

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this book is to make the case that international interactions should be understood in ethical terms.¹ International actors are generally concerned to act ethically and they take pains to point out the ethical flaws in the actions of others. They are sensitive to and concerned about the ethical criticisms of others. The argument is directed against a view, widely held by adherents of a number of different approaches to the subject, that we ought to understand these relations in terms of struggles for power (classical realism); the structural forces in play in the domain (structural realism and Marxist approaches); or in terms of the so-called 'power/knowledge' nexus that exists in various discourses constituting the field of international relations. Against these my contention is that international interactions are always ethically informed, but that this aspect is often hidden and not made apparent. I shall argue that bringing this aspect of our international interactions to light provides us with a more comprehensive, deeper and richer view of the field. Moreover, taking what one might call 'the ethical turn' also helps us understand the play of politics and power in a more nuanced way. Furthermore, an ethically informed understanding gives us a good account of what

1 I prefer to use the word 'interactions' rather than 'relations' because it more accurately reflects what happens between actors in the international domain.

is happening in international affairs and opens the way for the making of better policy choices. Part of the argument to be offered in this book is that the very act of analysing international affairs is itself an action, open to ethical evaluation. We can evaluate analyses of international affairs, such as the one presented in this book, in terms of whether they are ethical or not.

The arguments to be set out here are not primarily focused on meta-level analyses of ethics in IR which would only be of interest to philosophers, but which would have little relevance for participants in global politics. Rather this analysis puts forward what I take to be the most convincing substantive ethical analysis of our contemporary international practices. This analysis is of direct relevance to all participants in contemporary international politics.

In what follows I write as a participant in international affairs and I am directing myself to all my fellow participants in the contemporary practices of international relations. This is not a monograph directed specifically at specialists in International Relations.

THE UBIQUITY OF ETHICS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

When we participate in international affairs, as we all do in many different ways, ethical considerations manifest themselves in all the phases of our involvement. They are apparent in the way in which we characterize the international circumstances within which we find ourselves; they are manifest in the explanations we give to ourselves and others about how and why this state of affairs came to be as it is; they play a role in our determination of what lines of action are open to us given our circumstances; and they play a key role in the justifications we offer for having chosen one course of action rather than another. An example illustrates these points.² Consider the USA's military engagement in Iraq in 2003. Prior to launching the expeditionary force, the administration of the USA made an evaluation of the existing situation. Its evaluation was made clear in speeches and

² The reader may choose any other example of an engagement in international affairs. It might be a minor one or one of major international significance.

briefings.³ The view accepted by the administration in office at the time included an account of the recent history of the Iraqi state under its then ruler Saddam Hussein, leader of the Baathist party. The history included an account of the run-up, conduct and aftermath of the first Iraq war in 1991. Central to the account was an ethical evaluation of the non-democratic nature of the Iraqi state, the human rights-abusing policies of Hussein's government, the wrongful invasion by Iraq of the state of Kuwait and the failure to obey the legal and ethical injunction of the international community's stipulations in the post-war settlement. Crudely put, the account given portrayed Saddam Hussein and his government as the wrongdoers when judged from an ethical point of view. This ethical judgement was at the heart of the way in which the state of affairs just prior to the war was framed. Also, in the explanations given of the way things had developed after the first Gulf War, ethical propositions about the wrongdoing of Saddam Hussein's government featured prominently. In particular, regular reference was made to the ethically wrongful use he and his government made of the 'Oil for Food' programme.

If we move on to consider the USA government's consideration of the policy options it faced in Iraq, here again, ethical considerations played a key role. It is safe to assume that certain feasible options were, from the start, ruled out for ethical reasons. These would include the immediate use of maximum force, including the use of theatre nuclear weapons, the use of poison gas, the use of biological weapons and so on. These we may assume were not considered, or, if they were, were quickly turned aside. When force was contemplated the administration had to make decisions about the levels of force that were appropriate. These decisions were guided by well-known ethical constraints. For example, it was repeatedly stated that policies would be devised which would minimize collateral damage to civilians and so on.⁴ There were references to just war principles. Once the war option had been chosen then, once again, we see the salience

3 See an example of a briefing from the President's Office given on 3rd March 2003 at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030303-3.html>.

4 As evidence consider the Vice-President's remark on 17th September 2003:

In the battles of Iraq and Afghanistan and in other fronts in the war on terror, America's Air Force has played a crucial role, and it will continue to play a

of ethical considerations in the justifications provided for it. For example, on launching the expeditionary force into Iraq in 2003, President George W. Bush presented it as an ethical action. He and his advisors relied on a number of ethical arguments. Some were produced prior to the commencement of the war and others emerged as the campaign continued. Some were explicitly stated, others were implied. These included that Iraq was in breach of its Security Council commitments in terms of UN Security Council Resolution 687 and subsequently 1441. The former Resolution required Iraq to destroy all its weapons of mass destruction and allow UN weapons inspectors to verify that this had been done. Resolution 1441 arose from Iraq's failure to do this and it spelled out the consequences that would follow a further delay in completing these requirements. There are a number of different ethical arguments underlying this line of action. First, it rests on the requirement that states ought to keep their agreements (*pacta sunt servanda*) and especially those taken in accordance with international law. Second, the agreement itself was built on a number of ethical assumptions (many of which are embodied in international law) such as, states ought to desist from war and that entering into agreements to do this is, from an ethical point of view, a good thing. Also, underlying the assessment was the view that the UN itself is founded on a number of fundamental ethical principles and that the agreements it puts in place are good insofar as they promote these. President Bush also acted on the principle that Iraq was one of a number of states that formed what he called in his State of the Union Address in 2002 the 'axis of evil'.⁵ Another ethical reason put forward was that Iraq harboured and supported international terrorists and that the international community of states had an ethical duty to oppose this – with force if necessary. These judgements themselves, of course, rest on the ethical contention that terrorism is wrong. Beyond these reasons, he referred to Iraq's history of human rights abuses. This reason, in turn, supported another which was that there was an ethical

crucial role in the battles to come. The Air Force's global reach enables us to project our power anywhere in the world within a matter of hours. Its new tactics and precision weapons help us achieve our military objectives while minimizing collateral damage.

5 29th January 2002.

requirement to bring about regime change so that a democratic state could be established to replace the tyrannous rule of the Sunni minority.⁶ Over and above these ethical considerations were others, more assumed than overtly stated, to do with the sanctions regime that had been in place against Iraq since the first Gulf War. These sanctions, themselves instituted for ethical reasons (to prevent genocide by Saddam Hussein against Kurdish Iraqis), had been shown to have damaged the innocent, including women and children. This itself, then, was a supplementary ethical judgement. A continuation of this policy would have been ethically untenable. Yet the alternative also seemed ethically untenable. Simply lifting sanctions would have rewarded Saddam Hussein and his regime for their ethical wrongdoing. In order to prevent him committing genocide against his own people again, some other course of action was required. Force seemed a feasible, legitimate and above all ethical option.

Any participant in international relations seeking to understand the second war against Iraq might have strong views about which of the above-mentioned ethical reasons for going to war were the 'real' reasons for Bush's action and might have strong opinions about which were 'good' ethical reasons for war. But it is certain that, if one

6 A number of the ethical reasons he offered in justification of the military action are contained in the following section of a speech he gave at the Port of Philadelphia on 31st March 2003:

Our victory will mean the end of a tyrant who rules by fear and torture. Our victory will remove a sponsor of terror, armed with weapons of terror. Our victory will uphold the just demands of the United Nations and the civilized world. And when victory comes, it will be shared by the long-suffering people of Iraq, who deserve freedom and dignity.

The dictator's regime has ruled by fear and continues to use fear as a tool of domination to the end. Many Iraqis have been ordered to fight or die by Saddam's death squads. Others are pressed into service by threats against their children. Iraqi civilians attempting to flee to liberated areas have been shot and shelled from behind by Saddam's thugs. Schools and hospitals have been used to store military equipment. They serve as bases for military operations. Iraqis who show friendship toward coalition troops are murdered in cold blood by the regime's enforcers. The people of Iraq have lived in this nightmare world for more than two decades. It is understandable that fear and distrust run deep. Yet, here in the city where America itself gained freedom, I give this pledge to the citizens of Iraq: We're coming with a mighty force to

did not have some understanding of the ethical arguments for and against this policy, we would not understand the resulting war and the reasons for it at all.

Those on the receiving end of this war also justified what they did (or did not do) with reference to ethical considerations. For example, the Iraqi government claimed that Iraq had done its duty and had dismantled its weapons of mass destruction.⁷ After the war it turned out that this claim was true. The government also claimed that it was not a host to international terror, implying that Iraq ought not to be punished for an ethical wrong it did not commit. It claimed that the international community was behaving unethically in instituting and maintaining sanctions against the country. It made the ethical claim that the sanctions were harming the innocent. It claimed, too, that Iraq had a right not to be subject to unwarranted interference in its domestic affairs. As a sovereign state it had a right to non-intervention.⁸ Both are well-known ethical claims that states normally make for themselves.

Similarly, those not directly involved in the war, such as those many people around the world who opposed the American and British military intervention, justified their positions with regard to both ethical and legal considerations, the former always taken to underpin the latter. For example, there were many who said that the so-called 'ethical' reasons referred to above were all window-dressing used to hide more sinister (and unethical) underlying reasons to do with access to the oil resources in Iraq. The ethical argument here is that states, including the USA and the UK, are not entitled to simply pursue their own self-interest by military means. This would flout the sovereign right of the state of Iraq to control its own natural resources. Other arguments referred to the way in which the action of the USA and UK bypassed the processes of the UN. Underlying this argument is the ethical notion that states ought

end the reign of your oppressors. We are coming to bring you food and medicine and a better life. And we are coming, and we will not stop, we will not relent until your country is free.

7 See the speech to the UN Security Council by the Iraqi Ambassador Mr Mohammed A. Aldouri on 5th February 2003, which may be found at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/storyAr.asp?NewsID=6083&Cr=iraq&Cr1=inspect#>.

8 Many of these claims were made by Saddam Hussein in an interview with Dan Rather on CBS during the '60 Minutes' show, 26th February 2003.

to follow the procedures set out by the UN, especially in matters of peace and war. A further argument stressed that military means ought only to be used as a last resort and that in this case the actors had not yet reached the stage of last resort. Other means, short of violence, were still available to the international community to use against the regime to prevent genocide and human rights abuses. Looking at all these ethical arguments in the round, it is clear that not all opponents of the war were agreed on all of these ethically-based arguments for opposing the war, but it is nevertheless the case that a student of international relations who failed to understand these ethical arguments would not have understood the war at all.

The import of all of the above is that getting to grips with the ethical issues at stake in the war against Iraq is central to understanding it. This point may be generalized as follows: In order to participate in international affairs, either as an individual or as part of a collective actor (such as a state, international organization or a corporation), one has to have some understanding about what is happening around one and why. As we have seen in the example just discussed, this requires that one understands the ethical dimensions of what has gone before, the ethical dimensions of the present state of affairs, the ethical aspects of various policy options and the ethical dimensions of the means whose use is under consideration.

