

Anarchy, Evolution, and Ethics in International Relations

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Abstract

Challenging the Realist claim that international anarchy produces an amoral sphere of political action, Brian C. Rathbun argues that anarchy has selected for individuals with a particular moral sense. Flipping Realist arguments around, he claims that individuals would have never survived the hardships of anarchy if they were completely amoral. Rather, morality is a precondition for survival in anarchy. But unlike Constructivists, who maintain that socially constructed norms over time have civilized international politics, Rathbun claims that a morality is part of our human nature, and thus, a material feature of the world. To substantiate his claims, Rathbun adeptly applies insights from multiple disciplines, marshalling empirical evidence generated through a variety of natural and social scientific methods.

Keywords: international relations; anarchy; morality; human nature; materialism; constructivism; ethics

For most Realists, international politics, resembling the state of nature, is a realm of compulsion, not choice. The absence of an international sovereign that can constrain violent aggression means that states will do whatever they must to survive. In the state of nature, as Thomas Hobbes famously put it, “nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues.”¹ Of course, not every leader will have been fortunate enough to have read Hobbes. Nonetheless, Realists believe that an evolutionary dynamic will provide for the condition of widespread immorality. States that are incapable or unwilling to master the game of power politics simply will not survive. As a result, the international system will be left populated by rational egoists.

The pessimistic view of the prospects for morality in international relations (IR) has always been contested. Like Hobbes, Immanuel Kant regarded the depravity of mankind to be undeniable. Nonetheless, he maintained that there

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¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: On the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (New York: Collier, 1962 [1651]), 101.

exists in humans a dormant moral aptitude that, over time, might be cultivated such that it could overtake the evil in our nature.² Post–World War II patterns of development aid have been pointed to as evidence in support of the claim.³ Other contemporary Liberal theorists of IR suggest that anarchy is a matter of degree, allowing more room for choice and cooperation in periods when state survival is less precarious.⁴ Moving beyond Liberal theories of norm-guided cooperation in pursuit of self-interests, Constructivist scholars assert the impossibility of modern IR absent a basis of some shared conceptions of right and wrong. Evidence of such has been provided by both political scientists and diplomatic historians.⁵

Building on an impressive resumé of profound, provocative, and often heterodox scholarship, Brian C. Rathbun devotes his latest volume, *Right and Wronged in International Relations: Evolutionary Ethics, Moral Revolutions, and the Nature of Power Politics*, to the question of morality in IR. Applying insights from multiple disciplines and providing evidence generated through a variety of social science methods, he brashly dismisses as “preposterous” the Realist argument that IR is an amoral sphere.⁶ Nevertheless, Liberal and Constructivist scholars will be disappointed if they are hoping for an ally (Liberals more than Constructivists for reasons I discuss later in this review), for Rathbun’s argument is not that morality can coexist with anarchy or that widespread morality is a force for peace. Rather, he argues that anarchy has selected for individuals with a particular moral sense. Flipping Realist arguments around, Rathbun argues that individuals would have never survived the hardships of anarchy if they were completely amoral. Morality, he claims, is a precondition for survival in anarchy.

Asking a big question, Rathbun provides an innovative answer that opens myriad avenues for theoretical advancement and empirical research. When viewed from an evolutionary perspective, our understanding of familiar features of IR and IR theory may require revision. Hence, every serious student of IR theory should read Rathbun’s book and seriously engage with his central methodological and substantive claims.

How can so many strands of IR scholarship have missed the pervasiveness of morality in international politics? For Rathbun, the problem lies in our working definition of the concept. Because most IR scholars set moral behavior in opposition to egoism, their conception of morality is necessarily altruistic. Because Liberals as well as many critical theorists are committed to the proposition of the fundamental equality of all individuals, irrespective of ethnic or national origin, altruism is often equated with cosmopolitan humanitarianism. The debate

² Immanuel Kant, “To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992 [1795]), 116.

³ David Halloran Lumsdaine, *Moral Vision in International Politics: The Foreign Aid Regime, 1949–1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁴ Helen V. Milner, “The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory: A Critique,” *Review of International Studies* 17, no. 1 (January 1991): 67–85.

⁵ See, for example, John G. Ruggie, “What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-utilitarianism and the Constructivist Challenge,” *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1988): 855–85; and Paul W. Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe*, eds. David Wetzel, Robert Jervis, and Jack Levy (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

⁶ Brian C. Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations: Evolutionary Ethics, Moral Revolutions, and the Nature of Power Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), xvii.

between Realists and Idealists (or Utopians, to use Carr's term)⁷ is, thus, in part, a dispute over the prospects for cosmopolitan humanitarianism under anarchy.⁸

Of course, morality cannot be reduced to a selfless cosmopolitan concern for the well-being of other human beings. A passing reference to the traditional Judeo-Christian proscription against suicide or contemporary discussions of environmental morality or duties toward animals should suffice as evidence to the contrary. Aware of the existence of principles of morality beyond cosmopolitan humanitarianism, Rathbun suggests we consider the implications of two alternatives for discussions of morality in international politics. The first is what Rathbun terms "moral condemnation," the second, "binding morality."

