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Introduction

Radical re-interpretations of the Enlightenment have been in vogue in the past decade. Israel (2001, 2006) and Onfray (2007) have spearheaded the popularisation of little-read radical thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while Frazer (2010) and Jeffery (2011) have reconceptualised theories of moral sentiments. These scholars propose re-interpretations of well-known thinkers, notably Spinoza, Hume, Diderot, Adam Smith, Vico, Herder, and Kant; but also provide insights on less well-known thinkers outside of the history of ideas scholarship, such as Bayle, Meslier, La Mettrie, Helvétius and Holbach. These thinkers' writings shook the foundations of philosophy, political thought and, as I will show here, international relations theory during their time. In this article, I focus on the utilitarian international ethics of Paul-Henri Thiry, baron d'Holbach (Holbach for short). Kors (1976) and Hulliung (1994) have established the importance of Holbach's contribution to French and European thought in the second half of the eighteenth century, notably through his social circle which gathered in his *salon* (the infamous and ill-named *coterie holbachique*), his polemical writings of the 1760s, his scientific articles published in the *Encyclopédie*, his philosophical, ethical and political writings of the 1770s, and his reception by many other authors, notably Jefferson, Hegel and Marxⁱ. In this last decade, Holbach put forward a nuanced, pre-Benthamite theory of utilitarian ethics, which he applied to international relations. This article will, in the first part, detail his international utilitarian ethics, showing how it differs from (later) theories of utilitarianism; as well as show the importance of virtue in his ethical thought. There, Holbach shows that the dichotomy between self-interest and virtuous behaviour is misguided – a point of particular importance for international relations scholarship. In the second part, this article engages the most nuanced understanding of utilitarianism in international relations, more specifically the works of Hoogensen who, among others, sought to redress the injustice done to Bentham's thought in the field. Comparing Holbach's and Bentham's international relations theory, this article shows why

Holbach is more relevant than Bentham for debates around international *ethics* – as opposed to Bentham’s focus on international *security*. In the third part, this article addresses Holbach’s relevance for international relations theory and international ethics today, by showing the relative worth of his contribution against realist, liberal, and constructivist theories. It then answers the challenges raised against utilitarianism by Walzer, before considering Holbach’s materialist contribution to international ethics.

Holbach’s utilitarian ethics

From ‘utility’ to utilitarian thought

‘on French soil, one finds utilitarian arguments everywhere, utilitarianism nowhere.’ (Hullung 1994: 19)

Holbach is neither unique, nor the first, to use utilitarian arguments. From Leibniz onwards, there are a plethora of authors who talk of *utility*, and for whom the concept is more or less central (Hruschka, 1991: 166). Although Bentham is often considered as the founder of utilitarianism, there is clearly a whole tradition, stretching back to the end of the seventeenth century, which had taken utility as an ethical concept very seriously. It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate this tradition, but Bentham himself, in a letter to Voltaire in 1776, refers to Beccaria and Helvétius – both of whom had attended Holbach’s salon – as authors providing the ‘foundation of utility’ before him (Burns, 1968: 367). Holbach is central in this pre-Benthamite utilitarian tradition for two reasons. Firstly he comes at the end of it – his last works, written in 1776, were published just before Bentham’s major works, notably the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* first printed in 1780 – and is thus able to reflect on much of the tradition before him. Secondly, he wrote extensively about international ethics, the area this article focuses on, and applied utilitarian principles to it.

What is utility in Holbach’s thought? The use of the term appears in his first publication, the *Christianisme dévoilé* written in 1761, where it is used in the polemics against the power of the

(Catholic) Church and Christian ethic more widely (Holbach, [1761] 1998: 72). As Hulliung (1994: 20) rightly notes, it is an opposition to the Church's unproductive use of land that cements utility in French eighteenth-century thought. But such negative uses of the term against the Church's uselessness (*inutilité*) hardly make Holbach's thought utilitarian. One will have to wait until his works of the 1770s to find more positive uses of the term, and a genuine utilitarian ethic to develop. In the *Essai sur les préjugés* (1770), Holbach uses the 'greatest number' formula that is so characteristic of utilitarian thought. True opinions, for Holbach, are not judged only by experience and reason, but also if they are 'really and constantly advantageous for the greatest number' (Holbach, [1770a] 1999: 9) This will be repeated in a slightly different format in the *Politique Naturelle* (1773) where Holbach claims that whatever the form of government, it 'will be good when it will bring happiness to the greatest number' (Holbach [1773a] 2001: 382). This reference to the greatest number formula, however, never translates itself into a rational calculation of interests (Crimmins, 1996: 754). This is primarily because it is not rationality that grounds our interests in Holbach's thought, but our self-love coupled with our natural sociability. In the words of Hulliung (1994: 17):

If utilitarianism had to depend on rational self-interest it would fail; fortunately, we can dispense with a calculus of felicity because our passions are better than our interests – better at making us care about those for whom we feel sympathy, those nearest us, but also, potentially, anyone who shares our human condition.

As Frazer (2010) and Jeffrey (2011) have noted, Hume, Adam Smith, (the early) Kant and Herder all had a similar recourse to *sympathy* to ground the moral sentiments, combining elements of self-love and sociability into one simple concept.

