International political economy and the question of ethics

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ABSTRACT

The article provides a critical analysis of how IPE might engage with the question of ethics. After reviewing existing calls to bring ethics and ethical considerations within the mainstream of the discipline several questions are made. Drawing from critical and post-structural thought, it is argued that existing accounts of ethics privilege a problematic separation between ethics and power. Power is depicted as obligation – as power over – while ethics is depicted as an ameliorative other to power. We draw out several limits in this separation – including the reification of market subjectivities of contract, individualism, and a problematic global scale – arguing that ethics should be seen as a constitutive discourse like any other. Power is re-phrased as productive, as the power to. We conclude by articulating a pragmatist research agenda that seeks to foster the kernel ‘possibility’ in discourses of ethics while retaining sensitivity to the potential constitutive ‘violence’ of ethics. Given this dilemma, we argue that ongoing practices of ‘resistance’ – in both practical and scholarly senses – should be a central problematic for engaging with the (political) question of ethics in IPE.

KEYWORDS

Ethics; IPE; power; pragmatism; resistance.

[O]nce we have become fully aware of our intellectual tradition with its deep split between head and heart and its not always beneficial consequences, the first step toward healing that split has already been taken. Down the road, it is then possible to visualise a kind of social science that would be very different from the one most of us have been practicing: a moral social science where moral
considerations are not repressed or kept apart, but are systematically commingled with analytic argument, without guilt feelings over any lack of integration; where the transition from preaching to proving and back again is performed frequently and with ease; and where moral considerations need no longer be smuggled in surreptitiously, nor expressed unconsciously, but are displayed openly and disarmingly. (Hirschman, 1981: 305–6)

Nearly three decades after Albert Hirschman made this call for a ‘moral social science’ it can be argued that scholars in the new disciplinary home of international political economy (IPE) are beginning to engage with ethical questions. In their critique of positivism, neo-Gramscian’s have insisted upon ‘an ethical dimension to analysis, so that questions of justice, legitimacy, and moral credibility are integrated sociologically into the whole and into many of its key concepts’ (Gill, 1991: 57). For her part, Susan Strange (1991: 171) recognised the problem as a two-way affair, arguing that globalisation also requires moral philosophers to extend their own purview: ‘[t]he horizons of moral philosophy, as of the social sciences no longer end at the frontiers of the state.’ And Richard Higgott (2000: 133) has also noted the importance of working across theory and practice in the evolving politics of global governance, arguing that:

[p]olitics, in the context of the emerging global conversation about governance, needs to be understood as not only the pursuit of effective and efficient government, but also as a normative, indeed explicitly ethical, approach to the advancement of a more just agenda of global economic management.

However, and despite the good intentions of these and other significant interventions, we argue that IPE theorists have not yet reflected upon the question of ethics, per se? What is it? What does it do? How, to put the point bluntly, is it ethical?

In the race to discredit the ‘scientific’ assumptions of previous work and usher in a greater reflexivity to the relationship between theory and practice in IPE, morality and ethics have been introduced in a straightforward, if not to say, caricatured fashion. As above, ethics is taken as an ‘inherently good thing’ that can be applied to the global political economy, a panacea for the ills of hard headed materialism, or a positive increment to the (power) politics of global governance. The central contention of this paper is that ethics – like positivism and power politics – should be a subject of critical scrutiny for IPE theorists. While Hirschman is correct that ‘moral considerations need no longer be smuggled in surreptitiously’, it should be fore-grounded that such considerations do not necessarily act to simplify or improve matters. Ethics, like politics, is contested terrain and it is only by working through ethical arguments critically and
sensitively that IPE will benefit. We make this broad point over three sections.

Section 1 highlights some critical issues with the demand for ethics in IPE. This demand can be observed substantively, in keynote interventions by figures such as Robert Cox, Stephen Gill, Richard Higgott, Robert Keohane, Craig Murphy, and Susan Strange, amongst many others. It is also observable, we think, in the recent gravitation of significant political theorists to the empirical concerns that IPE, as a field of enquiry, regularly confronts. Authors like Charles Beitz, James Bohman, Allen Buchanan and Thomas Pogge have avowedly confronted questions of ethics in the context of globalisation, global governance, trade and global inequality. The empirical linkages between international political theory and IPE seem fertile ground for conversation at least. Having outlined the substance of the demand for ethics in IPE we suggest some critical issues that might arise. While such work is promising, not least because it potentially brings an important reflective moment to IPE, we suggest some reasons to reserve judgement. Drawing on a set of debates which have occurred in international relations (IR) (Hutchings, 1999; Walker, 1993) we question the use of ethics as a ‘supplement’ to IPE; a view of ethics as somehow outside IPE, helpful for IPE, a potential doctor for critical IPE, leaves unquestioned the content and potential violence(s) that ethics can enact.

Taking a lead from critical and post-structural thought, we re-phrase the question of ethics as one which is not about introducing some ‘pre-discursive realm of goodness’ to the ‘regrettably power laden world’ that IPE observes, but rather, as seeking to understand the way ethics and ethical arguments are intimately bound up with power relations in the first place. From this point of view, theoretical separations between positive and normative, ethics and politics, and indeed, ethics and power are unsustainable. Ethics is a constitutive power similar to any other discourse. While it can present new possibilities and hopes, it can also perform a violence. This might be a violence to the ‘outside’, to what or who is marginalised by the discourse, but it may also be a violence to the ‘subject’ of the discourse itself, which may become circumscribed through the act of definition implicit in the ethical statement itself (Butler, 2005, 2007).1

While we sympathise with the general thrust of calls to introduce ethics to IPE then, our interest is far more qualified. In particular, we suggest that a popular notion within IPE, that ethics (good) is something that confronts power (bad), or ‘ameliorates’ it in some way (Tooze and Murphy, 1996), deserves scrutiny. Section 2 therefore sets out to develop an immanent critique of some existing discourses of ethics within IPE. Most significantly, we argue that IPE as a discipline has been implicitly underscored by a concept of power as obligation. That is to say, a wide range of approaches to IPE view power as an obliging force, as constraining, a power over. On this view, we trace a line between liberal and critical arguments that coalesce
on the idea that the reduction of obligation, the removal or re-fashioning of power relations – to preserve freedom, justice, etc. – is a quintessential ethical goal for IPE in its traditional guises. Interestingly, we find that an opposite concept of obligation underpins much international political theory on the question of global ethics, where the question of ethics is seen as one of finding the obligations that human beings owe to each other, the environment, or the state, etc. However, each discourse of ethics – both as the ‘removal’ of obligating power, and as the encouragement of ethical obligations – accepts an artificial divide between ethics and power. The violence of this assumption is twofold.

Firstly, it risks reifying a set of particularly neo-liberal conceptions of the individual, property and the market, albeit couched in the language of ethics. This is evident in the unquestioned sovereignty of contract in much work in IPE, but, it is also a problem for international political theory. When, for instance, Thomas Pogge (2002: 205) invokes ethical obligations ‘not to harm’ in order to reform globalisation, his central suggestion of a Global Resources Dividend (GRD) to ameliorate the ‘ordinary centrifugal forces’ of the global market place, arguably reifies and instantiates just as much neo-liberal theory as it challenges. Such suggestions automatically construct ‘the market’, and specifically its existence at the global level, which is to accept a specific set of power relations and knowledge claims as a condition of thinking ethically. Likewise, Pogge’s ‘ordinary centrifugal forces’ would likely strike many critical political economists, we think, as neither ordinary, nor necessarily centrifugal.

