Moralising the World

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Abstract: Our adversarial system of international relations poses substantial risks of violent catastrophe and impedes morally urgent initiatives and reform collaborations. The domestic politics of our more advanced societies provide guidance toward a better world, governed by just rules which ensure that basic human needs are met, inequalities are constrained, and weapons and wealth are marginalized as tools for influencing political and judicial outcomes. Impartial administration, adjudication, and enforcement of just rules requires a strong normative expectation on officials and citizens to fully subordinate their personal and national loyalties to their shared commitment to the just and fair functioning of the global order. As we have fought (and often defeated) nepotism within states, we must fight nepotism in behalf of states to overcome humanity's great common challenges. To moralize international relations, states can plausibly begin with reforming the world economy toward ending severe poverty, thereby building the trust and respect needed for more difficult reforms.

Keywords: bargaining, cosmopolitanism, game theory, human rights, impartiality, *modus vivendi*, national security, nepotism, overlapping consensus, poverty, power, progress, prudence, soft power, violence.

1. Introduction

If 18th-century scholars of human affairs could observe the present, they would surely be impressed — though probably not surprised — by the scientific and economic progress humanity has made since their time, including the many new technologies that can make life much safer, more comfortable, and more interesting. But they would also be deeply disappointed by how little *moral* progress has accompanied these achievements. Severe poverty still blights the lives of half of humankind, with over 3 billion unable to afford a healthy diet (FAO et al., 2023: 27). We have not attained global governance institutions that fairly take account of everyone's basic needs. We have not learned to settle international disagreements by the strength of arguments, in judicial or quasi-judicial proceedings. Instead, we still settle such disagreements in a barbaric way: by violence and the threat thereof. Even worse, war now poses an existential threat to humanity and many other life forms — as do the rapidly intensifying ecological effects of human activities, including climate change and heavy pollution of our planet's air, water, and soil. There is a real danger that without substantial moral progress in this 21st century, past gains in quality of human life will be reversed.

Humans aspire to more: to a world in which conflicts and challenges are resolved through moral reasoning and democratic processes, in which weapons and violence no longer have political relevance, in which income and wealth disparities no longer dominate political outcomes. We already know how to resolve conflicting claims on the basis of standing rules, democratically adopted and impartially adjudicated by an independent professional judiciary. The domestic lives of many national societies — and, to some extent, the European Union — demonstrate this know-how, showing that large numbers of people can form a vibrant and diverse political community in which (the capacity for) violence has lost all importance. So why have we not managed to realize this kind of structure at the global level?

Clearly, such a global order is possible with today's economic, technological, and administrative capabilities. What makes it so difficult to achieve the transition to such an order? How can we overcome these difficulties to engineer such a transition?

2. The Adversarial Modus Vivendi

We live in a world of rival states, which differs from a Hobbesian state of nature in that this rivalry is deeply structured by rules. We have piles of international laws, bilateral and multilateral treaties, and unwritten customs and conventions that – together – organise the interactions of state actors as well as those of their banks, corporations, and the like. One could say that international relations have become a highly **complex game**, which my doctoral supervisor John Rawls has characterized as a ***modus vivendi*** (Rawls, 1993: xxxix-xliv & 146-7).

Rule-governed rivalry has immense advantages over a state of nature: participants can form stabler expectations and can usually resolve conflicts without violence. These advantages depend on it being in each party's interest to comply with the rules. Such incentive compatibility requires that the rules treat the various parties differently, according to their respective bargaining power. The rules of a *modus vivendi* unfairly favour the strong. But such unfairness is in the interest also of the weak, who urgently want the strong to be motivated to comply. The weak fare better with unfair rules that are tilted against them than with fair rules that, at critical moments, the strong would disregard.

The distribution of power shifts over time: some parties become weaker; others stronger. Such fluctuations need not disrupt the *modus vivendi* but can be accommodated by adjusting its rules, which then reflect a ***dynamic* prudential equilibrium**.

In this dynamic contest, the rules are influenced by the distribution of power and, conversely, the power distribution is influenced by the rules. Understanding this, strengthening parties will seek rule modifications that further increase their power. Consequently, shifts in power may be

cumulative and self-reinforcing, giving rise to **upward and downward spirals**, where an initial power shift, through rule changes it facilitates, intensifies into a major power surge or power slide.

