
The ethics of modern diplomacy

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Introduction

The crisis over Kosovo, in the spring of 1999, brought the ethical discourse to the forefront of international debate. Political and military leaders have started referring to moral considerations not only, as was traditionally done, to illustrate the foundations of their political options, but also to justify specific strategies, in particular the recourse to military force to attain morally relevant results. Intellectuals and columnists debate the concept of "ethical war" in the pages of the world's press. Although the issue relates to the use of military force, it is more than ever evident, in the case of the conflict over Kosovo, that diplomatic and military means are concomitant and intertwined, rather than being sequentially linked in a continuum. That if we dare to rephrase von Clausewitz, military action – like diplomacy – is one of the means of politics. Thus the issue is at the same time one of "ethics and war" and "ethics and diplomacy".

Yet, paradoxically, whereas the debate on ethics and war, while being controversial, is relatively "easy" and clear cut, the issue of ethics and diplomacy has been less thoroughly explored and in particular has been overlooked, if not openly discarded as irrelevant, by practitioners in the field. This writer can testify that it is especially difficult for a professional diplomat to address the issue of "ethics and diplomacy". More precisely, one can do so only by deciding to go against the current, to challenge the

conventional wisdom of one's peers, the majority of whom, if asked to react to the idea of such an endeavour, would probably respond as one of the author's colleagues actually did: "Ethics and diplomacy? But it is an oxymoron!" A difficult task, indeed, but an unavoidable one if one is not satisfied with the simple technicalities of a profession, if one wants to ask "what for" and not only "how".

It is not enough, evidently, to reject the idea that diplomacy can be declared "off limits" for an ethical discourse. What is necessary, if one wants to challenge this predominant view, is to try to understand the reasons for its widespread acceptance, to identify the specific difficulties faced by the extension of an ethical discourse to the field of diplomacy, and finally to see whether and how such a discourse can be phrased in the actual conditions that characterize contemporary international relations.

Why look for specificities? In a way one could stop this exercise from even starting by accepting an apparently indisputable truth: diplomacy is just an aspect of politics, it is but practical politics applied to international relations. So, why reopen the ancient debate on politics and ethics? Nothing new can be said there: Machiavelli and his critics, in particular, have said it all long ago. The terms of the question are clear: what is left is only declaring our own ethical preference.

This reductionist view has the misleading charm of apparent common sense, but its clay feet become quickly evident. The legitimacy, or — better — the need, of addressing the issue of ethics and diplomacy with a degree of autonomy *vis-à-vis* the "ethics and politics" debate is proved by a few simple questions. If diplomacy is but politics beyond national borders, why is it that Machiavelli dominates in diplomacy — at least on the level of unspoken assumptions¹ — but not in internal political discourse? Why does the brilliant Florentine cross international frontiers so freely, whereas the ethical discourse tends to be stopped at border crossings? Why does the same Machiavellian recipe for ethics-free political action produce horror (in the same citizens who implicitly accept it without qualms as an obvious foundation for diplomacy) once it is brought back to its original birthplace, the internal body politic?

So, after all, there might be a real need to understand and explain the separate issue of ethics in the conduct of international relations.²

First, however, it should be stated from the outset, for the benefit of unambiguous understanding of the text, which is the working definition of both terms (ethics and diplomacy) that will be used.

Ethics and morality

A warning to the reader: in this chapter, "ethical" and "moral" will be used (for practical purposes and following a widespread though perhaps

objectionable practice) in an interchangeable way. This does not mean to imply that the author is convinced that no distinction can be drawn between the two concepts. Ethics, in fact, answers the question "How should I live?", whereas the moral question is "What must I do?" Ethics is germane to wisdom and borders with love, morality deals with obligation and borders with law. Morality commands, ethics recommends. One may think that ethics is superior to morals, but moral rules are in any case socially indispensable so that, recognizing duty, people will live as if they loved their fellow humans. Paraphrasing St Augustine's "Love, and do what you want", one could say "Love, or do what you must".³

In both cases, however, we will expressly avoid a "foundational" discussion: why one should live in a certain way and not in another, or why one must do something instead of something else, falls beyond the scope of what intends to be a modest attempt at exploring a particular field of "applied ethics" and not elaborating a study in moral philosophy.

Here, however, the author – though not stating his own preferences as to the possible foundations (or lack of them) of ethics – will clearly state his belief that both questions ("How should I live?" and "What must I do?") are incomplete, not because they do not include the "Why?", but because they lack the definition of a relationship/obligation toward "the Other".⁴ Confessing a humanist bias, this author, in other words, wants to state from the outset his conviction that both ethics and morals are conceivable outside human relationships, that both questions, therefore, are incomplete, and should read respectively: "How should I live with others?" and "What must I do unto others?"

Diplomacy and international relations

As for the definition of diplomacy, preferences should be stated from the outset. This author finds that – especially for the purpose of a discussion on ethics and diplomacy – the most satisfactory definition can be found in Der Derian: "the mediation of estranged peoples organized in states which interact in a system". Der Derian then defines "diplomatic culture" as "the mediation of estrangement by symbolic power and social constraints".⁵

All the necessary elements are thus present in this two-stage definition: the "otherness" ("estranged peoples"); the focus on relationship ("mediation"); the reference to the fact that the protagonists are "states which interact in a system"; and the combination of "symbolic power" and "social constraints", referring to the mix (present at all levels of politics) between material power and symbolic hegemony

—Diplomacy is of course about politics on the international level, but its specific profile is linked with the "mediation" Der Derian speaks about.

It identifies at the same time a profession, some would say an art (or at least a set of peculiar skills), and its focus is on the role and choices of practitioners. One might therefore maintain that international relations – in so far as it is a discipline dealing with historical events and the actual working of functional systems – does not lend itself to a reading conducted on the basis of ethical premises. It would, however, be much less justified to dismiss the possibility of ethical scrutiny if our focus is not international relations but diplomacy, which means choice and action by what one, again following Der Derian, could venture to define as “professional mediators of international otherness”.

Diplomacy and ethics: An impossible coexistence?

Realism versus ethics – From Nicolo' Machiavelli to George Kennan

If realism can be considered a very powerful school of thought in international relations at the academic level, once we turn to practitioners in the field it is without doubt the predominant, if not in practice the exclusive, one.⁶ Most practitioners share what has been aptly defined as “skepticism concerning the relevance of moral categories to the relations among states”⁷ to the point of considering an contrary opinion as a symptom of soft-headedness,⁸ to be dismissed intellectually and rejected as unprofessional and dangerous to the defence of national interest. The famous “my country, right or wrong” (uttered by an American patriot who would certainly have been surprised to be qualified as “Machiavellian”) is the unspoken but quasi-universal foundation of the role and professionalism of diplomats the world over, who would also – in most cases – reject any intellectual or moral link with Machiavelli, and yet would accept as a matter of fact the need to have recourse, when necessary in the defence of their state, to deceit and/or the threat or actual use of violence.