Here we find an important distinction between Holbach and Bentham's conception of utility. Although there is much debate about what utility is in Bentham's thought, his works refer to a certain calculating aspect of utility, for example the 'sum total of his pleasures' or the 'sum total of his pains' (Bentham, 1996: 12). Such a calculation of interests, through pleasures and pains, is

entirely absent from Holbach's thought, and misses the importance of *sociability* in determining an ethics of utility. Holbach is much more concerned, at the political level, with the absence of pain than with a calculus of pleasures and pains. This distinction is essential as Holbach is closer to a model of *ataraxia à la* Epicurus, than to a positivist calculus of interest, which 'utilitarians' in economics and neo-utilitarians in international relations have discussed (Ruggie, 1998: 855). Against such a calculation, Holbach prefers the language of *happiness* which refers to a durable state of being. At the individual level, his utilitarian thought is not about the acquisition of pleasures, but about the minimising of pains, and about the general consequences that bring one to happiness thus defined. This means that at the international level, Holbach's utilitarian ethics is not be used to further the *positive* interests of some over others simply because of a higher aggregate level of happiness; but it may be used to justify intervention when particular situations create intolerable pains and sufferings, or make a life of happiness impossible.

In contrast to other efficiency-driven models of utilitarianism, Holbach's eudæmonist ethic is not built on human *rationality*, but on the ideal of *sociability*. Rousseau had famously disagreed with the *philosophes* on this point, but Holbach attempts one more defence of man's natural sociability against the ascetic model of the state of nature suggested by Rousseau (Wokler, 1978: 117). For Holbach, humans never live outside society, as they cannot be happy alone. Holbach's ethical theory is unashamedly a theory of reciprocity and of necessity. We are necessarily social beings who need others, and we cannot interest them in our own happiness without making them happy in return. Therefore, we have a duty to render them happy, a duty enshrined in our own need for happiness, and the virtuous cycle of happiness is complete.

Holbach's thought in this respect is not limited to an ethical theory, it is not primarily about what one *ought* to do, but rather it is a universal claim about the way humans act; i.e. *always* according to what they believe is in their interest. As such, it is not only the good or virtuous action, nor is it the rational action that seeks its own interest, but *every* human action. Human beings can of

course be wrong, irrational, bad, etc.; yet they always do so with the belief that it is their interest that they are seeking. It is our desires, whether real or imaginary, that drive our interests (Holbach, [1776b] 2004: 343). Holbach is not proposing a rational choice theory, whereby we calculate that our self-interest is best achieved by such-and-such means, but rather he is putting forward an ontological claim about what it means to be human; what I call a theory of the *immanence of interest*.

It is evident already that *utility*, as defined by Holbach, is already a *social* theory and not an individual theory. Since it is about interests, it has direct applications to the international level, which has been concerned with state interest at its very core. Unlike some theories of international relations that divorce state interests from ethical concerns, Holbach's theory never severs that link and insists on the necessity of cultivating *virtues*, even at the international level.

Virtue ethics and international relations

Debates about virtues are not widespread in international ethics. Since virtues are found in individuals, it is difficult to make a link between them and wider international concerns. It is clear, however, that there were competing virtues in the eighteenth century, such as those based on moral sentiments in Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith (Frazer 2010; Jeffery 2011) or the eudæmonist virtues of utilitarian thinkers, including Meslier, Helvétius, Diderot and Holbach (Israel 2010).

Holbach's virtues clearly apply to international ethics, but what are they? A virtue is a 'habitual and permanent will or disposition'. It is acquired through habit, or repetitive action, and contributes to one's future actions – through the will – and to one's character more generally – as a disposition. This definition is much closer to an Aristotelian understanding of virtues than to a Christian one. This is not a surprise, given Holbach's avowed atheism. But it does differentiate him from Bentham, who had 'subsequently changed his mind such that the notion of virtue drops from his thinking and human beings only function with regard to self-preference' (Hoogensen, 2005: 26). In Holbach there is no such antagonism between self-interest and virtue. Virtue is not defined as 'other-regarding' or

'self-less', but as a constant feature of one's character, as an internalisation of common interest as part of self-interest. Holbach's republicanism is grounded on this notion of virtue, as publicly-spirited individuals will take an active interest in the affairs of the polity, whose interests they perceive as their own. Holbach here may be over-optimistic about the applicability of such a principle to the international domain. Perhaps it is possible to achieve this level of public spirit at the level of a particular republic, but is it possible to achieve it for the international level as well? To answer this challenge, Holbach relies on two central virtues that are applicable beyond the interests of one's republic: the virtues of *humanity* and *justice*.

