BEYOND MACHIAVELLI: INTEGRATING APPLIED ETHICS INTO A COURSE ON TECHNOLOGY AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Mary Jane C. Parmentier  
Arizona State University

INTRODUCTION

Niccolo Machiavelli advised in the 16th century that a successful leader must act ethically if at all possible, but warned that political priorities come first. His ideal leader, his ‘prince’, was to ‘appear to be compassionate…but if he needs to be the opposite, he knows how’. (Machiavelli, p. 100) Ethics, in other words, should be readily abandoned if necessary. And while Machiavelli has given us an adjective synonymous with evil behavior, scholars in the field of international politics have traditionally observed that nation-states act according to their own interests, not according to their own ethics. Thus in traditional studies of international relations, Machiavelli is required reading, as is Thucydides’ Melian Dialogue, in which the democratically-minded Athenians behave quite differently abroad when forcing the island of Melos to surrender or be massacred. Hans Morgenthau, considered a key founder of the field of international relations in the 1950s, defined national interest as power, and international politics he conceptualized as the struggle for power. Ethics, for Morgenthau, factor in only as a restraint on this ongoing struggle. (Morgenthau, p. 243) Political realism, then, has dominated the field since the beginning, and with realism, ethics are assumed to be largely irrelevant in understanding the political behavior of national actors.

This is not say, however, that ethics has been completely ignored in the wider discipline of international relations. The rival idealist perspective in international relations argues that ideas, and very often ethical ideas, do matter. In policy this is most famously exemplified by Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations. Idealism, however, took a back seat to realism after World War II and during the Cold War. Since
the end of the Cold War it has made somewhat of a comeback and with it the growth of several subfields of international politics, such as human rights, just and unjust war theory, and ethics and international affairs. In the late 1980s the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs implemented an academic journal, Ethics and International Affairs, and in 1993 an Ethics section was started in the International Studies Association, the main organization for international politics scholars. Work began to be published, much of it harking back to classic material from Grotius and St. Augustine, on international law and just war theory. (Graham, 1997)

Ethics, however, was still treated as a separate subject, either in distinct books or articles, or single chapters in books, often at the end and very brief, such as the eight pages devoted to the topic in Viotti and Kauppi’s International Relations Theory. (Viotti and Kauppi, 1993) World Politics by Kegley does not have a separate chapter on ethics, but ethical considerations are raised in discussions of human rights and war. (Kegley, 2007) This latter example is closer to an integration of ethical analyses into the teaching of international politics, though is still treated as a discrete topic. Finally, among British international relations scholars there has been more of a tradition of integrating ethics, with concepts of global society and international legal traditions, and the application of social constructivism; the British scholar Alexander Wendt famously declared that ‘anarchy is what states make of it’—turning realism on its head with the notion that the quest for power is not a given, even in an anarchical world system. Recently an assessment of this ‘English School’ noted that throughout, however, there has been “tension between ethics and power or interests”. (Cochran, 2009) This tension has not yet been resolved in the field of international relations or politics.

**INTEGRATING ETHICS**

It was upon this background that I decided to apply and was accepted to participate in the Lincoln Polytechnic Ethics Teaching Fellowship program at Arizona State University during the 2008-2009 academic year. Coming from this realist tradition of international politics, I had not had a formal background in applied ethics nor had I dealt much, if at all, with ethical questions in the classes that I teach on international politics and international development. I was also skeptical of the relevancy of applying ethics to the teaching of international political behavior, and concerned about students focusing on normative
rather than descriptive theory. In the past few years, however, there had been more scholarship in ethics and international affairs, and in some of my more specialized classes that deal with technology, politics and development, the students themselves were raising ethical considerations.

The class I chose to transform for the Fellowship had been called Technology and International Politics, and in considering the possible approaches to integrating ethical aspects, I decided to completely re-design the course. In the past I had structured the class along the lines of a classic international politics course, beginning with theory, then bringing technology in as a variable, mostly focusing on issues of international conflict and security. I was using a book that analyzed sociotechnical systems, such as global transportation, military technologies and arms races, and globalization and the internet. Students were asked to examine history for the impact of these systems on international politics, including global transformations, such as the Cold War and its end. The course was an upper division, undergraduate course, mainly for political science and other social science majors, and had been taught completely online.

