

Reflections On the Theory and Practice of an Ethical Foreign Policy

I feel slightly embarrassed to speak under such a grand heading. Anyone expecting me to match the intellectual level of Edmund Burke in my remarks will be sorely disappointed. Actually, though I don't intend to dwell on Burke, he is of course far from irrelevant to the discussion of Europe as an ethical power. In fact, his *Reflections On the Revolution in France* are part of the debate to which Immanuel Kant contributed with his small but – to this day - highly influential *Perpetual Peace* – a work I intend to return to off and on during my intervention.

I should like to begin, though, by telling a story. Once upon a time when I was desk officer for China-stroke-Tibet – a whole tangled web of ethics, history and politics is of course contained in that stroke – in the Foreign Ministry, I had a visit from the Swedish Tibet Committee. It was a fairly friendly visit, they came in fact to "learn how to promote human rights through the UN institutions". They seemed to think that Swedish foreign policy on that score was reasonably ethical. But they also came to discuss our Tibet policy. I remember saying to them:"I know what you'd like the Swedish government to do. You would like us to challenge the Chinese claims to sovereignty over Tibet and to recognize the Dalai Lama's government in exile. This the Swedish government will not do. We only recognize governments who have a reasonable degree of control of their territory and, according to international law, if control of a territory has lasted long enough, it confers sovereignty, even if that sovereignty was established by foul means (a view, incidentally, that Kant would have concurred with)."

"Unfortunately," I added,"politics and ethics are not the same thing. However, there are some things we *can* do for Tibet and the Tibetans within these limits, and these we are trying to do."

Strangely enough, no one flared up in righteous anger at this remark in spite of its *realpolitischness*. On the contrary, I received a letter afterwards thanking me for my honesty.

So, as you will have understood, I have a fair degree of skepticism towards the notion of an ethical foreign policy. I am a firm believer in calling a spade a spade – unless, of course, you deliberately want to manipulate someone, but then we have left the field of ethics for the fields of political rhetoric and ideology production - and I do not think that the attribute "ethical" can ever be affixed to any foreign policy –European, American, Chinese or Swedish - in its entirety. In fact, I rather wonder whether it may not even be dangerous and counterproductive to do so, since it could blunt our moral sensitiveness concerning the means of our foreign policy and, at worst, tempt us towards rather Jesuitical thinking. Those who are exposed to brusque action inflicted with the best of intentions do not necessarily accept the reasoning "the end justifies the means". We have to tread cautiously here.

This is, of course, not the same as to say that ethics and foreign policy are completely separate. On the contrary, a foreign policy can be more or less influenced by ethical concerns and I doubt that any foreign policy – even the most interest-based – is entirely free of such concerns. But this depends, ultimately, on what you mean by "ethics", something which, I am sure, we could quite easily spend the rest of the conference debating. An ethical attitude presupposes a concept of "the good", but who determines the nature and content of that "good"? In Europe, we have – leaving aside the debate over "Christian values" in the context of the EU constitutional treaty – by and large scrapped God as an final source of value, which means that the question "what is good" in foreign policy is now contained within the sublunar, hence political, world. Who in this world has the authority to replace God as the final arbiter of good and evil?

Kant thought the best we could arrive at in foreign policy was a respect for international *law*. In fact, he did not think that the concept of ethics could be applied consistently *at all* in international relations until they had left the anarchic state of nature and established an international community, or in Kant's words, federation, of "republican" states which all have agreed to adhere to common rules. . The underlying notion in Kant, as I read him, is that there has to be equality, or at least a degree of *mutuality*, in an ethical relationship. This is indeed the philosophical basis for the international *corpus* of norms concerning human rights. In my mind, therefore, it is politically unfortunate that the EU, in its proposed constitutional treaty, claims copyright on what it calls "European values", without any reference to accepted international norms such as the UN Declaration on Human Rights or the UN Charter. I am sure it is not the intention, but what one in fact does is provide arguments for those in other parts of the world who will resist when the EU, quite rightly, uses its clout to promote respects for *universal* human rights.

This raises, too, some interesting questions concerning the need for *double standards* in foreign policy, an idea raised by Robert Cooper and repeated with approval by Robert Kagan in his pamphlet *Of Paradise and Power*. We must, so the two Roberts argue, apply civilized law at home and the law of the jungle – i.e., harsher methods - in the jungle – for instance when dealing with enemies as ruthless as al-Qaida. One wonders whether it is possible to be half-ethical? Kant would, in all probability, given his categorical imperative, have argued that having a split ethical personality one simply can't claim to be ethical at all. It may be practical, it may be necessary, but in that case: *exit Europe as an ethical power*. You can't, as they say, be half pregnant.

