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Article

Images of a Statist Ethic in "Western" and Chinese IR Theory: Locating (and Deciphering) the "Moral Realism" of the Tsinghua Approach

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Abstract

In this article, we identify—and interrogate—one thematic thread that is intricately woven through prominent positions within classical realism, normative international relations (IR) theory, and what Zhang Feng (2012) has called Chinese IR's "Tsinghua approach." This thread is the often-controversial notion of a statist ethic for international politics or an ethical perspective that grants priority to one's state, fellow citizens, and the national interest. Positions within each of these theoretical traditions—what we label "egoistic realism" and "responsible realism" within the classical realist tradition, "communitarian realism" and "impartialist statism" within normative IR theory, and what others have described as "moral realism" within the Tsinghua approach—share a commitment to an ethical approach variously defined in terms of the protection of, and preference for, one's state and compatriots. We take this rich collection of positions, and the points of comparison that it affords, as an opportunity to better understand the possibilities and limits of a statist ethic for international politics. Specifically, we endeavour to illustrate four points: (1) that a morality defined in terms of the priority of the state, one's fellow citizens, and the national interest is neither impossible nor a contradiction in terms; (2) that such a perspective can constitute a sophisticated theoretical position; (3) that it can be conceived in radically different ways, including with respect to the source of value to which it appeals and who it deems to matter; and (4) that these differences have profound practical consequences. In terms of contributing to a conversation between Western and Chinese IR theory, this analysis helps us not only to explore how the "moral realism" of the Tsinghua approach relates to positions within classical realism and normative IR theory but also to evaluate the practical implications of its points of theoretical convergence and divergence.

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Introduction

A central challenge laid down at the workshop that led to this symposium was to uncover points of contact and divergence between so-called "Western approaches" to the discipline of international relations (IR) and what has been labelled (perhaps aspirationally) IR's "Chinese School." We are aware of the great diversity of theoretical approaches and methodologies encompassed by each of these proposed labels and acknowledge that the labels themselves are contested. Moreover, we remain agnostic as to whether the important contributions to IR theory made by our Chinese colleagues share the properties and distinguishing features that would constitute a "school" of thought.[1] Nevertheless, we wish to accept this challenge by identifying—and interrogating—one thematic thread that is intricately woven through prominent positions within classical realism, normative IR theory, and what we will follow Zhang Feng in calling Chinese IR's "Tsinghua approach."[2] This thread is the often-controversial notion of a statist ethic for international politics or an ethical perspective that grants priority to one's state, fellow citizens, and the national interest.

Positions within each of these theoretical traditions—what we will label "egoistic realism" and "responsible realism" within the classical realist tradition and "communitarian realism" and "impartialist statism" within normative IR theory, and what others have described as "moral realism" within the Tsinghua approach—share a commitment to an ethic variously defined in terms of the protection of and preference for one's state and compatriots. We will take this rich collection of positions, and the points of comparison that it affords, as an opportunity to better understand the possibilities and limits of a statist ethic for international politics. Specifically, we will endeavour to illustrate four points: (1) that a morality defined in terms of the priority of the state, one's fellow citizens, and the national interest is neither impossible nor a contradiction in terms; (2) that such a perspective can constitute a sophisticated theoretical position; (3) that it can be conceived in radically different ways, including with respect to the source of value to which it appeals and who it deems to matter; and (4) that these differences have profound practical consequences. In terms of contributing to a conversation between Western and Chinese IR theory, this analysis will help us to not only explore and illustrate how the "moral realism" of the Tsinghua approach relates to positions within classical realism and normative IR theory but also, importantly, to evaluate the practical implications of its points of theoretical convergence and divergence.

We will proceed through three steps. First, we will highlight common ground between classical realism, normative IR theory, and Chinese IR's Tsinghua approach in their shared commitment to ethical analysis. Second, we will present four images of a statist ethic inspired by positions within classical realism and normative IR theory. Finally, we will ask how the "moral realism" of the Tsinghua approach relates to these images—how it variously extends or challenges them and, indeed, whether it offers a unique, and coherent, fifth image of a statist ethic for IR.

Placing Ethics at the Heart of IR: Classical Realism, Normative IR Theory, and the Tsinghua Approach

Much of the discipline of IR has eschewed ethical analysis as a legitimate scholarly pursuit. By embracing the centrality of ethics to the study of international politics, classical realism,

[1] Both the existence of and need for a "Chinese School of IR" have been debated by Chinese scholars of IR. See, for example, Yaqing Qin, "Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?" *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2007), pp. 313–40; Yaqing Qin, "Chinese Theories of International Relations," in Yizhou Wang, ed., *The Transformation of China's Foreign Relations in Thirty Years* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2008), pp. 306–43; Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Daniel A. Bell and Sun Zhe, eds., Edmund Ryden, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), Appendix 3; and Xiao Ren, "Grown From Within: Building a Chinese School of International Relations," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 33, No. 3–4 (2020), pp. 386–412.

[2] Feng Zhang, "The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2012), pp. 73–102.

normative IR theory, and the Tsinghua approach already reveal important, if overlooked, common ground. Accompanying affinities between these three traditions can be found in their status at the margins of mainstream approaches and in the challenge that each provides to dominant methodological approaches within IR.

Classical Realism

To claim that "classical" (or "political") realism has an ethical dimension might seem to some a contradiction. However, this judgement is a product of two mischaracterisations—one of classical realism and the other of the nature of morality. First, there is a tendency to conflate classical realism's incisive critique of *moralism*—or the proselytization of morals—with a rejection of morality.[3] While realism cautions against the former, it has no issue with the latter. Indeed, as Hans Morgenthau asserts (in his six principles of realism), "[p]olitical realism is aware of the moral significance of political action."[4] Second, morality itself is often narrowly defined as necessarily entailing abstract reasoning, impartiality, and universality. Such a formulation is understandably seen to be incompatible with classical realism's commitment to prudence and practical judgement, its defence of the national interest, and its cautiously circumscribed moral claims. Yet, there are prominent ethical positions that are grounded in context and particularity, that defend variations on partiality (towards friends, family, or fellow citizens), and that even (albeit more controversially) advocate radical self-interest. As we will argue in the following section, the assumptions adopted by classical realism are compatible with recognised moral perspectives. Classical realism is, at its core, an IR tradition with a powerful and an unavoidable ethical dimension.

Classical realism is also aptly described as "a minority perspective in contemporary International Relations (IR) theory."[5] This might seem an odd claim given that "realism" has long been considered a dominant approach within the discipline of IR. However, there is a crucial distinction between "classical" realism—the realism that self-consciously emerged in the interwar and early-Cold-War periods (with no need for a distinguishing modifier)—and the rationalist, "structural" or "neo-" realism that eclipsed it and dominated the discipline from the 1980s. Some theorists, like Jack Donnelly, stress the continuity between these intellectual traditions and understand "realism" inclusively as a collection of dispositions that "share a family resemblance."[6] William Wohlforth concurs, categorising realism as "a large and complex tradition of statecraft and scholarship," which encompasses both "classical" and "neorealist" variations and is defined by the common propositions of "anarchy", "egoism", "groupism", and "power politics."[7] This inclusive account, however, ignores their distinct points of emphasis and methodological commitments. Neo-realism focuses on the international system, while the agency of the state and the individual human being hold the gaze of classical realism.[8] Whereas neo-realism foregrounds anarchy, or the

[3] Cecil A. J. Coady, *Messy Morality: The Challenge of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat, "Realism in Normative Political Theory," *Philosophy Compass*, Vol. 9, No. 10 (2014), pp. 689–701; Duncan Bell, "Realist Challenges," in Chris Brown and Robyn Eckersley, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 641–51.

[4] Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th Edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2005), p. 12.

[5] Jonathan Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), p. 1.

[6] Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 9.

[7] William C. Wohlforth, "Realism," in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 131–49, especially pp. 131, 133. See also Jack Donnelly, "The Ethics of Realism," in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 150–62.

