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The Liberalist Tightrope:

Balancing Pluralism and Meaningful Action in International Relations, a study on Judith Shklar's Liberalism of Fear

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Abstract

Judith Shklar's liberalism of fear, while characterized by deep skepticism and dissatisfaction with utilitarian theories on liberalism, is also filled with hope and a tireless dedication to the victims of our political worlds. This thesis in international political theory explores Judith Shklar's underappreciated international political thought. The thesis argues that while her liberalism of fear can be considered a coherent alternative to rivaling theories in international political theory, as it explores questions on ethics beyond the horizons of single political communities, it also presupposes strict limitations regarding the purpose of international political theory. Consequently, the liberalism of fear can be thought of as an international political theory that functions as a sense-making tool rather than being action-guiding. Hence, the aim of this thesis is twofold: It aims to contribute to the secondary literature on Shklar's political thought in the context of international relations, but it also aims to contribute to the broader discussion on the study of ethics in international relations, especially concerning realist political theory, and in such ways, it illuminates some fundamental complexities in real-world politics.

Keywords: *Judith Shklar, Liberalism of Fear, Realism, Pluralism, Skepticism, Liberal Crisis*

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1. Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a burgeoning belief that we had finally reached the end of history, or in other words, the final form of human government. A unipolar world order, in which the United States exercised its influence around the globe, made for a balance of power that encouraged economic integration, democratization, and international cooperation. However, in the last 15 or so years these developments seem to have slowed down and, in some cases, even reversed. With the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 as its starting point, we have seen the return of great powers waging war for territorial gains. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 accelerated this trend further, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in February 2022, showed its full escalation. Some claim that these events illustrate the collapse of the liberal world order and a return to realpolitik. Consequently, liberalism, once claimed by Fukuyama, (2020 [1992]) to be the ideology of the last man, is now being questioned, both in a domestic and international context. Can liberalism survive this ongoing crisis and how will it need to adapt to do so?

In 2019 Mearsheimer identified in his essay, *Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order*, that the ongoing liberal crisis connects to the fact that liberalism, internationally, necessitates foreign intervention, as it 'aims to reshape the world in its own image' (14). The resulting 'crusader mentality' risks creating more conflict and resentment, and will, ultimately, contribute to the collapse of the liberal world order (ibid:33). While Mearsheimer is empirically driven in his argument, his concerns are accompanied by much theoretical doubt. Of special interest, when we look at the international level, is the question of how liberalism can sufficiently accommodate value plurality (Freyenhagen, 2011; Galston, 2002; Sterling-Folker, 2015). The expectations of liberalist theory to carefully tread the tightrope between tolerance and purposeful action against illiberal regimes allows for many mistakes. As Susan Mendus suggests, the question is how, in theory, we may accommodate and celebrate differences while also realizing that some of these are illiberal, and how, in the political world, we may act purposefully against evil without becoming tyrants. In philosophy, we are told that there is no truth to be found in this question, yet our political realities remind us 'that we cannot afford to believe that is so' (1995:24). Additionally, along with increasing challenges posed to liberalism, there is a growing disdain for idealist theory. Instead, theorists are asking if the new realities of international politics necessitate a return to realist political theory or if they call for an altogether new way of theorizing about international relations.

This thesis departs from these political realities and their accompanying theoretical debates on liberalism. Hence, the thesis places itself in the theoretical realm where international relations realism meets liberalist theory. The liberal crisis, and the debates it spurs, stress the importance of reconsidering the academic traditions of international relations as they bring to light debates on ethics and liberalism, and, more specifically, ideas on how we can better understand these in the context of real-world politics. Further, these real-world developments lead us to question the role of international political theory, and how we can do more purposeful international political theory.

In contrast to Mearsheimer, this thesis remains hopeful about the liberal endeavors of the international political society. It will be argued that it is not necessarily so that liberalism, as a political doctrine, has proven itself incapable of handling contemporary international challenges. Arguably, it is rather so that we need a better way to make sense of liberalism as an international political doctrine, and, crucially, the challenges that liberalism is facing, including aspects of tolerance and value plurality. The purpose of this thesis is to answer this call by considering and reconstructing Judith Shklar's liberalism of fear as an international political theory.

