A central theme of realist thought in international relations is that some conflicts run too deep to be overcome by the force of reason. Enlightened statecraft can avoid competition, but folly, ignorance and prejudice often prevent us from doing so. Even if human beings were rational and fully informed, many agreements would be thwarted by conflicts of interest. In such cases, “the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.” At best the latter may avoid despoliation and destruction through timely surrender; they cannot expect justice or to be left alone (Thucydides 1950, 351; see also Coby 1991). Were all ignorance and superstition to be overcome, human relations would still be marked by “the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all intergroup relations” (Niebuhr 1932; quoted passage at xx). States may listen to counsels of prudence, but morality alone is powerless to overcome their selfishness (Leiter 2001).

Nor can institutions—either domestic or international—overcome these gloomy facts. The belief “that the power element and its evilness are particularly attached to certain actions, situations, and institutions,” Hans Morgenthau writes (1948/1971, 200, 215), is an illusion: “Social problems....do not grow out of temporary limitations of knowledge or temporary insufficiencies of technical achievement….They are the result of those conflicts in which the selfishness and the lust for power, which are common to all men, involve all men.” While placing less stress on human egoism, contemporary realists are equally pessimistic about the ability of ideas or institutions to transcend conflict (Mearsheimer 1994/1995; Mearsheimer

*I thank John Mueller and my colleagues at the University of Nottingham’s Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice for comments on earlier presentations of this argument.*
Randall Schweller (1996, 118) cites “realism's most basic tenet that conflicts of interest among states are genuine rather than the result of misunderstanding and misperception.”

Whereas the classical realists based much of their pessimism on human egoism, structural realism ignores individuals altogether, holding that pressures from the international system suffice to explain state behavior. This has led to charges that it lacks theoretical microfoundations in the motives and actions of individual agents (Tellis 1995; Fischer 1996; Gaubatz 2001-2002; Jones 2009). This might not be worrying if its claims should prove consistent with a plausible account of the latter; ignoring them could then be defended as a simplification for the sake of theoretical parsimony (Waltz 1986, 339). But the discovery that no micro-level explanation consistent with the theory could be constructed would be more troubling. As Morgenthau recognized (1948/1971, 187), it is ultimately human agents who make decisions, and when we speak of collectives as if they were agents, it is “a mere figure of speech.” If structural realism should rely on assumptions about these agents that prove to be not merely simplified, but logically contradictory or empirically false, it would make us wonder if the theory can possibly hold up. As one of its leading contemporary proponents observes, “a theory based on unrealistic or false assumptions will not explain much about how the world works” (Mearsheimer 2001, 30).

Some theorists have proposed that classical realism can provide these microfoundations. For Thucydides, Hobbes, and Machiavelli, conflict arises largely from human egoism, and for Machiavelli, at any rate, aggression is often instrumentally rational. 1 “…Machiavelli's thought offers neorealists a deductive argument to ground their concept of political unit in concrete assumptions on individuals,” argues Markus Fischer,

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1 While sharing Machiavelli’s analysis of the source of conflict, the other two writers are less inclined to see aggression as advantageous. See Forde 1992; Forde 1995; Freyberg-Inan 2004.
for he generates his propositions from a well-developed psychology, and his propositions on political order are broadly compatible with neorealist assumptions about the state. … [Politics will always be organized into mutually exclusive units because human beings are self-seeking individuals; in the case of autocracies, the rulers will thus seek to exclude one another from controlling subjects they hope to exploit by themselves; in the case of institutional orders, they will consider foreigners as enemies to be exploited in order for their citizens to keep peace at home. Further, the ends of political orders necessarily consist of preservation, glory, domination, and wealth, because these are the goods that satisfy the given passions of their constituent members.]

For Reinhold Niebuhr (1932) and Hans Morgenthau (1948/1974), the ultimate obstacle to conflict resolution is the self-seeking nature of man. Classical realism, then, may seem to hold promise for setting realism on firm foundations, and turning it into “not simply an explanation of ‘international’ politics but rather a scientific theory of egoist competition writ large” (Tellis 1995, 94).

This paper argues that any such attempt must fail. One reason to insist that a structural theory have plausible microfoundations is that otherwise it may fall foul of the logic of collective action (Heath 2015). If supposed egoists engage in collective behavior that is not obviously in their individual self-interest, the suspicion arises that ideational or institutional factors are doing part of the explanatory work. To claim that states give priority to self-interest, realism must assume ignorance, irrationality and/or suboptimal domestic institutions.

