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The Ethics of Constructivism 🔒

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Abstract and Keywords

Social constructivism has increasingly been seen as one of the chief theoretical contenders in contemporary scholarship in international relations. As a research program, one of its main substantive contributions to the field has been to show that moral norms — and thus ethics — matter in world politics. In this very agenda itself, constructivist scholars have embodied ethical commitments — at its most basic level this most often has been one of challenging realist scepticism concerning the possibilities for progressive moral change. Yet the plausibility of such ethical positions has typically been defended by constructivists on rigorous empirical terms — showing that human rights norms or norms of warfare can matter, for example — rather than on comparably rigorous normative grounds (that such norms are ethically desirable). This article briefly outlines the trajectory of the constructivist research programme, arguing that its development and responses to its critics have now led it — and its challengers — centrally to explicit engagement with ethical questions. It then considers the extent to which constructivism can be said to entail a distinctive ethic at all, and outlines its potential contributions to addressing global ethical challenges.

Keywords: international relations, social constructivism, ethics, world politics

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defended by constructivists on rigorous empirical terms—showing that human rights norms or norms of warfare can matter, for example—rather than on comparably rigorous normative grounds (that such norms are ethically desirable). In this chapter I briefly outline the trajectory of the constructivist research program, arguing that its development and responses to its critics have now led it—and its challengers—centrally to explicit engagement with ethical questions. I then consider the extent to which constructivism can be said to entail a distinctive ethic at all, and outline its potential contributions to addressing global ethical challenges.

1 Whence Constructivism and Ethics

Various ways of championing causes of moral progress have long been central to varieties of liberal and critical theories of international relations (as against their (p. 318) skeptical counterparts), even if there is hardly agreement on what would actually count as moral progress. And yet both broad camps have been the targets of persistent charges of utopianism from skeptics. Recent constructivist scholarship on the role of moral norms in international relations, I have argued elsewhere, has responded convincingly to such charges with careful empirical research that demonstrates the possibilities of moral change in world politics (Price 2003). Having successfully taken on the initial challenge of demonstrating that moral norms can matter in world politics, the constructivist agenda was pushed to a second generation of work by a comparativist/ methodological critique that demanded explanations for how and why some norms mattered in some places or sometimes, but not in others (Kowert and Legro 1996; Checkel 1998). This in turn led to a plethora of work crossing the boundaries of comparative politics and international relations seeking to account for the mechanisms of variation in compliance with systemic norms, citing factors such as cultural match, domestic interests, domestic institutions, and the like.

But while it has thus opened up convincing space for taking seriously the role of moral change in the study and practice of international relations, this literature for the most part has not offered its own explicit normative or prescriptive defenses of particular changes as good. Such positions are often left more implicit rather than defended with the same kind of rigor of systematically considering alternative explanations that is typically a hallmark of constructivist empirical work.[1] One might ask, then, upon what basis are such accounts of moral change, which are presumed to be desirable, to be accepted as in fact "good?" One person's cosmopolitan victory might be another's intolerable encroachment upon the prerogatives of a self-determining cultural community. While constructivist scholarship has typically sought to demonstrate the existence and importance of intersubjective, transcommunity (systemic) norms, there is

nothing in constructivism itself that inherently privileges cosmopolitan values over communitarian ones as always more just. The upshot is that empirically demonstrating, for example, that transnational activist networks have been successful in curtailing the practice of female genital cutting, by itself does not suffice to make the case that morally desirable change has occurred unless accompanied by a persuasive ethical defense that human rights ought to trump this particular cultural practice. While the challenge of having to offer a convincing defense of the ethical desirability of many international (p. 319) norms—such as the abolition of slavery, apartheid, ritual sacrifice, and the like— would not exactly keep too many constructivist scholars up at night, there are thus important grounds why more explicit engagement with the question of ethics is timely for the constructivist research program.

