

Charting the Ethics of the English School: What “Good” is There in a Middle-Ground Ethics?

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This article aims to advance our understanding of the development of English School thinking on international ethics by outlining three phases of ethical inquiry within the British Committee. The article argues that, throughout the life of the Committee, its outlook was conditioned by a pervading moral skepticism, which was reflected in the School’s commitment to a “middle-ground ethics”; however, at various times the Committee members’ views changed about how maximalist the “good” could be that oriented this ethical position. Awareness of this ebb and flow helps us better understand Hedley Bull’s characterization of the ethics of pluralism and solidarism within the School as well as the precise challenge contemporary English School theorists face if they are to move beyond the normative cul-de-sac that British Committee members encountered in each phase of their ethical discussions.

In recent years, there has been a significant revival of interest in the work of the English School, within both Europe and America (Buzan 2004; Linklater and Suganami 2006).¹ A large part of this revival has focused on the School’s historical analysis of the development of modern international relations (IR), particularly its key conceptual distinction between an international system and an international society. But it is also widely accepted that the School had a strong normative dimension as well; indeed, part of the argument of this article is that ethical questions were always at the center of the English School’s agenda, and were so closely related to their historical understanding of the practices that sustain an international society as to make a study of the evolution of the English School’s ethical thought crucial to an understanding of their views on IR more generally. Recovering a better understanding of how the English School’s ethics developed also chimes with the gradual growth, or perhaps one might again say revival, in interest in ethical questions among other IR theorists, for example, in recent constructivist calls to include the philosophical consideration of the moral value of different norms in their research program on how those norms effect the conduct of international actors (Finnemore 1996, 5; Wendt 1999, 377). The English School’s attempt to

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¹ It is also worth noting that an English School section of the International Studies Association was founded in 2003.

construct what I will call a “middle-ground ethics”—that is to say, one that tries to find a working balance between ideas of the good and the actualities of real-world politics—is a highly distinctive perspective on these questions, and one that seeks a nuanced balance between individual morality and state practice that could provide a valuable resource for such inquiries.

In this article, I will trace the development of the English school’s ‘middle-ground ethics’ across the lifetime of the British Committee for the Theory of International Politics, a group of scholars that is frequently, if not entirely uncontroversially (Dunne 1998, 2000; Jones 1981; Linklater and Suganami 2006; Suganami 2000), taken to be a representative of the School. A major reason why this intellectual history is necessary is that two substantive histories of the British Committee (Dunne 1998; Vigezzi 2005) have neglected important parts of the trajectory of its ethical thinking, leading, among other things, to a misapprehension that the School gradually became more “normative” over time (Dunne 1995, 125, 138). In contrast, I will show that ethics, or, more precisely, the tension between ethics and power or interests, was one of the original concerns of the founding members of the Committee, and formed an important part of their discussions from the beginning. I will also show that, while there were some continuities in how the English School tackled these questions, there were also variations in how individual members of the school dealt with them; variations that were largely produced by the fact that, although some form of skepticism was a constant feature of the School’s ethical thinking, different sorts of skepticism colored the views of different thinkers.

I will describe these variations in terms of three phases in the English School’s ethical thought. The first phase runs from 1959 to 1962 and was defined by a contrast that Donald Mackinnon drew between two concepts of international ethics. This phase was heavily marked by the Christian pessimist moral skepticism of Butterfield, Wight, and Mackinnon. Here, the principle ethical debate was concerned, on the one hand, whether there was scope within international relations for the exercise of free will and individual moral judgment in orienting the practice of international society towards the welfare of humanity; or whether, on the other hand, an understanding of international relations in terms of tragedy, determinism, and pessimism was more appropriate. In phase two (1962–1970), Bull’s intellectual leadership took hold of the Committee and a more minimal idea of international ethics became dominant within the group, heavily influenced by Bull’s moral knowledge (not Christian pessimist) skepticism. The middle-ground ethic of this period was centered upon Bull’s notion of international society: a practice bound by common interests, common rules, and common institutions; international ethics were unequivocally associated with the responsibilities felt by member states for maintaining the whole, the society of states. Phase three (1970–1985) was marked by an understanding that the presumed good of international society—international order—was facing serious questions. The demands of the Third World challenged the idea, strongly held by Bull, that the issue of justice was secondary to what might result if order broke down altogether. At this time, an expanded and more ad hoc British Committee re-dedicated its efforts toward inquiry into ethics and international relations, and was compelled to examine more closely the relationship between order and justice. However, it continued to answer these questions from within its paradigm of moral knowledge skepticism. As Bull’s skepticism had required, members of the British Committee argued for ethical positions on the basis of empirical, not moral, foundations. In a Cold War context, this often led to the admission of “tough choices” that had to be made in favor of order over justice.

This picture of the evolution of the English School’s ethical thought across three phases of the British Committee helps to clarify some of the problems contained within its distinctive “middle-ground ethics,” and thus enables us to see

how it should be further developed in contemporary scholarship. One major conclusion is that the distinction between pluralism and solidarism, which has formed a significant element within “second-generation” English School thinking since the demise of the British Committee, is unlikely to be successful in resolving some of the central problems that the original members of the School encountered in framing the relationship between the ideal and the actual in world politics. Such work too readily defaults to Bull’s approach of making the empirical study of state consensus the crucial determinant of ethical possibility. If a more satisfactory middle-ground ethic is to be constructed, it will need to engage more systematically with the primarily epistemological and philosophical, rather than empirical, way in which other members of the School approached these questions, especially the development of a more maximal ethic that makes the idea of the good a more active force for shaping the actual practice of “creative statecraft.” While this presents immediate tasks for those explicitly working within the English School tradition, it poses questions for any ethically minded scholar about the role of ethical inquiry in a world where the logic of *realpolitik* cannot simply be wished away. It is to the credit of all the members of the School that they took such concerns seriously, perhaps more so than the avowedly “ideal-theoretical” cast of Rawlsian-inspired normative theories. While the historical exploration of the English School’s ideas offers no easy answers, it at least helps to establish the parameters within which future ethical inquiries, both within and beyond the School, should be conducted.

Phase One: Framing a Contest Over Concepts of International Ethics

The book, *Diplomatic Investigations*, a collection of papers written by the Committee between 1959 and 1962 under its first grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, is at once representative of the deliberations of the Committee in this period and, at the same time, it is not. What is not reflected in the volume is the extent and range of debate that took place within the Committee as to what scope existed for talking about morality and moral obligation in world politics. This debate within the Committee stemmed from uncertainty among its members as to what kind of philosophical argument was available to the moral skeptic, who, despite his skepticism, was compelled to theorize out of a sense of moral urgency as de-colonization, the Cold War, and nuclear confrontation loomed large. Their moral skepticism, derived largely from Christian pessimism, kept bringing the group back to the question of whether or not it was within the capacities of man to change human society, and international society in particular, for the better. This led the Committee into a number of distinct conversations about ethics, characterized by what one can only call a rather idiosyncratic group of preoccupations: free will and determinism; tragedy and progress; the place of individual moral conscience or moral absolutes in international politics; the need for, and nature of, responsible academic inquiry; pluralism versus solidarism; and the value of order versus justice.

The debate was set in motion by Wight and Butterfield in the Committee’s first meeting in January 1959. In his paper, “Why is There No International Theory?” Wight argued that anyone interested in international theory must face up to the probable conclusion that progressivist theories cannot be fixed onto international politics; we cannot cower behind Natural Law arguments, in the manner of Kant, fearing the despair that would inevitably ensue if there was indeed no basis for saying “pure principles of right and justice have objective reality” (Wight 1966a, 28). International politics is primarily a field of material forces, beyond the control of man and impervious to the taming effect of ideas. It is not a ready object for theorizing if theorizing is, as Wight thought, to be done in the language of political theory and law. This is “the language appropriate to

man's control of his social life...the theory of the good life. International theory is the theory of survival" (Wight 1966a, 33). All that is left for international politics is "rumination about human destiny to which we give the unsatisfactory name of philosophy of history" (Wight 1966a, 33).

