Review of "Ethics and International Relations, Second edition"

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Recommended Citation
This is a revised second-edition of Gordon Graham’s popular introductory text in political philosophy. The first edition was published in 1997, but the political landscape has changed remarkably in the intervening years, and the new edition of this useful textbook incorporates many of the important developments of the last ten years, as they relate to international relations. I see Graham’s book as part of an interesting interdisciplinary project, attempting to link the disciplines of political science, philosophy, economics, environmental studies, and international law in a cohesive framework, and his approach to the project, while primarily philosophical, does not give the other disciplines short shrift. I would class this text as an introduction to “applied political philosophy,” which seems to be an underused nomenclature for work that bridges the gaps between the related disciplines. It is clear that many of the issues and topics that Graham addresses in the book are often taught in law schools (international law, humanitarian intervention), economics classrooms (The WTO, the World Bank), applied ethics and philosophy courses (war, poverty and famine, terrorism), political science courses (Realism, international relations, globalization), environmental studies classes (the Gaia hypothesis, deep ecology) and other disciplines, but Graham synthesizes these divergent programs into a thematically linked project that moves beyond ‘applied ethics’ or ‘political philosophy’. It should also be noted that the royalties from the book are donated to The Soko Fund, a non-profit organization that funds college education for women in Malawi.

The book itself is nicely written and remarkably brisk, and covers an expansive amount of material in only 223 pages. Graham opens with a survey of the historical rise of the nation-state, and then moves to a systematic discussion of varying approaches to international morality. He then moves, in chapters three through eight, to discuss specific issues in detail, including warfare, weapons of mass destruction, humanitarian intervention, terrorism, guerrilla warfare and torture, the morality of trade and aid, and, finally, the environment. Each chapter ends with a brief summary of the arguments presented, and a list of suggested readings. The text includes an index and a bibliography, and does not feature any footnotes and endnotes. The revised edition features substantially reworked sections within each of the chapters, and an increased analysis of The World Trade Organization, the World Bank, torture, terrorism, globalism, cosmopolitan approaches to the environment, and Rawls’s *The Law of Peoples*, among other revisions and additions. It is clear that many of the issues and topics covered in the first edition over a decade ago are still important and timely, but also that Graham has made an effort to insert discussions about some of the most important new developments (9/11, pre-emptive war in Iraq, the torture debate) that have occurred...
since the writing of the first edition.

The general argumentative structure of each chapter of the book is to set theories in contrast with each other in relation to specific issues, for the sake of making clear the relevant differences of those theories. In the historically-minded first chapter (where Graham explains how we have arrived at a world of sovereign nation-states), he sets out, for example, the conflicts between nationalism and internationalism about the relations of states to each other, and explores the roles that communism, imperialism, and cosmopolitanism have to play in global affairs. The most commonly recurring motif, however, is the diverging trio of views about the nature of international relations and international morality that Graham terms Realism, Moralism, and Legalism. Where Realism rejects any attempt to ‘moralize’ in politics, both Moralism and Legalism will, to some degree, acknowledge that morality plays SOME kind of role in determining what is permissible in governing. The difference, according to Graham, is simply HOW MUCH morality is allowed into the fray: while the Moralists will make moral principles central to their ideas of government (he cites Utilitarians and Kantians as typical Moralists) the Legalists will only allow morality to slip into when the agreed-upon system allows for it. Putting it in the context of international law, the Realist will argue that ethical foreign policy is hopelessly utopian, while the Morality could encourage the violation of existing international law to enable an ethical foreign policy, and the Legalist will find ethical foreign policy to be one that falls under the existing laws of nations. It is this debate, between the Moralists, Realists, and Legalists, that frames the discussion of the problems of ethics in international relations. More often than not, Graham seems to side with the Legalists.

While Graham explores, and challenges, some of the commonly held views on issues like the theory of just war, the consequentialist justification for use of weapons of mass destruction, the complexity of the definition of terrorism, and many other issues, I will focus my evaluation here on his discussion of the ‘ticking bomb problem’ and the dirty hands dilemma, as it relates to the torturing suspected terrorists (146-155). Graham sets the problem out using a version of the ticking bomb problem as developed by Seumas Miller for the entry on torture in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Miller, 2006) and later fleshed out in *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism* (Miller, 2008). The simplified case goes as follows: a small nuclear weapon has been hidden in a densely populated urban area, and will detonate shortly if not located and disarmed. The police have captured the leader of the terrorist operation (who is refusing to cooperate) and are faced with a decision: should they engage in torturing the leader, to obtain the location of the device, or do they refrain from torturing him and, in so doing, doom thousands of citizens (who cannot be quickly evacuated) and leave the city uninhabitable for decades. As Miller presents the argument, the police think that torture will give them a ‘reasonable chance’ of obtaining the information which is otherwise not forthcoming. Critical to the placement of this case as a moral (or political, or legal) dilemma is the fact that torture is neither a legally or morally permitted tactic for the police generally, but that it would seem, in this case, that torture is morally justifiable, according to Miller.