[8] Kenneth N. Waltz highlights this point in his account of how neorealism breaks with realism in "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (1990), pp. 21–37, especially pp. 32–4.

absence of international government, classical realism tends to centre (biological, theological, or philosophical) conceptions of human nature. These respective points of emphasis are accompanied by stark methodological differences. Neo-realism, conceived amidst IR's "behavioural revolution," sought to provide a parsimonious theory of international politics that draws on microeconomics[9] and eschews classical realism's emphasis on history, ideas, ideology, and emotions.[10] These distinctions are particularly important for our purposes because it is precisely these features rejected by neo-realism that nurture classical realism's ethical dimension—and provide important links with both normative IR theory and (at least one dimension of) the Tsinghua approach.

Normative IR Theory

Identifying the centrality of ethics to normative IR theory is a less contentious endeavour. Also known as "international political theory (IPT)" and "international ethics," this sub-field is defined by its primary and explicit focus on the ethical dimension of international politics.[11] Drawing on a rich combination of concepts and concerns from political theory, moral philosophy, and other areas within IR, normative IR theory comprises work that embraces two distinct connotations of "normative." It includes research that seeks to describe and understand the role of morality in international politics (normative as "pertaining to norms and values") and scholarship that endeavours to ethically evaluate and prescribe its principles, practices, and policies (normative as "prescriptive").[12]

Like classical realism, normative IR theory can be understood to have something of a minority status within mainstream IR theory. This is perhaps unsurprising. Much of contemporary IR theory adheres to methodological commitments that support a stark distinction between facts and values and accepts only the former as legitimate objects of study. In contrast, for normative IR theory, the "facts" we study include the values that variously define who we are and guide our actions. While the once-dominant classical realism was eclipsed by its social scientific namesake, normative IR theory's somewhat marginal status has been the result of the endurance of the very positivist commitments within mainstream IR that motivated the emergence of this sub-field in the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, important qualifications to this description of "minority status" are in order. First, this status is geographically variable within Western IR. The sub-field has enjoyed a central role in British IR theory, for example, and currently flourishes in the Australian IR community.

[9] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1979).

[10] This list is extrapolated from Jonathan Kirshner, "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2012), pp. 53–75, especially p. 57: "[C]lassical realists…understand that state behavior is shaped by the lessons of history (right or wrong), ideas (accurate or not), ideology (good or bad), and that states make choices influenced by fear, vulnerability, and hubris, usually in the context of considerable uncertainty". Lamenting, in a similar vein, all that was lost in the changing of the realist guard—including an understanding of "politics and human nature"—Richard Ned Lebow advocates a return to the classical realism of Hans Morgenthau and maintains that "Kenneth Waltz and his disciples – purged his approach of its tensions and nuance in a misguided effort to construct a more scientific theory." See Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests, and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 217. Richard Ashley's cutting account of neo-realism similarly links its "poverty" to the selective silencing of key features of classical realism in the name of science: "Dispensing with the normatively laden metaphysics of fallen man, they [neo-realists] seemed to root realist power politics, including concepts of power and national interest, securely in the scientifically defensible terrain of objective necessity". See Richard K. Ashley, "The Poverty of Neorealism," *International Organization*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Spring 1984), pp. 225–86, especially p. 233.

[11] An introduction to this IR sub-field can be found in Toni Erskine, "Normative International Relations Theory," in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theories*, 5th Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 237–62.

[12] For accounts of these two dimensions of normative IR theory see Chris Brown, *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (New York, NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 3; and Toni Erskine, "Still Avoiding Armageddon: Neglected Antecedents and The Future Promise of Australian Normative IR Theory," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 6 (2021), pp. 619–36, 621.

These are contexts in which a "classical" or "traditional" approach to IR scholarship—"the approach to theorizing that derives from philosophy, history, and law, and that is characterised above all by explicit reliance upon the exercise of judgment"[13]—has never come under serious threat and the wave of "scientific" scholarship that swept North American IR in the 1950s and 1960s was largely observed from afar.[14] Moreover, normative IR theory has become more visible—and valued—within mainstream IR theory over the past 15 years as the contributions of ethical analyses to our understanding of international politics has been increasingly recognised.[15] Nevertheless, by taking moral norms and values as its subject matter, and often engaging in prescriptive and evaluative endeavours, it sits outside the discipline's still-dominant, American-centric, social scientific worldview.

The Tsinghua Approach

In common with classical realism and normative IR theory, the Tsinghua approach takes for granted both that the international is an inescapably moral domain and that engaging with this reality is important to understanding—and explaining—international politics. Also in line with the two traditions just introduced, the Tsinghua approach takes inspiration from political thinkers of the past.[16] If classical realism appeals to the works of, *inter alia*, Thucydides and Thomas Hobbes and normative IR theory harks back to, among others, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, and Aristotle, the Tsinghua approach embraces the political thought of the pre-Qin masters from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 BC), and, in particular, centres the thought of Xunzi.[17] Proponents of the Tsinghua approach abstract from these periods both criteria for normative evaluation and guidelines for what constitutes morally right action. The former can be seen, for example, in a schema that distinguishes broadly between "humane authority," "hegemony," "anemocracy," and "tyranny"[18]; instances of the latter are evident in the implicit prescription that China assume the role of a humane authority.[19]

Also like classical realism and normative IR theory, the Tsinghua approach sits somewhere at the margins of the broader still-Western-dominated discipline. Notably, the Tsinghua approach is a relative newcomer to IR. It takes its name from Tsinghua University in Beijing, China, where, in 2005, Yan Xuetong and other scholars in the Institute of Modern International Relations began research into pre-Qin interstate relations. Their contribution is still evolving. Yet, when it comes to the marginal status of the Tsinghua approach within mainstream IR theory, more significant than its relative youth, or degree

[13] Hedley Bull, "International Theory: The Case For a Classical Approach," *World Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1966), pp. 361–77, especially p. 361.

[14] Toni Erskine, "Whose Progress, Which Morals? Constructivism, Normative IR Theory and The Limits and Possibilities of Studying Ethics in World Politics," *International Theory*, Vol. 4 No. 3 (2012), pp. 449–68, especially pp. 459–60; Toni Erskine, "Still Avoiding Armageddon," p. 631.

[15] Signs of a turning point about 15 years ago include: the publication of *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, ed. by Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), in which every chapter on an IR theory or subfield is accompanied by corresponding chapter on its ethical underpinnings and implications; and the 2008 launch of the journal *International Theory* out of the Mershon Center at Ohio State University, which took normative IR theory/international political theory to be one of the three main pillars of "international theory".

[16] Notably, its debt to history and political philosophy and its commitment to addressing the ethical dimension of international politics also link it to the other two branches of Chinese IR, namely, *Tianxia*, or the "all under heaven" approach of Zhao Tingyang, and *zhongyong*, or the Chinese theory of relationality espoused by Yaqing Qin. See Zhao Tingyang, *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, trans. Joseph E. Harroff (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021) and Yaqing Qin, "A Relational Theory of World Politics," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2016), pp. 33–47. Indeed, all three approaches are unabashedly normative (in both senses defined earlier).

[17] See Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). See also Feng Zhang, "The Conception of Morality in Moral Realism," in Yan Xuetong and Fang Yuanyuan, eds., *The Essence of Interstate Leadership: Debating Moral Realism* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023), pp. 93–112.

[18] Yan, ibid., p. 40.