The integration of applied ethics prompted me to completely re-think the goals, objectives and underlying assumptions of this course. I realized that the subject matter, particularly with the highlighted role of technology as a variable, was very rich in ethical questions and considerations, even though the field did not include a code of professional ethics as did the professions of most of my Fellowship colleagues. Instead, the ethical questions raised in my course would contribute to the general education of Arizona State University students in increasing awareness of questions and problems that are of local, global and of critical importance.

First I created several new goals for the course, in which students would: 1.) discuss and analyze ethical considerations regarding technology and international politics; and 2.) Read and discuss ethical questions, and incorporate discussion of ethical dilemmas in research papers. I then divided the curriculum into three parts, which created a straightforward foundation for the emergence of the ethical dimensions; furthermore, these three sections were the main areas being discussed in the literature that was raising questions about technology and its effects on international affairs. (Hanson, 2008) Following are the three modules that were created, with some of the pertinent ethical questions raised. These are all questions that did not figure in the old version of this course.
MODULE 1: TECHNOLOGY, INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND INSECURITY

• Should nuclear powers dictate who gets to have nuclear weapons?
• Are there double standards in the politics of nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation?
• Are there ethical problems with weapons of mass destruction in general?
• Just and unjust war theory: is war ever justified and if so, under what conditions?
• Does asymmetric warfare change the rules of war? Who makes the rules?

MODULE 2: GLOBALIZATION, TECHNOLOGY AND THE NORTH-SOUTH DISCOURSE

• Should the global North be responsible for the socioeconomic development of the global South?
• Should the transfer of technology be left to the market?
• Is access to information technology a human right?
• Intellectual property in a cross cultural perspective - can you own ideas?

MODULE 3: TECHNOLOGY, GLOBALIZATION AND THE NATION-STATE

• Should the internet be regulated and if so, by whom?
• Are global ethics possible? What is ethical: relativism, universalism, cosmopolitanism?
• Is the role of the state changing? What are the responsibilities of the state towards its citizens?
The following is a sample lesson from Module 3:

The topic this week is war. Much of international political theory is concerned with why states go to war. There is a philosophical tradition, mostly coming from religious and legal scholars, that deals with the ethics of war. Are there conditions under which it is morally acceptable to go to war? What are those conditions? What about rules of warfare once war has begun?

And our question: do any of our answers or considerations change when we factor in technological developments?

It is recommended to do the assignment in the following order. The first three items are fairly short, with the final reading being the longest. Be sure to all four before you make your post!

1. Read the brief description of 'Just War' - linked under Websites
2. Watch portions of film 'Religion, War and Violence: The Ethics of War and Peace' (34996):
   *First Segment - Rules of War Violations in Iraq
   *Last Segment - Just War Tradition
   (These are each less than 10 minutes. The entire video is 90 minutes, and I encourage you to watch the entire video if you have time - they might help you formulate your discussion board post.)
3. Browse the Revolution in Military Affairs website (RMA under Websites) until you understand the RMA and use of information and communications technology in the conduct of war
4. Read the article by Smith, 'The New Law of War: Legitimizing Hi-tech and Infrastructural Violence' (linked under E-Articles)

Post Discussion Board response to ONE of the following:

A. Do inequities in technology pose particular issues for 'jus in bello' rules? Or should the rules be the same, regardless of technological developments? Give examples to support your response.

B. Pick a war (any war in time, of any size, but one that you are reasonably familiar with, or that you can familiarize yourself with quickly). Apply either 'jus in bello' rules or 'jus ad bello' rules - were they followed or violated in any aspect of this war?