In contrast to the notion of a moral conscience—the voice within us that reminds us to do good and feel shame or guilt when we do bad—moral condemnation is that faculty of the mind that allows us to judge the behavior of others and motivates us to punish them when they exhibit excessive egoism.⁹ Whereas scripture—for many, the source of moral authority—maintains that caring for children often requires parents to punish them,¹⁰ Rathbun appears to deny that punishment might be consistent with a moral imperative of care. "If morality is merely caring for others," he writes, "moralistic punishment would be unethical".¹¹ Rathbun's claim that international politics is replete with examples of moral condemnation is reminiscent of Kant's arguments regarding the homage that states render to the idea of right.¹² But whereas Kant regarded such behavior as indicative of some dormant capacity of individuals to control themselves, Rathbun sees it primarily as a motivation for controlling the amoral behavior of others. Moreover, moralistic punishment cannot be reduced to the narrower conception of strategic coercion—the manipulation of another's choice situation with threats and promises—in pursuit of specific goals, or a strategy of tit-for-tat in situations where repeated interaction is assumed. Such rationalist understandings of behavior are hard put to account for the willingness of humans to incur the costs associated with punishing others for excessive egoism that does not affect them but rather harms third parties.¹³ Rathbun argues that this sort of "self-help justice" is common in international politics.¹⁴

Individuals punish bad behavior toward themselves and others, but they also routinely engage in costly in-group favoritism. In fact, without a willingness to engage in "parochial altruism," individuals could not have survived the hardships of anarchy and, thus, passed their genes to future generations.¹⁵ If strong

⁷ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

⁸ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 34–37.

⁹ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 38.

¹⁰ Prov. 13:24.

¹¹ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 39.

¹² Kant, *To Perpetual Peace*, 116.

¹³ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 40, 70.

¹⁴ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 39. The original studies of the willingness of individuals to engage in costly altruistic punishment include those by Ernst Fehr and Simon Gächter, "Altruistic Punishment in Humans," *Nature* 415 (January 2002), 137–40; Robert Boyd, Herbert Gintis, Samuel Bowles, and Peter J. Richerson, "The Evolution of Altruistic Punishment," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 100, no. 6 (March 2003): 3531–35; and James H. Fowler, "Altruistic Punishment and the Origin of Cooperation," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 102, no. 19 (April 2005): 7047–49.

¹⁵ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 49, 68–72.

communities have enjoyed an evolutionary advantage over small familial groups and lone individuals, binding altruism is the glue that holds communities together. Binding altruism is hierarchical rather than egalitarian, as group cohesion requires that individuals subjugate their self-interest to that of the group while also subordinating themselves to authority. Binding altruism points toward the importance of communitarian rather than cosmopolitan morality. Thus, we should not equate widespread morality with international peace. Rather, parochial altruism and punishment directed at the out-group are behaviors that often will exacerbate conflict.

The argument that certain principles governing individual behavior within a group might give some groups a survival advantage over others is not novel and could be consistent with a variety of ontological commitments. Rathbun, however, devotes chapter 3 to anchoring his argument in a firm materialist foundation. That morality appears to be a human constant and that the moral sense appears to be rooted in emotions lead him to conclude that morality is part of our evolved biological rather than cultural heritage. To put it another way, we are hardwired to express moral condemnation and engage in binding altruism.

After developing an alternative to the widespread conception of morality as cosmopolitan altruism in the first three chapters of his book, Rathbun devotes the remaining eight chapters to providing various types of empirical evidence to substantiate his claims. In chapter 4, he presents cross-national, micro- and macro-foundational data generated through survey experiments. Chapters 5–11 comprise historical analyses of German foreign policy behavior from the Wilhelmine period, through the Weimar Republic, and ultimately Hitler's Third Reich. Why Germany? Rathbun argues that German history provides a hard test for his claims. Since Germany is widely understood to be the paragon of the amoral state, it constitutes a "least likely" case for strong evidence of morality.¹⁶

By now it should be apparent that this is an ambitious book. To succeed fully, Rathbun must accomplish at least four tasks. First, he needs to convince the reader that Realism has overlooked "binding morality" and the in-group costly altruism to which it gives rise as fundamental features of IR. Second, he must provide compelling evidence that the origins of binding morality are to be found in the evolutionary pressures our ancestors faced while living in an anarchic environment, rather than shared understandings of what constitutes acceptable behavior for members of a group. Third, he needs to demonstrate that universal traits at the level of the individual aggregate in ways that explain state behavior. Success in the first three tasks then hinges on the fourth: Rathbun's convincing us that we have misread the history of late nineteenth and early twentieth century German history.