[19] See, for example, ibid., pp. 50–1. We return to this particular example in Part III of this article.

of compatibility with mainstream IR's self-identity as a social science, is the reality of Chinese IR's general neglect within the broader discipline. (This paper seeks to redress this neglect.) Indeed, the particular challenge that the Tsinghua approach poses to mainstream IR theory's methodological assumptions does not lie in a rejection of its social scientific commitments. Rather, it provocatively implies that these are perfectly compatible with a focus on moral norms, values, and ethical analysis. In seeking to enrich IR theory and draw policy lessons for China's rise, the Tsinghua approach evokes the pre-Qin era as a golden age and is inspired by its political philosophy. However, rather than adopting the "classical" methodological commitments that accompanied a focus on moral judgement in mid-twentieth century/post-World War II realism—and re-emerged in normative IR theory in the 1980s following what Steve Smith aptly called "a forty years' detour" into behavioralism[20]—the Tsinghua approach seeks to integrate normative lessons drawn from the work of the pre-Qin masters with a scientific method that emphasises "hypothesis testing, causal analysis, objectivity, and verifiability."[21] In one respect, this adherence to a scientific method is unsurprising. It demonstrates the influence both of Yan Xuetong's doctoral training in mainstream American IR at UC Berkeley and, more specifically, of Kenneth Waltz (whose classes Yan attended).[22] Yet, its pairing with a commitment to ethical analysis is startlingly unique. While the Tsinghua approach's embrace of history, political philosophy, and ethics shares much in common with classical realism and normative IR theory, its pioneering value-oriented scientific method represents a definite point of departure.[23]

Within this seemingly eclectic, still-emerging tradition, one finds a position that invokes the role and significance of a so-called "governmental morality" understood in terms of the "responsibility" that the government of the state owes "to the country it represents and the people it governs."[24] Indeed, this notion of governmental morality forms an integral component of a position that has been labelled "moral realism." First coined by Zhang to describe Yan's contribution to IR theory,[25] and now also used by Yan as a term of self-identification,[26] "moral realism" describes an "approach that combines the political determinism of Chinese traditional philosophy with modern realist theory of international relations."[27] Yan's intriguing vision of moral realism, with its emphasis on "governmental morality" as a morally attuned commitment to the national interest—along with the apparent assumption by some commentators that this combination of morality and key aspects of realism represents something of a novelty—has prompted us to revisit four significant examples of statist ethics within Western IR theory.[28] Our aim is both to demonstrate the disparate ways in which statist ethics can be conceived and to better understand the Tsinghua approach by exploring where it is located in relation to them.

[20] Steve Smith, "The Forty Years' Detour: The Resurgence of Normative Theory in International Relations," *Millennium*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1992), pp. 489–506.

[21] Zhang, "The Tsinghua Approach And The Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations," p. 74.

[22] We are grateful to Zhang (personal correspondence, 19 September 2022) for highlighting Waltz's influence on Yan. For a general account of Yan's time at Berkeley and how it led to his commitment to the scientific method, see Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, pp. 234–7, especially pp. 236–7.

[23] The Tsinghua approach's unique combination of history, philosophy, and science has been the subject of methodological critique. See, for instance, Kai He, "A Realist's Ideal Pursuit," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2012), pp. 183–97; Zhang, "The Conception of Morality in Moral Realism"; and Xu Jin and Sun Xuefeng, "The Tsinghua Approach And The Future Direction of Chinese International Relations," in Yongjin Zhang and Teng-Chi Chang, eds., *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations: Ongoing Debates and Sociological Realities*, Worlding beyond the West 9 (Milton Park: Routledge, 2016), pp. 162–176.

[24] Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, p. 9.

[25] Zhang, "The Tsinghua Approach And The Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations."

[26] Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*.

[27] Ibid., p. 215, note 4.

[28] For an example of this assumption of novelty, see Zhang, "The Tsinghua Approach And The Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations," p. 95.

Four Images of a Statist Ethic

We will proceed to paint four images of a statist ethic. While each represents a position that provides a moral justification for granting priority (at least contingently) to one's state, fellow citizens, and the national interest, these positions are grounded in often radically different ways, embrace divergent accounts of who (or what) ultimately matters, and concomitantly defend different paths to particular policies, including in response to crises. Each image is conceived as an ideal type, inspired by the sophisticated, nuanced works of theorists within classical realism and normative IR theory. It is important to note that while the theorists invoked below all offer insights and arguments in the context of specific writings that contribute directly to one of our proposed conceptions, the corpus of work attached to each theorist often refuses to be strictly bound within a single image. In other words, while these accounts of statist ethics draw on the particular positions of important scholars who theorise the international, ultimately, as they are depicted here, they are our constructions. Indeed, in creating these images, our aim here is not to categorise thinkers but, rather, to represent the key arguments and assumptions of what we identify as four compelling, coherent, and markedly different accounts of what a statist ethic can look like, extracted from positions within classical realism and normative IR theory. These images are intended as heuristic tools to better understand and compare the limits and possibilities of ethical perspectives that appeal to, and are somehow delimited by, the state. In the subsequent section, we will explore where the moral realism of the Tsinghua approach fits in relation to these ideal types—and whether it represents a coherent image that is distinct from them.

Before proceeding, a few points of conceptual clarification are in order. As we have alluded to, in comparing our proposed ideal types, we will ask how each perspective understands: (1) its "moral starting point";[29] (2) who counts; and (3) what these underlying assumptions mean for how particular policies and practices can be variously justified and carried out. By each perspective's "moral starting point," we mean, simply, the source of value and meaning upon which proponents draw to engage in ethical deliberation, make judgements, and perhaps prescribe particular courses of action. Here, two positions are especially important: ethical particularism and ethical universalism. Ethical particularism describes a position whereby one engages in moral reasoning from the perspective of one's own particular relationships, practices, and context. Ethical universalism, associated with an impartial point of view, describes a position according to which one stands apart from all local loyalties and affiliations when engaging in moral reasoning. In terms of "who counts," we ask specifically (and demandingly—we are interested in more than simply who warrants some degree of concern) who is granted *equal moral standing* according to each image, or whose moral worth is considered on par with the agent's own from this perspective. To use another phrase, we ask how each perspective portrays its "sphere of equal moral standing"—how far the realm of those considered fellow moral agents extends, and who is included within it.[30]

Our final point of comparison follows from our conviction that these moral premises inform how policies and practices can be coherently defended from each perspective, including in times of crisis. Importantly, we are not suggesting that each conception of a statist ethic necessarily leads to particular policy prescriptions. This is not the case. Rather, the underlying assumptions of each approach directly inform *how* particular courses of action can be decided and accounted for, deemed appropriate or perhaps imperative, and, in cases

[29] We borrow this phrase from Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd Edition (London: Duckworth, 1985 [1981]), p. 220. MacIntyre uses it to refer specifically to the "given" of one's life, or what imbues one's life with "its own particularity." However, we use it also to indicate the proposed source of value of perspectives that claim to be detached from all particular ties, loyalties, and social roles.

[30] Toni Erskine, *Embedded Cosmopolitanism: Duties to Strangers and Enemies in a World of "Dislocated Communities"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 15–23.

of extremity, permitted or excused. Although the *same* policy or response to crisis can be defended and justified (albeit differently) from distinct conceptions of a statist ethic, we suggest that the respective underlying moral assumptions of each constrain those who champion them in terms of how these policies are variously carried out, qualified, and affected by contingencies—and by setting the outer limits of what is considered possible (and defensible).

Egoistic Realism

What we call "egoistic realism" focuses singularly on preserving, advancing, and strengthening the interests of the state in an anarchic world. Variously associated with the logic of *raison d'état* and *realpolitik*, one might be tempted to describe this perspective as embodying an amoral—or even *immoral*—stance. Yet, in offering this as our first image of a statist ethic, we maintain that even this stark account of a particular disposition within classical realism, which focuses unapologetically on the self-interest of the state, can be understood to represent a coherent—if controversial—ethical perspective. In labelling this first image, we are invoking "ethical egoism," a recognised position within moral philosophy according to which the moral agent *ought* to act in such a way as to maximise the moral agent's own self-interest.[31] While this ethical perspective is generally understood with reference to individual human actors, we suggest that it can also be extended to describe a position that takes a corporate entity like the state to be the relevant agent of self-regard. Indeed, understanding a prominent variation on classical realism in terms of ethical egoism makes eminent sense for two reasons. First, classical realism—like other mainstream approaches within IR—presents the state as an agent in itself with sophisticated capacities for deliberation and action, or, in other words, as (at least implicitly) a moral agent.[32] Second, the history of classical realism—from the debate between the Scholastics and Humanists in the fourteenth and fifteenth century to the imagined debate between the idealists and realists thought to mark the birth of the discipline of IR in the early twentieth century—is characterised by the defence of the state as an end-in-itself, a legitimate moral pursuit in its own right, in need of no further philosophical or theological validation.[33] As Heinrich von Treitschke observed, the state is a "high moral good in itself."[34]

As a strictly self-interested perspective, egoistic realism's ultimate and exclusive source of value is the state itself—not all states, or the idea of the state, but, rather, the state with reference to which the perspective is invoked. Simply, egoistic realism adopts a radically particularist moral starting point. In terms of the scope of equal moral standing that it allows, positions associated with this image are straightforward: their singular focus on self-preservation leaves no room for genuine recognition of the moral standing of anyone

[31] See Richard Kraut, "Egoism and Altruism," in Edward Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 246–48; and Robert Shaver, "Egoism," in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021), Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/egoism/ (accessed 7 October 2022). Ethical egoism is distinct from both "psychological egoism," a descriptive form of egoism, and "rational egoism" another normative variation that prescribes actions because they are rational (as opposed to morally good or right). Significantly, when egoism is invoked in IR as a key characteristic of realism (for example, William C. Wohlforth, "Realism"; and Jack Donnelly, "The ethics of realism"), it is descriptive/psychological realism that is being referred to with respect to the individual human agent. Separately (and compatibly), we are arguing here that one prominent disposition within classical realism—often characterised as "immoral" or "amoral" *realpolitik*—exemplifies a corporate variation on egoism as a distinctively *ethical* perspective.