As well, it is hardly the case that all scholars who might be considered construc-tivists agree on the normative desirability of various developments in world politics, as evident in cases of humanitarian intervention such as practiced in Kosovo among numerous others. Indeed, while some constructivists have argued that a variety of critical theorists, post-structuralists, and constructivists can for certain purposes be considered under one broad tent (Price and Reus-Smit 1998), other constructivists (Adler 1997) and critical scholars like David Campbell (1998) have argued that they cannot. And it is often on substantive ethical questions such as the promotion of a zone of liberal democratic peace or the justifiability of purportedly humanitarian interventions that the divides have come to the fore between the frequent liberal/cosmopolitan cast of constructivism and the more skeptical versions of critical theory, feminism, and post-structural international relations, which tend to privilege relations of domination lurking behind the embrace of such projects. In short, one cannot claim that progressive moral change is possible in world politics solely by demonstrating empirically that normative change occurs, since this presupposes that it is unproblematically accepted that such change is indeed morally desirable; thus an account of its normative appeal is also required at some point.

Besides disagreements among constructivists, an accounting of the ethics of constructivism is called for as well given the normative nature of other contemporary challenges to constructivism. In response to a plethora of scholarly works demonstrating the importance of norms and the role of transnational advocacy networks in world politics for such developments as the Landmines Convention, and milestones in international criminal law including tribunals and the International Criminal Court (ICC), a conservative response has emerged to challenge the normative desirability of such erstwhile progressive developments (see, e.g., Anderson 2000; Snyder and Vinjamuri 2003–4). In order to respond adequately to critics who charge that constructivist research has been beset by a normative bias in favor of "good" norms that worked, scholars ultimately must turn to some form of normative defense. To be sure, this goes

both ways: Critics who make such charges can make them intelligible only on the basis of their own normative defenses of what qualifies as good or undesirable norms, or else the critique is incoherent. In either case—or better, for both reasons—normative theorizing is inescapable, and thus central to practice and intellectual discourse in international relations, even as professionally it has not been accorded pride of place in the American academy of international relations, which has been dominated by predictive and explanatory agendas that have largely excluded normative theorizing as the subjective terrain (p. 320) of "political theory," "normative theory," or philosophy.[2] All this has put the moral question front and center in mainstream international relations, and not just for constructivists, though that will be the focus here (see, e.g., Snyder 2003).[3]

2 Between Skepticism...

In short, the trajectory of the constructivist research agenda and responses to it have led it, among other things, to ethics. But does constructivism itself entail a substantive answer to the ethical question of "what we ought to do?" Or is it better thought of as an ethically neutral analytical tool to which one may harness different substantive ethical positions? 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 international relations as such (see Ruggie 1998; Wendt 1999). This position implies the understanding that constructivism is best understood as not itself constituting a normative position, nor constituting an ethical theory as such. Is this the case? I argue here that, while constructivism does not by itself entail full-fledged normative commitments of a sort of cosmopolitanism or communitarianism, it does lend strength to a position between skepticism and utopianism.

On the one hand, the understanding of constructivism's alleged agnosticism 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 we 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. Constructivism is also agnostic, which is to say equally compatible, with either solidarist or pluralist positions on how thick the rules of international (p. 321) society are and whether they pertain only between states or also among humanity. While it may be the case that, to

this point in the English-speaking academy of international relations, a predominantly "progressivist" cast has characterized much constructivist scholarship, on this reading there is nothing to preclude realist or other illiberal constructivisms, even if constructivism to date typically has not been harnessed to such perspectives (see Barkin 2003).

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 Robert Cox (1986). Indeed the analytic of constructivism does seem to foreclose key contentions of some substantive political theories, which inherently entail normative commitments. This is particularly the case with materialist theories, which would locate all the explanatory leverage we need 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, which as a matter of presumption discount the possibility of moral change across borders as enough of an anomaly that initiatives to those ends can be reliably dismissed as "unrealistic," though I would suggest that the relationship here is subtle.

By bringing in the centrality of power to the study of moral norms, constructivism implicitly acknowledges that the resolution of any genuine moral dilemma entails the trumping of some morally substantive visions of politics over others. The war over Kosovo involved (among numerous other things) the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's trumping of humanitarian rescue over Serbian claims of self-determination and autonomy. The dilemma between humanitarian intervention and norms of self-determination is illustrative of constructivism's relation to realist ethics. 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 (see Finnemore 2008). The dilemma we are now left with between these two international norms is not some timeless 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 systemic moral change, not the realm of recurrence and repetition. Constructivism's ontological granting of such developments distinguishes it crucially from important versions of realist skepticism. These dilemmas arise only if these moral norms are international social facts, which they have become. This would differentiate a constructivist ethic of moral possibility from a skepticism that would dismiss efforts toward agreement upon international moral standards as unrealistic, insofar as the analytical and ontological underpinnings of the former allows for more transcommunity

shared morality in world politics than skeptical or communitarian realisms would typically be willing to concede.