Each of Rathbun's claims challenges existing orthodoxies. Although I largely accept Rathbun's characterization of recent findings in evolutionary biology, psychology, and neuroscience, in what follows, I nonetheless want to point out possible lines of rebuttal to his principal claims, as well as some of the tensions and, in some cases, contradictions that arise from his efforts to link findings from these disciplines to central questions of IR. Although they will strike many readers as controversial and not always persuasive, engaging with Rathbun's arguments brings many of the defining debates in IR theory into sharper focus.

¹⁶ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 16.

Rathbun and I have discussed Hans Morghethau's arguments about the "autonomy of the political sphere" and the implications for morality that Morgenthau derives therefrom. Our understandings of Morgenthau diverge. I maintain that when speaking of political morality, Morgenthau is building upon arguments that were popularized by Max Weber. Weberian claims about the autonomy of the political sphere do not assert that politics is an amoral realm, but rather that political and personal morality are different. The difference between the two derives from the fact that the politician acts on behalf of others. Crucially, the politician has a moral obligation to ensure the survival of the group, an obligation that he or she must place above personal conviction (*Gesinnung*):

Other giants of the post-World War II Realist pantheon further refined Morgenthau's understanding of the need for consequentialist ethics in international politics in ways that allowed for nuanced judgments of the morality of foreign policy choices. Although the exigencies of anarchy often compel leaders to engage in behaviors that otherwise would appear amoral, consequentialist ethics do not provide them with a moral *carte blanche*. Thus, Arnold Wolfers wrote:

When national survival is not at stake, “[m]oral condemnation...rests not on the fact that values have been destroyed, however deplorable or downright evil such destruction may be judged. Instead, it is based on the conviction either that the action in question rested on false ethical standards or that in terms of agreed ethical standards a less destructive choice could and should have been made.”¹⁹ Although an approach to political ethics based on choosing the lesser among evils has been criticized by prominent philosophers,²⁰ the sentiment was echoed forty years later as Robert Jervis contemplated the implications of the nuclear revolution for morality in international politics:

¹⁷ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 3rd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1960), 10. For Weber's articulation, see Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation," in *Essays in Sociology*, eds. H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948), especially 124–25.

¹⁹ Wolfers, "Statesmanship and Moral Choice," 180.

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. H. Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 17–48.

constantly be resisted....Perhaps as shocking as the calculated violations of moral standards are the many cases in which statesmen do not even think of what their acts will cost in terms of innocent lives, deplorable precedents, and values sullied.²¹

So, Realism does not maintain that anarchy is an amoral realm, as Rathbun asserts. Rather, when they do speak of morality, these Realists assert that politics requires a particular approach to ethics, one that differs from that which individuals apply in their personal behavior in most social settings.²²

This fact leads to the question of why Rathbun frames his argument as a foil to Realism in the first place. After all, Morgenthau's assertion that national survival itself is a moral principle fits well with Rathbun's notion that anarchy has given rise to a form of binding morality that places a high value on behaviors directed toward the preservation of the group. The answer would appear to be his desire to characterize classical Realism, and hence Realist ethics, as not just consequentialist in overall tendency but rather as exclusively utilitarian.

Although the approach is not uniformly accepted by psychologists and neuroscientists,²³ Rathbun adopts the "dual-process model popularized by Daniel Kahneman²⁴ to argue that "realists are 'System II' thinkers who base their judgments on a deliberative and objective consideration of the situation. Realist thinkers explicitly warn against allowing emotions and wishful thinking to intrude into decision-making".²⁵ Prudent decision-makers will try to understand the motives of others' behaviors and avoid the temptation to engage in excessive moral condemnation. By contrast, Rathbun argues that the binding morality he asserts to be a pervasive feature of international politics is rooted in emotional responses to perceived threats and perceived injustices. Binding morality is thus associated with "System I" thinking: "We determine what is right and wrong by how it makes us feel, not by adding factual information".²⁶

Rathbun's shift from a misplaced critique of Realism for its supposed conception of IR as an amoral realm to a critique of Realism as a form of hyperutilitarianism is linked to second ambitious goal: anchoring morality in human biology. Understood as an emotional response to external stimuli, morality is no longer primarily the product of humans' capacity for reason. Rather, it is reduced to a biological trait. As such, might it best be considered an adaptive feature for a particular niche occupied by our ancestors, a trait reproduced through processes of natural selection?

Morality as Biology

In his second move, Rathbun asserts a consensus among evolutionary biologists that "morality emerged through a process of selection as a way to promote the

²¹ Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 133–34.

²² See James W. Davis, "The (Good) Person and the (Bad) Situation: Recovering Innocence at the Expense of Responsibility?," in *Psychology, Strategy and Conflict: Perceptions of Insecurity in International Relations*, ed. J. W. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 199–219.