The reason is simple: in a representative democracy, the logic of collective action makes it irrational to vote egoistically (Goodin and Roberts 1975). For a number of reasons, on the

\[2\] Fischer 1996, quoted passage at 274; see also Tellis 1995, 29, 49, 94.
other hand, it can be, and often is, rational to vote for moral reasons. Even if most people are egoists, a representative democracy whose voters were ideally rational and understood the relevant facts, and that faithfully translated their preferences into foreign policy, would pursue a thoroughly ethical foreign policy. Such a state has never existed and probably never will, but the bare possibility shows that realists must appeal to just the sort of defects in ideas and institutions that they have often criticized idealists for invoking.

On some views, individuals, groups and states are morally permitted, even obliged, to give priority to their own interests over those of others. Those who hold such views do not argue that self-interest should outweigh morality, but rather that it can render self-interested actions moral. As Jack Donnelly (2000, 164; emphasis in original) notes, “[t]hese are ethical arguments….They adopt the substantive moral position that ‘our’ interests ought to count more than the interests of others.” This paper does not contest such views. Rather, my thesis is that citizens of a representative democracy cannot rationally vote for policies they recognize to be morally wrong. This is by no means a trivial claim. That egoistic considerations can rationally trump moral ones was precisely the claim of Thucydides’ Athenians on Melos.

The argument of this paper is normative, not empirical. It is about whether and when people have reason to go to the polls, not why they actually do. Rationalist theories of IR already pursue this approach at the level of state decision-making. Determining what a state would rationally do allows us to identify the influence of domestic politics, bureaucratic organizations, cognitive distortions, and the like (e.g., Allison 1971). Normative accounts thus serve as “a rational baseline against which actual state behavior can be evaluated” (Glaser 2010, 3). Here I extend this approach to the decisions of individual citizens in representative democracies, and find that egoistic voting is not rationally justified.

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3 I say “probably” because of the possibility of human evolution or genetic enhancement.
The first part argues that realists face a problem already well-known to Marxists: explaining why self-interested agents would engage in costly collective action. While the costs of voting are low, the expected value for the individual is so low that rational egoists will free ride off of the efforts of others. Part two shows that for morally motivated agents seeking to maximize the expected utility of the group, voting is, on the other hand, rational. This might seem to offer realists a comeback by suggesting that egoists might rationally vote out of vicarious identification with the nation. Part three shows that the gain in individual expected utility is still far too small to render voting rational. Part four and five consider expressive voting and civic duty. Here too, such voting makes sense only if morally motivated. Part six concludes that if democracies put egoism ahead of morality, the explanation must be irrationality, moral confusion, factual ignorance, or institutions that misrepresent voters’ preferences.

1. Materialism, Realism and the Logic of Collective Action

Viewing war as the result of the competition of self-interested groups, realists have often compared conflicts between states with those between classes. “Try as he will,” observes Reinhold Niebuhr (1932, 48-49), “man seems incapable of forming an international community, with power and prestige great enough to bring social restraint upon collective egoism. He has not even succeeded in disciplining anti-social group egoism within the nation.” The similarity between international and class conflict became a central theme of E. H. Carr’s The Twenty Years’ Crisis, with Carr comparing the demands of the dissatisfied powers to those of the dispossessed classes. He argued that lessons could be learned from the mitigation of domestic disputes, including that “the reality of the conflict should be frankly recognised, and not dismissed as an illusion in the minds of wicked agitators,” and that the privileged must be prepared to make concessions (Carr 1946/1964, 237). While Niebuhr (1932, 141) also believed...
that greater understanding could mitigate class conflict, he warned that “it cannot abolish the egoism of a class.”

That social groups pursue their self-interest is an assumption realism shares with Marxism. The appearance in 1965 of Mancur Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action* caused a headache for Marxist theory. Like realism, Marxism has traditionally understood itself as a materialist philosophy that assumes self-interested agents. Yet as Olson pointed out, what is best for the individual is not always what is best for her group. All workers may benefit from socialist revolution, but the individually optimal strategy for a self-interested worker is likely to be to keep her head down and let others take the risks. If the revolution succeeds, she will share in the benefits; even if it fails, she will at least have spared herself much trouble and danger. Of course, if most of the workers reason this way, the revolution will fail or never occur at all. But this does not alter the individual worker’s incentives. If too many other workers abstain, the revolution will fail even if he joins in; if a sufficient number take part, it will succeed regardless of whether he abstains (Olson 1965, chapter 4; see also Tullock 1971).

