

When anyone asked him where he came from, he said, "I am a citizen of the world."

—Diogenes Laertius



Martha Nussbaum

RULES FOR THE WORLD STAGE

There once was a noble vision of what the world of international relations can be. In recent weeks this vision, once nearly realized, has receded from view, so much so that we might forget that human beings ever had such a dream. The idea I have in mind is Hugo Grotius' concept of "international society": the notion that all human beings form part of a single moral community, regulated by binding ethical norms that constrain the actions of nations in pursuit of their own advantage.

Grotius (or Hugo de Groot), the founding father of international law, lived between 1583 and 1645. A child prodigy, he played a leading role in Dutch trade negotiations at the age of 15, and published books from that time onward. But he was also a man who stuck his neck out. Prevailing religious doctrine in the Netherlands held that human beings were not free to alter the course of their salvation by their own choices. Closely linked to this idea was a political belief that people had no right to give themselves laws, deciding how to conduct their own affairs.

Grotius was a great believer in choice and human freedom, and in the freedom of each state to make its own laws. For both of these beliefs, he was convicted of heresy and sent to prison in a gloomy castle. But he was permitted to receive books, which his wife would deliver and cart away in a large trunk. One day the outgoing trunk had an extra occupant: Grotius himself. He managed to get on a boat to France, where he spent the next five years in exile and wrote his great work, "On the Law of War and Peace."

The book has been hugely influential for many reasons: for its insistence that war is just only if it responds to a conspicuous and serious act of aggression; for its insistence that even then, the party in the wrong must be treated in accordance with strict moral laws; for its insistence that killing of innocent civilians is morally wrong, even though the formal international law of that time did permit it; for its insistence that a stable and moral peace should be the long-term goal of international relations.

But the work's greatest contribution lies in its conception of relations among states. For Grotius, each state has sovereignty: the right to give itself laws and control its destiny. This is not just a fact, but a moral norm that expresses something deep about human freedom, something for which Grotius himself was prepared to risk imprisonment and worse.

Second, however, the world contains interactions between nations, which are mediated not just by concerns for expediency and safety but by moral considerations. Moral laws bind all nations in their dealings with one another, whether these laws have been turned into enforceable international law or not. Why should this be? Because, third, the world contains, most fundamentally, individual human beings, who are needy and trying to flourish. The moral duties to support human well-being bind us all into what Grotius calls "international society."

The norms of this society begin with the idea of humans as creatures who are both rational and social, and who need to find a way to live together. Certain ways of behaving support that conception (for example, abiding by treaties that one has made), and others do not (killing civilians in wartime).

According to Grotius, then, when international law limits America in some of its plans, Americans are not wrong to feel constrained. But Grotius would insist that the more fundamental identity we have is as members of a moral world of human beings.



Hugo Grotius
1583-1645

National sovereignty also is limited internally by morality. If a nation commits certain very bad acts against its own population, such as torture and mass murder, another nation may intervene - what we now call "humanitarian intervention" - to help the people. National sovereignty's importance derives from its value to people

and their freedom; it cannot be invoked to justify genocide and torture.

Grotius was also a radical in his thought about material need. He saw that a lasting peace among nations requires thinking about how all citizens of the world can get the things they need to live. He held that when any person anywhere is in extreme need, that person has a right to food and other necessities of life (he explicitly mentions medical care). He even says that the needy person owns the surplus that the rich are squandering, if he needs it and they don't.

Grotius' vision was not the way the world was seen in his own day. But by insisting on the power of this vision he created a climate of opinion in which that vision increasingly became real. Although his contemporary Thomas Hobbes influentially developed the pre-Grotian idea that the realm between nations is one of force and interest only, Immanuel Kant in the 18th century sided with Grotius, envisaging a world that achieved lasting peace through a federation of nations. Such ideas eventually led to the United Nations and Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although the UN treats nations as the major actors in international affairs, the human rights movement moves us closer to Grotius' picture of a world in which national boundaries are porous, and international agreements have at least some power to constrain nations.

Are these ideas still alive? The Bush administration treats such moralized visions with utter scorn, casting the United States as the Hobbesian sovereign needed to bring order to an amoral realm. This stance is deeply alien to America's founding traditions: Thomas Paine and other founders were steeped in the continental human rights tradition that had grown out of Grotius' ideas.

In the Grotian/Kantian vision, alliances among republican nations are crucial to lasting peace. In our current foreign policy, by contrast, even once-stable alliances are treated with contempt. The duty of wealthy nations to ensure that all humans have urgent needs met does not rank high on the agenda of any major politician or political party.