The points made above about the war in Iraq, and the ethical arguments for and against it, are true of most (if not all) our actions in world politics. Sometimes we confront problems that are overtly ethical. For example, as citizens in states, we are often acutely aware of the ethical dimensions of the situations in which we find ourselves. Here are some of the overt ethical concerns that beset us: We worry about the justness of going to war, in general, not just in the Iraqi case.⁹ We have ethical misgivings about admitting or not admitting economic migrants to our countries. We have ethical concerns about the treatment of those detained on suspicion of being international terrorists. We are concerned about the treatment of national groups in specific states, for example, the Chechens in Russia, the Palestinians in Israel, the Québécois in Canada, the aboriginal

⁹ In all the examples given to this point in the argument, I wish merely to highlight that there is an ethical element to these problems. I am not making a case for any particular ethical position.

peoples in Australia (and many others). On a number of occasions we might well have had concerns about whether to intervene in certain conflicts on humanitarian grounds. Those of us in the states being intervened in worried about whether to support intervention into our countries or not.¹⁰ Many ethical issues arise with regard to distributional issues globally. Some of these have been manifest in the most recent round of World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations: Is the European Union justified in maintaining subsidies to farmers which disadvantage the farmers in Third World countries? Are Third World countries justified in maintaining current tariff barriers preventing the First World countries gaining market access to their territories?

In the same way that many international problems are articulated and understood by us as ethical problems, so, too, is it the case that we justify many of the things that we do with reference to ethical criteria. For example, decisions to grant international aid are justified by reference to ethical considerations. Disaster aid is similarly justified in ethical terms. The young who attend the rock concerts for international causes understand themselves to be ethically motivated (at least in part).

Similarly, our stances with regard to specific wars are justified in ethical terms. In the most recent wars in the Middle East, as we have seen above, justifications have been offered that referred to, amongst other things, the just war tradition, pre-emptive self-defence, self-defence, the prevention of tyranny, the promotion of freedom, the promotion of democracy and the protection of human rights. At the limit, the use of force was justified in terms of a struggle between good and evil.¹¹ Both in the Middle East and elsewhere actors in the international realm have referred to the sovereign rights of autonomous states and the rights of peoples to autonomy as grounds for using force. Reference has also often been made to religious rights – the right to be governed by Sharia law, for example. To refer to such a right is to make an ethical claim. It is not difficult to construe

10 For example, in South Africa, prior to the end of *apartheid* there was a vigorous internal debate about whether international intervention through mandatory sanctions would be ethically justifiable or not. Similar debates are currently taking place in Zimbabwe.

11 President George W. Bush's State of the Union Address 29th January 2002.

almost all our decisions and actions in the international domain as having an ethical dimension.

It is not only in our role as citizens of states that we view and present what we do in ethical terms. As individual men and women active in international affairs more generally we understand ourselves to be ethical actors pursuing ethical goals. Many of us contribute to non-governmental organizations that seek to promote the well-being of those less fortunate than we are. In doing so, we understand ourselves to be acting for ethical reasons. Many of us, as individuals, participate in protests of one kind or another directed at what we perceive to be injustices abroad, whether these be in opposition to war, to *apartheid*, to genocide, to unjust distributions and so on. When disaster strikes we, as individuals, often contribute directly or indirectly to the relief efforts that follow. Many people, for ethical and religious reasons, working through religious movements, often become involved in international good works. Others make similar use of service organizations like Rotary, Round Table and Lions to engage in international activities of a similar kind. They also promote 'good will' educational visits by young people to foreign countries. Even as tourists we encounter any number of ethical issues that call upon us to make difficult decisions. Should we buy goods from stalls and bazaars run by children? Should we visit sites of archaeological interest, even when these are located in authoritarian states? Should we visit game reserves that are situated on sites claimed by the indigenous people who wish to use the land for traditional purposes and/or who see the land as holy because their ancestors were buried there? The ethical issues listed above do not only present themselves to Westerners but face international actors worldwide whether they be Buddhist, Hindu or followers of Islam.

Furthermore, beyond the ethical dimensions of our social and political relationships, there is a persistent ethical dimension to our economic activities in the international domain. It is a truism that the economic component is a core component of every person's life. Each one of us needs to engage in some economic activity in order to live. It is now the case that ever greater proportions of our economic lives have an international dimension. At every point our international economic activities are shot through with ethical features. At the most basic level they rely on our notion of a right to own

property.¹² Although property rights are often protected by law, we consider that the law of property itself has an ethical basis. Those who infringe such laws are themselves considered to be not just criminals in terms of the law but also wrongdoers in terms of widely recognized ethical standards.¹³ Similarly, we all have ideas about what would count as a just distribution of economic assets and what would constitute injustice. In pursuit of our economic goals we make contracts and we consider these to be ethically binding. Those who break them, we say, have committed not merely a legal wrong but also an ethical wrong. We have developed complex sets of laws governing our economic behaviour both at home and abroad. In general, we argue that the laws that have been created are ethically sound or at least have an ethical basis. Here and there, for ethical reasons, we propose that the laws be reformed. A good example of this kind of argument is to be found in the support that we give (or that we refuse to give) to the positions taken by sovereign states in the current Doha round of the WTO negotiations.

The ethical dimension of our involvement in international relations is not merely confined to instances, such as those discussed above, where we confront problems that present themselves to us as *overtly* ethical. There is an ethical dimension to even the most run-of-the-mill instances of our engagement with international affairs. This is true even where the ethical dimension is not immediately patent but rather *implicit* in what we do. Consider the everyday business of participation in international trade, the activity of tourists or the transnational activities of tertiary educational institutions. In each of these spheres we, as actors, were we to be asked, would claim ourselves to be acting ethically. In our everyday conduct we simply take it for granted, without a thought, that in participating in these spheres of activity we are doing the right thing from an ethical point of view. But were we to be challenged, we would be ready with an answer to justify our actions on ethical grounds. So, for example, if, as international traders, we were charged with economic imperialism, we would no doubt defend our actions by referring to the ethical

12 Here I am not defending the international economic order which is based on notions of private property being an ethical value. I am simply describing a feature of the present economic order.

13 'Thou shalt not steal' is an ethical injunction.

case for free market arrangements. Similarly, if, as tourists, we were charged with the exploitation (or with causing the under-development) of the local population in the places that we visit, we might defend our action on developmental ethical grounds. In the case of international academic transfers we might make a defence referring to the ethical case for trans-border academic freedom. The general point is that when we act in the sphere of international relations we generally consider ourselves to be acting ethically and we are ready with arguments to rebut counterclaims on this score.

In summary, then, when we engage in international relations we frame and explain the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we choose courses of action, we justify our choices of policy and we evaluate our own performances, in terms that have as a central feature an ethical aspect. We could not make sense of any of these phases of our involvement without reference to the ethical dimensions in them. In order to participate in the international domain, then, an actor (you, me, anyone) has to be what one might call 'ethically literate'. In order to participate, one has to understand the terms of ethical debate in the practice(s) within which one finds oneself.

INTERNATIONAL ETHICS: THICK OR THIN?

What is puzzling, though, is that, in spite of the fact, as indicated above, that in our everyday engagement in the international domain we often (almost always) frame the context, and our interactions with it, in ethical terms, it is a commonplace amongst us that the ethical dimension of international politics is in some general sense 'thin'.¹⁴ In spite of the ubiquitous use of ethical language referred to in the opening paragraphs above, many of us persist in holding to the position that ethical concerns are of minor relevance in the domain of international politics. We hold that in some sense they are less important in the international sphere than they are in other spheres of our lives, including those to do with domestic politics within states; families; tribes; clans and nations; and so on. There is a widespread perception that the ethical aspects of international

14 For accounts given by academics of the 'thinness' of ethics in the international realm see the positions of both John Rawls and of Michael Walzer (Rawls, 1993, *passim*; Walzer, 1994, *passim*).

politics are less important than other factors operative in this field. Indeed, there are some who regard the claim that ethics is pertinent to international affairs as an oxymoron.

Are there good reasons for holding to the view that the ethical constraints on international relations are 'thin'? Many consider the following reasons to be self-evident. First, we hold that, when looked at in the round, the interaction between participants in the international domain is governed more by a struggle for power than by our obedience to common ethical constraints and a pursuit of commonly acknowledged ethical goals. For example, it is often suggested that the USA interest in the Gulf is prompted more by a material interest in stable oil supplies than by an ethical concern for the human rights of the people in, for example, Iraq. This vague notion of the international being a domain of power play is taken up in a number of major academic theories to be found in, amongst other places, the disciplines of sociology, political science, international relations (IR), geography and history. Some theories within these disciplines stress the primary role played by states and their pursuit of power in this domain; others admit an important place for actors other than states, actors such as multinational corporations and international organizations. But these, too, are understood to be power-seeking. Yet others stress the primacy of social classes engaged in an epic international struggle for power, especially economic power. Common to them all, though, is the understanding that this is a domain of political struggle where politics is understood as the struggle for power.¹⁵

A second reason for considering the role of ethics to be 'thin' in the sphere of international relations is that we often present the domain as one within which we find ourselves confronted by a 'them' whose ethical commitments are different from ours. On this view we are, as it were, trapped, each in our own ethical community, without any overarching cosmopolitan ethicality to provide a common framework for ethical discussion between us and them. The substance of this insight has been played out in the well-known,

15 For a structural realist theory that stresses the importance of power play between states see Kenneth Waltz (Waltz, 1979); for a discussion of liberal theory see Dunne, 1997; and for a discussion of class theory applied to international relations see Amin, 1974.

cosmopolitan/communitarian debate.¹⁶ Another version of this argument is to be found in the writings of those who portray our world order as consisting of a clash of civilizations or a domain of cultural conflict (Huntington, 1996). On this view we formulate our ideas about our relationship to others in ethical terms and they do the same about their relations to us, but between us there is no common ethicality in terms of which we can settle our ethical differences about what counts as a just war, what counts as the right treatment of an asylum seeker, an economic refugee and so on. At the very best there is a limited ethical consensus to help us here. This is the 'thin' raft of agreement on a minimal set of ethical standards (Paskins & Dockrill, 1979, pp. 205–206).

Third, the 'thin' notion of ethics in world affairs also stems from a widely accepted assumption that relations between states are governed by *conventional* rules agreed between them for pragmatic rather than ethical reasons.¹⁷

Fourth, support for the 'thin' view of ethics in international affairs is also provided by reference to the fact of regular and severe conflict between the diverse actors in international affairs. The argument seems to be that the fact of widespread conflict in some sense proves the absence of a 'thick' ethical dimension to our common life in this domain. The counter-factual seems to be that, if there were a substantial ethicality between people on the world stage, there would not be so many violent conflicts. These conflicts include conventional wars, struggles for secession, national liberation wars and the so called 'New Wars'. On this view, the fact of widespread and persistent conflict is evidence of an absence of an overarching ethical consensus. Presumably, were there a 'thick' ethicality, this would be marked by a zone of peace comparable to what we find in well-established, sovereign states.

Fifth, another factor which seems to point to the limited salience of ethics to international relations is the limited time and effort that individuals, politicians, theorists and states give to a serious and

16 On the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate see Cochran, 2000 and also Delaney, 1994.

17 Strong proponents of this point of view are to be found in the English School approach to international relations: Bull, 1977, *passim*, Wight, 1979, Buzan, Jones & Little, 1993.

sustained discussion of ethical questions in international affairs. Whereas time and money are expended on research into the causes of conflict, into the conditions for peace, into the structures for peaceful and sustained economic development, comparatively few-resources are committed to a study of the ethical questions I mentioned earlier. Governments have in-house research teams seeking to explain and predict international developments and there are any number of private sector think-tanks and other specialized research bodies, and so on, that deal with such matters from an empirical and explanatory angle. The fact that resources are poured into these activities could be taken as supporting the claim that these are worthwhile activities. If they were not, why would people engage in them? Money feeds the 'thick' issues and allows the 'thin' ones to starve.

