

Review - Ethics, Diversity and World Politics: Saving Pluralism From Itself

Written by Davide Orsi

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/13/review-ethics-diversity-and-world-politics-saving-pluralism-from-itself/>

DAVIDE ORSI, JAN 13 2017

Ethics, Diversity and World Politics: Saving Pluralism From Itself

By John Williams

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015

The purpose of this book by John Williams is to revitalize and defend an innovative pluralist interpretation of international society. That between pluralism and solidarism is a fundamental distinction within the English School and was first stated by Hedley Bull in one of his contributions to *Diplomatic Investigations* (1966). According to pluralist notions of international society, various states with different goals and conceptions of the good recognise and acknowledge that they are bound by a minimal code of coexistence. States agree on certain minimal rules, which result from evolving historical practices. Solidarist views, on the other hand, argue for a more cohesive conception of international society based on substantive notion of common good, purposes and will. With the exception of Terry Nardin's *Law, Morality, and the Relations of States* (1983) and Robert Jackson's *The Global Covenant* (2000), over the past few decades, pluralism has been neglected in favour of solidarism (the most notable examples are Wheeler's *Saving Strangers*, published in 2000, and Hurrell's *On Global Order*, published in 2007). There are many reasons for this hegemony in IR theory and in academia in general, including the association of pluralism with conservatism, Eurocentrism, and moral indifference to injustice.

Ethics, Diversity & World Politics sets off from a frank, deep analysis of traditional pluralist theory and of its shortcomings, as they are identified in solidarist literature (in particular statism, nationalism and exclusivism). The first objective pursued by Williams is to ground pluralism on solid philosophical theory. According to his reading, pluralism has not one, except for a vague, and at the same time radical, moral scepticism. To some readers this last critique might appear too harsh, especially if one thinks at the considerable effort to link English School's theorizing to social constructivism and, more particularly, of theorists like Nardin, Jackson, Rengger to ground their pluralist position on an innovative interpretation of Michael Oakeshott's political philosophy. However, the second chapter proposes a convincing and well-developed philosophical analysis of the epistemological and theoretical ground of pluralism. In particular, it is the connection between knowledge and politics that is highlighted. According to this reading, if we acknowledge that political communities are communities of belief, then, Williams argues, pluralist theorists should give an informed account of the different types of knowledge grounding political authority. The main purpose of pluralism is indeed that of defending the rich variety of human diversity composing the communities that are part of international society.

Williams takes this seriously and indicates in the normative defence of the ethical diversity of human communities the main contribution of his work. Indeed, the whole book is grounded on the critique of what is perceived as the lack of normative engagement of traditional pluralism. In particular, Williams argues, previous pluralists have acknowledged that in international society there is a multiplicity of communities, but have failed to explain why this is desirable. In particular, the defence of the priority of order over justice and perfectionist project in international society is contested in the light of the problematic ethical dilemmas that animate world politics. Williams argument is based on an elaboration of Hannah Arendt's political philosophy and of her reflection on the ontological importance of communities in shaping ideas about the good life. Even though one could have asked for this part to be more

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developed, what is particularly remarkable is the persuasive defence of a normative conception of IR theory, in spite of the opposite hegemonic trends in current debates in IR.

On this ground, the book advances an innovative theory of pluralist international society and of its institutions, in the light of the challenges of globalization, which has challenged the statist presupposition of pluralism within the English School. In addition to this deep and elaborated theoretical analysis, the book offers gives insight on some of the most recent trends in IR theory, including practice theory, social constructivism, and the increasing relevance of international political theory. Finally, in order to show the normative and analytic power of the revised pluralism proposed, *Ethics, Diversity & World Politics* looks at some key contemporary challenges in world politics, including human security, targeted killing.

The book advances a valuable philosophical and theoretical justification of the normative desirability of ethical diversity in world politics. It contributes to the renewed interest in the English School of International Relations that is one of the most significant phenomenon in contemporary IR theory. By proposing an innovative reading of pluralism, the book not only provides essential insights for anyone with interest in ethical pluralism in contemporary politics, but it also sets the agenda for future research in this field of study.

About the author:

Davide Orsi (Ph.D. in Politics and International Relations from Cardiff University, 2015) is Editor-at-Large and Deputy Articles Editor at E-IR. His first book *Michael Oakeshott's Political Philosophy of International Relations: Civil Association and International Society* (Palgrave, 2016) explores the historical and normative dimension of international society by relating Oakeshott's philosophy of civil association to English School theories of international relations. He has published work in journals including the *Journal of International Political Theory*, *Filosofia Politica*, *Intersezioni*, *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, the *European Legacy*, and the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. He is co-editor of *Realism in Practice: An Appraisal* and editor of *The Clash of Civilizations. Twenty-Five Years On*, both published by E-International Relations in 2018.