One of the most brilliant diplomats of the twentieth century, George Kennan, has consistently espoused in his many and very influential writings the same view: that there are national interests consisting mainly in security, political independence, and well-being of the population; and that such needs have no intrinsic moral quality, and cannot be subject to moral scrutiny or judgement.⁹ As Hobbes said:

[T]he law of nations, and the law of nature, is the same thing. And every sovereign hath the same right, in procuring the safety of his people, that any particular man can have, in procuring his own safety.¹⁰

But should we accept the claims of realists when they say that their approach to international relations is objective and value-free? The author would say exactly the opposite, starting from a critical appraisal of the nature of Machiavelli's challenge to morals – to individual morals. Isaiah Berlin maintains that, in spite of the conventional wisdom on Machiavelli's "amoralism", his whole political theory is firmly grounded on a strong moral option that privileges over all other considerations the security and strength of the *res publica* (today we would say the state).¹¹ Or, as Stuart Hampshire has written, "Machiavelli himself is an advocate of one specific concept of the good".¹² Contemporary realists follow in the footsteps of their most eminent maestro, with the added peculiarity that they, differently from Machiavelli – whose intent was to give practical advice to the "Prince" – pretend to clothe their own options in "objective", "scientific" garb.

Facing this claim, it becomes necessary to draw attention to the ideological nature of realism, which appears to be the far-from-objective rationalization of a specific moral and political option in favour of the nation-state, its power, and its right to pursue political ends without being subject to ordinary moral scrutiny. Realism in international theory should be more correctly called "state realism".

To realize how far from being universal and non-controversial "state realism" is, it is useful to stop for a moment to consider other causes for moral justification that have been historically devised by humanity with the aim of justifying behaviour, even anti-social and violent behaviour. We might still have a preference for the state, but we will have to admit that there are other possible "realisms". The state has never been, and is not today, the only "legitimiser". Sophocles's *Antigone* is an early, and very powerful, testimony of the drama of conflicting ethical stands, with Creon representing the *raison d'état* and Antigone finding her legitimation in the adherence to another ethical paradigm, centred on duty to the family and religious piety. Creon appears to be a true realist. For him – to quote Paul Ricoeur – "the only good is that which serves the *polis*, the only evil that which harms it".¹³ Ricoeur, however, acutely points out that both Creon and Antigone are one-sided, partial, and sectarian. They are the stubborn and substantially inhuman holders of non-compatible ethical stands. Thus in no way could we say that Creon is "realist" while Antigone is "moral".

Of course, family and religion have a good name, and when confronted with *Antigone* most contemporary viewers are willing to follow Sophocles in his attempt to let both sides (the state versus religion and family) be heard without caricature or bias. Things become more difficult when we are confronted with another kind of "realism": revolutionary realism. Both in practice and in theory revolutionaries (in our era mostly of the

Marxist-Leninist persuasion) have systematically challenged common (for them "bourgeois") morality on the basis of a different brand of realism. We owe to Leon Trotsky the most articulate apology for this stand.¹⁴ It is remarkable to see how much his arguments follow the reasoning of the "realist" school: it is enough to substitute "revolution" for "nation-state".

As a matter of fact, if we want to be consistent realists, we could not avoid adding, together with family¹⁵ and revolutionary party, also fundamentalist religion, race, class, and even criminal groups.¹⁶ Contemporary reality gives abundant evidence of the fact that "state realism" gives voice to only one of the manifold claims to such exemption. And yet today, for historical and cultural reasons — as well as for the ideological hegemony of the nation-state — few would be as bold as Thomas Hobbes was in the following description, in which claims of "ethical exceptionalism" of the state versus other human groups are in practice dismissed:

And in all places, where men have lived by small families, to rob and spoil one another, has been a trade, and so far from being reputed against the law of nature, that the greater spoils they gained, the greater was their honour ... And as small families did then, so now do cities and Kingdoms which are but greater families (for their own security) enlarge their dominions, upon all pretences of danger, and fear of invasion, or assistance that may be given to invaders, and endeavour as much as they can, to subdue, or weaken their neighbours, by open force, and secret arts, for want of other caution, justly; and are remembered for it in after ages with honour.¹⁷

It would be one more ideological fallacy, on the other hand, to attribute the difficulty that ethical considerations face in crossing borders to the strength and dominance of the realist school of international relations. Beyond the prestige and intellectual appeal of thinkers/practitioners from Machiavelli to Kennan, from Hobbes to Kissinger, the real reason for the strong appeal of realism lies in the fact that it appears to coincide with and to supply an adequate rationalization to actual features and actual problems characterizing relations among nations; those very features and problems that make it so difficult for ethics and diplomacy to be rendered at least compatible.

The menace of war

Every being tends to persevere in its existence, with an "urge to be" (Spinoza's *conatus essendi*¹⁸) that overrides any moral precept; war threatens the existence of humans as individuals and as communities; ergo, to the extent that diplomacy unfolds under the menace of war, sur-

vival takes precedence over ethics. There is nothing specific in this process, since it is but the extension to the international sphere and the generalization of the principle (both legal and moral) of self-defence. Since self-defence is a universally recognized cause of exemption from moral judgement, positing nation-states as existing in a constant state of actual or potential self-defence against aggression (war) cannot but rule out any relevance of ethics for diplomacy. The "potential", here, is an essential qualification, ~~since otherwise one could only suggest the need~~ for a sort of "suspension of ethics" in open war or in its imminence, and not a blanket exclusion of ethics from diplomacy.

