

From serpents and doves to the war on teleocracy

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ire**Chris Brown**

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Abstract

In one of his earliest papers, ‘Serpents and Doves in Classical International Theory’ (1988), Nick Rengger set out themes that would be important to him for the next thirty years, including a Rortyan/Oakeshottian commitment to conversation as the appropriate mode of human inquiry, with the premise that there is no truth to be discovered, and a healthy scepticism directed towards reformist projects in international relations. These themes are present in his final works on just war and the anti-Pelagian imagination, but in a new, and less attractive, more dogmatic form. His critique of ‘teleocracy’ had hardened into something that no longer resembled a conversation, and his critique of progressivism involved the burning of a multitude of straw men. In 1988 Rengger aspired to be one of Rorty’s ‘edifying’ philosophers, by 2018 he seemed to have become committed to a system.

Keywords

just war, Oakeshott, Pelagianism/anti-Pelagianism, Rorty, teleocracy

I first met Nick Rengger sometime in the mid to late 1980s when he came to give a talk at the Seminar series we ran at Kent every Friday afternoon. I can’t remember the ostensible title of the talk he gave, but I do remember, to quote Keats,

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

When a new planet swims into his ken.

This was a time when the new discourse of International Political Theory was slowly emerging out of a strange, and, it was to prove, ultimately unstable, mix of newly-christened English School thinkers, post-Rawls justice theorists, feminists, critical theorists.

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post-structuralists and even the occasional post-modernist. Nick brought to this discourse an encyclopaedic knowledge of the literature of most of these components, and, most important of all, the training and background of a genuine political philosopher – most of us then were amateurs who aspired to a level of fluency that we didn't really possess. He did; whether the subject was Derrida's deconstruction, Foucault's archaeology, Frankfurtian critical theory or Bull's international society he had something to say – to put it crudely, even if occasionally he was a bullshitter, his bullshit was of a higher order than anything most of the rest of us could offer.

One of Nick's earliest papers was entitled 'Serpents and Doves in Classical International Theory', appearing in a Special Edition of *Millennium* on 'Philosophical Traditions in International Relations',¹ a collection which brought together *inter alia* James Der Derian, Friedrich Kratochwil, Richard Ashley, John Vincent (and me). In this paper he displayed the full range of his knowledge, engaging with the English School, asserting the importance of classical political theory, and raising (via Richard Rorty) Michael Oakeshott's 'conception of human modes of inquiry conceived of in terms of a conversation' (p. 218). In the paper he endorsed Kant's position that 'there can be no dispute between political and ethical concepts', citing Kant (channelling St Matthew) that 'if politics were to say "be ye therefore wise as serpents" morality might add . . . "and harmless as doves"' but adding that Kant did not have to come to terms, as we do, with modernity's discontents, especially our disillusion with objectivity (p.222). All this was presented with an engaging swagger and an infectious sense of fun – he was enjoying himself and inviting us to the party. Here was a political philosopher at the beginning of his career but already at the height of his powers laying out a prospectus for a lifetime's work

Rereading this paper from 1988 today, it is striking how many of the themes it addresses are still present 25 years later in *Just War and International Order* and *The Anti-Pelagian Imagination in Political Theory and International Relations* and in his other late-period essays.² Present, but, I want to argue, taking a somewhat different form and one that is less consistent with the earlier conception of a conversation where ' . . . [there] is no truth to be discovered, no proposition to be affirmed, no conclusion sought. . . .'³ The trope of social and political theory as a 'conversation' on his reading is clearly oriented towards undermining the view that these discourses could have more practical implications, and in his late work Rengger's early scepticism about the prospects for international reform was firmed up and generalised. The possibility that the conversation might be transformative for its participants seems to have disappeared.⁴ Reformers who were gently chided in 1988 are now to be understood as 'Pelagians' (on which more below) and simply wrongheaded – which rather suggests that that, contra the above quotation, truth has been discovered. More, Oakeshott's subtle distinction between enterprise and civil associations, so nicely employed at the international level by Terry Nardin,⁵ has now become the basis for an across the board critique of 'teleocracy'.