²³ See James D. Grayot, "Dual Process Theories in Behavioral Economics and Neuroeconomics: A Critical Review," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 11, no. 1 (February 2020): 105–36.

²⁴ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

²⁵ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 63.

²⁶ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 67.

survival of individuals' genetic material".²⁷ Insofar as humans are the product of evolution, their capacity for moral judgments ipso facto is an evolutionally conditioned trait. Indeed, E. O. Wilson called for a biologizing of ethics as early as 1975.²⁸ But Rathbun goes further. Not only is our capacity for morality a function of evolution, rather the specific content of binding morality is hardwired into the species.

It seems clear that the evolutionary success of our species is largely a function of our ability to cooperate with others to create groups with shared purposes, security often chief among them. A moral sense facilitates the ability to internalize behavioral norms and employ our capacity for reason to reach judgments about what would constitute appropriate behavior in a particular situation. A capacity for moral judgment explains both of the behaviors that Rathbun attributes to binding morality: the sense of obligation that individuals feel to members of their group and the moral outrage that leads to condemnation when individuals feel that they or their group have been treated unfairly or that others have been dishonest.²⁹ But does a biological capacity for morality necessarily require us to accept the proposition that moral judgments are primarily emotional, a product of System I mental processes and, thus, somatic?

Responding to Wilson's call as well as the tendency of sociobiologists to argue that everything social is ultimately material (in a biological sense), thus rendering efforts to discover extrasomatic sources of ethics obsolete, Philip Kitcher argued, "That this reasoning is fallacious is evident once we consider other systems of human belief. Plainly, we have capacities for making judgments in mathematics, physics, biology, and other areas of inquiry. These capacities, too, have historical explanations, including, ultimately, evolutionary components." Would we thereby conclude that mathematics, physics, and our knowledge of biology are themselves material and biological?³⁰

For Rathbun, the conviction that the basis of binding morality is biological derives from the observation that moral judgments are accompanied by physical sensations and feelings. Reason, he argues, might lead us to modify our feelings, but, by itself, it cannot motivate moral action.³¹ The obvious response to this line of reasoning is to point out that sentiments and somatic responses to others' behavior vary across individuals and cultures. A passing reference to the revulsion most Americans would feel at the sight of someone eating a cockroach—a common snack food in Cambodia—should suffice as evidence both that culture is not merely "veneer" and that such somatic responses are the product of complex relations between culture and biology.³²

Cultural approaches to morality stress the variability of norms and principles across time and place and thus are often rooted in a constructivist understanding of ontology. Rathbun is clearly uncomfortable with the notion that rules and norms are merely intersubjective understandings and would seem to fear a descent into moral relativism: "If this is all there is to morality, we are denied a firm

²⁷ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 65.

²⁸ E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 562.

²⁹ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 32.

³⁰ Philip Kitcher, "Four Ways of 'Biologizing' Ethics," 577.

³¹ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 66–67.

³² The term *veneer* as applied to the study of ethics comes from Frans de Waal, *Our Inner Ape: The Best and Worst of Human Nature* (New York: Riverhead, 2005).

foundation from which to ethically judge others' behavior, even Hitler".³³ But does a biological account of morality as emotions (or Humean sentiments) provide the solid foundation for moral judgments for which Rathbun yearns?

Consider, for a moment, individuals with irregularities in their orbitofrontal cortex, that portion of the brain responsible for how we connect our current choices to likely outcomes. On emotivist grounds alone, we have no way of condemning morally deviant actions of such individuals. After all, they are merely receiving different guidance from the "orbital oracle."³⁴ Pressed to defend our moral revulsion, we would need to make the normative claim that the choices of such individuals are of less moral worth because of some biological deficiency.³⁵ But this is not a position that can be derived from biology. Moreover, it is one that Rathbun would certainly reject. Yet, it is hard to see how he could do so without moving beyond evolutionary biology and appealing to moral arguments derived from fundamental philosophical or religious principles.

Rathbun would likely reply to this critique by pointing out that he does admit some room for cultural variables in his exploration of morality in IR. But then the question turns to the relative causal weight of biology and culture in accounting for moral judgments, including feelings of righteous indignation. Given that we are usually interested in explaining behavioral variation—not least war or peace—approaches that rely on constants of human nature are unlikely to take us very far. At a minimum, we need to examine the effects of biological constants across a range of environmental contexts.

