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# Normative behaviourism and global political principles

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**[PENULTIMATE DRAFT – PLEASE SEE PUBLISHED VERSION IN ORDER TO CITE, forthcoming in the *Journal of International Political Theory* as part of a special edition entitled ‘Should global political theory get real?’. Further contributors are: Chris Bertram, Aaron James, Terry MacDonald, David Miller, Shmulik Nili, Mathias Risse, Matt Sleat]**

## **Abstract**

This article takes a new idea, ‘normative behaviourism’, and applies it to global political theory, in order to address at least one of the problems we might have in mind when accusing that subject of being too ‘unrealistic’. The core of this idea is that political principles can be justified, not just by patterns in our thinking, and in particular our intuitions and considered judgements, but also by patterns in our behaviour, and in particular acts of insurrection and crime. The problem addressed is ‘cultural relativism’, understood here not as a meta-ethical doctrine, but as the apparent ‘fact’ that people around the world have culturally varying intuitions and judgements of a kind that lead them to affirm different political principles. This is a problem because it seems to follow (1) that global agreement on any substantial set of political principles is impossible, and (2) that any political theory in denial of this ‘fact’ would be, for that reason, deeply unrealistic. The solution argued for here is that, if domestic political principles (i.e. principles intended to regulate a single state) could be justified by normative behaviourism, and in reference to culturally invariant behaviour, then an international system supportive of such principles is justifiable by extension.

## **Introduction**

We political theorists are agog with talk of our subject being unrealistic. Although we might talk of ‘political theory’ or ‘political philosophy’; of ‘impractical’, ‘unapplied’, ‘unengaged’, ‘quixotic’, ‘indeterminate’, or even ‘dangerous’; and of ‘ideal’ vs. ‘nonideal’ theory, ‘moralism’ vs. ‘realism’, ‘utopian’ vs. ‘concessive’ theory, ‘transcendental’ vs. ‘comparative’ theory, or even the idea of ‘political political theory’, there can be little doubt that the three general questions of *whether* political theory is unrealistic, in what *ways* it is unrealistic, and what if anything needs to *change* about the subject as a result, are now central ones (the seminal works here include Estlund, 2008; Farrelly, 2007; Geuss, 2008; Sen, 2011; Waldron,

2013; and Williams, 2005. For overarching discussion, see Rossi & Sleat, 2014; and Valentini, 2012)<sup>1</sup>.

In response to all this, I want to ask an odd question, the relevance of which will become clear in a moment: What would our *students* make of this? The answer, I suspect, is that they would be surprised, and not just because they are unaware of the described centrality. Insisting that we need some kind of ‘reality check’ more than we need anything else, they would also be surprised that it has taken us so long to make these questions so central. Somewhat defensively, we might reply that discussions of the gap between theory and practice, and between justification and motivation, are as old as Kant, Hobbes, and Plato. Yet that reply, as well as ignoring the recent trend from margins to centre (and thus the older trend from centre to margins), also rather misses the point. Think here about what it means to be ‘realistic’; about what it means to take seriously the gap, if there is one, between political theory and ‘real politics’. Amongst other things, I presume that it means taking seriously, not just *our* new objections to the dominant theories of the day, but also the objections of *real people* to what we do. As a result, I think we should take seriously whatever objections our students have to the way we do things, and in particular the reasoning behind those objections.

This reasoning, subject to distillation, runs as follows. They say ‘the problem with all these theories is that they’re too unrealistic’. We say ‘what do you mean by theories?’. They say ‘either arguments for particular institutions and policies or, more commonly, arguments for principles (e.g. of justice) that could be translated, subject to context (e.g. high levels of economic development) and local process (e.g. democratic deliberation), into such institutions and policies’. We say ‘so what do you mean by too unrealistic?’. They say ‘because nobody would ever agree to them’. And that is the crucial bit: *agreement*. Or at least, this plus their *theories* for the impossibility of agreement are the crucial two bits.

Those theories emerge if we push them a bit more. We might say here ‘are you sure that *nobody* would agree?’, to which they would say ‘well, most people’. We would then say, ‘but why?’, and then they say roughly the following: (1) some people wouldn’t agree because

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<sup>1</sup> There are also three key collections on the topic: A special edition of *Social Theory and Practice*, 34:3 (2008), a special edition of the *European Journal of Political Theory*, 9:4 (2010); and (Floyd & Stears, 2011). Note that by implying that these debates overlap, which they do, I am not saying that they are identical. Realists in particular are keen to stress the distinctiveness of their concerns – see (Rossi & Sleat, 2014).

they're too selfish (*egoism*), (2) some wouldn't agree because they have naturally different intuitions or feelings regarding right and wrong (*subjectivism*), and (3) some wouldn't agree because they come from different cultures (*relativism*). And note: these theories imply not just that they wouldn't agree with *us*, 'the philosophers', on whatever particularly ambitious set of principles we have in mind, but also with *each other*, 'the people', on any such set. As a result, we have a problem, not just of realism – we're aiming *too high* – but also of fatalism – there's no point aiming *at all*.

