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# Is ideal theory practical?

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Abstract. This article examines how the exemplars of ideal theory have addressed what I term 'the problem of preservation'. The 'problem' in question is not so much that a political community must make provisions for its self-preservation, but rather that its provisions must correspond to the intentions and capabilities of its neighbours. This constraint implies that the ability of a political community to pursue ideals rather than power depends heavily on who its neighbours happen to be. This article shows how Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls address this problem by recommending measures such as defensive fortification, collective security, and democratic peace, which, they claim, will dampen the anarchic nature of the international system. It argues that the implausibility of these measures renders the ability of political communities to heed the moral guidance offered by ideal theory contingent at best and impractical at worst. If proponents of ideal theory wish to resist this conclusion, then they must offer a more persuasive answer to the problem of preservation.

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An ideal theory, as I use the term here, is a theory that explains how actual political communities ought to conduct their politics by examining how a political community that finds itself in ideal circumstances would conduct its politics. The practicality of such a theory is brought into question, understandably enough, by the fact that actual political communities tend to operate in less than ideal circumstances. Above all else, actual political communities are confronted by an 'anarchic' international system where the absence of a power able to enforce mutually agreed upon rules leaves all concerned responsible for ensuring their own security and safety.[1] Under the circumstances the mantle of practicality is usually worn by a rather different theory, namely, the political realism associated most famously with Machiavelli. This theory, as Pierre Hassner has put it, emerges when political experience leads the philosopher to settle 'down on the battlefield and base his thinking not on peace but on war, not on the idea of the good society but on the reality of the struggle for power.'[2]

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[1] On this see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1948); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

[2] Pierre Hassner, 'Beyond the Three Traditions: The Philosophy of War and Peace in Historical Perspective', *International Affairs*, 70:4 (1994), p. 743.



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So how can a political philosopher attracted to ideal theory respond to the distance between the assumptions she makes and the reality she is confronted by? Arguably, she has little option but to respond constructively; she must show how an actual political community that prioritises ends other than those of power and wealth can still ensure its security and safety.[3] As it happens, there is a long history of such endeavours. This article shows how some of the exemplars of ideal theory, namely, Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls, address the problem of preservation by proposing institutional arrangements, including defensive fortification, collective security, and democratic peace, which, they assume, will dampen the anarchic nature of the international system. The upside of this history is that it shows that the charge of naivety that is sometimes levelled against these ideal theorists has little merit. On the contrary, as we shall see below, Aristotle, Rousseau and Kant (and, to a lesser degree, Rawls) are all well aware of the anarchic nature of the international system. The downside, however, is that political experience has not exactly validated the answers that these philosophers have given to the question of how we can temper, if not overcome, the anarchic nature of the international system. This failure matters a great deal, because it means that the practicality of the moral guidance offered by ideal theory continues to be held hostage to the ebb and flow of international politics. And the failure to address this failure is perhaps even more significant, because it raises the question as to whether contemporary proponents of ideal theory take the issue of practicality seriously enough in the first place.

## Aristotle: the economistic principle

It is a basic axiom of politics that the members of a political community cannot pursue the ends they desire collectively if their community cannot be secured against external threats. An early statement of this axiom can be found in *The Politics* where Aristotle criticises the egalitarian constitution devised by Phaleas of Chalcedon on the grounds that it is:

> chiefly designed to promote the internal welfare of the state. But the legislator should consider also its relation to neighbouring nations, and to all who are outside of it. The government must be organized with a view to military strength; and of this he has not said a word.[4]

This point is subsequently reiterated in Aristotle's discussion on Sparta's laws of inheritance, which he blames for having created such enormous inequalities in property ownership that although the country had resources sufficient to maintain fifteen hundred cavalry and thirty thousand hoplites, the total number of Spartan citizens fell below a thousand. The eventual fate of the Spartans 'proves the faulty nature of their laws respecting property', Aristotle says, 'for the city sank under a

[3] This is the subject matter of what contemporary Rawlsians refer to as 'non-ideal' theory. As John Simmons has put it, 'where ideal theory dictates the objective, non-ideal theory dictates the route to that objective.' On this, see A. John Simmons, 'Ideal and Nonideal Theory', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 38:1 (2010), p. 12.

[4] Aristotle, *The Politics, and the Constitution of Athens*, ed. Stephen Everson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1267a17–28.

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single defeat; the want of men was their ruin.'[5] This point is reiterated yet again in Aristotle's discussion of Plato's *Laws*. Observing that Plato directs the lawgiver to 'have his eye directed at two points – the people and country', Aristotle adds that 'neighbouring countries must not also be forgotten by him' because 'a state must have such a military force as will be serviceable against her neighbours, and not merely useful at home.'[6] This is because even a political community that wishes to disassociate itself from such matters must be prepared to partake in a 'political' way of life. And so, 'even if such a life is not accepted, either for individuals or states', Aristotle says, 'still a city should be formidable to enemies, whether invading or retreating.'[7]