In describing the Islamic concept of *jihad*, commentators insist on the fact that the state of war it describes does not have to be open and actual: it is instead a sort of normal, natural, permanent condition which may be interrupted by temporary truces, but which never stops supplying the only real paradigm of the relations between the House of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and the House of War (*dar al-Harb*), meaning the non-Moslem world.¹⁹ We find a similar concept in Hobbes: "[T]he nature of war, consisteth not in actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary."²⁰

But when can there be "assurance to the contrary" in the real world of international relations? How can states – and their respective diplomacies, pursuing national interests in the real world thus described – exit from the conceptual mode of war, a mode that appears to rule out ethics? The problem is that nation-states have shown, historically, the tendency to give to the concept of self-defence against aggression a very wide interpretation. Again, let us go back to Machiavelli. Examining in Chapter 3 of *The Prince* the imperial policy of Rome, he considers it "justified ... by the nature of the international environment: the Romans were compelled to conquer to forestall threats to their security ... They conquered the world out of self-defence." (emphasis added).²¹ Thus Machiavelli justifies on the basis of the absolute primacy of self-defence and security both imperial expansion and pre-emptive attack. Even realists will agree that things become more complicated here. One example only: it is difficult to question the fact that the Soviet Union was historically guided, in its diplomacy, by a true "obsession for security" – the product of both the awareness of internal weakness²² and of events like post-1917 international intervention and Hitler's 1941 attack (with Napoleon's invasion in the distant, but still psychologically important, past). And yet, who would refrain from a political and moral judgement of events such as Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, and Afghanistan 1979? How is it possible to accept at face value the all-purpose, self-declared (and self-serving) security rationale for that "ethical exemption" that traditionally, facing a theoretically always looming danger of war, diplomacy claims for itself?

The dogma of national interest

The panoply of arguments utilized by those who maintain the necessarily "extra-ethical" nature of diplomacy is, however, not limited to self-defence and the overwhelming imperatives of security. Actually, self-defence and security are but the most dramatic, most cogent items within a wider category: that of national interest.²³ According to this dogma (the common catechism of diplomats of nations belonging to all geographical areas, cultures, and political orientation), ethics is inevitably subjective, whereas national interest is objective; thus the former is debatable, the latter is not; the former is abstract, the latter concrete. Ethical preference is divisive, national interest unites.

Once again we are apparently facing a claim of "ethical exemption" on the basis of a realistic, objective approach: "the process of government is a practical exercise, and not a moral one".²⁴ But once more it is not too difficult to detect, behind this apparent realism, a different moralism, one that consists in ethical partiality in favour of the state. National-interest doctrine, in other words, is but a doctrine of "higher allegiance"; overriding – whenever necessary – not only the specific interests of individuals, but their common morality. We are not facing, indeed, amoral realism, but rather what one could call "statist ethics".

The idol of sovereignty

This chapter is not the right context in which to examine the concept of sovereignty, one of the main pillars of the contemporary system of international relations. And yet any discourse on ethics and diplomacy cannot avoid touching upon sovereignty. Once more, we are led back to Hobbes, and in general to prevailing doctrine on the nature of state power. "Ethical exemption" claimed by diplomacy is not only based upon the overriding-right to act in self-preservation, or the wider concept of national interest, but also upon the nature of the sovereign state, an entity that "recognizes no superior" (*superiorem non recognoscens*, as the Romans stated). Though today few would formulate it in openly Hobbesian terms, this doctrine is still very strong as an implicit assumption underlying contemporary interstate relations. And it is a doctrine that has not only legal but also moral repercussions.²⁵

The fact is that diplomacy has been traditionally conducted on the basis of the assumption that no one has the legitimization to question on moral grounds the international behaviour of states; an assumption that has

The fetish of territoriality

One more reason for the problems that diplomacy has with ethics is the fact that the object of interstate relations is often territory. But what is it, exactly, that makes territorial issues and disputes so incompatible with an ethical approach? Ethics is recognizing the relevance of the other, admitting that the other's demands might be justified and at least should be seriously considered; territorial issues tend to be of a "zero-sum game" nature. Territory means resources, population, and strategic control. Territory constitutes the very body of the state, so that every loss is perceived as a mutilation, every gain as vital growth (or, more often, recovery of previously detached limbs).

This organic explanation, however, would not adequately explain the enormous attachment to territory displayed by most if not all nation-states. We must shift from geography (and geopolitics) to symbols. Why otherwise, if not for symbolic and ideological reasons, would it be that even uninhabited, barren, economically useless territory frequently becomes the object of ferocious, ethically deaf, diplomatic and military contention? It is ideology — nationalist ideology — that works systematically in order to transform real estate into sacred soil, that (to go back to the organic metaphor) is able to present the insignificant paring of a fingernail as the painful mutilation of an arm. Honour, history, and identity are brought to bear on what from a rational point of view might be seen as minor, or in any case negotiable, territorial issues. The result is that the space for reasonableness and morally defensible diplomacy is annulled. Once more, morality is presented as a treacherous weakness incompatible with the preservation of the integrity and honour of the nation.

The terminology used above to describe the main facets of the ethical "unfriendliness" of diplomacy is purposefully judgemental and biased: the idol of sovereignty, the dogma of national interest, the fetish of territoriality. Does this mean that the author denies the importance of sovereignty, the validity of the principle of the national interest, the reality of the territorial dimension? Quite the opposite. The attack is not, and could not be, on aspects and principles that do characterize, for very good intrinsic reasons, international relations — and that should be thoroughly considered in the theory and practice of diplomacy.

What is to be criticized is not their recognition, but their absolutization. The common fallacy (an intellectual fallacy inevitably turning into a moral one) in all these cases is the idolatric raising of a particular concern into an all-powerful, unconditionally overriding consideration. Indeed it can be said, following the Jewish tradition, that at the root of evil there lies the absolutization of particular aspects — even true, valid, positive aspects — of human reality.²⁷ The same concept can be found in a

Christian thinker, Pascal, when he defines "tyranny" as the pretence of affirming the value of a specific category (be it strength, beauty, knowledge, or piety) "outside its order".²⁸ The result has been described as follows by a contemporary writer in ethics:

Conscientious wickedness is rarely a case of pursuing an end unaware of the attendant consequences as evils; it is more often the case of a single-minded pursuit of an objective which can be reasonably seen as good, but at the cost of a callous insensitivity to evil done by the way.²⁹

Thus, defence of territory is legitimate, sovereignty is the necessary keystone of the international system, and national interest is the obvious point of reference for foreign policy. What is to be questioned, also because it expels ethics from the realm of diplomacy, is the raising of territoriality, sovereignty, and national interest to the absolute (which, one should remember, etymologically means unfettered, loose) status of an idol not subject to ethical scrutiny.

Ethics and diplomacy at the end of the twentieth century

The elements the author tried to identify in the previous section are of a permanent, intrinsic nature. But we live in history, we live in a society that undergoes rapid and radical transformations. An analysis of the ethics-in-diplomacy theme must therefore be conducted with reference also to the peculiarities of our epoch.