Against Wight's contention that international politics was first and foremost "necessitous," Butterfield argued that moral factors and questions of justice were becoming more significant and that there was a role for "creative statesmanship." The new struggle in international politics, the Cold War, was primarily one of ideas; the statesman preoccupied with power and the maintenance of the status quo therefore needed to think and work more imaginatively, getting ahead of revolutionary challenges to international society by initiating "a liberating movement" (Butterfield 1959, 11). To see international affairs purely in terms of material forces from the vantage point of an imperial, Western power was a limited and limiting response to the rebellion against Western imperialism. Nevertheless, Butterfield's attention to justice claims against the West was built upon a concern for order, and especially the broadly conservative hope that imaginative statesmen might forestall attempts at violent change by making "the required change as an act of grace before it is compelled to do so as a concession of force" (Butterfield 1959, 10). While polemical, these key papers by Wight and Butterfield struck a chord that resonated well beyond the first meeting.²

Most important in defining this phase of moral skepticism is the fundamental question raised by both Wight and Butterfield in their first papers: can international theory be anything more than a kind of philosophy of history which charts human tragedy, or is there scope for statesmen to act in such a way as to enable progress in world politics?

The Committee looked to one member in particular to guide them through this terrain: Donald Mackinnon. Mackinnon wrote more papers in this phase than any other member—eight in all—and he helped to frame the problem of moral skepticism for the Committee, sketching its impact on philosophy as well as the implications of such a position for their own thinking about international ethics.³ In each paper, Mackinnon sought to find a middle-ground moral skepticism, both ontologically and epistemologically speaking. There is tragedy, but there is also the possibility of change for the better. There are causes for hope as well as fear in human existence. Truth is not available; but there are powerful "idioms" that work like truth, setting limits on human behaviors. Most

² Neither of the papers are altogether representative of the thinking of these writers in one sense or another. Despite the pessimism evident in Wight's paper, Wight was very interested in and thought about the "fundamental questions" that preoccupied political philosophers, and he saw a role for them in the work of the British Committee; see BCTIP (1959, 2). While Butterfield's paper makes the point that the new struggle is about ideas rather than power, he remains steadfastly interested in material power and the role of the balance of power in the history of states systems, frequently invoking the balance between the Great Powers of the 18th century as a worthy model for contemporary international politics; see Butterfield (1964).

³ In Butterfield's account of the early years of the Committee given at the first Martin Wight Memorial lecture, he says that Mackinnon, "on so many occasions was to electrify the rest of us and drive our thinking into a new dimension" (Butterfield 1975, 2). It is true that one can focus, as Tim Dunne (1998, 97) does, upon letters between Butterfield and Wight about the problems of Mackinnon's fit with other contributions in the *Diplomatic Investigations* volume and conclude that Mackinnon was not effective as a member of the group. However, the unity they sought for *Diplomatic Investigations* as a volume of collected BCTIP papers never centered upon a philosophy of international ethics. Instead, it was intended as a collection which offered a different perspective on IR as a field of study from that being constructed in America at the time. After Cambridge University Press rejected their proposal for the volume that became *Diplomatic Investigations*, Wight (1965) wrote Butterfield saying, "I still think the book has a unity, and that if it were to be printed students would still be referring to it in 20 years' time more often than they would to the American sister volume." To focus upon Mackinnon's awkward fit within such a volume potentially screens from view another sense in which he did provide leadership within the group on the subject of international ethics. To be clear, I am not arguing here that Mackinnon was a more central figure in the English School than anyone has credited him for to date. However, I am saying that he offered an important framework of two concepts of international ethics, overlooked in recent histories of the English School and significant to understanding its ethical thought today.

importantly, he presented the group with two ideas of international ethics: (1) a notion of the good, founded either upon ideas of natural law or upon a common way of life; and (2) a weaker notion of obligation built upon a *modus vivendi*, a balancing of interests founded upon a principle of utility. Mackinnon outlined for the Committee both the nature of the philosophical arguments used to support these positions, and the kind of ethical claims that would follow for an international society premised on either of the two concepts of ethics.⁴

In his papers, "Natural Law," "Some Notes on the Notion of a Christian Statesman," and "Kant: On Perpetual Peace," Mackinnon presented his preferred concept of international ethics: one based on a notion of the good. He believed that international ethics should puzzle over matters of right and wrong, working to translate the problem of personal morality—a "conflict of the claims of justice with those of compassion"—into different terms for a new plane: the realm of the international (Mackinnon 1962a, 9). For example, in "Natural Law," Mackinnon argued that when one says an action is wrong, when one feels compelled to criticize his leaders, then natural law "intrudes upon our consciousness," and in the name of "'natural law' we can argue there are risks which men have no right to take with their world" (Mackinnon 1960b, 16). While Mackinnon was of the view that one should be skeptical about the possibility of metaphysics, nonetheless, he thought the *idea* of natural rights as "an idiom of protest" had "extraordinary resilience" (Mackinnon 1960b, 19).

In his paper, "Freedom, Determinism, Responsibility and History," Mackinnon provided his clearest statement of the second of the two concepts of international ethics, as well as his criticisms of it. Mackinnon argued that the system of states used the language of, and found its justification in, utilitarianism. "We distinguish Khrushchev from Hitler partly because we believe that Khrushchev's language is in fact a dialect of the Benthamite *lingua franca* of international relations, where interest, security, incentive, deterrent can achieve a common reference that obviously democracy and freedom cannot" (Mackinnon 1960c, 16).⁵ However, Mackinnon was not content to let a concept of international ethics rest here; the psychological determinism of utilitarianism fails to see that "interest is a complex thing, and we are perhaps wise to question the possibility of resting the foundations of international order on a psychological over-simplification" (Mackinnon 1960c, 17). Also, as a form of determinism, utilitarianism, does what all determinisms do according to Mackinnon: it leaves men devoid of the "energy to act." While utilitarianism can accommodate plurality and promote tolerance, it does so at a cost; it can "imprison the spirit in narrow and confining horizons" (Mackinnon 1960c, 17).

Mackinnon admitted that his preference for ethics as an idea of the good reflected what he believed the doctrine of Atonement required, and he acknowledged that there is a lot of uncertainty in Christianity about the significance of political action as well as the essence of Christianity itself (Mackinnon 1962a, 2). Mackinnon wrote that this uncertainty took the form of a "theological question which has been with us on previous occasions...the sense in which the Christian understanding of life is properly regarded as optimistic or pessimistic" (Mackinnon 1962a, 8). Mackinnon preferred to discard these polarizing categories altogether, and pointed to Kant as someone who had done that particularly well. According to Mackinnon; Kant sought to "achieve a proper balance between hope and fear in the way in which we approach the human future" (Mackinnon 1960b, 20). In other

⁴ Mackinnon (1960a, 2) says that his major philosophical interest is the epistemological basis of ethics.

⁵ Discussion of this second concept of international ethics can also be found in Mackinnon (1959, 7) where he raises the question of whether the Idealist notion of the state as having a persona should be replaced by a utilitarian, "more modest, yet down-to-earth and empirically based appraisal of managing conflicting interests." Here too he prefers to side with a modified Idealist position rather than go the way of the utilitarians.

words, Mackinnon wanted to dispel the popular notion that Kant was a utopian, explaining that really, Kant was “one of us,” sharing the preoccupations of this Committee:

He was aware of power; and yet he argued that if we were to approach the problems of international theory with clear heads we must not treat these problems of international theory as in the first instance problems of power adjustment. And yet Kant knew that human life was always a curious, unexampled mutual interpenetration of ideal and actual. Where he is strong is in his insistence as a profound moralist that we do not seek any easy formula for getting rid of the problem of that interpenetration. Thus he is the enemy of the sort of approach to the problems of government which you can find in the writings of Professor Michael Oakeshott; but this [is] not because he is unaware of the importance of what is empirical, of what is matter of contingent fact...He was aware too of the kind of fools and tyrants which ill-judged idealism made of men; but his answer to this was...to suggest the inadequacy of models whereby we construe the mediation of the ideal by the actual, and moreover to insist that when it came to action men could not escape from the duality of their relationship, their involvement in the realm of nature and history, their involvement in the realm of ends. He is among the greatest of those who made play with the idea of progress (Mackinnon 1962b, 21).