Participant awareness of the danger of such a descending spiral has a destabilising effect. An actor who foresees that it will prudently have to accept increasingly unfavourable rules in the future may prefer to fight at once, even with slim chances of victory, rather than become increasingly marginalised over time.

The ever-present danger of a downward spiral leads *modus-vivendi* participants to focus obsessively on the preservation and expansion of their power without letting moral principles or values get in the way. This imperative of **national security** infects even domestic politics. For optimal power projection, a country's government needs popular support and therefore has reason to manufacture such support by any means, even dishonest and undemocratic ones. Politicians then tell themselves that they must violate their own country's values for the sake of those values themselves — namely, to ensure the long-term preservation and, ideally, global victory of those very values: "seeking a future world of justice / liberty / equality / virtue / happiness, we must unfortunately often use nasty means toward defending and promoting these values: means such as lies and disinformation, bribery and blackmail, treachery, war, assassinations, torture, alliances with tyrants, and subversion of legitimate governments. *Realpolitik* demands that we use all such tools of statecraft to advance our power and interests."

In a thoroughly peaceful world, states would feel safe to honour their own moral principles in their foreign-policy decisions. But within the existing *modus vivendi*, any practical anticipation of such a world is risky. If other states join in, perpetual peace may be achieved. But if other states merely pretend to go along, then the sincere party risks a substantial loss of power — as happened with Gorbachev's ambitious initiative to end the Cold War, which sent the USSR/Russia into a downward spiral. This cautionary example complicates the transition problem but may not make it unsolvable. The transition may still be possible through a sequence of precisely coordinated steps that, at each stage, only minimally affect the power distribution among the most powerful states.

3. The Power of States

Reflection of the transition problem requires a more detailed understanding of the ongoing *modus vivendi* and of the way it is analysed by international-relations experts and leading practitioners of foreign policy. They view the power of states as deriving from three sources: military strength, economic strength, and a residual category — including cultural influence, charisma, moral reputation, and the capacity to convince others with compelling arguments — for which Joseph Nye has coined the term ***soft power*** (Nye, 2004: 17). Within each of these components, what matters is *relative* position: for example, a state's economic strength *compared to that of its rivals*. A state's power depends on its ranking in these three hierarchies.

States have an interest in protecting and improving their ranking in all three hierarchies. Because efforts in any one dimension typically have opportunity costs in the other two dimensions, states often face difficult choices about the strategically optimal allocation of their limited resources: about how much effort to devote to promoting their military, economic, and soft power. Of course, a state wants to allocate its resources so as to optimize its overall political power. But finding the optimal allocation of resources is difficult because a state's political power is not simply some additive function of its military, economic, and soft power

$$(\forall S)\ p_S=f_1(m_S)+f_2(e_S)+f_3(s_S)$$

Assuming fixed conversion rates across the three components of power, this oversimple equation fails because (1) there are no such fixed conversion rates and because (2) the amount of political power a state derives from its own constellation of strength in the three components importantly depends on how the political power of its most relevant peers is configured.

Let us examine reason (1) more closely. The relative importance of the three components of political power depends on the global political climate. When states are at war or on the brink of war, military strength is paramount. In more peaceful periods, economic strength and soft power have greater significance. Consequently, states have opposing interests regarding the geopolitical climate. Some states have an interest in not letting the world become too peaceful. These are states whose comparative advantage lies in military strength — states that do better in the hierarchy of military strength than in the two other hierarchies. Such states must always exist, though which states are in this group varies from time to time. Presently, the premier example is the United States — which is militarily about as strong as all other states combined but economically accounting for merely one-sixth of gross world product at purchasing power parities. Russia, too, seems to belong in this group. On the opposite side are the states that score better in economic and cultural than in military strength — currently most obviously Japan, Germany, South Korea, India, Indonesia, China, Mexico, and Switzerland. Such states would gain political power if military strength lost its relevance — though the richer ones among them might also lose some political power insofar as they could no longer justify economic selfishness by declaring the world to be a jungle in which they can ill afford the luxury of morality.

