‘Obligations written in the heart’: The primacy of association and the renewal of political theology

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Introduction

The assumption that both domestic politics and international relations are characterised by an original condition of anarchy, which can only be regulated by the artifice of a formal social contract and a system of sovereign states, underpins much of modern political thought and IR theory, especially the realist tradition (Murray 1997: 31-143; Rengger 2000: 37-71; Bell 2008). In the wake of Kenneth Waltz’ *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz 1979), the neo-realist claim about uncertainty and the permanent risk of inter-state conflict has been challenged by both neo-liberal thinkers and theorists of constructivism. The former tend to emphasise the varieties of cooperative behaviour between states as part of international institutions (e.g. Keohane 1984; Keohane and Nye 1989). Meanwhile, the latter tend to accentuate inter-subjectively shared ideas that shape action by constituting the identities and interests of both state and non-state actors (Wendt 1992, 1999; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Reus-Smit 1999, 2004; Finnemore 1996; Barnett and Finnemore 2006).

It is true that neo-realism, neo-liberalism and constructivism differ fundamentally on key questions such as the nature of the international system, the extent to which states are driven by national interest and whether identities are exogenously given or socially constructed. However, as this essay will suggest, they also share a number of foundational assumptions, including (1) the existence of anarchy not only in the state of nature but also in the international system; (2) the individual and the state as the key units of domestic politics and international relations; (3) the separation of ideational from material forces and a residually dualist ontology (oscillating between the self and the other). By contrast, there are elements of the English School of IR – in some of the writings by Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight – that provide an alternative conception to the

three dominant discourses, notably (1) the existence of order both in the state of nature and in the international system; (2) the primacy of communities, groups and other associations over the individual and the state; (3) the fusion of ideas with material forces and a more fully relational ontology.

This paper argues that one source for this alternative conception is the work of Edmund Burke who viewed political association as more primary than anarchy and as naturally given (in the sense of reflecting a natural order) rather than socially constructed. Wight himself hinted at the importance of Burke's intellectual legacy for the English School of IR in his seminal essay 'Why is there no international theory?', where he writes that "the only political philosopher who has turned wholly from political theory to international theory is Burke" (Wight, 1966: 19). Both in his speeches and writings Burke articulates a new approach to the political and the international that focuses on the primacy of association: cultural and social bonds that are more primary than the social contract or the inter-state system. Such ties involve reciprocal rights and mutual duties – 'obligations written in the heart' (Burke 2014b: 316) – which Burke viewed as more fundamental than formal legal or procedural arrangements as expressed in treaties (or, arguably, much of international law today).

Contrary to certain strands in constructivism, Burke considers associative ties not as socially constructed but rather as reflecting a natural order governed by custom, tradition and the experience of connectedness in which communities and groups embody the political and social nature of humankind. Such an order is reflected in their participation in a 'commonwealth of nations' that is governed by a transcendent morality given to humanity by God (Burke 1993c). And contrary to more 'culturalist' approaches (e.g. Huntington 1996 and 2004, and in a very different way, Lebow 2003, 2009 and 2014), Burke views identity not in essentialist terms but instead as an organically evolving reality that is shaped by both ideas *and* material forces. My argument is that Burke's more 'organicist' approach avoids both the view that identity is essentialist, fixed and immutable and the notion of identity as fragmented, in flux and permanently changing. Instead, he conceives of being,

community and identity in terms of living traditions – a covenantal link among generations that connects the past with the present and the future.

Section one explores the conception of association in constructivist and 'culturalist' theories of IR and shows that in each case, there is a dualism between ideas and material forces that reflects a secular logic – a separation of immanence from transcendence that underpins an ontology that is ultimately idealist. Section two provides an analysis of Burke's critique of the modern secular settlement before outlining his 'associationist' alternative and the way in which this approach informed his analyses and actions on the burning questions of international affairs in his day. Section three discusses a number of possible objections to Burke's approach and tries to show how Burke's associationism contributes to the solution of perennial problems in IR theory, including the reality of human vice, violence and war, before the final section offers some concluding reflections and outlines future avenues of research.

1. A critique of constructivist and 'culturalist' conceptions of association

The idea of association and culture in politics and international relations is not new, but it has recently come once again to the fore. The argument that human association is more primary than either the sovereign individual or the sovereign state because humankind is always already political can be traced to ancient philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and Cicero, as well as to medieval and some modern thinkers in Western tradition (Pickstock 2012; Pabst 2016; Rengger 2016). Over the past two decades or so, the idea of the international as a 'thick' order of interpersonal relations that generate cross-border connections, including language and cultural customs, has received renewed attention in IR by certain strands in the constructivist school (e.g. Wendt 1992, 1999; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Ruggie 1998; Reus-Smit 1999, 2004; Finnemore 1996; Barnett and Finnemore 2006). In different ways, they emphasise the role of inter-subjectively shared ideas rather than material forces in shaping political action by constituting the identities and interests of states and other actors in the international arena.

1.1. Constructivist accounts of association

The constructivist conception of association derives from an important critique of neo-realist and neo-liberal approaches to the international. As John Gerard Ruggie (1998) and Alexander Wendt (1992 and 1999) have argued, the debate between neo-realism and neo-liberalism is an intra-paradigmatic one. Both schools of IR view the international system as characterised by anarchy, which is regulated through a combination of structure (distribution of power) and process (institutional interaction).[1] Both are also committed to rationalism and utilitarianism: in the words of Ruggie, '[w]ithin the ontology of neo-utilitarianism, ideational factors, when they are examined at all, are rendered in strictly instrumental terms, useful or not to self-regarding individuals (units) in the pursuit of typically material interests, including efficiency concerns' (Ruggie 1998: 855). Therefore both neo-realist and neo-liberal approaches consider identities and interests to be exogenously given, such that state actors might change their behaviour but not their essential identity or vital interests. As a result, the main disagreement between neo-realists and neo-liberals is about the relative importance of anarchic structure *versus* process-generated cooperative behaviour as part of the international system. Any association between states is based on a rationalist calculation of (relative or absolute) gains.

Wendt rightly recognises that some (neo)-liberal theorists of IR go further and try to conceptualise forms of 'complex learning' (Nye 1987), 'changing conceptions of self and interest' (Jervis 1988), or 'sociological' approaches to interest (Keohane 1990). However, this raises questions about the tension between an individualist ontology and an inter-subjective epistemology that neo-liberalism cannot resolve because it is wedded to ontological individualism. In light of this, Wendt argues for an inter-subjective structure that can account for interest- and identity formation in a way that the rationalist separation of exogenously given structure from fluid process cannot. Key to this is what Wendt calls the distribution of knowledge based on ideas (as opposed to the

distribution of power based on material interests) and the 'collective meanings that constitute the structures which organize our actions' (Wendt 1992: 397).

Crucially, as he claims in his influential book *Social Theory of International Politics* (Wendt 1999), constructivism offers an alternative to neo-realism and neo-liberalism that revolves around two arguments: 'that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature' (Wendt 1999: 1). Against the philosophical materialism of the realist tradition in IR, Wendt's variant of constructivism tries to show that the structures of human association are primarily to do with cultural factors rather than material forces. And against the philosophical rationalism of neo-liberal approaches, Wendtian constructivism seeks to establish that these culturally conditioned structures not merely regulate action but also build interests and identities. In Wendt's own words, '[a]nalysis should therefore begin with culture and then move to power and interest, rather than only invoke culture to clean up what they leave unexplained' (Wendt 1999: 193).