Secondly, the assumed divide between ethics and power misses the potential bestowed by a more positive conception of power, as power to. On this view, the failure to undermine existing ontological starting points is also, at once, a failure to think and imagine differently, how people might live. We draw on Foucault’s notion of power as productive, a power to-, ‘be’, ‘act’, and to resist, as one potential way to analyse the question of ethics, as intimately tied to power. One of the implications of the question of ethics in IPE, as we have framed it, is that it is actually difficult to elucidate ethical alternatives without performing a new moment of violence. The task may therefore be to think in quite practical terms of a continuous and ongoing process that moves ‘back and forth’ between ethical proposals and their empirical manifestations (Brassett, 2009a).

Section 3 therefore outlines a research programme for developing the question of ethics in IPE. Key questions relate to the idea of ‘possibility’ contained within ethics; the potential constitutive violence within ethical discourses; and the ongoing, perhaps unimagined, resistances which spring forth. Potential studies might include cosmopolitan justice theory, or the proliferation of ‘ethical’ responses to globalisation. For instance, moral economy perspectives have led to formal justifications for the Tobin Tax, fair trade initiatives and carbon trading schemes. Such moves present
the possibility of a close examination of the role of ethical arguments in the extant circumstances of a particular campaign/initiative. Theoretical as much of this argument may seem then, the actual proposition is to ‘de-mythologize’ ethics – as something ‘outside of power’, or a way of ‘taming power’ – and begin treating it as a subject for critical empirical enquiry like any other. In this way, the role of ethics in IPE can start to be seen rather like an ongoing conversation where propositions are made, ethical limits are identified and new resistances are made thinkable.

1. THE DEMAND FOR ETHICS IN IPE

The demand for ethics in IPE can be read through the work of some of the most significant scholars in the discipline (Brassett, J. 2010). For instance, Susan Strange’s (1991: 171) ongoing concern with the ‘mix of justice’ in IPE was made explicit when she argued that ‘Sooner or later, it will be necessary to go back and start at the beginning if we are to achieve a genuine synthesis of political and economic activity.’

Going back to the beginning, for me, means starting with what used to be called moral philosophy. As I understand it, moral philosophers were concerned with fundamental values – how they could be reflected in the ordering of human society and how conflicts between them could be resolved. They were – some still are – interested in analysing both the mix of values in any society and their distribution. The only difference now is that we have, in some sense at least, a global society and, sustaining it, a virtually worldwide political economy. The horizons of moral philosophy, as of the social sciences no longer end at the frontiers of the state.

This integrationist view has proved influential. Indeed, many now regard IPE’s inter-disciplinary concern with political and ethical reflection as a key reason for its successful growth (Higgott, 2001; Underhill, 2000). In a complementary fashion, a recent revisionist school of political economy (Tabb, 1999; Watson, 2005) has sought to return to the writings of classical political economists like Adam Smith to recover the moral component of their work. As Smith wrote, ‘Justice . . . is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society . . . must in a moment crumble into atoms’ (cited in Tabb, 1999: 38). In some incarnations this revisionism goes beyond intellectual history to look at how re-reading the ideas of classical political economists can become an invitation to re-think the very basis of IPE theory. As Mat Watson (2005: 33–4) argues:

We bear the imprints of our economic relations in all aspects of our social life. The socializing effects of those relations shape who we
are, how we act, how we think before we act, and the broader truth regime within which we locate ourselves as meaningful actors. As such, the economic relations in which we are embedded are imbued with a fundamentally moral character.

In line with this sentiment there have been numerous calls within the neo-Gramscian scholarship for the development of an explicitly ethical approach to IPE. In strident fashion, Stephen Gill (1991: 57) ‘insists upon an ethical dimension to analysis, so that questions of justice, legitimacy, and moral credibility are integrated sociologically into the whole and into many of its key concepts’, going on to state that ‘... the normative goal of the Gramscian approach is to move toward the solution to the fundamental problem of political philosophy – the nature of the good society and thus, politically, the construction of an ethical state and a unitary society in which personal development, rational reflection, open debate, democratic empowerment, and economic and social liberation can become more widely available’ (Gill 1991: 57).3

Of course, given the passports of many of the authors listed, it might be suggested that the concern with ethics is a symptom of the ‘British School of IPE’. Indeed, a concern with being ‘normative in ambition’ was listed by Jerry Cohen (2007: 209) as one of the principal distinguishing characteristics of the ‘British School’. While we would not like to enter into a detailed discussion of the debate about the differences between (and the veracity of labels like) British and American IPE, we suggest a wider basis for our claim exists. One variant of the demand for ethics in IPE sees a turn to the issue of legitimacy. Robert Keohane (2006: 3) has produced important work on the legitimacy of global governance that seeks to re-phrase the question in multi-lateral and democratic terms, arguing that

as democracy has become more widely accepted as the best form of government domestically, its international analogues have also made inroads. Demands for multilateral organizations to become more accountable to ‘civil society’ rather than simply to states have proliferated. Insofar as these views become widespread, the sociological legitimacy of statism will decline and multilateral organizations will need to find new bases for their claims of legitimacy in the 21st century.4

Equally Len Seabrooke (2006) has argued that legitimacy, as a concept, needs to be integrated sociologically in the agenda of IPE. For Seabrooke (2010), such an account would bring the issue of democracy to the heart of IPE by addressing the way in which everyday contests between social actors can have profound effects upon the final settlement(s) agreed upon in political–economic arrangements. And, perhaps the most ethico-politically
engaged move has been made by John Ruggie (2004), who has sought to use his reputation and experience within IPE as a basis for building up the actually-existing normative legitimacy of global governance via his work on the global social compact.

Finally, we would like to suggest that a central (intuitive) reason why IPE is a suitable discipline in which to explore ethical questions, is the deep concern it holds, theoretically and empirically, with globalisation. As Craig Murphy (2000; 789) argues, ‘[t]he best arguments for paying attention to the world polity are ethical and moral.’ Equally, Richard Higgott and Matthew Watson (2008: 13) call for a ‘new political economy’ encompassing: ‘a strong normative agenda of “order”, . . . an order underwritten by an impetus towards issues of justice and fairness under conditions of globalisation.’ This intuition can play out in two ways. On one hand, existing analyses of the social and environmental implications of global capital flows, global production chains and global financial crises within IPE suggest that ethical questions which could previously be engaged at the level of the state now need to be thought in broader terms (see inter alia Held and McGrew, 2007; Devetak and Higgott, 1999; Scholte, 2005). Indeed, as Jan Aart Scholte (2005: 67) affirms:

if significant parts of capitalism now operate with relative autonomy from territorial space, then old intellectual frameworks cannot adequately address the issues of distributive justice that invariably accompany processes of surplus accumulation. Similarly a political theory that offers today’s world only territorial constructions of community, citizenship and democracy is obsolete.