The geopolitical climate is not fixed or exogenously set but rather itself under the influence of states, which can invest not merely in any of the three components of political power but also in affecting the geopolitical climate. States whose comparative advantage lies in economic or soft power may have reason in promoting international peace and understanding; states whose comparative advantage lies in military power may have reason to invest in promoting international hostility and conflict (preferably ones in which themselves are not directly involved).

A further complication arises from the fact that the geopolitical climate influences not merely the international, but also the intranational power distribution. In times of international conflict, the executive branch gains power, as do the military, the intelligence services, and the arms industry. These actors therefore often have an interest in deliberately worsening the international political climate. An unpopular government, for example, may gain power and influence domestically if it can, in contentious confrontation with other states, drape itself in the national flag and rouse the population's patriotism, national pride, chauvinism, or xenophobia. Genuine peace thus has natural — *ex officio* — enemies: most notably the supremely important President of the United States, who can increase both his political power in his country and the political power of his country by moving the world closer to war.

The presented analysis sees humanity trapped in an adversarial game in which political actors use their political power to maintain and, if possible, to expand their political power. In this game, the use and threat of violence remain central because this serves the interests of those states and intra-state actors whose comparative advantage is military strength — and because these actors can generally prevail over the rest: disputes, crises, conflicts, incidents, tensions, belligerence, wars and hostilities are easier to produce than to prevent.

Though conducted in a civilized, rule-structured way, this adversarial *modus vivendi* game is in the long run a matter of naked survival because its rules are not fixed, but rather adjusted to power fluctuations in order to induce strengthening participants to remain in compliance. Each participant thus runs the risk of sliding into a descending spiral that can marginalise it and ultimately eliminate it from the game. And all participants are endangered by others who, fearing such a spiral, seek immediate combat.

The foregoing analysis has the flavour of a self-fulfilling prophecy: it is true because many political professionals take it to be true. Another, much better world is possible; but we must find ways to approach it with the political actors that now exist in our present adversarial system.

4. Sacred Rules as a Shared Identity

If we want to inaugurate a new phase of international relations, one in which the competition for power no longer dominates everything else, then we must make clear, especially to the world's key political leaders, that in their adversarial game everyone will lose in the long run. A technologically highly advanced and fast-advancing world in which always some states can increase their political power by promoting tension and hostility and in which consequently most states invest substantial efforts into inventing and accumulating ever more powerful weapons of mass destruction — such a world will sooner or later be consumed in a horrific war. This insight is a sober piece of realism that we must hold up against the school of political realists who subscribe to the dogma that the pursuit of power ought to be the primary goal of any state. The collectively self-defeating nature of this

goal gives all of us, political realists included, a powerful reason to seek profound reform — though not yet a reform programme.

A plausible reform programme must gradually remove certain rules from the *modus vivendi* game by entrenching them in such a way that all actors can rely on their continued observance. Such entrenchment requires that the relevant rules are widely regarded as **sacred**. As the word implies, such sacredness of certain rules might be grounded in a religion and has historically been so grounded for certain periods in certain regions of the Earth. But, in the modern world, sacredness must be more broadly based in a widespread revulsion that places certain policies and behaviours firmly beyond consideration. For example, we categorically reject eating captured enemy spies or soldiers, or processing them into dog food. We categorically reject torturing or killing diplomats. And we categorically reject even doing any research into whether such practices might be useful — reinforced by understanding that any government found to be doing such research would draw worldwide disgust upon itself.

For sacred rules to be truly entrenched, political actors and the citizens they represent must hold them sacred. This requires **higher-order volition**. States must subordinate their central imperative of power maximization to an even higher constraint of respecting and enforcing the sacred rules. This subordination must be internalized by their political leaders and their citizens. A rule has reached sacredness when a politician found to have violated it, or to have seriously considered violating it, would lose the support of his or her own constituents. This is the best assurance one state can give other states of its continued compliance.