In this article I want to focus on the third of these theories, given that *cultural relativism*, to use its most common label, has become one of the most prominent barriers to both (1) certain theoretical ambitions within political theory, e.g. the justification of universal principles of justice, and (2) the kinds of political projects those ambitions require, e.g. the introduction of institutions that express such principles<sup>2</sup>. There are though two distinct versions of this theory, each of which affects those 'ambitions' and 'projects' differently. On the first, we treat cultural relativism as a meta-ethical doctrine, and then say that a meta-ethical doctrine is a fundamental force in the real world. This sounds like the kind of ivory-tower delusion from which many of our students think we need to be rescued, though it is really nothing of the sort, given that such doctrines, however inchoately and inconsistently held, can be powerful movers in the world – and specifically powerful along Luke's third dimension of power, the altering of what people *want* (Lukes, 2004).

Yet this is not, despite such relevance, the version that interests me here. Instead of the idea that different political principles somehow 'apply' to different cultures (a notably widespread belief across both Western *and* non-Western countries), I want to consider the apparent 'fact' that members of different cultures seem to 'affirm' different principles in virtue of that membership. Or, put differently, whereas the first says that political principles (and thus institutions and policies) *should* somehow track variations in culture, I want to consider the idea that people simply people *do*, as a matter of fact, affirm different political principles as a result of differences in their cultural background. This is in part because I cannot consider both, but also because I think it is ultimately more threatening to the way that political theory

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<sup>2</sup> The most *culturally* influential argument on this front is A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), esp. 38-39. Within political theory, the issue is mostly treated under discussions of 'multiculturalism', cf. W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: OUP, 1995) with B. Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

normally operates - for reasons that will become clear - and thus more plausible as grounds for that subject being labelled 'unrealistic'.

What though has all of this got to do with specifically *international* or *global* political theory (and from now on I stick with *global*<sup>3</sup>)? The connection is that it is here that cultural relativism is at its most problematic, and for at least three reasons. First, because it is where the gap between ideals and reality is at its greatest, whether one considers the gap between theories of 'global justice' and contemporary global inequality, or the gap between theories of 'just war' and contemporary armed conflict. Second, because attempts to bridge that gap are easily portrayed as imperialistic attempts to impose Western ideals on non-Western cultures<sup>4</sup>. And third, because cultural variation in terms of the affirmation of different political principles seems to be much more significant *between* countries than *within* them, in the simple sense that there is more variety of this kind across the globe as a whole than in any one part of it. All of which suggests, regardless of whatever other problems apply, that the gap between the *principles* global political theorists propose, and the *reality* of global politics, might be very great indeed.

With this gap in mind, the rest of the article now unfolds into three stages. First, I discuss what I take to be the *standard* method of arguing for political principles in political theory, of both the domestic and global kind, and explain why it is more vulnerable to the problem of cultural relativism than is generally assumed. This method I describe as 'thinking about thinking', just insofar as it tries to turn patterns in things like our intuitions and considered judgements into principles for regulating our political existence. Second, I discuss how an *alternative* method might avoid the problem of cultural relativism. This method I call 'normative behaviourism', and it works by turning patterns in the way that we behave in response to particular policies and institutions into principles that justify either the same or further policies and institutions. Third, I explore how normative behaviourism might deliver a realistic response to cultural relativism at the specific level of *global* political theory.

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<sup>3</sup> One might think that the phrase 'international' political theory suggests theory for a world that either is, or should stay, fundamentally Westphalian, with 'global' suggesting a more cosmopolitan bent. I use the term 'global political theory' as a catch-all for both approaches.

<sup>4</sup> For useful discussion, see: S. Caney (2005) *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory* (Oxford: OUP), 25-62; L. May, *Global Justice and Due Process* (Cambridge: CUP), 37-43; A.M. Jaggard (2005) "'Saving Amina": Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue'. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 19:03, 55-75; and M. Risse (2012), *Global Political Philosophy* (London: Palgrave), 40-61.

## **‘Thinking about thinking’ and the problem of cultural relativism**

We start then with what I see as the standard method of doing political theory, by which I mean the standard method of justifying political principles. This method is a form of *introspection* (Floyd, forthcoming-b)<sup>5</sup>. It involves the study of a particular set of thoughts within either the heads of all reasonable individuals, often referred to as ‘we’ or ‘us’, or the heads of the members of a particular group, such as ‘modern Westerners’. These are the thoughts political philosophers have in mind, no pun intended, when using terms such as ‘moral intuition’, ‘considered judgement’, ‘conviction’, ‘commitment’, and so forth. As a class, they are what I have called elsewhere our ‘normative thoughts’, because in contrast to descriptive beliefs, they are thoughts about either what *should* or *should not* be the case in the world or what we *should* or *should not* do within it (Floyd, forthcoming-a). For example, the thought that we would save a child drowning in a pond if we could do so at little cost to ourselves is a normative thought, as is the thought that selfishness and ignorance ought not to affect our choice of principles of justice, and the thought that it is wrong to burn ants with a magnifying glass<sup>6</sup>.