Ethics and diplomacy in a globalized world

Globalization is a limited, imperfect, and probably oversold paradigm, but one that, if handled with care, can function as a useful tool for understanding the times in which we are living. The author will suggest just a few points for reflection on the specific implications of globalization for the ethics (or non-ethics) of diplomacy.

If ethics means choice of morally relevant action, how can diplomacy allow for an ethical dimension in the presence of a theory/ideology that posits the impossibility of choice facing the "iron laws" of the globalized economy?³⁰ Paradoxically, neo-liberals tend to go the same way as their arch opponents, the Marxists: if reality is determined by "objective laws", then all political action, including diplomacy, must be shaped accordingly, so that any talk of ethics is simply inane. What sense can there be, to make one example, in assessing from an ethical point of view the impact of internationally sponsored (one might say imposed) stabilization plans, if we are convinced that there is no possible alternative choice? *Force*

majeure, as everybody knows, entails an exclusion of both legal and moral responsibility, so that there is a possibility that globalization will turn into a functional equivalent of the Cold War³¹ as a tool for rationalizing the exclusion of ethics from diplomacy. As a matter of fact, the intellectual positions of the realist school of international relations have always been remarkably similar – in their focus on necessity – to those that characterize Marxist economic determinism,³² another ethics-unfriendly doctrine. Following the end of the Cold War, realism in international affairs and (neo-liberal) economic determinism tend to coincide.

What is the impact on the possibility of an ethical dimension of diplomacy of the fact that today people who are still enormously different are put, as never before, in direct contact? If the face of the other is so radically different, what will happen to its concrete recognition, the basis of ethics? Of course this is an individual dilemma: for instance, many Europeans are confronted for the first time with the presence of radically different human beings in the streets of their cities, and their reaction, in many cases, leaves a lot to be desired from the point-of-view of ethics. But it also involves diplomacy: the diplomacy of migrations. The challenge is serious, often putting under stress not only the logistics involved with the absorption of an irregular and sometimes massive influx, but also the avowed progressive and humanistic beliefs of many governments. We are dealing here not with land or resources, not with trade or cultural programmes; we are dealing with real people, among them many women and children, suffering people escaping from situations of horror (be it war or persecution) or from conditions of difficult economic survival, if not downright hunger. If this branch of diplomacy is not ethically relevant, one cannot imagine which other branch could be. And yet here, too, the constraints of a globalized world – and its disconcerting combination of difference and proximity – heighten defensive attitudes and barriers, and raise the Moloch of necessity over choice, including moral choice. At times one gets the impression that governments (often fully supported by public opinion) are trying to compensate – through a rigid, often ostentatious, attitude of control and exclusion at the borders – for their growing loss of power, so characteristic of globalization, over vital items such as capital flows, exchange rates, localization, and conditions of investment. This, too, contributes to aggravating the insensitivity of “migration diplomacy” – an important branch of contemporary diplomacy – to ethical considerations

Universality challenged

relations, with a view to the repercussions of diplomatic action on the lives of concrete individuals. But which moral concerns? The question would have appeared merely rhetorical up until not very long ago (say, the middle of the twentieth century and decolonization), in so far as the marked cultural (and even religious) homogeneity of most international actors determined an implicit coincidence, at least in theory, on fundamental ethical values. It is interesting to note, however, that homogeneity was broken only in fact, but not in theory, at a very recent date, basically coinciding with the end of the Cold War. For about 50 years, a less homogeneous composition of the international community did not have any visible impact on the articulation of ethical values. In part this was due to the persistent cultural hegemony that colonial powers continued to exert over their former colonies even after independence; in part, also, to the fact that the main ideological challenge to the hegemony of Western powers came from Soviet communism, a system that was in its practice the antithesis of Western liberal democracy, but which in its doctrine purported to uphold the same values of human dignity, freedom, non-alienation, and democracy. The gap between theory and practice was of course monumental, often grotesque, and yet this ideological camouflage had as a consequence the fact that a real East-West confrontation on ethical issues never took place. This, of course, had major consequences in a world in which most weaker, non-European, non-developed countries had to find a niche and an alignment in the great schism dividing the more developed, or in any case more powerful, world.

The outbreak of an open ideological confrontation in recent years is due to several factors. One is of course the end of the East-West confrontation — a confrontation that for about half a century not only imposed discipline in political behaviour, but also strongly discouraged the formulation of alternative values. Second, we can point to the strengthening of political (often radical) Islam, a religion which focuses on morals rather than on theology, on “how to live” rather than on “what to believe”, and which therefore identifies the confrontation on moral values as being one of the most promising grounds for proving vitality and building consensus. Thirdly, in many Asian countries economic success has stimulated a renewed pride in ethical traditions that are presented as alternative to, and sometimes contradictory with, the hitherto unchallenged moral canon of the West.

Since these aggressive alternatives to Western “ethical hegemony” have already been voiced, especially in the field of human rights (a theme that is dealt with separately by Jack Donnelly in Chapter 6 of this volume), the writer will refrain from advancing deeper into the subject. Yet it has to be pointed out, in the framework of a discussion on ethics and ethical relativism in the field of human rights not only has

a direct impact on the diplomacy of human-rights-as-such, but it also raises supplementary doubts – confronted as we are today with ethical options that are divergent not only in practice, but also in theory – as to whether ethics and diplomacy are at all compatible.

Ethics and diplomacy: The case for compatibility

— In the previous sections the author has attempted to identify the reasons, both intrinsic and historically contingent, that make the coexistence of ethics and diplomacy a most problematic endeavour. In setting out the arguments for the sceptical view the chapter tried to subject them to criticism. But is it possible to conceive “ethics and diplomacy” instead of “ethics *versus* diplomacy”, and, in a more concrete focus, “how is it possible to look for compatibility”?

The purpose of this chapter is in fact that of challenging the common-sense, conventional-wisdom “oxymoron dogma” predominant among practitioners of diplomacy – not that of claiming a coincidence of ethics and diplomacy. The idea of a total coincidence of ethics with diplomacy, as with any other branch of politics, is the very essence of fundamentalism, or, better, *intégrisme*,³³ since by eliminating all autonomy of the political sphere, it ends up subsuming politics (and inevitably also political institutions and mechanisms) into an moral sphere that demands the rigorous application of rules – not subject to critical scrutiny or political option – that in most cases are interpreted and applied by an oligarchy of priests/ideologues. From Giovanni Gentile’s “ethical state” in fascist Italy to present-day fundamentalisms (not only Islamic, but also Christian or Jewish), the coincidence of ethics and politics makes for bad politics and questionable ethics. Compatibility means instead that, though not coinciding, politics (in this case diplomacy) and ethics can be linked in a way that is not mutually exclusive. Although there will be tensions, contradictions, and conflicts between them, there is nothing that prevents them from maintaining a sort of permanent dialogue; especially, subjecting diplomacy to ethical scrutiny is neither conceptually absurd nor practically unfeasible.