We are familiar with such higher-order volition in sports. Genuine athletes are wholeheartedly invested in their sport and passionate to win. But not unconditionally. They want to win in a fair competition. This is not an ordinary desire, goal, or commitment to be balanced against their desire to win. A true athlete will not compromise the fairness of the contest in the slightest, even if doing so could greatly improve her chance of winning. The fairness of the competition is sacred to her. Fairness is central to her identity as an athlete and a human being. Fairness is a precondition for competitive sports to have meaning for her at all.

It may be objected that such genuine sportsmanship is rare. Perhaps. Yet, nonetheless, the *ideal* of genuine sportsmanship is real: everyone immediately recognizes it — feels uplifted by it, attracted to it.

In our social and political lives, too, we are familiar with higher-order volition. Whoever holds a public office must set aside all personal goals in its exercise. A school principal, for instance, must treat all pupils equally, even if one of them is her own son in whose success she, as his mother, takes a fervent interest. Even if her son is equally qualified as other pupils for the prestigious school prize, we expect her not simply to award the prize to him but in this case to leave the decision to

others or to make it by lot. Even the strongest reasons for action arising from our very closest relationships are to be considered null and set aside in such a context. Granted, this does not always happen. But when violations come to light, there is little sympathy and tolerance — and much loud criticism of corruption, nepotism, favouritism, cronyism. People lose their job for favouring, even just slightly, someone they deeply love.

What holds for the headmistress holds of course even more for politicians in the more advanced states, who should never favour their relatives and friends, or their hometown or native region. Interestingly, it also holds for ordinary people in their role as citizen. Consider for example a woman who takes a public stand on the political question of whether, in the face of historical discrimination in education, girls or minority children should now be accorded certain advantages. And suppose it were to come out that she has tailored her public statements to the interests of her own children—thinking along the lines of: "I love my children, and if they were girls or minorities, then of course I would speak out in favour of such advantages. But since my children are majority boys, whose taxes could be raised and career prospects lowered by such advantages, I will raise my political voice against them." Even opponents of special benefits for historically discriminated groups would find such reasoning morally offensive. This shows that we normatively expect even ordinary citizens, in their public expressions and voting behaviour, to set aside their private attachments and to be guided solely by justice and the common good.

Familiar from domestic politics in advanced states, this thought pattern can help us at the international level. In today's world, politicians pursue their respective partisan interests. There are indeed some special officers, notably the Secretary General of the United Nations, from whom impartiality is expected. But the important international decisions are made in bodies whose members pursue the power interests of their respective states; and these decisions therefore reflect the existing power distribution in keeping with the *modus vivendi* model.

To overcome this condition, we need higher-order volition. We must build worldwide a normative expectation that anyone involved in such international decisions may represent her country's partisan interests but must subordinate this effort to the observance and enforcement of special — sacred — rules that protect the weak and preserve the essentials of a level playing field.

Intellectually, this task seems achievable. National impartiality requirements are now deeply entrenched in the more advanced national societies. Anti-nepotism has a long and distinguished history in several great cultural traditions as well as more recent, inspiringly passionate support in newer states such as South Korea, Malaysia, Brazil, and South Africa. So, the idea of a special kind of loyalty that cancels other loyalties within its domain is already familiar. It should thus be possible to gain a foothold for this idea on the supranational plane: for the idea that it is as shameful to subvert the justice of our global institutional order for the benefit of one's own country as it is to subvert

the justice of one's country's national institutional order for the sake of benefiting oneself or one's family, friends, or neighbors.

While the task seems intellectually within reach, politically it is daunting. One reason for this is that the needed transition cannot count on an important factor that may well have played a crucial role in the emergence of the modern state. It is deeply surprising that, in many national societies, an impartiality requirement associated with certain roles and performances has come to be internalized and honored to the extent that it is — that, in these societies, most citizens are genuinely appalled when they learn that a mother has used her political office to enrich her son, even when his gain is greater than the social loss. Centuries of social struggle on different continents and in diverse cultures have preceded this civilizational achievement. Crucially important to the historical outcome is the plain fact that, in any historical period, societies that were ahead in terms of internalizing a strong impartiality requirement had a substantial competitive advantage over societies that were behind. By interfering with an efficient, merit-based division of labor, nepotism and other forms of corruption are a serious drag on any society's ability to solve its problems and to compete against other societies.