This “paradox of revolution” and the broader puzzle of why mass political mobilization occurs have been debated since the 1970s. One explanation for mass mobilization is that participants believe that they can make an individual difference, or that everyone must participate for the movement to succeed (Finkel, Muller and Opp 1989; Finkel and Muller 1998). Given the negligible impact of the average revolutionary or protester, such a belief would be clearly irrational.⁴ Rather than attributing the failure of workers to solidarize with their class to false consciousness, Marxism would have to attribute their participation to mistaken thinking. Not surprisingly, many have concluded rather that Marxism already makes room for moral motives, or ought to do so (Buchanan 1979; Holmstrom 1983; Arneson 1985). A related

⁴ See George Klosko’s comments in Klosko, Muller and Opp 1987, 559-60.
suggestion is that rebels might view their actions as “collectively rational” (Muller and Opp 1986; Kavka 1982). While it may be that such a mode of reasoning would be collectively advantageous for the group, there seems no reason for an individual egoist to adopt it. The same objection applies to the assumption that individual capitalists would cooperate to promote their interests as a class. Marxists thus have reason to worry that their theory has “overlooked the potential for collective action problems among the various world-historical actors” (Heath 2015).

A similar difficulty arises for realism in explaining individuals’ willingness to make sacrifices on behalf of the state. Thomas Hobbes is often invoked in one breath with Thucydides and Machiavelli as a central figure in the realist tradition. Yet a major problem for his interpreters has been to explain how Hobbes—whose theory assumes individual egoism—can conclude that it is one’s rational self-interest to obey the sovereign and cooperate with fellow citizens under circumstances when one could get away with defection. A particular mystery is why the state’s inhabitants should risk their lives in battle when they could malinger or desert. If the war is going to be lost, it will be lost whatever one soldier does; if it is going to be won, it will be won without his help. What is his interest in fighting if he could get away with leaving the work to others (Gaubatz 2001-2)? “The use of military power requires that the individuals involved must be willing to behave in very unselfish ways,” Michael Nicholson (1998, 73) points out, “for the system to work at all. Specifically, people have to be willing to get killed and maimed in order to contribute towards the greater good of the community. This is not obviously consistent with the hypothesis of self-interest much less of selfishness.”

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5 Cf. Kavka 1982, 463-64, 468, which makes an unconvincing argument to the contrary.
6 For a review, see LeBuffe 2007.
Most important for our purposes is the puzzle of why egoists would vote, described by one writer as “the paradox that ate rational choice theory.”\(^7\) Voting is individually costly, since the voter must decide for whom to vote and then take time to go to the polls (Aldrich 1993, 248). Yet on one estimate the average U.S. voter had about one chance in 60 million of tipping the 2008 presidential election (Gelman, Silver and Edlin, 2012, 323-24). Under such circumstances, as Stanley Benn (1979, 292) observes, “anyone would have a better chance of making positive gains in utility by pursuing some private end, where his action would make a difference.” Provided voting is not legally required, and there is no social pressure to turn up at the ballot box (cf. Geys 2006, 24), there seems no reason why self-interested agents should bother.

Consider the calculus for rational egoist X considering voting in the next election. Presidential candidate A is proposing to raise taxes by 1% in order to assist war refugees in desperate suffering, whereas candidate B opposes the proposal. X recognizes that the benefits to the refugees would greatly exceed the loss to the taxpayers. If another country were to enact the same measure, she would consider it a praiseworthy thing to do. However, she doesn’t fancy paying more tax. Does this, other things being equal, give X a self-interested reason to vote for B? Almost certainly not. Even if she lives in Colorado, a swing state, her probability of deciding the presidential election is still roughly 1 in 10 million (Gelman, Silver and Edlin, 323). If she lives more than five miles from the polls, her chance is greater of dying driving to and from the polling booth than of deciding the national election.\(^8\) With these odds, it is obvious she could use her time more advantageously. Even if she strongly prefers that her taxes should not go up, she will abstain. As many scholars have recognized, it will seldom if ever be rational for an egoist to

\(^7\) Morris Fiorina, quoted in Geys 2006, 16.

\(^8\) See the statistics in Sivak 2014, 5; cf. Goodin and Roberts, 526; Meehl 1977, 14-15.
vote in a national election. Even if she cares about her family and friends as well as herself, she will do better to spend her time on activities that benefit them directly.

This leaves realism without microfoundations in the rational choices of individual agents. A longstanding tenet of the realist credo is that state egoism is not merely the result of ignorance, misunderstanding or faulty domestic institutions. But if the foregoing argument goes through, a representative democracy whose voters understood the relevant facts and which faithfully implemented their preferences would have no reason to pursue an egoistic foreign policy. This might seem less damaging to realism if voting were *never* rational, as many scholars have believed. Plausibly, however, it is often rational to vote—but only for moral reasons.