Finally, a sixth factor supporting the 'thin' view of ethics in international relations is found in the widespread belief that individual ethical commitments are a matter of individual choice and that, therefore, it is wrong to suppose that rational inquiry will reveal what the 'true' ethical stance ought to be for everyone. This belief, then, blocks people from considering, in any detail, arguments for and against rival ethical positions. If one's ethical stance is a personal one, then there is no point in looking for a single overarching ethical belief system applicable to all people everywhere, for all time, for, by definition, there are many different individual ethical creeds.¹⁸ All one has to do is choose one's own.

To summarize, the reasons for accepting the role of ethics in international relations as 'thin' are: that the realm of international affairs is governed by power relations; there are many different ethical systems; that many of these are in conflict with one another; that there is no agreed-upon overarching ethic that may be used to sort out the differences between them; and that ethical choices are a personal matter.

18 Ironically what is obscured in this line of thinking is that this belief that ethics is a personal matter is itself an ethical position. In other words, the view that it is wrong to prescribe an ethical position that is binding on all people is itself an ethical commitment. It is not a self-evident truth that all people should be left to decide their own ethical tastes on questions of war and peace, human rights, global justice and so on. The belief that they should be left free to do this is part of a particular ethical code, a liberal one. If we find that this view is widely held, then this is *prima facie* evidence that there is an internationally accepted ethicality.

The consequences that flow from accepting the 'thin' thesis are important. Most obviously, the role of ethical discussion in the solution of international conflict is taken to be limited, for, if there is but a limited morality to guide us in international relations, then there is not a lot to draw on when seeking solutions to urgent conflicts. When Zionism encounters Islam in the Middle East there is, on this view, little that can be achieved through ethical argument. We simply have to note the differences between the parties to the conflict and observe how things resolve themselves in terms of the play of politics and power. The Zionists have one view of what is ethically appropriate behaviour given the circumstances, and the Islamic actors have a radically divergent view of political ethics. Each attempts to impose its view on its rival. One could easily draw up a long list of similar examples of what appear to be intractable rival interpretations of what counts as right and wrong action that seem doomed to be played out in power politics.

The truth of the previous assertion leads to the further one that in international affairs we ought to accept that the role of power is likely to be more important than it is in spheres of activity where there is something of an ethical consensus constraining the behaviour of key actors, such as is to be found in the domain of domestic politics within sovereign states.

Building on this point, this way of understanding the international domain encourages us to draw a sharp distinction between the international domain and the domestic one. In the domestic realm, where citizens are bound together by a common legal system which is normally understood to rest on a particular ethical foundation, for example, a democratic one, there can be (and often are) profound and ongoing discussions about the ethical merits of developing the legal and constitutional order in one direction rather than another. The public philosophy that underpins the legal order can be used as a resource in this debate to generate answers to difficult legal and constitutional questions.¹⁹ For example, democratic theory can be drawn on to discuss the merits of proportional representation as

19 Thus, when issues arise about how to regulate (or not) stem cell research within a particular state, citizens, parliamentarians and members of the government will draw on the public philosophy that informs the constitution under which they all live. In many such cases a call will be made on philosophies of human rights, and democratic philosophy.

opposed to Westminster-style, first-past-the-post-winner-takes-all systems of election. In communist states, communist theory could be used in a similar way to take on and to solve hard cases, as and when they arose. In Islamic states the source to be drawn on to solve difficult cases is the *Sharia*. Our standard stance towards the international domain is that it lacks this kind of widely accepted public philosophy underpinning its legal and institutional framework. Alternatively, if it does have such a philosophy it is a minimal one. So when ethical disputes arise about how the system might be changed or developed there is no widely acknowledged, and intellectually rich, public philosophy on which to call. On this view, when Islam confronts Western secular ideas there is nothing to do but acknowledge that this is a power struggle. As President Bush so graphically said, each person has to decide whether they are 'for us or against us'. Similarly, where traditional philosophies of certain African people based on theories of *Ubuntu* clash with the secular political philosophy widely accepted in the West, this, too, must be understood as a confrontation – a clash between incommensurable ethical positions.

A further crucial implication that flows from the 'thinness' thesis is that the widespread use of ethical language in international relations must be understood as so much hot air. Our use of ethical language on this view reveals our personal ethical choices and rationalizes our actions, but nothing more.

Finally, if we accept the 'thin' thesis, then it is clear that in this realm of confrontation between different and competing rival ethical codes there is great scope for tragic outcomes. Actors will often find themselves in situations where they are ethically required to act in ways which they know will bring disaster upon them. The ethical norms in the practices within which they find themselves may well compel them to behave in ways that will have very adverse consequences for them given that others do not have the same ethical commitments and given that, *vis-à-vis* those others, they are acting in the realm of naked power. For example, nationalist groups who are weaker than the groups ranged against them might feel themselves compelled by their nationalist ethic to enter into a war to protect their national values knowing that they are likely to lose that war.²⁰

20 Something like this inspired the Finns to go to war with Russia in World War II.

Similar predicaments might beset religious believers in an international environment that is strongly secular. In these cases the actors can either remain faithful to the requirements of their ethical codes or they can surrender their core values for pragmatic reasons. The role of ethical argument in solving the conflict will be limited.

On the account that I have given above, the international domain appears to be one condemned to the repetition of power struggles and clashes between rival ethical positions. The main disciplines focused on the analysis of the international domain focus on just these power struggles.²¹

In the light of the above we now need to confront the following paradoxes: First, as actors in international relations, we often frame our predicaments, explain their origins, determine our policy options and justify our choices, in ethical terms, as indicated at the outset. Yet, at the same time we view the international sphere as one that is minimally organized on ethical principles but is rather characterized by ongoing struggles of power. We appear to be living a contradiction. It would seem that our regular use of ethical language is deeply hypocritical and a mere disguise for the pursuit of self-interest. Second, in spite of the ubiquity of ethical language in portraying the international domain, the disciplines that study this domain focus their lenses on the political struggles in this area. We generally find that social scientists and historians appear to be interested in what might be called the 'physics of international motion'. Their focus is on questions about the causes of events, particularly those relating to war and peace, rather than on questions about what ought to be done in this domain.²² They focus not only on brute power but also on the

21 These include international relations, political science, political sociology, contemporary history, cultural studies, international law, business studies and so on.

22 Ironically, some of the most sophisticated theories that have emerged in recent times have declared themselves interested in ethical issues, but their interest is in the role ethics plays in the constitution of international power and the power struggles that have led to the emergence of certain ethical discourses as the dominant ones. The irony is that these theories are not interested in the ethical questions *per se* but in the power struggles that lead to their emergence and the empirical factors that influence the role they play in the constitution of the present day structures of international power. The theories that I refer to here are critical theory, post-structural theory and post-modern international theory. Critical theory has sought to show the role social theories play in constituting the social world within which we live. In particular, it seeks to show it is used to

complex and sophisticated power struggles that give (and have given) rise to certain dominant discourses. Readers of the texts written by such social scientists and newspaper pundits will have little sense of a sustained engagement with the analysis of international relations in ethical terms. They will have little sense of these authors taking on questions such as: What is a just war?, How should wars be fought?, When is humanitarian intervention justified? and so on. There may well be an ethical concern, but it is likely to be implicit rather than explicit. Overall, then, the professionals do not appear to hold much truck with our everyday concern and engagement with ethics in the international domain. Our everyday concern with such issues must then be taken to be naive, hypocritical or misguided.

TAKING THE ETHICAL TURN

This book takes issue with the position outlined above. It rejects the suggestion that the international domain is 'ethics-lite'. In what follows I attempt to show that the paradoxical position we find ourselves in arises from our having accepted a rather shallow understanding of the role of ethics in international affairs. These apparent paradoxes are dispelled if we advance to a more thorough grasp of the role of ethics in world affairs. In what follows I shall endeavour to make the case that, in order to participate in international relations, whether directly or relatively indirectly as an analyst, one cannot but be concerned with ethics at every point. What the argument will show is that hypocrisy is not to be found in those who purport to be concerned with the ethical dimensions of international interactions but quite the other way around; the hypocrites are those who purport simply to be interested in the imperatives of power politics. Their hypocrisy resides in the ways in which they conceal the fundamental ethical commitments which guide their actions both in theory-building and in policy-making.

Contrary to the commonplace assumptions discussed above, which suggest that international relations are best understood in

advance certain privileged interests. Using theory is a mode of deploying power. See Ashley 1987, p. 409. Post-structural theorists also focus on changing technologies of power and how these become embodied in forms of knowledge such as 'governmentality' that now stretch beyond the boundaries of states. See Jabri 2007.

power-political terms, I shall argue that ethical concerns are central to our participation in international interaction at every point. I shall make this case by presenting a way of understanding contemporary international relations which, instead of portraying the field as occupied by actors such as states and individuals, understood as entities that are primarily concerned with advancing their interests in a world of ongoing power struggles, I shall argue that the key actors, both states and individuals, are best understood as entities that are constituted as actors of a certain kind within specific global social practices each with its own internal ethical structure (constitution). I shall show how these constitutive practices are themselves underpinned by rather thick sets of ethical values which constrain in severe and complex ways the actions of the actors thus constituted. In these social practices, actors must always be (and, indeed, always are) concerned to maintain their ethically constituted status. Where they fail to maintain this, it results in the actors' loss of standing in the practice concerned. In order to maintain their status actors have to demonstrate in what they do and say that they are upholding the ethics internal to their constituting international practices. What emerges from this form of analysis is that an engagement with ethics is not an option for participants but is a precondition of their participation. This form of analysis shows ethics to be centre stage for all international actors, including that class of actors we know as 'scholar/experts' in the field.

I need to pause briefly to accentuate the claim that I am making here. On the argument to be offered below, to engage in international relations at all (and everyone of us does so in any number of different ways) is to make ethical claims for oneself and to recognize the ethical standing of others. This includes that form of engagement we know as the scholarly analysis of international affairs. To put forward an analysis is to do something that may be judged right or wrong from an ethical point of view. To get one's analysis of an international interaction wrong is, amongst other things, to be guilty of an ethical wrongdoing. This proposition, of course, applies to the analysis being given here, too.

How am I to make this case about the centrality of ethics to everything we do in international affairs? By what means can I demonstrate that, in participating in international relations, we, together with all the other participants, need to be understood as

actors fundamentally concerned about how our actions are being ethically appraised and as being fundamentally concerned with the ethical appraisal of the actions of others?

I shall do this by presenting a practice-based theory of international action. In terms of this theory we have to understand that international actors are constituted as such within global social practices which are underpinned by specific sets of ethical commitments. These constrain in a fundamental way what the actors thus constituted may do. Failure to abide by these constraints undermines the standing of the actors and, at the limit, results in their being excluded from these practices. Let me start then with a discussion of the relationship between actors, actions, practices and ethics.

SOCIAL PRACTICES, ACTORS AND ETHICS

The following analysis turns on the claim that to be an actor is to be a *participant* in a social practice. Thus, to be an international actor is to be a participant in a global practice. Crucially, being a participant in a social practice necessarily involves making evaluations about what, from an ethical point of view, it would be appropriate to do next. The analysis that follows turns on a particular understanding of the relationship between action, participation, social practices and ethics. This understanding is a general one and is applicable across all social forms from micro ones, such as families, meso ones, such as multinational corporations and beyond these to macro ones, such as global civil society and the system of sovereign states.

A participant in a social practice is an actor who, together with the other actors in the practice, acknowledges a complex set of rules which specify, amongst other things:

- who is qualified to be a participant
- what would count as disqualifying behaviour by a participant that would result in his/her exclusion from the practice
- what range of actions are available to qualified participants
- what actions are specifically disallowed to participants within the practice
- what procedures are appropriate for changing the rules of the practice
- what is to be done to those who flout the rules

- how to make an ethical evaluation of the history of interaction between the participants.

