The development of normative theory in International Relations:
Some practical implications for norm-based and value-based scholarly inquiry

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Abstract

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This article attempts to assess the development and significance of normative theory in International Relations as an academic discipline. It is pointed out that a revival of normative concerns and issues in International Relations has transpired in recent decades, and that many scholars in International Relations today accept a proposition that scientific knowledge and inquiry in the discipline and its application should be underpinned or directed by a defensible normative commitment. It is furthermore pointed out that normative theory and some practical manifestations of norm-based and value-based scholarly inquiry in the discipline are a matter of great significance, since these issues relate to some moral and ethical dimensions of activities in the international community. The article concludes by asserting that the growth of normative theory in International Relations is also of great importance and significance for scholarly research from a Christian perspective.

Opsomming

Die ontwikkeling van normatiewe teorie in Internasionale Verhoudinge: enkele praktiese implikasies vir norm- en waardegebaseerde wetenskaplike ondersoek

Hierdie artikel poog om die ontwikkeling en betekenis van normatiewe teorie in Internasionale Verhoudinge as 'n akademiese dissipline te ondersoek. Daar word aangetoon dat normatiewe aangeleenthede en

kwessies in Internasionale Verhoudinge opnuut van belang geraak het in die afgelope dekades, asook dat menige kenner van Internasionale Verhoudinge vandag aanvaar dat wetenskaplike kennis en ondersoek deur 'n normatief-verdedigbare verbintenis onderlê of gerig moet word. Daar word voorts aangetoon dat normatiewe teorie en sekere praktiese manifestasies van norm- en waarde-gebaseerde wetenskaplike ondersoek in die dissipline 'n saak van besondere belang is, omdat dit verband hou met bepaalde morele en etiese dimensies van aktiwiteit in die internasionale gemeenskap. Die artikel sluit met die standpunt dat die toenemende belangrikheid van normatiewe teorie in Internasionale Verhoudinge ook van besondere belang en betekenis is met betrekking tot wetenskaplike ondersoek vanuit 'n Christelike gesigspunt.

1. Introduction

International Relations (IR)[1] as an autonomous academic discipline dates back to the end of World War I. At a theoretical level, IR has always been cast as a discipline that is divided: a discipline of theoretical disagreement and discontent. In addition, its subject matter is prone to change and transformation. Looking back at the history of IR as an academic discipline, it is especially important to note that IR organises itself through a constant oscillation between grand debates. In this regard, a number of "great debates" could be identified between the 1920s and current-day academic practice of IR (Du Plessis, 2001:138-140). As far as these "great debates" are concerned, much of these have been concerned with rival views and macro-theories to explain or understand key events in the international system. These views are not readily comparable, for they sometimes project very different views of the world.

However, the concern of this article relates more to the scientific methods or type of scholarly inquiry underlying the above-mentioned macro-theories. Accordingly, it focuses on the "scientific character" or "scientific-ness" of IR as an academic discipline. In this regard, it should be noted that a significant segment of the great debates in IR revolved around the "intellectual revolt" which a disciplinary approach that has become known as Behaviouralism – and the quantitative approaches to the study of international relations – represented. Behaviouralists suggest that phenomena in IR should be observed systematically and comprehensively, that only

1 The term *International Relations* is preferred to *International Politics* as the context and semantic scope of the former are broader than the latter. See Holsti (1983:19) for a clarification of the two concepts.

generalisations rooted in empirical evidence should be formulated, and that such generalisations should be tested in accordance with the scientific method (Couloumbis & Wolfe, 1982:14). The fierce debates of the 1960s have in recent decades extended to ongoing debates between so-called Rationalist (empirical) and Reflectionist (normative) approaches (Du Plessis, 2001:138). These debates are newer references to opposing positions, but they are an effective perpetuation of earlier discourses on whether the discipline of IR should be informed by "scientific" or rational formulations.

This said, the main focus of this article is concerned with the emergence and growing importance of normative theory in IR in recent decades. It should be clear that normative theory is of great importance from a norm-based and value-based scientific perspective, and therefore much more than a matter of narrow disciplinary concern. Normative theory in IR refers to the moral or ethical dimension of activities in the international sphere and the question is whether macro-theories in IR and scientific practice in the field of politics in general should extend to the point that they not only explain reality, but also evaluate and suggest certain changes. In other words, this notion deals with the question of whether theories should operate within a set of norms (standards of good and bad in a simplistic sense) in terms of which existing reality is evaluated.

To address and analyse the aforementioned, this article will firstly clarify the phenomenon of "international relations", what it is meant to denote and what images of the world it conveys. In addition, it will attend to IR as a specific field of academic study taught at universities as a "subject" or "discipline". Secondly, the article will focus on the development of IR theory and specifically on two "types" of IR theory, namely normative political theory on the one hand (which is based on reason and boils down to a search for universal truths about politics), and empirical or "scientific" theory on the other (which is aimed at explaining phenomena). Having clarified this, the focus will then shift to contemporary developments – especially with regard to a "revival" of normative theory as a result of specific developments in the international community that lends itself much more readily to normative than empirical analysis. In this regard, developments in the South African context will also specifically be assessed. Lastly, the article will reflect on the state of normative theory in contemporary IR, as well as some of the practical manifestations of contemporary norm-based and value-based research approaches in IR. In the final analysis, a cursory appraisal of the "revival" and current significance of normative

theory, specifically from a Christian scholarly perspective, will receive attention.

