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ETHICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

By John Dewey

THE situation that exists among nations in their relations to one another is such that it tempts even those who ordinarily come far short of cynicism to say that there is no connection between ethics and international relations. The title is also a temptation to indulge in a drastic attack upon present international relations as inherently immoral. One might make out a case for the proposition that they are ruled by force, fraud and secret intrigue, and that whenever moral considerations come into conflict with national ambitions and nationalistic ideas they go by the board. Or, identifying the moral with that which ought to be, whether it is or not, one might appeal to some ideal of what ought to be and point out the discrepancies that are found between this ideal of what should be and what actually is. The latter method naturally terminates in exhortation, in appeal to the moral consciousness of mankind.

These considerations are not adduced in order to develop them, but to suggest the extraordinary confusion that is found in current moral ideas as they are reflected in the ethics of international relations. I do not intend, then, to discuss international relations from the moral point of view, but rather to discuss the uncertain estate, the almost chaotic condition, of moral conceptions and beliefs as that condition bears upon the international situation. Why is it that men's morals have so little effect in regulating the attitude of nations to one another? Even the most cynical would hesitate to declare that the habits, to say nothing of the ideals, of the average decent man and woman in their ordinary affairs were adequately embodied in the existing reign of hatred, suspicion, fear and secrecy in international politics. The truth seems to be rather that man's morals are paralyzed when it comes to international conduct; that they are swept away and rendered impotent by larger forces that go their own way irrespective of the morals that are employed in everyday matters.

The problems suggested by this state of affairs may be approached from two angles. We may ask what are the actual forces that have grown so powerful that they have escaped from moral control? What are the factors that prevent moral habits and ideas from operation? This opens a large and extremely

complex field to be attacked only by cooperative efforts of historians, publicists, lawyers, and economists. There is open, however, a less pretentious method of approach. One may make the inquiry from the side of moral conceptions and doctrines, and ask whether they are intellectually competent to meet the needs of the situation. Some of the trouble may be due to the lack of coherent and generally accepted moral ideas; not of ideas in a vague and abstract sense but of ideas sufficiently concrete to be operative. This intellectual factor may not be in itself very large or powerful, and yet it may represent a factor that, although small in itself, is an indispensable condition of straightening out objective political and economic forces that are much more energetic and active.

In such an appraisal the historic conditions under which the laws applicable to international relations were formulated furnish a natural starting point. There can be no doubt that the intellectual work of Grotius and his successors had great practical influence. It was not academic and professorial, nor was it conceived primarily in the interests of the claims and ambitions of some particular state. These men were genuinely international, and for a time they had great effect in appeasing international strife and moralizing actual international relations. These basic contributions all sprang from a common moral source. They all expressed the idea of laws of nature which are moral laws of universal validity. The conception of laws of nature that are the fundamental moral laws of all human conduct of every kind and at all times and places was not a new one. Roman moralists had worked out the idea in connection with Roman jurisprudence; it was familiar to every civilian and canonist, and indeed to every educated man. The Catholic church had made the notion fundamental to its whole doctrine of secular ethics, that is of all obligations not springing from divine revelation. And even these obligations only expressed a higher and more ultimate nature of things not accessible to man's unaided reason. The Protestant moralists and theologians equally built upon the conception; at most they only put a greater emphasis upon an inner light in the conscience of individuals which revealed and acknowledged the laws of nature as the supreme standards of human behavior.

There was thus a principle and method of morals which was universally recognized throughout Christendom; there was also

general agreement as to the contents of the code of obligations defined by the principle. The great achievement of Grotius and his followers consisted in studying existing international customs and in criticizing and organizing them by the help of the commonly accepted standard of laws of nature. More than one living authority in jurisprudence—like Pollock—has pointed out the service rendered by the conception of laws of nature in the development of various branches of law, private as well as public, and in equity practice. They all agree that its use in formulating the rules governing international conduct was its first and most conspicuous service. Now I do not mean to intimate that without responsive factors in the actual political and economic situation the intellectual application of the concept of natural laws to international relations would have exercised the moderating and humane influence which followed upon the labors of the school of Grotius. But it is meant that the general unquestioning and pervasive acknowledgment of the law of nature as the supreme ethical standard enabled the moral sentiments and ideals of Christendom to be concentrated upon problems of international conduct, so that whatever moral ideas *can* accomplish in practical regulation of human behavior *was* effectually accomplished.