'The first of social virtues is humanity' (Holbach, [1773a] 2001: 367). Holbach's virtue ethics proposes a universal application of its principles. This virtue is certainly present within the limits of one's society, but it is not confined by these boundaries as it applies to all members of our species – to humanity. At the international level, it is defined as 'love, charity, liberality, indulgence and pity'. These principles are of course too vague to guide international ethics adequately, and Holbach's thought remains too abstract here. It is possible, however, to piece together Holbach's thought and to expand on his definitions. Given Holbach's concern for material well-being of the least advantaged, and his constant critique of the abuses on the poor, taken together with this virtue of humanity which includes charity and liberality, it is reasonable to conclude that there is some form of international obligation to provide the material necessities to life, and to help create conditions under which happiness is possible. Holbach is here a *humanitarian thinker* before humanitarian concerns were on the international agenda. The virtue of humanity, taken together with Holbach's eudæmonism, provides the foundations for a *utilitarian* defence of humanitarian aid, and even possibly humanitarian intervention. If all human beings share some basic equal needs – food and shelter, for example – then these needs demand intervention from those who possess this virtue of humanity. Utility is certainly greatly improved when those who have nothing are given the basic necessities to strive for their own happiness.

If humanity is the virtue of humans *per se*, justice is the virtue of humans living in society. As every other virtue, justice supposes reciprocity. Holbach ([1768] 1998: 235) claims that ‘a man is just when he has a permanent will to give his fellow human beings what they are due and to treat them according to their merit.’ Justice is, first and foremost, a virtue – a habituated quality – that pushes humans to give other humans their due. Justice is inevitably linked to utility in Holbach’s thought. Laws, he claims, cannot be just if they only have in mind the utility of the few (Holbach, [1773a] 2001: 359). Justice is the basis of all social virtues, and without it no society can subsist for long. In this vision, there is no room for utilitarian calculations that violate the virtues, and in particular these two fundamental virtues: those of humanity and justice. Holbach’s ethics is centred on virtues and utility is only good insofar as it allows the virtues to flourish, insofar as it helps create citizens that are habituated towards being useful to others. The sacrifice of the few for the good of the many is therefore not useful, as it violates the virtues of humanity and justice whose utility is essential for social life. Such an argument is extended to the international realm, as Holbach claims that this argument is applicable to relations between peoples.

Holbach’s international thought versus Bentham’s

Bentham the international relations theorists, Holbach the international ethicist

‘Bentham has hitherto been one of the most neglected of the eighteenth century philosophers. His name is a household word; he is universally acknowledged to be one of the founders of modern utilitarianism’ (Hoogensen, 2005: 40)

If Bentham has been neglected, Holbach has been ignored by most commentators. Bentham is certainly known for his utilitarianism, but he is often misunderstood, and his contribution to international relations is not an exception to this rule (Hobsbawm 1992: 27; Hoogensen 2001; Kaino 2008). Hoogensen shows that Bentham’s thought does not easily ‘fit’ within the traditions of international relations, particularly the two dominant traditions: realism and liberalism. Bentham

has 'liberal' features: 'he detested war, thought commerce promoted peace, and respected notions of international law'; but he also thought of as 'a realist because of his emphasis on self-interest' (Hoogensen, 2005: 9). Perhaps this is most striking because Bentham was not only describing relations between states but was the first to attempt to come up with a 'Universal Jurisprudence' (Armitage, 2011).

Hoogensen shows that there is a meaningful way to look at the thought of historical thinkers, and to learn from their thought for contemporary theories. She shows that Bentham is a complex thinker, and one that firmly belongs to the realm of international relations because of the central role that *security* plays in his thought; in particular the security of expectation (Bentham, 1914: 124; Hoogensen, 2005: 12). Contrary to Bentham's study of international security, Holbach's international thought is more concerned with the role that ethics should play. Holbach's thought merits more attention than it receives, as the 'principle of utility was barely discussed in Bentham's 1786-89 international writings' (Hoogensen, 2005: 95). Holbach is not only important to the historian of ideas because he wrote before Bentham, he is important to scholars of international ethics because he explicitly linked his utilitarian thought to international matters. Holbach had already discussed many of the themes that Bentham develops, and in many cases Bentham reaches the same conclusions. This is not surprising given their common concern for the greatest happiness of the greatest number. There are, however, important differences between the two thinkers, and these help build a more thorough understanding of the utilitarian tradition in international relations.

Security and liberty

'Bentham places security as one of the four subordinate ends of the greatest happiness principle, and ultimately the most important end' (Hoogensen, 2005: 12)

Since security is central in Bentham's utilitarianism, it is important to ascertain its role in Holbach's, and highlight the difference between the two thinkers. Holbach never speaks of *security* as such, but

there is a central role for *safety* in his thought. The difference between security and safety may seem to be mainly semantic, but it actually reflects an important difference of emphasis between Holbach and Bentham. In Holbach's thought (1999: 251), safety is defined as one of the three political interests shared by the greatest number – along with liberty and property. Bentham had defined security as protection against the misdeeds of other individuals: whether they are citizens, public functionaries or foreign adversaries (Hoogensen, 2005: 13). Such a definition of security is too narrow for Holbach. There is nowhere the sense that safety is uniquely about intentional acts by other individuals, or that safety is *negative* – as protection *against* others. In the paragraph dedicated to *safety* in Holbach's *Politique Naturelle* ([1773a] 2001: 488), he insists that individuals' safety is about having the 'things necessary to their needs and that make their existence pleasant'; it implies a capacity for happiness, and safety can be understood in a positive sense as providing the necessary means for existence. We move away from security concerns, largely focused on (armed) protection against interference, and towards safety concerns, focused in part on material well-being and one's capacity to live a life of happiness.

