

Revisiting Wendt: An Argument for the Normativity of Wendtian Constructivism

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DANIEL BOSTON, MAR 7 2020

When Constructivism began to make waves in IR scholarship, its main focus was to show that norms matter empirically.^[1] Scholars such as Richard Price (1995), Audie Klotz (1995) and especially Alexander Wendt (1992) analysed how norms influence identities, and vice versa, and following that the impact it had on interactions between states in general and more specifically on the employment of weapons and sanction regimes among other things. This contrasted with the position held by the dominant schools of neorealism and neoliberalism. Yet, quite quickly, critics began to point out, that while constructivism had managed to show how norms influenced (inter)action, as of now there was no way of differentiating between norms as 'good' or 'bad'. In other words, constructivism, it was argued, was missing an ethical dimension. This critique was levelled especially at Alexander Wendt who is regarded by some scholars to omit said ethical dimension entirely (Bottici, 2009, p. 121; Erskine, 2001, pp. 67-68; Zehfuss, 2002, pp. 34). Yet, as Pashakhanlou points out, while there have been calls to study more in-depth the role of ethics in Wendt's thought, no significant studies have been done yet (2018, p. 2).^[2] Rather, it appears to me that the normative agnosticism of Wendt is simply taken for granted by some scholars. To be sure, said critique has not just been directed at Wendt and some constructivists have taken up the challenge. In the following paper I will first look at how one of them, Richard Price (2008), has responded to this critique by developing a framework for the ethics of constructivism. After that, I will critically analyze two positions which argue for and against the possibility of normativity in constructivism in general and Wendt more specifically. Lastly, I will look at Wendt's writing, specifically his paper 'Anarchy is what states make of it' (1992) and whether or how it fits into Price's framework. I argue that while Wendt may not offer a comprehensive ethical framework, he does, nonetheless, have a normative side in the sense that he offers a goal to strive towards and the means to judge whether or not an action is good or bad.

Price (2008) locates the ethics of constructivism between skepticism and utopianism. In doing so, he points out several key factors which differentiate constructivists' ethical position from other approaches. Regarding skepticism of the realist kind which commonly argues that significant moral change is either impossible and/or bears the risk of creating conflict which transcends the risk associated with the status quo, he upholds constructivism as allowing for 'progress as defined in humanitarian terms' as something that can be achieved (Price, 2008, p. 322). In other words, while he admits the possibility of a certain agnosticism regarding the content of norms, which may lead to constructivists deciding subjectively on what is desirable, he nonetheless stresses that the ethical position which can be attributed to constructivism is the allowance for moral change in the international system, thereby arguing against a naturalistic understanding of the materialist kind (pp. 321-322). In regards to utopianism, Price highlights that constructivism does not just argue for the existence of ethical possibilities but also for their empirical limits. Because, and this is crucial, Price argues that ethical ideals achieve their legitimacy not just by responding to the question of what ought to be but are qualified by the is, in the sense that they have to answer to the question of what might work. In other words, the ethics of constructivism argues against the utopianism of critical theory, post-structuralism or other post-positivist theories by putting a higher emphasis on 'practically realizable ethics' (p. 323). To be sure, Price does not disagree with the necessity of looking towards fundamental change. On the contrary, he argues that constructivists' ethical stance is quite suited for aiming towards utopian goals. Yet, this should not come at the expense of more easily realizable efforts. Especially since it has been shown how small, incremental changes can have unforeseen effects that lead to systemic changes (pp. 323-325). To summarize, Price argues that the ethics of constructivism are 'ethics of moral possibility' which is to be understood twofold. Firstly, possibility entails that

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change is possible. Secondly, possibility privileges small, more likely to be successful actions over grand designs with a high probability of failure.

Havercroft (2018) argues that constructivism, as of now, cannot be considered to possess a normative theoretical position. He gives the following reasons for this, which are in part features of social constructivism and in part due to research prioritization on the part of scholars. Firstly, Havercroft points out that social-constructivists tend towards taking norms at face value, meaning that they take certain norms to be good self-evidently without offering proper explanations for this, which he labels as 'cryptonormativism' (2018, p. 118). Secondly, he points out the criticisms of ethicists such as Erskine (2012) and Rengger (2012) who argue that constructivism is in general incapable of differentiating between norms because it is lacking a clear moral epistemology (Havercroft, 2018, p. 127). Thirdly, Havercroft points to the co-constitution of structures and agents as limiting the responsibility of agents. Regarding this, he states that from a rationalist normative perspective, it is necessary that the agents be responsible for their actions to a certain degree in order to judge their actions ethically. In his view, the focus on *structuration* forecloses this (2018, p. 117-118). In my view, some of his critiques are a tad misplaced. As Price has admitted, constructivism, taken by itself does not offer a 'full-fledged normative commitment' such as cosmopolitanism or communitarianism (Price, 2008, p. 320). If taken at face value, this entails that the lack of a comprehensive moral epistemology should not be understood as a major issue but rather as a feature. Regarding the other claims of cryptonormativism and structuration not allowing for moral agency of actors, I will answer these by referring to Pashakhanlou.