On the other hand, and as Section 2 will explore in more detail, there is now a growth of activity from the ‘other direction’, which has seen the emergence of international political theory as a discipline (see inter alia Beitz, 1979; Caney, 2005; Cochran, 2002; Habermas, 2001; Pogge, 2002). Amongst such political theorists there is now a growing interest in the dynamics of global capitalism and a growing awareness that engagement with IPE is important. Indeed, as Michael Walzer suggested of one significant scholar: ‘Thomas Pogge’s recent writings on global justice provide a useful model: he has gone to school with the political economists and writes knowledgeably about international terms of trade and the political context in which states borrow money and sell natural resources. That is the sort of work we have to do if we want to call ourselves ‘engaged’.

1.1 Critical issues

The demand for ethics in IPE is clearly not unified. Some privilege the importance of ethical outcomes, others look to the ethical underpinnings of theory in IPE. Likewise, the emergence of substantive overlaps between IPE and international political theory is only slowly starting to filter into
collaborative work in this area (see for instance, Buchanan and Keohane 2006; Smith and Brassett, 2008). However, that said, we think there is clearly enough set in train to begin a more critical analysis of the deeper issues at hand in the demand for ethics in IPE. Firstly, and most starkly, we think there is danger in portraying ethics as an inherently ‘good thing’ that can be added-on to the study of IPE once we have worked out the ‘stuff’ of world politics. As Rob Walker (1993: 50) argues for the case of ethics and IR: ‘Ethics comes to be understood as an achieved body of principles, norms and rules already codified in texts and traditions.’ Continuing:

This image is especially troubling because it is sustained by a series of additional dichotomies that are regularly denounced as implausible guides to the subtleties and complexities of human affairs. An opposition between utopianism and realist power politics, the Cartesian divide between matter and consciousness and the positivist injunction to separate the normative from the ethical. . . (Walker, 1993: 50–1)

On this view, the dichotomy between ethics and politics may be re-enforced by the separation between positive and normative theory, so often the bait of critical IPE. As Chris Brown (2002: 148) argues in the case of IR, ‘The idea that there is, or could be, a clear divide between normative and positive theory is profoundly misleading; all theories of international relations are, simultaneously, both positive and normative theories.’ The corollary of this view is that all theories of ethics are at the same time theories of power. Caution is therefore required.

Secondly, even in recognising the deep imbrications between ethics and power, it is possible to rehearse a new set of separations by thinking in terms of ‘ameliorative power’. Simply put, in recognising the way values structure thought there is a temptation in some critical circles to then go on to identify the ‘superior values’, in order to pit them against the inferior. In short, while neo-Gramscians and other critical theorists celebrate the ‘progressive potential’ of a constitutive view of ethics/power (Linklater, 1992; Neufeld, 1995; Gill, 1991) post-structural authors challenge the possibility for failing to reflect on the constitutive ambiguities of ethical theory itself (Walker, 1993). For post-structural scholars ethics is a constitutive power like any discourse. While it can present new possibilities and hopes, it can also perform a violence. This might be a violence to anything which is left ‘outside’ or ‘othered’, but it may also be a violence to the ‘subject’ of the discourse itself, which may be performatively circumscribed via the act of definition that any ethical statement entails. In a critique of feminism Judith Butler (2007: 8) argues:

What sense does it make to extend representation to subjects who are constructed through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject? What relations
of domination and exclusion are inadvertently sustained when representation becomes the sole focus of politics? The identity of the feminist subject ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics, if the formation of the subject takes place within a field of power regularly buried through the assertion of the foundation. Perhaps, paradoxically, ‘representation’ will . . . make sense for feminism only when the subject of ‘women’ is nowhere presumed.

Extending this logic to the ethical reform of globalisation requires us to think about the subversion of the subject of globalisation as well as the critique and reform of existing arrangements. While an ethical approach to global governance may, for instance, seek to change the practices of institutions and subject them to values like justice or democracy, it may unintentionally both leave out ‘non-global’ constituencies from the realm of relevant actors, and affirm violent subjectivities by producing certain traits – e.g. financial knowledge, competitiveness, ‘the global’, etc. – as normal. This article is probably not the place to resolve the tensions between critical and post-structural theory, we think it is possible to use it as an opportunity to reflect on the gamut of critical questions provided. Given the demand for ethics in IPE, we might persuasively draw on critical and post-structural insights to question the constitutive power of ethics in IPE. We re-frame ethics as the question rather than the solution, and seek to unpick how it has been understood in relation to power in IPE.

2. THE ETHICS OF IPE: DISCOURSES OF OBLIGATION

Taking up the challenge in Section 1 to think through the constitutive ambiguities of ethics this section will consider the ethical underpinnings of IPE and international political theory. The conceptual linchpin around which IPE and international political theory meet is the discourse of obligation: what ethical duties are expected in social relations? The argument proceeds by first analysing the nature of obligation within IPE and then within international political theory, reading correlations along the way.

2.1 Obligation in political economy

In the IPE textbooks, the question of ethics is often taken as an implicit factor of social relations which, while it might be forgotten every now and then and need to be re-energised, is basically straightforward. Thus, ethical obligation tends to be subsumed within a particular conception of justice in modernity. This is the view that individuals can own property, sell their labour and should expect a certain set of ‘fair treatments’ for themselves and their families. Sometimes this fair treatment is about outcomes, i.e. justice in distribution; sometimes it is about economic trust, i.e. justice in
contract; and, more recently, expectations regarding democratic rights have been vaunted (Scholte, 2005).

We concur with Strange that understanding the ethical basis of such claims requires ‘going back’ to the most fundamental values implied, and at the very root of these conceptions of ethical obligation is what Schneewind (1998) calls ‘the invention of autonomy’. In contrast to previous systems of political philosophy (theological, status based etc.), each individual is free to choose and pursue their own set of ends rather than to have ends imposed on them by others. Therefore, if we are to surmise an ethical imperative, then it is that of J. S. Mill’s harm principle (Mill, 1991) where, roughly speaking, the freedom of the individual should be maximised as far as possible with regard to the similar freedom of others. As Schneewind’s choice of words suggests, this notion is a construction: an invented ethics. Nevertheless, its intuitive plausibility runs deep, with perhaps its most definitive statement being Rawls’ (1971: 302) first principle of justice that ‘each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of basic liberty for all.’ While the notion of a ‘veil of ignorance’ thickens Rawls’s justification somewhat by introducing a notion of fairness, the ends to which he is addressed are the same: a rational defence of the liberty of the individual to self-determination.

However, such expositions assume a binary opposition between freedom and power, where power is the ability of one to obligate another. Modern liberalism has therefore seen itself engaged in a long list of battles to free, or emancipate individual freedoms from one or other coercive power, including religion, the state, slavery, poverty, ideology, etc. Freedom is thus constituted as the absence of coercive power, and, vice versa, power implies the curtailment of freedom. Therefore, where freedom is a moral good, power emerges as a moral bad, since power exercised by one party will inevitably result in the reduction of freedom for some other party. The key question becomes, therefore, at once how to maximise the freedom of autonomous individuals and how to minimise the power to obligate others coercively. It is the power side of the binary opposition that most critical IPE scholars choose to conceptualise their work around, but it is worth mapping the classical liberal economic solution to these questions first, not because it exists in unadulterated fashion, but because it forms an implicit intellectual backdrop against which newer, more sophisticated debates about ethics, power and their reflection in the economy, have been conducted.