Ethics and the diplomat

Up until this point the subject of the discussion has been “diplomacy”; we will now turn to the diplomat to address the issue of the ethics of the public servant. According to a universally held view, the essence of the public servant consists in the obligation to perform

personal opinion interfere. This obligation is dictated by a self-evident consideration: if each individual official were to act according to personal taste and preference, the correct functioning of any governmental structure would be rendered impossible. One way of proving that this is indeed so is to take an empirical look at those systems which have not reached this stage of "depersonalization" of the role of a civil servant: they are backward systems, disorderly systems, unjust systems, endemically conflictive systems.

This is certainly true in the field of international relations. Let us imagine foreign policy conducted according to the personal inclinations (political and/or moral) of individual diplomats and the chaos and unpredictability that would follow. The state needs reliable representatives who will not let personal inclination interfere with instructions received: instructions that originate in the constitutionally competent organs and are formulated and conveyed through the bureaucratic, hierarchically ordained machinery of the ministerial department competent for foreign affairs. It is so, and it can only be so.

Yet we cannot stop here. If we did we would deprive the single individual as diplomat of the possibility of ethically relevant action. There would be no choice. Obedience would have to be of the no-questions-asked type, whatever the policy and whatever its consequences.³⁴ But this is not so, and has never been so even in practice. It is by now widely accepted that for all kinds of public servants (and this includes diplomats), obedience to bureaucratic orders is not a cause of exemption from moral – and legal – responsibility. This is especially evident in the case of major crimes. The road that was opened in Nuremberg³⁵ has now taken us to Rome, where in July 1998 the approval of the statutes of the permanent International Criminal Court would not have been possible without a wide global consensus on the moral/legal responsibility of individuals who serve their state in different capacities but who, by so doing, are in no way exempt from ethical scrutiny and legal sanction.

It would be untenable to maintain that diplomats are exempt from such scrutiny (and sanctions), and that the mandate of the International Criminal Court covers only the actual physical purveyors of violence. It would indeed be a bizarre limitation, especially in a world in which the distinction between military action and diplomacy is more and more blurred in the framework of complex conflictive situations; all the more so since the mandate of the court includes (though for the time being still wanting a definition) the crime of aggression, one in which diplomats can play as big a role as soldiers.³⁶

How can we square the contradictory needs of impersonal bureaucratic discipline and persistent moral responsibility? The fact is that we cannot. There must be a limit, a certain threshold beyond which

the duty of allegiance and obedience is overruled, annulled by the moral outrage of certain acts in which the individual "servant of the state" is instructed to participate. The ethics of the public servant (with its corollary of obedience, of non-personalization of behaviour and choices) can take us only so far. A morally sane human being should be capable of determining when that limit is reached, when one must be able to breach one's allegiance and say "no" to the crossing of that threshold.

It is necessary to recall that decisions to rebel against orders that are legitimate as to the line of command but that become illegitimate by their moral unacceptability are definitely not unheard of in the annals of diplomacy. Several historians of the Holocaust have stressed the role (sometimes merely passive, often active) of Italians, officially allied with the Germans, in saving thousands of Jews from detention and deportation to death camps.³⁷ Among those Italians were many military officers, but also several diplomats. Though the policy of the highest levels of fascist Italy, starting from Mussolini himself, was often wavering, contradictory, and ambiguous, there is no doubt that on many occasions Italian diplomats, in particular in the Balkans, proceeded totally on their own to perform acts of political indiscipline and to infringe very basic bureaucratic rules, for instance by giving Italian passports to Jews whose only link with Italy was having visited it once: a rather serious breach of the ethics of an official and one that would make any self-respecting consular officer cringe.³⁸ In an unforgettable interview (included in Joseph Rochlitz's documentary *The Righteous Enemy*), the former Italian consul in Salonica, Guelfo Zamboni, replied in a half-surprised, half-amused tone to the interviewer, amazed at this most unusual concession of passports to aliens: "Well, they were in danger of death, weren't they? So, what was I supposed to do, let them be deported and exterminated?"³⁹

The threshold at which personal assessment of moral duties becomes destructive of the ethics of the public servant is not a clearly defined line. Each – but that of course is no news in ethical discourse – has to draw that line and act accordingly. Certainly, if we were to allow the possibility for each diplomat to turn personal disagreement and mental reservation on any given issue into undisciplined behaviour and active rebellion we would revert to that individualistic free-for-all that is the antithesis of a functioning *polis*, even the most open and pluralistic one. And yet, there is always, even in cases that are not as monumentally horrendous as the Holocaust, a path for a dignified stand in the presence of radical moral disagreement with specific policies. In those cases one can avoid taking the extreme, always-questionable step of breaking loyalty by opting out – by resignation. Of course, in non-democratic regimes such an act can entail consequences that may be as dire as those provoked by open re-

tige, and career, but not life or freedom. Thus it becomes more feasible. But where has it happened more frequently, in the past decades? It seems not without significance to note that it is in the USA that many diplomats have resigned (over policy issues from Viet Nam to Bosnia), a country whose citizens give a special relevance to debate on ethical issues and at the same time are frequently haunted by the awareness of the responsibility that their government's actions or omissions entail in terms of human consequences around the world. To be able to raise ethical issues in diplomacy you indeed need both: moral sensitivity, and the perception of the impact on human beings outside your borders of the power wielded by your country in the international arena.

If there is this sort of "ethical switch" that can interrupt allegiance to the state in the case of moral dissent, wouldn't it be safer for a state, any state, to privilege staunch nationalists as their diplomats, at least in the highest-ranking positions? Wouldn't they be more reliable in all conditions and facing any sort of problem, any sort of dilemma? The fallacy of this sort of reasoning lies in forgetting what a government official is supposed to be. It is true that public servants are not justified in sacrificing their loyalty to the state and their disciplined behaviour within their administrations to the vagaries of personal taste, nor to political inclinations, local partiality, or special interests. However, by the same token it is not necessary, and even counterproductive, that they should be militants of the nation-state, true believers in king and country. They can be such as citizens, but no one demands that they be such as officials. The confusion between the two roles (citizen and official) is typically totalitarian, and amounts to saying that the only good lawyers are those who believe that their clients are innocent – and possibly love them, too.