Pashakhanlou argues against the notion of Wendt's agnosticism, stating that Wendt does have a primary ethical concern which is 'peace defined as the prevention of the use of organized violence' (2018, p. 2). If the keeping or achieving of peace is the primary yardstick by which to judge whether a norm is good or bad or whether an action is ethical or unethical, then the charge of cryptonormativism does not ring true for Wendt since, I would argue, few would consider the avoidance of violence, if possible, to be contested on moral grounds and Wendt lays out a measure with which to decide on the desirability of actions. Wendt, Pashakhanlou argues, offers two remedies: a Kantian anarchic culture and a world state in a later paper.^[3] Secondly, he claims that Wendt's ontological and epistemological position allow for the inclusion of morals since morals are understood as unobservable entities which nonetheless have observable effects that, crucially, can be influenced by human actors (Pashakhanlou, 2018, p. 8). To be sure, Wendt's actors are sovereign states. Yet, Wendt makes the argument that '*states are people too*' and are capable of reasoning and therefore possess moral agency (Wendt, 2004, p. 291). As Pashakhanlou points out, this is not uncontested, but even critics of Wendt allow for the capability of, at least, 'indirect moral reasoning' (Brown, 2003, p. 44; quoted after Pashakhanlou, 2018, p. 9). This, I would argue, solves Havercroft's critique that structuration prevents moral agency and establishes Wendt's states as moral actors. Since Wendt links the reduction of violence to the establishment of either a Kantian culture of anarchy or the emergence of a world state, either one of these can be understood as desirable outcomes.

To continue, it is necessary to look at how change occurs according to Wendt and whether agency plays a role. In doing so, I will look at Wendt's article 'Anarchy is what states make of it' (1992) to show that, while less refined, normative considerations and the features that make them possible have always existed in his reasoning. To be sure, Wendt himself states that once a certain level of stability is reached, change is difficult to come by since even weaker members may act in the interest of preserving whatever is the current status quo (Wendt, 1992, p. 413; Wendt, 1999, p. 343). Yet, how probable said change is, does not completely determine whether there can be such a thing as ethical action. Rather, it may just determine how probable it is for actors to aim to act ethically instead of in the spirit of the status quo. Of importance for my argument is though that there has to exist a certain level of dissatisfaction to incentivize change (Wendt, 1992, p. 414). If there is an opportunity for change which consists of dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs which might lead to a breakdown of consensus regarding identity, then it is ethical for actors to act in a way that increases the probability of the system changing towards a Kantian anarchy/a World state. How this may look in practice is shown by the example of the Soviet Union's Perestroika. In essence, self-help and security competition can be reduced by teaching the other how to trust. The Soviet Union, I would argue, behaved clearly ethical by opening up an opportunity for systemic change when the opportunity arose to do so (Wendt, 1992, pp. 420-422). To be sure, as Wendt himself points out, whether or not such actions are successful is dependent on reciprocity and therefore influence of the single actor is limited. Yet, I would argue that this is almost always the case as long as one is looking at relations which are mostly equal, or sufficiently equal, in terms of power, and while it does

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lead to a reduction of responsibility through a reduction of the possible influence of individual agency, it does not negate responsibility altogether. Additionally, while constructivists, as Price argues, place a higher emphasis on outcome legitimacy, this does not solely determine whether an action is good or bad, either.

Looking back at Price's framework, it shows that Wendt's position fits somewhat into the 'ethics of moral possibility' laid out by Price. As does Price, Wendt highlights that change is possible and that said change may be brought about by actors. In addition to that, both stress the importance of feasibility or, in Price's terms, asking the question of 'what works'. Regarding this, Wendt tends stronger towards allowing for change mostly in situations of 'crisis', while Price puts more of an emphasis on small positive effects. In this sense, I would argue that a modified version of Price's 'moral possibility' can describe Wendt's normative position which I would label the ethics of probability.

To be sure, probability is dependent on a number of factors that go beyond individual agency. For that reason, I would argue, it is difficult to place Wendtian ethics neatly along the lines of a more substantive ethical framework, due to the plurality of influential factors and also the contingent nature of the international system. Yet, to get back to my argument, individual agency is clearly one influential factor. Therefore, to summon Price once more, I argue that moral possibility, in the Wendtian sense, is best understood as the possibility of actors influencing outcomes, responsibility is to be understood as acting in a way to increase the probability of systemic change if that happens to be in any way feasible and/or does not include significant risk to the actor. In outlining the three cultures of anarchy and making his argument for the world state, Wendt furthermore points in the direction towards which he believes systemic change should be directed. Lastly, for the argument I am making it is not important whether Kantian anarchy or the world state is ethically superior.^[4] What does matter is that Wendt clearly lays out a moral way for states to act by pointing to the normative superiority of *either* system over existing alternatives since they reduce the risk of violence. Therefore, Wendtian ethics may be understood as linked by the lowest common denominator, peace, which conveys responsibility to actors to act in a way that increases the probability of moving towards it.

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Notes

- [1] To be sure, to talk about constructivism is not accurate, rather, it makes sense to talk about constructivisms. Differences between these different forms are significant, as pointed out by Fierke (2013). In this paper I will focus on the social constructivism or 'conventional constructivism', to use Fierke's terminology, of Wendt.
- [2] Pashakhanlou singles out Hasenclever et al. (1997) who called for a more in-depth look at the underlying normativity of Wendt's work.
- [3] Kantian anarchy is already foreshadowed in Wendt's earlier paper 'Anarchy is what states make of it' (p. 400). He discusses it in detail in 'Social Theory of International Relations' (1999). In 'Why a World State is Inevitable' (2004) Wendt argues that the normatively superior system is the world state which has not been a feature of his writing up until that point.
- [4] Somewhat ironically, one could read Wendt as arguing that the world state is normatively superior because it reduces uncertainty by reducing agency of states; transferring agency away from states. If one takes his argument seriously, then it would incentivize future research into the question of whether Wendt's view is of a teleological nature and ethical actions move the system along the line towards the 'inevitable world government'.

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