While liberal economics usually consists of the search for the most efficient way to distribute goods, this is underscored by a specific account of justice and concomitant ethical presuppositions. For those liberal political economists who defend the liberal economic approach, the focus is on establishing conditions under which the freedom of the individual is maximised, where the minimisation of coercive power assumed
to follow. Somewhat inevitably, this focus tends towards contractualism, since entering a contract implies the self-determining agency of the parties involved. On this basis, a free market economy is concluded as the most just, most ethical solution to the distribution of goods, since ideally, it is made up of bilateral contracts. Mid-twentieth-century political economists like Friedman, Hayek, von Mises and Nozick all took this ethical imperative to varying degrees of extremity. Any interference with the market is, for them, ultimately immoral since it amounts to a reduction in freedom, apart from that which ensures ‘that individuals are sufficiently uninhibited by political demands to establish systems of exchange that operate on the basis of free will alone’ (Watson, 2005: 22). In other words, it should typically be limited to that which guarantees that contracts will be upheld and the institution of property maintained.

Crucially, such market fundamentalists do not deny that this will result in inequality and power differentials. The point is that such distributional outcomes are legitimated by the procedure. Outcomes are just to the extent that they are the result of bilateral, contractual arrangements between self-interested individuals. No-one has forced anyone else to do anything, and everyone is free to pursue their interests exactly as they see fit. This logic is impeccable with regard to the autonomy of the individual as sketched above. In principle, each individual autonomously chooses their own obligations and thus their freedom is maximised. Conversely power, understood as the power of one individual to obligate another against their will, is minimised.

For much contemporary IPE, this caricature lives on in the form of a straw man against which more realistic observations of the economy are posited. IPE emphasises that emergent structures of power, including the state, class, the firm, as well as the conditions of geography, culture and preference formation, exert strongly restrictive feedback effects that heavily circumscribe any essential notion of freedom. As such, IPE tends to explicitly re-conceptualise around power. As Nicola Phillips (2005: 260) notes, ‘[t]he study of power has been consistently depicted, in many different guises, as essentially what IPE is all about. Power is everywhere in IPE and runs through virtually all of the work that goes on in the field’. As Murphy and Nelson (2001: 405) point out, this is where much IPE is essentially critical and, ultimately, indebted to Karl Marx and, to a lesser extent, Karl Polanyi.

Where market fundamentalists see the free market, critical IPE scholars see the dominating power of capital. Where orthodox economists see freely chosen contracts, critical scholars see choice as tightly constrained by pre-existent, institutionalised structures of power – property relations, the firm, trans-national class alliances, the historic bloc and the like. Even if each individual economic decision appears contractually just, even if each individual only follows his self-interest (e.g. the worker seeks a wage,
the capitalist seeks a profit) the emergent structures constitute relations of subordination and domination that are unjust towards some (or all) individuals. In other words, capital, in all its various guises, enables people to oblige one another coercively.

The power of Marx’s re-description of the economy lives on in contemporary IPE. For example, Stephen Gill (2000: 8) embraces the Marxist contrast between the principles of contract, property and freedom on the one hand, and the relations of production, which suggest exploitation, inequality and ‘sacred egoism’ on the other. More usually, IPE tends to draw upon the neo-Gramscian perspective, as developed by Cox. Indeed some worry that this perspective has become so popular that it runs the risk of entrenching itself as a kind of orthodoxy itself (Abbott and Worth, 2002). While the target of attack is broadened through the notion of hegemony, the emphasis is still very firmly on describing relations of power and how they are facilitated by configurations of social forces, as Cox (1987: 4) describes. Similarly, Gramsci’s idea of a historic bloc – a configuration of power where economic, political and cultural elements of society all come together to allow the (exploitative) workings of capital to unfold – looms large, most notably in Craig Murphy’s work (Murphy, 2005: 125).

As with liberal contractualism, there is an intuitive plausibility to an IPE rooted in the study of power. The key point, though, is that in following this critique of power, the critical approach to IPE is actually predicated upon the same concept of an autonomous individual as market fundamentalist approaches. For market fundamentalists, self-interest, is the very expression of autonomy and freedom of the individual to choose his or her ends, and is thus cast as a moral good. However, to make this assertion, they have to simply ignore the other side of the binary opposition: if people are free, then they are free to group together and exploit one another and hence reduce freedoms for others. And critical IPE makes exactly this point by re-describing all economic interaction as power relations. Since power implies the reduction of freedom, power should be minimised as a moral priority. In other words, IPE has a strongly negative view of obligation rooted in an ontology of autonomous, self-interested individuals. Ethically speaking, power – the power to oblige – should be minimised.

This particular theoretical mixture tends to lead critical versions of IPE towards a philosophy of emancipation from power relations in their entirety. This fact is obvious in Marx’s work prompting some to note that Marx’s philosophy amounts to a kind of religious salvation (Cohn, 1970; Tucker, 1961). Communism is not an economic order for Marx, but a place where the means to enforce coercive obligations – capital and the private property relation – simply do not exist; it is an absence of power. As Virginia Held (1980: 9) sums up ‘Marx’s vision . . . sees human beings as having progressed beyond the self-interested pursuit of individual satisfactions that conflict with the satisfactions of others’.
It would be wrong to suggest that Marx’s epistemological attachments appear in contemporary IPE unchanged. However, while the word itself is often conspicuously absent, contemporary critical IPE is essentially underscored by the same commitment to some form of emancipation; it hardly makes sense to talk about Gramsci’s historic bloc if the ultimate aim is not to transcend it in some fundamental way. Indeed, the concept of hegemony implies an even more demanding emancipation, since it emphasises the depth and extensity of false consciousness through the consensus and complicity built up by the reproduction of specific sets of knowledge, social relations, morals and institutions (Cox, 1987: 39).

The meta-theoretical debate between critical and post-structural ontologies may be an irreplaceable one, but the basic critique of emancipation is simple and persuasive: a world without power relations is probably a world without humans in it (Foucault, 1990). Occasionally, critical political economists have also pondered on this problem, from Karl Polanyi (2001: 267), who recognised that ‘power and economic value are a paradigm of social reality’, to Christopher Farrands (2002: 31), who in discussing IPE remarks that we may never know enough to establish grounds for economic action that are not, if only implicitly, based on relations of power. However, this is not the norm. Despite its trademark heterodoxy, most IPE work has steadfastly refused to open up this debate. As Murphy and Nelson (2001: 405) note, IPE has rarely invited post-modern or post-structural positions into the fray. While we shy away from the strongest and most dogmatic post-modern conclusions, we do see the critical epistemology latent in much IPE as limiting in terms of ethical ideas. Where ideas are emphasised in IPE, they tend to be thought of as shot through with power relations. Most obviously, hegemony accounts for systems of norms and moral codes that shape economic action, but understood only as a means to coercively obligate people within an exploitative capitalist system. But what about ideas that people might hold about social justice, the human condition or ‘the good life’? What about people’s personal ideas about ethics? With its focus on power relations conducted at the macro level (i.e. centred on the state, capitalism, the global economy, high finance or other large socio-economic institutions), much critical IPE does not systematically include the ability of people to reflexively analyse their behaviour in light of ideas that they hold about ethics, social justice and obligation. In other words, the ethical subject – an agent capable of thinking about his or her obligations in light of ethical ideas – remains conspicuously absent.