Were the members compelled by Mackinnon’s argument that international politics should be adapted to something approximating Natural Law? Did the others come to his view that Kant was a model philosopher for their group, as opposed to a writer like Oakeshott?⁶

Only Desmond Williams held a position similar to Mackinnon’s. Like Mackinnon, Williams shared an understanding of individuals as being neither fully free nor fully determined and preferred a concept of international ethics premised on an idea of the good, albeit contingently held. In Williams’ paper “Freedom, Determinism, Responsibility and History,” he argued that, from a Christian viewpoint, absolute moral judgment cannot be passed on the totality of human personality, and that even if humans were not at all determined, it would still be the case that foundations for judgment would be lacking because not all the facts could be known. As a consequence, moral judgments are “relative and provisional”; but, Williams added, we can inquire into the moral responsibility of individuals to this degree: to determine whether individuals made “the best of the circumstances within which they acted” (Williams 1960, 2, 4).

For Williams, and invoking Butterfield’s notion of “creative statesmanship,” there was room for statesmen to be “great” and not “submit to ‘determining factors’” (Williams 1960, 34). Williams criticized Machiavelli for being too pessimistic, arguing there is always some basis for optimism in IR. That basis rests, according to Williams, in the fact that an international morality exists. There is a “basic underlying moral code,” in the form of the idea of “doing unto others as one would wish done to oneself,” although neither individuals nor states always succeed in its application (Williams 1961a, 3). Thus, Williams proposed that the Committee should explore whether states between the last two wars have or have not violated this principle, rather than seeing private morality as something apart from public morality (*raison d’état*), as Machiavelli and many others across the history of international affairs had done, in the name of order, rule of law, self-defense, or maintaining national unity (Williams 1961b).

While Mackinnon and Williams represented the minority view, Mackinnon was not wrong to say that Kant and the Committee held this much in common: the recognition that when acting in the world, and reflecting on that action, one

⁶ There are writers working in the tradition of international society today for whom Michael Oakeshott is a central influence. See Nardin (1983) and Jackson (2000).

cannot escape the interpenetration of our ideas of the good with real-world politics. The division that existed among the members stemmed from a difference in opinion as to whether an idea of the good or notions of the necessitous in real-world politics were to be more prominent in their efforts to define a working relationship between the two. It is arguable that Mackinnon, by framing two concepts of international ethics and favoring the one more readily associated with individual morality as he and Williams did, prodded others who did not share in Mackinnon's Kantianism to flesh out what was less clear: what if any, moral value there was in another kind of middle-ground international ethics, one led more by the existing practice of states and their norms and laws, than a concept of the good.

Butterfield held to the position that there was room for the assertion of free will and agency in world politics. However, while he remained open to the notion that we may be able "not to be the mere victims of historical processes" (Butterfield 1960, 12) and that "[y]ou help create the world by the way you think about it,"⁷ he was not advocating a natural law-like idea of the good after which the world should be fashioned. Butterfield (1960, 14) was quite clear that we "are *ipso facto* working for the development of an over-all 'international order' and for the achievement of a kind of stability." For example, Butterfield (1960, 2, 8) did not have the same belief in the robustness of the idiom of natural rights against a Hitler that Mackinnon did. Yes, Mackinnon was right to see natural law as a secularized form of the religious viewpoint; but the particular puzzle that interested Butterfield (1960, 8) was how it might be "grafted on to an initial conception of a universe of blind materialistic forces." Butterfield posited that rights are shaped in keeping with societal needs as they develop and grow.

[I]f we value universal education today, this may be because an industrial society cannot be run if the populace is left illiterate, and, in the process of fitting human beings for this service in the industrial order, our educational system does happen also to increase the independence of individuals, whether society likes it or not. Possibly mankind is exercising a creative function, creating a human society and a human ideal as it goes along; and then these themselves prescribe new sets of "natural rights" (Butterfield 1960, 8).

This creative function is not performed on the basis of an idea of the good, but instead, accords with the needs of a well-ordered society. For Butterfield, the Committee too had a similar kind of creative function: to make the maintenance of international order its aim as it defined the working relationship between the actual and ideal. However, Butterfield did not elaborate upon what, if any, ethical significance this had.

Wight's unique contribution to the foregoing discussions was in positing that there is ethical significance in the relationships between states and defending a middle-ground ethics resting between individual or personal morality on the one hand and *raison d'état* or *Realpolitik* on the other. This is what Wight called "political morality" and he found it at the center of Western values and thought political morality to be particular to Western values. By political morality, duties are understood to be "owed, not only by each government to its subjects, but by one government to another, and by one people to another" (Wight 1966b, 128). In part, this was a response to Williams' paper on Machiavelli. Wight wanted to invest the determinations made by statesmen with more moral value than Williams' discussion of the instrumental distinction between public and private morality, and his disvaluation of the former, would allow. "Political expedience itself has to consult the moral sense of those whom it will affect, and even

⁷ Attributed to Butterfield by Wight (1962).

combines with the moral sense of the politician himself. Thus it is softened into prudence, which is a moral virtue” (Wight 1966b, 128).

This was also a response to Mackinnon, as Wight was arguing that the residue of natural law operating in world politics today did not function as a limit, or in Wight’s words, a “dramatic moral veto,” but instead as a “permissible accommodation between moral necessity and practical demands” (Wight 1966b, 128).⁸ Like Butterfield, Wight had his doubts that the idiom of natural law as a limit or moral veto could hold up against the “realities” of international affairs. However, he did not want to rule out the possibility. His understanding of a *via media* moral sensibility for international affairs did not exclude the prospect that moral vetoes *might* be able to operate—that is to say, an idea of international ethics as a notion of the good—without tearing asunder the society of states. Indeed, “the upholding of moral standards will in itself tend to strengthen the fabric of political life” (Wight 1966b, 130–31). However, consistent with a position of moral skepticism, Wight was not willing to argue for the “truth” of the moral assumptions he had drawn; that was a matter of the “philosophy of history, or belief in Providence” (Wight 1966b, 131). Reasoned argument for the normative value of this second idea of ethics in the British Committee was thereafter dropped by Wight and he never returned to it. However, as we will see, it was to be picked up again by Hedley Bull and by Adam Watson.

To conclude, Butterfield and Wight directed discussion in this early phase of the Committee toward a concept of ethics that posited a sense of responsibility among states to a particular form of diplomatic practice and its maintenance, but stopped short of asserting that the practice was grounded in any notion of the good other than an instrumental one of peacefully managing the competing interests of states. However, where Butterfield was content to presume the moral value of international order among a society of states, Wight explored its strengths and weaknesses, and ultimately placed it at the center of Western values, where it operated as a moral sense that had value despite the fact that its grounding in political calculations of expediency and interest meant that it lacked the qualities of private morality. By Wight’s own admission, this understanding of international ethics was thin; it was a pragmatic and workable code of diplomatic practice that sustained order, if not always justice for individuals.