2. IR as an academic discipline

Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (1990:14) define international relations as the effort of one state, or another international actor, to influence in some way another state, or another international actor. Such an influence-based relationship may encompass the actual or threatened use of military force, or it may be based on political or economic inducements. International relations, therefore, relate to many but not necessarily all transactions or interactions that take place across the globe. To this end, the academic discipline of IR is generally concerned with relationships between or among all of the actors, i.e. state and non-state, international and transnational actors, to the extent that they contribute to an understanding of political phenomena.

Lawson (2003:4) states that IR in its simplest and narrowest sense denotes the study of relations between states. In a somewhat broader sense, IR denotes interactions between state-based and a plurality of other actors across state borders. This denotation includes a variety of non-governmental actors and organisations. A related concern is the state system as a whole that has been widely regarded as providing the essential foundation for the international order that is, in turn, a prerequisite for justice. Whether one adopts the narrower or the broader understanding, the central institutional focus, however, remain the state. Indeed, the entire edifice of traditional IR is founded on the modern sovereign state.

At the same time, it should be noted that many IR scholars have increasingly become critical of a too heavy emphasis and focus on the state and state systems. Nel and McGowan (2002:6-11), for instance, take a somewhat less "statist" view than Lawson by explaining that the prominence of the global system in people's lives has meant that quite a few academic fields have made it their business to study aspects of it. International Economics and International Law, as well as various environmental sciences are, for instance, studying the global effects of the ways humans interact in the global environment. The field of IR also studies aspects of the global system. At the same time, a specific focus that makes it possible to distinguish between IR and other academic fields is also aimed on the ways in which actors organise and manage their interactions in the global system, and how this approach leads to the establishment, maintenance and transformation of governance

structures in the world. Relations in the global system may involve states, in any combination of two or more, or may exclude states, or may involve non-state actors. IR is also concerned with "global governance" that is the sum total of authoritative measures to structure and manage the system as a whole. In view of the above, IR can be defined as the subject that studies global order: how order emerges, is maintained and is transformed in the global system through the use of authority and/or power to structure and manage the relations between actors.

IR as a distinct field of study has developed primarily in an American setting (Couloumbis & Wolfe, 1982:17). IR is obviously closely related to politics – is in fact often referred to as "word politics" – and is generally classified, along with disciplines such as Economics, Sociology and Anthropology, as a social science. But it also has close relations with History, Philosophy and International Law. In South Africa, Departments of Political Science (sometimes dubbed Political Studies) more often than not has the responsibility for the teaching of IR.

This state of affairs raises the question of what units and levels of analysis are used in IR. Goldstein (1994:120) outlines the following relevant levels:

- The individual level of analysis that concerns the perceptions, choices and actions of individual human beings.
- The domestic (or "state" or "societal") level of analysis that concerns the aggregations of individuals within states who influence state actions in the international arena.
- The interstate (or "international" or "systemic") level of analysis that concerns the influence of the international system upon outcomes.
- The global level of analysis that relates to global trends and forces that transcends the interactions of states.

Concerning the need for a reliable theoretical framework through which the above-mentioned phenomena may be interpreted, it has already been pointed out that IR organises itself through a constant oscillation between grand debates – specifically involving a number of rival views and macro-theories to explain or understand key events in the international system. These debates involve views that are not readily comparable, for they sometimes project very different views of the world. Each approach regards particular problems as the main ones and selects different objects to study. More

specifically, until the early 1970s the discipline was dominated by two rivalry approaches or paradigms: idealism and the more enduring realism. The message of idealism as a paradigm has always been that wars happen as a result of misunderstandings, ignorance and stupidity and that they could therefore be prevented if only leaders and citizens would consider the probable, if unintended, consequences of their actions. Thus idealism was a version of IR which focused on how to maximise the free flow of information and remove obstacles to accurate perceptions. As a theory it was based on understanding international relations rather than explaining it. The paradigm of realism on the other hand, is based on the point of view that international relations are governed by objective, timeless "laws" which are rooted in universal facts of human nature. It is argued that the driving force in international relations is power in various forms, all of which relate to interests. Realism has by far been the most prominent and dominant approach to the study of international relations since IR emerged as an autonomous academic discipline in the 20th century (Unisa, 1996:16-19).

Since the early 1970s three rivalry approaches or macro-theories could be distinguished[2] – all of which are aimed at explanation. These are realism in a somewhat "new appearance", called neo-realism; pluralism (also known as neo-liberalism or the world community approach); and structuralism (also known as globalism or the world system approach).

- *Neo-realism* basically advocates the importance of the state in a (changed) world where strong transnational economic role-players threaten to undermine the importance and primacy of the state (Burchill, 2001:87). Furthermore, key figures in neo-realism deviate from the classical realist view that power-driven international politics is rooted in the nature of humankind. Rather, they point towards the "anarchical condition" of the international system that imposes the accumulation of power as a systematic requirement on states (Burchill, 2001:90).
- *Pluralists* or *neo-liberalists* reject the singular simplicities of the realist approach of putting the state in the centre of the study of international relations. Whereas realists took the state as the only really significant factor in international relations, this school of liberal thought emphasises a plurality of actors in the international

2 It needs to be noted that there are also a number of other significant theories or approaches to explain or understand key events in the international system.

system (Lawson, 2003:49). In essence, they assert that states have to operate in a world in which nonstate actors intrude on their territory and encroach on their autonomy. These other actors (subnational, supranational and transnational) have specific spheres of interest in which they challenge the dominance of the state.