2.2 Obligation in international political theory

In contrast to the implicit accounts of justice latent in market fundamental and critical IPE, literature on international political theory implies, by its very nature, thinking first and foremost in terms of
obligation. It asks us what obligations do we owe one another? What are the bases of these obligations? And what social order might best actualise those obligations? However, we suggest some weaknesses in this approach that once again emerge from an underlying acceptance of power as power-over.8

While recent moves by analytical political theorists to engage issues of global (in)justice are very welcome (see inter alia Beitz, Pogge, Wenar), it can be argued that the de-ontological/ideal-theoretic method that underpins many approaches condemns them to rehearse the old dichotomy between ‘ought’ and ‘is’. In this rendering, power is attributable to a battle between reason and unreasonable circumstances, leading one to seek the most reasonable account of global justice that can have power-over those circumstances. Building from this, a tendency is to combine rigorous theoretical work with political strategy, such that the force of the better argument is expected to convince policy makers of their moral obligations. Beyond the common response that such expectations are quite unlikely, we suggest a more critical interpretation: the obliging power of international political theory can be used to entrench and perpetuate global (state-) market relationships that should, in principle, be the very point of departure for an ‘ethical’ analysis. Returning to the argument of the previous section, the constitutive power of the discourse of global justice, now popular within analytical political theory, is to render the globe in particular and limited ways such that justice can be seen to confirm rather than contest what ‘is’.

For the purposes of clarity these points can be read through the ground breaking work of Thomas Pogge, though other candidates in this regard might be Charles Beitz, Allen Buchanan, or Leif Wenar’s work on the enforcement of property relations across the globe. Thomas Pogge identifies vast global injustices relating to human poverty and argues that basic negative duties ‘not to harm’ can be used to justify global re-distribution. Despite increasingly effective moral norms protecting the weak and the vulnerable, poverty has slipped off the radar of many justice theorists. He cites the increasing conventions against domestic violence, slavery, autocracy, colonialism and genocide as signs of moral progress. But he questions how poverty has been left out of this discussion of weakness: ‘Each year, some 18 million of them die prematurely from poverty-related causes. This is one-third of all human deaths – 50,000 every day, including 34,000 children under the age of five’ (Pogge, 2002: 2). How can such severe poverty continue when there is enough money (and enough food, water, medicine, etc.) to end it? And why do citizens of the affluent Western states not find it morally troubling? He can provide only one answer: ‘Extensive, severe poverty can continue, because we do not find its eradication morally compelling’ (Pogge, 2002: 3).

This is a significant double standard for liberalism to overcome, and one which Pogge transcends through a synthesis of the liberal and critical
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attitudes to power discussed earlier. Firstly, Pogge (2002: 11) attacks the common prejudice that ‘there is nothing seriously wrong with our conduct, policies, and the global economic institutions we forge in regard to world poverty.’ And he goes on to base his notion of global justice on classically liberal foundations, i.e. ‘negative duties: specific minimal constraints . . . on what harms persons may inflict upon each other’ (Pogge, 2002: 13). Nevertheless, he invokes three different areas of injustice that might be used in support of his argument that global economic structure violates a negative duty not to harm. These are: the effects of shared social institutions; the uncompensated exclusion from the use of (natural) resources; and the effect of a common and violent history – all restrictive structures of power-over as defined in the canon of critical IPE. On the first condition he finds that the shared international order is acting and set up to the detriment of poor people:

... the citizens and governments of the affluent countries – whether intentionally or not – are imposing a global institutional order that forseeably and avoidably reproduces severe and widespread poverty. The worse-off are not merely poor and often starving, but are being impoverished and starved under our shared institutional arrangements, which inescapably shape their lives. (Pogge, 2002: 201).

On the second condition, for Pogge (2002: 202), ‘The better-off enjoy significant advantages in the use of a single natural resource base from whose benefits the worse-off are largely, and without compensation excluded.’ This argument refers to the highly uneven use of the world’s resources, resources are generally governed via a structure of property rights which precedes individual choices. Although the rich elites may pay for the resources they use, in the case of oil, this money goes towards corrupt autocrats who are not intent on distributing it widely. And finally, on the ‘Effects of Common and Violent History’ he adds the following condition: (1) the social starting positions of the worse-off and the better-off have emerged from a single historical process that was pervaded by massive, grievous wrongs (Pogge, 2002: 203).

Overall Pogge makes a reform proposal on the basis that the status quo can be reformed in such a way as to satisfy all three approaches. So, he argues, the proposal needs to show that inequality can be traced to the structure of the global economic order. And he adds the caveat that ‘the status quo is unjust only if we can improve the circumstances of the global poor without thereby becoming badly off ourselves’ (Pogge, 2002: 204). And he notes, ‘modesty’ is an important criteria is the GRD is to gain the support necessary to implement it (Pogge, 2002: 205) so that even ‘quite a small GRD may, in the context of a fair and open global market system, be sufficient continuously to balance those ordinary centrifugal tendencies of markets...’ (Pogge, 2002: 205).
The logic of this argument is impeccable and it is clearly tied to a practical strategic choice to influence policies amongst the affluent peoples. For these reasons it is clearly an important and worthy contribution to the discussion of global justice. However, there are a number of themes and issues which strike us as problematic. Firstly, the attribution of power to reason is clear; all that is seemingly required is the obliging force of the better argument and global justice can be achieved. Basic critical questions such as ‘whose reason?’ or ‘for what purpose?’ might suffice here, but the point is already apparent: Pogge intends to change the minds of ‘us’ citizens of affluent states, so that h/we can help ‘them’, the wretched and poor. The use of such dichotomies is problematic because ethics can only be understood and addressed in terms of a divide between strong and responsible subject/citizen and a weak and helpless subject/potential recipient. This is a form of ethical violence that places ‘the poor’ at one step remove from the political spaces in which they might shape and realise their own conceptions of justice. As Debbie Lisle (2008: 158) argues, ‘there is always a privileged subject who extends a helping hand to an already subordinate and victimised Other, and in the process entrenches the very inequalities s/he is trying to alleviate.’ In terms of breaking the divide between the ‘ought’ of reason and the ‘is’ of inequality at least one task might be to include the voices of the people we claim to speak for?