As Graham explains it, Miller’s argument seems to have the following structure:

1. There is a ticking time bomb that cannot be found or disarmed without information from the leader of the terrorist group
2. The bomb will cause catastrophic and long-term loss of life and damage to the city
3. The captured suspect is, in fact, the leader of the group
4. The captured suspect has vital information about the location of the bomb, but will not volunteer it
5. Torture is generally morally and legally prohibited
6. The captured suspect will surrender the information about the location of the bomb, in time to stop it, IF AND ONLY IF he is tortured
7. Therefore, the police are justified, morally (and legally?), if they choose to torture the terrorist to obtain the location of the ticking bomb.

Graham notes that several of these premises are, at the very least, based on worrisome assumptions, most notably 3, 4, and 6. Torture, he notes, is time-consuming, and, because of this, it seems difficult to be certain that we can accept premise 6 as true. However, the most telling problem in this version of the argument is the implicit move that gets us from the premises to the conclusion, namely the claim that preventing the loss of life and damage to the city that is imminent justifies the standard prohibition against torturing. As Graham notes, the Realist can admit (pace Walzer, 1973) there are cases like this one where one can both be guilty of a great moral wrong and yet still have done the right thing. The Moralist, however, must be able to present a moral argument that, while setting out high standards of justification, still admits that there are some cases where torture can be justified in principle. In this case, the Moralist is saying that one has done the right thing and denies that what was done is a great moral wrong. This is, according to Graham, the essence of the dirty hands problem, and both Moralists and Realists can deny that it is a problem, but for importantly different reasons. The Realist is denying that doing something morally wrong has any impact on our global judgments about politics. Politics and morality should be kept distinct from each other, and moral judgments should not impact the political decisions we make. The Moralist, as Graham describes her, is forced to create a theory that will occasionally justify actions that would normally be thought of as immoral for the sake of some greater moral good. Ultimately, neither the Realist denial of the place of morality in politics nor the Moralist’s high-minded values can spare us from the problems the both cause us to consider torture, and those raised by the actual torturing itself. This argument by elimination, says Graham, leads us to fall back to the third option, Legalism, where “nations can be rightly called to observe the rules of war in the war on terror, and to abide by the prohibitions that international law has placed upon the means by which that war can be conducted” (154-155).

I will close by offering some criticisms of Graham’s analysis of the ticking bomb case and the dirty hands scenario. While his three-theory framework is useful in a text that is geared toward introductory-level students, it seems to be overly simplified when one looks at dirty hands cases like torture. He seems to assume that, because one Moralist theory-cluster (consequentialism) can clearly work in permissions for torture based on promoting greater goods, that all reasonable Moralisms will do so mutatis mutandis. This seems clearly false, and it seems to be the case that a reasonable Kantian, virtue ethicist, contractualist, or contractarian (among others) could reject the permission to torture while still being Moralists in the sense that Graham would like to frame them. His only argument against this claim (148) is that the Moralist’s denial of the right to torture in extreme cases would have to rest on the fiat “Let justice be done, though the heavens fall” and that no Moralist could ACTUALLY let the heavens fall. I’m not sure about all of them, but I would imagine Kant would have something to say here. In general, then, I worry that he has lumped far too much together under the heading ‘Moralism’ to be able to use the terminology fairly. Moreover, if these three theories are all-or-nothing, he faces a further problem when nation-states utilize more
than one theory to self-identify. Is the United States, presently, a Realist project? Moralist? Legalist? A partial case can be made for all three, without a convincing case for any one on its own. The Bush Administration’s defense of torture has, at times, found roots in both Realist and Moralist arguments, but Legalism is deferred to quite frequently as well. It is difficult to imagine that something as large as a government of ANY sort would really be bound by one type of theoretical framework, but it is not clear how the parts make up the whole, in Graham’s view.

I conclude by noting that this is an excellent introductory text for courses in applied political philosophy, applied ethics, political science, and war and peace courses. Graham sets out a solid framework, explores the problems attached to international relations, and offers a critical perspective on the issues. His text is, in this way, a nice compliment to the standard fare in applied ethics and political theory.

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Works Cited.