- Lastly, the more recent *structuralism* views international relations from the perspective of less developed nations. In short, structuralists believe that there are other actors than the state whose precise role in the international community depends on the interests of international capital. This view implies that the true actors are classes and the position of the state within the global network of capital is crucially important (Unisa, 1996:16-19).

This said, Labuschagne (1991:33) correctly asserts that when uninitiated students of IR turn to IR theory for a proper understanding and explanation of international relations, they often find themselves frustratingly in the centre of contending and rival views of the world. Be that as it may, with regard to the main focus of this article it is important to note that since the late 1940s there has been a gradual development of methodologies and techniques for analysis, research and teaching in IR, which has contributed to the growth of IR theory. This is outlined in greater detail in the section below.

3. The development of IR theory

The simplest definition of a theory is probably that it is a mental picture of how things in a specific segment of reality hang together or are connected (Nel, 1999:50). Theories are basically general explanations of certain selected phenomena set forth in a manner satisfactory to someone acquainted with the characteristics of the reality being studied. It could also be said that theories are intellectual tools that help us to organise our knowledge of priorities in research as well as the selection of methods to carry out research in a fruitful manner. Theories furthermore help us to relate knowledge in our own field and they provide tools to apply the methods of scientific inquiry in an orderly rather than a haphazard fashion.

For more than a decade after World War II, scholars debated whether IR could be called an academic discipline with a methodology and a substantive content of its own. This question was also raised whether it was not so encyclopaedic as to belong to

several disciplines. Some scholars regarded it as an "emerging discipline", i.e. one in the process of formation. Eventually the 1960s saw a considerable expansion of interest in theoretical analysis. Insights from the biological, psychological, anthropological, sociological, economic and other behavioural sciences were borrowed with a view to explaining international relations. Considerable emphasis was placed on abstract model-building, while a variety of approaches to the understanding of relationships between humans and their milieu, regional interaction, dynamics in the international system, the causes of war, the conditions for deterrence, arms races and arms control, decision-making, and related subjects in foreign policy and international relations came about (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 1990:9, 13).

Importantly, the endeavour towards comprehensive theory-building and the utility of theory in the discipline of IR began with the "great debate" between traditional advocates of a normative approach to IR and those who were more often than not influenced by the methods of the newer behavioural sciences (much of which was based on the natural science) that placed their emphasis on quantification. In short, traditionalists emphasised the relative utility of disciplines like History, Law, Philosophy and other traditional methods of inquiry. Behaviouralists argued in favour of social-science conceptualisation, quantification of variables, formal hypothesis testing and causal model building. At the centre was the question of appropriate methodology (Viotti & Kauppi, 1993:2).

3.1 Normative theory vs. empirical theory

Having touched upon some relevant aspects of IR theory, it is necessary to elaborate further on the aforementioned by focusing on the crystallisation of two "types" of IR theory: normative political theory on the one hand (which is based on reason and even philosophical points of departure, and is a search for universal truths about politics) and empirical or "scientific" theory on the other (which is aimed at explaining phenomena). The following sections will thus attempt to deal further with the "scientificness" or "scientific character" of the discipline by unpacking the basic tenets and premises of behaviouralist and normative theorists.

3.1.1 Empirical theory

Broadly speaking, empirical theories in the social or natural sciences relate to facts and provide explanations or predictions for observed phenomena. Furthermore, hypotheses associated with these

theories are subject to being tested against real-world data or facts. Clinically speaking, theorists need not have any purpose in developing such empirical theories other than satisfying their intellectual curiosity, although some would seek to make their work policy-relevant (Viotti & Kauppi, 1993: 4-5).

It has already been mentioned that the discipline of IR took a new turn in the 1960s from a metatheoretical point of view. In the words of Olson and Groom (1991:125-126), a "paradigmatic debate" was taking place. In their assessment of the "intellectual revolt", which Behaviouralism and quantitative approaches represented,

> The behavioural and quantitative perspectives both promised for a time to engender an entirely new kind of scientific consensus … their contribution to the growth of the discipline was to be unmistakable, if not dominant … IR was now analytical rather than prescriptive.

Not surprisingly, behaviouralists drew on the natural sciences for guidance and they suggested that the application of scientific method should constitute the *sine qua non* for research. Behaviouralists, or the "behavioural movement", which started to transpire in the late 1940s, not only affected IR, but also the more established social sciences, such as Economics, Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology and Political Science (Little, 1980:14). In IR, behaviouralists – also described as "scientists of politics" by Couloumbis and Wolfe (1982:13-14) – have made a stand that the guidelines for the scientifically oriented IR scholars are to "observe, observe, observe". They asserted that it was a waste of time to analyse politics (in whatever manifestation) from a position of "faith"; that humans are either inherently good or evil, exploitive or even exploited. They would, for instance, argue that it is meaningless to make arbitrary statements about violence being either a natural or hereditary phenomenon, or a pattern of behaviour caused by manipulable environmental conditions such as political cultures, social norms and class confrontations.