Secondly, the move to emphasise the strategic relevance of international political theory creates an assumed privilege for the status quo. For instance, as the Introduction suggested, Pogge’s GRD arguably reifies and instantiates just as much neo-liberal theory as it challenges. It ultimately accepts the neo-liberal version of the global market place, as a basically benign instrument that occasionally needs correction. However, by his own argument, the current global market place is the product of (at least) a shared violent history, its (apparently) ‘ordinary and centrifugal forces’ are currently understood to cause massive environmental degradation, and an institutional order is systematically dominated by the large powers. At best, the GRD proposal is piecemeal. At worst its strategic logic works to tranquilise the fundamental critiques that drove its creation.

And thirdly, consolidating this point about the constitutive powers of the discourse of global justice, it is interesting to reflect upon the conception of the global that is being advanced. While one might conceive of ‘the global’ as a universal space, the whole globe perhaps, it is remarkable how prominent states remain in the equation. Pogge (2002: 199) speaks of powerful western states, weak and/or corrupt developing states, even his schema of global order remains state based ‘...a worldwide states system based on internationally recognized territorial domains, interconnected through a global network of market trade and diplomacy.’ The constitutive violence of this ontology is to leave unchecked the sovereign demarcation
of political space and political subjectivity, which might be regarded by many cosmopolitans as the first question of political ethics.

Drawing these points together, the reduction of justice to a deontological force of reason, power-over, requires both scrutiny in terms of how it acts to constitute the limit of global ethics, and, more substantially, how it sacrifices the very moment of ‘the political’ to strategy. In this way, the next section develops a pragmatic research method that retains greater sensitivity to the politics of justice, the violence of terms such as ‘state’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, and the importance of resistance for thinking beyond such limits.

3. THE QUESTION OF ETHICS: A RESEARCH AGENDA

We have argued that the demand for ethics in IPE is promising but problematic. While there is clearly an important reflexive moment to be explored, we should guard against a view of ethics as either ‘inherently good’, or somehow separate from power. In particular, Section 2 set out to explore how a tendency to pitch ethics as either the opposite of power, or an ameliorative obligation, downplay the constitutive violence entailed. On a strong interpretation, this view could be read to suggest that the demand for ethics in IPE is futile. However, that is not our venture. Instead, we seek to hold onto the kernel insight in the demand for ethics in IPE: that we might find better ways of ‘being’ relevant to the substantive field of enquiry. And we do this by both adopting a positive view of power, as power to, and treating ethics as a site for thinking resistance.

In ‘The Subject and Power’ (1982), Michel Foucault characterises power not in negative terms, as a constraining or obliging force, but as something productive. Power produces individuals, markets, ethics, and so forth. It is not simply domination. Rather, Foucault embraces the opposition between power and freedom upon which the critical/liberal dichotomy is based, and recognises that one always implies the other. Thus, every structure of power simultaneously opens up space for freedom and specifically the freedom to resist. In turn, resistance is something that requires constant input in the form of thought and action within the existing field of power relations. Its task is not simply the overthrow or removal of power, whatever that might mean, but rather to articulate new modes of being, new ‘truths’ and new possibilities, putting agents right back at the centre of the debate (Foucault, 1990).

This articulation of the productive possibilities (as well as the limited realities) of ethics might be particularly important/interesting move for IPE. One of the implications of the question of ethics in IPE, as we have framed it, is that it is actually difficult to elucidate ethical alternatives without performing a new violence. The task may therefore be to think in quite practical terms of a continuous and ongoing process that moves ‘back
and forth’ between ethical proposals and their empirical manifestations? Indeed, such an empirical turn was identified by Foucault (1994: 329) as crucial:

I would like to suggest another way to go further towards a new economy of power relations, a way which is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation, and which implies more relations between theory and practice. It consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. To use another metaphor, it consists in using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used. Rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies.

Rendered thus, we suggest that the question of ethics in IPE should be addressed via a new research agenda that seeks to address the importance of ethical possibility, and ethical violence, while remaining sensitive to new moments of ethical resistance.

3.1 Possibility

By far the clearest attraction in ethics for IPE theorists, we think, is the imaginative possibilities offered up. As Richard Rorty (1998: 175) suggested,

We remain profoundly grateful to philosophers like Plato and Kant, not because they discovered truths but because they prophesized cosmopolitan utopias – utopias most of whose details they have gotten wrong, but utopias we might never have struggled to reach had we not heard their prophecies.

Such an account may not please those critical scholars attracted by the perceived ‘depth’ of philosophical analysis, who want to seek firm foundations for the ethical ‘dimension’ of their analysis. Indeed, such authors may already be put off by the apparently hyper-critical view of ethics developed in this paper. But such a view would conflate two subjects – ‘ethics’ and ‘certain knowledge’ – which do not necessarily have to be combined. That is to say, it is only by taking a dogmatic view of the portrayal of Reason (capital R) within the Enlightenment that we might be tempted to treat arguments which do not rest on Truth (capital T) as ‘unethical’. If, as Rorty suggests, we drop such criteria and instead get on with working through ethical suggestions in a pragmatic, ‘back-and-forth’ sense, we can take what’s best in ethics, inspiration and imagination, while remaining sensitive to what is perhaps worst: a universalism that potentially circumscribes ethical possibility (Rorty, 2007).
As an example, rather than taking the whole gamut of cosmopolitan political theory, we might proceed via analysis of the specific suggestions of cosmopolitan theorists. For instance, the much vaunted agency of global civil society might be posited. In a ‘back and forth’ sense, we might retain a sense that global civil society is an important locus for promoting ethics in the global polity. But we would also engage the ambiguities of such forms, be it in the promotion of an essentially western liberal model of political agency, or by the promotion of cosmopolitan reforms, like the Tobin Tax, or debt relief, which of themselves do very little to question the foundational structures of global capitalism (Brassett, 2008, 2009a). For instance, the principle of debt relief championed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the G8, Make Poverty History and Jubilee 2000 is very seldom geared, in practice, towards anything other than the cancellation of debt for countries that cannot pay in order that they might pay private debt and/or take on new loans. It is in this sense, we argue, that ethics can foster a form of violence which should be a central research question in an IPE analysis.

3.2 Violence

We can think about the potential violence of ethics in very fundamental terms. One way of thinking about ethics is to posit responsibility and indeed, responsibility towards the other as the question, par excellence of ethics. Responsibility underpins many ethical approaches to poverty, migration, and democratic recognition, to name but a few subjects. However, when we begin to think through this concept of responsibility it immediately becomes clear that it embroils us in tough, perhaps unanswerable questions like ‘which others?’ and ‘how?’ Dan Bulley (2010) expresses the point as one about the fundamental politics of ethics:

If every other we have a responsibility to protect is every bit demanding of that responsibility, we can have no justification for choosing one responsibility over an-other. This is a genuine eternal moral dilemma and it reveals the truly political nature of [ethics] – the fact that it can only ever be ethico-political. By political, I mean that we do not know what to do. We cannot be sure what is the right thing to do. The fact that the conundrum is not resolvable or decidable, what Derrida calls its ‘undecidability’, is virtually a definition of politics and the political.

In recognising the fundamental politics of ethics, Bulley also provides a quandary for thinking about ethics in IPE. In all those moments where such politics, such undecidability has been overlooked – by choosing to defend one ‘other’, be it the poor, the fellow citizen, women, etc. – it can be seen that ethics enacts a violence. This is a violence to the ‘subject’ who
may be quite different from the way they are portrayed (Butler, 2005). It is also a violence towards whoever is left out.