Given these criticisms of the constitutions devised by Phaleas, Sparta, and Plato, it should come as no surprise that when Aristotle turns to describe his own conception of the ideal political community, he provisions for matters of defence from the very start. 'Where there are neighbours', he writes, the lawgiver 'will have to see what sort of studies should be practiced in relation to their several characters, or how the measures appropriate in relation to each are to be adopted.'[8] This pragmatism leads Aristotle to draw conclusions that say much about the ways in which the pressures of self-preservation can constrain the ability of a political community to pursue an ideal way of life. For instance, he recommends establishing a naval force in spite of concerns about the 'democratic' and 'commercial' aspects of navies and ports respectively, because a political community 'should be formidable not only to its own citizens but also to its neighbours.'[9] Even more revealing is his discussion of the Spartan belief that a city ought to refrain from building defensive walls so as to spur the military prowess of its citizens. In a scathing passage Aristotle writes that 'those who say that cities making any pretension to military virtue should not have [defensive walls], are quite out of date in their notions; and they may see the cities which prided themselves on this fancy confuted by the facts.'[10] He recommends, instead, that as 'the superiority of the besiegers may be and often is too much ... for ordinary human valour', if the city is 'to be saved and to escape defeat and outrage, the strongest wall will be the truest soldierly precaution, more especially now that missiles and siege engines have been brought to such perfection.'[11] He concludes with the injunction that just 'as the assailants of a city do all they can to gain an advantage, so the defenders should make use of any means of defence which have already been discovered, and should devise and invent others, for when men are well prepared no enemy even thinks of attacking them.'[12]

The passages cited above make a simple point, namely, that a political community must take account of the inclinations and capabilities of its neighbours

[5] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1270a30. The reference here is to the historic battle at Leuctra in 371 BC where the Spartans were defeated by the Thebans, an event that marked the beginning of their decline in Greek politics.
[6] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1265a20–25. Plato, *The Laws* trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 704.
[7] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1265a25–27.
[8] Ibid., 1325a13–15.
[9] Ibid., 1327a37–1327b5.
[10] Ibid., 1330b33–35.
[11] Ibid., 1330b37–1331a4.
[12] Ibid., 1331a13–18.

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when it makes preparations to ensure its own safety. This simple point has a deep implication though. It suggests that the ability of a political community to live under ideal laws, that is, laws that cultivate the good life and foster happiness, depends on who its neighbours happen to be. What does Aristotle make of this point seeing as he acknowledges that there existed in his time states where the 'entire aim of both the laws and of the constitution is to give men despotic power over their neighbours'?[13]

His response, in part at least, is to dissuade political communities from following the example set by such predatory states. An obsession with war is unhealthy, he argues, because then, instead of providing for ethical development, the state can end up demanding the suppression of ethical development in favour of the cultivation of military force, which, he tells us, would be like saying 'that political science governs the gods since it issues prescriptions about everything in the city.'[14] Aristotle tries to make us appreciate the perversity of this outcome by means of a thought experiment. Imagine, he says, a political community existing in isolation. Surely its isolation, he observes, cannot preclude it from being well-governed and thereby finding happiness. But this (otherwise happy) community will not have been 'constituted with any view to war or the conquest of enemies.' This shows 'very plainly', he concludes, that although 'warlike pursuits' are 'honourable', they are only the means to something higher and not an end in themselves.[15]

It is not difficult to see why this respsonse is unsatisfactory. Put simply, it does not answer the question of how far a political community can pursue the good life when, far from enjoying splendid isolation, it is in fact confronted by states like Sparta or Crete, where 'it is with a view to war and domination that education and the greatest part of the laws are organized', or states like Carthage and Macedonia, where the laws intend 'to stimulate the warlike virtues.'[16] Indeed, if anything, Aristotle's thought experiment suggests that under such circumstances the ability of the state to function as an abode for ethical development is rendered contingent at best and unrealistic at worst. This is because once we admit that a political community must prioritise its continued existence – as Aristotle reminds Phaleas and the Spartans – then we cannot constrain it to requisition anything less than what is necessitated by ensuing threats to its security.

So how can a political community resist being sucked into the vortex of necessity? As it happens, Aristotle also gestures, all too briefly, at an 'economistic' solution intended to moderate the threat posed by the external world. He argues that a political community should make itself an unprofitable target by having resources that are modest enough that they do not tempt the appetite of more powerful neighbours, but are also adequate enough to fend them off in the event that these more powerful neighbours decide to take their chances.[17] And should these more powerful neighbours decide to take their chances anyway, Aristotle

[13] Ibid., 1324b5.
[14] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1145a.
[15] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1324b40–1325a5. At 1333b40, Aristotle asserts men should study war to 'provide against their own enslavement' and to 'obtain empire for the good of the governed.'
[16] Ibid., 1324b7–10, 1271b1.
[17] Ibid., 1267a17–28.

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recommends taking defensive measures that would deny these opponents any hope whatsoever of profiting from their enterprise. 'Given that an abundance of wealth is an advantage', he writes, the best limit in acquiring wealth 'will probably be that a more powerful neighbour must have no inducement to go to war with you by reason of the excess of your wealth, but only such as he would have had if you had possessed less.'[18] Aristotle illustrates this solution with a story involving Eubulus, a money changer turned ruler, who offered to surrender to a rival, Autophradates, for a lesser sum than it would cost Autophradates to force Eubulus to surrender through a siege. Apparently the cost was sufficiently high to rein in Autophradates's ambition, for according to Aristotle, 'these words of Eubulus made an impression on Autophradates, and he desisted from the siege.'[19]

Aristotle's solution suffers from two obvious shortcomings. First, even if we set aside the question of whether states that pursue empires actually think in terms of cost and benefit, Aristotle's advice that a political community make itself an unprofitable target seems to be premised on the notion that the political community will be the sole target of a potential aggressor. But a potential aggressor could have broader strategic or hegemonic ambitions, in which case the unique cost of invading any one political community is likely to prove a relatively insignificant part of its overall calculus. Second, even if it is not confronted by neighbours aspiring to hegemony or empire, a political community that obeys Aristotle's advice would still be forced to concentrate on pursuing military power rather than ethical development in the event that it happens to live alongside a large or growing state, since it would need to be able to maintain the right sort of balance of resources *vis-à-vis* this state. As such, it becomes clear that Aristotle's solution depends on a rather unrealistic premise, namely, the assumption that a city can choose its neighbours.