2. **The Rationality of Ethical Voting: Expected Utility**

Rational choice theory in the social sciences commonly assumes that rationality entails the pursuit of self-interest. Yet this assumption by no means corresponds to “the conception of rationality in the dictionary sense of "the power of being able to exercise one's reason,"” as Amartya Sen (1977, 342) points out. A soldier who flings himself on a grenade to save his platoon acts against his self-interest, but he does not act irrationally: He is responding to the intelligible reason that it is better that he should die than his twenty comrades. Contemporary philosophers accept that we have both self-regarding and other-regarding reasons, and that giving priority to either kind can be rational (Scheffler 1982; Parfit 2011; Portmore 2011).

Once other-regarding motives are admitted, it is not hard to see the rationality of voting. If one seeks to maximize one’s personal expected utility, then the chance of tipping an election is far too small to justify the trouble. But if the goal is to maximize *total* expected utility, voting may be an efficient means indeed. Assume that the voter believes one candidate is likely to do significantly more good than the other. The expected value of a choice is its probability
multiplied by the value of the benefit. A U.S. presidential election substantially affects not only the entire U.S. population, but also millions outside it. One chance in ten million—for that matter, even one chance in a billion—of substantially benefiting hundreds of millions of people adds up to a valuable chance indeed. Elections in small countries affect fewer people, but a voter’s chance of tipping the election is proportionately greater. Some scholars have challenged this calculus, arguing that the chance of being pivotal is so small that voting does not maximize even collective expected utility (Dowding 2005, 448). Given significant expert disagreement about the matter, however, a rational voter will attach a subjective probability—say, fifty percent—to the chance that the probability of being pivotal is significant. Given the enormous payoff if she is pivotal, voting remains rational.

One might think that the foregoing argument ignores the logic of collective action. Olson (1965, 64) holds that free-riding incentives can exist even for those with altruistic motives, noting that a rational agent, “however unselfish, would not make…a futile and pointless sacrifice, but he would allocate his philanthropy in order to have a perceptible effect on someone.” While Olson himself saw the cost of voting as so low that he doubted it would necessarily influence an agent’s decisions (1965, 164-65, n. 102), Richard Tuck (2008, 10) notes that “since Olson's time it has become a commonplace that his argument covers voting.” But in fact, there is a more important difference between voting and Olson’s examples than their cost to the agent. Olson focuses on cases where it seems that the agent’s contribution would be too small to make any significant difference. Thus he observes that “[a] farmer who placed the interests of other farmers above his own would not necessarily restrict his production to raise farm prices,

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9 Parfit 1987, 73-75; Edlin, Gelman and Kaplan 2007; Edlin, Gelman and Kaplan 2008. Given the very large number of people one stands to benefit by tipping a U.S. election, Gelman, Kaplan and Silver’s (2012: 325) conclusion that “in states such as New York, California, and Texas, where the probability of a decisive vote is closer to 1 in a billion, any reasons for voting must go beyond any instrumental rationality” seems unwarranted.
since he would know that his sacrifice would not bring a noticeable benefit to anyone,” and that “those who sacrifice themselves in the interest of imperceptible improvements may not even receive the praise normally due selfless behavior.” But if one can cast a pivotal vote, then one has a small chance of making a very significant difference indeed. As Derek Parfit (1987, 75; emphasis in original) points out, “[v]ery small benefits may be imperceptible. And it is plausible to claim that an ‘imperceptible benefit’ is not a benefit. But it is not plausible to claim that a very small chance is not a chance.”

If one turns up to vote for moral reasons, it would be strange to vote egoistically when one entered the polling booth. Since the tiny chance of tipping the balance is insufficient to justifying voting for egoistic reasons, if a rational voter turns out at all, she must give some weight to moral considerations. That being the case, she should vote her conscience when she reaches the ballot box (Meehl 1977, 23-24; Edlin, Gelman and Kaplan 2007, 294). “Precisely the same factor that makes it irrational for an egoist to go to the polls,” observe Robert Goodin and Kevin Roberts (1975, 927-28), makes it rational for a less than thoroughly self-centered man to vote his ethical preferences once there….Since there is very little he can do inside the poll booth to further his egoistic interests, a man is freed to vote his ethical preferences. It should also be noted that this is an extraordinarily cheap way for a man to assuage his conscience. Casting a ballot for the forces of The Good is far safer than casting a stone.

This argument, Goodin and Roberts continue, “is best summarized as Niebuhr's slogan set on its head: immoral men, moral society.”