During the nineteenth century, the notion of natural law in morals fell largely into discredit and disuse outside the orthodox moralists of the Catholic church. Of recent years there has been an increasing recognition that in principle all that is meant by a law of nature is a moral law to be applied to the criticism and construction of positive law, legislative and judicial. It has been pointed out that either we must surrender the notion that moral principles have anything to do with positive laws, international and municipal, or else admit the idea of natural law in some shape or form. But there is a wide difference between admitting the general notion of moral laws over against custom and positive law, and imputing to the law of nature the character and content which was attributed to it by seventeenth century moralists. While Grotius asserted that the law of nature would still be binding even if there were no revelation and no God as supreme law-giver and judge, yet in the popular mind and in his mind the idea still had a theological background and a religious force. The laws of nature still represented the purposes of God and his injunctions concerning the ways in which his purposes as governing the life of man were to be realized. The secular science as well as the secular

morals of the period only substituted "secondary" causes and laws for the primary and direct action of God.

But as men's minds gradually got away from the habit of connecting secular things with theological and religious matters, primary or secondary, the enormous force of the religious associations and sanctions of the law of nature gradually ceased. And among Protestants at least, even among those in whom religious ideas retained their old force in morality, most men got out of the habit of associating the religious factor in morals with laws of nature and indeed, to a large extent, with law at all. Divine love and desire for man replaced the concept of divine commands, injunctions and prohibitions. Thus in international relations, as elsewhere, the notion of a definite and universal moral norm in the shape of laws of nature weakened and died out. Even when retained, as in some texts, it was in perfunctory deference to tradition rather than as a living intellectual force. But its decay has not been accompanied by the development of any other moral principle of equal generality and equally wide current acceptance. In its stead we have a multiplicity of moral doctrines, more or less opposed to one another, and none of them held with any great assurance except by a small band of ardent partisans.

Moreover, aside from the question of religious reinforcement, other factors have rendered the old concept of natural law uncongenial. It was always associated with the idea of reason as a force or faculty in things as well as a force and faculty in minds. The laws of nature signified that certain rational principles are actually embodied in the nature of man in his connection with the rest of nature. To obey the law of nature was all one with obeying the dictates of reason. And reason was thought of not just as a psychological possession of the individual mind but as the bond of unity in society. Even the physical laws of nature, since they were universal and "governed" particular empirical phenomena, were rational. Animals had laws of reason embodied in their structure and instincts which they followed without knowing them. The superiority of man is simply that he can be aware of the rational principles which physical things and animals unconsciously obey. It is not possible, I think, for any one today to estimate the power added to the concept of laws of nature by their implicit and unquestioned association with reason and with the common ends and interests that hold men together in society.

It is hardly necessary to note the various influences that under-

mined this association and, in undermining it, weakened also the working influence of moral ideas on custom and law. Even among those who might give a formal allegiance to similar ideas, if they were presented already formulated, the ideas have little vital power. Modern science has familiarized even the man in the street with a radically different notion about laws of nature. In writing these pages I have felt almost bound to use the term "law of nature" instead of the words "natural law," so different are the familiar connotations of the latter term. Natural law in the popular conception is physical rather than rational; it is associated with energies—heat, light, gravitation, electricity—not with rationality. And it would be difficult today to get even a serious hearing in most circles for the idea that reason is what holds men together in society. Economists, sociologists, historians, psychologists have worked together to displace this idea, to make it seem unreal and faded, even when they disagree radically among themselves as to just what is the nature of the social tie. When we ask what has taken the place of the old law of nature, of reason in nature and society, we are confronted with a scene of contention, confusion and uncertainty. Where is the moral idea capable of exercising the crystallizing, concentrating and directing force upon positive law and custom once exercised by the idea of laws of nature? Few of those who insist that it is necessary to revive the concept in order to have a basis of criticism and constructive effort would revive the idea in its older shape. And they are divided when asked what we should put in its place. This division among intellectuals would not be of any great importance were it not that it reflects division, confusion and uncertainty in the popular mind.