Behaviouralists – with their roots in the rationalist or positivist tradition – therefore see the world as existing objectively and they claim that subject and object have to be separated in order to theorise properly. They also contend that IR theorists are able to delink themselves from the world in order to observe and to provide policy that would correspond with the real word. Accordingly, they regard the world (and international relations) as something external to theories relating to it, and they see the task of theory only to report on the international community (Du Plessis, 2001:141).

Behaviouralist or empirical theorists are therefore strongly opposed to any overt and self-conscious involvement with specific situations. Also, since theorising should be limited to what is observable, it should exclude ideas or feelings. Accordingly, normative judgements are regarded as unscientific and should be banished from theory: because this is the subject and task of a separate field, namely ethics (Unisa, 1996:29).

In view of the above, behaviouralists would typically distance themselves from a macro-theory such as idealism that *inter alia* purports that states co-operate to their mutual benefit on a range of issues, such as health, the environment, making and keeping peace in conflict situations between states, promoting economic development, co-ordinating and managing international financial systems, and many more (Nel, 1999:60). Moreover, they would discard any effort on the part of idealist scholars to reflect on global interdependence and specifically to comment on efforts to decrease the prospects of global or transnational conflict. Instead, they would be more inclined to subscribe to realism as a macro-theory, that purports that states are essentially selfish actors who seek to maximise their own interests. In fact, according to Nel (1999:55), realists are less concerned with prescribing what the correct (wisest, most prudent) political practice is than they are with developing an understanding of the basic patterns of international relations – an outlook that stands in stark contrast with a normative theoretical orientation.

Specifically, as far as IR scholarship in South Africa is concerned, indications are that most political scientists of the past decades subscribed to a behaviouralist approach of scholarly enquiry. In a survey conducted in 1990, it transpired that "over two thirds of respondents accepted the canon of objectivity" (Taylor, 1990:120). In a more recent study it was specifically contended that IR scholarship is

> dominated by a postured objectivist epistemology, the practitioners of whom at times have asserted that they 'don't do theory' and merely represent the 'facts' … This dominant approach postures a 'scientific' approach, implicitly separating object from subject … (Taylor, 2000:208).

Be that as it may, the association of behaviouralism with "scientific method" precipitated a split in IR between behaviouralists and anti-behaviouralists (Little, 1980:14). The reason for this was that many IR scholars continued to favour a reflective philosophical mode of analysis as they were strongly opposed to a positivist approach in IR

scholarly work. “In practice, therefore, behaviouralism, as a movement, proved more effective in terms of splitting the existing disciplines than drawing the different disciplines together” (Little, 1980:14). This view is outlined in the section below with specific reference to the emergence of normative theory in a more sophisticated form.

3.1.2 Normative theory

It is commonly known in the social sciences that during the 1960s neo-Marxists started to claim that the idea of an objective and neutral science is suspect. Theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas contended that social theory by definition entails social critique and they managed to infiltrate the mindscape of many intellectuals (Strauss, 2003:257). Suffice it to say that much has been written on normative theory, some explicit, much implicit, but for the purpose of this paper the principal concern is normative theory in politics and more specifically IR. The source of normative theory in politics and IR is the need to know not simply what is done, but what ought to be done (Dyer, 1989:172). For normative theorists the challenge is to explain reality in order to evaluate and even change it (Nel, 1999:52).

Normative theory, unlike empirical IR theory, addresses questions relating to standards of behaviour, obligations, responsibilities, rights and duties as they pertain to individuals, states and the international state system. More particularly, studies with a normative orientation focus on contentious issues such as the moral significance of states and borders, the ethics of war and peace, the nature of human rights, the case for (political and military) intervention, and the requirements of international distributive justice. To this end, normative theory relates to norms, rules, values and standards in world politics and as such ranges over all aspects of the subject area – including international law, international political economy[3] and diplomacy (Evans & Newnham, 1998:328).

In simplified terms, normative theory in IR refers to the moral or ethical dimension of activities in the international sphere. Yet, there is nothing simple about the way in which normative analyses and reflections are deployed and practised. Certainly the range of

3 International political economy basically deals with issues concerning international economic development and the distribution of wealth in the global standard of living.

practical issues, such as intervention, nuclear issues, international legal matters, distributive justice and many more, are thorny issues (Lawson, 2003:76). Furthermore, one of the major concerns relates to the question of who bears responsibility and for what, and how far responsibility extends and, indeed, to what extent both the global and the local, the universal and particular, are interdependent. Imagine a situation where refugees flee from conflict where such people are unable to feed, clothe, house and educate their families. According to Lawson (2003:131), the question for normative IR theory applies to issues such as: what kind of ethics is most appropriately applied to issues such as these?

It could be argued, however, that normative issues should be considered a proper subject for philosophical reflection in as much as there is a natural curiosity about what is good and true about both individual and social existence. Furthermore, it could be argued that in the study of IR, common sense is out of its depth, and the immediate imperative of coping with the realities of daily politics simply overwhelms issues regarding value. In this regard, normative IR theorists would assert that the scale of conflict and the vast inequities of international political life engender some concern with normative issues (Dyer, 1989:173).