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10 Olson 1965, 64; cf. Tuck 2008, 44-45, 63. Whether many actions, all individually insignificant, can ever add up to a significant benefit or harm is philosophically controversial. For arguments that they cannot, see Otsuka 1991; Kagan 2011.
3. Vicarious Egoism

Realism emphasizes the tendency of individuals to identify with groups. Both Niebuhr (1932) and Morgenthau (1948/1974) maintained that the man on the street sublimated his frustrated egoistic impulses in identification with the nation. One might think that just as it can be rational for an ethically motivated voter to maximize expected value by voting despite the tininess of the chance that she will tip the balance, so too could it be rational for an egoist to maximize the expected utility of her country. We could then explain selfish national behavior as the outcome of the rational voting of vicarious egoists.

Suppose, for instance, that Canada holds a national referendum on whether to donate wheat to a country suffering a famine. The voters believe that from an impartial standpoint, the donation would be the morally best decision to take. If another country did the same thing, they would judge the action worthy of praise. Nevertheless, each voter, being partial to her own interests, prefers that Ottawa refrain from the tax increases that the donation would require. Clearly, a rational egoist will not bother turning up to vote. Her chance of tipping the balance is so miniscule that she could do much better for herself and those close to her by spending the time in some other fashion. Nevertheless, she will maximize the expected utility of Canadians by voting against the measure. If as a vicarious egoist, she assigns significant weight to Canada’s welfare, would it not be rational for her to turn out to do so?

To see why that would be wrong, we must consider Sen’s distinction between two kinds of reasons for action: sympathy and commitment. “The former,” Sen writes, corresponds to the case in which the concern for others directly affects one's own welfare. If the knowledge of torture of others makes you sick, it is a case of sympathy; if it does not make you feel personally worse off, but you think it is
wrong and you are ready to do something to stop it, it is a case of commitment….It can be argued that behavior based on sympathy is in an important sense egoistic, for one is oneself pleased at others' pleasure and pained at others’ pain, and the pursuit of one's own utility may thus be helped by sympathetic action.

Action based on commitment is more likely to conflict with the agent’s welfare.\textsuperscript{11} When Lucius Junius Brutus sentenced his own sons to death for plotting against the Roman republic, he did not maximize, we may assume, either his direct or his vicarious utility. When we decide thus, “the cold, clear light of reason” induces us to do what we consider right (Pettit 2005, 17).

The most plausible understanding of vicarious egoism is as a form of sympathy. Thus Niebuhr writes that the common man’s “frustrated individual ambitions gain a measure of satisfaction in the power and aggrandisement of his nation” (1932, 18, emphasis added). Since one identifies with one’s country, one rejoices in its successes, and grieves at its defeats. But to the extent that voting is rational, it must be based on commitment rather than sympathy (cf. Benn 1979, 299). Plausibly, vicarious egoists will normally care about both their personal interests, and also with the interests of their country. Assume, rather strongly, that a voter so identifies with Canada that she cares just as much about it as about herself. Even so, her chance of tipping the election is so tiny that it will be no more rational to turn out to vote in Canada’s selfish interests than in her own. As before, she will maximize her expected utility more effectively by concentrating on herself or those close to her. Even if she assigned ten times as much weight to Canada’s interests as to her own, her chance of being pivotal would still far too low to make

\textsuperscript{11} Sen 1977, 326-29. Adam Smith drew a similar distinction more than two centuries earlier. See Brennan and Lomasky 1993, 46-47.
voting a worthwhile gamble (Cf. Barry 1970/1988, 36). If we have reason to vote, it must be on the basis of commitment, not vicarious expected utility.

That may seem to move too fast. We often take pleasure in performing the right action. By voting for the right candidate, we will often maximize not only expected value, impartially understood, but also our own utility. One might think the same reasoning could be used to justify voting in one’s own selfish interest, or that of one’s country. If Canadians vote against wheat for India, and all take pleasure in doing so, then aren’t they maximizing their own utility? Yet to take pleasure in actions that contradict one’s own goals seems open to rational criticism. If someone tells us she is pleased that she has shot herself in the foot, and we know that she is neither a masochist, nor a malingerer, nor seeking to demonstrate the benefits of gun control, it seems we could fairly call her reaction irrational. For similar reasons, for an egoist to take pleasure in voting when by doing so she undermines her own expected utility seems senseless. “Why would a ‘narrowly self-interested’ person derive self-interested benefits,” ask Robert Goldfarb and Lee Sigelman (2010, 278), “from an activity that does nothing to advance his or her narrow self-interest?”