[32] Toni Erskine, "Assigning Responsibilities to Institutional Moral Agents: The Case of States and Quasi-States," *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2001), pp. 67–85, especially pp. 67–8; and Toni Erskine, "Locating Responsibility: The Problem of Moral Agency in International Relations," in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 699–707, especially p. 703.

[33] Richard Devetak, "'The Battle Is All There Is': Philosophy and History in International Relations Theory," *International Relations*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2017), pp. 261–8.

[34] Heinrich von Treitschke, *Politics* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1916), p. 54.

or anything beyond this state. This strict delimitation of "who counts," linked to the idea of the state as an end in itself, comes across clearly, for example, in Georg Schwarzenberger's depiction of power politics:

> Power politics signifies a type of relation between States in which… [e]ach group considers itself not as a means to a common end, but as an end in itself. At least for purposes of self-preservation, any measure required to achieve this object is considered to be justified.[35]

We qualified earlier that the egoistic realism leaves no room for "genuine" recognition of other agents. This distinction is important because, from an egoistic realist perspective, the pursuit of self-interest might require the state to cooperate with other states in a way that incidentally benefits other agents and mimics the acknowledgement of outward-looking duties. This matters profoundly for our third point of consideration: what egoistic realism's underlying assumptions mean for how particular policies and practices can be variously defended and carried out—and what limitations thereby accompany this perspective.

Giving absolute preference to the national interest is the default stance for this variation on a statist ethic. It leaves no room for degrees of concern beyond its borders and is not required to mediate between the interest of the state and the needs of those agents—states or individuals—beyond it. Simply, egoistic realism cannot support other-regarding justifications for action. Nevertheless, policies that involve international cooperation can arise from this stance, as long as the state's ultimate goal in supporting them is its own good. And, indeed, the existential threats of the early twenty-first century—nuclear weapons, COVID-19, climate chaos, and, arguably (according to some), the precarious evolution of artificial intelligence (AI)—provide compelling scenarios in which self-preservation demands acting in ways that involve effectively acknowledging, cooperating with, and (at least collaterally) protecting others. Simply, state survival requires collective action against apocalyptic global threats. Notably, from an egoistic realist perspective, such outward-looking gestures of cooperation and recognition are always conditional—and precarious. This has practical consequences. Not only are efforts at cooperation restricted to instances where the state will benefit, but such a stance risks undermining the requisite trust and commitment to meaningful reciprocity that other agents would bring to such interactions. Moreover, there is a danger that the blinkered worldview of egoistic realism would have difficulty discerning—and navigating—the increasingly significant reality of shared threats that are impervious to state boundaries and our necessarily common fate.

Communitarian Realism

A dichotomy between "communitarianism" and "cosmopolitanism"—presented as an analytical tool for understanding competing ethical approaches to international politics—gained prominence within the emerging field of normative IR theory in the 1990s.[36] Work that challenged and complicated this division followed; nevertheless, its value for understanding and organising assumptions underlying particular approaches endures. If ethical cosmopolitan positions (as they are generally understood) bracket, or abstract from, particular ties and loyalties to achieve an impartial point of view—one from which neither friends, nor family, nor fellow citizens count more than others—communitarianism represents a fiercely opposing stance. From a communitarian perspective, it is our membership in particular communities and participation in their practices that define who we are as

[35] Georg Schwarzenberger, *Power Politics: A Study of World Society*, 3rd Edition (London: Stevens & Sons, 1964), pp. 13–4. In what follows this statement, Schwarzenberger (p. 14) presents this stance as placing morality in a "relatively subordinate" position. We see it instead as representing a particular understanding of morality.

[36] See, for example, Brown, *International Relations Theory*.

moral agents. The communitarian side of this proposed divide within normative IR theory is associated with a position that treats the community and the state synonymously.[37] Apparent points of contact with some classical realist positions prompted one of us, in previous work, to refer to this state-centric perspective as "communitarian realism."[38] We will adopt this label here for our second image of a statist ethic within IR. A stark representation of this image can be found in a lecture by the political philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre on the "virtue" of loyalty to one's own state.[39] Variations on communitarian realism are also represented in vivid detail, and with greater nuance, in the nation-focused writings of David Miller and, at least intermittently, in the more hesitant (but, in cases of extremity, more confronting) reflections of Michael Walzer.

Like our first image, communitarian realism boasts a particularist moral starting point. The source of value to which its proponents appeal is situated within the state. Yet, unlike the crude state-as-self perspective of egoistic realism, communitarian realism appeals to the particular history, relationships, and practices of the community that underlies the state and defines the individual. The state-as-community matters because of the morally constitutive ties and traditions that it sustains. Miller sees the nation (which he equates with the state) as a "collective project that has been handed down from generation to generation."[40] Despite nations being large associations, he maintains that what links the members is "a set of shared understandings about what it is that they are members of and what distinguishes them from outsiders, and this is a strong enough link to create a relationship that can have genuine value."[41] In the words of Walzer, the "political community" is "a feature of our lived reality, a source of our identity and self-understanding."[42]

This moral starting point has implication for who matters, how much, and when. Communitarian realism does not (at least in its more nuanced forms) endorse the blanket disregard of those beyond the state that unapologetically characterises egoistic realism. Nevertheless, communitarian realism's belief in the intrinsic value of the state-as-community corresponds to both a commitment to its preservation and to the (albeit sometimes qualified) preferential treatment of its citizens. In his lecture on patriotism, MacIntyre maintains that the conviction that we are defined by our particular memberships, and the practices in which we participate, supports the view that loyalty to our own political community is a virtue.[43] For Walzer, "the survival and freedom of political communities – whose members share a way of life, developed by their ancestors, to be passed on to their children – are the highest values of international society."[44] In his sophisticated, carefully qualified, challenge to what he calls "strong cosmopolitan" approaches, Miller observes that the intrinsic

[37] This distinguishes it from its namesake in political philosophy, where the morally constitutive community need not be equated with the state. For a discussion, see Erskine, *Embedded Cosmopolitanism*, p. 119.

[38] Erskine, *Embedded Cosmopolitanism*, pp. 83–6.

[39] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism A Virtue?" in Ronald Beiner, ed., *Theorizing Citizenship*, SUNY series in political theory, Contemporary issues (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 209–28. Although MacIntyre does not defend this position as his own, but rather offers it as one possible (and admittedly extreme) characterisation of patriotism, it reflects many of his own communitarian commitments. Notably, however, elsewhere MacIntyre (like many so-called "communitarian" political theorists) distinguishes between the morally constitutive community and the state.

[40] David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 39. Although Miller writes about the value and bonds of the nation, it is clear that he is treating nations as political units. He also, for example, refers to the "governments of nations" (p. 48).

[41] Ibid., pp. 38–9.

[42] Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 49. Note that Walzer makes a conceptual distinction between the political community and the state in the arguments that we draw on here, even as he understands the two to be co-extensive.

[43] MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism A Virtue?".

[44] Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 2nd Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1992 [1977]), p. 254.

value of membership within the nation demands special responsibilities that stop at the borders of the nation-understood-as-state.[45] Simply, "nations are ethical communities whose members have special responsibilities both to support one another and to preserve their community."[46] He adds that this does not, of course, mean that we owe nothing to those outside the state. Yet he acknowledges that "[w]e should apply a weighting model, and think of partiality towards compatriots as a matter of giving their right-claims *greater* (although not absolute) weight when deciding how to use scarce resources."[47] His acknowledgement reveals the communitarian realist tendency to treat state borders as moral watersheds when resources are scarce or one's political community is under threat.