Teleocrats are people who see the *telos* (that is the end, the objective) of politics as lying beyond simply the association of citizens who come together to determine the terms of their co-existence in society. To employ the familiar 'ship of state' metaphor, teleocrats want to sail the ship in a particular direction rather than simply to keep it afloat. For most of us (I think it's most of us, but that may be presumptuous) the crucial

issue here is the direction in which the ship is sailed; some directions are clearly undesirable, but some are not. In liberal democratic, welfare-oriented states this direction could include the promotion of economic growth, the reduction of poverty and/or of inequality, the elimination of racial or other forms of discrimination and so on, and most of the citizens of these states are, I think, broadly content with these objectives, although they differ on priorities and the rigour with which they should be pursued. But Oakeshottians, including it seems Rengger, regard this as an illegitimate misuse of the idea of politics, exemplary of what Oakeshott called 'Rationalism in Politics'⁶ the belief that political power can be properly directed towards such social goals. Interestingly, the argument here is not dissimilar to that employed by Hannah Arendt, who also believed that using political means to improve one's position in the world was somehow illegitimate (on this see the Little Rock controversy in which Arendt appeared to side with segregationists against the civil rights movement).⁷

What, exactly, is wrong with the idea of wanting to improve society – or the world in the case of international reformers? Does a desire to get beyond the limits of teleocracy turn one into one of these Pelagians who in his later years Rengger took every opportunity to criticise? I think there is sleight of hand occurring here. There have been some people – not many, but some – who believe in the 'perfectibility of man' (Passmore's title,⁸ in those days sexist language went largely unchallenged) and they can perhaps, as Rengger and before him Vogelín and others suggest, be seen as inheriting one or other Christian heresy about the possibility of human beings achieving salvation without God's grace – but does this critique actually apply to most reformers? I suggest it does not. Rengger chooses to term such views Pelagian after Pelagius, the fourth century British Christian theologian or heretic who was the target of St. Augustine's wrath, but this is, I think, a deliberate attempt to use an unnecessary display of erudition to muddy the waters. Most reformers are Karl Popper's piecemeal social engineers.⁹ On the one hand, they certainly do not accept Augustine's pessimism about human nature based on his bizarre notion of original sin, much less his doctrine of 'double predestination' that salvation is only available to those to whom God extends His grace and are preordained to accept it.¹⁰ But on the other hand, neither do they believe that progress with a capital 'P' is inevitable and irreversible. Instead, they try to make the world a better place one step at a time, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding, trying to learn from their mistakes and, if they fail again, to fail better. The welfare states of post-war Western Europe were built in that way and have made for their citizens a better life than their forebears could have dreamed of.

Can the same be said of the broader international arena? To illustrate what is involved here, a personal story may help: Nick and I frequently clashed on these issues, usually in a good-humoured way, but one of the few times Nick lost his temper with me was when I defended Steven Pinker's position that violence and intolerance have become less salient over time.¹¹ To me, this is simply an empirical proposition which is either true or false, and, with all due respect being paid to the proposition that all data is socially constructed, it is, I think, true. There is less violence in the world today than there was in the past, racism and homophobia certainly haven't disappeared but they are less salient than they were, grinding poverty and malnutrition affects fewer people than previously, average life expectancy globally is rising and so on. None of this is any comfort if you are one of the

bottom billion still in extreme poverty, or suffering the effects of the Syrian civil war, or under persecution for being Gay in Uganda or Christian in Pakistan, or living in Russia where life expectancy is falling – but still, taken in the round, progress has been made. To Nick this was a clear and distressing example of my Pelagian tendencies and he was visibly upset that I could believe such, as he saw it, nonsense. But as far as I was concerned, this account of progress doesn't involve accepting any grand narratives; it could be reversed, and, even if it isn't, it doesn't lead to the end of all suffering, there's no notion of perfectibility here. In short, there is no logical reason to believe that the proposition that the condition of humanity has improved and could be improved further entails any belief that such improvement is irreversible or is leading to a perfected end-state.