The point of studying these thoughts, as stated, is to justify political principles, by which I mean principles capable of telling us how to regulate our collective political existence. Consider, as examples, Pettit’s claim that ‘the intuition from which republicans begin [is] that domination is a salient evil, and that removing it or reducing it is a more or less unambiguous enterprise’ (Pettit, 1997, 103), or Barry’s claim that his ‘argument presupposes a certain desire: the desire to live in a society whose members all freely accept its rules of justice and its major institutions’ (Barry, 1995, 164), or Christiano’s claim that his argument ‘relies on the intuitive strength of the starting premises concerning the dignity of persons and the importance of well-being in the argument for equality’ (Christiano, 2008, 5). Consider how

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<sup>5</sup> I have also used ‘the standard model’ and, most commonly, ‘mentalism’, as labels for this method, depending on the aspects of it I want to emphasise and the context in which it is being discussed. It’s worth stressing that such labels are completely interchangeable, though again, for the comprehensive treatment, see (Floyd, forthcoming-b).

<sup>6</sup> Note that these thoughts can be either targeted judgements, e.g. ‘don’t hit Peter’ or general principles, e.g. ‘only hit in self-defence’, depending on their level of generality. For example, if I affirm the principle GR – ‘only treat others as you would wish to be treated’ – then I hold the normative thought GR. This distinction might be pertinent in what follows, though it will not matter very much if it is true – and I believe it is true – that any affirmation of a particular judgement commits one to a general principle of much the same form. For example, if I think that I should not hit Peter right now, then presumably I am committed to a principle which says, at the least, that if all the current conditions in the world should pertain again in the future (call them ‘set of circumstances X’), then it would be wrong once more to hit Peter, meaning that I accept a principle of the form ‘never hit Peter under set of circumstances X’.

Nozick undermines egalitarianism by comparing redistributive taxation to, and thus invoking our thoughts about, forced labour, whilst Dworkin seeks to support it by imagining the kind of justice we might pursue on a desert island (Nozick, 1974, 169; Dworkin, 2002). Or consider how Daniels talks of the widely held view that ‘a moral theory consists of a set of moral judgements plus a set of principles that account for or generate them’ (Daniels, 1979, 256), how Scanlon describes his reasonable rejection principle as a ‘characterisation of the common element implicit in our judgements of wrongness’ (Scanlon, 1992, 21), and, most famously of all, how Rawls describes his argument as ‘a theory of our moral sentiments as manifested by our considered judgements in reflective equilibrium’ (Rawls, 1971, 120), and thus as ‘a more discriminating interpretation of our moral sensibilities’ (*ibid*, 587).

The key idea, in each case, is simply to tell us what we *should* think, when it comes to political principles, on the basis of what we *already* think, either about politics itself, or about some matter that is taken to be analogous to politics in just the right way – hence ‘thinking about thinking’. Or is this a mistake? One might after all object here by insisting that the point of political theory is to tell us what we *should* think about politics *regardless* of what we *currently* think, and that anything less than this is unduly *conservative*, or *ideological*, or *regressive*, or some such appellation. Yet consider, whatever portion of our ‘current’ thoughts we end up eliminating, we only ever do so by reference to a still further group of such thoughts. We might, for example, eliminate some normative thoughts due to (1) their inconsistency with the *majority* of our thoughts of this kind, (2) their inconsistency with a set of thoughts to which we cling more *dearly*, and which we thus *think* is a more important set of thoughts, or (3) their holding *implications*, including *political* implications, that are inconsistent in the same way<sup>7</sup>. The bigger picture is thus always one in which thoughts are sovereign. Whether we are dealing in runaway trolleys or children drowning in ponds, we are always essentially being told: ‘because you *do* think this, you *should* also think that’.

So where does *cultural relativism* come in? In order to see this, we need to go back to the point about group size – that is, the point that the group of people whose thoughts we are studying, and for whom a set of principles is intended, can vary from all of humanity to just a sub-set of it (and for an interesting position on *whose* thoughts matter, see Miller, 1999). In fact, we might usefully say, given my purposes here, that there are essentially two different

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<sup>7</sup> This is often done under the rubric of ‘reflective equilibrium’ or ‘coherentism’, though it need not be. The method described here is both older and more general than discussions of those concepts tend to suggest.

forms the described method can take: *universalistic* and *contextualist*. In the first case we study the normative thoughts of every human being, or at least of all reasonable human beings, in the hope of generating principles that apply to *all* human beings (though those principles might still be subject to universal rules of contextual applicability, e.g. ‘only introduce democratic principles under conditions of high material well-being’), whilst in the second we study the normative thoughts of just a select group, such as ‘contemporary Westerners’, or ‘Chinese people between the ages of 20 and 50’, in the hope of generating principles that apply *only* to that group.

This distinction matters because, in order to see the problems caused by cultural relativism, we need to see that it affects the two forms in different ways. In the first case, the problem is that, if individuals in different cultures (1) turn out to have *sufficiently different* normative-thought-sets, in the sense of differences great enough to commit them to different political principles (for small thought-differences might not lead to principle-differences), and (2) such differences survive even after due reflection (i.e. consideration of all relevant thoughts), then this makes universalism impossible, whilst apparently leaving contextualism intact, just so long as the posited ‘group’ occurs at the right ‘level’ of culture – that is, at whatever level one has to go down to in order to find sufficiently similar normative thoughts (i.e. thoughts similar enough to generate the same political principles). All of which is welcome news to contextualists. Yet there is still a sting in the tail. In this second case, and bearing in mind the subject of this article, it is hard to see how principles that apply only to a particular group could ever be applied to the globe as a whole, in the form of principles of ‘just war’, ‘global justice’, and so on. As a result, it becomes easy to see, not just why many moral universalists are happy to be political cosmopolitans, for that is obvious, but also why many contextualists, including some ‘practice-dependence’ theorists, take up ‘nationalist’ or ‘statist’ positions<sup>8</sup>. Yet such illumination, despite this interesting connection between the methodological and the normative, is not really the point here. The key thing is this: *if* these problems do apply, then *global* political theory appears to be *impossible*.