The same goes for vicarious egoism. Niebuhr (1932, 93) claims that “[t]he man in the street… projects his ego upon his nation and indulges his anarchic lusts vicariously,” and Morgenthau (1948/1974, 198) writes that “[b]y transferring his egotism and power impulses to the nation, the individual gives his inhibited aspirations…a vicarious satisfaction.” But anyone who thinks he has much of an opportunity to indulge his lusts or satisfy his aspirations by voting has failed to grasp the improbability of tipping the election. He is like a patriotic child shooting at foreigners with a pop gun, and imagining he has a significant chance of hurting them. Agents can better satisfy their direct and their transferred egoism by doing something else. And, in fact,
extensive evidence indicates that voters do typically vote their consciences (Sears, Lau, Tyler and Allen 1980; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Lewin 1991; Caplan 2007, 149-50).

4. Expressive Voting

One might think that this misses the point. Theories of “expressive voting” see it as aimed less at affecting the outcome of an election than expressing one’s preferences. One influential account compares voting to cheering for a team. In a stadium, the sound of any one individual’s cheering is sure to be too small to affect the team’s efforts; when performed in front of the TV, cheering cannot be heard by the team at all (Brennan and Lomasky 1993, 33). Perhaps the vicarious egoist simply enjoys sounding off in the voting booth. If it is rational to cheer for one’s team because one enjoys cheering, it could be rational to vote in the egoistic national interest because one likes doing so. It could even be a chance to vent one’s xenophobic and malevolent preferences (Usher 2011, 21). Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky (1993, 50) give the example of the choice during an international crisis between a dove who supports appeasement and a hawk who says “By God, we are not going to be pushed around by these bastards.” The voters may prefer the dove to be elected. Yet knowing that one’s individual vote has next to no chance of tipping the balance, one might well, they suggest, vote for the hawk, in order to “show one’s patriotism, one’s antipathy to servility, one’s strength of national purpose.”

It is easy to imagine voters doing this. But would it be rational? When one cheers at a football match, it may make no difference to what the team hears, but at least one expresses one’s views to the surrounding spectators. In the voting booth, she expresses her views only to herself. Unless the election result is improbably close, nobody will notice her vote—who cares whether the margin of victory was 3,555,986 or 3,555,987? To go to the polls for expressive

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12 Mackie 2011, 3-4. Alexander Guerrero acknowledges this objection, but argues that (a) “despite being a small increase, each vote does represent a real increase,” (b) that candidates sensitive to the size of their mandates may
reasons is like making a special trip to the sports bar to cheer on one’s team in a locked and 
empty room. The voter will not show her patriotism or hatred of servility to anyone but herself. 
“If one means to express such things to others,” as Gerry Mackie (2011, 17) points, out, “she 
would do so far more broadly and cheaply by almost any other method, such as a few bumper 
stickers on the car or a memorably worded t-shirt.” Another version of the expressive voting 
hypothesis sees voting as a means of expressing identity—even if only to oneself (Engelen 
2006). But what sort of identity would an egoistic voter express to herself by voting? “I’m an 
idiot who waste my time on something of no good to myself?”

We might hold that any action is rational which maximizes the agent’s utility and does 
not reflect an intransitive preference ordering. On this “thin” account of rationality, expressive 
voting would be rational if it brought the agent enough pleasure (Goldfarb and Sigelman 2010, 
279). But then so would writing the name of one’s candidate on the ballot in hieroglyphics, or 
delivering political speeches to flocks of seagulls. Surely this is not what we want to say. 
“Expressive” behavior that predictably goes unnoticed fails in its goal of expression. Moreover, 
survey evidence indicates that many people do not much enjoy voting. Roughly half of [U.S.?] 
voters—and most of those who vote regularly—indicate that they do it out of a sense of duty 
(Engelen 2006, 428-29; Mackie 2014, 26-27).

5. Civic Duty and Increasing the Candidate’s Mandate

What, however, if one is voting in a “safe” district such as Washington, DC? Here one 
could more plausibly argue that one’s vote stands no significant chance of making a difference
(Edlin, Gelman and Kaplan 2008). So many people will predictably vote for the candidate of one party that the result is not in doubt. The claim would not be that effect of voting would be too small to matter, but rather that the votes of others would be sure to cancel it out.13 In such cases, people often cite other non-egoistic reasons to vote, and some of these reasons may be good ones. The ‘civic duty’ rationale for voting—which survey evidence suggests is the most widely embraced by voters (Blais 2000; Mackie 2014), commonly invokes such considerations. If everyone refrained from voting on the ground that enough other people will vote, then democracy would collapse. That would not only be a disaster, but also defeat the voter’s very purpose in free-riding off of the voting of others. Both Kantianism and some versions of rule consequentialism will thus require voting.14 But then, we may add, if one is sufficiently motivated to take the trouble to vote for moral reasons, it is also rational to vote morally.