The inadequacy of Aristotle's solution has significant consequences for his broader endeavour to have philosophy guide politics. As Aristotle observes in the final chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, philosophy has a fundamental interest in politics since 'knowing about virtue is not enough, but we must also try to attain and exercise it.'[20] In order to fulfil this desire, philosophy, which illuminates the highest ends that individuals ought to strive toward, must turn to political science, which diagnoses politics on behalf of philosophy in order to provide for the coming into being of that which is deemed to be good. This is why *The Politics* begins from where the *Ethics* leaves off. However, Aristotle's critique of Phaleas, Sparta, and Plato, and the inadequacy of his own solution to the problem of preservation suggest that the flow of influence may not be unidirectional – the findings of political science or prudence may actually curtail or reshape the normative ambitions of the political philosopher. This is the point eventually driven home by Machiavelli's political philosophy. On this view, as I noted earlier, political experience feeds into political philosophy in such a way that virtue comes to be associated with the qualities required to secure the preservation of the political community rather than the attainment of happiness. The challenge posed by Machiavelli has not eliminated the ambition to have the ideal guide the actual. This

[18] Ibid., 1267a30–33.
[19] Ibid., 1267a32–36.
[20] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b.

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ambition survives in the work of later philosophers, including Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls. Let us now turn to examine how these figures have tried to bolster the practicality of ideal theory by providing their own solutions to the problem of preservation.

## Rousseau: self-sufficiency and collective security

Few political philosophers see as clearly as Rousseau does how the demands of self-preservation can hinder the ability of a political community to live under ideal laws. The starting point of his analysis lies in *The State of War* where he observes that the presence of two competing principles – that of states responding to force and that of civil society responding to law – creates a fundamental paradox in political life.[21] The paradox is that while the 'perfection of the social order' requires that law must guide force, the absence of security in the external realm makes force the arbiter of the right of nations, thus making it necessary for states to cultivate military power in order to be able to defend their rights. In this paradox, he writes, lies 'the genuine origin of public calamities.'[22]

Rousseau recognises that this calamity is not easily addressed because the existence of a state of war between states is itself not easily resolved. In the original state of nature, he suggests, war was a particular and incidental event because the 'madness for universal monarchy never tormented any but a great king's heart.'[23] But once men entered the social state, 'the whole face of the earth is changed', because unlike man, whose appetites have natural limits, the state is an artificial creation, whose appetite is infinite precisely because it is non-natural.[24] The organisms that result from this historical process, he writes, are principally animated by a concern for relative power:

> since the size of the body politic is purely relative, it is forced constantly to compare itself in order to know itself; it depends on everything around it, and has to take an interest in everything happening around it, for regardless of how much it might wish to remain within itself without gain or loss, it becomes small or large, weak or strong, according to whether its neighbour expands or contracts and grows stronger or weaker.[25]

Given the obstacle that this preoccupation with relative power poses to the rule of ideal law, Rousseau devotes significant attention to the question of how the state of war between states can be ameliorated. The crux of his answer comes in an important passage in *The Social Contract*. A people fit to receive laws, he writes, is one 'which does not fear sudden invasion, and which, without intervening in the quarrels of its neighbours, can stand up to any of them, *or* secure the help of one to resist another.'[26] The former of these two ideas is discussed only briefly in *The Social Contract* where Rousseau observes that weak and small states are always in

[21] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'the State of War', in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 163.
[22] Ibid., p. 163.
[23] Ibid., p. 165.
[24] Ibid., p. 167.
[25] Ibid., p. 169.
[26] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, ed. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 95, emphasis added.

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danger of being swallowed up by larger states, and that therefore 'no people can well preserve itself except by achieving a kind of equilibrium with all the others which makes the pressure everywhere the same for all.'[27] This idea of reaching an 'equilibrium' is akin to Aristotle's economistic principle, which seeks to cultivate resources adequate for defence, but not so much as to offend. Notably, Rousseau does not specify a formula like Aristotle does. It is, he says, the business of prudence to judge 'the precise balance which is most conducive to the preservation of the state.'[28] He does, however, pay closer attention than Aristotle does to the question of how a small or weak state may deter its larger rivals. 'How', he asks, 'are small states to be given enough strength to rest larger states, as the Greek cities once resisted a great king and as, more recently, Holland and Switzerland resisted the House of Austria?'[29]

This important question is answered in some detail by two of Rousseau's later works. In his *Constitutional Project for Corsica*, he provides us with a clear summary of Corsica's strategic circumstances, which leaves it 'exposed on land and sea' and 'at the mercy of everyone.'[30] In response, Rousseau counsels cultivating a new self-sufficiency through legislation intended to spur the virtues required for defence rather than offense, that is, patriotism and self-abnegation rather than acquisitiveness and ambition. So instead of commerce, trade and cities, which foster corrupting needs, the political community is to encourage agriculture, which assures the simplicity of needs and the love of country required for citizens to have a selfless devotion to fulfilling public duties. The same legislative devices are recommended to the Poles in *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, whose condition Rousseau holds to be even worse than that of the Corsicans, since they can never have offensive power while also lacking defensive power in the short term. He emphasises here the necessity of cultivating love of country as the surest means of preserving its spirit, if not always its sanctity, arguing that the 'hearts of the Poles' is the 'only sanctuary where force can neither reach nor destroy her.'[31] In time, when these devices have worked, he writes, 'neither the Russians nor anyone else will ever again come to rule over you.'[32]