Skeptical of dogmatic assertions that complex social phenomena can be reduced either to some materialist or ideationist foundation, and inspired by arguments made by McDermott and Hatemi, I would suggest that we suspend the archeological expedition and instead think for a moment about the possible coevolution of biology and culture.³⁶ Radical constructivists are wrong to ignore the implications of human biology, even for the emergence of complex social practices. But the latter cannot be reduced to biological constants.³⁷ Natural selection may have predisposed us to form groups and to favor our group over others, but there is quite a variety of bases upon which groups form. Evolution is not the obvious place to look for answering the question of why human beings have, at some points, formed groups on the basis of dynastic loyalties, and at other points, formed groups on the basis of a sense of religious or national identity. Yet, for explaining key outcomes in IR, it is not the fact that members of groups experience emotional reactions when they perceive the group to which they feel attached has somehow been treated unfairly that is central, but rather the basis of group identity. Moreover, the bases for feelings of indignation clearly change over time, even as the biological traits we have been given through evolution remain constant.

³³ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 14–15.

³⁴ Peter H. Rudebeck and Elisabeth A. Murray, "The Orbitofrontal Oracle: Cortical Mechanisms for the Prediction and Evaluation of Specific Behavioral Outcomes," *Neuron* 84, no. 6 (December 2014): 1143–56.

³⁵ Kitcher, "Four Ways of 'Biologizing' Ethics," 580.

³⁶ Rose McDermott and Peter K. Hatemi, "Political Ecology: On the Mutual Formation of Biology and Culture," *Advances in Political Psychology* 35, no. 1 (February 2014): 111–27.

³⁷ For a discussion of some of the issues, see James W. Davis, "I Think, Therefore IR? Psychology, Biology and the Notion of Praxis," in *Praxis as a Perspective on International Politics*, eds. Gunther Hellmann and Jens Steffek (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023), 145–65; and James W. Davis, *Terms of Inquiry: On the Theory and Practice of Political Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 10–60.

Of course, Rathbun knows this, as both issues emerge in the context of his analysis of the early twentieth century crises involving the status of Morocco and the rights of the European great powers in that North African state. German behavior in both the First (1904–6) and Second (1911) Moroccan Crises is driven both by Germany's self-identification as a member of the great power club after unification and the sense that great powers were entitled to equal treatment in the colonial game.³⁸ Thus, the deployment of a German gunboat, the *Panther*, to the port of Agadir in July 1911, a move that escalated a regional dispute into a European crisis, was motivated by the perception that Germany was being denied either its right to participate in decisions affecting the disposition of colonial territories or a material guarantee of compensation for any discriminatory treatment. Importantly, this motivation was understood by observers at the time, suggesting there were, indeed, common understandings of appropriate behavior among the great powers.³⁹ German moral indignation arose from the belief that France, through Foreign Minister Delcassé's policy of *penetration pacifique*, clearly was breaking the rules by seeking unilateral advantage in Morocco.

Two issues stand out in Rathbun's analysis of the Moroccan crises. First, German behavior was driven by the belief that it was a member of the club of great powers. Prior to German unification in 1871 and its shift to a colonial policy in the 1880s, Berlin was relatively uninterested in what France was doing in Africa.⁴⁰ Second, Berlin's sense of having been wronged was inspired by France's breach of widely accepted norms. By mid-century, however, Germany was again divided, now into two states. And by 1960, the norms of great-power behavior were definitively changed with the passage of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1514, which declared the independence of all colonial countries and peoples. None of these developments were foreordained by evolution or biology, but unless one includes them in a discussion of German foreign policy, references to a biologically anchored capacity for moral behavior—or indeed moral indignation—tell us little of interest.

In Rathbun's account, Hitler subsequently reordered the German nationalism of the Wilhelmine period with an asserted racial unity displacing linguistic and cultural bases of national identity and group membership. Much of chapter 10 is devoted to recounting the domestic competition between the traditional conservative elites and the new adherents to National Socialist ideology.⁴¹ Failing to understand the racial nature of Nazi ideology, the British did not recognize that Germany was playing a rather different international game, one for which the tools of an earlier period—for example, the strategy of appeasement—were no longer appropriate.⁴² German biology did not change between the Wilhelmine and Nazi periods. Rather, German ideology did. And to quote Rathbun: "This again shows that an

³⁸ See Gordon A. Craig, *Germany: 1866–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 119.

³⁹ See the memorandum from the interim Russian Foreign Minister Anatoly Neratoff to Alexander von Benckendorff, "Russian Ambassador in London, 2 July 1911," in *Entente Diplomacy and the World*, ed. G. A. Schreiner (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1921), 680.

⁴⁰ I discuss Germany's shift to a colonial policy in James W. Davis, Jr., *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 95–99.

⁴¹ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 296–335.

⁴² For the argument that appeasement had proven to be a reasonably effective policy in light the slow decline of British power, see Paul M. Kennedy, "The Tradition of Appeasement in British Foreign Policy 1865–1939," *British Journal of International Studies* 2, no. 3 (October 1976): 195–215.