Mackinnon and Williams, meanwhile, drew upon a different concept of international ethics, grounded in an idea of the good not dissimilar to what Kant would require if the individual was to be taken seriously as a subject of justice in international society. On this side of the debate, workable diplomatic practice was still a concern, but their pragmatism was fastened to a resolute belief that justice toward individuals must be kept at the forefront of theorizing about international relations. Their concept of ethics acknowledged the weakness of natural law foundations for universal principles of right and wrong, but they saw evidence of its vitality in idioms of natural law drawn upon by practitioners of international affairs. The theme of pessimism did not weigh any less heavily upon Mackinnon or Williams, but ultimately, neither convinced the group that a sense of tragic drama in our theorizing about IR was sufficient and that connection to a more maximalist concept of the good could nonetheless be maintained. Interestingly, Mackinnon anticipates the dilemma that will preoccupy the Committee’s third phase when he writes in 1959 that “although we may favor the style

⁸ In 1963, Wight wrote Butterfield to say that he was taking “a little trouble to hitch” this piece onto Mackinnon’s own “Western values” paper for the Committee; see Wight (1963). However, Wight does not explicitly say how combining two seeming opposites, private and public morality, in fact follows through on Mackinnon’s own view that to articulate “habits and styles of thought and feeling that might well be judged to be irreconcilable” is integrally linked to the deep-running skepticism within the Western tradition; see Mackinnon (1960d, 6).

of the pluralist, we will not long escape the profound questions” (Mackinnon 1959, 13).

Phase Two: International Ethics as International Society Management

A pivotal change in the British Committee’s thinking about ethics and world politics occurred not long after Hedley Bull joined in the spring of 1961: any scope there may have been for consideration of a concept of international ethics grounded in a universal idea of the good dissipated. The moral skepticism exhibited by the Committee in its first phase was borne of Christian pessimism, but the moral skepticism in its second phase, led by Bull’s intellectual concerns, was more uncompromising. In particular, the moral skepticism of Mackinnon and Williams sought quasi-foundations for moral claims to the good, believing there were idioms of natural law operating in world politics that placed moral restraints on the actions of statesmen. In large part, Christian duty compelled this outlook in Mackinnon and Williams. Christian duty as felt by Butterfield and Wight did not generate the same conclusion and they expressed their doubts about the robustness of the idiom of natural law as a limit or moral veto against the “realities” of international affairs. However, they did not let go of the possibility.⁹ Bull never embraced such a possibility.

Bull’s skepticism was a moral knowledge skepticism that was secular and refused any and all philosophical grounds for moral claims, foundational or quasi-foundational. Nonetheless, he did see that there was scope within international practice for responsibilities between state actors, a society of states, allowing for a kind of ethics in the sense of the second, weaker notion of obligation outlined by Mackinnon. Bull began by showing little interest in defining a working relationship between the realm of necessity and the realm of ends in world politics. Gradually, however, he came to defend a middle-ground ethics which prioritized international society management as a limited form of international justice. This priority was not grounded in moral reasoning, but instead, in what he understood to be universally agreed as basic and necessary to intersocietal interaction.

Bull’s moral knowledge skepticism was evident in his earliest published work.¹⁰ In his book, *The Control of the Arms Race*, he argued that there was:

no way of finally settling this [arms control] or any other moral issue. There are no moral arguments to be propounded or moral criteria to be identified that are beyond dispute...The moral doctrines which unite particular societies or social movements are different and often incompatible: they reflect the existence of different ways of life, and of conflicts among them (Bull 1961a, 20).

For Bull, no side in a struggle had an exclusive hold on the “right.” Moral criteria do not display any natural or universal characteristics; they are merely reflections of ourselves. However, this does not mean that we do not express or act on our belief, only that we do so with “humility,” understanding our moral preferences to be “parochial,” and seeking common ground through argument where possible.

To act publicly on belief is a political pursuit, not an academic one. Proper academic inquiry *is not* an inquiry into ends. The default position of Bull’s moral skepticism was an empiricism which held that conflicts of interest, and even some moral conflicts, are best settled by looking at the facts of a situation and analyzing them in an objective, scientific manner. This tendency in Bull’s thought was evident throughout his career. In his 1959 piece, “What is the

⁹ Christian duty contributed to Butterfield’s disregard for political morality. See Hall (2002).

¹⁰ For an account of the intellectual influence of Bull’s teacher, John Anderson, upon Bull’s skepticism in relation to questions of ethics and religion see Jeffery (2008). Further evidence supporting Jeffery’s argument about the legacy of Anderson’s thinking upon Bull will be found in this section.

Commonwealth?," he criticized those who reinforced the Commonwealth "myth" by assuming it served useful purposes without properly and scientifically evaluating whether that was indeed the case. His argument was expressed with typical force: "it is just this prostitution of inquiry to practical ends that is the foremost obstacle to the development of a science of politics" (Bull 1959, 586–87). For Bull, it was an academic responsibility not to engage in polemics (Bull's own gift for a polemical turn of phrase notwithstanding) or to take moral positions, but to remain detached and employ an indiscriminating skepticism. "For a moral justification of the study of international relations we need not look beyond inquiry itself, which has its own morality, and saps the strength of political causes of all kinds, good and bad" (Bull 2000a, 263). If there was any first morality of a philosophical kind for Bull, it was critical inquiry.

So how did Bull's moral skepticism and understanding of inquiry impact his approach to the study of international affairs, and how did it influence his papers for the British Committee? Bull's earliest contributions to the Committee, like his method in the "Commonwealth" paper above, turned an inquiring and skeptical mind to a commonly accepted proposition: in particular, the idea that IR reflected a condition of anarchy. In his introductory talk to the Committee in July of 1961, he provided his first sketch of the elements of society in IR and immediately marked his distinctive contribution to the group and to IR theory more generally.

His introductory talk drew extensively from the jurisprudence of Herbert Hart. Bull contended that rules about respect for life, property, and truth, or the idea that promises will be kept, were present in all societies. Society would not be possible without them, but that did not mean they were natural laws; instead, they were simply what we find whenever we examine the facts of international interaction (Bull 1961b, 2–3). In the formal paper written from the talk, Bull set this international society view of international anarchy against Hobbesian and Kantian views. He described international society as intercourse between states that are "consciously united together for certain purposes, which modify their conduct in relation to one another," adding that responsibilities are assumed by members to respect the moral and legal rules that make international society work (Bull 1966a, 38–9). Bull was emphatic that this was not a moral responsibility founded on an abstract or "higher morality" of the kind that Kant enjoined, but upon duties and rights that followed for members situated and participant in a social practice (Bull 1966a, 38–9). To further underline the point, he insisted that "order or security is the prime need of international society" (Bull 1966a, 50).

When Bull made statements about the primacy of order, as he did many times and perhaps most famously in *The Anarchical Society*, he recognized that "the singling out of international security as what is most worthy of our attention is itself, in part, a moral judgment" (Bull 1961a, 25). However, on what kind of criteria or grounds can such judgments be evaluated? Bull is criticized for failing to address this question properly (Harris 1993). True, he did not offer any sustained arguments to this effect; he preferred to stay focused upon the one kind of contribution he thought possible: that which dealt with the facts of IR as they are. His default position was one of empiricism.

In the discussion that followed his paper "Society and Anarchy in International Relations," Mackinnon asked Bull what elements of a common culture were necessary before a rule such as toleration could be practiced in international society. Bull replied:

though a European cultural tradition in part accounts for what our international society is like now, the rules of respect for life, truth and property which underlie this society as they do any other, are necessary conditions of all regular human intercourse, and would have been arrived at by some route or other, even in the absence of common culture (BCTIP 1961, 7).

While universal moral claims are not available to us, universal human *needs* in the way of societal requirements are. In this way, Hart's legal philosophy helps Bull get to something foundational that, in his mind, can hold up to empirical scrutiny and sustain claims about the value of order without recourse to philosophy. In so doing, he was adamant that the kind of ethics or purposes that can be shared within international society were of a different, more minimal character; to invest them with more than the consensus which sustained them could in fact allow, would be a dereliction of academic duty.