We identify two broad senses in which ethics can enact a violence: conceptual and empirical. In conceptual terms, as we have been suggesting throughout this paper, theory and knowledge of any kind must inevitably make certain ontological and epistemological moves in order to even ‘speak’. This is what Derrida refers to as iter-ability, such that the ethical subject is both produced and frozen at the point of utterance. In empirical terms, it could be argued that scholars within IPE are well placed to critically engage. With the profusion of ethically motivated ‘agents’ in the global polity – be it individuals, civil society, or even ‘celebrities’ – the critique and reform of globalisation has increasingly come centre stage. This presents a vast array of potential ethical studies for IPE to address.

For instance, fair trade emerged as an important attempt to subject the trade relation to a form of social regulation. The idea that a higher price is paid to farmers in exchange for a cup of coffee, say, was celebrated by many as an important, if piecemeal, intervention in the governance of global trade. However, the ambiguities of such ethical trade governance require scrutiny. As Mat Watson (2007: 265) argues, ‘fair trade works within the structures of market exchange, thereby reinforcing their dominance’ and while the act of ethical consumption may be seen as a form of ‘beneficence’ towards distant farmers, no reciprocal relations are engendered:

Despite the best efforts of fair trade campaigners to de-anonymize the trading relationship, this has been a decidedly one-way process which works only to the benefit of the consumer. First World consumers are provided with information about the type of Third World producer with whom they are trading. This enables them to reconstruct the context of Third World livelihood struggles in their own minds and, as such, to confer sympathy on the emotions that they presume the producers will feel. But this same sort of imaginative projection into another person’s life context is not also conferred upon the producers.

This point can be extended to examine the everyday politics of consumerism. In the case of Starbucks, for instance, consumers are told that the cup of coffee they are buying is sourced according to the ‘highest ethics’, that the cup of coffee is not only good quality but also ‘responsible’. In this way, the ethical consumer is confronted with a question about global ethics which simultaneously constructs the global as a pre-existent reality, demanding of certain ethical decisions. As well as the often, frankly, patronising depictions of indigenous farmers, smiling and humble in receipt of Starbucks trade, the individual consumer is constructed as an unquestioned site for the adjudication of global responsibilities.
Such violences abound in the narratives surrounding climate change as well, where scientific forms of knowledge have translated into ethical imperatives most markedly, for example the notion of de-carbonising the global economy. Climate change, by its nature, has global consequences, but on our view, the political and ethical knowledge assumed in notions of globality must be recognised along with the dead ends that can result from it. For example, framing the ethics of climate change at the global level leads inevitably to a clash with other forms of global ethics concerning development and poverty. Put crudely, is it fair to kick the growth ladder away once the West has already climbed it? To propose an ‘answer’ to a question put thus is inevitably to do violence to one or other sets of ethics and the subjects implied. Furthermore, like Pogge’s statistics on global poverty, there is the danger that focusing on the global nature of climate change generates a lacuna between expressions of the problem and the lived experience of ethically reflexive agents, encouraging disenchantment for individuals and the sense that climate change is simply a giant, intractable collective action problem conducted amongst units no smaller than states.

Because climate change is global in consequence does not mean that ‘the global’ is the only level through which we can articulate environmental ethics. We would suggest that the emergence of global scientific/ethical imperatives associated with climate change are not the definitive statement of pre-political, pre-ethical truth on the issue, but merely as one part of that ongoing, back and forth process through which ethics are constantly articulated. Global narratives on climate change may form one part of the puzzle, but to focus on them exclusively is to commit ourselves to the violences and contradictions that result from them.

Empirically, we must also recognise the ambivalent ethics and politics of environmental policy interventions. For example, the aim of preventing global warming via the reduction of atmospheric carbon is full of ethical sentiment ranging from concern for our commitment to those from nations likely to be hit hardest by the effects in the medium-term (e.g. people in low lying areas such as Bangladesh for whom rises in sea level could be catastrophic) through our obligation to future generations and on towards the salvation of humanity from destroying the conditions of its own existence. The weight of these sentiments has lent widespread support to emissions trading schemes in the wake of Kyoto, most notably the EU’s Emissions Trading System. However, such systems need to be treated with caution since they have been conditioned by existing political and economic structures. Indeed, carbon trading was successful precisely because it packaged environmentalism in such a way as was palatable to big business (Egenhofer, 2007; Lohmann, 2006; MacKenzie 2007) and discourses of shareholder value (see for example Sandor, Bettelheim and Swingland, 2002). The use of ethics in such
instances could therefore be said to reinforce and legitimate existing global accumulation patterns as much as to challenge them, providing a clear example of the co-constitution of discourses of ethics and power.

One advocate suggests of carbon trading schemes that ‘The property rights policies proposed are especially appealing because they can lead to win-win solutions for all the traders concerned’ (Chichilnisky and Heal 2000: 5). What violence does an ethical policy enact when expressed in terms of private property, pareto optimality and where agency is that of the market trader? We must look beyond the ends – in this case the straightforwardly ethical goal of reducing carbon emissions – and ask what conceptions of ethics and politics motivate such interventions in the first place, whose interests they serve, what arenas of politics they privilege and what ones they marginalise.

3.3 Resistance

We do not suggest that ethical interventions like fair trade and carbon trading schemes are intrinsically flawed, but we do suggest that they demand critical attention on the basis that they are already political and ethical at the moment of utterance. In turn, such critical attention should force us to go on to ask more questions. To wit, if ethical arguments from within IPE enact a violence, which is identifiable from within IPE research, then it should suggest the further question of how we might resist and whether such resistance is already articulated in ways that are not recognised by the paradigms and epistemologies at work. Thus finally, it is incumbent to provide an account of what an ‘ethical resistance to ethics’ might look like. Foucault’s (2005: 88) view of resistance was avowedly plural:

...there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case ...by definition they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or a rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination, an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat. Resistances do not derive from a few heterogeneous principles; but neither are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed. They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite.

When power is understood in positive terms then we are faced with a proliferation of possible resistances. Resistance is not here understood as a reaction against power, an obligating power, instead resistance is understood as part of power, the ‘odd term’. Rendered thus, the examination of ethical possibility, which we suggest inevitably leads to a violence, does
not mark the final point of analysis. (Such a view would be more appropriate for the Marxist riposte that ethics is always a rhetorical cover for interest.) Instead, resistance can be thought in terms of thinking/doing differently (within the field of power relations).

In some instances, the resistance will be straightforward, when, for instance, power/knowledge relations are structured so as to cause death, destruction, or suffering. In others the role of critical reflection is paramount. For instance, as is the case with fair trade, an apparently straightforward intervention is unavoidably imbricated in the power/knowledge relations, which made the problem possible. Thus, resistance, as the ‘odd term’, involves tracing the line of fragility in the logic that produces concepts of ‘trade’, ‘fair trade’ and the relations between the two. This might require the kinds of imaginative interventions now common within the global civil society such as the use of parody or satire (Brassett, 2009a; De Goede, 2005). Or else, we might intervene more systematically via the deconstruction of the discourse of fair trade. For example, Alex Hughes (2002) has argued that fair trade imperatives actually accentuate a form of governmental control over the poor farmer collectives who increasingly face the burden of meeting (ethical) accountancy directives. Equally, it has been suggested that the use of images of smiling black people in the adverts of fair trade companies is a clear sign that the discourse of a ‘white man’s burden’ lingers on (Wright, 2004). The tensions, ambivalences and unintended consequences of particular forms of resistance thus require careful analysis.

