Exploring Social Relations, Understanding Power, and Valuing Care: the Role of Critical Feminist Ethics in International Relations Theory

Fiona Robinson

Introduction

This chapter explores the nature and role of feminist ethics in International Relations. By this I do not mean to suggest that there is a single, unified approach to ethics which may be unequivocally defined as ‘feminist’. Indeed, just as there is much diversity among ‘feminisms’ or feminist theories in general, there are a variety of interpretations of what can be considered as feminist ethics. My aim in this chapter is to construct a feminist approach to ethics which is relevant and useful in the context of International Relations, and which avoids some of the dangers and shortcomings of which feminist ethics has been accused in the past.

In the first half of the chapter I argue that the current field of international ethics may be divided into three broad ‘schools’: the American, ‘Carnegie’ school, which is policy-oriented in focus and positivist in its epistemology; the ‘English school’, which uses the cosmopolitan/communitarian framework and is largely derived from Enlightenment or ‘modernist’ moral and political philosophy; and finally, more recently, the ‘critical’ school, which includes the work of both Frankfurt School Critical Theorists and postmodernists. Through an analysis of the different approaches put forward by these schools, I will argue that all of these understandings are, to a greater or lesser extent, flawed in their conception of the role of ethics and the nature of morality in the context of international relations, due largely to their failure to
overcome the analytical, normative and epistemological dichotomy between ethics and politics.

The main argument of the chapter is that in spite of its marginalisation in the literature on international ethics, feminist approaches are well-suited to the task of exploring the nature of morality and moral relations in an era of globalisation. To support this, the second half of the chapter outlines a particular formulation of feminist ethics – that I call a ‘critical ethics of care’ – that is particularly relevant to the analysis of morality in the contemporary world. This approach has three central characteristics: first, it understands ethics as concrete, situated and relevant to particular social and historical contexts – thus, morality is seen as embedded in the fabric of the social world; second, it relies on a critical, naturalised epistemology; and third, it starts from a relational ontology, which sees morality as emerging out of personal and social relations. Importantly, this last characteristic has two further parts to it: a critical ethics of care recognises that while healthy personal and social relations can motivate and give rise to the moral practice of care – encompassing the moral qualities of responsiveness, attentiveness and responsibility, it is also acutely aware that all personal and social relations are infused with power and thus contain at least the potential for inequality, oppression and violence. I will argue that, because of these characteristics, only a critical feminist ethics can adequately address the nature of moral relations in a world that is not only increasingly interconnected, but is also characterised by massive and ever-widening disparities in levels of well-being and access to basic goods and resources. Finally, I will suggest that a critical ethics of this nature is important in an era in which globalisation – and especially the global capitalist economy – is increasingly regarded as a totalising, unstoppable force which is beyond the control of individual agents. Making social and analytical space for ethics – especially a critical ethics of care – reminds us that there is still room for agency and resistance in the face of globalisation.

An American social science: the Carnegie school

It is often said that International Relations is an Anglo-American discipline. What is meant by this is that most scholarly analysis of world politics originates today, as it always has done, in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The hyphen between ‘Anglo’ and ‘American’ however, has never been understood as an indicator of synthesis or consensus; indeed, the divide between the American and English schools is fundamental to the identity of the discipline.