Of course there have been many attempts to fill the void created by the gradual disappearance from the practical scene of the idea of laws of nature, and some of the attempts have been successful in forming not only schools of thought but in exerting considerable practical influence upon affairs. From among these schools we may select the utilitarian and what for convenience may be called the Hegelian for special consideration. The utilitarian school cannot be charged with lack of definiteness and assurance of conviction. And no candid student of English legal, political and social reforms of the last century can assert that it lacked great practical influence. Ignoring technical details that are connected mainly with a psychology of feelings and pleasures

and pains which has been largely outgrown by the advance of mental inquiry, we may say that the formula of the greatest good for the greatest number, every individual to count as one and only one in the enumeration, has been translated into the conviction that social welfare is the last and the legitimate moral standard. Regard for the general welfare is the proper source of all moral rules and moral obligations. Instead of considering antecedent ready-made laws, we should search social *consequences* to find principles of criticism of positive laws and current customs and of plans for legislation and new social arrangements.

Great as was the efficacy of this idea in domestic affairs, where shall we look to find traces of its influence upon international morality? Even admitting that it presents to us a sound view of the moral standard and the source of moral laws, has it been applied with any effectiveness to the conduct of international affairs? As a moral standard it puts upon an equal footing the happiness of citizens of foreign lands and of the home land. Where has this principle determined an important branch of international law? What has it done, I will not say to prevent war, but to mitigate its horrors? To most people, I suppose, the idea of its general application to international relations would seem as Utopian as the literal application of the teachings of Jesus. It is sometimes said that utilitarianism supplies us with a low and somewhat sordid moral principle. But in this respect, at least, it would seem to be too high, too far above and beyond present attainment.

More concretely, various attempts to show that war in particular and methods relying upon force and intrigue in general do not pay, may be said to represent examples of the attempt to apply the utilitarian theory in international affairs. The demonstration that war does not pay even the nations that win is probably sufficiently convincing to most persons since the Great War. But the demonstration and the conviction do not appear to have much practical influence. It is too rationalistic; it assumes in too exclusive a way that men are governed by considerations of advantage, of profit and loss. Not only critics of utilitarianism but a great utilitarian, John Stuart Mill, criticized the earlier Benthamite version, on the ground that it leaned too heavily on the material interests of man without enough regard for the motives that may, according to one's bias, be termed sentimental, ideal or spiritual. And it might almost be said that the very

existence of war with its willingness to sacrifice life and property for a cause is proof of the soundness of the criticism. War is as stupid as you please but it does not *persist* because of wrong calculations of profit, even though wrong estimates of national advantage may sometimes play a part in the minds of statesmen in starting a war.

The reasons for the practical failure of utilitarianism in international morality can be found within the doctrine itself. It is a theory not only of the moral standard but also of the moral motive, namely, concern for the general happiness. Now the utilitarians themselves recognized that after consideration for the standard has shown what should be done, the question remains of linking up the moral end with the motives that will make it prevail in conduct. They listed the motives that may be relied upon: natural sympathy with others; education into social ways of looking at conduct; mutual advantage through industrial interdependence, division of labor and exchange; and the penal sanction—personal suffering when anti-social motives are given sway.