Crucially, for my present purposes, the participants in a social practice know what the ethical underpinnings of the practice are – these specify what the point and purpose of the practice are and what values are made possible within it. The ethical underpinnings specify what values are so fundamental to the participants in the practice that the flouting of these rules would result in the exclusion (excommunication, expulsion, ostracization) of actors who flout them.²³ Usually these fundamental ethical commitments are valued forms of mutual recognition that can only be had through participation in the practice in question.²⁴

A quick example can demonstrate the core features of social practices mentioned above. International diplomacy is a social practice. In order to be recognized as a participant in it, one has to meet certain criteria and go through rigorous processes of recognition. Meeting these conditions is a requirement that has to be fulfilled before one can participate as a diplomat. Diplomats have a range of widely understood actions open to them, such as presenting their credentials and executing *démarches*. They know what conduct is disallowed within the practice. An example of what is not allowed is spying. Underlying the complex of rules that constitute the practice is a sophisticated set of ethical values, to do with promoting the well-being of the system of states through avenues of clear communication and so on.²⁵ It is crucial for participants in this practice to know how to evaluate from an ethical point of view the history of interactions within the system leading up to the current period. Such an historical account will make ethical judgements about who did what,

23 Many practices create relationships between the participants which are of fundamental ethical value to them. For example, for many Roman Catholics being a member of the church is not a means to an end but is of value in itself. Excommunication would, for such people, be an ethical disaster.

24 In families the core value is the value we attach to being recognized as a member of the family; in universities it is the value we attach to being recognized as a practising academic; in states it is the value we attach to being recognized as a citizen; and so on.

25 For a traditional account of the diplomatic practice see Nicolson, 1961, Anderson, 1993.

to whom and why, in the run-up to the present. Such an account must necessarily specify who, in this historical process, was wronged and who was not. A diplomat who was not able to do this would not be able to participate in this practice.

Having introduced the essentials of practice theory, we now need to ask: How do we know of any group of people whether or not they are participants in a social practice? How are we to determine where one practice ends and another begins? How do we know whether the people in a group are engaged in a single practice or whether they are simultaneously participating in a number of different practices? Most importantly, how do we determine what ethic is embedded in any given practice?

In brief, we know that a social practice exists through noting the existence of a pattern of claims and counterclaims between a group of people – by noting what they say about their own actions and about the actions of others. The existence of a social practice is indicated where between the members of a group of people we notice, through what they do and say, that they acknowledge the pertinence of a common set of criteria for appraising one another's actions. For example, you as an observer might notice that I, as an academic, acknowledge in a number of different ways that my actions may properly be appraised by other academics in terms of a set of criteria commonly recognized amongst us. You might find that my colleagues and I recognize rules pertaining to research practices, the use of sources, the testing of findings and the publication of the results of my research. It is our common recognition of the 'rules of the academic game' that identifies us to you as participants in the practice of academic life. My adherence to these determines my standing within the practice. That I am a participant is indicated by the vulnerability I display towards criticisms from my fellow participants in terms of these settled norms of academic life. The set of criteria binding participants in this (and other) social practices has a more or less clear border. The border is indicated by those criticisms of others to which we pay no attention – to the criticisms that we take as not being relevant to us. For example, my status as an academic is not at all vulnerable, to put it glibly, to the criticisms of 'flat earthers', members of cults based on superstition and so on. Similarly, participants in the practice of chess are vulnerable to the criticisms of fellow chess players who acknowledge a core set of

settled norms of chess, but they are not vulnerable to those who might criticize them from the point of view of some other game. A final example is provided by the participants in the global market. They are vulnerable in what they do and say, to the criticisms of fellow participants in the market – to those who appraise their actions in terms of a key set of settled norms. They are not vulnerable to evaluations offered by communists and others who reject markets, *tout court*.

In summary, then, a practice exists where we find people offering to one another explanations and justifications for what they do by referring to a commonly accepted set of ‘rules of the game’.²⁶ As already indicated, this feature of social practices, the vulnerability of participants to the criticism of other participants, implies the existence between them of mutually recognized maxims, rules and norms in terms of which they make their justifications and criticisms. These need not be rules or norms that are overtly articulated. They may simply be tacitly understood. Participants show their understanding of such rules by knowing what counts as getting a particular action right and what would count as having made a mistake in the execution of the action. In order to become a participant in a practice a person has to learn what the constitutive rules, norms and maxims of the practice are, for these determine who is to count as a legitimate participant and what is to count as appropriate conduct within the practice. Appropriate conduct in turn determines one’s standing as an actor in the practice in question.

It is central for the purposes of this book that we take note of the following insight of practice theory. When seeking to understand a practice it is important to ascertain from what people say about it (whether it be a family, a church, a sport or a corporation) what the underlying ethic of that practice is. For in all practices the participants hold to some underlying ethic which justifies the ‘rules of the game’ seen in the round. *It is this internal ethic which enables them to make sense of what they do within the practice.* In what follows I shall use the following phrases interchangeably to refer to the internal ethic of social practices: internal ethic, background ethical theory, ethical foundation and ethical basis.

The relationships between participants within any social practice are quite different to those which obtain between actors who are not

26 We might also refer to these as ‘settled norms’.

participating in such a common practice. A hypothetical example can illustrate this point. Consider the relationships that might hold between the members of an expeditionary force to a foreign place and the people they might encounter there. Suppose they stumble across a gathering of such 'foreigners', but do not know what they are doing. They find that they do not know how to respond to what may, or may not be, criticisms from these people. This would be a clear case where we would say that there was no social practice incorporating both the members of the expeditionary group and the foreigners. We would have to say that the two groups were simply *encountering* one another, rather than *participating* (or *interacting*) in a common social practice. In such an encounter the people from both groups would no doubt experience incomprehension, bewilderment and confusion. They would be akin to explorers encountering a foreign tribe in the way that the Spaniards encountered the Aztecs and the Incas when they first arrived in South America. A central theme of this book, then, is that contemporary international relations are not properly understood if they are understood as a set of encounters. They are better understood as a set of interactions. This requires practice theory.

All of us are normally simultaneously participants in a large number of social practices, such as families, churches, schools, universities, political parties, corporations and states, to mention but a few. The relationship between these multiple practices is complex, subject to ongoing change and often contentious. Participation in some of them is a prerequisite for participation in others. In some cases the opposite is true, participating in one practice rules out the possibility of bona fide participation in others.²⁷ Over time, some practices may have formed the foundation for subsequent more sophisticated practices.²⁸ For the moment, I have said enough to indicate in a general way what a social practice is and how one might go about determining that one exists. I have also indicated how participation requires knowledge of and adherence to the background ethic embedded in it.

27 Ongoing membership of the Roman Catholic Church precludes any possibility of a person converting to Judaism and vice versa.

28 For example, participation in the practice of reading is a prerequisite for entry into to the practice of university life.

Let us now return to our specific focus, international relations. Are there any international practices that involve most people in most places? By paying attention to the claims and counterclaims that we make upon one another in the global context, it is abundantly clear that there are at least two international practices. The one we might call global civil society (GCS) and the other the society of sovereign states (SOSS). Their existence is indicated by the fact that for each we acknowledge a body of settled rules, norms and maxims, which together establish who is to count as a participant, what array of permissible actions are available to participants, what actions are prohibited, what countermeasures are appropriate in the face of transgressions, how new rules may come into being and so on. Worldwide we find actors using these settled norms to grant one another valued standing as actors of a certain kind, to act in certain permitted ways, to justify their actions in well-known terms, to criticize wrong action on the part of other actors and to defend their own actions in the light of the criticism of others. The participants in this practice (that is, us) also, in some measure, know and understand the values that implicitly underpin the total set of settled norms. They criticize those who seek to undermine these. They show themselves to be vulnerable to such criticism coming from other actors in the practice.

Crucially, in these, as in other practices, participants (those who have been constituted as actors in them) must always be concerned about the 'fit' of their actions with the underlying ethic of that practice. As participants they have to scan the conduct of others and their own past and future conduct in order to determine whether or not their actions are appropriate to the underlying ethic embedded in these practices.

In the normal course of events securing the fit is easy and straightforward. In everyday international conduct the fit between action and the underlying ethic is present in an uncontentious way. Thus, in the system of sovereign states, for example, when two or more states sign a free trade agreement (such as NAFTA) the participants understand that doing this kind of thing fits with the ethical values embedded in the inter-state practice within which they are participating. This is the kind of thing that states are authorized to do within the practice of sovereign states. This is ethically justifiable conduct. Similarly, when individual rights holders buy and sell

products to one another in the global practice of civil society, the actors recognize that this is the kind of thing authorized by the ethic underlying the practice, although there are well-known limits on the class of things it is ethically appropriate to buy and sell. Selling people is outside this limit. Similarly, members of international practices know the range of actions that are ethically inappropriate to these practices. For example, when the officers of a state squirrel away public money into private bank accounts, there is widespread recognition by the other participants that this conduct is inappropriate in terms of the basic ethic of the practice of states. The miscreants know this, too, and go to lengths to conceal their deeds, for they well understand the public criticism that would come their way if their deeds became publicly known.

To repeat the central point, understanding what is deemed ethically appropriate conduct is a prerequisite for participation in social practices, including our international ones. Those who do not understand the embedded ethic risk acting inappropriately and thus risk exclusion, ridicule, punishment and often laughter from the other participants. To use an extreme example, even the rumours that Idi Amin 'President for Life' in Uganda and 'Emperor' Bokassa in the Central African Republic ignored the ethic embedded in the practice of sovereign states that eating one's fellow citizens is wrong resulted in their being internationally ostracized and ridiculed.

We have seen then that international actors are, simply by virtue of their status as actors in international practices, vulnerable to ethical criticism from their fellow participants. This vulnerability arises from the fact that the actors are constituted as such through the recognition accorded them by their fellow participants. The recognition is granted or withheld according to whether or not the actors uphold the fundamental ethic embedded in the international practices. This vulnerability to ethical appraisal by the other participants is not dependent on the actors' power. Superpowers are as vulnerable as small powers. The process of ethical appraisal is ongoing for all actors in social practices throughout the different phases of participation, which include: appraising the context of action, considering options, justifying the choice of option and the carrying out of decisions arrived at.

There is an alternative way of expressing what I have outlined

above. We may say that the rules, maxims, principles and the background ethic which supports them, taken together, create the conditions of possibility (COP) for a range of different actions by a specific actor in a given situation. A state deciding on a foreign policy within the practice of sovereign states has a range of policy alternatives open to it within the ethical COP created by that practice. For example, Britain has the option of strengthening its ties with the EU or not, strengthening the 'special relationship' with the USA or not, or some combination of these. All of these options may well be within the COP set down by the ethical constraints within the practice of states. It is not the case that the ethic embedded in a social practice only authorizes a single action as ethically appropriate in a given context. I am not making the case for structural determinism. The ethic makes possible a range of actions and sets the limits of that range. The ethic, together with its associated laws, rules and principles, creates an area of freedom for actors.