The course has been taught this way for four semesters, with a total of approximately 150 students enrolled. It has continued to be an online course, and in the Spring of 2010 was taught as a BIS (bachelors of interdisciplinary studies) 402 Capstone: Technology and Global Conflict. It was decided, in consultation with departmental academic advisors, that the word 'ethics' would not assist in attracting students to enroll in the course. Indeed, the whole approach has been to integrate the ethical components in order to enrich the subject matter, not to create a separate course on ethics and international politics.
Structuring the course in this way has created many opportunities for profound discussions, and has provided an enriched environment for the development of critical thinking skills. For a topic such as international politics, raising ethical considerations allows students to think outside of their own local context, considering the viewpoints of other actors in global affairs. For example, in the four semesters that the revised course has now been taught, students have engaged in discussions prompted by the above questions, and it can be noted that some of these require critical thinking application, with the students being able to do this weighing various options and points of view. Contrary to the way the course was taught before the integration of ethical considerations, this course seemed to illicit many responses from students that they ‘hadn’t thought of something in that light before’, or ‘I never really thought about it that way’. Given that this is an online class it is possible to see, in the written transactions among students, their thought processes in action. It is also possible to let a discussion proceed with minimal facilitation from the instructor, with the students themselves inviting each other to look at an issue from various perspectives. The following section reviews some of the results observed by including ethical aspects in this course.

**STUDENT OUTCOMES**

With the sample lesson outlined above for Module 1 on the application of just war theory, students became fully engaged in discussions of both jus en bello (rules of warfare) and jus ad bellum (rules and justifications for going to war). For instance, a discussion of ethics has ensued when considering asymmetric warfare between adversaries of unequal economic and technological power, and whether or not the rules of war (jus en bello) apply equally in all situations. After viewing a film that showed Iraqi soldier’s disguised as civilians, students frequently note that this is a direct jus en bello violation. However, others usually counter that the rules should differ in asymmetric warfare, asking the other students to consider that if they were overpowered by a military force threatening their homes, would they not ‘do whatever they can to survive?’ Other students have discussed the ethical issues in Israel’s 2009 military strikes on Gaza, with some arguing that they were justified due to Palestinian terrorist attacks, and others wondering if ‘Israel’s possible uses of excessive force puts the nation in violation (of the rules of war)?’ For considerations of going to war (jus ad bellum), students are asked to
pick a war and discuss its ‘justness’, using the specific criteria, such as the requirement that all other means of settling the conflict peacefully must be exhausted. This assignment has allowed much thoughtful discussion in class about U.S. involvement in the world wars, Vietnam, and Iraq.

The topic of nuclear technology and weapons is also fully explored in Module 1, and students have discussed this widely, with some declaring nuclear weapons to be completely unethical, but others arguing that giving them up would be unethical because countries have a responsibility to protect their citizens (which, the students presume, occurs with the principle of nuclear deterrence). This discussion also prompts some students to look at the issue of proliferation from a non-U.S. perspective, and observe possible Western violations of the non-proliferation regime of which non-Western countries are often accused.

In Module 2 the topic of global disparities of income, the digital divide, and social justice is explored. The textbook they read advocates for universal access to information and communications technologies, portraying it as a significant human right. (Drori, 2006) This discussion polarized one class of seventy students between those who agreed with the author, and those who vehemently did not. Then there were some in the middle, who brought up many nuances, such as types of technologies, who should be responsible for closing the digital divide, and circumstances under which a society might be ready for access to information technology. Several students, reacting to those who said that access to technology is not a human right, came back with comments such as ‘what about technology that could save someone’s life?’ and that ‘in certain cases the ‘haves’ have a social responsibility to the world around them’. Many students stated that access to the internet was a privilege, not a right; this provoked others to crystallize their positions around the idea that access to information that could improve lives was a human right, thus so was access to the internet. The level of discussion and student engagement is perhaps exemplified by a student who stated ‘I have not fully decided if access to technology and technological advance is a human right’. The student went on to provide a meaningful analysis of both sides, reflecting the complexity of the issue.