In an informal talk and a separate paper for the Committee in 1962 on "The Grotian Conception of International Society," Bull addressed the issue of the nature and content of the consensus on obligations between members of international society. In so doing, Bull used the terms "pluralism" and "solidarism" to describe divergent positions with regard to the level of cultural cohesion existing in international society around shared purposes. In his talk, Bull characterized Grotius as pinning the validity of international society to natural law and positing a solidarity among members that could sustain shared rules about the justice of war and aggression. Bull argued that the natural law notion "that somehow all men are endowed with the faculty of reason, which enables them to distinguish the justice from the injustice of conflict and to agree to where this distinction lies" was mistaken and "anti-historical," as it posited a "moral unanimity irrespective of what the history of a particularly society is, irrespective of whether people in fact form a moral community in their judgments" (Bull 2000b, 123). Bull's conclusion was that to *assume* that rules about justice of war and aggression can be shared places a huge "strain" on international society, one that "the degree of moral cohesion in international society cannot stand" (Bull 2000b, 123).

In his paper for the Committee on this subject, Bull outlined an alternate conception of international society that he labeled as pluralism. Pluralism holds that states can only agree to "certain minimum purposes" and are not prepared to see law as having a role in determining the proper and just causes of war (Bull 1966b, 52). The key difference between solidarism and Bull's position of pluralism was "a question as to what kind of legal rules are most appropriate to the working of international order; a matter not of international law but of international political science" (Bull 1966b, 70). That is, the institutions of international society cannot be founded upon anything other than actual, existing agreements between states; the burden is therefore on solidarists to demonstrate that the degree of moral cohesion that actually exists in international society is of a level that can sustain their idea of justice.

It would be wrong to think that Bull's pluralism, empiricism, and moral skepticism suggest a kind of amorality on his part. He was highly critical of Realists for not recognizing the force of moral and legal rules in IR and his idea of international society was an ethical position in itself, even though his moral foundational skepticism left him with no recourse to defend it in any sort of philosophical way. A first, and quite limited, defense of international society as an ethical position, comes not in a paper for the Committee, but in a 1969 review article of E.H. Carr, "*The Twenty Years' Crisis Thirty Years On*" (Bull 2000c).¹¹ Bull wrote that Carr's relativism and instrumentalism left him unable to provide a moral argument for why the Anglo-French order was preferable. However, Bull could and his basis for doing so was upon what I call his notion of international ethics as international society management; that is, great powers taking responsibility for the maintenance of international society and conducting watchful guardianship over the common interests of the whole. Yes, the international order of the time preferred by the British and the Americans was "tainted" by interest according to Bull, but at least their order "better understood the task of creating an ascendancy which was

¹¹ It is interesting to note that Bull's argument here has affinities with Wight's paper on "Western Values."

generally accepted as tolerant and unoppressive,” a critical determination for discerning and responsible great powers to make in Bull’s estimation (Bull 2000c, 129).

The most important point to be made at this juncture is that ethics and interest *are not mutually exclusive* for Bull. The scope we, as responsible academics, have for discussing international ethics is given by the extent to which it lives and works in the world. For Bull, any concept of international ethics has to incorporate an understanding of the competing interests of states and the notion that any and all international orders need invested parties who will see to its continuance and management.¹² Drawing from the example of how at times powers will use the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* for their own special purposes, Bull wrote that such moral principles “function so as to fulfill purposes recognized by the society as a whole,” and so it is upheld because it is seen to serve the interests of all “in securing the elemental conditions of social existence” (Bull 2000c, 130). Again, it is not a universal value upon which this preference for international society is built, but it is something around which broad consensus can be gained, the closest we get to truth: that is, an empirical awareness of what is most basic to societal living.¹³ This is the point at which Wight had left it up to a philosophy of history or Providence to decide the “good” of international society, but both Wight and Bull were making similar arguments that there is a kind of ethics in IR, albeit not one built on an idea of right or wrong founded on moral universal principle. Instead, international ethics rests in ideas of right and wrong that are to be found within a practice of states bound by common interests, rules and institutions.

To conclude, in this second phase of thought about international ethics within the British Committee, one finds Bull’s idea of international society consolidated as a good in itself built upon nothing more than a minimalist understanding of what is possible in the way of international moral consensus. Bull’s characterization of the ethics of pluralism and solidarity is better understood when set within the context of a group struggling with what they could say about moral action in world politics consistent with both their moral skepticism and their will to see an improved world order. Mackinnon had clarified the issues and provided two concepts of ethics as a framework. However, lost with the secularization of the Committee’s moral skepticism was a willingness to think beyond the empirical to the philosophical and to broader themes of free will, determinism, progress, and tragedy.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the earlier concerns of proponents of an alternative, more maximal concept of international ethics in Phase One were not lost altogether. Bull does not rule out the possibility that more maximal principles of the good might arise from the practice of a society of states (Bull 2000c, 137), but he does so, I argue, not out of any softening of his moral knowledge skepticism, but out of his understanding of what critical academic inquiry requires: that receptiveness to change within empirical possibility be kept open. In the next phase, new facts of world politics will lead Bull to the conclusion that he must do more to define the working relationship between the actual and the ideal in his thinking about the management of international society.

Phase Three: International Society in Crisis

Throughout what remained in the life of the British Committee, the group was preoccupied by the impact of justice demands on international society as represented

¹² See also BCTIP (1961, 2) where Bull says, “[a]ny international order, to persist, must be someone’s order; just as the perquisites of office may be justified by the need to give someone a special interest in maintaining domestic order, so an international order will be upheld only if certain states have a stake in it.”

¹³ See also, Linklater and Suganami (2006, 129).

¹⁴ An exchange of letters between Butterfield (1961) and Wight (1961) suggests that the two may not have seen this as a great loss since they note a lack of focus in the Committee’s discussions prior to Bull joining.

in the revolt against the West and an expanded, more diverse, international society no longer dominated by European states.¹⁵ Claims for self-determination expanded into protest over what newly independent states felt was neo-colonialism in the continuing military and economic domination they experienced. Calls for development assistance to redress the imbalance between rich and poor states were also being issued and effectively pressed in the United Nations. For the concerns of this article, what was most significant about this revolt was its challenge to the value of international society, forcing the question of whether international order was in fact a secondary concern to that of international justice. Members of the British Committee were in agreement that the status quo powers could not turn a blind eye to these demands. The legitimacy of international society as well as its own sustainability were at stake. The third phase of thinking about international ethics within the Committee was marked by a concern to elaborate what international society could support in the way of justice claims in international relations.

In a 1971 paper for the Committee, and in another short piece in 1973, Bull convinced the group to commit itself to an inquiry into ethics and international relations after it suspended its collaborative systems of states project and suffered the loss of Martin Wight. Both Bull and Adam Watson, who chaired the Committee over the course of this ethical inquiry, would contribute their own notions of a middle-ground ethics similar to that begun by Wight in his paper, "Western Values."

Bull was absent from Committee meetings for much of this period,¹⁶ but his influence lingered; Watson described Bull's paper "Order versus Justice in International Society" as "seminal" to their enterprise (Watson 1976, 1). In the paper, Bull provided definitions and categories of justice claims in world politics that reappeared in much the same form in *The Anarchical Society* and in his 1983 Hagey Lectures.¹⁷ The question at the center of the paper was: can order and justice be "mutually re-enforcing ends of policy" or do they conflict? Bull wrote that the purpose of international order was to secure "the primary or elemental goals of social co-existence; goals that are common to all social life at all times and in all places," repeating his Hartian mantra that the needs to limit violence, keep promises and secure possessions were universal (Bull 1971, 6). He also reinforced another idea that has been discussed: the idea that the kind of purpose he assigned to order in international society was minimal and unconnected to any higher order or maximal moral concerns, such as Myers MacDougal's call for a "world public order with human dignity." However, what set this piece apart was Bull's desire to explore any possible connections his minimal order could have with other higher-order values like justice (Bull 1971, 5). He was examining the extent to which his minimalist concept of international ethics could approximate a more maximal concept of international ethics.