Bentham had rightly been sceptical of the possibility of reconciling the conflicting values of liberty and security. As Rosen (1983: 156) points out, Bentham's focus on security over liberty is aimed at showing that one's real interests lie in security rather than liberty. But Holbach ([1770b] 1999: 252) had already made that point, he had clearly stated that members of society must 'renounce a portion of their natural liberty'. This point is emphasised in Holbach's works, as it is a part of the social contract to determine, according to the preferences and needs of each particular society, what the balance between liberty, safety and property is to look like (Devellennes, 2013). Bentham's emphasis on security *over* liberty is here unconvincing; for Holbach this should not be judged *a priori*, but the consequences of such a preference have to be taken into account. While some cases may warrant more security than liberty, others will warrant the opposite. Holbach, by being less categorical about the need for safety, is closer to a consequentialist position than Bentham.

Sovereignty, an international contract, and a universal league

‘A universal league should arm all nations to crush these monsters that, with a view of acquiring a few scraps of land that they will govern badly, make a game out of making millions of soldiers perish.’ (Holbach, [1776a] 2001: 622)

If security is merely a subordinate end of utility, then there should be limits upon sovereignty, limits that are dictated by utility itself. Bentham’s conception of sovereignty seems too absolute, here, for a utilitarian international ethics. For Bentham, the ‘sovereign then [is the one] who has the physical power of occupying and traversing a given tract of land [... conferring him] dominion *de facto* over the greater part of the natives’ (Bentham, 1843: 542). This conception of sovereignty is largely unlimited in the thought of Bentham. Holbach provides a more coherent international framework, from the standpoint of utility, as even external sovereignty (non-interference into another sovereign’s territory) is subject to the dictates of utility.

Holbach had argued at the level of the social contract that individuals need to surrender a part of their personal freedom under the terms of the contract. Equally, at the international level, Holbach ([1773a] 2001: 360) argues for a surrender of sovereignty in favour of ‘the right of all other nations taken collectively’. This version of the international social contract demands a trade-off between individual liberty and common utility. A state will have to accept a loss of sovereignty for the good of the society of states as whole. In his international social contract, Holbach ([1773a] 2001: 360) therefore promotes a form of collective security. In order to enforce the respect of the contract by all, ‘the united forces of all societies could execute the law or the will of all’. These limits on sovereignty are much closer to the debates in international ethics today than Bentham’s focus on absolute external sovereignty. Holbach is here explicitly critical of the ‘realist’ notion of the *balance of power*. It cannot hold, Holbach claims, without abiding by the rules of justice. This balance of power cannot produce its desired effect as each sovereign tries to tip the balance in its favour under the pretext of maintaining it (Holbach, [1773a] 2001: 559).

Instead of a balance of power, Holbach ([1773a] 2001: 558) makes a concrete proposal. The 'grand society' of nations needs to contain those who are dangerous for humankind. This can only be done if there exists a power to constrain sovereign to act in a just manner, and this can be achieved through a tribunal to settle disputes. As Meyerfeld (2012: 290) has shown, a similar conclusion can come from a reading of Hobbes and Locke, as they demand an impartial arbitrator or judge for inter-state conflict. Bentham will advocate for a very similar organ when he defends a common tribunal to apply moral sanctions to state action (Hoogensen, 2005: 86). If Bentham remains vague on this topic, as Hoogensen notes, so does Holbach. The idea of a 'confederation against injustice' (Holbach, [1773a] 2001: 559) lacks clarity, and can only be a starting point for considering what it would look like in practice. But in Holbach it clearly has common institutions, common laws, a guiding moral code under the – rather vague – terms of justice and utility, it poses limits on sovereignty and can call for a just war.

War and peace

Holbach's aversion towards warfare does not make him exclude its possibility altogether from international affairs. There are several possibilities for legitimate warfare to arise, and collective security is but one of them. If entering an international social contract requires a surrender of sovereignty, giving up one's rights – including one's rights as a nation – has limits that should never be crossed. Nature, Holbach claims, allows the attacked, the oppressed and the rejected to take all means for their conservation. Nations should therefore only take up arms for their own defence, safety, or for legitimate causes (Holbach, [1773b] 2004: 189). Holbach ([1773b] 2004: 190) further expands on this concept of legitimate causes, and he is adamant that it excludes any kind of conquest or expansion. The only legitimate right to war, therefore, is for defensive purposes - understood rather largely. Legitimate defence indeed includes repelling an unjust adversary, repressing a frenzied nation, holding back a conqueror, or even suppressing plots of envious neighbours in their infancy (Holbach, [1773a] 2001: 548). Just war can be understood to include the

possibility of pre-emptive warfare, as it did in Bentham's thought (Conway, 1989), but Holbach never goes as far as to argue for preventive warfare, whereby the very acquisition of military power is cause for legitimate war.