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<sup>8</sup> For an illustrative range of contextualist positions, see James (2008), Miller (2007), and Sangiovanni (2008), though note that one’s commitment to contextualism could be *moral* rather than *methodological* (or indeed both moral *and* methodological), in the sense that one might believe, like Miller, that ‘people greatly value living under their own rules and according to their own cultural beliefs’ (Miller, 2007, 21). Similarly, one might believe, as many realists do, that *legitimacy* is the key political concern, in which case it matters, at least on their view of legitimacy, what a particular group of people happens to *believe* is legitimate (Williams, 2005).



That is, assuming (1) that I am accurately describing the standard *modus operandi* of political theory, and (2) that the normative thoughts of individuals in different cultures differ enough to commit them to different political principles, then it seems to follow (3) that cultural relativism is a problem worth taking seriously, especially in (4) global political theory, given the need for principles to somehow apply to (i.e. be justified for) individuals across a range of cultures. Of course, at this point, I have only sketched out my reasoning for (1), and have provided no evidence at all for (2), yet given the plausibility of both notions (in terms of familiarity or recognisability), that seems enough reason for now to at least consider an alternative way of doing things.

### **Normative behaviourism**

Consider then that the standard method of justifying political principles, if I am right, works by looking for principle-shaped patterns in the way that we think. That is, it works by looking to see what principles ‘we’ might be committed to, in virtue of the normative thoughts we already hold, where *we* might mean 7 thousand or even 7 billion individuals. By contrast, normative behaviourism works by contemplating patterns in the way that we behave. Instead of studying, for example, the choices we imagine we would make in hypothetical scenarios, and then seeing what those choices tell us in terms of our nascent principle-commitments, it studies the choices individuals do make, in the real world, and in response to particular policies and institutions.

And not just any choices. It studies forms of behaviour that express a strong *negative* verdict on either (1) particular institutions and policies (e.g. autocratic institutions or totalitarian policies) or (2) the ways of life those institutions and policies facilitate (e.g. lives of poverty and inequality). As a result, it studies, in particular, *insurrection* and *crime*, with the former treated as expressing a negative verdict on (1) and the latter on (2). What makes these two really interesting is that they involve considerable personal *risk*, and thus require considerable personal *commitment*, even if that commitment is based simply on an *aversion* to alternative courses of action. So, unlike a hypothetical choice made from an armchair, whether to save a child or turn a trolley, these are *dangerous* choices, and so highly illuminating regarding an individual’s *priorities*. And, more interestingly still, if *high numbers* of people engage in these acts in the presence of particular institutions and policies, *regardless* of cultural variations, and over *long* periods of time, then that starts to tell us something very clear

regarding the way those people feel, not just about those institutions and policies, but also about the political *principles* those institutions and policies *express*.

Let me try and explain that last claim. My suggestion is that, just as we might *affirm* a political principle on the basis that we are committed to it via a *hypothetical* choice scenario – for this is the easiest comparison in terms of our normative thoughts - so we might come to *reject* a political principle by realising that lots of people find it deeply unpalatable *in practice*. For example, if lots of people act so as to reject fascist institutions, having had the chance to live with them, then it seems as though (1) they are thereby rejecting fascist political *principles*, and (2) the rest of us *also* have reason to reject such principles, as fellow human beings likely to have a similar response. There is nothing, I think, particularly controversial about that claim. What *is* controversial is my next claim: that this kind of reasoning can also lead us to *affirm* a distinct set of political principles, and in particular the principles of what Americans tend to call liberalism, Europeans tend to call Social Democracy, and political philosophers tend to call egalitarianism.

This claim rests upon two premises: (1) that there are clear empirical trends in the way that human beings respond to at least some political institutions and policies, such that they reveal, *en masse*, though again, only over *long periods of time*, a strong expressed preference for democracies over non-democracies, liberal democracies over illiberal democracies, and egalitarian liberal democracies over inegalitarian liberal democracies; and (2) that there are sufficient reasons, at least for most of us, to affirm the political principles constitutive of egalitarian liberal democracy on the basis of those empirical trends. These premises are argued for in different ways. The first breaks down into a finding that liberal-democracies generate less *insurrection* than their alternatives, and a finding that egalitarian liberal-democracies – understood here as liberal-democracies with smaller wealth and opportunity gaps between top and bottom - generate less *crime* than their alternatives. As a result, it relies upon a wide range of empirical studies supportive of these two findings, the strength of which I will largely assume here, though it's worth nothing, for the sake of clarity, that *The Polity report* is a cornerstone of the first<sup>9</sup>, whilst Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level* is a cornerstone of the second<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>. Further supportive studies include: C.A. Crocker, "Engaging Fragile States", *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 5 (2003); Freedom House, *The Worst of the Worst: The World's Most Repressive Societies* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2004). R. Rotberg, *When States Fail*:

So what about the second premise? This is the really tricky one, assuming that we can put the described empirical trends to one side. One option would be to think about how political theory looks when adopting a god-like view – the ‘I-expect-you’d-all-like-to-know-what-I-would-do-if-I-ruled-the-world’ view (Waldron, 1999, 1) - and when adopting some form of prioritarianism. On this basis, we might say that the described empirical trends tell us which set of political principles, in practice, produce the least suffering, and so should be implemented for that reason, in which case we would be using such trends in order to translate a more general moral principle into specific political principles. A second option, in turn, would be to treat our choices to rebel, or commit crime, as grounds from which political principles can be directly derived. Bearing in mind the way in which we sometime use hypothetical choices, whether in Hobbes’ ‘state of nature’, Rawls’ ‘original position’, or even Cohen’s ‘camping trip’ (Cohen, 2009), we might just say that these ‘real’ choices, as expressed by our behaviour, somehow already entail a commitment to a particular set of political principles, without reference to a deeper principle or set of principles that explains their relevance.

Yet I do not want to take either of these routes here, despite believing that there is much to be said for the second. Instead I want to describe a third possibility, and in order to do so I want to start off by pointing out that one front on which contemporary political theory struggles is the problem of individual human *motivation*. That is, although there has been some recent discussion of the concept of motivation as part of the task of making assessments of political *feasibility* (cf. Estlund, 2011 with Wiens, 2013), we still do not consider what would *actually* motivate people to support, in practice, a given conception of justice. This is odd not just because an un-motivating conception of justice might also be, for that reason, an unjustified

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*Causes and Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); M. Besancon, ‘Good Governance Rankings: The Art of Measurement’, in *World Peace Foundation Reports, No. 36* (Cambridge, MA: World Peace Foundation, 2003); H. Hegre, T. Ellingsen, S. Gates, & N.P. Gleditsch, “Towards a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816-1992”, *American Political Science Review*, 95, no. 1 (2001), 33-48; Fund for Peace, ‘The Failed States Index’, *Foreign Policy* (2008), May / June; J. Di John, “Conceptualising the Causes and Consequences of Failed States: A Critical Review of the Literature”, *LSE Crisis States Research Centre Working Papers*, 25 (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Further supportive studies include: C.C. Hsieh & M.D. Pugh, ‘Poverty, income inequality, and violent crime: A meta-analysis of recent aggregate data studies’, *Criminal Justice Review*, 18 (1993), 182-202; United Nations Crime and Justice Information Network, *Survey on Crime Trends and the Operations of Criminal Justice Systems* (New York, NY: United Nations, 2000); Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1990-2000). M. Kelly, ‘Inequality and Crime’, *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 82:4 (2000), 530-539; E. Neumayer, ‘Inequality and violent crime: evidence from data on robbery and violent theft’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 42 (2005), 101-112 For further discussion, see (Floyd, forthcoming-b).

one, or indeed an illegitimate one, but also because one would think that a commitment to discovering and implementing justice in the world would bring with it the desire to find out just how such implementation might garner support. Consider, for example, that even assuming that a particular set of political principles (e.g. principles of justice) captures a relevant set of normative thoughts (e.g. my considered judgements regarding cases of injustice), I might still ask: why should I support those principles, in practice, over other principles, such as those which serve the material well-being of my family? Or: What is there to motivate me to prioritise justice, even assuming that I agree with you regarding what it asks of me?

To be clear, I am not arguing that this is the fundamental or indeed only question with which political philosophers should concern themselves. Assuming that there is, for example, any one conception of *justice* on which we *should* agree, then clearly uncovering the process of *justifying* that conception is going to reveal, amongst other things, some reasons that might motivate us to adopt it in practice, whether we are god-like legislators or day-to-day citizens<sup>11</sup>. But there is still a *separate* question. Knowing what justice is, what legitimacy is, what rights are, and indeed, what love is, what friendship is, what happiness is, what excellence is – even knowing all of these things, I still have to decide what to *prioritise*, and thus how to *act*. Political theory still has to meet practical reason, in the sense that the question ‘what should I think about justice/legitimacy/etc.?’ still has to meet the question ‘what should I do?’. All of which means, I assume, that it is a point in favour of any set of political principles if they lend themselves to an answer to this second question; if, that is, they lend themselves to a credible account of how an ordinary and rational human being might be motivated to support them.

So, with this in mind, I now suggest, as briefly as possible, four reasons that function as answers to *both* questions – and thus as both *justification* and *motivation* - for egalitarian-liberal-democratic principles, with the point being simply to sketch out how a spread of such reasons might convince people, not just to think that such principles are ‘a good thing’, but also that it is in their ‘interests’, however broadly conceived, to support them. First, if the described trends reveal the principles which, in practice, most people tend to prefer, then it

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<sup>11</sup> Though note, if there is not just *one* such conception, then the question of what actually motivates us in practice might well become the more important one. For an argument to the effect that there is *not* just one such conception - or at least, not one such conception as justified by the method described in the previous section - see (Floyd, forthcoming-b).