Bull wrote in this paper that justice is a much trickier concept than order to get a sense of, mired as it is in subjectivity, and thus, less penetrable than order which

¹⁵ Dunne (1998) does not explicitly address this phase of dedicated inquiry into ethics and IR in the British Committee. Vigezzi (2005) devotes a chapter to it, but lacks a frame of analysis of the kind presented here.

¹⁶ Bull left the U.K. in 1967 to take up a Chair in IR at the Australian National University. He returned to the U.K. in 1977 as Montague Burton Professor at Oxford University.

¹⁷ The claim in second generation English School writing (Wheeler and Dunne 1996a, 1996b) that there are two phases in Bull's writing—an early pluralist phase and a later solidarist phase—is undermined by the fact that Bull had been writing in similar terms, using the same definitions and categories of justice in 1971 as he did in the Hagey Lectures more than 10 years later. It is important to note that Bull was motivated to write about the subject because states were *in fact* talking about these issues and he felt that "just change rather than order" was the "more arresting" matter in world politics at that time (Bull 1973, 2). Thus, justice was a subject of inquiry for Bull in this third phase because it had taken on significance in the actual, existing international relations of the time. His concern for individuals as subjects of justice go back as far as his book, *The Control of the Arms Race*, but so does his moral skepticism and its influence upon his ideas about good academic inquiry, neither of which will allow him to explore his concerns for individual or cosmopolitan justice openly and easily across his writing career.

in his view was an objective concept. So Bull started where his preference for empirical inquiry naturally led: to trace the *effects* of ideas of justice as they are used in international society, rather than to provide any philosophical criteria for identifying a claim to justice. Generally speaking, Bull said that justice claims took the form of “demands for the removal of privilege or discrimination, for equality in the distribution or in the application of rights” (Bull 1971, 6). However, Bull recognized that further distinctions were required for understanding the effects of justice claims in international society. He outlined substantive versus formal, arithmetical versus proportionate, and commutative versus distributive uses of the term, arguing that while thoughts about justice in international society had previously been limited to more formal and commutative considerations, ideas of distributive justice were making headway. Particularly useful and important to Bull’s conclusion were the distinctions he made between the agents who were the subjects of moral concern in different categories of justice claims: states in claims for international justice; individuals in claims for individual or human justice; and the community of humankind in claims for cosmopolitan or world justice. For Bull, only international justice claims could be met in international society, and even its more limited goals were often compromised in practice.

International society was “inhospitable” to individual justice because duties to individuals often conflict with duties to the state. What Bull called the “basic compact of coexistence between states,” the principle of equal sovereign rights of states, implied “a conspiracy of silence” on the rights of individuals within state boundaries (Bull 1971, 9). Such matters as duties to protect the rights of individuals were left unspoken in the name of order. Cosmopolitan justice, on the other hand, implies that there is a world common good that shapes the rights of individuals, an idea that Bull saw as “inchoate,” operating in the main as a myth guiding demands for international redistributive justice or protection of the environment. International society could not meet this category of justice claim either, even if it were of more practical importance than at present, as it would mean a level of restructuring that would be the end of international society. To press for either individual or world justice in an international environment that held no “sufficiently overwhelming” consensus on such claims would lead to disorder. The only global consensus that existed upon which an idea of justice might be supported was the compact of coexistence which conferred rights and responsibilities upon states—“not necessarily moral rules, but procedural rules or rules of the game” (Bull 1971, 15). Bull thus drew upon the moral language he saw as actually existing in international society to argue that the notion of international or interstate justice “may reinforce the compact of coexistence between states by adding a moral imperative to the imperative of enlightened self-interest and of law by which it is defined” (Bull 1971, 15).

While Bull entertained no doubts that international justice had to make some concessions to power and political expediency, any sense of international justice that could be afforded within international society was seen by Bull as merely an additional benefit to securing the prior issue: order. He was not willing to state any general rule that in all conflicts between order and justice, order should prevail (Bull 1971, 19).¹⁸ Simply put, his moral skepticism and notion of good academic inquiry could not support such a position: the merits of one claim over another always had to be examined in the context of particular situations. Interestingly, Bull argued that, in weighing the merits of the prioritization of order, one must

¹⁸ In this paper, Bull introduces three ideal types that he draws upon again in his Hagey Lectures where he discusses responses to how one might prioritize among conflicting claims to order versus justice: the conservative who will always prefer order; the revolutionary who will always prefer justice; and the liberal who will seek to reconcile the two. In this paper, he holds back from the conclusion that he draws in the Hagey Lectures, that “[t]here is a deeper wisdom in the recognition, common to the conservatives and the revolutionaries, that terrible choices have to be made” Bull (1984, 18).

recognize that it “cannot be asserted without some assessment of the question whether or not or to what extent injustice is embodied in the existing order.”¹⁹ However, he posited this link only to drop it on the grounds that “when all of these qualifications are made, order is prior because it comprises what is most elemental” (Bull 1971, 19); that is, international society creates a context of order in which rights can be enjoyed and values of a higher order than co-existence can at least be given expression.

Bull would not rule out the possibility that consensus could be formed around more ambitious claims than international justice, and he believed that an international society that enjoyed consensus on a notion of individual or cosmopolitan justice could be “in a stronger position to maintain the framework of minimum order or co-existence than one that has not” (Bull 1971, 18). Such possibilities were more likely to be issue-specific for Bull—consensus on the suppression of the slave trade, for example, or more modern condemnations of racism—rather than comprehensive, say by way of agreement as to what human rights are and a commitment to their realization.²⁰ Also, he cautioned that any attention brought to higher-order justice issues would be selective and mediated by states bringing their own interests to bear on such matters.

In this third phase, the force of Bull’s intellectual priorities upon the group were again suggested when Watson wrote in a 1977 summary paper of the ethical discussions of the Committee up to that point that, “I have been struck by how much...we have concerned ourselves with peace, and to a lesser extent with honesty, than with justice” (Watson 1977a, 7). In reflecting upon where their discussions had taken them, Watson commented on the theme of absolute and relative moral criteria that had arisen in a number of meetings, saying that the Committee “agreed that it could tackle the relationship of statecraft to ethical standards, and what shifts opinion from one set of ethical criteria or another: the unanswerable question is what is right or wrong” (Watson 1977a, 3). So the question that had been with the group from the beginning resurfaced here: can the same ethical principles that guide individual conduct within states operate between states that have rights to engage in war (Watson 1977a, 3). Despite the range of paper topics on ethics and IR across the period, the will to seek a middle-ground international ethics was a point of intellectual coherence for the group, and the distinctiveness of international society as a morally significant entity was again a theme in their discussions. According to Watson, they were often on the edge of considering “whether there is a *raison de système*, going beyond the *raison* of an individual state, with its own sense of right, that is, its own ethical values” (Watson 1977a, 4). Watson himself had come close to this in his 1976 paper and he worked more on the idea of a *raison de système* in his 1977 paper, “Distributive Justice Between States.”

In his 1976 paper, Watson claimed that there was in “any state’s system at any period a general legitimizing principle, limited by certain others. The general principle is one of right. The limiting principles are those of expediency rather than right: they overrule the general principle at the margins” (Watson 1976, 7). Watson felt that a new legitimizing principle—social justice—was breaking through, and he argued that thought would have to be given to its effects on a well ordered society of states. For him, in what may be heard as an echo of Butterfield’s early call for “creative statesmanship,” the chief guardians of the

¹⁹ A brief treatment of the link between order and justice can be found in Bull (1977, chapter 9) where he talks about the legitimacy of Great Powers and their dominance resting on the fulfillment of Great-Power responsibilities in properly managing international order for the whole that is international society.