I call the approach to the analysis of international relations that I am outlining here 'constitutive theory'.²⁹ It focuses attention on how the key actors in international relations are constituted as such through the mutual recognition they give one another in terms of a standard set of 'rules of the international game'. More specifically it focuses on the ethical background theory which justifies the whole set of rules which constitute the practice. Constitutive theory is a particularly important mode of analysis because it brings to light that actors within a given social practice (or set of social practices) are constituted not just as actors but as ethical actors subject to ethical conditionalities. Their standing as actors depends on their adherence to a given set of ethical preconditions. Consider a state that never honoured its treaty commitments and often breached the requirements of international diplomatic protocol. Such a state would no longer be deemed a sovereign state in good standing within the international community of states. It might be termed a *pariah* or a

29 I first developed constitutive theory in Frost 1986 a work in which I sought to apply some of the core insights taken from GWF Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, but without relying on Hegel's metaphysics Hegel 1973. This was reworked and extended in Frost 1996. I produced a further elaboration of constitutive theory in Frost 2002.

rogue state.³⁰ Let me briefly reiterate what distinguishes constitutive theory from other forms of social theory. In the first place it is a *holist* form of analysis. It starts from the assumption that we cannot make sense of human action and interaction without paying close attention to the social practices within which these take place. In order to do this we need to have an *insider perspective*. We need to understand the criteria actors use in interpreting and criticizing their actions and those of others. This highlights the importance of *understanding* rather than mere observation. Part of what is involved in this is paying attention to the forms of *reciprocal recognition* that we encounter within social practices. These stipulate criteria that determine who is to count as a participant in good standing and what would count as adequate reason to expel a participant from a practice. It focuses, thus, on how through such modes of mutual recognition we constitute one another as actors of a certain kind. A further key feature of constitutive theory is its focus on individual actors who are simultaneously constituted in multiple social arrangements that relate to one another in interesting and complex ways. Taken together these practices form the social architecture within which we are constituted as who we are. As these social practices evolve and change tensions emerge within this architecture. Of particular interest are the ethical tensions that arise from time to time.

POWER, POLITICS AND ETHICS

In the preceding section I have made the point that in order to become a participant in a social practice we need to be constituted as an actor in good standing within the practice. This involves learning the rules governing action within that practice (we might call these colloquially ‘the rules of the game’ even though many social practices are not games) and learning the ethic that underlies them.³¹

30 Consider an example from football. Imagine a very talented player who consistently cheated and flouted the rules of the game. No matter how good a player he was, no matter how ‘strong’ he was as a player, he would cease to be recognized as a player in good standing within the practice of football. It is easy to think of similar examples from any social practice whatsoever.

31 An alternative metaphor here might be taken from the practice of sailing where one talks of ‘learning the ropes’.

Within social practices actors always have a range of options open to them within the ethical conditionalities imposed on them.³² The practice creates areas of freedom for the participants.

Within any, and all, social practices, including international ones, actors with differing skills, different temperaments, different aims and ambitions, will make different uses of the options available to them within them – we might say that they will make different uses of the freedoms they have within those practices. Some will use them to their own advantage and will accumulate social power through their astute actions. Others will make bad choices with negative consequences for their long-term well-being. Whatever the rules in a given social practice, they will benefit some actors with certain natural attributes more than others. For example, in the practice of states, states that are rich in natural resources may well be able to prosper in ways not open to states less well endowed. Similarly, states that are well governed may prosper in ways that poorly governed states do not. Actors may use their advantages to form alliances with other astute actors in their respective practices, thus accumulating social power which they might then use to advance their own interests. They will accumulate that form of power that comes from acting in concert. The ethical constraints within practices are not antipathetic towards the accumulation of power *per se*; they merely set ethical limits to how this might legitimately be done. The common perception, discussed in the opening section of this book, that the international domain is one characterized by the pursuit of power by states, need not be read as indicating that this is a field in which ethical constraints do not have a hold on actors. Quite the contrary, in terms of the present analysis, we might say that the actors that pursue power in international relations are actors who are socially constituted and are, as such, ethically constrained. As actors of a certain kind they are required to seek power subject to the ethical constraints embedded in the practice. So, sovereign states, within the practice of sovereign states, are free (ethically authorized) to make arrangements with one another in order to advance what they consider their interests to be. The states of Southern Africa, for example, have formed the Southern African Customs Union. Its

32 This is a defining feature of what is involved in being an actor at all. To act is to initiate a deed from within a range of possibilities.

success has afforded to it power and prestige not enjoyed by states in the region which are not members. Within SACU, of course, the member states are still subject to the ethical constraints operative in the practice as a whole.

It has been pointed out that those who seek to maximize their power in international affairs (and in other spheres) are constrained by ethical considerations embedded in the practice of international relations. It is, however, important to stress that this does not mean that the actors are not *able* to flout the constraints. The constraints are not physical laws which dictate what is possible in the way that laws of gravity dictate the behaviour of a falling apple. The constraints of a practice can be flouted, but doing this will undermine the recognition accorded the actor and will thus affect his/her/its ethical standing. Were a state within the SACU to fail to honour the terms of its agreement with the other states of SACU, this would undermine its standing as an international actor.

In like manner, within all social practices it is possible to use the menu of ethical options available to one to pursue *political* ends. There are many different definitions of 'politics', but for my present purposes let me define 'politics' as 'action within a practice directed towards changing the fundamental rules of association'. An example of politics would thus be efforts to change the voting procedures in the UN Security Council. Another example of politics would be found in the efforts in the UN directed towards improving the procedures for dealing with humanitarian crises. Most social practices provide for ways of conducting politics that do not flout the ethical conditions of possibility of the actors doing the politics. Thus, within the existing international practices, the UN provides a forum for conducting politics within the ethical constraints imposed by these practices. International law specifies a number of ways in which new international law may be made and old law changed. It is, of course, possible that in pursuing political goals actors may well infringe the ethical constraints imposed on them. Obviously, this will undermine their standing within the relevant practice. For example, the contemporary international order provides a set of conflict resolution techniques to be used by states involved in disputes about borders. States that seek to resolve the issue by immediate resort to force are flouting the ethic of the international practice of sovereign states. Such action will bring down on the offending

state a spate of international condemnation, which may well lead to action against it, as happened in the first war against Iraq in 1991.

Without extending this discussion too much, let me say a little more about the relationship between actors, action and social power. All social power derives either from actors acting in concert with the deliberate aim of reaching certain goals (as has happened in Europe, for example, through the creation of military alliances such as NATO) or from the structural effects of people following certain social rules over time. Structural power becomes manifest, for example, in the ongoing functioning of an economic market – some get rich and some remain poor. Who ends up rich or poor does not simply depend on individual effort, but depends on the structural position of participants in the market place. Those who start with capital (including educational capital) are more likely to end up rich than those who start with none. Those who are rich often turn out to have considerable social power simply by virtue of their social position. There is a vast literature dealing with the niceties involved in the analysis of power.³³ While these are interesting for specialists, they are not crucial for my current purposes. What is important for the present argument is that we note that all analyses of social power can only be launched once we have understood the deed or deeds of actors who have standing, including ethical standing, in some or other social practice within which they are constituted as actors of a certain kind. Thus it is that the kind of power that comes from the concerted action of states in treaty-based organizations can only be put together by states who have standing as sovereign states within a system of sovereign states. Maintaining this standing, the standing of being a participating state, requires general adherence to the ethical constraints internal to the system of states. Of course, within social practices like the SOSS some states might, from time to time, seek to flout the rules and ethical constraints, but this is a risk that can only be done occasionally. Similarly, within an economic practice the structural effects come from actors reiterating again and again the actions they are entitled to undertake within the marketplace – of particular importance here, of course, are the acts of buying and selling. To be a participant (a buyer or seller) one has to be in good standing within the global

33 See for example Lukes 1974 for a powerful introduction to a complex subject.

market place. Cheating, although possible, can only be done from time to time.³⁴

THE PRIMACY OF ETHICS

We have seen then that the primary goal of a participant in a social practice, *qua* participant, must be to maintain his/her/its standing as a participant in that practice. This is primarily an ethical goal. It is 'ethical' in that it involves the participants inter-subjectively valuing one another as actors of a certain kind through adherence to rule-governed patterns of reciprocal recognition. The maintenance of the standing thus created is a precondition for whatever else the actor may wish to achieve within that practice. Maintaining status as a participant requires that actors correctly appraise the ethical constraints applicable to their status and that they do not fall foul of these. Passing this ethical test is crucial, for to fail it, is to lose standing within the practice and, at the limit, to be excluded from it. Consider some simple illustrations of this: For those seeking to maintain their standing as arbitrators in processes of international arbitration it is crucial that in what they do they remain true to the ethic embedded in the arbitration practice. A special envoy of the UN in order to maintain his/her status must remain true to the ethical underpinnings of that office. Similarly, a diplomat seeking to negotiate a treaty must maintain his/her good standing in the practice of diplomacy.³⁵

In international relations, as in other social practices, actors are vulnerable to ethical appraisal by their fellow participants on an ongoing basis and through all the phases of an action. What aspects of an actor's activities are open to criticism include: an actor's analysis of a situation, the explanation of how it came about, the choice of

34 Rule-breaking and cheating of all kinds is only open to a few participants in any social practice and then only every now and again. Rule-breaking is parasitic on most people, being rule-abiding most of the time.

35 Examples can be adduced from any social practice whatsoever. In order to achieve one's goals in sport one must maintain one's status as a player in good standing; in order to achieve one's goals in a religious practice one must maintain one's good standing as a Buddhist, Christian or Hindu; in academic practice one must not abuse the ethical codes of academic life (truth-seeking, the anti-plagiarism rule and so on).

policy options, the justification of the chosen option and the execution of that option. All these are open to ethical appraisal by the actor's co-participants. There is no way in which one can make oneself secure against such appraisal in some permanent physical sense. Practice theory requires of us that we adopt an ethics-based understanding of security. At the heart of the matter is this: What has to be maintained here is inter-subjective ethical approval. The approval sought has to be sought and maintained in the public domain of the practice in question (it cannot be secured in some private deal on the side). The most devastating manoeuvre that can be delivered against a co-participant in a social practice is to be de-constituted as a participant, to be expelled, excommunicated, ostracized, ousted and so on. This ethical de-constitution or decommissioning of an actor is achieved not by some feat of physical force but by making the case that the actor has fallen foul of one or more constitutive norms – by showing that the immanent ethic of the practice has been severely breached through the action in question.

Because the process of ethical appraisal is so fundamental to our participation in social practices it ought not to surprise us that a lot of conflict in the practices of international relations can be construed as argument (in a very broad sense of the term) directed at securing a positive ethical appraisal for the participants' actions. While the ethical dimensions of interaction are always present in international relations, ethical disputes come to the fore in abnormal situations that present the actors with what might be termed 'hard cases'.

Before looking at such cases more closely, it is important to note that most actions in our international practices are ethically uncontentious. Day in and day out people, either as individuals or as collective actors (states, churches, multinational corporations), participate in our international practices in any number of uncontentious ways. They trade, migrate, tour, make financial deals, communicate (mail, phone, email, fax), undertake international sporting tours, engage in study abroad programmes and so on.³⁶ In these

36 Similarly, in other social practices the normal run of actions is ethically uncontentious – in universities academics get on with teaching and research, football players play football and so on. When they do these things, they automatically, as a matter of course, follow the ethic embedded in the social institution within which they are participating.

mundane actions the participants are simply able to rely on and take for granted the ethical soundness of both their own actions and those of others. The ethical soundness of the transactions is taken for granted. No conscious thought about the ethical dimensions of what they are doing is required.³⁷ However, even in these everyday ethically contentious actions, it is crucial that the actors know what the ethical constraints are. In order to act in an ethically contentious way, they need to know what would count as a wrongdoing on their own part or on the part of others. This comfortable state of affairs, though, is ruptured in those 'hard cases' where disputes arise about what is ethically required in the circumstances. Such difficult cases often emerge where there is a political dispute, that is, where there is a dispute about a fundamental rule(s) in the practice in question. This happens, for example, when there is a dispute about whether to intervene in the domestic affairs of another state. This can be understood as a dispute about the fundamental non-intervention rule of the practice of states. It is a political dispute.³⁸ Here one might expect argument to ensue about the ethical appropriateness of an interventionist action. Here the very stuff of the political dispute is an ethical matter – what the politics are about are ethical disputes. This needs to be elucidated.