would be a *prudent* guess on my part to decide that I am likely to feel the same way. Second, if those trends reveals the principles that produce the least *suffering*, then, assuming I care about the well-being of others, that is a reason for me to affirm those principles. Third, if they reveal which principles produce the fewest *objections* on the part of others, then, assuming that I affirm something like the ‘liberal principle of legitimacy’ (Rawls, 2005), that is a reason for me to affirm those principles. Fourth, if they reveal the principles which, in practice, produce the most *stable* and *secure* environment for myself and my loved ones, then again, that is a reason for me to affirm those principles. And so, as a result, if we can assume that the described empirical trends hold, and also that enough of us want to, for example, minimise suffering, maximise principle-acceptance (and thus perceived legitimacy), or promote security for ourselves and our nearest and dearest - and it is not necessary for all individuals to be motivated by the same things<sup>12</sup> - then there is a route here, it seems, from observed patterns in human behaviour to the justification of political principles.

Or is there? At this point, I doubt anybody would be particularly convinced by what I have sketched out. Some will doubt those empirical patterns, whilst others will think that I am moving from an ‘is’ to an ‘ought’, or from ‘facts’ to ‘principles’, in an unacceptable fashion (Floyd, forthcoming-b). Relatedly, one might also wonder why we should even consider utilising normative behaviourism if the standard method of arguing for political principles, as described in the previous section, is working perfectly fine (Floyd, forthcoming-b). Yet what if is *not* working fine, bearing in mind in particular (1) our present interest in applying normative behaviourism to global political theory, and (2) the problem of cultural relativism, as considered earlier, and as it apparently applies to that subject? Again, given this possibility, it seems sensible to find out just how normative behaviourism fares on these two fronts, and thus to put to one side those other problems, especially as they are only *worth* taking on provided that there is some such pay-off at the end of the road.

Remember then what I said earlier: that if our political principles rest upon our normative thoughts, and our normative thoughts vary enough across cultures to commit us to different political principles, then this is a problem for global political theory (without even considering the possibility that they vary even *within* societies, including in particular

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<sup>12</sup> On this front, normative behaviourism is aligned with some theories of deliberative democracy, according to which it is perfectly fine for different people to affirm a given proposition, or indeed policy, for very different reasons – meaning that what counts is simply agreement on a particular conclusion, not the reasoning that leads to it. See, e.g. (Bohman, 1995).

*multicultural* societies). Consider, for example, the empirical finding that, when given the hypothetical choice between convicting an innocent individual in order to avoid a riot, or freeing that individual and thus triggering the riot, Chinese subjects are significantly more likely than American subjects (of European descent) to think that the first option is acceptable (Doris & Plakias, 2008, 324). The worry here is that if differences of this kind run deep enough to ensure that no *one* set of global political principles could be justified for even a majority of the global population, then we have a serious challenge on our hands. As a result, the key question becomes whether normative behaviourism helps with that specific challenge, to which the general answer, or so I hope, is that it does so by moving our attention away from culturally-variant thoughts of this kind, and towards culturally-invariant behaviour of the sort described earlier, at least if we focus, as stated, on *long term trends* and *large numbers* of people (for nobody denies that culture influences responses to principles-in-practice in the short-run).

Let me explain that answer. Consider how a woman might say that she is not addicted to cigarettes, despite smoking twenty a day for the past thirty years, or how a man might say that he is not gay, despite repeatedly engaging in homosexual acts, or how a teenager might say that she/he doesn't care about anyone, despite regularly helping out others for no personal reward. In each case, crucially, *cultural* norms influence the language people use to describe their intentions, motivations, and values. But not *just* their language: They also affect what people actually *think*, at least at one level, is *wrong* (and note: I deliberately use the term *think* rather than either *believe* or *feel* in order to avoid taking a position on cognitivism/non-cognitivism). The woman, for example, might think that addiction shows personal failure; the man might think homosexuality is sinful, or a failure of masculinity; the teenager might think that altruism shows a pathetic lack of transgression. Yet their *behaviour* tells us something else.

This is why I have suggested, elsewhere, that an apt slogan for normative behaviourism would be 'actions (sometimes) speak louder than thoughts' (Floyd, forthcoming-a), where 'louder' means both 'more clearly', given the often messy and inconsistent nature of our thinking, and 'with greater authenticity and commitment', given the risks involved with insurrection and crime. By contrast, our moral intuitions, our considered judgements, and the decisions we imagine we would make in hypothetical choice situations – all of these can be misleading in terms of revealing where our 'real' preferences lie. Which is not, of course, to

say that actions *always* speak louder than thoughts or words – hence the parentheses in the slogan – but simply to say that it is plausible that at least certain kinds of action might have more relevance in terms of our preferences across different political principles than certain kinds of thought.

So: normative behaviourism has at least the potential to help us with the described difficulties, just so long as (1) it is able to justify any principles at all, and (2) it draws on patterns of behaviour that are sufficiently culturally invariant. As to how this precisely plays out at the level of global political theory – that is what we turn to now.