We shall see how effectively humanitarian aid is given in Iraq; the example of Afghanistan gives reason for skepticism. But the more important issue is that the United States has long lagged behind wealthy nations in the proportion of gross domestic product it designates for foreign aid, giving, for example, about one-tenth of

Norway's share. The Grotian vision entails support for all urgent needs, not just those of a nation one has invaded.

For me, the events of the past weeks engender a powerful grief, grief for a hope that is dying. And yet, moral norms are not docile, submissive things. They do not quit the scene when people treat them with contempt. Instead, they call us to outrage and protest. Just as the leaders of the Civil Rights movement did not abandon their vision of human equality in the face of the contempt and scorn of white society, so those of us who care about the vision of international society that Grotius bequeathed to us should insist on that vision.

People in power may say that we are dealing with "rogue states" and must shape our thinking accordingly. Grotius had seen a side of human conduct that he called "bestial." He argued that in such a world it is all the more important to proclaim and abide by principles of which a decent society can be proud and to work tirelessly to produce a world in which such principles increasingly hold sway. He warned people in power that if they imitate wild beasts they may forget to be human.

Grotius' own life also takes its stand against the course of despairing detachment, a great temptation in this time as in his own. He conspicuously does not say, "These times are bestial, so we right-thinking people had better check out." Instead, living in exile, he created a norm of cooperation and moral order that continues to inspire, and to determine the course of some world events, even if not all.

Those of us who feel a deep moral sadness about the current conduct of the United States, as our leadership shows contempt for this vision of a multilateral world, could do worse than to follow Grotius' example. Moral norms do not cease to exist because current leaders do not believe in them. We may refine them and further develop them, in the hope that once again, sooner or later, their day will dawn. 

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Political language - and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists - is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

—George Orwell



George Orwell
1903-1950

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Dr. Peter Jones says that universities are becoming factories of jargon and illiteracy

In his essay 'Politics and the English Language' (1946), George Orwell laments the corruption of the English language in postwar society. Everywhere he finds pompous phrases designed to sound weighty ('render inoperative', meaning 'break'); Latin- or Greek-based words where simpler words will do ('ameliorate' for 'improve', 'clandestine' for 'secret'); words which have lost their meaning ('fascism', meaning 'something not desirable'); padding to give an impression of depth ('this is a consideration which we

should do well to bear in mind’); clichés (‘ring the changes on’, ‘play into the hands of’, ‘toe the line’, ‘explore every avenue’). Words that give him particular grief include ‘phenomenon’, ‘element’, ‘objective’, ‘categorical’, ‘virtual’, ‘basic’, ‘primary’, ‘promote’, ‘constitute’, ‘exhibit’, ‘exploit’, ‘utilise’.

Orwell continues, ‘A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance to turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself.’ It is like ‘having a packet of aspirins always at one’s elbow’.

The result, he thinks, is that slovenly language and slovenly thinking begin to feed off and reinforce each other: ‘[English] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.’ He pleads for a return to linguistic simplicity, letting ‘the meaning choose the words and not the other way round’. Otherwise, he fears that the language of politics in particular will become an instrument not for expressing, but for concealing or preventing thought.

Politicians, of course, still resort to glib catch-phrases. As soon as you hear one saying, ‘Our policy on this is quite clear,’ or, ‘Let me be quite clear on this,’ you know that the fog is about to start rolling in. But politics these days is not the main offender. As everyone is aware, though still no one does anything about it, the infection that threatens our national language the length and breadth of the land is education-speak.

This special language had its origins in business-speak, and began to spread when Margaret Thatcher insisted that universities should see themselves as businesses, involving ‘processes’ and ‘products’. Such language is fine for the business world, which deals with the definable and quantifiable. As long as the ‘product’ works and sells, they can use whatever language they like about it, however laughably inflated and self-important. But such language is entirely inappropriate to the world of education, for two reasons. First, if students can be processed, produced and packaged like Dairy Lea, their educational experience will be worthless. Second, the ‘product’ of university teaching and research is the articulation of ideas, an activity not best engaged in by downloading pre-packed phrases from the computer in your brain and regurgitating them in no particular order.

This practice has, of course, been going on in the worlds of contemporary literary criticism and social and cultural studies for years. ‘Pseuds Corner’ in *Private Eye* mocks it every fortnight. In 1996 an American academic, the physicist Alan Sokal, positively blew it apart when he stitched together an article from the most vacuous phrases he could find, entitled it ‘Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity’ and submitted it for publication. The editors of the academic journal *Social Text* duly obliged.