Here are some contemporary examples of the ways in which we have to, and indeed do, understand many contemporary international interactions in ethical terms. When President George W. Bush launched operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan he was not simply authorizing his military forces to attack the Taliban (although he was doing this). Beyond unleashing his forces, he was wanting his action to be understood as the conclusion of an ethical argument that started with a wrong that had been done to the USA by the Jihadi who had flown their planes into targets in the USA on

37 The reader is invited to consider all the many mundane actions with an international dimension that he or she has done today and to consider the ethical assumptions that undergirded them. Examples might include telephoning, buying things, touring, reading, surfing the web or selling one's labour. All of these are ethically constrained, but for the most part we adhere to the constraints as a matter of course, without a second's thought.

38 Recall the definition of politics discussed earlier where politics was defined as thought and action among participants about the fundamental rules in terms of which they are associating.

9/11; this was backed up by other arguments that referred to a set of ethical values embodied in the constitution of the USA, to the values built into international law, to standards that condemn the use of terror as a means of conflict which in turn highlighted the ways in which the use of such means wrongfully harms innocent people, and so on. The military action by the coalition of the willing was framed in such a way that it was not merely to be understood as a deployment of force but was to be seen as a forceful action that the actors (the USA and its allies) wished to have interpreted in a very specific ethical way.

Similarly, the hijackers on 9/11, the Mujahidin and all the fellow travellers that sympathized with them did not want what they did to be interpreted merely as the deployment of force against the USA and its allies. They did not simply launch manned missiles at their targets (although, of course, they did this), but they sought to have the deed carry a certain meaning to the international audience.³⁹ The actors wished this to be interpreted in a specific ethically charged way. The act was a statement that needed interpretation. A key component of the ethical justification put forward by Al Qaeda and other groups sympathetic to it was a religious one referring to the tenets of Islam. These certainly carried no conviction for people not of the Islamic faith. However, parallel to this justification were a number of other arguments that have found resonance with many people worldwide. These referred to alleged injustices perpetrated against Muslims by despotic regimes, several of which have been supported by the USA and its allies. They also referred to the use of double standards by the USA and its allies in many parts of the world. The allegations of 'double standards' referred to the way in which notionally the USA and others stood for the promotion of democracy and the protection of human rights, but in many cases these values were not upheld, particularly in those cases where they were over-ridden by material interests.⁴⁰ There were also arguments about the injustice of the USA's uncritical support for the policies of Israel against the Palestinians and so on.

Here is a further example of what I mean when I claim that in

39 On the need to interpret international affairs in terms of meaning see Laidi, 1998.

40 For a discussion of some of these see Devji, 2005.

such hard cases international action is best understood as 'ethical argument broadly construed?' In a *New York Times* article headed 'The Long-Term Battle: Defining "Victory" Before the World', Steven Erlanger states

As Israeli troops press the ground offensive in southern Lebanon, Israel is fighting now to win the battle of perceptions.⁴¹

In the meat of the article he makes the case that the Israeli government and those who support it internally and externally are taking great pains to present what they are doing in one ethical way rather than another. The case that they wish to make is that the ground offensive is not to be understood as an act of aggression against Lebanon or against the Palestinian people in Lebanon generally. Rather they wish to present it as an ethically justified act of self-defence against the movement Hezbollah. The opponents of Israel are, of course, seeking to push exactly the counterargument. They argue that what Israel is doing is ethically unjustified because it is an act of aggression, using disproportionate force against innocent people. The dispute here is not about the gloss to be put on an action, it is about the nature of the act itself.

A large component then of the conflictual activity in international relations consists in an ongoing struggle to promote one kind of ethical account (interpretation) of one's actions and policies rather than another. This is not something unusual in international affairs, nor is it something added on, as an afterthought, to the normal aims of actors in the field. For participants in the international practices of our time this struggle is always important. As indicated above, sometimes in everyday matters an actor knows that his own ethical standing and the status of his actions is uncontentious both for himself and for the others with whom he is interacting. In such cases the actor does not have to be concerned about how he himself or his deeds are being ethically appraised. He simply knows himself to be on ethically firm ground. The more difficult cases such as those discussed above are not like this at all. In these, the ethical case has to be made. These are the hard cases.

All actors in international affairs seek to have their actions

41 *New York Times* 3rd August 2006.

interpreted in ethical terms. Israel has to make the case in its words and deeds that what it is doing is ethically acceptable to the international audience. If it fails in this, this will have severe consequences internationally. If it fails, there will be widespread international condemnation of what it has done. In the eyes of other states it will move towards pariah status. This condemnation is not merely rhetorical but will have consequences for its social, political, economic and military position in the world.⁴² The government of a state not only has to present what it is doing as ethical to the international audience but it has to make the ethical case to its own domestic audience too.

For a further example of how fundamental ethical concerns are in our international interactions, consider the dispute between the Russian government and the Chechen nationalist movement which has played itself out over the past decade and a half. Throughout what was often a bloody and cruel conflict, various Chechen separatist groups sought to show up the Russian government's policies and actions towards Chechens as oppressive, as abusive of human rights, as denying to the Chechens their right to self-determination and as a form of state-backed terrorism. In the first Chechen War many Russian soldiers (including high-ranking officers) disputed the rightness of using excessive force against people who were Russian citizens. For a time there was some sympathy in Russia and abroad for the claims of the Chechens. But their claims encountered a rival set of claims. The Russian government claimed that the Chechen separatist groups were terrorists, that they abused human rights, that they sought to undermine the legitimate sovereign authority of the Russian state. Both sides in this dispute directed their arguments to both their domestic audiences and to the international audience. There are several things we need to notice in this and other such cases. The dispute – the argument – was not merely a verbal one, although, of course, it was that. Neither was it merely a physical one of force against force. The verbal propositions put forward to the domestic and international audience by all parties were closely tied

42 Such consequences became manifest when South Africa, Chile, Rhodesia, Libya and others found themselves outcasts within the international community of states. The ethical appraisal had very real results for these states. See Geldenhuys, 1990.

to the violent deeds committed. By moving beyond mere words, the actors sought to show that they were in earnest about the arguments they were advancing. The actions, even the violent ones, must be understood as part and parcel of the case being made.⁴³ In the sphere of ethics a failure to act on what one professed would be a ground for doubting the argument put forward. A government that presented the argument that Al Qaeda was a terrorist group but failed to take anti-terrorist action would be inviting the audience to doubt its overall position. It would be held guilty of merely paying lip service to an ethical position of anti-terrorism. Similarly, an actor that vocally defended a human rights-based position but did not follow through with acts appropriate to that position would not be taken seriously. As things currently stand President Putin has successfully sidelined the separatists whom he argues are radical fundamentalist terrorists who oppose the moderate form of Sufism followed by the Islamic majority in the area. It is not my goal to present the historical details of this conflict. The example is used simply to illustrate that even in one of the most brutal of recent civil wars the ethical dimension is crucial at every point. To understand what the participants say and do we need to have views on the following ethical questions: Who is the legitimate authority? Who is employing legitimate means to promote its goals? Who is the terrorist?

Consider yet another example: Where a state or group of states professes itself to be in favour of free markets and where it defends this position with reference to a number of well-known liberal arguments but does not follow up this profession of a commitment to liberal values with support for the current round of WTO negotiations but instead seeks to maintain tariffs that protect local interests (e.g. farming interests), then we would be inclined to say that its ethical defence of liberal values was a sham.

A final case that demonstrates the point being made concerns migrants who sought entry into Australia under the 1951 Refugee Convention. The refugees claimed that they faced persecution in Indonesia and that they sought protection of their rights in Australia. They rested their case on an international legal instrument to which Australia is a signatory. That legal instrument itself is based on

43 The turn to violence does not mark the end of the attempt to present an ethical case to the world, but must be understood as a different way of making the case.

strong ethical arguments indicating the flaws of tyranny and the good to be found in human rights protection. The asylum seekers did not merely make a verbal argument justifying their stance but their actions in taking to boats en route for Australia were guided by the argument. By boarding boats and fleeing to Australia they demonstrated to the international audience that what they were doing was congruent with what they professed. For its part the Australian government claimed that the claims made by these 'refugees' were bogus – that they presented themselves as threatened with rights abuse whereas they were in fact economic refugees. This rhetorical position then became embodied for a while in a series of policy measures which included diverting the boats with refugees to a number of Australian islands which, through executive *fiat*, had been excised from the migration zone of the Australian state.⁴⁴ Here once again, in the confrontation between the antagonists, both put to the international audience their verbal arguments backed and supported by their deeds. The audience, the total international community, was in effect asked to determine who had the best of the ethical argument? The excising of parts of Australia from its migration zone meant that asylum seekers who landed in these excised territories lost rights that they might previously have claimed. The laws meant that asylum seekers could not automatically apply for refugee status and enabled Australia to move them to third countries (such as Nauru) who were paid a fee for receiving them.

These examples are illustrations of the way in which international actors may be seen as active in an ongoing way in the process of ethical appraisal outlined in the previous sections. On the view that I have advanced here, these actions, understood as arguments broadly conceived, do not represent some 'thin' aspect of international relations but must be understood as fundamental to the actors in question. They are 'fundamental' in that they pertain to how the actors

44 'This excising of Australia's migration zone meant that asylum seekers who landed in these excised territories lost rights that they would otherwise have been entitled to. The laws meant that asylum seekers could not automatically apply for refugee status and enabled Australia to move them to a third country while their applications were processed' (De Tarczynski 2008).

are constituted in international practices.⁴⁵ It is through these broad arguments that the actors attempt to maintain their standing in the relevant international social practices. Our ethical engagement, one may say, has to be 'thick' or 'substantial' at every point.

In general, then, my argument is that we often fail properly to engage with all the ethical dimensions of our international relations.⁴⁶ We might have noticed the ubiquity of ethical terms used when we give accounts of what happens in international affairs and in accounts of what we have done, but we have failed to realize just how fundamental these ethical justifications are to our participation in this realm. Instead, we have tended to see the domain as one in which ethics plays a minor role which is overshadowed by those of politics and power. Our self-understandings of what it is we are doing when we participate in international relations has been faulty. Later I shall show how this failure has given rise to some mistaken interpretations of events in world politics. These in turn have led to the adoption and pursuit of many ill-considered policies. Later I shall show how a particularly grievous example of this is to be found in many of the actions taken by a diverse range of actors with regard to the so-called 'global war on terror'. The morass of bewilderment and anguish into which this so called 'war' has plunged us has not come about because we have failed to identify the proper enemy, or because we have failed in intelligence gathering about the enemy, or because we have failed to deploy sufficient force, or because we lack political will, or because the 'enemy' is cleverer than we are but because we have failed to understand the phenomenon of international 'terror' in all its ethical complexity. This set of problems does not arise only for the so called 'West' but also besets the

45 The argument being offered here is one which opposes the view that states may be understood as autarkic actors who may or may not concede to being bound by a 'thin' set of ethical principles. On the view being presented here, to be a state is to occupy a status conferred by a social practice. Outside of the recognition conferred on a state by the other states in the practice a state-like entity is not a state. The people of Quebec might wish to form a state, but Quebec is not a state because it is not recognized as such within the practice of states. On the criteria for gaining recognition as a sovereign state see Brownlie, 1979.

46 I suggest that we would be less likely to do this were we to talk of 'international interactions' rather than 'international relations'.