Judith Shklar was an American political theorist and historian of ideas, active from the year 1957 until her death in 1992. She is today most famous for her unique realist thought characterized by a tireless interest in the political realities of conflict and war, and a meaningful pursuit to not only better understand these realities but to also act in accordance. One of her most famous works, *The Liberalism of Fear*, published close to her death in 1989, combines her realist influences with a deep dedication to liberalism, and thus, departed from much political theory published at the time in its seemingly pessimistic and anti-ideological tendencies. Yet, Shklar, traditionally seen as a political theorist in realism, encourages ways of doing political theory which has to this day, been underexplored in the context of international relations (Stullerova, 2019, 2020; Royer, 2020). This thesis intends to fill this research gap and show that Shklar's ideas on ethics in international relations can call attention to some concerns and problems in today's theorizing on liberalism and international relations and allow for new ways of thinking about the relationship between realism and liberalism.

By focusing on her theory, the liberalism of fear, this thesis will argue that Shklar's liberalism should be considered as distinctly international as it deals with ethical concerns beyond state borders. Further, I will illustrate how Shklar's skepticism, which grounds her liberalism of fear, allows her theory to oscillate between value pluralism, and thus avoid the universalist label, and ethical confidence in the form of liberalism, in which case her theory neither says too much,

nor too little. This will be done by exploring an attempt to make sense of the international doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (Henceforth: RtoP) using Shklar's liberalism of fear.

However, my analysis will also come to show that, following Shklar, we need to reconsider the ambitions and purpose of the international relations debate and consequently, take more seriously its limitations in questions on ethics. Accordingly, while my thesis will necessarily be normative in its engagement with questions on ethics and justice, it will not be normative in the sense of making claims on what *should* be done in international affairs. In contrast, my analysis will present a view of ethics that is distinctly political and non-foundationalist, and as such encourage humility and prudence when writing in normative political theory.

1.1. Research Problem

In his essay *20 Years of Institutional Liberalism*, Robert Keohane writes that there has been 'a rise in legalism and moralism in international relations' (2012:129). He lists four examples of international political reforms where moral justifications were widely applied, including 1) several major human rights treaties, in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, along with an organized push for the implementation of these by NGOs, 2) efforts to promote democratic governments in eastern Europe and around the world after the end of the cold war, 3) the RtoP doctrine and 4) NATO's military efforts to prevent regime overthrow in Serbia and overthrow the Qaddafi regime in Libya (ibid:130-131). Hence, Liberalism, on an international scale, seems to have been accompanied by a great deal of moralism in its emphasis on universal human rights and individual liberties. Keohane problematizes overly moralist liberal political doctrines in international relations on the premise that moralism, 'in the hands of fools or demagogues (…) can become a pernicious form of moralism, serving not to check power but to justify its use in ways that are false and typically damaging' (ibid:131). Yet one could push the problem further.

While liberalism on the one hand celebrates great diversity of views, this diversity also serves as an obstacle when justifying the use of power in different circumstances. In recent times, and as argued by Keohane, we have seen a greater reliance on moralism as a justification or legitimization in such instances, as we try to reconstruct 'a conception of justice that is meant to be rationally acceptable to each citizen' (Freyenhagen, 2011:324). However, if we truly appreciate the realities of value pluralism, including on an epistemic level, as an inevitable feature of international political reality, we should also see why attempts to resolve conflict, on an international scale, by ascribing to moralist doctrines on human rationality do not make much sense.