Of course an ethical foreign policy need not always be peaceful. Kant himself, though by instinct a peaceful reformist, could see the justification, in certain circumstances, of both war and revolution. You may well argue that the US policy in the 1990's of wanting to supply the Bosniaks with arms was just as defendable – perhaps more so – from an ethical standpoint than the European policy at the time of standing idly by. Another example is Nato's Kosovo campaign in 1999. Most governments would probably have preferred to turn a blind eye to the ethnic cleansing going on in that small corner of Europe – just as is the case now with Chechnya – but there, actually, you might argue that ethical concerns prevailed, to the point of using military violence. I think, though, that if you look closely, you will find that there were mixed motives on the part of governments for that action too. If you think that, on balance, it was the right thing to do, I think the moral credit should largely go to the media and to public opinion – something which, incidentally, confirms Kant's belief that transparency and open debate are essential to keep governments who, he thought, tend to prioritize reasons of state over ethics – on the straight and narrow.

One consequence of this is that I – as a non-pacifist - do not see any ethical conflict *per se* in the EU's ambition to acquire a military capability – it depends on partly on the motives – which I am sure are mixed -, what it will actually be used for, and also on how the alternative use of scarce resources might be evaluated from an ethical standpoint. If the British had not had military on the ground in Afghanistan in 2001 they would not have been able to demand that their prisoners-of-war not be subjected to capital punishment before handing them over to the Americans. But I think we should be very wary, and have no illusions, about that power necessarily and *by definition* being used for good purposes. Healthy democracy, open public debate and a watchful citizenry will be needed to assure this.

I think, as a matter of fact, that this kind of fusion – or confusion - of power with ethics is a trap that our American cousins have fallen into a number of times with

disastrous results and one that the Europeans should carefully avoid. European history and European tradition can be of great help here. One major difference between Europe and the US, that Robert Kagan for one has not understood, concerns precisely the relationship between power and ethics. Kagan assumes, in his pamphlet *Of Paradise and Power*, that the concept of power is the same on both sides of the Atlantic and that the current European preference for negotiation, agreements and treaties over military violence as instruments in international relations is simply a case of sour grapes - making a virtue out of necessity – a reflection of Europe’s military weakness. Well, I think the truth is more complex than that, although not necessarily more ethical. I think the European preference for negotiated conflict resolution reflects traditional geopolitics - the fact that Europe since the end of the Roman Empire has been made up of entities of roughly equal size, whose rulers knew that power had to be tempered with negotiation since no one was strong enough to dominate the rest by force. This brought about a view of power as, if not evil, at least ethically neutral, something that required a bridle of treaties, bonds and institutions to keep it within limits. This rather gloomy, or at least disillusioned, view of power is a strain that runs through European political history as far back as the Middle Ages. It has been reinforced by the still-kept-alive dream of a harmonious and united Europe – a dream harking back to the Roman Empire and whose latest incarnation is the European Union. By contrast, American political history – a much younger one – is saturated with Enlightenment optimism, with the conviction that the US – regardless of whether its foreign policy is one of activism or isolation - is a force for good in the world and that the exercise of US power therefore by definition is morally good. Could it be that the present emphasis on the EU as a “force for good” simply reflects guilty feelings about centuries of *Realpolitik* and an inferiority complex v   our more ethical American friends ? There is, to be sure, something commendable about *wanting* to be a force for good, but in order actually to *be* it, I think actually we need to stick to our old cautious attitude to power.

Do I want Europe to be Machiavellian? Yes and no. Because I actually don’t think there is any quarrel between Machiavelli and Kant concerning ethics. Where they differ, is in their view of *reality* – more particularly of human nature. I actually think there is fair dose of Machiavellian thinking in Kant,

Political decision-making is rarely satisfactory from the ethical point of view. More often, it is a choice between two evils, and you might not even know which is the least. The only solution, in my view, is to develop an ethical outlook in politicians and decision-makers. The good politician, according to Kant, is the politician who never loses sight of her ethical principles, but is aware of the inertia of human nature and has patience. Rather like alpine skiing – you avoid hitting the poles, without losing direction. We must, as the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes, admit the tragedy in certain decisions and the moral guilt that comes with them. This, and not grand declarations, is the way to make Europe into more of an ethical power.