However, along with these ambivalences come opportunities. By re-privileging the ethically reflexive individual as a worthy object of analysis, we are afforded a much wider sense of what might actually constitute an act of resistance. Thinking in terms of a ‘power to’ this can include the everyday actions of individuals that challenge particular configurations of power relations, intended or not. So the farmer who exits the trade relation in favour individual or collective subsistence farming, or the individual who only buys locally produced coffee, or grows their own, each explore a new mode of being not produced by the existing set of relations. Similarly, we might address resistance to climate change by switching our attention away from the global solutions that automatically privilege the actors and mechanisms that operate at the global level and towards actors who articulate resistance to norms of commercial society in a creative and productive way. Examples of such work from political economists already exists, including Polanyi’s (2001) analysis of Robert Owen’s counter-industrial revolution politics, E.F. Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful (1973) and Juliet Schor’s (1998) research on ‘downshifters’, who partially reject the norms and incentives of commercial worklife in favour of ‘slower’ forms of existence less reliant on consumption and waste. By focusing on these creative acts of resistance, we can avoid grinding to a halt as we begin to appreciate the limitations of macro-structural solutions to climate change.
4. CONCLUSION/CONVERSATION

It is sometimes suggested that the presence of ethical assumptions or arguments within a theory or discipline is a sign of weakness, immaturity and/or lack of scientific rigour. Stated boldly, we propose the absolute opposite of this view: the demand for ethics in IPE is a sign of rude health. It speaks of a discipline that is more aware of the inter-relations between theory and practice (and between practice and theory). It suggests that academics within IPE are more willing to understand and take responsibility for the world they observe/construct. In making this argument though, we stress that such maturity means accepting that we are at the beginning, not the end of a conversation. While the possibilities of ethical reflexivity within IPE are indeed appealing, and particularly so, when one considers the global scope (and therefore potentially larger impact) of the ethical projects under consideration, it is with great caution that we should endorse such moves. The deep imbrications between knowledge and power identified by critical and post-structural authors mean that ethics must be seen as a constitutive discourse like any other. New possibilities are always-already a potential violence. In this sense, we have drawn upon Foucault to highlight the ethical importance of a creative concept of resistance that is able to work within, but also articulate new discourses of IPE. And this anticipation of new, and perhaps unimagined resistances, means that the question of ethics in IPE is likely to produce a very lively conversation indeed.

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NOTES

1 We draw this notion of violence primarily from Judith Butler and her various critiques of ethical violence, but similar points can be made/read in relation to Zizek’s accounts of ‘symbolic’ and ‘systemic’ violence. Other candidates might be ‘harm’ or ‘suffering’ and we have explored these foundational ethical subjects elsewhere (Brassett and Bulley, 2007). In this paper, we use violence instead of harm merely to shy away from the close association of the latter term with notions of ‘intentionality’ and ‘action’.
Another potential way in which these ideas might be explored could, for example, draw upon Colin Hay’s (1997: 49) critical reading of Lukes’ three faces of power where he argues that Lukes’ elision of the critical, analytical and ethical means that ‘power becomes a purely pejorative concept by definitional fiat. If to identify a power relationship is to engage in a critique of that relationship, then it is clear that power cannot be exercised responsibly or legitimately. The essence of power is negative, the purpose of critique to expose power relations as a potential means to their elimination.’

This view is developed more broadly in the work of neo-Gramscians in relation to questions of how world order might be understood/changed. See, for instance, Cox (1981).

In work with Allen Buchanan (Buchanan and Keohane 2006: 406) this perspective on the legitimacy of global governance is elaborated in explicitly ethical terms: ‘Essential to our account is the idea that to be legitimate a global governance institution must possess certain epistemic virtues that facilitate the ongoing critical revision of its goals, through interaction with agents and organizations outside the institution. A principled global public standard of legitimacy can help citizens committed to democratic principles to distinguish legitimate institutions from illegitimate ones and to achieve a reasonable congruence in their legitimacy assessments.’

http://eis.bris.ac.uk/~plcdib/imprints/michaelwalzerinterview.html.

Although more extreme forms of the Mont Pelerin liberal tradition can be found much later in the twentieth century, for example, see Rothbard (1982) and Hoppe (1993).

Our intention here is not to pigeonhole contemporary IPE into market fundamental and critical ‘camps’, each with immovable epistemological dogmas. To do so would be an injustice to the variety and subtlety of the work on offer. Instead, the above analysis – and our argument in general – is focused on the underlying problematiques that have come to define IPE as a discipline. Only a relatively small group of theorists would actively identify themselves as either market fundamentalists or strict critical theorists, but the continuum between the two extremes neatly captures the conception of power and ethics that arise as a result of the intellectual traditions that IPE has drawn upon.

What is provided here is necessarily a broad cut at the literature that is meant to illustrate the consequences of our approach for thinking about international political theory. More substantial treatments of the limits of current thinking about global justice amongst analytical political theorists can be found in Brassett (2009b) and Brown (2007).

For instance, ‘The Space Hijackers’ are a London based group of ‘Anarchitects’ who seek to reclaim, through subverting, the space of the world from corporate logics. They engage in non-violent protest such as their regular Anarchist vs. Capitalist Cricket Match in the City of London: ‘an opportunity for two opposing cultures and world views to take to the crease and prove their worth like Ladies and Gentlemen’. More directly, they wear t-Shirts that say 50 per cent off everything and walk around Top Shop causing chaos, or more critically, they put leaflets detailing the relationship of a particular retailer to the use of sweatshops. And, they actively subvert the logics of global trade governance identified above, as their website states: ‘The Space Hijackers will not be held responsible for any trouble that you get into after reading the content of this website. All of the views and actions contained within it are completely ludicrous and we actually believe the opposite. All of the actions
and projects documented in this site are fake; we are just very good at Photoshop. Do yourself a favour, go out buy a McDonalds, wash it down with a Starbucks whilst sitting in the window seat checking out all the other people in their GAP clothes just like yours. You will find that life is much more fulfilling if you go down the path of the Global Capitalists. Sweatshop labour is a lie invented by mean hearted lefties, so that you can save your money to buy their papers. Town planners do an excellent job of protecting local character (Which incidentally is over-rated anyway). What we actually need are more coffee shops and Malls and less local small run businesses. After all this is what the punters want isn’t it? The Space Hijackers believe completely in the good hard work of the IMF, World Bank and WTO. We think big multinationals are brilliant, and all wear Nike thongs. If you still want to see the poorly designed, badly spelt, spoof anarchist/anti-capitalist/troublemaking website, please click below’. <http://www.spacehijackers.com>

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