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This is not to say that there cannot be clashes between rival global moral visions and their sponsors, and thus realists who do take ideology, culture, and the like seriously (mostly classical realists) but see them as sources of conflict, repression, and injustice rather than the solution, can share some affinities with a constructivist emphasis on such social structures at least in that narrow sense. After all, critical constructivists point out the conflict-producing "othering" involved in establishing the liberal democratic peace or security communities, which, substantively speaking, is not too far from the logic of Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations (though, to be sure, constructivists would typically resist the latter's essentializing, among other things). Or, as Marc Lynch (2006) has put it, Osama Bin Laden is a social constructivist.

Besides acknowledging that international social structures may clash, constructivism, as Alexander Wendt has argued, can be agnostic on the content of those in-tersubjective social structures—they may be what a given constructivist herself may hold to be good, like the abolition of the slave trade, or bad, like the much longer-held acceptance of slavery itself. But where constructivist international relations differs from realist skepticism is not assigning the unrealizability of international moral goods including of the cosmopolitan kind as the unchanging lot of humanity or as solely the causes rather than solutions to repetitively dire problems. Progress as defined in humanitarian terms can be had, even if in achieving it new problems and conflicts in resolving them are produced by the inherent restructuring of moral standards of possibility and impossibility that moral change itself then makes possible. But, granting this form of ever-present moral conflict at the same time denies the presumption of skepticism that meaningful moral improvement in world politics can be presumptively dismissed as ontologically implausible or inherently ethically dangerous, as a project that "sounds nice but regrettably is not the world we live in."

3 ... and Utopianism

On the other hand, the ontology and strong empirical findings of much constructivist scholarship lends strength to a normative theoretical position that accords an essential place, not just for ethical possibilities, but also for the empirical limits of ethical ideals for ultimately assessing their legitimacy and thus rightness. That is, research programs that have shown how moral norms arise and have an impact on world politics ought to be well

placed to help us answer the ethical question of "what to do" insofar as it is accepted that a responsible answer to that question entails a response to the question of not just "what is just" in principle but also to (p. 323) some extent the question of "what might work" in practice. In that sense I would contend that constructivist scholarship in international relations on the limits and possibilities of moral change can provide a rigorous rejoinder to Immanuel Kant's rejection of the naturalist fallacy—that is, his rejection of the idea that the "ought" depends in a meaningful way upon the "is." Or, more generously, constructivism at least thrives in the small space for the "is" left open by Kant by his concession that duty requires one to enact the moral imperative unless it is demonstrably impossible to fulfill (Donaldson 1992). How do we know, constructivists might ask, what is possible or impossible morally in world politics in the absence of empirical assessments of the successes or failures of moral practice? Without presuming to deny Kantian or other idealisms to all constructivists, I would contend that, even as constructivism demonstrates the power of such idealisms in the real world, it simultaneously provides confident grounds for resisting the seductive critical skepticism born of the always available insistence of critical theory or utopianism (of the sort: "relations of power and domination are still there"/"more could have been done") at the expense of practically realizable ethics, even if it does not dictate abandonment of such critical or utopian outlooks. In short, I would argue that constructivism provides powerful grounds for an ethic that navigates between skepticism and the utopian poles of critical theory.