Now it is obvious that under existing conditions these motives have little chance to operate in international affairs. The extent of sympathy is conditioned in the concrete among the mass of persons by habitual contact and familiar association. It may work strongly where these conditions are found and be very weak when there are barriers of language, custom, and political affiliation. Sympathy with one's immediate fellows is easily turned into antipathy to the outsider and stranger. Education is limited also by range of contact and intercourse, and at present the forces that educate into nationalistic patriotism are powerful and those that educate into equal regard and esteem for aliens are weak. The economic motive works both ways. As already stated, war almost undoubtedly entails loss for a nation as a whole; the risk of loss through defeat is great. But there are also profiteers, those who stand to gain for themselves, and there is no guarantee that they will not occupy places of power and influence. Aside from profiteering, the existence of protective tariffs shows how far men are from believing that free exchange is of necessity a mutual advantage.

As for the legal penal sanction, that is manifestly totally lacking, since there is no common political superior that makes laws with penalties attached for violation. In short, all the conditions

that made utilitarianism domestically and internally effective are either absent or much enfeebled in international relations. It will be understood that these remarks are no more an attack upon utilitarianism than they are a defense of it. They are made not for the sake of making any assessment of utilitarianism but because they throw light upon the present lack of a coherent body of moral ideas that may be efficaciously applied in international matters. The evidence is the more striking in the case of utilitarian moral beliefs, because although not universally accepted—in fact although bitterly attacked—they were none the less effective within a nation.

The type of moral doctrine that for convenience in having a single name was called Hegelian is in fact much wider than any one school of philosophy. It goes back in its cruder form to Machiavelli and Hobbes. Both of these writers were attacked in their own day and ever since that day as immoralists rather than moralists. But nevertheless they represent a distinct type of moral ideas. Their underlying principle, when we eliminate idiosyncracies of personality and surroundings, is that institutions having authority, especially that institution we call the state, are a necessary precondition of the morality of individuals. Hence, the social organization has a privileged, indeed, a unique moral position. Being the condition without which morality in the concrete is impossible, it is also above morals in the ordinary sense, in the sense in which private persons and voluntary communities are required to be moral. The idea came into later German philosophy not from Machiavelli and Hobbes direct but by a revival of Greek (especially Aristotelian) political ethics interpreted by the teaching of Spinoza. The latter, living in a period of almost universal war, external and civil, with all its attendant insecurity of existence, immensely deepened the teaching of Hobbes. He taught expressly that the authority of the state is a necessary pre-condition of stability of social and personal life and of any widespread freedom and rationality of life. Even the most rational of beings cannot put his rationality into effect and achieve freedom except as he has the external support as well as the positive assistance of others. Without political power most men will be governed by their passions, and the wisest of men will be constantly at the mercy of his environment and of appetite and passion.

The political condition of Germany, internal and external, after

the Napoleonic wars created a situation favorable to the revival of these ideas. It also furnished a situation in which these ideas were important intellectual weapons in regenerating and unifying the separate and particularistic states of Germany under the hegemony of Prussia. These ideas, first taught in the universities, were so congenial to the needs of political Germany that they soon bore practical fruit. If they were not active forces in bringing about the centralization of previously scattered political authority they at least formulated the end and gave it intellectual justification.

It is not necessary to spend much time showing that this type of ethical thought, a type which insisted upon certainty, unity and stability of institutions, as utilitarians insisted upon the spread of general personal happiness, did not and could not favorably affect international morality. Its whole tendency was toward an intellectual glorification of the national state. Struggle between states was a necessary incident of history; more than this, it operated to strengthen and consolidate the authority of institutions. Success in war was objective evidence of a superior social organization, and hence of superior morality. If a single peaceful international order is ever attainable it is only by means of a *Pax Romana*; some one state must become so powerful as to be able to enforce its will upon all other communities.