The advice outlined above shows how Rousseau addresses the central deficiency in Aristotle's solution. Recall that we criticised Aristotle's solution because it requires a political community to be willing to expand in order to maintain the requisite balance with its neighbours. By forwarding an account of how states can defend themselves by relying on isolation and patriotism, Rousseau eliminates the need for such concomitant expansion since a political community's strength now derives from unity, rather than through the cultivation of traditional power resources.[33] Unfortunately, the plausibility of this concept of 'defensive strength' is

[27] Ibid., p. 92.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., p. 138.
[30] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Constitutional Project for Corsica', in Stanley Hoffmann and David P. Fidler (eds), *Rousseau on International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 141.
[31] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Considerations on the Government of Poland', in Hoffmann and Fidler (eds), *Rousseau on International Relations*, p. 168.
[32] Ibid., p. 183.
[33] Rousseau says to the Corsicans that 'it is not so much a question of becoming different as of knowing how to stay who you are.' (Rousseau, 'Constitutional Project', p. 142). Also see Stanley Hoffmann, 'Rousseau on War and Peace', *American Political Science Review*, 57:2 (1963), pp. 328–9.

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suspect for at least two reasons. First, the example provided by the Swiss (whose past exploits in guerrilla warfare Rousseau considers vindication for his concept of defensive strength) seems to constitute no more than an exception to the general rule that small states survive only due to the operation of contingent moral and strategic restraints on the actions of more powerful states, which could otherwise dominate (or even annihilate) them. Second, by requiring citizens to choose poverty in order to have security – and that too of only a tenuous sort in the case of the Poles – Rousseau's solution also runs contrary to the link that has been forged in modern times between technological progress and military power. This relationship, which has revolutionised the offensive power of nations, is driven by economic growth based on investment, consumption and trade. Consequently, even a state seeking purely defensive power would find it hard in modern times to ignore the importance of commerce and trade.[34] Yet, Rousseau does not grant political communities recourse to these means, because he sees them as producing self-interested and slavish citizens incapable of laying down their lives for the common good.

Let me now turn to briefly outline the other means by which Rousseau tries to ameliorate the problem of self-preservation, namely, the idea of collective security through confederation. Rousseau sets the stage for this idea in his discussion of St. Pierre's arguments on behalf of a European federation. 'Anyone can see', he writes in his *Criticism of St. Pierre's Project*, that the establishment of such a federation would be welcome because it 'will fix the constitution of each state as inexorably as its frontiers.'[35] But he casts doubt on the feasibility of this idea, arguing that the rulers of states are likely to have no interest in pursuing it because 'war and conquest without and the encroachments of despotism within give each other mutual support.'[36] This means, he concludes, that a European federation could only be constructed through the use of revolutionary force, a possibility that he declines to examine further.[37] Given this background, we should not be surprised to find that when Rousseau turns to consider the problem of preservation, he is instead attracted to the idea of collective security through confederation. The obvious advantage of this idea, from his perspective, is that it provided a means by which to reconcile the continued existence of independent political communities with the desire to reduce the threat they pose to each other. Unfortunately, Rousseau's discussion of this idea is so abbreviated that we have little insight into how he expected it to be realised. All that we are left with is his gesture toward the idea in the dedicatory epistle of his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, where he offers a 'wishful' account of the external environment an ideal state might find itself in. He writes:

> I should have wished to choose myself a country, diverted, by a fortunate impotence, from the brutal love of conquest, and secured, by a still more fortunate situation, from the fear of becoming itself the conquest of other States: a free city situated between several nations,

[34] Hoffmann, 'Rousseau on War and Peace', pp. 330–1.
[35] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Criticism of St. Pierre's Project', in *A Lasting Peace Through the Federation of Europe*, trans. C. E. Vaughan (New York: Herman and Stephens, 1955), p. 96. More generally see Patrick Riley, 'Rousseau as a Theorist of National and International Federalism', *Publius*, 3:1 (1973), pp. 11–16.
[36] Ibid., p. 96.
[37] Ibid., pp. 111–12.

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> none of which should have any interest in attacking it, while each had an interest in preventing it from being attacked by the others; in short, a Republic which should have nothing to tempt the ambition of its neighbours, but might reasonably depend on their assistance in case of need.[38]

This is a fascinating passage because it suggests that, unlike Aristotle, who only sought to limit the extent to which a political community would have to strive to secure itself, Rousseau would have liked to eliminate the problem of self-preservation altogether. It is not difficult to see what Rousseau would have found attractive in this vision: a confederation of the sort described above would allow political communities to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the refinement of their internal affairs. But there are at least two reasons to doubt the practicality of this vision. First, the fragment cited above does little to illuminate how a set of political communities could realistically come to have an enduring incentive to care for each other's sanctity in the absence of obligations created by a unifying federal structure. Second, even if it is possible to conceive of realistic circumstances under which a set of independent political communities could come to have an enduring incentive to care for each other's sanctity, the fragment cited above does little to illuminate how these communities can overcome the problems of coordination that can hamper even well-intentioned cooperative ventures. Arguably, in the absence of a higher power capable of enforcing mutually agreed upon provisions and resolving disagreements between members of this collective venture, the relevant political communities would have a strong incentive to maintain recourse to self-help.[39]