In Module 3 students read an excerpt from Appiah’s book on cosmopolitanism, after which they discuss globalization, cultural change and identity. (Appiah, 2006) With this topic students question the ethical assertion that globalization destroys traditional cultures. Appiah demonstrates with examples how cultures always change and are socially constructed; scratching the surface of any cultural tradition reveals a
starting point of that tradition. Students also provide positive examples of the globalization of media and information curtailing the repressive actions of some governments (when this course was being taught during the Tibetan uprising in China 2009). Students are inspired when Appiah points out that not all cultural traditions should be preserved—students quickly bring up slavery, cannibalism, etc. Cultural universalism and cultural relativism run throughout this discussion, without either position being labeled—the students simply discuss freely between the two positions. A student in one class stated that ‘cultural norms can change so dramatically over time… there are no absolutes’ while another argued for the unity of humanity and universality of morality. The lack of consensus on these questions is significant, as it allowed for a rich exploration of complex themes and engaged students actively in the topics.

Overall, it can also be noted that the student discussions have all, with no exceptions, proceeded in a very civil manner, with no need for instructor intervention (which commonly can occur in online classes) reminding students to be polite and critique each other constructively, despite the fact that many of the topics required students to explore their own assumptions and view issues from varying perspectives. It seems that these discussions of ethical aspects brought students into a richer consideration of these complex issues.

A final observation should be noted regarding student outcomes with these ethical dimensions. Students are required to research and write two papers on topics related to the course material (they are given a list, but they are also free to choose). Several new topics have been pursued since the integration of ethics, such as the global North e-dumping in the global South, applications of just war theory to real events, and information and communications technologies and global justice. They are also required in these papers to bring in ethical dimensions, which some did with more success than others. In general, as this course continues to evolve and my experience teaching ethics in my field increases, it may be recommended to give students more specific training in the area of ethics at the beginning of the course. While some have clearly studied ethics in other classes, others are not as comfortable discussing ethics, nor as intuitive at teasing out the ethical dimensions from the various topics.
CONCLUSION

As an academic for almost thirty years in the field of international politics, and one who has leaned towards political realism as the closest explanation for international political behavior, undertaking this infusion of ethics into the curriculum was done with some skepticism. There is a tendency for students to misunderstand the role of theory, and jump to normative applications and assumptions, thus obscuring in some instances what is actually going on. Or, to assume that the United States is a nation of morally minded citizens, therefore its foreign policy is always moral. In a course on Middle Eastern politics that I teach, for example, students are quick to denounce Iran as an ‘unethical nation’ without exploring national interests and practical reasons for Iran’s behavior, something that political realism instructs us to do.

Theory and reality, however, are related. We know, for example, that in international studies, the popularity of certain theories can be explained by the international environment at the time—such as idealism taking hold after the end of WWI, the ‘war to end all wars’, and realism becoming the reigning academic and policy paradigm during the Cold War. Theory can influence policy as well, with academics from international politics putting their perspectives into practice by entering the government, such as Henry Kissinger, a political realist as an academic, and an influential actor in international politics. It has been argued, in fact, that we can view theories as actors that affect foreign policy, with policy makers influenced by academic theories and theoreticians. This is perhaps more recently exemplified by the 1990 Samuel Huntington article “The Clash of Civilizations” in Foreign Affairs, in which he portrays ‘Islamic’ civilization as inherently pitted against ‘Western’ civilization. This seemed to become a framework through which many in Washington came to view the 9/11 attacks. (Shalom, 2006)

Thus we have a responsibility as teachers in international studies in how we present theories, and how we instruct students to look at international affairs. As Frost has noted, “ethical values are embedded in our practices” (p. 97), and much of the language and behaviors in international affairs are understood in “such normative terms as self-determination, sovereignty, wrongful and imperial aggression, human rights abuses, democratic rights . . . and so on” (p. 92). (Frost, 2009) Despite the unethical behaviors against such concepts in international affairs, these terms are not meaningless, and in fact play a large role in international discourse and relation. Thus the infusion of ethics into the
study of international politics is not only useful in developing students’
critical thinking in this realm, but also imperative in terms of equipping
them to weigh national interests against global interests, question the
actions of states, and to relate international behavior to their own value
system in more meaningful ways. Who knows, perhaps Machiavelli’s
imperative will give way to morality if citizens are educated to ethical
possibilities in international affairs?

NOTE
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