If the suggestion that liberal states should necessarily see it as their goal to persuade, and if that does not work, force other states into liberalism, given that the survival of the liberalist world order depends on it, Mearsheimer (2019) might be right to say that international liberalism is in serious jeopardy. However, this need not be the case. Instead of focusing on the, supposedly predetermined, fate of liberalism, this thesis will look at the options of formulating a distinctly different international liberal theory, one that can also have a positive impact on political practices. A theory on liberalism that cannot be used as a disguise for imperialistic ambitions, as it is not grounded in a moral high ground but sees the possibility of several truths. Hence, we are looking for a theory on liberalism that can better handle the fact that 'there never has been and never will be universal agreement on what constitutes the ideal political system' (Mearsheimer, 2019:31). The theoretical research problem thus concerns the problem of how an international political theory may be sufficiently liberal while also meeting the demands of tolerance and handling value pluralism, or in other words, how it can avoid collapsing into some form of ideological imperialism.

I intend to look specifically at Judith Shklar's contribution to this debate and how her writing can help illuminate some of these concerns and perhaps also give us a distinctly different way of thinking about them. Hence, this is in no way an attempt to answer these questions altogether. Additionally, my endeavor involves a theoretical problem rather than an empirical one, yet, as has been shown, this theoretical research problem has its grounding in real-world development concerning human security and conflict.

1.2.   Research Question and Aim

The recent surge in realist political theory has brought an increasing number of theorists to the works of Judith Shklar. However, still very few have written on her political theories in the context of international relations. As a student of political theory and international relations, I believe that it is due time we examine closer how Shklar's theory can contribute to this debate by presenting a distinctly political ethics, based not on some foundational, *a priori*, *summum bonum*[1], but instead grounded in a historical sensitivity which genuinely appreciates the realities of politics and their contingencies.

I want to explore how Shklar's liberalism of fear can contribute to the international relations debate on liberalism. To do so I will need to answer two questions. First, I will ask:

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[1] *Summum bonum* refers to an ultimate end, good or goal.

How can Shklar's theory be both liberal and realist (i.e. how can it foster ethical confidence without compromising on its skeptical demands)?

This question concerns the quality of her argument, and it is necessary to ask since it shows us whether we can sufficiently distinguish Shklar's liberalism of fear from other realist or idealist forms of liberalism. Given the answer to this question, we will then go on to ask:

How can Shklar's Liberalism of Fear be considered as a 'coherent affirmative alternative' to the international political theories (realist or idealist) it criticizes?[2]

This thesis, and the questions it stresses, will contribute, on the one hand, to the secondary literature on Shklar's theories. That is the ongoing debate among a rather small number of theorists who disagree on the extent to which Shklar should be read and regarded as a cosmopolitan theorist given her minimalist non-foundationalist ethics. In this sense, the thesis will provide an interpretation of Shklar's theory. On the other hand, this thesis attempts to contribute to the much larger literature on ethics in international relations in general, and ethics in political realism, in particular. Hence, this thesis aims to bring some clarity to Shklar's theories and help us better understand in what sense her political thought was international. Yet the aim is also to better understand questions on ethics in international relations and accordingly, the world we are living in, including the ongoing challenges being posed to liberalism in an international context. Hence, I will follow the call from Samantha Ashenden and Andreas Hess to contribute to the debate on liberalism in exploring differences and commonalities in the 'Atlantic political tradition' at a time when 'the West seems to be drifting apart and post–World War II transatlantic relations are changing' (2019:3).

2. Previous Research

I will now present a brief literature review on the international relations debate and its limitations, with a focus on the tradition of realism in international relations, in order to better understand how Shklar's thought, and hence, this thesis, can contribute to debates on international relations. My focus is to summarize my understanding of the key traditions in the debate and subsequently, concentrate specifically on the debate on realism and ethics in international relations theory. Moreover, I will briefly present Judith Shklar as a political theorist,

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[2] The expression 'coherent affirmative alternative' is borrowed from Galston (2010:408).

her most famous writing *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989), and lastly some previous research on her international political thought. My full interpretation of Shklar's work and a review of secondary sources will be part of the analysis and are therefore not thoroughly presented in this section.