There can be little doubt that the idea of collective security is far more compatible with modernity than the idea of isolationism and patriotism. However, the objections outlined above suggest that in order to be efficacious, a system of collective security requires the very federal structure envisioned by St. Pierre that Rousseau dismisses as impractical. Unfortunately, Rousseau offers us no way around this problem. Instead, he sidesteps the problem completely, saying only in an important footnote in *The Social Contract* that 'this is what I intended to do in the remaining part of this work, when, in dealing with foreign relations, I should have come to the subject of confederations. This subject is entirely new, and its principles are yet to be established.'[40] It is the foreword to the *Social Contract* that reveals the fate of this endeavour, where Rousseau writes that:

> this little treatise is part of a longer work which I began years ago without realizing my limitations, and long since abandoned. Of the various fragments that might have been extracted from what I wrote, this is the most considerable, and, I think, the least unworthy of being offered to the public. The rest no longer exists.[41]

[38] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 116.
[39] For a recent critique of the idea of collective security see John J. Mearshimer, 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, 19:3 (1994); and for a rebuttal see Charles A. Kupchan and Clifford A. Kupchan, 'The Promise of Collective Security', *International Security*, 21:1 (1995). For a broad survey see George Downs, ed., *Collective Security Beyond the Cold War* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1994).
[40] Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 143.
[41] Ibid., p. 47. More generally see Hassner, 'Beyond the Three Traditions', pp. 740–2.

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**Kant: a confederation of republics**

Like Aristotle and Rousseau before him, Kant too acknowledges that the demands of self-preservation can hinder the ability of a political community to live under ideal laws. There can be little progress toward 'moral maturity', he writes in *The Idea of a Universal History*, 'as long as states apply all their resources to their vain and violent schemes of self-expansion, thus incessantly obstructing the slow and laborious efforts of their citizens to cultivate their minds.'[42] This is the reason why, he argues, 'the problem of the establishment of a perfect civil constitution is subordinate to the problem of a law-governed external relationship with other states, and cannot be solved unless the latter is also solved.'[43] In addressing this problem, Kant does not develop an analogue to Aristotle's solution, which is to cultivate resources adequate for defence, but not so much as to offend. On the contrary, he voices disapproval at the political instability associated with balances of power.[44] Nor does he take up Rousseau's analogue, which instructs a political community to defend itself against the acquisitiveness of its neighbours by developing its defensive power. This is because, in contrast to Rousseau's emphasis on isolationism and patriotism, Kant follows Hume in seeing the wealth produced by trade and commerce as providing the financial basis for the military power needed for self-defence.[45] Instead, Kant addresses the problem of preservation by reworking the idea of collective security through confederation. Kant is compelled to rework this idea because he accepts Rousseau's observation that the rulers of states would be loathe to submit to the rule of law, much less participate in a 'league of peace'. This places him in the difficult position of admitting on one hand that the development of a 'league of peace' requires human artifice, while acknowledging on the other, that there would be little interest amongst absolute rulers for such an enterprise. Unlike Rousseau, who, as we have seen, finds his way out of his quandary by relying on 'fortune', Kant's answer is to explain why rulers would come to construct a pacific confederation against their own wishes.

This remarkable navigation of the problem is clarified in the *Contest of the Faculties* where Kant answers the question of 'What Sequence Progress can be Expected to Follow?' by stating that it is 'not the usual sequence from bottom upwards, but from the top downwards.'[46] This is because if human beings are to accomplish progress, Kant says, it can only be through the 'negative wisdom' they gain by trying to further their own ends in the international state of nature.[47] Thus, he writes,

> however wild or fanciful this idea may appear – and it has been ridiculed as such when put forward by Abbe St Pierre and Rousseau (perhaps because they thought its realization was so imminent) – it is nonetheless the inevitable outcome of the distress in which men involve

[42] Immanuel Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History From a Cosmopolitan Point of View', in *Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 49.
[43] Ibid., p. 47.
[44] Immanuel Kant, 'On the Common Saying: This May be True in Theory but it does not Apply in Practice', in *Political Writings*, p. 92.
[45] David Hume, 'Of Commerce' in *Political Essays*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 100.
[46] Immanuel Kant, 'the Contest of Faculties', in *Political Writings*, p. 188.
[47] Ibid., p. 189.

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one another. For this distress must force the states to make exactly the same decision (however difficult it may be for them) as that which man was forced to make equally unwillingly, in his savage state – the decision to renounce brutish freedom and seek calm and security within a law-governed constitution.[48]

The mechanism underpinning this claim consists of three parts. The first part, seemingly derived from Hume's observations on the rise of England and Holland, is that the positive relationship between commercial success and military power would force absolute rulers to encourage commerce.[49] Subsequently, on the assumption that the arbitrariness that characterises absolute monarchies makes them less capable than republics at encouraging commerce, Kant predicts that the efforts of these monarchies to enhance their commercial power would inevitably lead to the formation of republican governments, which he views as more peaceable.[50] The second part of this mechanism draws on Hobbes's account of the state of nature. Setting aside the distinction that Hobbes draws between the prospects of individuals and states in the state of nature, Kant posits that the social hardship caused by international conflict would lead the ever-increasing number of republican societies to acquire the desire for peace, in effect mirroring the desire of men to escape from the state of nature when they were individuals.[51] Kant writes that he would not blame anyone if never-ending wars made them despair the prospects of mankind, but he professes a confidence in the 'heroic medicine' identified by Hume that 'ought to produce a speedy cure', *viz*. the notion that the costliness of unceasing warfare will lead to excessive debt and taxation, and thereby ultimately threaten the continuation of commerce, and hence, the government itself.[52] Having outlined the manner in which republican societies will emerge and exhaust themselves, the third part of Kant's analysis identifies the manner in which republican societies would wish to leave the international state of nature. The appropriate method, at least according to his *Perpetual Peace*, would be through the institution of a pacific confederation based on the articles of international right.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the mechanism outlined above is how little it depends on fortune (as compared to the solutions offered by Aristotle and Rousseau). Put succinctly, the solution Kant offers is that a law governed state – far from being upset by war – would actually be brought about by war. As he puts it, 'nature has chosen war as a means of attaining this end.'[53] Of course this setting does not eliminate the need for positive moral intervention: witness the distinction Kant draws between the political moralist who cannot lift his vision above the