### **Normative behaviourism and (realistic) global political theory**

Consider here that the standard case I have described for normative behaviourism holds that if a set of political principles, in practice, elicits less expressed discontent, in the form of insurrection and crime, over long periods of time, and for large numbers of people, then they are the best principles *domestically*. That is, they are the principles a society should choose for itself based on what we know of how various societies have fared in the past with a variety of political principles. This makes the relevance of normative behaviourism for principles intended to regulate a *global* order, of Westphalian or cosmopolitan character, unclear. What relevance could *insurrection* have, given that, when people rebel against their government, they generally do not do so as a protest against the international system of the day? What relevance could *crime* have when a society's high crime-rate is more often causally attributable to (and so the perceived responsibility of) domestic politics than the international system? Of course, there are exceptions to these trends. We do sometimes directly oppose the international system in these ways (e.g. anti-globalisation protests), and sometimes indirectly (e.g. various riots in Greece over the last few years). But this is not the norm. So again: what on earth could normative behaviourism have to do with *global* political principles?

There are two possibilities here. First, we might look at *distinctively international* forms of behaviour of similar ilk to insurrection and crime, such as war, violent anti-globalisation protests, or illegal migration, in the hope that they can be treated as expressions of judgements, not just about the present international system, but also about the principles it expresses in its design and operation. This focus might lead to arguments in favour of, say,

just war, cosmopolitan global governance, or open borders. Second, we might argue that, if normative behaviourism justifies domestic egalitarian liberal democracy, then it might also justify, *by extension*, whatever international or global system best supports it (i.e. whatever system would best support a world of such states). This would then connect normative behaviourism to an argument often heard on the political left over the last twenty or so years – that neoliberal globalisation, and its regulatory and fiscal race to the bottom, needs somehow to be tamed in order for national social-democracy to remain viable<sup>13</sup>.

Yet that connection, unfortunately, also reveals a potential conflict between the two possibilities, given that the first might lead to an opposing conclusion to the second, and thus yet another front on which cosmopolitans might face off against statist/nationalists/realists. So what to do? My approach will be to focus solely on the second possibility – call it ‘making the world safe for social democracy’. This is in part because there is not the room to explore both – and one can only assess the described potential conflict having explored each of them – but also because the former requires a much deeper kind of exploration, given its need of an account regarding why these *new* forms of behaviour might be relevant to the justification of political principles, and thus a return to the very idea of normative behaviourism. The second possibility, by contrast, allows me to assume that idea as a fairly clear (if by no means fully justified) background.

So what can be said for this second approach? Actually not very much at all. The core of the argument is simple: Assuming (1) that the standard way of justifying political principles fails us as the global level, as indicated, (2) that the behavioural data described holds, regardless of culture, and (3) that normative behaviourism is a valid way of justifying political principles, then we have at least a *prima facie* reason for adopting whatever global political reforms are entailed by such principles (e.g. global fiscal rules designed to avoid tax-competition between states, or international labour standards designed to avoid a regulatory race to the bottom in terms of working practices), provided of course that the implications of such adoption would not be of a kind that calls into question those initial principles (where ‘implications’ includes, at the least, whatever *behaviour* is likely to result from such adoption)<sup>14</sup>. As a result, the way

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<sup>13</sup> This was a staple of discussions surrounding the ‘Third Way’. See (Giddens, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> This is in parallel with reflective equilibrium, according to which the implications of a set of principles can give us reason to change the justificatory story behind them, and thus also the principles themselves.



to *argue* for this position is not really to argue *for* it all, but rather to argue *against* either *alternatives* or *objections* to it<sup>15</sup>.

Yet that does not mean *any* objections or alternatives, i.e. whatever ‘straw men’ or ‘aunt sallies’ can be mustered for rhetorical effect, but rather the *strongest* objections possible. As a result, I want to consider an objection that relates to the specific concerns of global political theory, as stemming from two things in particular: (1) *cosmopolitan* arguments regarding global governance, and (2) what appears to be the natural *conservative* bias of normative behaviourism. This objection goes as follows. First, note how normative behaviourism attempts to justify political principles of the basis of their record in practice. Second, note that this means *historically-tested* principles. Third, note that this leads to at least two difficulties: (A) in the *past* (say, before the 20<sup>th</sup> century), it could not have justified social democracy, given that we had no empirical knowledge of such a system; (B) in the *present*, it could never justify a cosmopolitan global order (or, for example, a ‘true’ democratic-socialist domestic order), given that, again, we have no empirical knowledge of such things. As a result, normative behaviourism appears to be an absurd form of ‘end of history’ thinking, according to which the present is valorised as the pinnacle of historical progress.

This, I believe, is the key objection to normative behaviourism, at least at the level of global political theory, though I believe it can be rebutted, just so long as one can show how a cosmopolitan global order (whatever precise form such an order might take) is not necessarily ruled out by the case I have advanced so far.

Central to this rebuttal is the idea of an ‘experiment’. Normative behaviourism, we might say, and without denying the first part of the objection under consideration, essentially treats political history as a set of historical experiments regarding the way in which political principles perform in practice, and so evaluates those principles in terms of the extent to which they generate specific kinds of behaviour – insurrection and crime. Yet that is not the *end* of experimentation. Looking forward, the idea then becomes to *try out* new principles, whilst recognising (1) that we should not regurgitate principles that we already know (eventually) fail in practice and (2) that there might be no way of fully justifying such principles until enough time has passed.

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<sup>15</sup> In this respect I follow Mill, who once declared –and it is an under-appreciated point – that three quarters of any normative case of this sort has to be argument against the alternatives (Mill, 1974, 98).