Communitarian realism's recognition of some responsibilities that extend beyond the state (in contrast to egoistic realism's complete inability to support other-regarding justifications for action) arguably makes more meaningful and enduring international cooperation possible—and in a wider range of scenarios—than is the case with egoistic realism. Nevertheless, communitarian realism can lead to startling conclusions in situations of crisis. These are represented particularly starkly in MacIntyre's depiction of patriotism as a virtue—in language that echoes Schwarzenberger's conclusions, if not quite his starting point—when the good of the state and its members conflicts with the well-being of those outside it:

> [E]verything that I have said on behalf of the morality of patriotism is compatible with it being the case that on occasion patriotism might require me to support and work for the success of some enterprise of my nation as crucial to its overall project, crucial perhaps to its survival, when the success of that enterprise would not be in the best interests of humankind…[48]

Although we present communitarian realism as another ideal image, intentionally painted with broad brush strokes and boldly represented by MacIntyre's characterisation of what he acknowledges is an extreme view of patriotic loyalty, it would be wrong to assume that more nuanced (and seemingly moderate) versions of this position somehow escape such stark conclusions in situations of extremity. Agonizing over the circumstances of a "supreme emergency," when the very survival of the political community is under threat, Walzer asks: "Can soldiers and statesmen override the rights of innocent people [outside their state] for the sake of their own political community?"[49] His response is surprising in light of his human rights-based arguments elsewhere in his deliberations over the ethics of war, but consistent with the assumptions underlying a communitarian realist stance: "I am inclined to answer affirmatively", he concedes, "although not without hesitation and worry."[50] Indeed, referring back to this conclusion, and after reiterating how political communities define us, Walzer observes that such "moral communities make great immoralities morally possible."[51] In cases of extremity, the political community must be protected—even at the cost of those agents beyond it.

[45] Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*.
[46] Ibid., p. 40.
[47] Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, p. 49. Emphasis added.
[48] MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism A Virtue?" p. 222.
[49] Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 254.
[50] Ibid., p. 254.
[51] Walzer, *Arguing About War*, p. 50. There is a subtle distinction between the extreme position arrived at in Walzer's variation on communitarian realism and the other two surveyed here. MacIntyre provides a moral premise for allowing preference for one's own state and fellow citizens to eclipse duties that we might have to fellow human beings in cases of crisis in "Is patriotism a virtue?". Our reading of Miller leads us to conclude that his position also allows this stance in extreme cases, although he is less willing to state it explicitly. As for Walzer, the intrinsic value of the political community under threat can lead to the apparently contradictory stance whereby harming innocent foreigners is not only imperative ("we cannot do anything else"), but also immoral ("a blasphemy against our deepest moral commitments"). See Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 262.

Impartialist Statism

A very different conception of a statist ethic, also drawn from positions within normative IR theory, is one that we will call "impartialist statism."[52] It provides yet another moral premise for granting priority to one's state and fellow citizens—one with a twist that is hinted at in its seemingly contradictory label. The positions that fall within this category of statist ethic are those explicitly "cosmopolitan" positions that aspire to impartiality and a universally inclusive moral purview—and therefore seem unlikely candidates to be championing an ethic that would grant priority to the state and fellow citizens. Yet, this pairing is possible. Impartialist statism defends prioritizing the state and one's fellow citizens because doing so is deemed to be either in the best interest of humankind, or a way of discharging the responsibilities that we have to everyone globally. For example, according to one "consequentialist" moral argument—according to which what is morally right constitutes the greatest balance of good over evil for everyone universally—prioritizing our fellow citizens provides a necessary global division of moral labour, which allows us most effectively to ensure that *everyone's* needs are met.[53] Robert Goodin refers to this variation on impartialist statism as an "assigned responsibility model."[54] Defending her own Stoicism-inspired cosmopolitan position against calls to patriotism, Martha Nussbaum offers a similar justification for, in some circumstances, providing special attention to particular others, including one's fellow citizens. With specific reference to "the nation-state," she observes that "[c]osmopolitans hold…that it is right to give the local an additional measure of concern."[55] Yet, she clarifies that "the primary reason a cosmopolitan should have for this is not that the local person is better per se, but rather that this is the only sensible way to do good".[56] "Politics, like child care", she maintains, "will be poorly done if each thinks herself equally responsible for all, rather than giving the immediate surroundings special attention and care."[57]

Variations on impartialist statism are very different from positions associated with the two images described above. They are not grounded in the intrinsic value of either the state or the community that is seen to underlie it. Disapproving of both self-interest and the partiality that would taint (its conception of) a moral perspective, impartialist statism

[52] "Communitarian realism" and "impartialist statism" do not exhaust the ethical approaches within normative IR theory that make important appeals to the state. The neo-Hegelian "constitutive theory" of Mervyn Frost and Chris Brown, as well as John Rawls' implicitly state-centric "law of peoples", for example, would also fit this broad description. See Mervyn Frost, *Ethics in International Relations: A Constitutive Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Chris Brown, "The Ethics of Political Restructuring in Europe: The Perspective of Constitutive Theory," in Chris Brown, ed., *Political Restructuring in Europe: Ethical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 159–81; and John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). However, the conceptions of statist ethics that we are surveying here depart from these other positions in that they provide a moral justification for (even contingently) *granting priority* to the state, one's fellow citizens, and the national interest.

[53] Robert E. Goodin, "What Is So Special About Our Fellow Countrymen?" *Ethics*, Vol. 98, No. 4 (1988), pp. 663–86. It is worth noting that consequentialism is structurally comparable to ethical egoism (discussed earlier). Both maintain that what is morally right is to maximize a certain good. (Indeed, Henry Sidgwick, who introduced "egoism" as a moral theory, drew a parallel between egoism and utilitarianism—the latter being a variety of consequentialism. See Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th Edition (London: Macmillan, 1907/1874).) However, for consequentialism, an act is morally right if it results in a greater balance of good over evil than alternatives *for everyone universally*. For ethical egoism, an act is morally right if it results in a greater balance of good over evil *for that agent only*. In short, consequentialism adopts an impartial point of view and necessarily assumes a universal sphere of equal moral standing, whereas ethical egoism defends radical self-interest and a sphere of equal moral standing that cannot extend beyond the self. Classical realist positions are often—misleadingly—described as being aligned with a consequentialist ethic. A more accurate description of the ethical stance of some movements within classical realism, as we have argued, is a corporate variation on ethical egoism.

[54] Goodin, "What Is So Special About Our Fellow Countrymen?" p. 678.

[55] Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, Joshua Cohen, ed., (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 135–6.

[56] Nussbaum, *For Love of Country*, p. 136.

[57] Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," *Boston Review*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (1994), pp. 3–16, especially p. 6.

adopts a universalist moral starting point that is above and beyond particular ties and loyalties. The state, by this account, can only have instrumental value. Moreover, this starting point is linked to an inclusive sphere of equal moral standing. By bracketing, or abstracting from, particular ties and loyalties, one is understood to achieve an impartial point of view from which no one is excluded—and one's own state, fellow citizens, and national interest can count for no more than others'. Political borders cannot demarcate a class of "outsiders" either completely beyond concern (as with egoistic realism) or with precariously reduced moral standing and vulnerable to, albeit regretful, sacrifice in times of scarcity and threat (like communitarian realism). That one owes special treatment to one's compatriots is deemed straightforwardly derivative from the duties that one has to everyone everywhere. For Goodin, "[w]hat justifies states in pressing the particular claims of their own citizens is…the presumption that everyone has been assigned an advocate/protector."[58]

This image could be criticised for ignoring inadequacies in the international political system and defending the status quo as the "best we can do." Yet this would miss the critical potential of this image. And this is where another distinguishing feature of this image comes in. Namely, the preferential commitment to one's state and fellow citizens is merely *contingent* for impartialist statism. Priority can be granted to one's state and fellow citizens only provisionally. Unlike the previous image, for which scarcity and crisis shore up, and take to its logical extreme, the preference granted to compatriots, the state, and the national interest, for impartialist statism, extreme cases cause such preference to break down. As Goodin explains: "If special duties can be shown to derive the whole of their moral force from their connection to general duties, then they are susceptible to being overridden (at least at the margins, or in exceptional circumstances) by those more general considerations."[59] This point is profoundly important when it comes to the practical implications of this proposed image. It is not only the case that its state-centric focus loses its unique moral defence if this focus no longer serves a larger, global good—although this certainly is the case. More profoundly (and in a move to which Goodin alludes), the commitment to general duties that ultimately underlies this statist ethic carries critical force when it comes to potentially reallocating the distribution of resources, not to mention rethinking international boundaries.[60] In other words, taken to its logical, critical conclusion, we can see in this image of a statist ethic a glimmer of a reformist spark. This is a feature that it shares with our fourth image of a statist ethic, drawn from what is perhaps an unexpected source: classical realism.