We can see the same sleight of hand in operation again when we turn to Rengger's writings on intervention and the just war. He is, of course, right (and hardly unusual), in pointing out that interventions often fail and indeed can make things worse; difficult to find anyone who would disagree nowadays. But what conclusion ought to be drawn from this? His seems to be 'don't ever intervene' but this doesn't automatically follow; another approach might be try to learn from past errors and look at those cases where intervention has been relatively successful (Sierra Leone, East Timor, on some counts Kosovo) to work out why these cases were different from the obvious failures. It seems to me that there is nothing particularly Pelagian about such a learning process. Again, In *Just War and International Order*, Rengger accuses just war thinkers such as James Turner Johnson and Jean Bethke Elshtain of using the doctrine to legitimise action rather than to restrict the use of violence. This may or may not be a valid criticism in these particular cases, but the tradition in itself is neither permissive nor restrictive – just war thinking says act if and only if it can be judged that there is a just cause and that the other conventional criteria can be met, which may restrict action in some cases or mandate it in others. In both of these cases, Rengger begins with a legitimate critique of existing practice but then attributes to the practitioners motives they don't possess, pushing them towards extreme positions that he rightly argues cannot be defended – but don't need to be because no-one actually holds them.

In 'Serpents and Doves' Rengger writes with a swagger, joyfully displaying the wide range of his reading and the originality of his thought. There is, I think, a rather different tone to late Rengger, albeit still embedded in prose that welcomes the reader in. As he well knew, few of his readers would have read Pelagius or have been familiar with Augustine's critique – as suggested above, this is scholarship deployed to stifle rather than to promote conversation; obviously he could have made the same point without reference to the theological-political thought of late antiquity. In 'Serpents and Doves' he favourably references Richard Rorty's distinction between 'systematic' and edifying' philosophers and seems happy to place himself in the latter category. His late writings are in danger of leading in the other direction – that the anti-Pelagian, anti-Teleocratic Rengger of the 2010s might be sliding towards the 'systematic' would, I think, have disturbed the 'edifying' Rengger of the 1980s. I wish he was still here to put me right on this.

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Notes

1. N. J. Rengger, 'Serpents and Doves in Classical International Theory', *Millennium*, 17(2), 1988, pp. 215–225.
2. Nicholas Rengger, *Just War and International Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013); Nicholas Rengger, *The Anti-Pelagian Imagination in Political Theory and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2017).
3. 'Serpents and Doves' p.218.
4. Thanks to Liane Hartnett for pointing me towards the potentially transformative nature of conversation.
5. Terry Nardin, *Law, Morality and the Relations of States* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1983).
6. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962).
7. The controversy was occasioned by Hannah Arendt, 'Reflections on Little Rock', *Dissent* 6(1) 1959, pp. 45–56.
8. John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* 1st ed. (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc, 2000-1970).
9. Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of History* 3rd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).
10. This is a very inadequate summary of the theological differences between Augustine and Pelagius - I hope to extend this discussion in a longer version of this essay on Rengger's work.
11. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature* (NY: Viking Books, 2011) also *Enlightenment Now* (London: Penguin, 2019).

Author biography

Chris Brown is an Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the LSE, and the author of *International Society*, *Global Politics* (2015), *Practical Judgement in International Political Theory* (2010), *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice* (2002), *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (1992), editor of *Political Restructuring in Europe: Ethical Perspectives* (1994) and co-editor (with Terry Nardin and N.J. Rengger) of *International Relations in Political Thought* (2002) and (with Robyn Eckersley) of *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Theory* (2018). His textbook *Understanding International Relations* (2019) is now in its 5th edition and has been translated into, Arabic, Chinese, Euskara, Portuguese, Thai, and Turkish.