That second point, however, touches again upon something I have repeatedly tried to sideline – the rivalry between normative behaviourism and the described ‘standard’ method of justifying political principles. As a result, it is worth pointing out that I believe – and have argued elsewhere (Floyd, 2011; Floyd, forthcoming-b) - that the latter method cannot deliver the goods in the way - or at least to the extent – that its practitioners hope. This is because conflicts between normative thoughts both *within* and *across* individuals (e.g. conflicting intuitions within one mind, and between two or more individuals), and even *within* cultures, are sufficiently large to lead to conflicts between the political principles they affirm, even after sufficient reflection (e.g. via ‘wide reflective equilibrium’). Yet this is not something we need to assume in order to accept the point about experimentation. For now, even if we think, like Parfit (1984), and unlike MacIntyre (1984) – and note the shared year of publication - that the current model of ethical enquiry is a young subject, and should be given time to find its truths, it is enough to see that there is no harm in taking such an experimental approach, given that - and who would argue against this? - we currently do *not* agree, at either the *academic* or *political* level, upon either domestic or global political principles.

Yet this still leaves the cosmopolitan half of the objection outstanding. If a commitment to human moral equality, when appropriately interpreted, leads to cosmopolitan principles of global governance, then what can a normative behaviourist say that would find common ground with such a position?

In order to answer that question, I want to draw on Pasternak’s recent discussion of the idea of a ‘league of democracies’ (Pasternak, 2012). The argument here is that our primary goal, in terms of international reform, should be for mature liberal democracies to construct *their own* governance framework, rather than diluting that framework, in terms of regulatory bite, and from the point of view of liberal values, in order to include everyone else. Crucially, she argues not just that this is a viable and attractive project in the short term, but also one that offers, at least potentially, a viable and attractive route to cosmopolitan global governance, whereby other countries steadily join that framework when ready. As a result, the argument covers its tracks in the right way, given that, even if such an end-point turns out not to be attractive in and of itself, it remains the case that whatever steps were taken in that direction would have been small, peaceful, and legitimate ones. All of which chimes rather nicely with normative behaviourism, given that the proposal is for small and feasible steps from an

arrangement that we *already know* is attractive, to a sequence of reversible stages that could be *evaluated in practice*, before proceeding any further. All of which should appeal to both cosmopolitans *and* statist, given that we are essentially shoring egalitarian-liberal-democratic principles *today*, without ruling out *cosmopolitan* governance *tomorrow*.

Remember though, one more time, the challenge of cultural relativism, given that it reminds us not to concede *more* than this to the cosmopolitans. This is because, if cosmopolitans rely upon *Western* normative thoughts as a basis for justifying *global* political principles, then they too have reason to be interested in a method of justification that bypasses whatever bias there is in that selection. And indeed, not just cosmopolitans. Consider also that *realists*, whether focused on *power* (in international relations) or *legitimacy* (in political theory), have similar reason to think that this is a more appropriate way of proceeding when it comes to justifying a genuinely shared idea of global political progress. This is because normative behaviourism, by working up principles from the *real* preferences expressed by *real* people, and in response to *real* political institutions and policies, does not face the problems of feasibility, illegitimacy, or general ignorance of ‘real politics’, that typically worry those who argue about either realism vs. moralism, as well as those discussing ideal vs. non-ideal theory. It takes seriously the idea that we live in a contemporary global world defined by deep normative disagreement (Valentini, 2012) and even a plural distribution of power (Hurrell & MacDonald, 2012), yet without necessarily stamping on legitimacy, cosmopolitan aspirations, or wider democratic values (Ronzoni, 2012). So *again*, regardless of whether one focuses on cosmopolitanism, realism, or of course cultural relativism, there is good reason here to think that promoting a global order centred upon domestic egalitarian liberal democracy is an attractive step to take.

## **Conclusion**

The word ‘revolting’, I think, fits normative behaviourism rather well: *Empirically*, because it focuses on acts of revolution (as well as criminal acts); *psychologically*, because it interprets such acts as an expression of the feeling that the status quo is, to those actors, revolting; *philosophically*, because for some it will seem a revolting theory, given its movement from an ‘is’ of behaviour to an ‘ought’ of political principles; and *politically*, because for some it will suggest an undue conservatism in the face of, for example, untested cosmopolitan global governance. All of which should be clear from the preceding argument. The key question,

however, has been whether normative behaviourism provides a *realistic* approach to global political theory, given the apparent ‘fact’ of cultural relativism, to which the answer, or so I have claimed, is this: Yes, in the sense that it takes *people* as they are, without assuming away cultural differences in their normative thinking; yes, in the sense that it takes *institutions* as they are, in the sense of how they perform in practice; yes, in the sense that it recommends familiar and thus apparently *feasible* international institutions; but also yes, in the sense that it does not either rule out future *progress*, or even future ideas of a kind that we *have not yet imagined* – bearing in mind that denying the importance of ideas, or the possibility of progress, in politics, also shows a lack of realism regarding the way the ‘real world’ works (Philp, 2010). So, four-way revulsion, but also four-way realism, in the specific senses mentioned, and thus also in the wider Rousseauan sense of taking ‘men as they are and laws as they might be’.

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