Yet, even this rather wide definition of just war as *ius ad bellum* includes strict limits on the conduct of war as *ius in bello*. Enemies are still human beings, and Holbach's ([1776b] 2004: 430) virtue of humanity demands that fighting be limited to weakening enemies and not crushing them altogether. Holbach also praises the move towards more humane treatment of prisoners and the end of the 'barbaric' practices of the past. Thankfully, Holbach ([1776b] 2004: 513) notes, the voice of humanity is heard even in the midst of battles. Certainly, the killing of non-combatants is excluded from such just warfare, and even defeated combatants deserve the humanity of their vanquisher (Holbach, [1776b] 2004: 572). As a reward for the observation of these rules of just war, Holbach expresses a faith in natural rewards. Those who obey the rules of justice, he believes, will be rewarded by abundance, prosperity and peace (Holbach, [1773a] 2001: 361). Such faith in providential rewards can seem to be at odds with other beliefs of the atheist *philosophe*. It is difficult to believe, furthermore, that 'Nature' will punish those who transgress the rules of justice. One needs to remember, however, that 'Nature' as Holbach refers to it here, includes human actions as well as natural phenomena (Doyle, 2010: 101; Holbach [1770b] 1999: 167-173). Holbach remains unconvincing, however, and he is at pains to reconcile his belief that justice will prevail with the rewards that injustice can bring. The faith of Enlightenment thinkers in the workings of providence seems odd today, but his call for human, international justice remains a valid concern in international ethics. Bentham here is more convincing than Holbach, as he sticks to the language of interests and thus avoids the pitfalls of a belief in natural progress (Hoogensen, 2005: 66; Haakonssen, 2008: 81). This contradiction in Holbach's thought, who had largely focused on *interests* except when discussed natural justice, is thus avoided by Bentham.

Commerce

Bentham's thought on the role of commerce in international politics is ambivalent at best. In some cases he argues for as few limits on trade as possible, in others he argues that rivalries of commerce lead to war (Hoogensen, 2005: 107). Holbach is much more consistent in his argument that commercial interests are often at the detriment of peace. Two commercial nations, he claims, cannot be friends for a long time (Holbach, [1773a] 2001: 552). Building on his disagreement with the belief that private vices lead to public virtues (which he found in Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*), Holbach ([1776b] 2004: 325) takes his case to the international level by arguing that there is no reason to believe that states in pursuit of their own commercial interests will somehow 'harmonise' these potentially conflicting interests in times of trouble. On the contrary, if commercial nations follow their own interests, clashes, rather than harmonisation, are more likely to be the outcome of recurring self-centred action. Such a challenge to the 'liberal' belief in a harmony of commercial interests is potently pointed out in Holbach's thought, without ambiguity or hesitation. Finally, one area where Bentham's thought was more convincing than Holbach's was in his approach to the colonies. Although Holbach makes vague mentions of colonial policy in the *Politique Naturelle* (Holbach, [1773a] 2001: 519-22), his thought remains in its infancy in this area.

Contemporary applications of Holbach's international ethics

Mark Amstutz (2008: 1) claims that 'the realist notion that international politics is fundamentally a quest for political power and economic interests is false and untenable'. This is likely to be the first thing that a student of international ethics reads, and yet it is full of assumptions that a reading of Holbach easily dispels. The centrality of interests in human nature is key to Holbach, and it avoids falling into the pitfall of trying to argue against interest. Doubtless there are serious challenges to Holbach's theory of interests, but his thought emerged within a context where the claims of Christian morality were fundamentally opposed to the idea that self-interest could be the source of morality. Most of the French eighteenth-century *philosophes* were in disagreement with a central

tenet of the orthodox conception of morality of their day. Holbach's primary concern in this respect is that by accepting the duality between self-interest and morality, one falls prey to a flawed conception of morality. Holbach's argument is aimed at a Christian aversion to self-interest, but this aversion is still present, albeit in a secularised manner, in contemporary ethics and international ethics – starting with Kant. Denying that self-interest has a powerful sway over our actions is bound to create cynicism about moral approaches. This is the Nietzschean critique of morality for which disinterested actions are a myth (Connolly, 1991; Newman, 2007). It is this intuition about human action being essentially self-interested that is hard to ignore, and the contemporary literature on international ethics often fails to address the seriousness of this issue adequately. Yet Holbach had already proposed a theory that posed itself as an alternative to the ascetic, self-sacrificial morality so difficult to maintain in international relations. He proposed to recognise the power of self-interest to create virtuous behaviour, by actively and politically tying self-interest with the interest of the collective. The ground of self-interest cannot be abandoned to realism, for it is too strong a motive to be ignored by ethics.

Holbach versus contemporary international theories

Realism is widely understood as the theory that makes this point about self-interest most potently. As Barry Buzan (1996: 54) notes, 'both classical realism and neo-realism borrow consciously from microeconomic theory, seeing states as analogous to firms, anarchic structure as analogous to market structure, and power as analogous to utility.' But the workings of the anarchic structure are not any more straightforward than the workings of the 'invisible hand' of the market, and the recourse to utility of microeconomic theory is a long way from the utilitarian vision of Holbach. Self-interest is important, but it is problematised in Holbach's thought in a way that is not the case of realist theories. A sacrifice of immediate self-interest is perfectly justifiable in a virtue ethics based on utility. Debates around a post-Westphalian state system, where the norms of the international

community are not perceived as exogenously given but rather as constituted through interdependent relations (Frost 1996), certainly follow this line of thinking.