Others, like Ruggie, focus on the 'civilizational constructs, cultural factors, state identities, and the like, together with how they shape states' interests and patterns of international outcomes' (Ruggie 1998: 867). His argument is that core building blocs of the international system such as sovereignty, power or national interest exist only within a framework of shared meaning that recognises it to be legitimate precisely because underpinning it is some form of collective intentionality. As he notes, collective intentionality creates identity and meaning, including the case of negotiating trade agreements. The reason is 'intersubjective frameworks of understanding that included a shared narrative about the conditions that had made the [trade] regimes necessary and the objectives they were intended to accomplish and generated a grammar' (Ruggie 1998: 870). So like many other constructivists (including Barnett, Finnemore, Keck, Reus-Smit and Sikkink), Wendt's and Ruggie's conceptions rest on the claim that identities and interests change as a result of social interaction – in particular the use of language.

But the linguistic turn of IR, which lies at the conceptual heart of constructivism, is not sufficiently developed. As Maja Zehfuss has shown, constructivist depictions of interactions lack communicative action: Wendt's 'actors do not speak' (Zehfuss 2002: 48), and the duality between the self (*ego*) and the other (*alter*) is in fact devoid of linguistic mediation. Thus actors are engaged in signalling games and in an exchange of discrete moves that resemble rationalist game theory more than continued social interaction based on a properly relational ontology. It is true that Wendt draws on Peter Berger's conception of identity, which he describes as relational: 'Actors acquire identities-relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self-by participating in such collective meanings. Identities are inherently relational' (Wendt 1992: 397). However, the ontology that underpins Wendt's constructivism and the constructivist tradition of IR more widely is dualistic. Not only does it view the individual and the state as the fundamental units of politics and international relations without the mediation of groups, communities or other forms of association. It also considers ideas as separate from material forces, which alongside institutions are little more than external constraints on socially knowledgeable and discursively competent actors.

The primacy of ideational over material factors implies that constructivism is a variant of idealism: reality is merely physical and given, devoid of any meaning except for the mentally and socially constructed meaning of individuals and their interaction with other individuals. The same is true for norms in the international system, which are but the outcome of states interacting with other states. Underpinning constructivist approaches is the premise that politics and the international system are ultimately composed of individuals and states and that these units have nothing ontological in common. Therefore, the political and the international rest on a relational social structure that is the outcome of ideas and interaction – a constructed artifice rather than a naturally given imperfect order that human beings try to discover and to improve.

Thus we can summarise by saying that neo-realism, neo-liberalism and constructivism differ fundamentally on key questions, such as the nature of the international system, the extent to which states are driven by national interest and whether identities are exogenously given or socially

constructed. However, they do share a number of foundational presuppositions, including (1) the existence of anarchy not only in the state of nature but also in the international system; (2) the individual and the state as the core units of domestic politics and international relations; (3) the separation of ideational from material forces.

1.2. 'Culturalist' approaches to association

Among the most prominent 'culturalist' approaches to IR and the question of association are the works of Samuel Huntington (1996 and 2004) and (much closer to social constructivism) the writings of Richard Ned Lebow (notably 2003, 2009, 2014). The focus of my critique will be on the latter because, like the constructivist tradition of IR, Lebow rejects the neo-realist assumption that the international is characterised by a condition of anarchy and that states are primarily engaged in the pursuit of national interest. Instead of a rationalist calculation of gain and loss, his contention is that actors in the international system are motivated in much more complex ways and that there is something like a commonwealth of nations bound together by notions of justice. Lebow's emphasis is on the tragic character of international politics linked to the inherent difficult of establishing and maintaining an orderly conduct among nations, the contingent nature of human efforts to improve the material environment of individuals and states, as well as the fundamental condition of uncertainty, which according to him remains unaddressed in the constructivist work of Wendt and others (Lebow 2003).

Faced with uncertain domestic and international contexts, actors do not simply fall back on power or national interests but have a much wider range of motives. For Lebow, political leaders draw on notions of honour, patriotism and charisma for their decisions and actions. These emotions and other motivations are part of a deeper philosophical dynamic between different poles that exceed the constructivist binary of self and other: Lebow's culturalist approach accentuates the interplay between *physis* and *nomos* – a natural order and human conventions, customs and laws.

This interplay between nature and culture is key to the development of civilisations, their rise and their fall (Lebow 2012 and 2016).

Beyond neo-realism, Lebow's theory of IR emphasises cultural patterns that shape the interests and ideas of states and their exercise of power. And beyond social constructivism, his conception highlights the deep connections between natural order and human culture – culture is not just a pure social artifice but in some sense reflects an imperfect cosmic order, while this imperfect cosmic order requires human creativity for its preservation and perfection. Linking together nature and culture is *logos* – right reason in the sense of argumentative engagement and the fashioning of shared meanings within and between societies. These meanings are vital to the survival and flourishing of civilisations. For Lebow, Thucydides

> explored the relationship between words (*logoi*) and deeds (*erga*), and documented the double feedback loop between them. Shared meanings of words are the basis for conventions and civic cooperation. When words lose their meanings, or when their meanings are subverted, the conventions that depend on them lose their force, communication becomes difficult and civilization declines (Lebow 2003: 161).

By contrast, international order and a shared sense of justice based on the cultivation of common bonds is central to a *nomos* that can restrain the worst excesses of actors – including individual leaders, city states or entire empires. Such a *nomos* involves a cultural understanding of the self-image and self-esteem of other actors on the international stage among whom some shared interests and identities can be discerned.

However, Lebow insists that the human condition is tragic in the sense of being subject not just to uncertainty but also to irreconcilable tension between opposing passions. As a result, both individual and collective identities are fragile and unstable, which in turn implies that persons and societies evolve according to non-linear patterns that are neither determined by fixed factors such as power (as for neo-realism), nor by law-like regularities (as for neo-liberalism), nor by inter-subjectivity (as for constructivism). That is so because for Lebow the latter forgets the importance

of human interaction with reality or, to put the same point differently, the interplay of nature and culture.

In other works, notably his *Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Lebow 2009), he argues that emotional motives of 'appetite', 'spirit', 'reason' and 'fear', which are absent from the neo-realist, neo-liberal and constructivist traditions of IR, turn out to be central to human action and political behaviour – including the shaping of the international system. Fundamentally, these emotions interact with one another: for example, spirit or the drive for self-esteem can be sustained by reason or by fear. But beyond the rationalism of neo-realist and the neo-liberal approaches, Lebow makes the point that human nature is itself more holistic and integrated than and the emphasis on inter-subjectivity in constructivism: '[r]eason combined with positive affect in the form of affection builds empathy'; 'reason divorced from emotional commitments […] can intensify conflict and prevent the emergence of […] communities that enable actors to […] satisfy their spirit' (Lebow 2009: 514). Social order at the domestic and international level is in large part a reflection of rival emotions: reason-based arrangements tame spirit and appetite, which leads to self-restraint, while appetite-based arrangements induce selfishness, rapacity and conflict. Spirit-based arrangements involve the pursuit of honour and therefore produce a competition for status, which is also unstable.