Responsible Realism

If egoistic realism is at once an accurate reflection of particular arguments within classical realism, and a common caricature that sidesteps more sophisticated accounts of ethical commitments also apparent within the broader tradition, our fourth image of a statist ethic serves to reveal these often-overlooked, alternative accounts. What we label "responsible realism" aligns with, and pays tribute to, the important "reinterpretive" studies of classical realism by Joel Rosenthal, Richard Ned Lebow, Michael Williams, and William Scheuerman, which retrieve a nuanced, explicitly ethical, strikingly progressive, and surprisingly universalist tradition of thought.[61] Tracing distinct theoretical veins within the broader tradition allows one to extract a statist ethics that is very different from—and arguably in

[58] Goodin, "What Is So Special About Our Fellow Countrymen?" p. 684.
[59] Ibid., p. 679.
[60] Ibid., p. 685.
[61] These theorists offer accounts of what they call, respectively, "righteous realism"; "recaptured" and "reconstructed" classical realism; "wilful realism"; and "progressive realism". See Joel H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists: Political Realism, Responsible Power, and American Culture in the Nuclear Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991); Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*; Michael C. Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and William E. Scheuerman, *The Realist Case for Global Reform* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011). In Williams' evocative description, there is "another Realism within the existing 'tradition'" (*The*

tension with—egoistic realism. Indeed, Reinhold Niebuhr seems to caution against our first image of a statist ethic when he warns that "[a] realism becomes morally cynical or nihilistic when it assumes that the [egoistic] universal characteristic in human behaviour must also be regarded as normative."[62]

Responsible realism differs in fundamental respects from both egoistic realism and communitarian realism while surprisingly—if one heeds common perceptions of realist thought—revealing some affinities with our third image of impartialist statism. Whereas our first two images locate the source of value in the state and the political community that underlies it, respectively, responsible realism embraces a moral starting point that is explicitly universalist. This is exemplified by Hans Morgenthau's acknowledgement of a "transcendent standard of ethics"[63] and his claim that "there is one moral code…which is something objective that is to be discovered."[64] To be sure, responsible realism cautions against claims to universal moral truth. However, the object of concern is a parochialism that would merely masquerade as universalism and identify "the moral aspiration of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe…"[65] In other words, what responsible realists find problematic is not the existence of universal truths as such but the *hubris* of claiming to know or realise them. Despite its underlying universalism, responsible realism therefore embodies a statist ethic because it *pragmatically delimits* the scope of its moral claims and the espoused validity of its own commitments. This is a function of an attempt to reconcile its commitment to moral universalism, on the one hand, with the reality of the constraints of nature and circumstance, on the other. In terms of its sphere of equal moral standing, in line with its universalist moral starting point (and again in contrast with our first two images, but boldly displaying points of commonality with our third), responsible realism recognises the existence of "universal and unlimited moral obligation."[66] What arises from these moral premises and pragmatic manoeuvres is a stance purposively calibrated to the interests of the state, which nevertheless retains a moral purview that extends beyond its horizon in a significant sense: its underlying sphere of equal moral standing (supported by a universalist moral starting point), ultimately encompasses all human beings globally.

These distinctions are crucially important when it comes to addressing how responsible realism would arrive at and defend particular policies—and respond to extremity. For responsible realism, the existence of universal moral principles constitute both an ethical limit to what can be defended in the name of the state and an invitation to reconceive the interests of the citizen, nation, and state in terms of "mutualities in a community of nations."[67] Indeed, the underlying commitment of responsible realism to both a universalist moral starting point and an inclusive sphere of equal moral standing is arguably most apparent in its calls for the cultivation of a world community and supranational authority specifically to counter the existential threat of a world with nuclear weapons.[68] As Morgenthau put it:

Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations, p. 4), one that requires "recovery" (p. 9) and "a reinterpretive study" (p. 14).

[62] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (edited by Robert McAfee Brown) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 130.

[63] Hans Morgenthau, "The Political Science of E. H. Carr," *World Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1948), pp. 127–34, especially p. 134.

[64] Hans Morgenthau, *Human Rights & Foreign Policy* (New York: Council on Religion & International Affairs, 1979), p. 10.

[65] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, p. 12.

[66] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 155.

[67] Reinhold Niebuhr, cited in Robert C. Good, "The National Interest and Political Realism: Niebuhr's 'debate' with Morgenthau and Kennan," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 22 No. 4 (1960), pp. 597–619, especially p. 605.

[68] See, for example, Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*; also, Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939–1950* (Princeton: Princeton

> The experience of two world wars within a quarter of a century and the prospect of a third one to be fought with nuclear weapons have imparted to the idea of a world state an unprecedented urgency. What is needed, so the argument runs, in order to save the world from self-destruction is not limitation of the exercise of national sovereignty through international obligations and institutions but the transference of the sovereignities of individual nations to a world authority, which would be as sovereign over the individual nations as the individual nations are sovereign within their respective territories. Reforms within the international society have failed and were bound to fail. What is needed, then, is a radical transformation of the existing international society of sovereign nations into a supranational community of individuals.[69]

Yet, this reformist spark is tempered by a certain pragmatism informed by recognition of constraints imposed by human nature. Opting for a position that neither settles for the *status quo* nor immediately abandons the nation-state as defunct, responsible realism envisages the possibility of a world community, which it claims ought to "ante-date a world state."[70] In times of crisis, responsible realism possesses the theoretical tools and moral motivation to move beyond mere self-interested and superficial cooperation and reconceive the state (and national interest) to act in the interests of humanity.

If these four diverse images of a statist ethic can be drawn from Western IR's classical realism and normative IR theory, where does the moral realism of the Tsinghua approach fit in relation to them? Does it offer a coherent statist ethic in its own right? And, how can it contribute to our understanding of the possibilities and limits of statist ethics in IR?

A Fifth Image? Deciphering the "Moral Realism" of the Tsinghua Approach

"Moral realism" is the lynchpin in Yan's systematic account of power transition. It is also implicitly his articulation of a statist ethic. Indeed, Yan's project, which seeks to explain how "dominance is achieved mainly by morally informed political leadership rather than economic or military power,"[71] offers a mode of theorising that centres what he calls "governmental morality" in causal explanations of the rise and decline of Great Powers. Further, this moral realism is underpinned by a set of assumptions about what constitutes moral action on the global stage. In what follows, we interrogate Yan's espousal of moral realism, asking (as we did of each image in the previous section) how he understands its source of value, who counts from this perspective, and what these underlying assumptions mean for how particular policies and practices can be variously justified and carried out.

Examining the source, scope, and practical implications of the statist ethic that underlies moral realism is profoundly important. However, as Yan claims to be offering an *explanatory theory*, a sceptic might object that interrogating the ethical assumptions underlying his position in this way fails to engage with Yan on his own terms. There are two powerful responses to this potential objection. First, Yan has made the ethical dimension of his moral realism central to his explanatory project. The assumptions that he makes about the statist ethic that underlies moral realism cannot be simply set aside if one is to understand, and assess, his overall theory. Sidestepping the difficult questions about how best to define its moral premises, how they hang together, and what they mean in practice would ignore a

University Press, 2017); and Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[69] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nation*, pp. 505–6.

[70] Ibid., p. 521.