There are other theories of international relations that insist that self-interest of nations is compatible with ethical behaviour. Liberal institutionalism is one of these theories, tying commercial interests with collective peace and security. Yet here Holbach's virtue ethics opposes itself to this faith in the ability of private vices to turn into public virtues. His criticism of Mandeville's *Fables of the Bees* (which preceded Adam Smith's similar point in the *Wealth of Nations*), taken to the international stage, allows one to argue that if each nation pursues its own economic interest, there is no guarantee that it will be in the interest of the greatest number. Holbach's utilitarian humanism, as a universal doctrine, does not look favourably at any kind of order that prioritises the utility of some at the expense of others. The interests of the few (and particularly of the rich) are not an adequate basis for an ethical system under Holbach's utilitarian theory, and there is no need for a rational model of calculation of utility to use utility as a critical tool to displace such belief in the harmonisation of vicious, self-oriented interest (Schofield, 2004: 381).

Holbach's belief in the possibility of self-interested ethics is thus not straightforward, in that it refutes two of the major international relations theories on the importance of self-interest. Perhaps then it is his capacity to *problematise* interest that is uniquely relevant in moral terms. John Ruggie (1998) makes the point that neo-utilitarianism is challenged by the constructivist position in international relations theory, precisely along similar lines. He argues that constructivism problematises interests and does not take them as exogenously given – which is the case for neo-utilitarian theories. It is clear, however, that the use of the term utilitarian by Ruggie is the one that I am challenging in this article. Holbach, in contrast with the 'neo-utilitarian' traditions which encompass both neo-realist and neo-liberal theories, provides a much more nuanced picture of the possibility of self-interest in morality. Holbach was not a 'constructivist', but his critique of interest,

and his struggle to get to the bottom of what is *really* in one's interest, is shared by constructivists today (Wendt, 1992; Erskine, 2012; Snyder and Vinjamuri 2012).

Holbach's view cannot easily fit within the methodological individualism pre-supposed by realism and liberal internationalism. There is, in a sense, no logical link between this methodological individualism and a utilitarian theory of ethics, and Holbach provides a clear alternative when he posits the social nature of human beings. Self-interests, we recall, are enshrined in a conception of reciprocal self-interests, grounded in the belief that humans cannot be happy on their own. This is Holbach's starting point, and when applied at the international level, it makes the claim that supposedly autonomous states are actually dependent upon one another and cannot escape this fact of co-existence. Holbach, who reacted against Rousseau's critique of dependence as a source of corruption, clearly rejects the conclusions of the Genevan philosopher. Against the conception of autarky defended by Rousseau (Nili, 2011), dependence, Holbach argues, is natural, and states cannot hope to strive for the autonomy required by Rousseau's republicanism, or by the 'Westphalian' – a term that Holbach does not use – state system. Holbach's thought is in sharp contrast with an international relations theory that values state sovereignty as an absolute principle, and contemporary critics of the Westphalian system make similar points to Holbach when they argue that this system is unrealistically (and perhaps ahistorically) based on an absolutisation of autonomy as a model for states (Krasner, 1995-6: 115).

Holbach's ethics provides us with critical tools to address the issue of self-interest in international politics, as well as the issue of autonomy of states. It is Holbach's categorical refusal of free will, at the level of the individual, which best explains this rejection of the principle of autonomy at the international level. For Holbach ([1770b] 1999: 290), the individual is determined by nature and social circumstances, and free will becomes impossible. The same rationale is applied at the level of the state, for states cannot be free in the absolute sense that is required by a conception of free will. It is our belief in free will that is the source of our prejudice in favour of the autonomous

nation state. Autonomy of state power makes no more sense than freedom of the will for this materialist philosopher. States cannot be autonomous for they are part of a material world comprised of individuals and other states. They are, just as much as any other entity, subject to the laws of ethics, and required to adhere by the standards of utility.

Even for international *ethicists* that go beyond this battle of international theories, very few have taken utilitarian theories seriously enough. Michael Walzer (1977) is probably the one that took the utilitarian challenge most seriously, especially in terms of its arguments in favour (and against) preventive war. Following Bacon's defence of preventive war, Walzer identifies two utilitarian criteria in defence of such line of action. The first, quite historically specific to Bacon's time, is the belief that the balance of power plays an active role in the preservation of liberty in Europe. Such an argument, as Walzer highlights, is an argument against the alternative model of a universal monarchy. A balance of power is seen to be a check on the ambition of some monarchs to rule the territories of others. Secondly, utilitarians might argue that fighting early tips the balance in a decisive way, and considerably reduces the cost involved in fighting the war at a later stage. So far, we are still in the 'traditional' understanding of utilitarian thought. These are almost purely instrumental reasonings, which could be quantified. Yet Walzer sees a third utilitarian option, which is much closer to the alternative theory of utility that Holbach illustrates so well. This third option highlighted by Walzer (1977: 77) recognises that the application of preventive wars will lead to 'innumerable and fruitless wars', as each state tries to strike early when the costs of intervention are low. As such, the use of preventive war is against the permanent utility of the society of nations, and Walzer clearly exposes a utilitarian argument against war that could have come straight out of Holbach's works. For it is precisely a utilitarian argument that does not rest upon calculations, but the virtue ethics that Holbach was defending. Getting used to fighting preventive wars is vicious not because of the individual circumstances of each case, but because it leads to a *habit of intervention*.