Crucially, Lebow argues that such a cultural approach to IR is compatible with certain standard in the social sciences, including generalisation over time and across space:

> [b]y identifying roughly where societies reside within [the mixture of motives,] we can infer important things about their politics, including the basis and degree of cooperation, the nature of conflict and the frequency of violence or war, and actors' propensity for risk-taking. With a large number of cases we could determine the distribution of societies across time and cultures to see if certain mixtures of motives were more common and stable than other configurations (Lebow 2009: 510-11).

Leaving aside the challenge of operationalising this theory, Lebow's approach runs into a number of conceptual problems. First of all, Lebow is right to treat culture not as an epiphenomenon but rather as a force in its own right that shapes behaviour, but in his theory there is a tension between transhistorical continuities and contingent, contending factors. On the one hand, Lebow emphasises the universal motive of spirit, but on the other hand he privileges change over continuity and human agency over material structure. So is spirit always more important than other emotions and, if so, why? Or does that depend on historical context, which would suggest that even universal motives are subject to contingency.

Connected with this is a second conceptual problem – a rationale for why hierarchies of standing and conceptions of honour are more fundamental than other factors in shaping political behaviour. Lebow shows how they emerge from continuous social interactions and are transformed by them, but he fails to account for why they are more central to identity than other factors, such as a sense of belonging. But so far he has not explained why the sources of political order are to be found purely in human nature and social interaction, which rest on the ontological assumption of individual substances rather than relational beings – beings in relationship with other beings. Both Lebow and Wendt assume that the natural and social sciences give us access to a physicalist ontology that grounds both the identities and interests of actors. Thereby they explicitly exclude all non-secular, metaphysical thinking that views relationality as more primary than substance and offers a more 'organicist' conception of being, community and identity (cf. Pabst 2012). Such a conception suggests that beings are in association with other beings in such a way that community and identity describe what is 'with us' beyond the dualism between the self and the other so beloved of constructivists.

As the remainder of the essay will suggest, Burke's more 'organicist' approach outflanks in advance two conceptions of identity – either as essentialist, fixed and immutable or as fragmented, in flux and permanently changing. Instead, Burke views being, community and identity in terms of living traditions – a covenantal link among generations that connects the past with the present and

the future. As Vincent (1984: 207) rightly remarks, 'the more general function of history in Burke's thought […] was to establish a context by means of which those merely temporary possessors of the commonwealth, the current generations, could be connected up to the past, and also to the future, of their society'. This more relational ontology underpins Burke's argument that the international can be conceptualised in terms of the primacy of association over the individual and the state.

2. Burke's conception of association

2.1. Elements of political theology in Burke's conception of the international

Burke's conception of the international represents an extension of his political thought, which is infused with numerous elements of political theology. To start with, there is Burke's critique of the secular logic of anarchy and artifice on which the main traditions of IR theory rest. He rejects the Hobbesian idea of a violent and anarchic state of nature, which can be merely regulated by the central state and an international system of sovereign states. Nor does he agree with the Rousseauian notion that in the state of nature human beings do not depend on each other – pre-social liberty as self-sufficiency. On the contrary, for Burke the natural condition of humankind is social and relational, and human nature is by nature artistic and creative:

> The state of civil society is a state of nature; and much more truly so than a savage and incoherent mode of life. For man is by nature reasonable; and he is never perfectly in his natural state, but when he is placed where reason may be best cultivated, and most predominates. Art is man's nature (Burke 1791: 108).

In line with this thinking, Burke views rights as social and relational too, such as the right to property by descent, the right to due process (including trial by jury) and the right to education. In the *Reflections*, he contrasts these '*real* rights of men' (Burke 1790: 59 [original italics]) with purely individual rights either in the state of nature, as for Rousseau, or in the artifice of political society, as for Hobbes.

If there is anarchy and violence in international relations, then the reason is the arbitrary division of humankind into isolated individuals and separate states whose existence is predicated on their sovereign power of dominion. According to Burke, this conception of the international brings about a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the premise of a violent state of nature leads to the institution of a logic that exacerbates rather than resolves disagreements: in the words of Burke, '[…] this artificial Division of Mankind, into separate societies, is a perpetual Source in itself of Hatred and Dissention among them. The Names which distinguish them are enough to blow up Hatred, and Rage' (Burke 1993a: 28). In other words, the artifice of the sovereign state and the state-centric system reinforce some of humankind's worst inclinations towards egotism, greed, distrust and violence.

Burke's alternative to anarchy in the state of nature and to dominion in the artifice of political society can be traced to his search for an order in history. Such an order is neither reducible to a competition between sovereigns based on *raison d'état* (as in realism). Nor does it take the form of an imposed sanction based on fixed divine or natural law (as in idealism). Compared with these two traditions of theorising, there is a third tradition in which international order is considered to be immanent in the unfolding of history itself, and Burke is one of its principal proponents (Boucher 1991; Fidler and Welsh 1999; Insole 2012). Beyond empirical realism and rationalist idealism, Burke's close engagement with historical processes shifts the emphasis away from inductive observation and deductive speculation towards reflections on practice – on particular customs and habits that are embodied in the traditions of states' associations with others and that reflect certain universal principles of humanity and justice.

This centrality of 'principled practice' is at the heart of his search for a middle path between mere facts without theory (associated with empirical realism) and pure abstraction without practical meaning (associated with rationalist idealism). Burke's characterisation of what distinguishes a statesman from a politician illustrates this well: 'A statesman, never losing sight of principles, is to be guided by circumstances' (quoted in Boucher 1991: 140); 'A statesman forms the best judgement

of all moral disquisitions who has the greatest number and variety of considerations in one before him, and can take them in with the best possible consideration of the middle result of them' (quoted in Fidler and Welsh 1999: 39). In the *Reflections*, the above-mentioned real rights of men are said to be found 'in a sort of *middle*, incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned (Burke 2014a: 63 [original italics]).

In Burke's political theory of the international, the continuous search for a middle path is most clearly articulated in his reflections on Britain's mixed constitution, which is a fusion of classical with Christian ideas of sovereignty shared between the people, the Church and the Crown. Each represents a different principle of government – democracy, aristocracy and monarchy – and each is represented in Parliament, which in turn sustains the plurality of the political realm. As Burke explains, this reflects both universal truths in nature and particular arrangements in culture:

> the foundation of government is laid, not in imaginary rights of men (which at best is a confusion of judicial with civil principles), but in political convenience and in human nature; either as that nature is universal, or as it is modified by local habits and social aptitudes […] These doctrines do of themselves gravitate to a middle point […] That medium is not such, because it is found there; but it is found there because it is conformable to truth and nature […] the whole scheme of our mixed constitution is to prevent any of its principles from being carried as far as, taken by itself and theoretically, it would go (Burke 1791: 140).

The fundamental problem with the French Revolution is that it elevates one principle – the supposed 'will of the people' – over all others and thereby subverts the balance of the mixed constitution in favour of something like democracy by mob rule, which is allied to new forms of oligarchy, anarchy, demagogy and tyranny.