[71] Daniel A. Bell, "Introduction," in Daniel A. Bell and Sun Zhe, eds., *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (The Princeton-China Series. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 1–18, especially p. 3.

crucial part of this proposed position and make it impossible to hold any of it up to critical scrutiny. Indeed, we propose that the robustness of Yan's explanatory theory is tethered to the soundness of the statist ethic that underpins it. Second, and separately, it is simply not the case that Yan's moral realism aims to be exclusively explanatory. As Zhang rightly observes, Yan "has in fact theorized in a normative as well as explanatory manner."[72] While it is true the Yan engages in discussions of international norms and their effects in his book—thereby embracing a normative dimension to his work in terms of its subject matter, in a way that serves descriptive and explanatory aims—here Zhang is referring to "normative" in the prescriptive sense. As we suggested above, Yan's moral realism aspires not only to explain "what is" and "why" (in accordance with his espoused "scientific positivism") but also to set out "what ought to be" and (in guidance directed specifically at China) "what should be done"—prescriptions that are themselves linked to particular evaluations of what constitutes right and good action. This takes moral realism far beyond mere explanatory objectives. We suggest that these evaluative and prescriptive claims provide important clues to understanding the statist ethic that underlies moral realism. These clues are important because the moral premises of this ethic are often taken for granted rather than explicitly stated or defended and are not always, we suggest, presented in a way that is consistent or internally coherent.

This ambiguity in the statist ethic underlying moral realism (as it has been articulated to date) leads to different possible interpretations of what it entails. Simply, the many claims, allusions, and gestures within Yan's moral realism that we can appeal to in order to locate the statist ethic that underlies it ultimately leads us in different directions. Indeed, our attempts to decipher the moral starting point and account of who matters in Yan's espoused position, as well as the practical consequences of these assumptions, lead to (at least) two understandings of the statist ethic upon which moral realism rests. In this section, we identify two possibilities in turn (uncovered with reference to the images above), along with the aspects of Yan's account of moral realism that appear to support them. We then reflect on what these divergent interpretations mean for the further development of the moral realism of the Tsinghua approach and its capacity to offer a unique—and coherent—image of a statist ethic.

An Egoistic Ethic of the Chinese State?

Diverse claims to the universal nature of morality decorate Yan's account of moral realism. Yet, these could be conceived as contributing to no more than a misleading façade of ethical platitudes behind which lies a very different set of commitments. In the four images of a statist ethic sketched above, we drew on various theorists' accounts of their moral starting points and spheres of equal moral standing, and then reflected on what these mean for how they can—and do—defend particular practices and policies. These diverse images help to illustrate an important insight: namely, the limits and possibilities for defending particular courses of action are tied directly to the moral premises that one invokes. Given the ambiguity surrounding Yan's position—again, he seems to make contradictory claims at different points in his work—one way to uncover these underlying assumptions is to work backwards, so to speak. In other words, one might try to interpret what moral realism is actually committed to in terms of its moral premises with reference to what Yan endorses and prescribes in practice. We will suggest that this means of deciphering the nature of the statist ethic underlying moral realism reveals a variation on *ethical particularism*—one with arguably worrying implications if taken to its logical conclusion.

For Yan, "humane authority," which rests on the morality of the leading state, is judged to be the preferred form of global power. At various points throughout Yan's account of moral realism it is clear that it is specifically China that should strive for, and is capable of

[72] Zhang, "The Tsinghua Approach And The Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations," p. 96.

achieving, this variation on hegemonic power. Yan is explicit that his "purpose in studying pre-Qin interstate political thought is… to draw lessons for the present, especially for the great task of China's rise."[73] Moreover, he presents this body of work as an "aid to reflecting on how to implement China's rise and to ask what kind of rising state it is to be."[74] Indeed, at particular points in Yan's argument, his aim is explicitly to take lessons from the past to reveal how China can replace the United States as the "world's leading state."[75] Such moves prompt Zhang to lament that moral realism "imbues an undeniable statism and great power mentality, and even sort of hegemonism, in unashamedly advocating and in places assuming Chinese hegemony in international politics."[76] This preference for China and apparent desire for its predominance, which come across in passages focusing on policy prescriptions arising from moral realism, suggest that the moral starting point of this approach is located in the Chinese state and, moreover, that the sphere of equal moral standing that this approach thereby supports is qualified, if not delimited, by its borders. Arguably, such a curtailed sphere of equal moral standing is also revealed in the subtle suggestion (expressed through Yan's account of Guanzi's philosophy) that the "humane authority" that Yan associates with China's potential relies on "moral ability" and comes from a "superior moral status."[77] In addition, and not incidentally, the nationalism and patriotic sentiment that Yan explicitly acknowledges influenced both his return to China after his studies in the United States and his scholarship are consistent with such an inclination toward a particularist, and statist, moral perspective.[78] Like MacIntyre, Yan sees patriotism as a virtue. This reading of moral realism's source of value and sphere of equal moral standing places this approach alongside both egoistic realism and communitarian realism in embracing a particularistic ethic that recognises intrinsic value in the state. Indeed, if egoistic realism locates its source of value unapologetically in the state-as-corporate-self, and communitarian realism sees its source of value as the state understood as the morally constitutive community, then moral realism, by this interpretation, understands its source of value, simply, as the state conceived as an ascending (and ordained) China.

In comparing moral realism to our first image of a statist ethic, one might note that the benevolent hegemony that Yan advocates China aspiring to seems to suggest an altruism of which egoistic realism is incapable. Yet, we would do well to remember that egoistic realism allows the recognition of others for instrumental reasons. And here Yan's repeated reference to instrumentality is significant. Indeed, a stark logic of instrumentality is laid bare in Yan's discussion of the historical merits of humane authority:

> As far back as antiquity, whenever China rose to a leading position in East Asia, a debate arose among high-ranking officials in the royal court and ordinary scholars too about the contrasting ruling principles of humane authority and hegemony. Starting out from the belief that humans are self-interested, the principle of humane authority encourages China's rulers to adopt a benevolent foreign policy toward their weaker neighbors in the expectation that recipients of said benevolence will express gratitude for the benefits provided by following such leadership.[79]

A benevolent foreign policy, by this account, does not rely on altruism. Indeed, Yan explicitly understands morality as being in the service of the state "making strategic decisions on

[73] Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, p. 203.
[74] Ibid., p. 216.
[75] Ibid., p. 65.
[76] Zhang, "The Tsinghua Approach And The Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations," p. 97.
[77] Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, p. 48.
[78] Ibid., pp. 237, 245–56.
[79] Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, p. 48.

how to achieve interest maximization."[80] As Acharya observes, Yan "sees certain types of morality and ethics as a *necessary tool* for managing global anarchy and the rise of China."[81] If Yan's moral realism advocates that a benevolent foreign policy be adopted in order to ensure the rise of one preferred (and inherently worthy) Great Power, then moral realism seems compatible with our image of egoistic realism.

Such an interpretation of moral realism as a position compatible with egoistic realism, whereby the exalted state-as-self is a rising China, might, of course, raise concerns—and not only about the implications of this statist ethic, but also regarding whether important aspects of Yan's intended position are vulnerable to being overlooked or misread. It is exactly this potential misreading that concerns Zhang. He cautions that moral realism might be "misused and abused" and "produce a dangerous ideology of power politics with moral trappings."[82] More specifically, he warns that Yan's "Xunzi-derived argument risks being seen as promoting a *Chinese* model of post-imperial hierarchic international politics for *China's* hegemony."[83] Rather than simply explaining why some states succeed in achieving their goal of becoming hegemon, moral realism can also be read as embodying an ethic that unapologetically elevates and promotes the interests of a particular state, namely China. Admittedly, however, this is not the only possible interpretation of the statist ethic underlying moral realism—and, notably, it is one that is at odds with other aspects of Yan's position.

Aspirations to a Universalist Ethic

If we take Yan's claims to the universal nature of morality seriously, it is possible that his project espouses another, albeit less clearly articulated, statist ethic. This reading requires us to foreground Yan's allusions to a universalist source and scope of morality, on the one hand, and his methodological commitments, on the other.