2.1.   The International Relations Debate and its Limitations

To understand and compare traditions in the international relations field, I will use Hutchings's (1999) terms international ethics and international relations theory. International ethics, according to Hutchings, is a method of political theory contingent on the idea that politics and morality can be considered separately, and that normative theorizing is ultimately about 'demonstrating how the latter (politics) can be made to conform to the requirements of the former (morality)' (ibid:29). This type of theory, sometimes called idealism, is often associated with the traditions of cosmopolitanism and utilitarianism.

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a surge in cosmopolitan political theory, ultimately based on a Kantian conception of human rationality, embracing that 'every human being has a global stature as an ultimate unit of moral concern' (Pogge, 1992:49). Given its emphasis on individual rights cosmopolitanism can be considered as a form of liberalism. Cosmopolitan political thought has had a particularly big influence on international political theory (see Nussbaum, 2000; Sangiovanni, 2011). Examples include cosmopolitan theories and the RtoP doctrine, which claims the individual to be the primary rights bearer rather than the state, and that, consequently, the individual's rights trump the state's right to non-intervention (see Thakur, 2013). This separation between ethics and politics results in a treatment of international relations theory as a form of 'applied ethics'. This positivist method of political theory, that is the separation between ethics and politics and consequently, treating morals as a form of 'applied ethics', seems to have permeated the international relations tradition lately and hence, in 'international (or global) political theory… it is the liberal voice that is now the dominant one' (Rennger, 2013: 51). Additionally, Maliniak et al., found in their article on dominant strands in the international relations academia that 'there exists little epistemological diversity in the field: American IR scholars share a strong and growing commitment to positivism' (2011:437).

Statism, just like cosmopolitanism, centers around questions on justice. However, in contrast to cosmopolitanism, statist theorists argue that questions on justice are limited to the boundaries of states, and thus that there is no *global* justice as the state is considered as the primary moral unit of concern (Nagel, 2005). Cosmopolitanism and statism are very different traditions. However, they can both be seen as treating questions of justice, i.e. morals, as prior to

those of politics and power and have for this reason been the object of criticism by realist theorists.

Critical theory, often from the Frankfurt school and developed from Marxist traditions, does not, in contrast to idealist traditions, differentiate between a sphere of normativity (that is, values, judgments, etc.) and our material existence. Hence, Marxism does not rely on specific assumptions about what is bad or good, or the rationality of human individuals (Hutchings, 1999:64). Marxist theory is revolutionary in that it believes in the positive progress of world history. However, Marxist theory battles with its 'notion of theory as both historically conditioned and true and the identification of the proletarian class as the universal subject of history' and how to account for these notions without collapsing into idealism (Linklater, 1990:66-67). Hence, critical Marxist theories have a hard time grappling with their universalist claims given that they ultimately depend on a view of historical progression that deems some standards (for example the emancipation of the proletariat) to be better than others. Thus, they can be seen as operating in similar ways to Kantian or utilitarian theories when orienting justice in international relations.

Realism is often contrasted with idealism based on its rejection of the centrality of ethics in international political thought. Hence, it is often argued that realism has no place for ethical concerns but is only interested in power and conflict (Bell, 2010:94). However, several theorists have opposed such accusations and shown that this claim makes a strawman argument as it gravely simplifies both the realist traditions and the concept of ethics (see Williams, M. C. 2005, 2004; Williams, B. 2006, Molloy, 2009; Lundborg, 2019; Schueuerman, 2011, Tucker, 2022; Sleat, 2016; Bell, 2010). Consequently, following this research, it is necessary to rethink the realist tradition and its possibilities for making sense of ethics in international relations.