For Burke, the absolutism of the French Revolution violates principles of humanity and justice. Human nature, like politics, is a question of balance between virtue and vice because human beings are capable of both good and evil. Since they are neither perfect nor beyond redemption, the

role of institutions is to encourage virtue and to limit vice. Prudence is the 'first of all virtues' (Burke 2014a: 63) and 'the God of this lower world' (Fidler and Welsh 1999: 39). Unlike abstract moral precepts, virtues are universal principles that are embodied in particular practices, and this is how Burke conceives of prudence: 'The *situations* in which men relatively stand produce the rules and principles of that responsibility, and afford directions to prudence in exacting it' (quoted in Boucher 1991: 141 [original italics]). The 'principled practice' of prudence applies as much to relations among individuals within a single society as it does to the relations between countries within the commonwealth of nations (as the following section will show).

Linking Burke's conception of humanity and justice is his invocation of natural law and divine authority. In his speeches on the impeachment of Warren Hastings, Burke is adamant that there is no such thing as arbitrary power because it is not human will which determines legitimacy but instead God: 'we are all born in subjection – all born equally, high and low, governors and governed, in subjection to one great, immutable, preexistent law […] by which we are knit and connected in the eternal frame of the universe' (Burke 2009: 478). Since this law is a gift from God and 'all power is of God' (Burke 1993c), it follows for Burke that the authority by which men rule over others is governed 'the eternal laws of Him that gave it, with which no human authority can dispense' (Burke 2009: 478). These 'eternal laws of justice, to which we are all subject' (Burke 2009: 479), provide the foundations for 'the laws of morality [that] are the same everywhere' (Burke 2009: 476). In other words, there are universal and immutable standards of justice that apply to all people irrespective of their particular culture.

Both Michael Freeman and R.J. Vincent contend that references to God in Burke are less a reflection of theology than a function of sociology. Freeman's argument is that Burke's reliance on religion is to do with social utility more than Christian metaphysics (Freeman 1980). And in the words of Vincent 'the legitimacy derived from this [God's] delegation provided the reason for social solidarity instructing the habit of co-operation. But it was in the habitual end of this connection that Burke was chiefly interested: he was a sociologist of religion before he was a

theologian' (Vincent 1984: 207). However, these two interpretations do not square with Burke's repeated appeals to God throughout his writings. Beyond mere rhetoric he argues that human beings, despite the Fall and the irruption of evil and sin, are capable of discovering the substance of natural law precisely because it has been mediated in history and through living traditions of wisdom. These cannot be purely man-made, as his distrust of reason and abstract principles clearly suggests.

Instead, for Burke, human beings are creative because they are made in the image and likeness of the Creator. As social and religious animals, we as human beings – Burke writes in the *Reflections* – 'know, and what is better, we feel inwardly that religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and of all comfort' (Burke 2014a: 94). God not only created the universe but also governs its laws through His hand of providence. There is a universal reason that is internal to history, and human beings are able freely to discern its workings and their own destiny. Crucially, for Burke God is the ultimate source of our being and our capacity for moral action:

> If there be a God such as we conceive, he must be our Maker. If he is our Maker, there is a Relation between us. If there be a Relation between us some Duty must arise from that Relation, since we cannot conceive that a reasonable Creature can be placed in any Relation that does not give rise to some Duty (Burke 1993c: 82)

As Boucher (1991) shows, Burke never developed a theory about how to distinguish universal principles from the general precepts of individual nations and cultures, but there is a governing philosophy of practice that emerges from his speeches and writings. Once again the trial of Hastings is instructive: Burke insists that the principle of all power having to be constrained by law can be found in both British and Indian traditions and that all constitutions have rules against arbitrary dominion and abuse of power precisely because they ultimately rest on traditions of wisdom and justice.

> I must do justice to the East. I assert that their morality is equal to ours, in whatever regards the duties of governors, fathers, and superiors; and I challenge the world to

> show in any modern European book more true morality and wisdom than is to be found in the writings of Asiastic men in high trust, and who have been counsellors to princes. If this be the true morality of Asia, as I affirm and can prove that it is, the plea founded on Mr. Hasting's geographical morality is annihilated (Burke 2009: 480).

In summary: far from serving a merely social or sociological function, Burke's references to God are central to his political conception of the international – a covenant between humanity and its Creator that is dimly reflected in covenantal relations among the generations of each nation and between the nations that form a commonwealth. In the words of Burke himself,

> We have obligations to mankind at large, which are not in consequence of any special voluntary pact. They arise from the relation of man to man, and the relation of man to God, which relations are not matters of pact. On the contrary, the force of all pacts which we enter into with any particular person or number of persons, amongst mankind, depends upon these prior obligations (quoted in Barth 1960: 34).

2.2. Burke's account of association

Central to Burke's account of the international is his conception of human beings as naturally linked to others by bonds of sympathy, which prevent fellow human beings from being 'indifferent spectators of almost anything which men can do or suffer' (Burke 1993b: 68). Coupled with the passions of imitation and ambition, sympathy helps to produce an order that is not imposed upon some pre-existing chaos but rather emerges from nature. It does so by fusing a concern for others (sympathy) with following the example (imitation) of those who excel and can offer virtuous leadership (ambition). Even though they are 'of a complicated kind', these three passions 'branch out into a variety of forms agreeable to that variety of ends they are to serve in the great chain of society' (Burke 1993b: 68).

Therefore the key difference between the social contract tradition based on an anarchic state of nature and Burke's emphasis on 'natural sociality' is that the latter evolves with the grain of

humanity, starting with the innate desire of human beings to associate with one another. The primacy of association underpins Burke's conception of community as expressed by his famous invocation of the 'little platoon':

> To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind […] We begin our public affections in our families. No cool relation is a good citizen (Burke 2014a: 47 and 201).

More fundamentally, Burke redefines the body politic as a 'community of communities' in ways that limit the power of both state and market institutions at home and abroad. On this basis Burke rejects the claim that international society is fundamentally anarchic – a global 'war of all against all' that mirrors the violent 'state of nature' at the national level. It is not so anarchic because the most primary ties, bonds, and connections between human beings are not confined to national borders. Against the New Whigs and their emphasis on individual rights and inter-state contracts, Burke emphasised 'traditioned' association as the most universal mode of human interaction. Here it is worth quoting him at some length:

> In the intercourse between nations, we are apt to rely too much on the instrumental part. We lay too much weight upon the formality of treaties and compacts. We do not act much more wisely when we trust to the interests of men as guarantees of their engagements […]. Men are not tied to one another by papers and seals. They are led to associate by resemblances, by conformities, by sympathies. It is with nations as with individuals. Nothing is so strong a tie of amity between nation and nation as correspondence in laws, customs, manners, and habits of life. They have more than the force of treaties in themselves. They are obligations written in the heart. They approximate men to men, without their knowledge, and sometimes against their intentions. The secret, unseen, but irrefragable bond of habitual intercourse holds them

> together even when their perverse and litigious nature sets them to equivocate, scuffle, and fight, about the terms of their written obligations. […] There have been periods of time in which communities, apparently in peace with each other, have been more perfectly separated than, in later times, many nations in Europe have been in the course of long and bloody wars. The cause must be sought in the similitude throughout of religion, laws, and manners. At bottom, these are all the same. The writers on public law have often called this aggregate of nations a *Commonwealth* (Burke 2014b: 316-17).

In short, Burke inverts the modern priority of rights and contracts by arguing that the mutual moral obligations of interpersonal relations are more primary than abstract, formal and procedural standards imposed for either state-administrative or market-commercial purposes. The reason is that without such obligations the law will not lead to greater justice in the sense of properly ordered relations (as can be seen today with the lack of trust in public institutions and political processes).