Challenging this logic, Dan Usher (2011, 24-25) has proposed that a rational voter could reason as follows: It is morally obligatory to turn out to avoid the collapse of democracy. Even a voter primarily concerned with her own self-interest will feel obliged to do that, provided that she is not entirely egoistic. If everyone votes in her own interest, however, it will not lead to disaster. Moreover, the cost of voting once she arrives in the voting booth—the time needed to tick the box on the ballot—is minimal, and thus the cost/benefit ratio of even a small chance of having a personally advantageous candidate elected is more favorable than in the original decision to go to the voting booth. For this reason, a predominantly but not entirely selfish voter might rationally allow herself to be guided by moral considerations in deciding to vote, but by

13 Glover 1975 calls these “the arguments from the insignificant difference” and “the argument from no difference.”
14 This reasoning is supported by rule consequentialist theories which hold that if an act is wrong if everyone performing it—or everyone feeling free to perform it—would be harmful (e.g., Hooker 2000). Such theories, however, can demand contribution to a collective endeavor even when participation is clearly superfluous. If nobody baked cookies for a bake sale, the results might be bad. But if I can foresee that more than enough people will bake cookies anyway, there is no point in my baking them as well.
egoistic considerations in deciding whom to vote for. “[I]f a sense of duty brings you to the
ballot box, pure self-interest would be sufficient for the rest.”

Usher is right to disaggregate the acts of going to vote and voting once one arrives. But
his argument does not seem to show what he intends. From an impartial standpoint, the expected
utility of voting ethically will usually be vastly greater than the expected utility of voting
egoistically. In either case the probability of deciding the election is equally tiny, but the second
benefit if it does materialize will be far larger. Raymond Sikora (1979, 464) gives an example:
“Suppose that Canada could give wheat to India, that the cost to you and to each of twenty
million other Canadian would be a dollar, and that this money would do roughly twice as much
good in India as it would at home. The gain/sacrifice ratio would then be roughly twenty million
to one: mankind would gain roughly twenty million times as much as you would lose. With a
ratio like this, you would have to be extremely selfish not to be willing to make the sacrifice.”

It may be the case that one could rationally be this selfish. But as Usher himself notes, the
cost in time and bother of going to the polls is many times as costly as that of ticking a box once
there. If a voter assigns twenty million times as much value to her own benefit as to benefits that
go to others (or even anything close), then how can it be rational for her to make the sacrifice of
going to the polls in the first place? If, on the other hand, her non-egoistic motives are strong
enough for her to give up an hour of her time to vote, then they should be strong enough for her
to vote ethically when she arrives in the polling booth (cf. Brennan and Lomasky 1993, 36).15

15 Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky (1993, 183-85, quoted passage at 184) maintain that electoral choices are
generally made between candidates with similar goals but who disagree as to how to accomplish them, or about how
they should be weighed against each other to promote the general welfare. Given that most voters lack reason for
confidence in their superior judgement about these matters, normally “the likelihood that any given voter will hit on
the utility-enhancing line is not appreciably greater than the chance that he will select the one that is utility
diminishing,” and “it is very likely that one could do better for overall utility by doing something else.” That is
unlikely to be true. Some policies—such as feeding starving people during a famine—seem desirable from nearly
any moral perspective (Singer 1972). If one judges one party morally superior in some respects, and not clearly
worse in others, then arguably it makes sense to vote for it. But we can freely grant that some voters might rationally
Voting even in a safe constituency also increases the size of a candidate’s margin. A candidate with a strong mandate is more likely to push her policies through. Even if she loses, she is more likely to survive to fight another day—and her ideas are more likely to receive attention—if she comes close to winning. Some writers have seen this as providing another reason to vote (Guerrero 2010; Mackie 2014: 30-34). It is true—as I argued in the previous section—that no single vote is likely to make a noticeable difference to that margin. To vote to increase a candidate’s margin on self-interested grounds is pointless. But there are many cases—from walking around lawns rather than crossing them, to limiting one’s carbon emissions—where while no single action seems to make a difference, nevertheless many taken together make a significant difference for the better. Rule consequentialists argue that, at least when enough others are contributing, we ought to do our part as well (Harrod 1936; Johnson 1991; Parfit 2011). Once again, if we have such reasons, they are moral, not egoistic ones.