Going back to diplomats, we indeed see that if we cast them as lawyers, and not as crusaders for the cause of their own nation-state, we will have solved part of our ethical dilemmas. Diplomats involved in a negotiation or dispute, no more than lawyers in court, do not have to believe in the righteousness of the cause they are defending. That is the essence of professionalism, a much more reliable foundation for good performance and loyalty than is belief. But the diplomat, as well as the lawyer, may decide at a certain point that there are some causes that are just too morally uncomfortable to defend, and opt out. It is of course easier to abandon litigation than to resign from government service, but conceptually there do not seem to be radical moral differences between the two instances. Both are rare, but both are possible.

The ethical dimension of diplomacy, however, should not be seen only in negative terms – as a limit to bureaucratic allegiance, as a moral safety valve allowing us to escape complicity with morally outrageous actions.

quo diplomatic system”⁴⁰—Actually, *status-quo* leaves very limited room for ethical discourse, since it confronts the individual actor with the stark alternative between playing by the existing rules or becoming a sort of conscientious objector and dropping out of the “regular” game. In real history – and real diplomacy – we are instead confronted with a moving framework of rules, with diplomats themselves playing a relevant role in the evolutionary process. Here ethics “gains space”, in so far as individual practitioners of diplomacy, even those who stick to the strictest allegiance to existing norms, are allowed to bring their own ethical inspiration to bear in shaping new international rules.⁴¹

Ethics and international law

If, as is widely accepted (with the exception of *intégristes* of various persuasions), ethics and law are different dimensions and do not necessarily coincide, then the same can of course be said for international ethics and international law. Ethics is indeed different from law, but how could one conceive the very possibility of ethical action in a totally lawless world? Anarchy and ethics are hardly compatible, so much so that those who deny the possibility of international ethics are logically obliged to describe the world as substantially anarchic, with individual states having the right to operate, for their own defence and for the pursuit of their interests, in a Hobbesian state of nature. According to Kenneth Waltz, for instance:

There is no way to get from here – a world of sovereign states operating in a state of nature – to there – a world of permanent peace, where morality and law reign in relations between sovereign entities.⁴²

It is of course true that in the total absence of law, ethical action amounts to the self-sacrificial option of saints and martyrs: in the international field, it would spell extinction. And yet, contrary to what Waltz maintains, a non-ideological analysis of the actual state of the world reveals that we are neither “here” nor “there”. As a matter of fact, both “state of nature” and “reign of peace and morality” are opposed, but equally unreal, descriptions. Saying that “we are neither here nor there” means, of course, that we are in part “here” and in part “there”. We have a legal framework that is real but fragile, developed but decentralized in its enforcement, and always threatened by actors who normally accept it, but who can at any moment upset the table and stop playing by the rules they have adhered to until then.

But that is exactly why projecting on to the international sphere the ethical discourse that was traditionally developed within the legally

regulated domestic body politic is a difficult task. Difficult, but not impossible, since in the very behaviour of states the two dimensions are not inexorably contradictory. It would be enough to consider the following, hardly questionable, factual consideration:

Commonly states will internalize the norms and principles embodied in regimes created out of pure self-interest, such that those norms and principles take on a moral hue over time ... Gradually the moral authority of internalized norms permits them to survive in the absence of external enforcement.⁴³

But the distinction between international law and international ethics cannot be pushed too far and transformed into a rigid dichotomy, not least because of the very nature of international law. It has been correctly remarked that the inadequacies and weaknesses of international law (if compared to the better-structured, systematically enforceable domestic norms) render it more similar to the field of ethics.⁴⁴ But this similarity goes beyond the relative "softness" of international law and has to do with its very structure and language. This is what has been defined by Dorothy V. Jones as "the declaratory tradition".⁴⁵ Jones writes:

It is precisely in this declaratory strand that the states have spelled out what international law means to them, and what they think it ought to be and, in so doing, have opened themselves to the possibility that there will be attempts to hold them to their word.

We are here confronted with an apparent paradox. International relations, as we have seen, seem rather impervious to ethical talk. And yet, in a bizarre compensation, present-day international texts (not only declarations, but also treaties, covenants, and bilateral and multilateral agreements of all sorts) indulge in the extensive spelling out of moral principles. For an ethics-unfriendly environment, as diplomacy should allegedly be, it is a remarkable fact indeed. One could talk here of "the diplomacy of the preamble", since it is usually in the preambular part of international agreements that these moral *consideranda* are inscribed. Pure rhetoric and hypocrisy? Definitely, if we were to subject to critical scrutiny the motivations of the subjects formulating those ethical avowals, we might reach this conclusion. Yet, even if we want to consider preambles as just receptacles of hardly believable moralistic rhetoric, those who follow international relations know that rhetoric (including rhetoric about ethics) is also a component of politics.

Machiavelli never thought that force alone was a determinant of ... but at the century gave strong consideration to a psychological

image. And it is interesting that we find basically the same concept in one of the most eminent of contemporary realists, Henry Kissinger.⁴⁶ In other words, power is also "soft power",⁴⁷ and – as the rise and fall of the Soviet Union seems to confirm – it would be a very precarious super-power indeed that were to rely exclusively on military, or even economic, strength and not on the capacity to exert its hegemony in the realm of values. But saying "values" means saying "ethics", so that one can conclude that ethics turns out to be a component in, and not an alternative to, real power.⁴⁸

We need, however, to take one step further, and to see what are the consequences – for the relationship between international law and international ethics – of this "declaratory approach". Here we have to move beyond the preambles, and see that even the normative part of international law shows an intrinsic connection with the ethical discourse.

Let us examine those principles that, as most will agree, can be considered as the fundamental pillars of international law:

- the sovereign equality of states
- the territorial integrity and political independence of states
- self-determination
- non-intervention in the internal affairs of states
- peaceful settlement of disputes
- no threat or use of force
- fulfilment in good faith of international obligations
- cooperation with other states
- respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms⁴⁹

It is enough to read through this list to realize how artificial is the dichotomy of law/ethics in international relations. All these principles are as much legal as they are ethical, or, perhaps better, they are ethical principles on the way to being "hardened" into legal ones. If one thinks that this smacks of evolutionist positivism, then what could be alternatively suggested is that these principles are like synapses at which a constant exchange between ethics and law takes place. Whatever our approach, however, in the light of these principles it seems difficult to deny the legitimacy of the ethical discourse in international law – as well as in diplomacy, whose task is to work with and on those principles to pursue political ends.