Crucially, for Burke this extends to ties across nominally sovereign states, which suggests there are commonwealths of nations in which the unity of the whole precedes the separateness of the individual parts. Underpinning the unity of each commonwealth are certain cultural traditions and customs. In the case of Europe, these include 'the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion' (Burke 2014a: 81), as well as the Roman law of neighbourhood or vicinity. In one sense this law merely reflects the geographical circumstance of proximity in space. But in another sense it also expresses the historical circumstance of cultural connectedness over time, as well as other common factors such as politics, economics and religion. The point for Burke is that the law of vicinity implies mutual obligations:

> Now where there is no constituted judge, as between independent states there is not, the vicinage itself is the natural judge. It is, preventively, the assertor of its own rights; or remedially, their avenger […]. This principle, which, like the rest, is as rue of nations, as of individual men, has bestowed on the grand vicinage of Europe, a duty to know,

> and a right to prevent, any capital innovation which may amount to the erection of a dangerous nuisance (Burke 2014b: 320).

The French Revolution was one such ‘nuisance’, which legitimated the intervention by France’s neighbours in order to restore the original commonwealth of nations whose existence had been endangered by the usurping revolutionaries (Welsh 1995). Burke’s reasoning is that the unity of the whole is based on a solidarity between members who are equally free and independent but also equally committed to a substantive order. As Boucher (1991: 143) rightly remarks, ‘'the principle of interference' associated with the right of vicinage is for Burke 'the basis of the public law in Europe', but […] there are severe limitations upon the exercise of this right’. Thus Burke subscribed to a conception of pooled sovereignty, just because nations, like individuals, are not absolutely separated or self-sufficient but instead related and interdependent.

At the same time, Burke argues that ‘[…] common-wealths are not physical but moral essences. They are artificial combinations, and, in their proximate efficient cause, the arbitrary productions of the human mind […]’ (Burke 2014b: 293). By ‘artificial combinations’ he means effects of human habit and creativity that blends nature with culture – the order of being with the order of knowing and ‘making’. Instead of formal first principles, Burke appeals to fundamental practices that are embedded in social relationships – the ‘customs, manners, and habits of life’ that shape, and are shaped by, language, music, art, literary modes, fashions in conduct and dress as well as religion. Crucially, these cultural customs and human habits consist in the ‘principled practice’ of virtue such as prudent action (as defined above) and more generally the pursuit of the good that is internal to each human activity. Instead of formal first principles, Burke locates virtue in cultural customs and human habits, for example a sense of personal freedom that is allied with social stability: ‘The liberty I mean is social freedom. It is that state of things in which liberty is secured by the equality of restraint’ (Burke 2009: 507 [original italics]).

Besides such embedded freedom, cultural customs and human habits also include social virtues such as generosity (rather than either greed or miserliness), courage (instead of recklessness

or cowardice), gratitude, loyalty, fraternity and friendship. In this way, 'customs, manners, and habits of life' provide the bonds and ties that infuse the immanent political order with a transcendent, cosmic outlook. For Burke, that is because human nature is equally characterised by virtue and vice – the capacity to do good or evil – but unlike Hobbes he argues that there is a natural desire for goodness that culture (and institutions) can nurture. Such a Burkean perspective shifts the focus from an artificial commonwealth that coercively regulates natural violence (as for Hobbes) to a natural-cultural commonwealth that can uphold some measure of peace beyond conflict based on the principle of association.

For example, faced with the absolutism of the French Revolution that sought to remake society in the image of new conception of humankind disembedded from culture and custom, Burke argued that

> It [Europe] is virtually one great state having the same basis of general law; with some diversity of provincial customs and local establishments. The nations of Europe have had the very same christian [*sic*] religion, agreeing in the fundamental parts, varying a little in the ceremonies and in the subordinate doctrines. The whole of the polity and œconomy [*sic*] of every country in Europe has been derived from the same sources. It was drawn from the old Germanic or Gothic customary; form the feudal institutions which must be considered as an emanation from that customary; and the whole has been improved and digested into system and discipline by the Roman law [….] From this resemblance in the modes of intercourse, and in the whole form and fashion of life, no citizen in Europe could be altogether an exile in any part of it. There was nothing more than a pleasing variety to recreate and instruct the mind; to enrich the imagination; and to meliorate the heart. When a man travelled or resided for health, pleasure, business or necessity, from his own country, he never felt himself quite abroad (Burke 2014b: 317).

In the final instance, Burke's vision is not really Eurocentric because Burke repeatedly emphasises the importance of inheritance in all cultural contexts. One of the main reasons for his radical critique of the French Revolution is the revolutionaries' disregard for institutions that are ultimately contingent products of specific historical circumstance – 'the gift of nature or of chance' (Burke 2014a: 161). While there is an element of arbitrary human artifice involved in establishing institutions, it is nonetheless the case that our institutional inheritance should neither be distrusted nor dismissed. As Hampsher-Monk (2014: xxxv) notes,

> for Burke, the contrast is not (as it is for the radical) between an arbitrary set of institutions and a better, more rational set, but between having the good fortune to possess stable institutions *at all* and the anarchy that we risk from rejecting what 'time and chance' have given us. Far from its being the case that stable institutions can be deduced from abstract principles, Burke thought that, in the absence of shared conventions – which only a specific historical culture provides – reason was incapable of deducing any specific arrangements.

The following sub-section explores how Burke's 'associationist' approach informed his analyses and political actions before the final section discusses a number of possible criticisms of a Burkean conception of IR.

2.3 How Burke's 'associationist' approach informed his analyses and actions

Burke's search for a middle path in international relations, which centres on cultural commonwealths, emerged in his discussions of the main international issues of his day. It also informed his analysis and actions in politics, notably on the question of Catholic emancipation in Ireland and American taxation, the French Revolution, and the British Empire in India. In each case, as this section shows, Burke sought to discern universal principles embodied in particular practices and in the process to develop his distinct theory of political action.

On the Irish question, Fidler and Welsh (1999: 8) argue that Burke's thinking and commitment was not driven by

> blind love for his native land. He proceeded on Irish policy within a framework that represented his perspective on imperial policy: toleration of the colony's traditions, customs and culture; recognition of empire as a unity of purpose and interest; the importance of imperial free trade; the effect on English liberties of imperial activity; and the military and strategic dangers lurking in disgruntled colonies.

Throughout his life the governing philosophy that underpinned Burke's analysis of Ireland was shaped by a concern for justice and a more mutual arrangement with Britain, which reflected reciprocal obligations. Not only did he describe British policy as 'unjust, impolitick [*sic*] and inefficacious' (quoted in Fidler and Welsh 1999: 8), provoking rebellions 'that were not produced by toleration, but by persecution; that they arose not from just and mild government, but from the most unparralled [*sic*] oppression' (Burke 1993d: 99). He also denounced Britain's popery laws as resting on an 'erroneous principle': laws 'against the majority of the people' that represent 'not particular injustice but general oppression' (quoted in Fidler and Welsh 1999: 8).

Burke's revulsion against oppression runs through much of his writing, and it is of a piece with his opposition to both divine absolutism and popular tyranny. This position rests on his defence of mixed constitution for all parts of the British empire and, crucially, of a transcendent morality grounded in God: 'the principle of a superior Law […] the will of Him who gave us our nature, and giving impressed an invariable law upon it' (quoted in Fidler and Welsh 1999: 8). Far from being mere moralism, Burke's appeal to a God-given standard of justice led him to reject both Protestant and Catholic sectarianism in favour of an affirmation of 'our common Christianity' – an inheritance of moral values and cultural practices of mutual respect that should unite Christians in a commonwealth of nations rather than entrench divisions and enmity.

