rigor to ground one’s decisions to judge and act, and thereby navigate between the denials of realism and the paralysis or morally corrosive cynicism induced by at least some trajectories of critical approaches.

References