It made little odds. But since contemporary lit. crit. and social and cultural studies are of no importance, it does not matter. Their practitioners can talk to themselves in whatever language they like. No one else listens. The problem is that the language is now universal throughout the university world—which does matter. A quick run through the advertisements for jobs in universities makes the point with terrifying clarity.

Since advertising is expensive and universities are short of cash, one would have thought that clarity, crispness and economy would be the priority—quite apart from the fact that universities are supposed to be all about clear thinking, writing and speaking. How wrong one would be. Turgid, repetitive, pompous, pretentious bombast is the order of the day. One would not have thought, for example, that there was much of a problem with the word ‘teach’. But it is not good enough for many universities, who prefer to ‘deliver modules across a wide range of courses within the undergraduate programme’. Universities are always ‘delivering’. Postmen will soon be out of a job.

Newcastle longs for ‘Functional Specialist Directors’ (as opposed to dysfunctional ones?) to play a ‘pivotal’ role in ‘delivering on its vision’ of ‘enhanced customer focused service delivery’ and ‘substantial service delivery enhancement’. Birmingham wants a registrar to ‘build upon the institution’s strengths, while addressing key opportunities in today’s challenging environment’. Surrey wants study skills tutors who will be ‘devising and delivering a range of study skills programmes, and participating in learning and teaching development to support widening participation’. It sounds a juicy prospect.

University advertisements simply groan with this sort of stuff—you cannot move for ‘development opportunities and provision’, ‘supporting and extending the capacity of the research function’, and ‘enhancing the research and practice development

profile’. And this is precisely what Orwell was complaining about—not thinking about what is being said but reaching for the prepacked words and phrases and letting them choose the meaning.


Here, then, is the roll-call of contemporary clichés to replace Orwell’s. Take any of the following nouns: aspect, role, development, challenge, context, stakeholder, opportunity, provision, resource, direction, investment, portfolio, policy, programme, skill, track-record, liaison, quality, function, end-user, process, commitment, profile, range, environment, skills, outcome, collaboration. Throw in any of the following adjectives: key, crucial, proven, wide, broad, emerging, expanding, international, ongoing, developing, innovative, pro-active, strong, strategic, organisational, or any of the above nouns used as adjectives (‘policy relevance’, ‘information resource’). String together with verbs such as facilitate, deliver, develop, broaden, enhance, support, encourage, co-ordinate, champion, implement. That’s it. You too can soon be talking about ‘pro-active development opportunities facilitating and delivering an ongoing end-user collaboration process’.

Orwell characterises this sort of writing with a splendid image: ‘words falling upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details’. Which raises the question: why are the guardians and transmitters of our culture presenting themselves to the outside world in this dreadful language? How on earth can anyone with the slightest respect for words write such vacuous drivel? What sort of education can people who promote such an image be trusted to offer? And what can be done?

By way of contrast, an old friend of mine, Peter Thornton, came round for lunch the other day bringing with him the original of a letter he owns, dated 9 April 1796, from George Humble, a rat-catcher living in Wooler, a village in north Northumberland. Humble is writing to William Robertson in nearby Ladykirk, explaining that he cannot come to kill his rats because he is short of ferrets and has found other work, thatching. Peter’s transcription runs as follows:

W.m Robertson Esqu Ladikirk Sir This day I re.d yours by reson of not being at Home when hit Came to my hous, and your desire is to Come emmedeatly, which is not of my Power to do, for this winter I have been unable to do any kind of wark, and this is the first job I have takin in hand which is some new houses to thach which must be amideatly done and my ferrets are all dead but one young one, so iff it is posable that you Can Let the Rats be unkiled till I be done with this present wark I am now with, I emmedetly will Come and

Kill them Sir I am your most obedient Humble Servent George Humble Wooler April 9.th 1796

One could speculate endlessly about the education that George Humble had undergone in a tiny village in north Northumberland in 1796 to produce this wonderfully simple, eloquent, stylish letter. Whatever it was, it was vastly more effective than anything received by today's semi-educated composers of university advertisements and those who permit such illiterate rubbish to be published in their name. So the answer is simple. We need more Northumberland rat-catchers. 

Dr. Peter Jones founded *Friends of Classics*, and has recently revised E.V. Rieu's 1950 translation of Homer's *Iliad* for Penguin. His commentary (*Homer's 'Iliad': a Commentary on Three Translations*) has just been published by Duckworth/Bristol Classical Press.

<http://www.friends-classics.demon.co.uk/>

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