1 The Case for International Political Theory

A theory of the state must be, from one angle, a philosophy of international law. (Laski)

The central purpose of the political theory of international relations is the presentation of a philosophical account of the experience of living in and among a world of separate, sovereign states. This identifying objective parallels the traditional concern of orthodox political theory with the provision of a theoretical representation of the experience of living within the state. Philosophies of politics aim to uncover the meaning and rationality of political existence without perpetuating the commonplace assumptions of everyday life or introducing their own undefended presuppositions. Typically, if it confronts a form of social life whose rationality seems less than fully realised or complete, the theory of politics becomes concerned with articulating the principles of a more perfect political order. The initial case for the political theory of international relations is derived from the need to undertake certain philosophical tasks which are often omitted from the scope of orthodox, more state-centred, social and political theories. No special method distinguishes it from that parallel enterprise which constitutes the history of political thought as it is conventionally understood – only the desire to consider the reasons which may exist for those structures which were not consciously determined for their own sake but shaped in accordance with the conflicts and compromises of earlier times. The international political theorist casts a Cartesian eye over that realm of politics, the international system of states, whose basic necessity or acceptability is too readily pre-judged by our more important traditions of
politic political thought. In particular, two postulates of modern political life fall immediately under its scrutiny: firstly, the near universal belief that a person's most fundamental political obligations are interconnected with the form of social life of which he is part, and which his political structures are obliged to protect; and, secondly, the virtually universal presumption of the acceptability of that order or framework within which all social and political interaction occurs, and upon which the maintenance of all other social orders depends, the international order itself.

To transform our brief claim for the importance of international political theory into a body of concrete theoretical principles, we must first confront certain obstacles allegedly unique to the enterprise. Here we can do no better than refer to Martin Wight's famous argument that international theory as 'a tradition of speculation about the society of states, or the family of nations, or the international community ... does not, at first sight, exist'. The reason is that 'the belief in the sovereign state as the consummation of political experience and activity which has marked Western political thought since the Renaissance ... has absorbed almost all the intellectual energy devoted to political study'. The 'intellectual prejudice imposed by the sovereign state' explains the fact that political theorists 'have not been attracted by the possibility of maximising the field of political theory' by reflecting, for example, upon alternative foundations of world political organisation. Furthermore, Wight argues, consideration needs to be given to the insurmountable fact that 'what for political theory is the extreme case [as revolution, or civil war] is for international theory the regular case'. The international states-system is 'the realm of recurrence and repetition; it is the field in which political action is most regularly necessitous' and least 'susceptible of a progressivist interpretation'. The distinctive kind of political conduct associated with the states-system means that international relations cannot be theorised 'in the language of political theory and law', a language 'appropriate to man's control of his social life'. While political theory can be 'the theory of the good life', international theory is limited to 'the theory of survival'. The world of international politics, unlike its domestic counterpart, does not make available a body of ideas