The realist tradition is characterized by its many varieties, yet its main agenda is often considered to be repudiating moralist theories on international relations. For this reason, realist theories tend to be clumped together, regardless of their considerably large differences (Sterling-Folker, 2015:42). For instance, non-ideal theories, which involve theorizing that attempts to be more realistic in that they account for feasibility constraints within the real world of politics (Sleat, 2014; see also Sen, 2017; Valentini, 2012), is distinguishable from other forms of realism in its relationship to ethics. These theories still attempt to maximize justice, in Kantian forms, however within the available constraints and can therefore still be considered moralistic in the sense rejected by many realists. Thus, non-ideal theory driven by the 'frustration with the subject's perceived lack of influence on real-world Politics' (Valentini, 2012:654), is not a rejection of morals as *a priori* to politics.

The tradition of neorealism, within international relations theory, is considered as the group of theories arguing that international politics is ultimately about balancing interests and relations of power in an effort of state survival, rather than about questions on what *de jure* is right or wrong (see Art and Waltz, 1983). This way of thinking is often associated with the Hobbesian notion that the political order 'is the sine qua non for every other political good' (Galston, 2010:408). For the purpose of this thesis, I will distinguish this form of realist theory, which I call international relations realism, from political realism. With the term political realism, I refer to theories that embrace a skeptical philosophy and hence, question foundationalism in political thought. This includes traditional political realists such as Hobbes, Weber, and Rousseau, as well as newer theorists inspired by skeptical philosophy (see Williams, 2006; Geuss, 2008; Rorty, 1989) [3]. The tradition of realism has been called into question on the premise of to what extent realism is 'essentially critical and cautionary ... as opposed to a coherent affirmative alternative' to the theories the tradition objects (Galston 2010:408). This thesis will argue that realism can indeed be regarded as a coherent alternative to idealist theories in international relations, while suggesting caution when considering how realist political theory can be 'affirmative', in the sense of providing action guidance in real-world politics.

Michael C. Williams, in his book *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (2005), presents a version of realism, which he calls 'wilful realism', which argues that by reexamining classical realists, such as Hobbes, Rousseau, and Morgenthau, we can see a realism which harbors an 'ethic of responsibility', as described by Weber. This 'wilful realism' is characterized by its relationship to skepticism, relationality, and power politics, and creates limits that do not 'yield resignation or nihilism' (ibid:5-6). Seán Molloy argues, in a similar way, that Morgenthau's concept of the lesser evil allows for a 'moral politics beyond mere expedience' (2009:94). He explores the relationship between morality and power, and how one can 'even begin to make moral claims in relation to political life?' (ibid).

It is this question that motivates me to turn to the tradition of realism and examine Shklar's potential contribution to realism in international relations. As will become clear, Shklar's political thought, presented in a distinctly international manner, can not only offer us a realist political theory where the importance of ethics and morals need not be rejected but can also illustrate how a distinct realist political theory, which allows for ethical confidence in our political beliefs, may look. Thus, Shklar's realism shows us 'how to secure and make justificatory sense of normative practices without normative foundations' (Sagar, 2014:638), which is of uttermost

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[3] For a summary of the realist debate and its varieties see Bell (2010).

importance in a world where dogmatic idealism has proven unfruitful, yet when our confidence in liberalism and social justice is crucial.

2.2.   Judith Shklar

Judith Shklar was an American political theorist who primarily studied the history of political thought. She was born in Riga, Latvia, with Jewish parents and fled with her family in 1941, at the age of 13, from Europe to Canada. She spent her academic career at Harvard's Government Department, where she studied with theorists such as Stanley Hoffman, John Rawls, and Michael Walzer. Shklar's background has a special importance for her work. Her most famous piece of theory *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989) is grounded in Shklar's own experience of fleeing the Nazis during the Second World War. Understanding the impact of the Second World War and its major atrocities on her theories is therefore crucial in any reading of her (Hoffmann, 1993:174). Shklar was celebrated and recognized before her sudden death in 1992 and still is. Yet, unlike the earlier generation of post-war theorists - Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, and F.A. Hayek - who like Shklar fled the totalitarianism raging in Europe during the Second World War, Shklar never gained a large following, nor did she have a habit of commenting on current political events (Hoffmann, 1989). Shklar's political thought, characterized by skepticism towards fundamentalist Rawlsian liberal theories and a serious dislike for utopian theories, was not widely appreciated in the post-Cold War period when US hegemony was spreading the hope of eternal peace and economic prosperity worldwide. Thus, it is first now, when Russia's and China's increasingly aggressive behaviors have led many to question the outlook of a Kantian perpetual peace and well-functioning international cooperation, that her works have gained wider attention. However, as will be argued in this thesis, Shklar's work has much more to offer and is still heavily underappreciated.