References to a universalist moral starting point are interspersed throughout Yan's works. A prominent example is his claim that according to the theory of moral realism,

> [w]hen the state's actions accord with universally accepted codes it is deemed moral, and when the reverse is true, it is deemed immoral. Thus, determining whether or not the action of a state is moral entails an assessment of that action according to universally accepted codes.[84]

Similarly, this universalism is implicit in his assertion that international moral codes like the Geneva Conventions, or international institutions like the UN are possible "because morality is built on shared moral foundations."[85] Moreover, in response to the question of "who counts", Yan can be understood as espousing a statist ethic that is other-regarding. This other-regarding ethic is evident in the moral ends Yan seemingly espouses for responsible state practice: "[a]lthough even this type of leadership [humane authority] cannot guarantee a more desirable world, I nevertheless believe it would offer the best chance of a world more peaceful than it is today."[86] Taken together, elements of Yan's work are arguably compatible with a vision of morality that is at once universalist in its source and scope.

[80] Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, p. 7.

[81] Amitav Acharya, "From Heaven to Earth: 'Cultural Idealism' and 'Moral Realism' as Chinese Contributions to Global International Relations," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2019), pp. 467–94, especially p. 471. Emphasis added.

[82] Zhang, "The Tsinghua Approach And The Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations," p. 97.

[83] Ibid., p. 90. Emphasis added.

[84] Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, p. 7.

[85] Ibid., p. 10.

[86] Ibid., p. 206.

As readers will recall, universalist moral commitments animate two statist ethics that we previously delineated: impartialist statism and responsible realism. In both constructions, the state is of instrumental rather than intrinsic value, embraced for its pragmatic promise. Nonetheless, a key difference distinguishes one stance from the other. Impartialist statism embraces the state as an efficient means of discharging responsibilities to all globally. Responsible realism, however, sees the state as a safeguard against epistemic *hubris* and (ironically) the propensity to and pervasiveness of unenlightened self-interest in international relations. To read Yan's work is to encounter invocations of Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, E.H. Carr, and George Kennan, and their endorsement of a position that places responsible moral action at the heart of foreign policy. His work is also replete with references to the need to reckon with the reality of self-interest and remain cautious about *hubris*. This would suggest some affinities with "responsible realism". Yet, at no juncture do we encounter in Yan's work the same reformist spark that characterises both responsible realism and impartialist statism. Instead, Yan holds fast to the indispensability of the state.

Despite apparent affinities with aspects of our images of a statist ethic, ambiguities abound. First, it is unclear what value Yan attaches to the state. Does it have intrinsic or instrumental value? If we assume that the state has only instrumental value, what is the state a means to achieving? While Yan's emphasis on world peace would suggest universalist goals, as we earlier noted, this is somewhat complicated by Yan's particularist preoccupation with China. Relatedly, it is never quite clear why Yan advocates moral state action. Is it pursued as an end-in-itself or because it is a means to guaranteeing power transition, or the hegemony of China? His repeated references to "instrumentality" complicate this. Any endorsement of nationalist, power-seeking behaviour is entirely at odds with impartialism, on the one hand, and responsible realism's historical critique of nationalism and imperialism, on the other. One is reminded of Reinhold Niebuhr's admonition in *The Irony of American History* that Manifest Destiny was simply a form of American imperialism and a will-to-power.[87]

Yan's ambitious methodological commitments further complicate rather than clarify his stance. To be clear, Yan makes two methodological contributions of great promise. First, he underscores how pre-Qin Chinese political thought is an important site of international theorising. This emphasis can be understood as both complementing and critiquing classical realism (and indeed normative IR theory), which, with a few rare exceptions, has turned to Western sources to make universalist proclamations about human nature.[88] Yan's turn to pre-Qin thought, in addition, makes important inroads to the flourishing field of global International Relations. While this work has hitherto treated cultures as closed containers concomitant with a kind of particularism,[89] Yan's bold universalist claims serve as an invitation to rethink the relationship between the universal and the particular.[90] Second, Yan's "moral realism" offers an important provocation about where genuine methodological limitations end and self-imposed constraints and inhibitions—borne of disciplinary expectations, artificial divisions, and internalised biases—begin. He does this by destabilising the divide between normative theory and science, which, since IR's behavioralist revolution, have each perceived the other as a threat to its own scholarly aims. While Yan's seemingly

[87] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 35–6.

[88] Acharya, "From Heaven to Earth." For an exception to this, see Valerie Morkevičius, *Realist Ethics: Just War Traditions as Power Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[89] Liane Hartnett, "Love Is Worldmaking: Reading Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* as International Theory," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac037.

[90] The relationship between the universal and the particular and the question of whether they can be reconciled has long been the subject of much debate in philosophy. Some attempts to reconcile this include Hegel's notion of the *Geist* [see Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975)] and the Indic notion of Advaita [see Deepshikha Shahi and Gennaro Ascione, "Rethinking the Absence of Post-Western International Relations Theory in India: 'Advaitic Monism' as An Alternative Epistemological Resource," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2016), pp. 313–34].

cavalier combination of elements of a classical approach to the study of the international, a focus on morality, *and* an explicit aspiration to a scientific methodology mirrors inconsistencies in what is an ambitious, wide-ranging, and sometimes internally contradictory work, he nonetheless invites us to consider if and how social scientific methodologies and philosophical enquiry can be brought together to address ethical questions.

Yet, for all the great promise of Yan's endeavour, the peril lies in its execution. His very conceptualisation of morality exemplifies this. Yan is keen to emphasise that self-interest in implicated in the norm-cycle, implying that power plays a vital role in which norms are adopted.[91] Elsewhere, he notes the great diversity which inheres within pre-Qin philosophy, detailing how seven of its key thinkers embraced distinct moral premises.[92] These claims about a contested morality sit ill at ease with his argument elsewhere that morality is self-evident, beyond the realm of contestation. Hence, he concludes that "universal morality…is accepted by all members, even adversaries, of a given international system,"[93] and that determining whether an action is moral or not simply entails "giving yes or no answers to questions….If there are more 'yes' than 'no' answers, then the action is moral; if 'no' is the predominant answer, then the action is not moral."[94] Although this latter conception of morality may lend itself to Yan's scientific method, it is ultimately one-dimensional. Not only does it evade the multiplicity and contestation that is at the heart of normative thought, but it also serves to obfuscate Yan's moral premises.

Conclusion

Identifying and comparing overlapping—and overlooked—conceptions of a statist ethic in classical realism, normative IR theory, and the Tsinghua approach reveal how all three traditions variously place ethics at the heart of their study of international relations. This exercise has also uncovered the different ways that particular positions within these traditions conceive and prescribe moral action in terms of the priority of one's state, one's fellow citizens, and the national interest. These traditions demonstrate plural possibilities for a statist ethic, including the "egoistic" and "responsible" variations on realism inspired by positions within classical realist thought, and the "communitarian realist" and "impartialist statist" stances that we have constructed from positions within normative IR theory. Ultimately, what distinguishes each ideal image of a statist ethic is its unique constellation of underlying assumptions: its conception of the source of value, who is thereby deemed to matter, and what these premises mean, in turn, for how it can defend a particular policy or course of action.

The Tsinghua approach contains great promise and potential for methodological and theoretical innovation. The nature of this innovation, however, is occluded by apparent inconsistencies within Yan's works, particularly with reference to his account of "moral realism." Our quest to conceive the contours of the statist ethic espoused within the Tsinghua approach, then, had to end in conjecture. In his account of moral realism, Yan rightly maintains that morality matters and plays a vital role in how we understand, explain, and even prescribe political action. Yet, it is not adequate to simply say that morality matters. Instead, it is imperative to recognise that one necessarily invokes specific moral premises (which define the limits of the policies and practices that one can defend) and must provide some account of what these are (and how they cohere to create an internally consistent position). As our schema suggests, moral premises matter not simply because they determine

[91] Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, pp. 67–70.
[92] Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, chapter 1.
[93] Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, p. 9.
[94] Ibid., p. 7.

where we go but also how we get there. Egoistic realism, communitarian realism, impartialist statism, and responsible realism may all give priority to one's state and fellow citizens, yet there are stark differences informing how and why they do so. Seeking clarification of these moral premises is integral to illuminating what image of a statist ethic Yan ultimately privileges. More pertinently, without recognition of the distinct moral assumptions that can ground such a stance and its plural possibilities, the explanatory potential of "morality" in international relations remains largely unrealised.

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