So how much of IR can we attribute to constants of human nature—or our evolutionary inheritance—and how much is a function of individual variation and/or variables at other levels of analysis?⁴⁴ In his drive to convince the reader of the pervasiveness of binding morality, the elements of Rathbun's analysis that point to the importance of human diversity and of variables at other levels of analysis for are not developed as systematically as in other recent contributions.⁴⁵ To be fair, this is not his objective. But then it is difficult to move beyond the general claim that individuals and groups exhibit behaviors consistent with the notion of an evolutionary trait that facilitates binding morality and moral condemnation.

Rathbun claims that a specific type of morality provided our ancestors with an adaptive advantage in the anarchy that he assumes was fundamental to our prehistoric development. If only moral individuals were able to survive the rigors of anarchy and reproduce, then our moral intuitions are an example of what some refer to as “first image reversed” causation.⁴⁶ Individual morality, it is held, derives from the anarchy IR scholars typically associate with the international system. But the acrobatics of the argument are not limited to jumping between the systemic to the individual levels of analysis. Echoing a logic proclaimed by Margaret Thatcher before him,⁴⁷ Rathbun assumes that the binding morality he attributes to individuals will aggregate to the level of the group:

The problems with this sort of reductionism are well known and there is no need to rehearse them here. Suffice it to say that a composite object can exhibit geometric symmetry even if none of its parts does; a system comprising stable elements may nonetheless prove unstable; and an international system comprising aggressive expansionist states can produce long periods of peace.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ See Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Societal Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Even if evolutionary dynamics are part of the explanation for important features of IR, several issues remain unresolved. For one, evolutionary theory is neither linear nor unidirectional. True, the environment may favor certain traits in a particular niche. But once a particular organism (or gene) begins to dominate, it often changes the very environment that originally afforded it a reproductive advantage. This way of thinking draws our attention to the co-evolution of organisms and their environment. For a social species such as human beings, the relevant environment includes cultural and institutional forms. Biological selection may have produced individuals capable of forming larger groups on the basis of a binding morality, but once such groups form and begin to interact, they create a cultural system that may generate an evolutionary dynamic of its own. In an account of the emergence and development of prevailing patterns of IR, evolutionary biology thus may play only a limited role.⁵⁰ Moreover, cultural evolution may interfere in processes of biological selection in nontrivial ways. For example, in an environment composed of competing groups, the need for effective leaders may “select” for individuals who display lower levels of binding morality than average, because a leader’s amorality affords the group a survival advantage. Of course, this is just a conjecture and there are some reasons to think it wrong, but it points to the possibility that the traits prevailing in the relations among groups may be quite different from those that foster the emergence of groups in the first place.⁵¹ Rathbun, by contrast, expects to see “the same moral dynamics at work between group as within them”.⁵²

Testing competing conjectures on the evolutionary processes that produced contemporary traits is notoriously difficult. For one, we cannot simply read history backward, as the functions performed by current traits may be quite different from those for which they originally were selected.⁵³ For another, there are often multiple evolutionary hypotheses that would predict the emergence of a particular trait. Moreover, though outwardly similar, a given trait—for example, human’s capacity for intraspecies violence—may be supported by different physiological mechanisms that are activated in different social situations.⁵⁴ At a deeper level, ontogenetic development is not merely a function of genotype. Rather, research in the relatively new fields of behavioral epigenetics and developmental systems theory provides data consistent with the hypothesis that the natural and social environments to which individuals or groups are exposed interact with their genetic inheritance in ways that influence downstream behaviors and other phenotypical traits.⁵⁵

Although he makes bold assertions about its evolutionary origins, Rathbun is content to demonstrate that many foreign policy behaviors are consistent with the existence of binding morality. This is consistent with his principal objective: to convince us that IR is not devoid of morality. This goal, then, informs his empirical strategy.

⁵⁰ Kitcher, “Four Ways of ‘Biologizing’ Ethics,” 577.

⁵¹ Wrangham argues that in hunter-gatherer societies, lower-status males likely formed coalitions to intimidate or otherwise check the efforts of males who sought dominance through fighting prowess simultaneously checking their reproductive success. See Richard W. Wrangham, “Two Types of Aggression in Human Evolution,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 115, no. 2 (January 2018): 245–53.

⁵² Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 16.

⁵³ Stephen Jay Gould, “Not Necessarily a Wing,” *Natural History* 94, no. 10 (1985): 12–25.

⁵⁴ Wrangham, “Two Types of Aggression,” 245–47.