²⁰ The reference to the slave trade can be found in Bull (1971, 18); and the idea that there is world consensus on the injustice of racism against blacks can be found in Bull (1982, 266): “It is a political fact that opposition to the oppression of blacks by whites unites the world in a way in which other violations of human rights, including other kinds of racial oppression, do not.”

good of the international order were diplomats; it was their role to facilitate the emergence of a new legitimizing principle upon terms of justice that could be agreed upon by all.²¹ They were also responsible for determining appropriate limiting principles, or what Watson also called “objective yardsticks,” to ensure that the operation of a new legitimacy principle did not jeopardize peace and order in international society. The diplomat’s task was, of course, complicated by the fact that these were topics upon which consensus was difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, Watson believed that diplomats were up to the task and invested in them something like a providential faith when he wrote that they have an ability to “exclude ideas of justice which, however noisily proclaimed by a minority, do not in fact reflect the opinion of mankind” (Watson 1976, 13).

Turning to distributive justice in his 1977 paper, Watson continued to press for a view of the system of states as having its own, unique set of moral principles that adjusted as needed to the facts of moral diversity, power and political necessity. Justice is, in effect, like anything else in the international system:

It is not a matter of enforcement or even of consent, but of active observance in practice. It becomes less a matter of high principle than justice inside a Leviathan-state, and more a matter of adjustment. It must take into account a wider range of considerations than domestic codes (Watson 1977b, 7).

The most difficult issue for potentially prevalent concepts of justice was that, by expanding into a global states system, the European states system had outgrown its cultural base of shared norms and values. As a consequence, Watson thought that concepts of justice would be founded to an increasing degree on explicit, contractual arrangements, negotiated by diplomats out of a sense of interdependence and mutual advantage, rather than upon a shared sense of moral scruple built on common cultural traditions (Watson 1977b, 10).

Nonetheless, he still thought that a greater degree of distributive justice could be facilitated, but it would require careful and deliberate construction by diplomats’ “patient negotiation” which accepted that the increased moral significance of equality represented in the expansion of international society meant, not only that the rules and laws of international society applied equally to states, but that the material wealth of the world should be more equally distributed too (Watson 1977b, 11–2).²² There were likely to be incompatible justice demands on international society, and, where states disagreed, it would come down either to the use of force or to brokerage. In brokerage, there must be recognition that no norm should “prevail absolutely,” that there are other values that must be weighed, like order, and so certain limiting principles on a justice norm were required (Watson 1977b, 14). Watson finished with a semantic flourish, writing that the concept of justice should be replaced with the notion of “what is right and reasonable,” as it is more consensuable than any criteria for justice.

Thus, both Bull and Watson, like Wight before them, proposed that international society was a middle-ground between an understanding of international affairs as a set of purely instrumental relations between states and that of a human community guided by standards of individual morality. International society was a code of

²¹ Adam Watson had a distinguished career as a diplomat, joining the service in 1937. He was posted in British Embassies in Cairo, Moscow, and Washington D.C. and served as head of the Africa department at the Foreign Office during the time of the Suez Crisis and was British Ambassador to Cuba from 1963–1966.

²² In this paper, Watson draws from Charles Taylor’s critique of the atomist description of individuals in domestic society—that the free and equal individual is only possible within a certain social context of institutional practices and rules—to say that it would work equally well at the international level. Watson writes that the system of states is highly atomistic, but adds that this is not all that it is. For Watson, states are also products of society, international society, and to the extent that this is true, there are republican as well as atomist aspects to the system of states, making the matter of distributive justice viable.

practice with its own unique understanding of moral responsibility aligned with recognition of the roles of power and interest, and grounded in consensus on the value of order for the whole. Yet, at the same time it sought, where possible and without danger to international order, consensus on ideas of the good that might guide member states not only to more security, but also to a more just practice.

The key point of difference between the two writers rested in the justifications each used for the priorities they outlined when thinking about the duality of interests and ethics, order and justice, the actual and the ideal. Watson's *raison de système* drew upon diplomatic discourse as its objective ground, while Bull's ethic of international society management appealed, as he had always done, to elementary social goals. Elementary social goals were universal, but they are at the same time less expansionable in the way of a more maximalist ethic. For Bull, their universality meant that cultural cohesion was not necessary to the existence of international society, but also that consensus on something beyond these minimal goals of order would be precarious. It could be helped by cultural cohesion, but that was unlikely to produce much more than agreement around a *particular* justice issue like racial discrimination, not human rights more broadly. For Watson, in contrast, international ethics was expansionable to redistributive justice considerations if diplomats choose to negotiate them within diplomatic practice. He possessed great faith in the responsible leadership and management of diplomats, so much so that, where a cultural base of shared values did not exist, he was optimistic about the prospects for the deliberate and careful negotiation of redistributive justice contractually and procedurally by diplomats, and as Watson wrote, "[t]o do what is right and reasonable would not cause the heavens to fall, but it would take us quite a distance nearer equality than we are now" (Watson 1977b, 18).

Finally, the doubts that came to both Bull and Watson as a consequence of the revolt against the West were of a different kind as well. Watson saw it as a serious challenge to which diplomats must apply themselves carefully, but his overall confidence in the diplomatic practice upon which international society was built was not shaken. Bull, on the other hand, was compelled to examine just how consensuable were the elementary social goals that he saw as the foundation of international society, something that up until this third phase he had not been willing to consider. His confidence in them did not falter, but he was forced to acknowledge that they would benefit from being supplemented by limited, interstate justice considerations. However, that is as far as his thinking moved toward a form of moral maximalism during this final phase of the Committee's discussions.

Thus, the third phase and the British Committee itself came to a close with its Bullian moral skepticism intact. Despite having recognized the significance of the justice issues that were at stake within international society, the British Committee never adopted natural law attributes or sought anything other than empirical means—that is, values explicit in the practice of states—for moral judgment in relation to these conflicts.

Conclusion

On balance the English School tradition has done more to set out the parameters of ethical inquiry in IR than to provide reasoned argument for a particular ethical content. The substance of the British Committee's ethical position across its history rested on what members believed possible in the way of defining and justifying a working balance between real-world politics and standards of the "good." As we have seen, within the British Committee, there were two main lines of thought about how this might be achieved. In the early work of Mackinnon and Williams, there was a tendency to find natural law-like idioms at work in international society that were capable of placing moral limits on the range of actions available to statesmen. Their idea of the "good," in other words, was a relatively maximal, morally

substantive one that resembled individual morality, but the question at issue was the extent to which international politics did, or could be made to, conform to it. In contrast, Bull had grave concerns about the assertion of such maximal ideas of the good. For one to state such a claim without examining its basis in fact was, in his eyes, a dereliction of academic duty, a form of polemicism or moralism of the worst kind. His ethical position was therefore a relatively cautious formulation of a more minimal idea of the good of international society management, founded on existing codes of practice between states in relation to norms of sovereignty, non-intervention, and self-determination.

One might say that Mackinnon's struggle was an epistemological one; Bull's was a practical, if not a moral one. Mackinnon was seeking answers to how one might still talk about maximal concepts of the good in ways consistent with the moral skepticism he and the others held, and he sought a middle-ground epistemology for securing those ideals in the world, so they could serve as guideposts for the conduct of IR. Bull came to find that international society could not just manage order, but that it had to judge and be judged, and that a minimal concept of ethics as a code of practice was not always up to both tasks. So he, like Wight before him, saw the need to find a middle-ground ethics, one that was capable, when political conditions and cultural attitudes on particular issues like the slave trade or racism were favorable, of tipping the working balance between the actual and the ideal toward a more maximal idea of the good, while still being grounded in the facts of IR as they exist. To put it rather crudely, in Mackinnon's formulation, the ideal should lead and shape the actual; whereas for Bull it was the other way around. Neither, however, could be said to have resolved the dilemmas that each position posed for them: Mackinnon was left with both the epistemological problem of grounding his "good" and the practical problem of explaining how it could guide the conduct of international actors; Bull had the problem, at once both practical and moral, of how to get his ethic to bite on deeply unjust practices that lacked a sufficient consensus among international actors on the need to address them.