The idea of a Christian commonwealth also informed Burke's qualified defence of empire precisely not as a system of dominion, oppression and exploitation (as in the case of Britain's policy

towards Ireland or Hasting's actions in India). Instead he defended empire as a society of nations and peoples who, based on their shared religious faith, might covenant with each other in the interests of mutual benefit and shared wealth. This 'associationist' approach underpinned Burke's advocacy of fair 'free trade' rather than the non-reciprocal form of legalised piracy practiced by the East India Company or Britain's mercantilist policy of raising revenue from Ireland and the American colonies. More generally, Burke championed religious toleration and the enfranchisement of Irish Catholics not so much because these were abstract principles but because applying these principles in the historic context of his times was the best way to strengthen the cohesion of the imperial society with all its different members and their respective obligations. The failure of British policy to enact any of these principles meant that the commonwealth faced an existential threat from a lethal mix of French revolutionary violence, Irish Catholic rebellion against the empire and British repression based on the fear that Jacobinism would infect Ireland.

On America, Burke's position was guided by his defence of the ancient 'mixed constitution' and its governing philosophy of a balance of interests. Specifically, he opposed the imposition of revenue-raising taxes on goods imported into America and argued for fairer free trade precisely because it reflected a more reciprocal arrangement in line with the spirit of the British constitutional settlement, limiting the powers of Parliament vis-à-vis the people in other lands and upholding mutual obligations rather than abstract rights. In his *Speech on American Taxation*, he enjoined his fellow Members of Parliament to remember

> the ancient policy and practice of the empire, as a rampart against the speculations of innovators […]. Again, and again, revert to your old principles – seek peace and ensue it – leave America […] to tax herself. I am not here going into the distinctions of rights […] I do not enter into these metaphysical distinctions; I hate the very sound of them. Leave the Americans as they anciently stood, and these distinctions, born of our unhappy contest, will die along with it (quoted in Fidler and Welsh 1999: 15).

Burke also emphasised the interconnectedness of the empire by showing how the American tea embargo (in response to resistance against taxation) jeopardised the attempt to save the East India Company from financial ruin because it had previously exported tea to America without paying any duties. With his typically acerbic style, Burke remarked that 'it is the same folly that has lost you at once the benefit of the West and of the East' (quoted in Fidler and Welsh 1999: 16).

Central to Burke's qualified defence of the empire was his emphasis on the common historical and cultural inheritance, which transmitted from generation to generation a series of intertwined principles that should guide policies and be refined through their enactment in political action. The guiding principles for Burke are a balance of interests, a restrained exercise of power and the upholding of liberty in line with equality and justice as part of cultural commonwealths. These principles shaped his thinking on the French Revolution, the American colonies and Britain's action towards India. In a famous letter to Charles-Jean-François Depont in November 1789, Burke writes that liberty 'is not solitary, unconnected, individual, selfish liberty, as if every man was to regulate the whole of his conduct by his own will. The liberty I mean is *social* freedom. It is that state of things in which liberty is secured by the equality of restraint' (Burke 2009: 507 [original italics]). Similarly, Burke offers a substantive vision of imperial society in which the principle of liberty emerges from the cultural commonwealth of covenanted nations:

> My hold of the Colonies is in the close affection which grows from common names, from kindred blood, from similar privileges, and equal protection. These are ties which, though light as air, are as strong as links of iron […] the wisdom to keep the sovereign authority of this country as a sanctuary of liberty, the sacred temple consecrated to our common faith (Burke 2009: 220).

Once again we can see how it is the transcendent morality given to us by God that underpins Burke's analysis and his actions in Parliament.

Burke's conception of justice based on the principles of liberty and equality also shaped his thinking on Britain's crimes against India. For example, in the *Ninth Report of the Select*

Committee, Burke writes '[b]efore any remedial law can have its just operation, the affairs of India must be restored to their natural order. The prosperity of the natives must be previously secured, before any Profit from them whatsoever is attempted' (Burke 2009: 427). Similarly, in the 1783 Speech on Fox's East India Bill, Burke launched an extraordinary attack on the prevailing attitude among MPs towards the Indians. He called for restorative justice for the evils perpetrated by the East India Company, which is 'demanded from us by humanity, by justice, and by every principle of true policy' (quoted in Fidler and Welsh 1999: 23). Attacking the 'total silence' of his fellows MPs 'concerning the interest and well-being of the people of India', he enjoined Parliament to abandon its contemptuous condescension for Indians who are 'not gangs of savages' but instead 'a people for ages civilised and cultivated; cultivated by all the arts of polished life, whilst we were yet in the woods' (quoted in Fidler and Welsh 1999: 23).

Thus Burke invoked a sense of common humanity to argue for universal justice based on the twin principles of liberty and equality, which can be discerned in different cultures and civilisations. More generally, Burke's speeches and writings both before and after the French Revolution were governed by a number of classical and Christian principles embodied – albeit imperfectly – in certain institutions and practices: the idea of local government that educates the citizenry to participate in the public realm; the idea of parliamentary scrutiny of government; the proportional participation of all classes of working people – not just property owners – in the affairs of the state; the right of the people to resistance as a last resort against unjustified tyranny; the idea of blending both authority and freedom by conceptualising the latter not as a rational right of the individual but rather as a system of both duties and privileges; the need for a renewable aristocracy that admits to its rank outstanding citizens and can thus assume the responsible leadership of the state with a view to the common good.

While for Burke history is contingent and particular, it nevertheless discloses normative and universal standards that are ultimately the work of God. The case of the French Revolution occupied him so deeply because it revealed the violation of the idea of common humanity and

universal justice in the name of a perverted philosophy with its oscillation between dogmatic rationalism and impoverished empiricism. At the heart of his critique was the argument that the French Revolution represents a theoretically justified despotism that is even worse than the worst excesses of the *ancient régime*. That is because it combines an abstract rationalism, which views humankind as disembedded from both nature and culture and which reduces society to a mechanical structure, with a proto-positivist commitment to absolute equality, which equates the citizenry with a homogenous mass of lone egos driven purely by self-interest.

The unique contribution of Burke's associationist approach to IR is to highlight the false choice between the divine absolutism of the *ancient régime* and the secular tyranny of revolutionary France. Whereas the former failed to guarantee individual liberty and provide popular participation in government, the latter elevated the 'will of the people' above the classical and Christian idea of a balance of power without which there can be no plural polity. Despite these and other differences, both the old absolutism and the new tyranny were united in undermining the mediating institutions between the citizen and the state, bringing guilds, councils and corporations under direct central control. This left society atomised and individuals in a state of anomie, stripped of any real possibility for local self-government and personal affiliation to intermediary groups that are democratically self-governing. In short, Burked offered a qualified defence of perennial principles transmitted from Antiquity via the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the modern era because they reflected universal standards of common humanity and justice and also provided a better yardstick for both political action and policy.