⁵⁵ See Davis and McDermott, “The Past, Present, and Future of Behavioral IR,” 160–62; and Susan Oyama, *Evolution’s Eye: A Systems View of the Biology-Culture Divide* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

To test his claim that morality is omnipresent in IR, Rathbun understandably looks for a least likely case. If we find morality where we would otherwise least expect it, then we are more likely to find it elsewhere. Arguing that Germany, in the period between Bismarck's departure and the defeat of the Nazi dictatorship, was "perhaps the biggest, baddest bully in international relations" German foreign policy from 1871 to 1945 becomes his laboratory.⁵⁶

First, German historiography is characterized by intense and ongoing debates that reflect many of the questions of interest to IR scholars. For example, were the sources of German foreign policy located in its relations with the other great powers (*der Primat der Aussenpolitik*), a claim perhaps most forcefully made by A. J. P. Taylor?⁵⁷ Or, was German foreign policy primarily an outgrowth of interests and processes within German domestic politics and society (*der Primat der Innenpolitik*)?⁵⁸ None of the major works of German historiography adopts an approach informed by the sorts of biological arguments Rathbun puts forward. Although he does not shy away from the Herculean task of relating his claims to what has come before, he is navigating in the most treacherous of waters.

Second, and perhaps not surprisingly, the engagement with historical controversies leads Rathbun to qualify earlier, more categorical, statements. This has the effect of weakening his claim that binding morality is a human universal and (always?) reflected—if sometimes only imperfectly—in the foreign policies of states. Consequently, one might argue that Rathbun's thesis fails to pass the test he sets for it. For example, in his discussion of how the Pan German League (PGL) created a new politics of nationalism in Wilhelmine Germany, we read that the PGL's members were the “guardians of binding morality”.⁵⁹ Later, we read that “binding morality is primarily, but not exclusively, found on the political right. It is ‘conservative’ or ‘authoritarian’ morality”.⁶⁰ Considered against the argument that binding morality is an evolutionary legacy shared by all humans, such claims are odd, to say the least.

In chapter 1, Rathbun admits that binding morality and a desire to protect the in-group may compete with humanitarian impulses to provide for the welfare of

⁵⁶ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 16.

⁵⁷ A. J. P. Taylor, *Germany's First Bid for Colonies, 1884–1885* (London: Macmillan, 1938); and A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954). See, too, Andreas Hillgruber, *Deutschlands Rolle in der Vorgeschichte der beiden Weltkriege* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1967); and Hillgruber, *Kontinuität und Diskontinuität in der deutschen Aussenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler* (Düsseldorf: Droste 1960).

⁵⁸ See Eckart Kehr, *Der Primat der Innenpolitik Gesammelte Aufsätze zur preussisch-deutschen Sozialgeschichte im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, 2nd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970); Imanuel Geiss, *German Foreign Policy, 1871–1914* (London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1976); and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Bismarck and der Imperialismus* (Köln: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1969). For a version of the argument that stresses a breakdown of civil military relations in post-Bismarckian Germany and the attendant failure of statesmen to control militarist impulses in the armed forces and society, see Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and The Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, Vol. 4. (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1969).

⁵⁹ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 208. Established in 1891, the Pan German League was a nationalist organization that promoted the unification of all German-speaking peoples into one country, German participation in the colonial enterprise, as well as racial purity based on social Darwinist ideas and antisemitism.

⁶⁰ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 235.

members of other groups.⁶¹ In chapter 8, the behaviors Rathbun attributes to binding morality had their effects on German policymaking during World War I because conservatives were in positions of political authority. He acknowledges that the left advocated for different policies that reflected “different moral foundations, based on liberal humanitarianism”.⁶² To the degree that his historical interpretation is correct, however, Rathbun further relativizes the importance of binding morality to explanations for IR. For not only can binding morality “take any number of socially constructed shapes”,⁶³ its effects also seem to be conditioned by the state’s domestic politics. Such explicit and implicit concessions on the question of the causal weight attributable to binding morality recall an argument made I mentioned earlier. It is hard to provide compelling explanations for foreign policy variation with reference to a putative constant of human nature.

Third, one can question the extent to which Germany constitutes a hard case in the first place. Critical case tests are not competitions between a theory and nature but rather among competing theories. Least likely cases are least likely from the perspective of the theory or hypothesis one is trying to refute. Rathbun wants to falsify the common claim that IR take place in an “amoral sphere where right and wrong know no place”.⁶⁴ In what sense is German behavior in the period examined an appropriate test of this argument?

International relations Realists and Liberals make both empirical and normative arguments about the prospects for morality in IR. Classical Realists, such as Morgenthau and Wolfers, argued that the dictates of successful action in IR require different moral standards than those that might govern the behavior of individuals in society. This is the essence of the claim of the autonomy of the political sphere. Following Kenneth Waltz, most Neorealists shy away from normative arguments and, rather, assert that actors pursuing anything other than self-regarding policies are unlikely to survive the competitive pressures of anarchy. The prevailing patterns of international politics reflect an evolutionary dynamic specific to the realm. Actors pursuing maladaptive behaviors ultimately “fall by the wayside.”⁶⁵ For them, the empirical claim that IR constitutes an amoral sphere derives from the proposition that the international system selects for certain behaviors rather than others.