Against this background the critical disposition of normative theorists, such as Robert W. Cox, is that theory always exists *for* someone and *for* some purpose, and there is no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space. Thus theory never exists in a void (Burchill, 2001:19). Therefore, these theorists focus on the origins and conditions of existence of perspectives and they view theory as irreducibly related to social and political life (Du Plessis, 2001:142). For normative theorists in IR, it is impossible not to choose in favour of a set of norms. In fact, they claim that scientists should do so openly and explicitly as they assert that even if one would want to focus on understanding the world, one is already taking a normative position. They claim that empirical theory is already normative theory; it is simply not aware of its bias. Therefore, it is contended that scientists should rather be open about their unavoidable (normative) preferences – and that one should consequently not try to (falsely) claim objectivity. However, this does not change anything about the point that scholarly inquiry in IR should be based on rational argument with a healthy respect for evidence, which determines theory choice in science, and not simply normative preferences (Nel, 1999:52-53).

4. Approaches and developments in contemporary IR

It should be noted that the empirical or positivist approach to methodology in IR has always been much stronger in the US than for instance in the UK and Australia (Lawson, 2003:62). Nonetheless, the international debate regarding empirical or normative scientific practice in IR has led to deep divisions between scholars of the discipline. In the words of Du Plessis (2001:139):

> Rationalists[4] and reflectivists[5] seldom talk to one another and do not share a common language. Furthermore, amongst them there is an absence of tolerance, no mutual understanding, and a reciprocal withholding of recognition of legitimate parallel enterprises since these are believed to represent contending social agendas and political projects … consequently, rationalists and reflectivists see each other as harmful and at times almost 'evil'…

Yet, Little (1991:465) states that in the 1970s and 1980s it was gradually recognised that the methodological debate in the 1960s had oversimplified the major issues under discussion. Faure (1991:32) also points out that empirical theorists were severely criticised for their obsessive concern with methodological rigour. In this regard, political philosophy, as a sub-discipline with a somewhat distinct approach in political inquiry, opposed a narrow mode of behavioural inquiry in IR. At the same time, foremost in this criticism was a movement that eventually became known as the post-behavioural approach – a movement that laid less emphasis on methodological precision than on the practical relevance of scientific research. In short, their assertions led to a realisation that quantitative *and* qualitative analyses were necessary to the development of IR theory, thereby incorporating scientific insights from both the social sciences and the natural sciences. These developments contributed significantly to the stature of IR as an academic discipline (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 1990:547).

The above-mentioned views coincide with the assertion of Couloumbis and Wolfe (1982:15) that in the 1970s a number of "scientifically scholars" abandoned their self-neutralising role of purely unobtrusive and value-free observation. "They have realised that by serving only as human cameras and tape recorders they have been fulfilling useful functions, but in no way positively

4 Empirical theorists.

5 Normative theorists.

affecting or changing their environment." Lawson (2003:76) goes even further by stating that since the 1980s there has been a noticeable revival of normative theory. This revival has especially been the result of a growing interest in the role of culture in world politics, an issue that lends itself much more readily to normative than empirical analysis.

However, it was especially since the 1980s that IR theory has seen the emergence of more reflective forms of theoretical inquiry – all under the banner of what has become known as critical international theory. In brief, critical theory finds its origin in the Enlightenment and is informed by the traditions of hermeneutics and *Ideologiekritik* (Devetak, 2001:163). This approach in IR is not only concerned with understanding and explaining the existing realities of world politics, it also intends to criticise with a view to transforming politics. To this end, it is not merely an expression of the concrete historical situation, but also a force for change within those conditions.

In recent times, realist, liberal and Marxist orthodoxies in IR have been submitted to critical scrutiny as scholars such as Richard Ashley, Robert W. Cox, Andrew Linklater, Hohn Maclean and Mark Hoffman began to address epistemological, ontological and normative issues. These issues and questions were concerned with identifying not only relevant actors and structures in international relations, but also revealing their historical transformations and complicity with various forms of domination and exclusion. These theorists were driven by the removal of various forms of domination and the promotion of global freedom, justice and equality. In short, there can be little doubt that critical international theory has made a major contribution to the study of international relations. Critical theorists reject the idea of the theorist as objective bystander. Instead, the theorist is enmeshed in social and political life, and theories in IR are informed by prior interests and convictions (Devetak, 2001:156, 175).

In addition, it should furthermore be noted that apart from other distinct schools of thought, various feminist critiques also contributed significantly to the growth of normative theory in contemporary IR. There are various approaches, but there is a common point of departure and that is that feminist critiques of the dominant theories in IR view these as irredeemably masculinist in their most basic form (Lawson, 2003:10).

Evans and Newnham (1998:383) shed some further light on developments by stating that since the final throes of the Cold War

(circa 1991) to the present, a revival of normative issues has transpired to the extent that they now occupy a central place in the discipline. This was partly inspired by two earlier world events, namely the war in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War, both of which raised first-order normative questions concerning the conduct of just war[6] and the ethics of intervention. Currently, the centrepiece of contemporary normative theory is the dialogue between "communitarians" and "cosmopolitans". Suffice it to say that the distinction between these positions basically rests on the double existence of people as citizens; as members of particularist communities and/or universalist communities. More specifically, it involves examining the nature of human obligation to one another and probing the moral significance of the modern state.