I do not mean to intimate that these two types of moral doctrine exhaust the ethical conceptions that have developed in the void left by the subsidence of the theory of natural law. There are others of considerable importance. But the career of the two selected types may serve to illustrate our main thesis: one important factor in the present problem of ethics and international relations is found on the side of ethical beliefs themselves in their confused and contending divergencies. The trouble does not reside wholly on the practical side. It is not my intent to propose any set of moral beliefs which might in my opinion remedy this state of affairs. I content myself with pointing out that since we are still in a very early period of anything which may be called the modern world there is no ground for despair as to the future. Every condition of life as it moves toward coherent organization develops its own *ethos*, its own standards and codes. In spite of the wide extent and internal complexity of the present situation, so much greater than anything in previous history, there is sufficient ground for believing

that we are working toward a more coherent condition of life, and that a unified moral code will grow up when social relations are better adjusted. It is trite to say that we live in a time of immense transitions; we do not sufficiently note that ethical confusion always attends such epochs.

But future expectations give little comfort and stay in the present. It seems to me that there is one measure that would at least concentrate and direct moral sentiments and moral desires and emotions, which are certainly still widespread amid our intellectual confusion and uncertainty. *Law* has always served the purpose of condensing and defining the moral wishes and expectations of the community. No matter how much it is behind the highest moral aspirations of the developed members of the community, law has precipitated average moral sentiment in a way that has rendered it more effective than it would otherwise be. It has canalized moral emotions so that they may flow to a purpose. Changing the metaphor, it has given them positive leverage.

Now it seems to me that there is one legal change which, were it made, would effect an enormous change in clarifying the present situation and would give the development of sound ideas and valid practises a great impetus. I refer to the movement, originally launched in this country by Mr. Levinson, a successful lawyer of Chicago, for the outlawry of war. Under present international law war is legal. There is indeed no such thing as illegal war, except the kind of war that appears to most persons the most justifiable from the moral standpoint—internal wars of liberation. War is not only legal; it is the *most* authorized method of settling disputes between nations that are intense. Resort to organized force is the *ultima ratio* of states. This fact constitutes by far the greatest gap that exists in any realm of life between moral sentiment and authorized practise. With respect to all lesser disputes there are regular methods of settlement which are alone legal. There are laws, courts and procedures for settling them. I am not hopeful that causes of dispute between nations will cease any more than causes of disputes between individuals. But we no longer permit individuals to settle disputes by waging private war; even in cases when honor is impugned the duel is outlawed.

I do not see how anybody who faces the situation can do otherwise than be convinced that the legality of war constitutes the greatest anomaly that now anywhere exists in morals.

As long as it persists, moral sentiment is in a self-contradictory position; there is a double standard of moral ideas introducing an almost hopeless conflict, till a person has no choice except between belligerent loyalty to his own community and a non-resistant pacifism which comes close to moral passivism. The outlawing of war as a method of settling national disputes under any circumstances, with the attendant institution of courts having complete jurisdiction in disputes that might lead to war, operating under a carefully thought out code, would put an end to this fatal moral dualism.

Community of moral feeling exists even among those of diverse intellectual moral beliefs. The outlawing of war provides a common center for the expression of this community of moral emotion and desire. International law against war would produce the same condensing, precipitating, crystallizing effect for morals with respect to international relations that law has supplied everywhere else in its historic development. It is the logical completion of the historic development of courts as the instrumentalities for settling disputes, and until it is reached the influence of moral sentiment is split and scattered.

The argument is not that wars would necessarily cease. Laws have not prevented other crimes; it may be that war though a crime would still be resorted to. But the person who believes that law which should brand war for what it is instead of permitting it as legal would have no effect, has a peculiar view of history and human nature. There is an old saying that what the sovereign permits he commands. It is not needful to take this saying literally to recognize that the existing legal sanction of war inevitably confers upon it a moral sanction which in the end encourages war. What law authorizes is a powerful influence in determining moral ideas and aspirations in the mass of men. But above all what is asserted is that until war is outlawed by conjoint international action there is no opportunity for existing moral sentiments to function effectively in international relations, and next to no hope for the speedy development of a coherent and widely accepted body of moral ideas which will be effective in determining international relations. The first move in improving international morality is to outlaw war. Till this move is taken I do not see much chance that any other improvement in international relations will win general assent or be practicable in execution.