It is evident that, analogously, nationalist nepotism — the tendency to prioritize one's own country's interests in the design and application of international rules — is a serious drag on humanity's ability to solve its problems, our ability to make us safe from advanced weapons and other dangerous technologies, ecological catastrophe, resource depletion, pandemics, financial meltdowns, and the like. Unfortunately, this drag causes no *competitive* pressures: we are not falling behind some other intelligent species, at least not as far as we know. Still, a vivid appreciation of the real prospect of future catastrophe should be helpful for achieving the transition to a cosmopolitan ethos.

This may sound unrealistic. It is hard to imagine that a national ambassador to the United Nations Security Council would acknowledge, let alone highlight, constraints that disadvantage her own country, without being removed from office soon thereafter. But such progress is realistically conceivable if it is linked to new bodies whose members are explicitly sworn to impartiality. For example, we can create a body of jurists tasked with impartially determining whether the criteria for permissible humanitarian intervention are met in specific cases (Pogge 2005: 175-77). The relevant ambassador to the Security Council would then not have to judge for herself that her state's military intervention was illegitimate but would merely have to follow the independent panel's judgment on this matter.

5. Which Rules Might Become Sacred?

Such a reform program should most plausibly start with rules that satisfy three criteria: (1) they are of low relevance to the power competition and therefore do not expose states to substantial risks

from the noncompliance of others; (2) they are clear and compliance with them is easily monitored and observed; and (3) they are widely understood as morally important, intrinsically or instrumentally, so that people around the world see their establishment as valuable, which in turn makes it difficult for political leaders to violate them against the resistance of their own population and world public opinion.

Considering these three criteria, arms limitation treaties – beneficial as they might be – are not a promising first step in a moralizing transformation. Because they are of great relevance to the power competition, a strict compliance commitment to them is risky, especially in a context of fast and unpredictable technology development. Moreover, it is rarely easy to reliably monitor and observe compliance (certain test ban treaties prohibiting large explosions are an exception). Finally, arms control agreements are often highly technical, making it difficult for ordinary people to understand their meaning and to appreciate their moral importance.

A more promising starting point is afforded by rules that banish certain widely recognized moral evils. Of long standing among these are the rules of *Ius Cogens*, which prohibit, among other things, genocide, wars of aggression, slavery, torture, and piracy. Also among them are the human rights protections internationally recognized in the *Universal Declaration*, the two *Covenants*, and other documents. These restraints generally do well by criterion (3): ordinary people understand their basic meaning and appreciate their moral importance. Some of these rules can, however, be of high relevance to the international power competition; and states then go to great lengths to misapply them: to make false accusations of restraint violations or to deny or to excuse their own restraint violations or those of their allies. Here the restraint against aggressive war is especially vulnerable to violation by major military powers, as illustrated by the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And most governments stand accused of violating the rule against torture in the service of fighting their domestic opponents or foreign adversaries. Nevertheless, in contrast to arms limitation rules, these moral restraints have been successful insofar as there are no sustained disputes about their status. No state seriously seeks to modify them to its own advantage: at least verbally, states agree that these moral restraints, including those on aggressive war and torture, ought to be observed by all. But the international competition for power distorts states' interpretation of these restraints as well as their reactions to rule violations: states condemn even clear-cut violations only when doing so is not detrimental to their own power position. Consequently, the real influence of these moral restraints remains limited. Violations by powerful actors are often downplayed because criticism of such actors entails costs. Such manifestly unequal treatment of similar violations undermines the moral standing of the restraints and the credibility of those who criticise on their basis. It also renders the restraints unreliable: those who violate them may face condemnation but can use their power to soften it or can undermine it through counteraccusations of hypocrisy.

By the proposed three criteria, an even more promising starting point for a moralization of international relations would seem to be the eradication of **structural poverty**. Here — at little cost and risk to the more powerful states — enormous moral progress can be made. While the global average income exceeds 61 international dollars per person per day (22,410 international dollars per person per year in 2022, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/gdp_per_capita_ppp), 42% of human beings cannot afford a healthy diet costing 3.66 international dollars daily (FAO et al., 2023: 27-28). Dating back to colonial times, this radical inequality is perpetuated and reinforced by the more powerful states, which dominate design and application of the international economic and financial rules. If these rules were brought into compliance with even minimal requirements of justice, then this alone would get us more than halfway toward the full realisation of human rights.