In South Africa, some prominent academics also came out strongly in support of a normative commitment to the scientific practice of politics. Faure (1991:46), for example, stated the following in a textbook of the early 1990s:

> To state it once more: Knowledge about the science of politics as well as scientific knowledge about politics, is not an end in itself. Ultimately, it can be justified only in terms of its instrumental role for some more encompassing and defensible human purpose. This, in turn, implies that scientific knowledge and its application should be directed by a defensible normative commitment.

Evidence to the effect that normative theory has gained considerable ground in contemporary IR, is further evident from the following statements in the authoritative work of Viotti and Kauppi (1993:532), which is (still) widely used as a textbook in the teaching of contemporary IR theory:

> In recent years, textbooks on international relations have been conspicuous for the absence of much discussion of normative or value considerations … In this chapter, we raise some of the issues and value considerations central to an understanding of normative international relations theory. When, if ever, is war just, and what is just conduct in war? Is the global distribution of wealth equitable, and if not, what authoritative steps should be taken to alter the status quo? On what moral bases should statesmen make foreign policy choices? … Secondly, we also want to recognise normative international relations theory building as a legitimate

6 The traditional "just-war" approach in military ethics relates to the point that military action is morally just if it conforms to universally accepted norms.

> enterprise worthy of more scholarly efforts than has been the case in recent years.

In a highly acclaimed and widely used textbook for South African students in IR, Nel (2002:56) even explicitly states that

> most of the (mainly South African) authors of this book would tend to agree with those who say that theory is always already normative theory, and that we should openly say what we stand for and not hide behind the smokescreen of 'objectivity'. To the extent that the current set-up of the world stabilises or enforces patterns of inequity and marginalisation, we would like not only to understand it, but also to contribute towards changing it for the better.

Finally, in an inaugural address at the University of Pretoria, Schoeman (2001:4) likewise expressly rejected any positivist methodological orientation in the social sciences by stating that positivism "hides and even to an extent denies the normative commitment that underlies the social sciences, and the political sciences in particular – the inquiry into the basis upon which we might lead a good and just life".

In sum, it should be clear that a normative orientation towards the practice of political science in general and IR in particular gained much ground in the past decades. It was in this environment that peace studies, for instance, became effectively institutionalised as a sub-discipline of IR (Lawson, 2003:490). This will be outlined in the section below.

5. Norm-based and value-based scholarly inquiry in contemporary IR

It is in the field of peace studies or peace research that many IR scholars who have been motivated by strong moral concerns have engaged themselves. Although heavily reliant on empirical research methods, these scholars tend to work within the idealist paradigm in terms of considering and understanding world events. Idealists, as explained, contend that wars happen as a result of misunderstandings, ignorance and stupidity and that they could, therefore, be prevented if only leaders and citizens would consider the probable, if unintended, consequences of their actions. Thus idealism became known as a version of IR that focused on how to achieve the best and a capacity to be good; meaning that international relations should revolve around creating the right circumstances and institutions in which people's talents and propensity for the good may blossom (Nel, 1999:58).

In view of the above, peace researchers generally agree that violence is the most extreme manifestation of conflict and that a valid self-sustaining condition of peace should begin by an understanding of conflict *per se* (Evans & Newnham, 1998:425). Moreover, since war is among the most destructive phenomena that one human group could inflict on another, the projects within the peace studies fraternity commonly aim at understanding why such conflicts occur and how they could be terminated (Wallensteen, 2002:17). To this end, peace studies is that sub-discipline which seeks to improve the present and future prospects of peace. As such it is not a value-free branch of inquiry; indeed values intrude into peace research in two distinctive ways. Firstly, peace researchers are philosophically committed to the view that peace is both attainable and desirable. Secondly, by conducting peace research it is believed that the goal of peace may be moved closer to realisation. In this way peace research could be viewed as an applied study rather than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake (Evans & Newnham, 1998:424).

Although many of those engaged in peace research have been strongly motivated by moral concerns, Lawson (2003:63) points out that their methods have been strongly positivist. In other words they do not discard many of the propositions of the behaviouralist approach.[7] Holsti (1983:12) likewise points out that that the objective of peace research is clearly normative, namely devising ways to control processes leading to violence, but that these control processes are exercised on the basis of techniques that are scientific and systematic. This would seem to coincide with the statement by Little (1991:465) that (some or many) IR scholars gradually admitted in the 1970s and 1980s that the methodological debate in the 1960s had oversimplified the major issues under discussion.

Holsti (1983:120) argues that this type of scholarship (peace research) has earned itself a rather unfortunate title as this is a term that creates an image of fuzzy-minded, naïve intellectuals pontificating from their ivory towers about the ways to secure everlasting peace. Work done in the field of peace research has indeed made important contributions to the understanding of problems such as

- processes leading to war;

7 See for instance *Journal of Peace Research* of the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo.

- the escalation of violence;
- the relationship between individual personality characteristics and the phenomena of bigotry, prejudice, and national hostility;
- the economic consequences of disarmament and arms control programmes; and
- the sources of public attitudes towards foreign countries and alien cultures.