[48] Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History', p. 48.
[49] David Hume, 'Of Civil Liberty', in *Political Essays*, p. 55.
[50] Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History', pp. 50–1; 'On the Common Saying', pp. 90–1; Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace', in *Political Writings*, p. 114.
[51] Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History', pp. 47–9; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 90. Hobbes denies that interstate relations are likely to prove intolerable and does not make the assumption that sovereign states would be incapable of outright military victory over rivals.
[52] Kant, 'the Contest of Faculties', pp. 189–90. Contrast with David Hume, 'Of Public Credit', in *Political Essays*, pp. 172–7.
[53] Kant, 'Perpetual Peace', p. 111. Or as he states in another essay, enlightenment is 'a great benefit which the human race must reap even from its rulers self-seeking schemes of expansion' (Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History', p. 51). For a more recent variation on this approach see Alexander Wendt, 'Why a World State is Inevitable: Teleology and the Logic of Anarchy', *European Journal of International Relations*, 9:4 (2003).

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cunning pursuit of self-interest and the moral politician who strives to convert political openings into an enduring, if always fragile, alliance of peace.[54] Yet if moral thought and unilateral action were alone sufficient to secure world peace, Kant would not have needed to discuss the role of exhaustion in the international state of nature, which creates the systemic openings that the moral politician is supposed to exploit. And herein lies the problem: Kant's prediction that such systemic openings are nearly inevitable lacks plausibility. This claim seems to rest on the assumption that war will be severely debilitating for all participants (as war would otherwise not create the sort of mutual exhaustion that Kant sees as necessary to setting the stage or creating the opening for cooperative action). But this assumption is highly problematic, because even though it is reasonable to assume that men in the state of nature are equally capable of harming each other, the artificial nature of states means that the players in the international state of nature can have differing capabilities. Such disparities in capabilities can allow powerful states to prey on weak states without necessarily incurring great cost. Indeed, one might argue that this disparity has been exacerbated in recent decades by technological advances that increasingly allow powerful, advanced states to conduct new forms of warfare that yield fewer casualties, thereby dampening the domestic resentment that is supposed to enhance the desire to exit the international state of nature. So far then, political experience seems to support Hobbes' view of the international state of nature, which is that states can provide their constituents with a degree of security that does not cause them to anxiously desire an end to potentially profitable conflict.[55]

## Rawls: democratic peace

Thus far we have been examining how Aristotle, Rousseau and Kant have sought to prevent the demands of self-preservation from undermining the ability of a political community to live under ideal laws by offering various proposals to dampen the anarchic nature of the international system. Given this history, it is quite remarkable that the most prominent contemporary proponent of ideal theory should so readily pass over the subject of self-preservation. In his *Theory of Justice*, John Rawls simply assumes away international politics; he writes that the scope of his normative inquiry is to be limited to an ideal world, as 'I shall not consider except in passing the justice of the law of nations and relations between states.'[56] This limitation subsequently expands into the statement that 'I shall be satisfied if

[54] For an account that emphasises Kant's solution as an open moral challenge for mankind rather than a causal mechanism prone to falsification see Michael C. Williams, 'Reason and Realpolitik: Kant's 'Critique of International Politics', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 25:1 (1992), pp. 117–19. Also see John MacMillan, 'A Kantian Protest Against the Peculiar Discourse of Inter-Liberal State Peace', *Millennium*, 24:3 (1994); and Georg Cavallar, 'Kantian Perspectives on Democratic Peace: Alternatives to Doyle', *Review of International Studies*, 27:2 (2001). More generally see Andrew Hurrell, 'Kant and the Kantian Paradigm in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 16:3 (1990).

[55] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 90. However, also see Pauline Kleingeld, 'Approaching Perpetual Peace: Kant's Defense of a League of States and his Ideal of a World Federation', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 12:3 (2004), pp. 314–15.

[56] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 7.

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it is possible to formulate a reasonable conception of justice for the basic structure of society conceived for the time being as a closed system isolated from other societies. The significance of this special case is obvious and needs no explanation.'[57] This assumption means that instead of taking account of Aristotle's critique of Phaleas, Rawls takes the unprecedented step of simply ignoring the subject of self-preservation. He defends this manoeuvre with the assertion that 'it is worth asking what a perfectly just society would be like. Thus I consider primarily what I call strict compliance as opposed to partial compliance theory.'[58]