6. Realism and Irrational Choice

There are, then, several plausible moral reasons to vote, but no egoistic ones. If voters attach enough weight to morality to bother voting, they ought to vote morally. If they endorse egoistic foreign policies, then they must be ignorant or confused. If governments pursue selfish foreign policies in spite of the voters, then democracy is not working as it is supposedly designed to do.

Realists might simply grant these points. Since Thucydides and Hobbes, realism has stressed the limits to human reason (Forde 1995, 148, 157; Leiter 2001, 248-49; Freyberg-Inan 2003, 47, 52, 57, 99-100). The assumption underlying most rational choice theory—that reason entails pursuing one’s egoistic interests—is different from the sense in which Niebuhr and...
Morgenthau speak of “reason” or “rationality.” They mean the ability and willingness to take others’ legitimate interests into account. Nevertheless, both show so much doubt in human rationality that one writer asserts that “skepticism regarding the progressive power of reason is the central tenet of modern realism” (Loriaux 1992, 404). If human psychology or even our evolutionary history predisposes us to support our own group against others (Mercer 1995; Thayer 2000), tribalism may overwhelm both egoist and moral rationality.

Much of the problem, in Niebuhr’s and Morgenthau’s view, lies in moral parochialism. Both writers noted the tendency to identify the interests of the state with those of the world (Niebuhr 1932; Hare and Joynt 1982, 31. Wong 2000, 395-97). Moral judgment is also distorted by motivated bias: Nations are all too prone to identify their own interests with those of mankind, and persuade themselves that they are doing good by doing well. Privileged states, like privileged classes, regard their entitlements as justified (Niebuhr 1932). Nationalism breeds moral particularism. All this can be true even if citizens vote ethically. “The fact that ethical preferences are reflected in electoral results,” observe Goodin and Roberts, “is not necessarily a cause for celebration. One cannot help wishing that Hitler had forsaken ethical ideals and pursued narrow material gain instead” (1975, 928).

Moreover, precisely because any one vote is most unlikely to tip the election, voters have no self-interested incentive to read up on the options and weigh them carefully and dispassionately. Unlike choosing a bad house or bad car, bad voting decisions are seldom

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16 Thus Niebuhr wrote that “the rational man is bound to recognise the claims made by others,” but warns of “the…persistence of irrational egoism,” and insists that peace “has been achieved only partially by a mutual accommodation of conflicting interests and certainly not by a rational and moral adjustment of rights.” (Niebuhr 1932, xx, 19, 30; for similar statements, see xxii-xxiii, 3, 27, 31, 88, 213-14, 233, 262.) At one point Niebuhr does concede that “[m]en may achieve a rational unity of impulse around the organising centre of the possessive instinct or the will-to-power” (p. 30). Morgenthau attacked “rationalism” for blaming “the reluctance of reality to conform to the ethical commands of reason” on ignorance and moral weakness, and noted that “interests and emotions” were gaining increasing predominance over “reason,” “even though [man’s] knowledge of social causation suggests to him a different course.” (Morgenthau 1948/1974, 172-73, 211, 213.)
quickly and unambiguously punished—particularly when their victims are third parties. While voters have no reason to vote in their own self-interest, they do have egoistic reasons to swallow comforting myths about themselves and their countries, instead of subjecting them to careful—and perhaps unsettling—scrutiny (Caplan 2007; Durant and Weintraub 2008).

Politicians, of course, are only too happy to oblige, as Niebuhr (1932: 20-21) pointed out. Since leaders, unlike voters, have a sizable chance of affecting policy, they can rationally pursue selfish aims. The same goes, to a lesser extent, for any actor who has a serious chance of tipping the balance (Olson 1965). If they can pull the wool over the citizens’ eyes, it will be in their interest to do so. In any event, citizens may be unable to control their leaders. Voters must choose among parties with positions on a range of issues. They vote not for particular policies, but rather for a package deal. Moral voters might rationally vote for an immoral foreign policy pursued by a candidate who was better all things considered.17

Given the manifest failings of human beings and institutions, does it matter how ideally rational citizens of an ideal representative democracy would vote? I believe it does. Part of what makes realism seem compelling is the notion that it reflects the hard fact of human egoism. Since human nature cannot easily be manipulated, so realists hold, conflict and oppression will always be with us—however much we may try to educate, enlighten, and reform. That is one of the basic points at issue between idealism and realism (Waltz 1959, 30; Nicholson 1998).

This paper has argued that idealists have the better of that argument. If states behave badly, the problem does lie in ideas and institutions—and these could, in principle, be reformed. It may be that in reality either or both are incorrigible. But then, those are the hard facts on which realists must build their case, not the selfishness of human nature.

References

17 I am grateful to my colleague Mat Humphrey for stressing this objection.


York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.