Epistemologically, Shklar rejects forms of political theory that differentiate between morality and politics. Hence, she seriously questions theorists writing philosophical recipes for utopias. Shklar rejects formalist philosophy in specific, and foundational political theories in general, as she believes that political categories and values cannot be stable but are constantly changing. *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989) is thus an attempt to build a theory that does not rely on some form of *a priori* universal moral truth. Instead, the tenets of Shklar's theories are based on her observations and further sense-making of liberalism. Consequently, there are three main tenets of Shklar's political thought 1) political theorists must turn to the realities of politics 2) all governments are coercive 3) political life takes as its basic units the weak and the powerful (Hall,

2023). How these tenets are arrived at and how they come to sustain her theory will be presented in the analysis section.

Shklar's theories have been described by Giunia Gatta, as a 'clashing of two polar forces' (2018:91). On the one side, there is a pessimism grounded in her skepticism of overly naïve ideas on politics based on her deep rejection of fundamentalist ideas and her experiences of the deadly 20th century. On the other side, her theories are filled with hope for a better future and possibilities for change. Shklar's theories are not systematic and can, at times, appear somewhat messy. However, given that Shklar never had any intentions of creating a 'philosophical program', we should not blame her for that (Royer, 2020). In this thesis, I have chosen to focus on her most famous writing *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989).

2.3. The Liberalism of Fear

Close to her death, Shklar published her now most appreciated essay *The Liberalism of Fear (*1989*). The Liberalism of Fear* (1989) offers an alternative theory of liberalism, not premised on Kantian ethics, and it has only one overriding aim: 'to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom' (Shklar, 1989:21). Shklar argues that many liberal theories lack historical sensitivity and are not sufficiently occupied with the real world of politics and war (ibid:22). Instead of composing a theory of liberalism intended to act as an ideal for society to correct itself to, Shklar writes theory sensitive to the inescapable conflicts and horrors of human existence.

For Shklar, the freedom liberalism is necessarily supposed to protect is primarily the 'freedom from the abuse of power and the intimidation of the defenseless' (Shklar, 1998:9). Thus, the liberalism of fear is a 'liberalism that is driven by suspicion of government power and genuine hatred for 'cruelty as the worst evil'', given its focus on negative liberties and injustice rather than positive liberties and justice (Royer, 2022:705). The liberalism of fear is not based on some philosophical tenets arrived at through processes of rationalization. Rather, it is a particularly normative theory in that it tries to make sense of liberalism and its possibilities without treating it like an external phenomenon examined by the theorist like a scientist examines her subject. Rather, Shklar believes that ideology 'is an inescapable feature of purposeful political thought' and that the purpose of political theory was to attempt to 're-examine, adapt, or reject received ideas by asking if they give coherent intellectual expression to our political experiences', while simultaneously reflecting on our own values and experiences (Hall, 2023:2).

From this position, Shklar developed three tenets on which the liberalism of fear is built. First, the theory is premised on a *summum malum*, or 'a greatest evil'. Second, this *summum malum* is the 'evil of cruelty'. Lastly, her theory has a cosmopolitan element as this 'evil of cruelty' can be regarded as a universal bad. Yet, there is also a realist component to Shklar's theory grounded in her sensitivity to great human horrors as well as her awareness that tragedy is an inescapable part of human existence (Royer, 2022:706). This thesis will explore some of the disagreements among theorists regarding the question of whether the liberalism of fear can be regarded as a cosmopolitan theory and if so, to what extent it then complies with its own restrictive demands. My exploration of this question will come to show that Shklar's Liberalism of Fear is a political theory uniquely considerate of the realities of vulnerable humans, often ignored by much liberal theory, while also remarkably attentive to the demands of political realities and the value pluralism they accommodate.