In response, critical scholars might respond that constructivism (or at least such a conception of constructivism) is too conservative; the celebration of what critical theorists might characterize as reformist gestures implicit in much constructivist scholarship could be condemned as an impediment to more fundamental change. Indeed, this is a challenge not easily dismissed by constructivists themselves: Given their findings on possibilities of moral action, does positing any limits for ethical possibility make sense? Implicitly or explicitly endorsing developments such as the generation of an international norm prohibiting the use of antipersonnel landmines or the creation of an ICC need not preclude what some might champion as more fundamental progressive changes such as the ending of war altogether. Indeed, until such larger international structures are in fact favorably altered, constructivists can point the way to forms of action that could claim to make a progressive difference, as opposed to falling short of much more ambitious comparisons to the ideal that, until their realization, do amount to failure. The critical position might counter that such reformist gestures simply facilitate the perpetuation of systems that are fundamentally unjust and that call for more revolutionary action. This is not an unreasonable position, particularly on constructivists' own terms, insofar as scholars documenting change and processes like learning in world politics have often emphasized the crucial importance of a "crisis" as a catalyst for major shifts. The ethical prescription that would follow is to foment the conditions for crisis

rather than abate them. But this is not obviously a stronger moral position to take than judging that, if one weighs demonstrable humanitarian gains (the same causes championed by critical theorists) against the failures of an ideal, let alone making (p. 324) things worse in the hopes of more fundamental change, then those gains come out pretty well, especially if they cannot be demonstrably shown to render impossible or even more unlikely further progress toward more fundamental change.

The resulting ethical stance would not reject but rather would be open to efforts to reach even further for the ideal. However, at the same time this stance would approach exasperation when such a disposition is not reciprocated; that is, when criticisms from that ideal point of view 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, a tact that fosters a deep cynicism that undercuts moral action. This is particularly so, since constructivist scholarship's major 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. Who, really, would have thought that the Helsinki accords, routinely disparaged in the 1970s in the West as an inconsequential sell-out to the Soviets, would prove to have sowed the seeds for revolutionary peaceful change in the Soviet bloc (see Thomas 2001)? Who in 1996 (let alone weeks before its occurrence in 1998) would have really thought that the idea of Britain arresting Augusto Pinochet for his role in torture in Chile was anything but the highest flight of fancy?

4 Conclusion

Still, it is crucial to note that the ultimate ethical position developed here, focusing upon implications of constructivism's ontology, is contingent and open to empirical challenge. If, in fact, for example, international criminal tribunals are more decisively shown to make things worse than plausible and actually existing alternatives, then a constructivist like Kathryn Sikkink (2008) who champions them now as worthwhile progressive developments would be prepared to revise her moral support for such tribunals. This is important, 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 our world in which sometimes anything does seem to be possible, ought to underscore the necessary humility in a constructivist ethic.

Humility comes also from the proposition that moral progress almost invariably does not result in simple resolution but rather comes at the price of creating new (p. 325) 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 or be accompanied by simultaneously deleterious developments. Thus, the shaming techniques identified as so important for progress in human rights and other issues pushed by transnational advocacy networks can be shown to 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 the historicist sensibility inherent to constructivism's focus on cultural context, which reminds us that the standards we may uphold now, we ourselves as individuals or as communities would have run afoul of in the past. As Martha Finnemore (2008) has argued, "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," rarely reflecting upon "what if" such standards had been applied to their own civil wars or the colonizing of indigenous peoples. And yet, for all these reasons that constructivism would counsel an ethic of humility, constructivism at the same time provides additional rigorous grounds to act and judge in the spaces between self-fulfilling skepticism and the practical paralysis of a critical reflex unable to acknowledge practical ethical progress.

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Notes:

(1) There are exceptions. Nicholas Wheeler (2000, 6) works from a position that takes the English School and constructivist approaches in international relations as occupying the same terrain, and offers a solidarist theory of humanitarian intervention grounded in his empirical analysis. Scholars working in the shadow of the English School tradition have tended to be less reticent than their North American colleagues in simultaneously working both the normative and the empirical terrain, though it would seem that a skepticism in American international relations that the empirical side of such work is sufficiently rigorous methodologically and theoretically has hampered the receptivity of such work.

(2) From a survey of what are widely regarded as 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 engag ing in normative as opposed to primarily explanatory analysis. In contrast, international relations scholarship in the UK has accorded a much more prominent place to normative theorizing. For early statements, see Brown (1992); Smith (1992). See also journals such as *Review of International Studies* and *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, where normative theory figures prominently.

(3) It is most interesting to note the recent normative turn in the work of Robert Keohane, one of the most prominent scholars of American international relations; see, e.g., Holzgrefe and Keohane (2003); Buchanan and Keohane (2004).

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