Rathbun correctly notes that the type of morality Realists reject, whether on normative or empirical grounds, is the sort of other-regarding egalitarian or cosmopolitan morality usually associated with Liberal thought.⁶⁶ For their part, prominent Liberal thinkers maintain that the normative validity of cosmopolitan principles can be derived from the application of reason to the challenges of international life.⁶⁷ If adopted uniformly, they argue, cosmopolitan principles would pacify the relations of states and peoples under anarchy and contribute to a

⁶¹ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 12.

⁶² Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 235.

⁶³ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 199.

⁶⁴ Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, xvii.

⁶⁵ Kenneth J. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), 76–77.

⁶⁶ I am aware that there is a debate between certain proponents of cosmopolitan ethics and those they refer to as “egalitarians.” For purposes of this essay, I refer to representatives of both groups as cosmopolitans. But see Michael W. Doyle, “One World, Many Peoples: International Justice” in John Rawls’s *The Law of Peoples*, *Perspectives on Politics* 4, no. 1 (March 2006): 109–20.

⁶⁷ See, variously, Charles Beitz, “Justice and International Relations,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1975): 282–311; Thomas Pogge, “Priorities of Global Justice,” in *Global Justice*, ed. T. Pogge (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 6–23; John Rawls, “The Law of Peoples,” *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (Autumn, 1993): 36–68.

more equitable distribution of global goods. Empirically oriented Liberal scholars have presented data in support of such arguments.⁶⁸

But Rathbun does not test the extent to which one can find evidence of other-regarding cosmopolitan morality in the “hard case” of Germany. Indeed, to test the arguments of Realists and Liberals would require a very different research design. Rather, he marshals an impressive volume of data and analysis to make the case for the existence of binding morality as well as the in-group favoritism and self-righteousness toward others held to be attendant to it. But does the existence of binding morality and moral condemnation always displace any egalitarian concerns? In the Moroccan crises, he casts the question of German motives as reflecting either a concern for status, which he takes as evidence of self-regarding behavior, or fairness, which he would be indicative of egalitarian or other regarding motives. However, a different reading of the documents would support the conclusion that German behavior reflected an admixture of both motivations.⁶⁹

Finding ample evidence that Germany was concerned with its status among the great powers and reacted with moral indignation to perceived injustices, Rathbun concludes that IR is not the amoral sphere others claim it to be. Of course, he is free to argue that self-righteous behavior is evidence of morality in IR, and the empirical strategy he pursues is too transparent to justify accusations of some methodological sleight of hand. Nonetheless, both Realists and Liberals are likely to dismiss his claim to have tested their arguments by saying, “That’s not what we are talking about!”

Right Even if Wrong

Rathbun has produced an impressive piece of interdisciplinary scholarship that brings recent advances in our understanding of human decision-making processes to bear on central questions of international politics. He weaves together insights derived from IR theory, history, ethics, psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology. To do all of this in a way that does not lead to some critique would be impossible.

In many ways, this book is characteristic of the times. It reflects a widespread desire to uncover the micro foundations of IR.⁷⁰ Many of these efforts, in turn, have given rise to what has been termed a new “behavioral revolution,” where the microprocesses of interest are psychological or biological.⁷¹ Like Rathbun’s book, this research agenda is characterized by a variety of methods, ranging from case studies to statistical analyses of observational data, survey research, to experiments. Many issues remain unresolved, including the question of how integrate individual-level data into our understanding of the behavior of groups, including the state. Recent experimental evidence suggests that individual-level

⁶⁸ See, for example, Lumsdaine, *Moral Vision in International Politics*; and Michael W. Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 205–35.

⁶⁹ Rathbun casts the question of German motives during the crises as reflecting either status seeking (self-regarding) or fairness concerns (egalitarian other regarding). Of course, German behavior could have been the product of an admixture of both motivations. See Rathbun, *Right and Wronged in International Relations*, 164–70.

⁷⁰ Joshua D. Kertzer, “Microfoundations in International Relations,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 34, no. 1 (January 2017): 81–97.

⁷¹ James W. Davis and Rose McDermott, “The Past, Present, and Future of Behavioral IR,” *International Organization* 75, no. 1 (September 2020): 147–77.

Related to this general goal is a more specific effort to investigate the implications of neuroscience for the project of creating a more ethical society and perhaps even a better world. By informing such efforts with empirical data relating to how real people make choices when confronting moral dilemmas, the field of behavioral ethics might be a more promising basis on which to instantiate universal moral precepts than past efforts that relied on moral suasion or the mere articulation of general principles of international law. The endeavor is a noble, and Rathbun is right to contribute to it, even if some of the arguments in this book turn out to be wrong.

⁷³ James W. Davis, "Better than a Bet: Good Reasons for Behavioral and Rational Choice Assumptions in IR Theory," *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 1 (November 2022): 476–55.