The ultimate failure of Walzer (1977: 231) to square the circle of utilitarianism is through his famous 'utilitarianism of extremity'. Walzer had indeed spent a long time trying to defend the necessity of customs and conventions, yet he builds this utilitarianism of extremity precisely to bypass the laws of a theory of rights. This is unconvincing within Walzer's theory, for it accepts in extreme cases a principle that it refuses at other times, but it would pose little problem under the Holbach's utilitarian ethics. He could agree that there are evils so great as to demand the kind of action that Walzer advocates for. Of course, such extreme cases as the bombing of civilian targets would have to pass the test of legitimacy in Holbach's ethics. It would have to demonstrate, at a minimum, that it is the utility of humanity, and not merely that of one of the belligerent countries, that such actions strives for. Yet because Holbach's utilitarian thought is enshrined in virtue, it is possible for him to accommodate for such particular actions. The moral intuition that pushes Walzer back to utilitarianism in times of supreme emergency could then easily be encompassed within Holbach's philosophy. There is no need, in other words, to move past utilitarian thought in order to come back to it, if one understands utility to be part of an ethical system where happiness, sociability and virtue have their proper role, and where self-interest is paramount.ⁱⁱ

A materialist critique of democratic peace

One important area of critique emanating from Holbach's that has contemporary relevance is Holbach's utilitarian critique of democratic peace. Steven Pinker's *Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011) has reignited the debate about the supposed success of democratic peace – linking his thesis about the decline in violence throughout the world to the thought of Immanuel Kant and the idea of perpetual peace between republican polities. Unsurprisingly, Pinker's thesis is closer to an understanding of security *à la* Bentham, than to a concern for safety *à la* Holbach, as illustrated above. For Pinker, the *better angels* are 'referring to the advance of peace and human security', not to increased safety and material well-being (2011: 34). For this reason, peace, as the absence of violent death, would be too weak for Holbach's utilitarian ethics. Surely, violent deaths in conflicts

are concerning, but the emphasis on the *security* dimension of this theory obfuscates the importance of *safety* for human flourishing. Peace between states or between groups within states, is too narrow a focus for international ethics. Structural concerns, such as those who keep vast portions of humanity impoverished to the point where meaningful lives become an impossibility, would be equally worthy of attention. Holbach was very concerned with these conditions that kept the poor in subservient positions in society – he widely criticised the great inequalities of wealth in the *Ancien Régime*. Peace is not the ultimate goal – for it may enshrine and foster inequalities – but a fairer distribution of wealth would bring about additional safety for both individuals and countries. In eighteenth-century France, this meant distribution of land – the main source of wealth at the time, and Holbach clearly sided with the Physiocrats who argued for redistribution of arable land – despite his personal interest as a large land-owner due to his aristocratic background. Holbach's defence of virtue utilitarian ethics was not purely abstract, as he was willing to concede that the interest of the greatest number lay in widespread ownership of land. It was both virtuous at the personal level (he would have had to give up his wealth), and at the political level: the widening of land-ownership would foster virtues in citizens, particularly by interesting them in the land and their fellow-citizens. It also acts as a critique of the mercantilist economic model, under which increased trade is the main source of wealth. Under these theories of unrestricted free trade, increased wealth may be achieved, but they do not guarantee its fair distribution throughout society. Instead of attaching citizens to the land, mercantilist ideals further create competition between merchants, with potentially belligerent consequences (Holbach, [1773b] 2004: 265). In other word, free trade does not create the virtues that Holbach wanted to see fostered by his utilitarian ethic. It denies that virtues are important, precisely by claiming that individual vices create public goods. Democratic peace, so often although not exclusively linked to this idea of liberal trade (Bell, 2013), grows less convincing after one takes the concerns of safety above those of security. If fair distribution of economic resources is taken seriously as an essential source of human *safety*, as Holbach does, the fall in violence is not the only concerns of the international ethicist.