This postulation of ideal conditions is hardly new to Rawls because Aristotle, as we have already seen, uses broadly the same technique to prove that success in war and conquest does not constitute the highest good.[59] Yet, Aristotle's thought experiment is counterbalanced by his observations on the shortcomings of the constitutions devised by Phaleas, Sparta, and Plato. In other words, Aristotle's political philosophy does not lose sight of the fact that the ideal must take account of the actual, indeed that the ideal may have to be constrained by the actual – a point made most clearly by his observation that even the ideal political community will need to build defensive walls and requisition a naval force. Rawls, by contrast, does not feel compelled to make comparable concessions because he sharply demarcates the domain of the internal and the external. Thus when he turns to the subject of international politics in *Theory of Justice*, his first concern is to clarify how a just society should behave toward other societies, rather than consider how the just society might be treated by other, potentially unjust, societies. He writes:

> the national interest of a just state is defined by the principles of justice that have already been acknowledged. Therefore such a nation will aim above all to maintain and preserve its just institutions and the conditions that make them possible. It is not moved by the desire for world power or national glory; nor does it wage war for purposes of economic gain or the acquisition of territory. These ends are contrary to the conception of justice that defines a society's legitimate interest, however prevalent they have been in the actual conduct of states.[60]

This statement illuminates a vital distinction between Rawls and Kant on the question of international politics. While Rawls, like Kant, assumes that societies can be motivated to act justly, unlike Kant, he does not model this motivation as arising from the violence produced in the state of nature. Rather, the Kantian claim of progress toward confederation through the process of mutual exhaustion is dropped in favour of the rationality of voluntarily abiding by the standards of international right. Now, this approach to the subject of international politics would make sense if one showed that the more justly one state treats another, the less likely it is to be treated unjustly in turn. In other words, if one could prove that dutiful behaviour is always reciprocated, then it would be true that the just society would not have to move beyond thinking about how to be just toward

[57] Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, p. 7, emphasis added.
[58] Ibid., p. 8.
[59] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1324b40–1325a5.
[60] Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, p. 333. Also see John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Rawls elaborates his account of the principles of international right in *The Law of Peoples*. These principles are intended to inform the conduct of a just society *vis-à-vis* other societies. *The Law of Peoples* does not however shed significant new light on the question of how a just society can continue to operate reasonably – both within and without – when it encounters unjust aggression.

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others. However, Rawls does not provide such an account of reciprocity in the international sphere. Consequently, the sharp dichotomy that Rawls draws between the ideal (domestic) and non-ideal (external) world leads him to treat international conflict as if it were an inexplicable shock. He simply states that 'in a well-ordered society, these evils arise externally, that is, from unjustified attacks from the outside. It is impossible for just institutions to eliminate these hardships entirely.'[61] But this statement can hardly be considered sufficient. It makes Rawl's project akin to building the genetically perfect man, but then giving him no defence against the common cold: he would be a God amongst men if only he could stop sneezing.

In spite of his general silence on the problem of preservation, Rawls is ultimately forced to attend to the subject indirectly because, as one might expect, external pressures eventually bleed into the internal politics of his ideal regime. We see this happen in the *Theory of Justice* under the rubric of conscription, which implies the need for domestic compulsion in order to provide the resources required to wage war, including self-defence against (presumably unjust) foreign aggressors. In allowing recourse to conscription Rawls contends that

> since conscription is a drastic interference with the basic liberties of equal citizenship, it cannot be justified by any needs less compelling than those of national security. In a well-ordered society (or one nearly just) these needs are determined by the end of preserving just institutions. Conscription is permissible only if it is demanded for the defence of liberty itself.[62]

This is an interesting moment in Rawls' enterprise because it shows him being forced to finally admit that the liberties of citizens may have to be sacrificed in order to maintain the existence of the political community. This admission means that Rawls realises that the 'priority of liberty' is in fact dependent upon the pressures of preservation, which determine whether a citizen may enjoy or lose basic liberties. As Rawls acknowledges in an absolutely critical passage: 'the priority of liberty ... requires that conscription be used only as the security of liberty *necessitates*.'[63] Given what we have argued thus far, the implication of this acknowledgement should be clear: it implies that the political or legislative ambition of the Rawlsian system is limited by what necessity will permit – it is, in other words, held hostage to necessity.

As one might expect, Rawls' escape route from this dilemma is to search for a solution that would dampen the anarchic nature of international politics. Rawls gestures toward such an approach in his *Law of Peoples*, where he briefly discusses the 'democratic peace theory' developed by Michael Doyle and others, which suggests that liberal democracies tend to not wage war on other liberal democracies.[64] But Rawls does not address the fact that there is in fact strong disagreement amongst theorists of international relations on the validity of this hypothesis.[65] Nor does he address the concern that even if the democratic peace hypothesis is

[61] Ibid., p. 334.
[62] Ibid., p. 333–4.
[63] Ibid., p. 334, emphasis added.
[64] Rawls, *Law of Peoples*, pp. 44–54; Michael W. Doyle, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 12:3 (1983).
[65] For example, see Christopher Layne, 'Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace', *International Security*, 19:2 (1994); Joanne Gowa, *Ballots and Bullets: The Elusive Democratic Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Sebastian Rosato, 'The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory', *American Political Science Review*, 97:4 (2003).

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proven true, the existence of illiberal societies still makes it necessary for liberal democracies to attend to the problem of preservation, unless a plausible further theory of the diffusion of liberal democratic ideals is offered (a process which, history tells us, can easily prove a precursor to a self-serving imperialism).[66] Furthermore, while Rawls does offer an account of why liberal democracies ought to peacefully tolerate 'decent hierarchical societies', his analysis does not extend to explaining how liberal democracies are to transform illiberal societies into such acceptable counterparts. In other words, what Rawls provides is an account of how international relations might be structured in one possible world, but he does not explain how we might arrive at such a world. This shortcoming leaves the Rawlsian project with a significant and unresolved vulnerability that has yet to receive sufficient attention from Rawlsians and critics alike.