3. Burke's associationist approach in question

This section discusses two possible objections to Burke's conception of the international: first of all, the claim that Burke's position does not differ fundamentally from that of Grotius and that therefore Burke can be seen as part of the rationalist tradition of international theory (Wight 1991). Secondly, that Burke's emphasis on culture and association might ignore problems ranging from an

essentialist conception of identity to a lack of relevance in today's predominantly secular international system.

3.1. On the fundamental differences between Grotius and Burke

At first, Burke's approach seems to echo Grotius' political theology, as both thinkers reject the nominalist and voluntarist conception of God and the cosmic-political order (Burke 1993c; Grotius 2006: 20-31, 2012: 30-45). This conception can be traced to influential Franciscans such as William of Ockham who argued that God's will and power can undo the law of nature and subvert the created cosmos (Dupré 1993; Gillespie 2008; Pabst 2016). By contrast with Ockham, both Burke and Grotius defended an intellectualist vision according to which God's reason and creative activity bring about a relational world composed of mutually related things, which is intelligible in terms of the unity of efficient and final cause in the divine source of all being. Unlike Hobbes' asocial 'state of nature', Burke shares Grotius' conception views human beings as naturally desiring life in society and governing the polity as God rules over the cosmos (Burke 1993c; Grotius 1988). These and other similarities have led a number of scholars, including Martin Wight, to suggest that Burke is part of the rationalist tradition of IR thinking (Bull 1966; Wight 1991; in a much more qualified way, Vincent 1984).

However, Grotius – as an Arminian Calvinist – developed a rationalist theology that in many ways runs counter to Burke's thought. First of all, Grotius' theology had the effect of sundering the natural light of reason from the supernatural light of faith and also separating rationality from feeling, habit, and the imagination (a separation that thinkers of the Renaissance and, later, Burke, T.H. Green and R.G. Collingwood sought to overcome). Connected with Grotian rationalism is his emphasis on the formality of the law as the main mediation between individuals within domestic politics and among states in the realm of international relations. This follows directly from his theological argument that God reigns over humankind by legislative command rather than by the outflow of love and the example of virtue embodied in Christ (Grotius 1988: 106-112; Grotius

1990; Grotius 2001: 159-263). The contrast with Burke's accentuation of virtue and sympathy could hardly be more marked.

It is true that Grotius does define states as particular instantiations of a larger unity which he describes in terms of the universal society established by nature.[2] However, he nevertheless views this unity in primarily formal, legal terms – not a 'thick', substantive conception of the common good that includes yet also transcends law (as for Burke). Shaped by the experience of the religious wars and by intra-confessional disputes internal to Dutch Calvinism, Grotius invoked natural rights as a means to restore an original community of humankind that was destroyed by original sin and continues to be ridden by the violence between and among confessional states. For Grotius natural law provides the foundation for common norms that govern the polity, which might suggest that Burke's position is Grotian after all. But Grotius views man as the bearer of individual, subjective rights, which reinforces the absolute power of the central sovereign (Grotius 2005, I: 300, II: 393) – a position that is incompatible with Burke's emphasis on the mixed constitution.

Even seemingly inalienable individual rights, such as the right to ownership or the power to delegate sovereignty to the ruler, are ultimately alienable for Grotius because property may be sold and delegation is irreversible. For inalienable individual rights are already defined in terms of subjective right (*ius*), independently of the right use (*usus*) and the objective purpose (*finis*). Although Grotius defends a strong notion of divinely ordained purpose such as peace and the unity of humankind, his political theology grants sovereign states such power over individuals and in relation to other states that this effectively rules out an overarching commonwealth of nations and peoples akin to Burke's vision. That is because for Grotius there is no commonly agreed authority such as the *imperium* or the *ecclesia* (Pabst 2016) and not even a common Christian heritage (destroyed by what he saw as the corruption of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy).

It is the case that there was still a significant step from Grotius' formalist conception of an international society of states to Hobbes' anarchical 'state of nature', but what binds them together is the rationalist primacy of formally sovereign individuals and states over a more mutualist cosmic-

political order. Burke's attempt to renew just such a conception marks him out as a distinct thinker who cannot easily be categorised according to Wight's typology of the three (admittedly permeable) traditions of international theory – realism, rationalism and revolutionism (Wight 1991; cf. Bull 1966). Vincent claims that Burke

> was all of them. He was a realist, for example, in recognizing that the balance of power was as much 'an engine subservient to the designs of interested and ambitious persons' as a preserver of the unity of the international system. He was a rationalist in his belief in 'obligations written in the heart'. And he was a revolutionist in signing up with the counter-Reformation.

However, Vincent's verdict ignores Burke's repeated argument that power requires a higher authority than individual will or *raison d'état* and that a balance of power can only preserve the unity of the international system if it reflects standards of common humanity and universal justice. Moreover, Burke's invocation of 'obligations written in the heart' shifts the emphasis from rationalist arguments about laws, treaties and contract towards cultural practices that are foreign to rationalism. And Burke's search for a middle path means that he kept a clear distance vis-à-vis the worst excesses of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation alike, as well as the *ancient régime* and the French Revolution, so the label of 'revolutionist' makes little sense.

Boucher's conclusion about Burke is much more accurate: 'in the case of Burke we find the differing elements in constant tension, but because of his anti-rationalism and dislike for arbitrary power, in whatever sphere it may be exercised, we find that the historical criterion of state conduct wins out over the others [rationalism and idealism/revolutionism], but not always convincingly, nor unequivocally' (Boucher 1991: 148). Boucher is right about the lack of a clear and distinct position and indeed a certain ambiguity in Burke's thinking, but there are a number of constants that do run through his speeches and writings, as section two of this paper suggested.

3.2. On essentialism and a lack of relevance

Was Burke an essentialist? And did he bequeath to us a conception of identity that is exclusivist and might legitimate a culturalised and even racialist politics of populism? There is no doubt that in an important sense Burke was a committed imperialist who spoke the language of 'governors and governed', imperialist rulers and their subjects, the 'European gentleman' and the natives of India, as well as the 'spirit of religion' and the 'spirit of commerce'. These and other formulations seem to lend credence to the claim that Burke subscribed to a static and immutable identity, dividing humanity into exclusive groups based on cultural homogeneity. And it is certainly the case that Burke assumed a relatively homogenous culture across Europe, as evinced by the above-mentioned passage in which he describe Europe as 'virtually one great state having the same basis of general law' and 'the very same Christian religion'. On this basis Burke seemed to restrict the reach of cultural commonwealth, limiting it to European civilisation and excluding not just India but also the 'wholly Asiastic' Ottoman Empire from the international society and the European balance of power.

All this raises questions about the 'other' in Burke's social imaginary – all those who belong to different cultural traditions outside the bounds of European customs. In line with his search for a middle path, Burke neither imposes in an absolutist manner European standards on other parts of the world, nor does he retreat to a position of cultural relativism where all standards are equally valid. Instead, he appealed to notions of common humanity and universal justice based on natural law in his critique of Britain's policy towards India (as detailed in the previous section). Burke viewed each and every culture or civilisation as a distinct blend of universality and particularity. For example, Europe's common cultural heritage gave rise to notions such as 'laws of nations' (*ius publicum europaeum*) that rest on the fusion of Greco-Roman philosophy with Judeo-Christian ideas but are universally applicable as they concern all the nations. While Burke's thinking was certainly shaped by the legacy of medieval Christendom, he nevertheless emphasised throughout his writings the dynamic nature of history and the development of practice that is transmitted across generations. In one of the most famous passages in Burke's *Reflections*, he writes that society 'is a

partnership […] not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born' (Burke 2014a: 101). So rather than describing Burke as an essentialist (if by that term we mean an eternal essence that is immutable and outside both time and space), it is perhaps more accurate to characterise his position as universalist – a defender of universal principles of humanity and justice that are mediated in particular practices, which can be found in all cultures – (formerly) Christian cultures as well as India and other civilisations.