The positing of those principles, furthermore, opens up a whole set of contradictions and dilemmas that appear to be more moral than legal, since their solution can be found not by a very problematic process of interpretation or reference to jurisprudence, but by applying criteria of an ethical nature. The main obstacle to solving the dilemmas that constantly arise in real-life international situations is that those principles

— have no objective ranking: is self-determination — to take one of the more frequent quandaries — to prevail over territorial integrity; or vice-versa?

The author maintains that in practice the only way of solving this conceptual legal gridlock is by having recourse to ethical considerations. It is also maintained that this is exactly what the international community has been doing in practice. One can recall several cases Michael Walzer has written:

Nonintervention gives way to proportionality only in cases of massacre or politically induced famine and epidemic, when the costs are unbearable. Then we are justified in acting or, more strongly, we ought to act (like the Vietnamese in Pol Pot's Cambodia, or the Tanzanians in Idi Amin's Uganda, or the Indians in what was then East Pakistan) without regard to the idea of sovereignty.⁵⁰

Of course, writing in the spring of 1999, we should add to this list NATO intervention against Serbia over Kosovo, a case of ethically motivated disregard of the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. Indeed, the international community by and large condoned (in all these cases — and in others like the Syrian intervention putting an end to the Lebanese civil war) evident violations of the principle of non-intervention because the costs of the *status quo* were considered — as Walzer writes — unbearable. But “unbearable” does not sound like a legal term; rather, it is a moral one.

But let us take other cases of contradiction over fundamental principles. The way a regime treats its own citizens is, according to traditional doctrine, “its own business”, and the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs (not only a general principle of international law, but one that is also enshrined in the UN Charter)⁵¹ should prevent any outside meddling. Yet, from apartheid in South Africa to repression against Kurds in north Iraq, the international community has shown that it can, on some occasions, overcome that impediment and overrule that prohibition even in the presence of a hostile attitude on the part of the state concerned. Of course that has been done, as a rule, by recourse to Chapter VII, the enforcement chapter, that is indicated in the UN Charter itself as the only exception to the prohibition of interference in the domestic affairs of any country.⁵²

NATO intervention against Serbia over repression and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo has shown that, even apart from Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the growth of an ethically based sensitivity to human rights the world over is exerting such pressures on diplomacy that, with increasing frequency, “principle 9” of the list is ominously knocking at the door of

been extremely controversial, especially as far as legal legitimization is concerned, but who would maintain that respect for the principle of non-interference in 1994 Rwanda should have ruled out trying to save, forcibly if necessary, hundreds of thousands from genocide?⁵³ And who has the moral courage to maintain, today, that the principle of non-interference rules out international action to stop the outrage of Taleban treatment of Afghan women? (Incidentally, what are the moral differences between the situation of Afghan women under the Talebans and that of South African blacks under apartheid, to which the international community did respond forcefully setting aside the taboo of non-intervention?)

The same is happening to "principle 3", self-determination, once very high – given its compensatory function towards the injustices and crimes of colonialism – in the moral ranking of the international community, but now (especially after the consequences of its application to former Yugoslavia) being more and more subject to a scrutiny that is not, cannot be, of a legal nature (the principle still stands, and international law could not do without it), but rather is moral. We have all become consequentialists, since we are asking ourselves what will be the repercussions on real people of the application of that abstract principle? The widespread reluctance to accept the idea of the independence of Kosovo – an apparently unjustifiable exception to the previous indiscriminate approval in the region of self-determination for anyone who would bother to ask for it – is also of this nature, should also be of this nature, and is not only the product of balance-of-power considerations.

Given the impossibility of an objective, non-contentious prioritization of principles, it is ethical orientation (together, to be sure, with political preference, usually formulated – however – in moral terms) that determines the actual ranking of principles; a ranking that is not fixed but which, as we have seen, shifts together with changes in culture and moral sensitivities the world over.

A space for ethics Between anarchy and total power

In the attempt to look for an ethically compatible diplomacy one must necessarily try to clarify what are the systemic conditions that make such an option possible – how, to put it differently, the space for ethical action can be identified, or created, in the structure of the international system.

The author has already hinted at the fact that if it were true that the relations between states are of a purely anarchic nature, no talk of ethics in diplomacy would be possible: *bellum omnium contra omnes* is the "point zero" of ethics. But if there is a point zero of ethics in the total dispersion of anomic power, there is also a vanishing point located at the

with anarchy, but it hardly thrives better in conditions of totalitarian power, where lack of limit and control breeds injustice,⁵⁴ and where individual moral choice not only constitutes a deadly risk but is often annulled by the hammering in of an official message that fills all spaces and leaves no room for alternative views or contradiction. Choice itself, of any kind, is not conceivable in conditions of absolute, totally centralized power: and choice is the very core of ethics.

If we apply this to the international sphere, we realize that a space for ethical diplomacy requires, to go back to the critical quote from Kenneth Waltz's formula, that the international system continues to be "neither here nor there". The world could definitely use some more and some better legal "vertebration", especially in the phase of enforcement and not only standard-setting. And yet, it is false that, since anarchy is bad, world government is good. Kant himself, though putting peace and coexistence first, had serious doubts (also of an ethical nature) on the possibility of a world government.⁵⁵ Apart from the tautological consideration that world government would eliminate diplomacy (ethical or otherwise), it can be said in more general terms that the space for ethics is only created when the individual can actually choose – the space between total anarchy and total rule.

It is important to address the question of power, its levels, and distribution in relation to the possibility of a space for ethical action. In classic political theory (domestic), Montesquieu's doctrine is still valid in identifying a mechanism of repartition of powers that impedes tyranny – and is perfectly functional for the creation of a space for ethically relevant individual choice and also for ethically compatible politics. What should we aim for in the international field? World government, we have seen, is not the answer. But a system based exclusively on individual sovereign states runs the constant risk of oscillating between lapses into anarchy and attempts to impose imperial rule: the space for ethics is threatened in both cases.

If it is true that both absolute anarchy and absolute power destroy the space for ethics, then what we need is a sort of "vertical Montesquieu". Similarly to the positive ethical impact of the horizontal, intra-state division of power spelled out by that great political thinker, a vertical division, both supranational and subnational, would help create that "space for ethics" (including ethics in diplomacy) by making power more efficient and more diffuse. Indeed, we have seen that the denial of the possibility of ethical behaviour in diplomacy is closely linked to the doctrine of the exclusive, sovereign, and absolute power of the nation-state.