## The implications for ideal theory

This article has shown how far some of the exemplars of ideal theory – Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant and Rawls – have been aware of what I have termed the 'problem' of preservation. The 'problem' in question is not so much that a political community must make provisions for its defence, but rather that these provisions must correspond in scope and scale to the intentions and capabilities of its neighbours. This requirement means that the ability of a political community to pursue its ideals rather than power depends heavily on who its neighbours happen to be. This article has also shown how Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls try to solve this problem by relying on concepts and institutional arrangements such as collective security and defensive fortification, which, they assume, will dampen the anarchic nature of the international system. It has argued that the implausibility of these solutions means that the ability of actual political communities to pursue the ideals illuminated by these political philosophers is rendered contingent at best and impractical at worst.

This conclusion has two implications for proponents of ideal theory, especially contemporary Rawlsians. The first is that they need to take the problem of preservation more seriously. Although an important recent essay by Leif Wenar and Branko Milanovic has done much to explain how far Rawls failed to fully grasp the limitations of democratic peace theory, there continues to be a deafening silence on the question of how a just society might address the threat posed by what Rawls terms 'outlaw' states without losing its 'justness' in the process.[67] Here I foresee an objection to the effect that there is no pressing need for contemporary ideal theorists to outline a path to a less anarchic international system because the threat posed by international conflict is rarely so severe as to prevent a political community from pursuing at least some of the normative prescriptions generated by ideal theory. But this objection is unpersuasive. Although it is true that the normative prescriptions offered by ideal theory can, and indeed have, been

[66] Bruce Buchan, 'Explaining War and Peace: Kant and Liberal IR Theory', *Alternatives*, 27 (2002), pp. 419–22.
[67] Leif Wenar and Branko Milanovic, 'Are Liberal Peoples Peaceful?', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17:4 (2009).

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followed even in the midst of conflict, the fact that these prescriptions can, and often have been, brushed aside in the face of 'necessity' ought to give us reason for pause. Moreover, even if one admitted that some of the moral guidance provided by ideal theory is likely to continue to be relevant even in the midst of international conflict (for example, international conflict is not likely to make us question whether discrimination on grounds of race or gender is unfair), it remains the case that if ideal theory has little to say about matters such as whether and when military force should be used, then it will prove itself irrelevant on the most vital matters of politics. In other words, if contemporary proponents of ideal theory respond to the problem of preservation by arguing that the purpose of ideal theory is to generate only those sorts of normative prescriptions that are not likely to be easily brushed aside by claims about necessity, then they will purchase practicality at the cost of relevance.

I suspect though that this will not be the response favoured by proponents of ideal theory, especially contemporary Rawlsians. On the contrary, they will argue that far from being irrelevant, the moral guidance offered by ideal theory (for example, an illumination of the reasons in favour of human rights) is especially relevant during times of war and conflict because it establishes standards against which a political community can measure and justify its actions and policies (for example, the use of waterboarding). Indeed, this point has been emphasised in a number of recent essays defending the relevance of ideal theory.[68] For instance, Zofia Stemplowska has written that 'unless we know what is desirable when there is full compliance, we could adopt a direction of reform for non-ideal circumstances that unnecessarily moves us away from the ultimate aim of full compliance.'[69] Similarly, John Simmons has argued that 'we, as theorists of justice, simply should not care about which policies are politically possible unless those policies are also on an acceptable path to a just institutional structure.'[70] It needs to be borne in mind though that an actual political community is only obliged to heed the moral guidance offered by ideal theory if what ideal theory demands of it is realistic (as opposed to utopian). For instance, if ideal theory suggests that a political community should not violate human rights or the sovereignty of others unless this is necessary for the complete elimination of injustice, then an actual political community is only obliged to heed this advice and refrain from waterboarding and pre-emptive war insofar as it has reason to believe that there is in fact 'something else' that it can do which would help it arrive at a world where it will not need to resort to such 'unjust' actions in order to secure itself against external aggression. But if there is no such alterative available, then it may well prove irresponsible for an actual political community to refrain from doing the sorts of things that ideal theory declares 'unjust'.

This is not to say that there can be no moral guidance whatsoever in matters of war and peace. The alternative to ideal theory does not have to be a crude Machiavellianism. Rather, the problem of preservation could simply mean that it is more practical for actual political communities to obtain moral guidance from

[68] For example see, Simmons, 'Ideal and Nonideal Theory', pp. 31–4; Zofia Stemplowska, 'What's Ideal About Ideal Theory', *Social Theory and Practice*, 34:3 (2008), pp. 331–4; Adam Swift, 'The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances', *Social Theory and Practice*, 34:3 (2008), p. 364.
[69] Stemplowska, 'What's Ideal About Ideal Theory', p. 332.
[70] Simmons, 'Ideal and Nonideal Theory', p. 34.

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other kinds of normative theory, most notably forms of consequentialism, including political realism. These theories do not start out by assuming that we can one day arrive at a world without conflict, but this does not prevent them from offering distinctive moral reasons for refraining from the use of waterboarding or pre-emptive war (for example, if we use these techniques against 'them' then they could use them against 'us'). I doubt though that proponents of ideal theory will throw in the towel so quickly. But if they wish to resist the implication that ideal theory is impractical, then they must provide a more convincing answer to the problem of preservation. The reason why this solution must involve dampening the anarchic nature of the international system should by now be clear. The difficulty though lies in discovering such a solution.

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