In practice, a plethora of research centres, institutes, organisations and networks in North America, Europe and Asia (especially Japan) are today actively involved in the conduct and promotion of peace research. Also, the existence of a dynamic International Peace Research Association, encompassing five regional associations[8], exemplifies the measure of emphasis placed on peace research as a distinctive field of inquiry (Anon., 2003). One typical example of a current-day research institute that is involved in peace research is the internationally acclaimed Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). The task of SIPRI is set to

> … conduct research on questions of conflict and co-operation of importance for international peace and security, with the aim of contributing to an understanding of the conditions for peaceful solutions of international conflicts and for stable peace (SIPRI, 2003).

In this respect, SIPRI has become famous for its annual SIPRI Yearbooks – highly acclaimed and comprehensive data-bases, analyses and assessments with regard to international security and conflict; military spending and armaments; as well as non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament.

It needs to be noted that the impact of normative theory on contemporary IR extends far beyond the above-mentioned examples. The importance of "critical theory" in IR also bears testimony to the fact that many scholars in the discipline have moved away from positivist methodological approaches. These scholars are openly committed to extending the rational, just and democratic organisation of political life beyond the level of the state to the whole of humanity. IR scholars with a Marxist point of departure – also known as structuralism – would usually find themselves in this framework of scholarship (Devetak, 2001:163).

8 This includes the African Peace Research Association.

Such scholars typically assert that there are other actors than the state whose precise role in the international community depends on the interests of international capital. This is where international political economy as a sub-discipline of IR makes its contribution: students are encouraged to always ask: *cui bono?* Who benefits? (Schoeman, 2001:4). In fact, such scholars propose radical changes in international relations, for instance in the manner in which humans organise and use capital, technology, raw materials and labour power.

Finally, foreign policy is typically a domain in which values apply directly. As a most important facet of international relations (Du Plessis, 2002:113), it is inextricably linked to moral concerns. On the basis of some set of criteria, foreign policy decision-makers need to choose among competing alternatives (Viotti & Kauppi, 1993:538). It is also important to note that foreign policy could raise questions of morality in international relations. This could be done by reference to individual responsibility, but even extend to the functions of multi-national organisations, such as the United Nations. Mostly responsibility comes down to what should be expected of national governments, but also of multinational organisations, that are almost wholly dependent on foreign policy decisions taken by individual states. Very often at stake, are obligations of states and other entities to promote certain universal values, in particular those of human rights. In this regard, it is sometimes as difficult at the practical-functional level as at the philosophical level to decide on the extent of one community or state's obligations to another, and on the principles of what should underpin international order. It should also be clear that foreign policy always has consequences for others, since technical agreements or arrangements, for instance, may effectively imply judgements about the rights of one community or state over another. Against this background, the changing environment has especially given extra force to one particular issue of normative concern that has always existed between the in-tricacies of foreign policy, namely how much responsibility should be borne for shaping the lives of others outside one's own society, and for the international milieu as a whole. States obviously vary in what they are able to do and how they view foreign policy through the lens of national interest, but as such it is a perpetual ethical challenge in foreign policy analysis (Hill, 2003:17, 39, 163, 303).

Furthermore, Du Plessis (2002:113) states that on the one hand, most or many governments define, promote and justify their primary foreign policy objectives in terms of specific moral ends and purposes. They also deem their foreign policy actions to be beyond

moral reproach. Yet, they are also constrained in the sense that they have a responsibility to their state and citizens and are not always in a position to give preference to international norms and individual concerns over moral concerns. To this end, there is a constant tension between morality and self-interest (or the interest of the state). Be that as it may, because morality is implicit in the purposes and actions of foreign policy, Du Plessis (2002:128) contends that any evaluation of foreign policy is incomplete without an appraisal of moral issues. This implies, for instance, that South Africa's foreign policy towards the internal situation in Zimbabwe, evidenced by uncontrolled land resettlement, the threat of democracy, the erosion of the rule of law and constant economic decline (Du Plessis, 2002: 110), should (also) be appraised on the basis of norms and principles of moral conduct in international relations.

This said, foreign policy analysis needs to face certain normative issues that, according to Hill (2003:170), postivist roots have tended to obscure. Moreover, it could be argued that many important and interesting questions about foreign policy are not technical but involve issues of value and principle. One such question is how far foreign policy could or should be accountable to citizens who may ultimately be asked to make sacrifices in its name. In fact, it could be pointed out that the strong growth of interest in normative issues has returned some of the focus to actors and their roles (Hill, 2003:161).

Lastly, it would probably be wrong to contend that the heavy emphasis of realism on power politics results in a dichotomy between power and morality, or that realism negates the usefulness, or indeed, the relevance of ethics in the international arena. Solomon (1996:11) points out that some prominent realist thinkers, such as E.H. Carr, put forward the notion of a combination of power and morality. Carr also noted that international order could not be based on power alone, and that only an "unreal kind of realism" would ignore the element of morality in any world order. To this end, Solomon (1996:12) contends that realism "is not as immoral as it has been presented". Be that as it may, it is today widely accepted in IR that morality is not absent from international relations, and that scholars develop arguments to support the moral points they want to make (Nel, 2002:63-64).