State-centrism, in many cases becoming "statolatry", is one of the main

foreseeable future, the main form in which man lives in society. Yet it is by applying some "vertical Montesquieu" that all ethics-incompatible idolatry of this specific political form will be overcome. Power should be vertically distributed along a line that starts with subnational units (local communities with a degree of autonomy and self-administration), in some cases followed by federal units, continues to the level of the state, reaches the regional level of both political and economic integration, and finally attains the level of world governance (not government) that is guaranteed by the functioning of international organizations, sectorial or universal in character.

Vital local power is a reality the world over. More and more, centralized states are looking for forms of federal or non-federal decentralization of power capable of reabsorbing tensions and addressing diversity without sliding into disintegration: The United Nations, in spite of all its problems, is much more than a forum for debate, and operates functioning institutions in fields as varied as security, development, and human rights: it is a vital part of world governance. Regional arrangements are moving from mere trade to politics. The case of the European Union is the most advanced and the most significant, so much so that the power of its member states – whether they like it or not, whether they realize it or not – is already drastically curtailed. What is even more relevant to our subject, EU partners have developed among themselves a new kind of diplomatic relations in which – though divergences of interest are still a reality – ethical behaviour is no less taken for granted than among actors within a national body politic; a type of diplomacy where "Machiavelians" are not only disapproved but – given the intrinsically cooperative nature of the system – cannot possibly manage to get very far in the pursuit of their diplomatic goals.

It is indeed by strengthening and continuing this growing vertical distribution of power in the international system that we will ensure a space for ethically compatible diplomatic action, because the institutional counterweights of a multi-layered system of governance – as well as the multiplicity of allegiances as opposed to the idolatric recognition of only one power (whatever that power may be) – are the best guarantees that the diplomat (as well as the judge, the soldier, or even the common citizen) will be able to resist the pressure to violate ethical norms because of a mistaken concept of duty and loyalty. This multi-layered system of power is not, and will never be, in a position of equilibrium. On the contrary, it will remain in constant tension, in need of continuous institutional adjustments, the theatre of frequent political reassessments. And yet, it is in this very tension that resides the best hope for a dignified and

The European archipelago exists insofar as it faces a double danger: being resolved into a hierarchically ordained space/being dissolved into inhospitable, idiotic units, incapable of looking for one another, of calling one another into parts that have no longer anything to partake.⁵⁶

A space for ethics: Between self-preservation and self-denial

The previous section considered, in the search for compatibility between ethics and diplomacy, both legal norms and institutional arrangements, and tried to see how a space for ethics could be identified in their framework. It is time now, still in search of that controversial space, to focus on a more specifically ethical approach. Again, realists try to formulate the issue in starkly alternative terms: either a nation-state fights systematically (and regardless of moral principles) for self-preservation or, in that acceptance of the needs and reasons of others that is the essence of ethics, embarks on a path of self-denial leading to its gradual weakening – eventually to the point of extinction. The implications for the discourse on diplomacy are clear. Who are the diplomats who would consciously embark, on account of moral concerns, on a path leading to the weakening and possibly the extinction of their own country? If we phrase the question in these terms, ethics and diplomacy indeed look incompatible.

An answer to this dilemma – an artificial one, actually a case of intellectual blackmail – can be found in ethical theory at large, with no reference to the specific case of the nation-state. Self-preservation and survival are by no means the exclusive need of nation-states: they are first and foremost a primary urge/right of individuals. But who would maintain, in ethical theory, that self-preservation destroys the possible space for ethical behaviour? Concern – even love – for the other does not have to be contradictory with survival: on the contrary, survival is the evident precondition of ethical action. One of the most compelling enunciations of this concept is found in Vladimir Jankelevitch. According to this eminent French moral thinker, the territory of ethics can be located in the space between absolute love – self-denial to the point of self-destruction – and absolute being, by definition totally indifferent to ethics. Jankelevitch writes: “A being totally deprived of love is not even a being; a love without a being is not even a love.”⁵⁷ As a consequence, a space for ethical behaviour can only be found by pursuing all the love that is compatible with the preservation of being.

Let us try to apply this principle to international relations, and specifically to diplomatic action. Nation-states can be actually threatened with extinction, so it would be preposterous to state that the only possible “ethically compatible” diplomacy is one of pacifism. Ethics demands that

to avoid violent conflict – but not pacifist, if we interpret this term in its most consistent meaning: the refusal to have recourse to armed force in all instances, even defensive ones. Chamberlain and Churchill are of course the archetypes of two different approaches to diplomacy, and more specifically to diplomacy in the face of a threat of aggression. And yet, if we take Great Britain as the historical subject, we see that morally, facing the Nazi challenge, the country demonstrated that it was willing, in order to avoid violent conflict, to go to the brink of self-denial, only to draw later the conclusion that there was no alternative to violent self-defence and self-affirmation. What is important to stress is that Chamberlain was deeply wrong *in fact* (wrong assessment of the adversary, of the possibility to stipulate solid agreements with him, of the fact that appeasement with Adolf Hitler could mean peace), but he was not wrong *in principle*. It is important to state this, especially since bellicose “realists” the world over have been using Chamberlain, ever since 1938, as a handy symbol to deny the legitimacy of the morally justified and politically rational search for alternatives to violent conflict. Cries of “Chamberlain!” resound whenever, from the Middle East to the Balkans, there are attempts to find an alternative to war.

Another important clarification concerns the very definition of survival. As mentioned above, the tendency of nation-states to declare as “vital” marginal chunks of real estate, or even symbols, is quite widespread – and yet it would be absurd if we were to take those claims at face value. Up to a certain point, a threat to survival entails subjective elements of appreciation, but the idea (the mainstay of nationalist agitation) that a barren rock in contested waters is vital for the survival of a country – and therefore diplomacy aimed at its preservation or acquisition for the homeland should not be subject to moral scrutiny – is too preposterous to be taken seriously.

The issue of survival, for nation-states, is often bound with that of identity – one additional problem for ethics, indeed, given the non-rational, non-negotiable nature of this deep psychological need. If we shift from survival (a debatable but substantive concept) to the more dubious concept of identity, moral discourse becomes even more complicated. In fact, one can rationally prove, in many if not most cases, that yielding – on the basis of both legal and moral considerations – to the claims and rights of others does not have to mean for a nation-state to go inexorably down the path to self-destruction.

But one cannot “prove” that even a minor event, psychologically charged with historical symbolism, will not irreparably mutilate (to use the language of nationalists) the very soul of the nation. Here, again, as in the case of survival, one should try to “deconstruct” nationalist claims