The eradication of global poverty is already a declared common goal of the world's governments, laid out in the Sustainable Development Goals of the Agenda 2030. But governments have not lived up to their promises, as is shown, for example, by the fact that the official number of food-insecure people has risen every single year: from 1543.9 million in 2014 (FAO et al. 2022: 26) to 2356.9 million in 2022 (FAO et al. 2023: 21) — for a total increase of 53%. It is high time to work on fulfilling this promise by reforming the structural defects in the global order which aggravate global inequality and perpetuate severe poverty. Lacking the space here to describe such reforms in detail, I briefly sketch three examples.

(1) Presently, large multinational corporations (MNCs) and super-rich individuals pay taxes at much lower effective rates – relative to their real profits and incomes – than their less-wealthy peers. Such undertaxation in the hundreds of billions (Alstadsæter et al. 2024) gravely impedes progress against deprivation and inequality as mandated by the Sustainable Development Goals. Such undertaxation is also associated with large collective harms, as vast sums are spent on tax avoidance and as large less efficient actors outcompete smaller more efficient ones. This problem should be substantially mitigated through a fair and comprehensive **minimum tax scheme** under which even the wealthiest MNCs and individuals would pay appropriate taxes on their gains. A fuller statement of this proposal would cover matters of implementation and enforcement, envisioning *inter alia* a Global Asset Registry and measures for dealing with non-cooperating states. The lion's share of the additional tax revenues collected should go to poor populations to meet their basic needs and ecological challenges.

(2) The current global regime governing innovation has monopoly markups as its key funding source. Such monopoly rents encourage the quest for innovations, but also greatly impede their diffusion. This headwind harms the poor, who cannot afford monopoly prices and whose specific needs innovators thus tend to ignore. It also works against potential innovations whose benefits would mostly go to third parties whom buyers care little about. Both problems can be much alleviated through a supplementary alternative reward mechanism that would enable innovators to exchange their monopoly privileges on any patentable technology for impact rewards based on the

social benefits achieved with it (Pogge 2023). By promoting innovations and their diffusion together, **international impact funds** would bring substantial gains in justice and cost-effectiveness, especially in the pharmaceutical and green-technology sectors.

(3) Presently, appropriation of value from our planet is highly uneven: wealthy elites are seizing its natural resources on mutually agreeable terms, and the same rich elites also massively degrade our air, water, and soil through their vastly disproportionate pollution. A **global resources dividend** (GRD) would reduce this disparity (Pogge 2024). It would require states to share a small part of the value of any natural resources they decide to use, to sell, or to degrade. This payment they must make is called a dividend because it is based on the proposition that the global poor own an inalienable stake in all limited natural resources. As in the case of preferred stock, this stake confers no right to participate in decisions about whether or how natural resources are to be used and so does not interfere with national control over resources, or eminent domain. But it does entitle its holders to a share of the economic value of the resource in question, if indeed the decision is to use it. This proposition is to the applied also to limited resources that are not destroyed through use but merely eroded, worn down, or occupied, such as air and water used for discharging pollutants or land used for farming, ranching, or buildings. Proceeds from the GRD are to be used toward ensuring that all human beings can meet their own basic needs with dignity. The goal is not merely to improve nutrition, housing, health, and education of the poor, but also to enable them effectively to defend and realise their basic interests themselves. This capacity presupposes that they are freed from bondage and other relations of personal dependence, that they can acquire professional skills, that they can participate as equals in politics and in the labour market, and that their status is protected by appropriate legal rights which they can understand and effectively enforce through an open and fair legal system.

Such progress against poverty would help us anchor the idea of moralisation in people's minds, to build trust, and then to extend the moral approach to more difficult challenges, such as environmental protection, resource depletion, global health, dangerous technologies, and the threat of war. Following this path, humanity may yet be able, through overlapping consensus, to achieve its deepest aspiration of an Ethical Commonwealth (Kant), Tianxia (all under Heaven), Ubuntu (we are through one another), Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (one Earth, one family, one future).

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