6. Appraisal and conclusion

It should be clear from the above that a revival of normative issues has occured in IR and that these issues now occupy a central place in the discipline. This is evident from the fact that many or most IR

scholars today seem to contend that scholarly inquiry in IR should extend to the point that they not only explain reality, but also evaluate the knowable reality. In other words, this boils down to the point that theorising as such should not be limited to what is only observable, and that it could or should involve certain norms or values. In fact, it spells out an approach that theories function within a set of norms (standards of good or bad in a certain simplistic sense) in terms of which existing reality is evaluated. However, as indicated, this does not imply any change to the proposition that scientific practice by IR scholars should be based on rational argument with a healthy respect for evidence. It simply means that the focus on and studying of foreign policy – to use this as an example once more – raise questions of morality in international relations, and that issues that positivists have tended to obscure, are now also viewed from a perspective of normative concern.

It should also be clear that IR scholars who assert that theories have normative implications find themselves attached to different paradigmatic or macro-theoretical approaches to understanding and/or explaining world events. Some are clearly attached to the Marxist-oriented structuralist paradigm. Others tend to work and fall within the idealist paradigm to considering and understanding world events. As far as idealism is concerned, Potgieter (1986:14) asserts that this is not a macro-theory without any merit. It portrays something of the pursuit for peace that one would find in the hearts of Christians who feel themselves obliged to work and strive for a better world order on the basis of justice – also in international relations. However, it is also rightly argued (by Potgieter) that the idealist paradigm is rooted in a (somewhat questionable) liberal-humanistic approach of pursuing a common international ideal of peace, and that this ideal does not always accord with basic international political realities. To some extent, the same criticism could also be extended to peace studies as a sub-discipline in IR that seeks to improve the present and future prospects of regional or international peace.

Although both structuralism and idealism could be criticised from a Christian approach to science (Potgieter, 1986: 14-15), it could also be argued that the growth of normative theory in IR is of great importance and significance for scholarly inquiry from a Christian perspective. In fact, needless to state that scholars who embrace an assessment of the international community from a biblical point of departure have always found themselves in stark opposition to the positivistic ideal of an objective and neutral science. The Christian approach to science – specifically in the social sciences – has

always strongly argued against the assertion of positivist thinkers like David Hume, August Comte and Ernst Mach that there is no place for suppositions and metaphysics (or philosophy) in scientific practice. Furthermore, normative theory is certainly a matter of great importance as it deals with some of the moral or ethical dimensions of activities in the international sphere. In IR specifically, there could be no doubt that many important and intriguing questions about foreign policy, for instance, extend mere technical-disciplinary concerns, but involve issues of value and principle.

Against this background, Strauss (2003:255) rightly asserts that a critique of positivism may render a service to the ideal of Christian scholarship, since such a critique highlights the inevitability of a distinct theoretical view of reality that ultimately emanates from a person's deepest convictions. From this particular perspective, the development of normative theory in IR and some recent manifestations of a norm-based and value-based disciplinary approach in an increasingly secularised world should be considered as a matter of considerable interest. The point that many IR scholars have become more committed and involved in their scientific approach by rejecting a clinical subject-object divide, put Christian scholars in the field of IR (and related disciplines) in a much more "legitimate academic position" than a few decades ago to practise Christian scholarship, and to contribute to their field of study in a meaningful, responsible and constructive manner from a principled position.

However, this does not necessarily imply that Christian scholars in IR are now operating in an academic atmosphere of understanding and/or support for scientific inquiry from a biblical perspective. Many IR scholars would be swift to assert that "[s]cientists are not members of a religious sect that have to believe against all odds and evidence. Scientists believe in pursuing the truth whatever that may be" (Nel, 1999:53). Still, it could be argued that the growth of normative theory in IR does indeed present Christian scholars in IR (specifically those who are committed to scientific practice from a Christian perspective) with a firm and sound theoretical grounding to defend the proposition that academics are entitled to an appreciation of phenomena and trends in the international community from a religiously-based point of departure. In fact, if scholars should openly say what they stand for and not hide behind the smokescreen of "objectivity", as Nel (2002:56) indeed argues, then Christian scholars face a challenge and responsibility to relate their scientific endeavours to their religious convictions.

Moreover, the fact that many IR scholars today accept a proposition that scientific knowledge and inquiry in the discipline and its application should be underpinned or directed by a defensible normative commitment towards assessing world events and trends, leave Christian IR scholars with a challenging opportunity to base their "defensible normative commitment" on a biblical point of departure. This would, for example, imply a defensible normative position towards the assessment and appraisal of foreign policy on the basis of biblical norms and principles of moral conduct. This also means, for instance, that matters concerning war, technology of war (arms trade) and violent conflict, for instance, could "justifiably" be studied and viewed from a biblical point of view – in as much as (other) academics have the right to view and assess such phenomena from a secular or any other principled position. After all, if there is no such thing as theory in itself, and if theory is not neutral and divorced from a standpoint in time and space (to draw on Robert W. Cox's assertion), then surely this should extend to the point that Christian scholars in IR – or in any other discipline for that matter – can rightly and justly base their scholarly inquiry and appraisal of international relations on biblical fundamentals. In fact, this also would coincide with Hans Kung's view on the need for a "global ethic", and specifically his contention that a secular orientation can neither mobilise the peoples of the world for co-operative responses to the challenges and dangers of globalisation, nor can transnational dialogue proceed very far without an acceptance of the central role of religion (Falk, 2000:113).

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