'enemy', who are similarly subject to ethical misunderstandings and confusion.

As participants in international affairs we have been making a mistake in the way that we analyse what we do. The mistake, I have suggested, is that we have failed to understand just how international relations consist of an ongoing ethical engagement *within* a specific set of international social practices. We have failed to engage with sufficient sophistication with the *sittlichkeit* within which we are participating.

What would a good analysis look like? What difference would such an analysis make to our day-to-day participation in these practices? What changes would this approach recommend with regard to the discipline of IR? These are key questions in what follows.

UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN ETHICAL TERMS

The analysis presented above has been abstract and formal. The insights offered by practice theory as outlined above apply generally to all actors across the whole range of social practices. This includes families, schools, churches, corporations, states and the interstate system. Although I have given illustrative examples taken from the international domain, I have so far said little about the specific form and structure of our global international practices and about the struggles for ethical standing that takes place within them. Let me now turn to the international sphere with a view to demonstrating how this form of analysis can throw light on what we do and have done in our inter- and intra-practice international life.

As we have seen above, practice theory claims that in order to understand individual actions these have to be located in the broader context of the practices within which the actors are socially constituted. According to constitutive theory we have to pay particular attention to the ethical underpinning of these. How might we go about doing this? How does one determine the shape, form and ethical underpinnings of a practice within which one is already a participant? By definition as a participant one already knows some of the 'rules of the game'. Knowing these is a precondition for participation by any 'player' in any social 'game'. In order to fill out the details a participant must start with his own understanding of the

rules. This might be quite rudimentary. This understanding might then be supplemented by asking other participants for their understandings, referring to written rule books, asking learned commentators and so on. Another method might involve finding the rules by testing the limits of the practice. This might be done by trying out various courses of action in order to elicit praise and criticism from other participants. One might not agree with the criticisms offered by one's fellow participants and an argument about what is to count as a proper interpretation of the rules might then ensue. From such arguments a richer and more developed overall profile of the practice will emerge. Here is a hypothetical example about how such a testing procedure might work.

Minister of Defence: Would it be appropriate for me to authorize the launch of drones from our state to maintain surveillance over suspected terrorists in a neighbouring state?

International Lawyer responds: If this were done without the permission of the government of the neighbouring state, this would amount to illegal intrusion into the air space of a sovereign state.

Minister of Defence: But the neighbouring state is harbouring terrorists, which is not permitted in international law. (Refers to UN's International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings 1997) and other anti-terror conventions. This law is to prevent terrorists from undermining international law.

International Lawyer: The task of controlling such terrorists falls to the government of the sovereign state in which they operate.

Minister of Defence: When the government fails to do this then it is up to other states in the international community to intervene.

It is easy to see how such an argument would take the discussants into a thoroughgoing consideration of the core rules of the practice of states and a discussion of the ethical underpinnings of these rules. It is through such arguments that the complexities and limits of the practice may be explored. It is difficult to envisage an alternative procedure.

In order to do this in the international realm we have to undertake the following steps: First, we must examine the accounts that participants in the international domain give of their own conduct and the conduct of others. In these actions and reactions there are often competing accounts of what is being done. Our search must be for the most coherent of these. Second, we are to scrutinize their assessments for the terms that point towards the ethical criteria embedded in the constituting practices. Third, we need to construct an encapsulating ethical theory which enables us to make the best possible sense of the full set of ethical criteria identified in the previous step. Finally, we can then turn back to the original accounts given by the participants to see which of them best accords with the ethical theory thus constructed. This will enable us to determine who has fared well and who badly in the struggle for ethical standing in these international practices.

Central to every application of an ethics-centred approach to the analysis of international affairs is the identification of the global practices within which individual actors and actions are located. In the following sections I shall show how, through the close analysis of a single set of international interactions, we can construct a picture of the global practice, with its ethical foundations within which the interactions are taking place. This will then help us provide rich ethical interpretations of specific actions taking place in global politics. As an illustrative example of how this might be done, I shall discuss that set of international interactions we currently refer to as the war in Iraq.⁴⁷

The first step then is to determine what the actors themselves say they are doing. Constitutive theory suggests that the actors engaged in the current war in Iraq, in order to give an account of their actions, have to attend to the following ethical dimensions of their engagement: the ethical history of the state of affairs they are confronting (or which they confronted in the past) – this includes the series of actions and reactions that gave rise to the war; the

47 No particular significance ought to be read into this choice of example; any example from the realm of international events would do. One could refer to the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the ongoing conflict in Darfur in the Sudan, the disputes surrounding the Doha Round of the WTO, the international developments surrounding the war in Afghanistan, issues to do with migrants into the EU and so on.

ethical self-understandings of the key actors at the end of this history; an ethical assessment of the policy choices available to the actors; an ethical assessment of the policies chosen; an evaluation of the means of execution of the policies chosen; and an evaluation of the outcomes brought about as a result of the policies chosen. When combined into a single narrative these form the actor's appraisal of what is happening.⁴⁸ Of course, different actors might produce different appraisals of the same set of actions. By paying attention to these we can put together a comprehensive account of the global arrangements within which these disputes take place. Let us look at a range of appraisals of the current war in Iraq to demonstrate how the theory might be applied.

One such appraisal of this war is the Baker Hamilton Report (BHR). This was produced by the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan commission set up by Congress to take stock of the war and to recommend policy to the USA Administration. Let us consider this appraisal and then consider a range of rival assessments that were produced in reaction to it.

The Baker Hamilton Report (BHR) itself and the reactions to it are all interventions in the flow of activity that comprises the conflict. Interpreters of the conflict, although not themselves in the front line of the fighting, are nevertheless participants in the war. Through the production of their reports, the authors (and we who comment on them) are participating in the international practices within which the war is taking place. As indicated earlier, these acts of participation may be read as ethical arguments broadly conceived aimed at convincing our fellow participants of the ethical merits of the cases being made. In interpreting the reports that I set out below, we ourselves have to assess the ethical merits of the case(s) being made. Let us now turn to this task.

48 In what follows I use the words 'appraisal', 'account', 'assessment' and 'evaluation' interchangeably. In using these terms I follow customary usage according to which we use these terms to include elements of historical insight, contemporary understanding, social explanation, empirical description and ethical evaluation. When calling for an assessment of a situation one is calling for verbal statements that include elements of all of these. There is also a built-in assumption that the assessment should be as concise as possible.

WAR IN IRAQ UNDERSTOOD IN ETHICAL TERMS: THE BAKER HAMILTON REPORT AND OTHER INTERPRETATIONS

Let us attend closely to a portion of the executive summary of the BHR:⁴⁹

The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating. There is no path that can guarantee success, but the prospects can be improved. In this report, we make a number of recommendations for actions to be taken in Iraq, the United States, and the region. Our most important recommendations call for new and enhanced diplomatic and political efforts in Iraq and the region, and a change in the primary mission of U.S. forces in Iraq that will enable the United States to begin to move its combat forces out of Iraq responsibly. We believe that these two recommendations are equally important and reinforce one another. If they are effectively implemented, and if the Iraqi government moves forward with national reconciliation, Iraqis will have an opportunity for a better future, terrorism will be dealt a blow, stability will be enhanced in an important part of the world, and America's credibility, interests, and values will be protected. The challenges in Iraq are complex. Violence is increasing in scope and lethality. It is fed by a Sunni Arab insurgency, Shiite militias and death squads, Al Qaeda, and widespread criminality. Sectarian conflict is the principal challenge to stability. The Iraqi people have a democratically elected government, yet it is not adequately advancing national reconciliation, providing basic security, or delivering essential services. Pessimism is pervasive. If the situation continues to deteriorate, the consequences could be severe. A slide toward chaos could trigger the collapse of Iraq's government and a humanitarian catastrophe. Neighbouring countries could intervene. Sunni-Shia clashes could spread. Al Qaeda could win a propaganda victory and expand its base of operations. The global standing of the United States could be diminished. Americans could become more polarized. During the past nine months we have considered a full range of approaches for moving forward. All have flaws. Our recommended course has shortcomings, but we firmly believe that it includes the best strategies and tactics to positively influence the outcome in Iraq and the region.

49 Baker, Hamilton & others, 2006, pp. 6–8.

In this paragraph an assessment of the overall state of affairs is made and some policy recommendations are put forward. The ethical content of the assessment is to be found in the assertion that there is a democratically elected government facing violence emanating from, amongst other things, a 'Sunni Arab insurgency, Shiite militias and death squads, Al Qaeda, and widespread criminality. Sectarian conflict is the principal challenge to stability . . .'. Here the Iraqi government is framed as the ethically good actor. But, even though its ethical credentials are better than those of its adversaries, it is to be criticized for failing in its attempts at 'advancing national reconciliation, providing basic security, or delivering essential services'. Notice that these are ethical criticisms. These are to be read as the good things, ethically speaking, that the government ought to be doing. The goal for the US, the report says, ought to be to withdraw its troops responsibly and to give the Iraqi government an opportunity to achieve national reconciliation and establish a better future. These, too, are ethical goals. Beyond this the ethical goal of the USA is to strike a blow against terrorism, which is taken to be ethically noxious, to ensure stability and to bring it about that 'America's credibility, interests, and values will be protected'. A failure might result in governmental collapse in Iraq, a humanitarian disaster, intra-Islamic conflict, a victory for Al Qaeda and a loss of international standing for the USA. A central thing for us to notice here is that a failure to achieve these goals would result in the US's loss of moral standing. The USA, instead of being seen as the promoter of good things such as human rights and democracy, would be seen by the international community as the state that caused the collapse of a government and thus precipitated a humanitarian disaster.

Before moving on, let me repeat that this assessment creates, and is intended to create, a detailed ethical picture for us, the audience, who read it. Crudely put, the USA is presented as the 'good guy' trying to promote a democratically elected government facing the 'bad guys' who are the insurgents, militias, death squads, Al Qaeda and criminals. It can only do this by assuming that we, the audience for this report, are fellow participants in a common practice of ethical commitments.

The Baker Hamilton appraisal is, of course, not the only possible account of the situation prevailing at the time. Compare the assessment and recommendations of the BHR with a rival assessment,

with that provided by another participant in the war – this time one from the press. Matthew Parris in *The Times*, under the heading ‘I should welcome the Baker Report, so why do I feel sick?’ (Parris, 2006), appraises the report and a fortiori the situation in Iraq as follows:

It is shallow and dishonest. It shows how to weasel a way out of trouble and leave former friends to fall, undefended, by the wayside. It suggests how blame may be shifted onto hapless Iraqi ministers, and fatuous ‘milestones’ and ‘timetables’ concocted with a view to their being demonstrably missed. It explains how international conferences may be set up in order that they should fail. For Britain and the United States, Baker is now, with no shadow of doubt, the only way out. So is ‘Forward with James Baker III!’ to be my banner?

Well it should be. But something rises in my gorge at the moral and intellectual shabbiness of the exercise. If we have lost this war, and with it the likely capacity to forestall the vacuum that our defeat will surely leave behind, shouldn’t we just say so?

Only once do Baker and Hamilton engage with the cruelest question. They answer it quickly, flatly – and move on. ‘If,’ they say, ‘the Iraqi Government does not make substantial progress toward the achievement of milestones on national reconciliation, security, and governance, the United States should reduce its political, military, or economic support for the Iraqi Government.’ . . . the ISG report is really about a timetable for American withdrawal. The withdrawal is finally unconditional. Baker says so . . .