In turn, this raises a larger question about the relevance of Burke's thought in the contemporary context (for a summary of the literature see Fidler and Welsh 1999: 57-67). Two key objections are, first, Burke's focus on religion in a seemingly secular system of international relations and, second, his accentuation of common cultural heritage in an increasingly diverse world. A detailed treatment of both questions is beyond the scope of this paper, but the contemporary religious resurgence is itself a global phenomenon that affects all continents, including parts of Europe (cf. Dawson 2013) – even if many Western countries are becoming more secular in terms of a declining in religious practice at the same time as witnessing a revival of religion in the public sphere (e.g. Davie 2002 and 2015). Burke's thought reminds us that religion has not merely sociological significance but also concerns ontological questions about human nature that are perennial problems – including the propensity for both vice and virtue.

Specifically, Burke's ideas can help political and IR theory to rethink the potential for solidarity amid the process of globalisation and its blurring of the domestic and the international. Burke's reflections are a reminder that both political action and economic activity not only take place in a social context but often build on a complex set of historical, legal, moral and religious factors, which underpin cooperation and solidarity and which globalisation can either foster or undermine. As Fidler and Welsh (1999: 67) conclude, 'whether globalization helps transform the 'papers and seals' between states into 'obligations written in the hearts' of culturally heterogeneous peoples constitutes one of the great but enigmatic questions for the new millennium'. Burke's notion of cultural commonwealths is one way to conceptualise the combination of cultural diversity

with a commitment to universal standards of humanity and justice around 'principled practices' of mutual recognition, social freedom, generosity, loyalty and friendship.

Far from reducing a polity to some essentialist identity, Burke argues that both political institutions and cultural customs evolve over time and are therefore able to adapt to change in ways that uphold civilised life rather than sliding into barbarism. For example, Burke's injunction to search for a middle path can help avoid extremes such as individualism and nationalism in favour of more mutual arrangements based on new, shared identities. This involves seeing our fundamental identity beyond our individual selves and making personal sacrifices so that new, shared identities may be built and strengthened. Society is a covenant between generations that based on the right institutions and practices can balance freedom and autonomy with solidarity and care for others. One way to apply Burke's thought today is to suggest that a society, which reflects humankind's social and relational nature, rejects the cult of rampant individualism and arbitrary restrictions on freedom that come with the cult of nationalism.

A closely connected objection is that Burke's emphasis on 'customs, manners and habit of life' cannot help construct a more just international order than the one that is currently dominant. One critique of Burke (and this essay's reading of him) is that in the contemporary world, the bulk of political, economic and social transactions do occur at arms' length and that therefore Burke is wrong to focus on mutual obligations embodied in interpersonal relations because these are not more primary than abstract, formal and procedural standards upon which state and market processes rest. On the contrary, such standards real and they are desirable for the functioning of the international system. However, the counter-argument is that Burke's point about 'common culture' stands: rights, contracts and the law (both domestic and international) on which they rest involve questions of culture, social relations and shared norms. For example, international law is interpreted and applied very differently depending on the cultural context, as in the case of certain Westerns states and countries such as Russia or China on questions of national sovereignty *versus* foreign intervention. Leaving aside double standards, there is a clash of cultures (not civilisations) between

a more liberal cosmopolitan outlook and a more conservative national outlook. Neither culture is able to create the conditions for trust and cooperation within the international system, while the imposition of one on the other will almost inevitable lead to violent conflict.

Burke's appeal to shared norms embedded in customs across different civilisations is one way to find common ground in an increasingly heterogeneous mix of cultures and religions. Indeed, Burke urges us to think together plurality based on universal principles that are embodied in practices as an alterative to hegemony based on particular cultural values that are imposed on others. As Vincent (1984: 214) writes, 'the raising of questions about the cultural underpinnings of the international political system can be placed in a Burkean tradition, and his own work remains a fruitful source for their investigation'. Crucially, one of Burke's contribution to political and IR theory is to encourage a search for a 'thicker' shared culture based on substantive (not merely procedural) values, and in the contemporary context this remains a key conceptual task.

Concluding reflection

This paper has argued that much of modern political and IR theory rests on a shared foundational premise – the idea that domestic politics and international relations are characterised by an original condition of anarchy, which can only be regulated by the artifice of a formal social contract and a systems of sovereign states governed by formal law. By contrast, the paper has tried to show that work of Edmund Burke provides an alternative conception of the international that focuses on the primacy of association – cultural and social bonds that are more primary than the social contract or the inter-state system of treaties and international law. Burke views associative ties not as socially constructed but rather as reflecting a natural order composed of custom, tradition and ultimately divine providence. Such an order gives rise to 'commonwealths of nations' governed by a transcendent morality that for Burke is God-given. Identity is an organically evolving reality that is shaped by both ideas *and* material forces – notions of common humanity and universal standards of justice, which are mediated through history and embodied in particular practices of culture and human habit.

In terms of future research, three areas are of particular importance for IR theory. First, more works needs to be done on how the tradition of 'associationism' in the works of Burke (and the early writings of the English School of IR) can contribute not only to a normative analysis of the international system but also to a better understanding of its functioning – including factors such as human motivation that underpin causal explanations of international behaviour, or the role of culture in the operation of law, contracts and treaties. Connected to this is a second area, which concerns certain metaphysical and religious aspects about human nature that much of contemporary IR theory has assumed away in favour of either positivist approaches (going back to Comte) or transcendentalist conceptions (drawing on Kant). Does the 'associationist' tradition have conceptual resources to provide an alternative account of human nature and the socio-cultural embeddedness of individuals, (sub- and trans-national) groups and states, which might improve our understanding of key aspects of international relations? Third, could 'associationism' make a contribution to contemporary issues such as the relations between rights and obligations in international law and politics, or the role of cultural identity in the international system, or the tension between universal values and particular traditions? These and cognate questions will have to explored elsewhere.

Given Burke's focus on religion and transcendent morality, many scholars doubt his conception of the international has any relevance today. However, there is an ongoing debate about the sources of political order (e.g. Rengger 2000; Fukuyama 2012 and 2015) to which Burkean ideas might be able to make a distinct contribution, notably the role of cultural heritage and shared 'principled practices' amid the crisis of the dominant model of globalisation. Part of this crisis is a backlash against certain aspects of the liberal international order (Nye 2017; Niblett 2017), including a growing opposition between both liberal and anti-liberal identity politics. While there certainly is no moral or political equivalence between these positions, Burke's legacy is a reminder to try to find a middle path that avoids the extremes of excess and proceeds with prudence.

* I am indebted to Seán Molloy, three anonymous referees as well as the editors of the *Journal of International Relations & Development* for their comments on earlier drafts, which have greatly helped me to improve the argument.

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Notes

[1] For a critique of the assumption of anarchy, see Milner (1991).

[2] Cf. Will Bain 'Hugo Grotius and the God of International Society' (as yet unpublished manuscript).

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