Most second-generation English School writers have followed Bull's, rather than Mackinnon's, method for thinking about ethics in international society and defining the working relationship between the actual and the ideal. After the dissolution of the British Committee, John Vincent's (1986) book, *Human Rights and International Relations*, suggested that English School thinkers should adopt the role of world society watchmen, looking out for signs in international practice of an emerging global cosmopolitan culture capable of reconciling plural values and the universality implicit in the idea of human rights. Vincent was writing here within the trajectory of Bull's moral skepticism, and shared Bull's concern that there must be moral consensus in actual, existing international practice capable of sustaining more maximal ethical concerns about individual justice.²³ Both pluralists and solidarists continue to engage in that watchman's role today. Whatever moral philosophical claims they are willing to make—a pluralist morality of states view or a solidarist commitment to more cosmopolitan obligations—these claims are grounded in empirical assertions about the current state of international interaction.²⁴ The habit of moral skepticism has not been

²³ For example, see Vincent's discussion of cultural relativism and his assertion that there is no basis for these rights, other than a "wager" that they are prevalent in our thinking about international practice, Vincent (1986).

²⁴ Contemporary pluralists who deny that there is evidence of an emergent world society include Jackson (2000) and Mayall (1990, 2000). For others who look for and find evidence of solidarism today, see Wheeler (2000) in which he examines a number of post-Cold War case studies and argues that the willingness of states to engage in humanitarian intervention is evidence of such change. Hurrell (2006, 210–11) writes that pluralism is no longer a viable understanding of international interaction due to changes associated with globalization, the complexity of governance challenges requiring intervention, the erosion of states and their capacities, and the need for socialized power in a globalized world. See also Hurrell (2007).

broken and Bull's method of prioritizing the ethical as fact continues. However, there are those few who follow a method closer to Mackinnon's: keeping moral philosophical argument about what can be said in relation to the "good" at the forefront of their analysis of real-world politics. They open out the watchman's role beyond monitoring the advance of world society to that of providing moral reasons as to why international practice should move in particular directions.²⁵ In so doing, these English School writers are once again considering a more maximal concept of ethics.

This historical survey offers three lessons for the English School as it explores its future normative development. First, while the rest of the British Committee did not endorse his Kantian leanings, Mackinnon was right in at least this sense: the group shared the view that one cannot get around the basic Kantian problem of the interpenetration of ideas of the good and what happens in the world. This raises an issue for Barry Buzan's effort to "recast English school theory in Wendtian terms," as it results in normative and empirical wings of English School inquiry and reinforces the idea of independent or at least analytically separable tracks of inquiry.²⁶ The central message imparted by this intellectual history of ethical thought within the English School is that the two must go hand in hand. Moreover, if done well, this would give the English School a distinct advantage in relation to its closest cousin in American International Relations: constructivism. Norms cannot be studied apart from their normativity. This was Bull's own lesson that he learned in the third phase of the British Committee discussed here, and it is arguable that constructivists are learning a similar lesson today.

Second, norms are where ethics and interest, and the ideal and the actual meet for the English School; so, Buzan is right when he says that thinking within this tradition may be better characterized as a theory about norms than as normative theory.²⁷ However, the unique potential of the English School as a kind of normative IR theory rests in turning the "stuff" of norms into an empirically, as well as philosophically, argued ethics. Just because the English School talks more today than it once did about human rights as an emerging practice of world politics does not make it more normative. Were it to work more systematically and philosophically toward defending its middle-ground ethics, justifying the priorities it sets between more minimal and more maximal ideas of the good, the English School would have a normative theory. However, as this intellectual history suggests, this is not an insignificant challenge for the English School. It has long engaged in questions concerning what it can say about moral choice in international society consistent with its moral skepticism. In order to break through this difficulty, a middle-ground epistemology for moral claims, like the one sought by Mackinnon, will have to be found to suit its middle-ground ethics. Of course, the tradition does have the choice of breaking free of its moral skepticism in an effort to identify and defend moral criteria, but as this survey shows, to do so would be to abandon a defining element of the work that flowed out of the British Committee.

²⁵ For example, see Williams (2002), Linklater (1998), and Linklater and Suganami (2006).

²⁶ Buzan is careful to say that he does not want to "replace or over-ride the normative version of English school thinking," but to set an alternate, structural one "alongside," in this way represents a departure from the thought documented here (Buzan 2004, 228–30).

²⁷ Almeida (2003, 296) says that the English School should not be dismissed as a form of normative theory for failing to argue in a Rawlsian, Grand Theory sort of way; I agree. However, I do not agree with Buzan's characterization because the English School fails to argue as Grand Theorists do. I believe a more minimal, less ideal-cast notion of international ethics could make an interesting contribution to normative IR, but will only do so if the English School does what all normative theory must do to be so characterized: to be consciously engaged in the giving of moral or ethical reasons of judgment on action. See Cochran (1999).

Finally, perhaps the key to unlocking the ethical possibility of the English School rests in analyzing whether the problem, pluralism versus solidarism, is in fact a problem. William Bain writes that pluralism and solidarism both lock into the idea that the values at the base of each respectively, “the freedom of international society” and “the unity of human community,” represent conflicting moral claims. He argues that there is an account of obligation that reconciles both values which is in fact more consistent with “the conventional English School narrative than anything else that can be gleaned from the pluralist-solidarist debate” (Bain 2007, 574). This historical survey supports the idea that the English School has long understood that these more minimal and maximal ideas of the good coexist and intermingle, and that it is the job of the academic who studies international society to set priorities or a working relationship among these values, and more recently within the English School, to *justify* those choices in a middle-ground ethics. Bain’s effort to describe and defend a notion of obligation that demonstrates how the two dispositions can be taken together is an important example of what is required to develop ethical theory within the English School.²⁸

In conclusion, could the middle-ground ethics of the English School be compelling as a kind of normative IR theory? Yes. What is valuable in Bull, and potentially instructive for normative IR theory today, is the recognition of the enduring importance of power and interest to ethical debate: that all international orders “must be someone’s order” for some purpose.²⁹ Power, moral conflict, and states’ interests cannot sit apart from our inquiry into ethics and world politics. Donald Mackinnon and the members of the British Committee over the years understood no less. Normative IR theory has worked principally within the tradition of Grand Theory, expounding upon the nature of obligation that obtains in world politics that cannot be explained by power or interest. However, I believe the English School tradition makes a powerful case for the need of an “ethics as interest” formulation of normative IR theory that allows for more than what realists can accept in the notion of a limited, but shared interest in survival.³⁰ In providing the content for that formulation, the second generation of English School scholarship on international ethics should re-engage themes of the duality and interconnection of demands for order and justice *both empirically and philosophically* if it is to overcome the limitations outsiders and insiders attribute to it. This historical survey of how the various members of the School tried, and largely failed, to address this issue does not in itself present a blueprint as to how to do so; but it clarifies the nature of the problem and points toward a definite direction for future inquiry, both of which are necessary steps before the journey toward a more morally acceptable and empirically sustainable middle-ground ethic can be undertaken.

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²⁸ Almeida (2006, 68–9) criticizes the understanding of modern international history held by most recent English School scholars for failing to recognize that “[w]orld order is, and always has been, *both* pluralist and solidarist.”

²⁹ These are Bull’s words BCTIP (1961, 2) which are quoted more fully in note 12 above.

³⁰ For more on this point see Cochran (2008).

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