Notice, not only in James Baker’s but also in Tony Blair’s and George W. Bush’s remarks, a newly reproachful tenor in bewailing the Iraqi administration’s ‘failure to take control’ of militias or ‘root out corruption’ in the police. As though it could. As though the thought simply hadn’t occurred in Baghdad that this might be a good idea. As though that al-Maliki fellow just needs boxing about the ears to get up off his backside, reconcile his warring countrymen, find out who those shockingly corrupt policemen are and sack them – and then sort out the security situation. Goodness me – we never thought of that!

I do find this odious. Those in the Government in Baghdad are at their wits’ end and sinking: powerless to defeat what they hardly need Baker to tell them are the causes of the disaster unwinding on their doorsteps. They and their problems are the creation of British and

American policy and if Mr al-Maliki's Government cannot achieve what Britain and America want in Iraq, it ill-behoves us to establish (in Baker's phrase) 'milestones' for him to reach, to rail at him when he fails to reach them, and then to walk out in disgust at the lack of progress – as though only the Iraqi administration's foolish shortcomings had cheated the Forces of Freedom of victory . . .

In this column we are given an assessment of the ethical argument that was presented to us in the BHR. Parris suggests that the report paves the way for withdrawal, wrongly portrays the powers in the region as wanting peace, puts the blame for the instability on the government of Iraq and in no way makes mention of the USA and British role in causing this state of affairs. Throughout, there are a host of words used that in this context have an ethical dimension, including 'weasle', 'friends', 'fatuous', 'moral and intellectual shabbiness', 'blame', 'confected', 'set up to fail' and 'cynicism'.

The short version of the ethical argument presented by Parris is that the BHR seeks to set up the Iraqi government as being the party to blame for both the present set of problems and for what transpires after the USA withdrawal. A failure is anticipated and the ground is being laid for the apportioning of blame in the future. This is morally noxious, he says, because the civil war that pertains at the moment is largely the fault of the USA invasion in the first place.

Let us look at a third assessment of the same set of circumstances. After the production of the BHR and in the light of that report, the Administration of President George W. Bush drew up a new policy governing its engagement in Iraq. In some measure it accepted recommendations from BHR, but in other places it rejected them. The new Bush assessment, while accepting the needs for political and diplomatic efforts, still posited a role for a final military push in specified areas. It posited a need for what it called 'a surge' in forces prior to withdrawal. But it, too, cast the blame for the current civil war on insurgents and criminals. While not blaming the Maliki government, in power at the time, there were clear warnings to it that if it did not perform the USA would cease supporting it.⁵⁰

In its assessment of the same state of affairs, the Iraqi government

50 President Bush, 'The new way forward in Iraq'; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-3.htm>.

rejected the report for wrongly blaming it for the dire circumstances that pertained at the time. It refused to accept this blame.

A fifth assessment of the same set of events is to be found in the press sympathetic to Al Qaeda. It portrayed the situation in a different light, stressing that the USA must be seen as an occupying force in a sovereign state. It portrayed the USA and its allies as advancing a crusade against Islamic people both through its involvement in Iraq but also through their ongoing support of Israel.

In a sixth assessment the government of Iran advanced a different assessment of the BHR, saying that it was happy to become involved in a regional initiative to stabilize the situation. However, it indicated that it was only willing to do this if the USA was prepared to meet with it to have a serious discussion about the region as a whole. In an article in *Time Magazine* it was reported that

The Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki dangled an offer of cooperation in a statement published by an Iranian news agency. "Iran will support any policies returning *security, stability and territorial integrity* to Iraq," he said, "and considers withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq and leaving security to the Iraqi government as the most suitable option." In an interview on Al Jazeera, Mottaki added that if the U.S. needs an "honourable way out of Iraq," Iran "is in a position to help" (*Time Magazine*, 2006).

Here the Iranian Foreign Minister is portraying his country as being in a position to be a force for good (promoting security, stability and territorial integrity to Iraq) and offering the USA an honourable way out of its dilemma in Iraq – the suggestion being, of course, that dishonour is staring the USA in the face. Contrast this with the way in which Iran was portrayed in the BHR where it was said to be actively encouraging the instability in Iraq by supporting Shiite insurgents. In the Iranian assessment, again, as always, the appraisal is shot through with ethical judgements.

The first thing to note about all these appraisals about what was happening in Iraq, together with their suggestions about what ought to be done, is that they were not all agreed on a neutral description of the state of affairs that existed at the time. They did not all agree on some objectively determinable set of facts which 'existed on the ground' to which they each then added their own prescriptive

element. Instead, each presents us with a 'description' of the state of affairs that is, one might say, 'ethically drenched' from the outset. Instead of calling them 'descriptions' it is more accurate to say that what were presented to us, the international audience, were different appraisals, accounts, assessments or evaluations of the situation. A fundamental constituent of all of them was the ethical dimension.⁵¹ The appraisals we have looked at are shot through and through with ethical judgements about who is to blame for the current state of affairs, about whose moral burden it is to rectify them and about what would be ethically appropriate policies given the circumstances. In the face of these rival and conflicting appraisals, a key question now becomes: How are we to appraise these appraisals?

At this point a standard relativist response might be that we cannot appraise the appraisals. All we can do is note these different ethical 'takes' on the Iraqi conflict. We should take note of the different value slopes implicit in each of these analyses. There is no way to determine the 'right' one. The view that there is nothing more to be done arises from the idea that these value slopes are choices which the actors make – that they are subjective choices that are neither right nor wrong. These subjective choices are then used to frame the history, present conduct and future options of the key actors involved. On this account there can be no appraisal of the appraisals because this itself would simply be another subjective choice, another subjective appraisal.

In contrast to this view, the argument of this book is that, because these assessments are all made from *within* existing international social practices, no assessor is entitled to unilaterally define what the correct assessment of the situation should be. Because the practices themselves are inter-subjective realities, this gives us a vantage point from which we can evaluate and argue about rival assessments. Each one may be examined to determine the extent to which it coheres (or fails to cohere) with the ethicality that is embedded in the relevant global practice. In short, the individual assessments are open to public criticism within the social practice within which they are located.

Which of these assessments best meshes with the values implicit in the international practices within which these assessors are

51 The point can be even more strongly stated thus: No account of the situation in Iraq can be given which is ethically neutral.

constituted as international actors? We can only answer this once we have identified the relevant practices and have determined what their ethical underpinnings are.

To repeat this point which is at the very heart of the present argument: The rival assessments set out above are all offered by international actors constituted as such within the same global practices. The assessors are co-participants in these global practices. As such they are directing their evaluations at their fellow participants in these practices. At every point these assessors are engaged in an argument with one another. In this engagement they are constrained in the appraisals they are entitled to make by the ethical commitments embedded in the constituting practices. That they themselves are constituted as actors within these global practices gives us a vantage point from which we can evaluate their respective appraisals.⁵²

What then is, or are, the relevant global social practice(s) from within which we can evaluate these rival appraisers? Following from our earlier analysis of practices we know that the route to determining the existence of a practice and the identities of the participants in it is through an examination of the language that people use. Where there is a reciprocal vulnerability to criticisms in terms of certain sets of criteria, this indicates participation in a common practice. The criticisms identify who is to count as a legitimate actor, what menu of ethically appropriate actions are available to such actors and what list of actions are considered out of bounds and so on. The language reveals the self-understandings of the actors and these self-understandings reveal the parameters of the practice(s) within which they are constituted as actors.

52 It is important to note here that I am not simply making the case that the appraisers under consideration (the authors of the BHR, Matthew Parris, the Iraqi government, the Iranian government and the press sympathetic to Al Qaeda) are all constituted as actors in different social practices. Making this case would not give us any vantage point from which to evaluate the different appraisals. Instead, what I am claiming is that all the appraisers are participants in one or more *common* global practices. This opens the way for us to evaluate their appraisals in terms of a common ethicality. If they were not engaged in any common practices there could be no argument – there could be no assessment of their assessments. Instead, what transpired between them would have to be seen as a series of encounters that would be incomprehensible to the different parties.

The language use indicates who are to be taken as the legitimate actors in this 'war'. The language shows us, not surprisingly, that the actors whose conduct is being appraised are sovereign states within the society of sovereign states.⁵³ The actors making the appraisals are themselves participants, as citizens of sovereign states, in the practice of states. The assessments offered all draw on criteria which identify states (and the citizens in them) as legitimate actors. They all draw on criteria which specify what is to count as good conduct by citizens and states *vis-à-vis* one another. Some of the assessments drawing on these criteria point to insurgents, militias, Al Qaeda, death squads and criminals as people who have fallen foul of these criteria. They indicate that these actors have been disqualified from participation in this sphere of activity. Yet many of these 'wrongdoers' themselves rely on arguments which suggest that they, too, regard sovereign states as legitimate entities that are entitled to be autonomous and free of foreign occupation. They offer criticisms of specific actions of states such as the USA, Israel, Britain, Jordan and others that have fought in the coalition, but these criticisms indicate an assumption that normally sovereign states are legitimate and that the system of sovereign states itself is ethically sound. The argument is that in this specific case these states have behaved contrary to the appropriate norms.⁵⁴

In the assessments we have also been given ethical evaluations of actions undertaken and actions proposed. The BHR identifies the actions of the insurgents et al. as perpetrating violence, which is clearly to be understood as ethically unacceptable. It calls for the use of ethically acceptable force by the democratically elected Iraqi government against the insurgents. This is to be understood as police work which would make use of the legitimate deployment of

53 I say 'not surprisingly' because we are all participants in this practice and, as such, we recognize from the 'internal point of view' the practice that informs their analysis. We are not investigating a strange or foreign practice. We are not like anthropologists investigating the practices of a foreign tribe.

54 In his speeches Osama Bin Laden repeatedly makes reference to the USA as an 'occupier' and a 'crusader'. This is easily read as referring to the non-intervention norm in the practice of states. He says that there will be no peace until such time as the USA troops go home. Here again legitimacy is accorded to the boundary-maintenance commitments of the society of states. See his speeches on 2 July 2006 and 8 September 2006. Translations available at (Bin Laden, 2007).

violence. It recommends that the USA shift its military mission from overt military action to the training of the enforcement branches of the Iraqi government. This training is to be understood as being ethically acceptable.

In contrast, the Parris article offers a different ethical evaluation of past and proposed actions by the sovereign states involved. Where the BHR puts the blame on the Iraqi government for its failure to curb the violence by the insurgents and other groups, Parris admits that the Iraqi government has failed in this, but lays the blame for this failure on the USA and its coalition allies for causing the disastrous current situation in the first place. The newly formed government cannot be blamed for failing to control a set of circumstances not of its making. He also recommends that the USA leave, but thinks that failure by the Iraqi government is inevitable. He calls for an apology from the USA and the UK for having caused this carnage. They should simply accept their loss of face and standing in this set of interactions.

The assessment of the Iranian government accepts that the key players with ethical legitimacy are the governments of the states involved. The Foreign Minister's estimation is that an ethically acceptable outcome can be achieved, but that it will require the USA to give proper recognition to Iran and its government. This is the normal recognition that sovereign states are due. Then, through dialogue, the USA will be able to find a way to withdraw with honour.

In all of these appraisals of the situation and of the policy options open to the actors, there is a clear set of ethical moments: Each identifies the actors with good ethical standing (states) and distinguishes them from those that do not have it. The Al Qaeda point of view identifies the USA as a terrorist state, implying that other states are not. Each gives (or hints at) an account of the events leading up to the present state of affairs in which ethical praise and blame are allocated. Each plumps for an option which it portrays as the ethically sound one. These range from recommending withdrawal and putting the blame on the Iraqi government to recommending withdrawal and putting the blame on the USA and UK and, finally, to recommending withdrawal without blame.