There is a tension however, in Holbach's works, between the ideal of citizenship and that of the universality between his two cardinal virtues: humanity and justice. In many ways, the tension reminds one of the cosmopolitan/communitarian debates in international theory, as it highlights the differences between the sense of belonging to a community, particularly one's countryⁱⁱⁱ, and the wider duties towards the rest of humanity. Against a vision of the Enlightenment as a period uniquely concerned with universal values, a closer reading of Holbach reveals that the tension between cosmopolitan and communitarian ideals is already present within his work. As Jeffery says about the Scottish Enlightenment and Adam Smith in particular, there is a form of 'indiscriminate partiality' at stake (Jeffery, 2011: 156). Holbach's thought is *partial*, in the sense that it is our interests, and in particular our interests as sociable beings, that drive us closer to our own community than to others. But crucially, Holbach's ideal of citizens is driven by a partial attachment to the land, and to land-ownership (Holbach, [1773a] 2001:405-409). While a property requirement for citizenship sounds outdated for us, today, Holbach claims that it is through this material attachment to the land that one comes to care about the public good (Holbach, [1773b] 2004: 152). As Marx noted of the physiocratic school, they had the merit of being 'the true fathers of modern political economy' because of their 'analysis of the various material components in which capital exists and into which it resolves itself in the course of the labour-process' (Marx, 2000: 44). With all their faults – and Marx found many, the most obvious being for him their *bourgeois* horizon – the physiocrats enshrined social relations in material conditions. Holbach, who Marx and Engels (1999: 110) also considered as hopelessly bourgeois, had argued that the ideal of citizenship should be fostered, or in other words, that material attachment to the land and to others will only come when the greatest number of people become property owners (Holbach, [1776b] 2004: 610). In order to become *partial* to their fellow-citizens, Holbach defended an enlarged citizenry: defined as a large class of property owners who possess the land on which they live.

Yet if it is the goal of his conception of citizenship to become partial to fellow-citizens through material attachment to the land, is there a contradiction between his ideal of citizenship

and his virtues of humanity and justice with their universalistic appeals? Once again, Holbach's materialism is helpful to rebuke this contradiction. Human beings, irrespective of their country of origin, share some material interests in common. No happy life can thrive within food and shelter, with the basic material necessities for life. In addition, as mentioned above, and against the model of autarky advocated by Rousseau, Holbach argues that different countries depend on each other, creating bonds between them. These in turn demand that *indiscriminate* criteria, enforced by an independent tribunal. In other words, we are always *partial* towards people closer to us (members of our family, locality, or country), but this partiality needs to be mediated through an indiscriminate set of principles because we share enough material needs in common with other human beings and other societies to justify collective duties.

Conclusion

Holbach has much to contribute to international ethics. His nuanced conception of utility, combined with virtue ethics, provides a novel way to think about challenges in this field. I have shown the relative worth of Holbach's work compared to Bentham's, as the former has a lot to contribute over and above (as well as before) Bentham in international ethics. His concern for safety, as opposed to security, illustrates the concern that a utilitarian virtue ethics puts forward for the material well-being of the worst-off in international relations. His challenge to the conception of sovereignty can act as a critique of the Westphalian model, by putting forward a defence of an international social contract and a universal league. His thought on war and peace, as well as those on commerce, act as critical points against the dominant paradigms of realism and liberalism in international relations theory. It is precisely Holbach's challenges to these traditions, as well as to simplistic conceptions of self-interest, that prove useful for the international ethics scholar. Finally, I have shown that Holbach's thought can be used to address some of the most potent challenges raised against utilitarianism in international ethics: particularly those of Walzer. Holbach, a materialist thinker,

could also provide an alternative to Marxist theories yet to be developed. Engels and Marx (1999: 111) judged his political philosophy as 'the historically justified philosophical illusion about the bourgeoisie just then developing in France'. Yet they failed to take seriously republican materialism, with its concern for great material inequalities. Holbach's materialism proposes a blending of ethical and critical theory, where an ideal of self-sustaining citizenship is used as a lever against misery and exploitation. Holbach's materialistic philosophy proposes a republican twist to international critical theory that can bypass the Marxist critique of ethical debate being secondary to material interests (Roach, 2009).

Biographical statement

Charles Devellennes is lecturer in political and social thought at the University of Kent. He is working in the fields of the history of political thought, and contemporary political and international theory. He is currently writing on the emergence of atheism in France in the eighteenth-century in the radical Enlightenment, the contemporary political theory of atheism, Marx and atheism, and new materialisms.

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ⁱ Jefferson had a copy of Holbach's *System of Nature* in his library, Hegel had also read the work, whom he attributed to Mirabeau (Hegel, 1955: 387) – Holbach's *nom de plume* – and I will detail Marx and Engels' critique of Holbach later in this paper.

ⁱⁱ Rawls, despite wanting to provide 'a theory of justice [...] that proves superior to the long dominant tradition of utilitarianism' (1999: 179) equally fails to convince that the utilitarianism he attacks is not a straw man. Rawls' conception of the utilitarian tradition is simplistic, taking for granted its quantitative dimension. Utilitarianism is grouped with cost-benefit analysis and the practice of weighing national interests as a mode of 'means-end reasoning' dismissed outright as an 'unworkable ideal' that 'will not be accepted by peoples' (Rawls 1999: 179, 13, and 40 respectively). It is precisely a tradition of utilitarian thought that refuses these gross generalisations that I am uncovering here with Holbach's work.

ⁱⁱⁱ The French words 'pays' and 'patrie' are used interchangeably by Holbach ([1770b] 1999:638). For simplicity's sake, I have translated them into 'country' here, even though this term might lose some of the potency of Holbach's calls for citizens to defend, serve, and be useful to their 'patrie'. A full analysis of Holbach's thought on the topic would prove fascinating, especially since he adopted French citizenship and thus the French 'patrie', and I hope to develop it in future works.