2.4. Shklar's International Political Thought

Shklar rarely wrote on the topic of international relations and is not considered to be an international relations theorist. However, when looking at her body of work, it becomes clear that she was indeed very fascinated by questions of ethics in international relations (Hoffman, 1993). Secondary literature on Shklar's works in an international context center mainly around the topics of international law, humanitarian intervention, human rights, and war.

Kamilla Stullerova has written specifically on Shklar's international political thought and argues that Shklar's thoughts on war 'preceded and facilitated her negative political theory, not the other way round' (2020:720). Stullerova sees Shklar's political theory as having grown out of 'a life-long if unsystematic and idiosyncratic, interest in the causes and consequences of war' given her attentiveness to the realities of human conflict and suffering (ibid:730). From this observation, it follows that the liberalism of fear was a theory meant for both the domestic political setting and the global one. As such, Shklar's theory explores how judgments and explanations become interlocked in extreme situations such as war, and hence, these must be studied in conjunction (ibid).

Christof Royer has also written on Shklar's international political thought. In his article *Shklar's Underappreciated International Thought* (2020), he argues that the potential of Shklar's international thought lies both in the elements in Shklar's work that have 'an immediate international dimension' and 'in the elements that have a more 'indirect' bearing on international relations' (2020:640). Further, Royer argues for a reading of Shklar's work in which 'evil' is seen 'as a distinctive phenomenon of life that must be distinguished from injustice' and hence allows

for a cosmopolitan realism that can 'serve as a valuable source for the creative theorization of humanitarian intervention in world politics' (2022:704).

Similarly, Samantha Ashenden and Andreas Hess (2019) have written on Shklar's international political thought and argued that it provides a pathway between utopia and realism. Giunia Gatta describes in her book *Rethinking Liberalism for the 21st Century: The Skeptical Radicalism of Judith Shklar* (2018) a specific sentiment, one crucial in the study of international relations problems, which one can find in Shklar's political theory. This is the sentiment of combining our pull towards pessimist theory, given the cruel realities and injustices of our worlds, and an 'optimistic glance' that 'rejects fatalistic despair, an optimism that it is, indeed, possible to make the world a better place' (Royer, 2020:642).

On the other hand, some theorists, less sympathetic to Shklar's political theories, have argued that there is an inconsistency between Shklar's early skepticism and her liberalism of fear in that it represents a sharp break from her early pluralism (see Fives, 2020; Whiteside 1999; Benhabib, 1996; Guttman, 1996). Another critique posed against the liberalism of fear comes from Andrea Sangiovanni, who has argued that while in some instances the bare minimum of protection from physical pain and cruelty is still required, the liberalism of fear cannot harbor high-reaching political values in for instance, rich stable democracies (2009:233). On the other end of that spectrum, some theorists argue that the liberalism of fear says too much and that it, essentially, provides a moralistic doctrine that legitimates imperialistic practices and perpetual intervention (see Anker, 2014; Mesiter, 2002).

2.5.   Summary

This previous research section has explored both some complexities within the international relations debate as well as some debates in the secondary literature on Shklar. In regard to this thesis, the most crucial elements of Shklar's work are considered to be her *summum malum* and the following principle of 'putting cruelty first', as well as an appreciation of her overall skeptical philosophical position. These components of her theory illuminate my research puzzle on how realism can accommodate ethical confidence in liberalist values. Hence, following primarily Stullerova, Gatta, and Royer, this thesis will explore specifically the relationship between Shklar's pessimistic skepticism and hopeful liberalism in the context of international relations.

3. Method

There are a variety of different epistemological and methodological approaches within the field of international relations and the different labels sometimes lead to considerable confusion. Therefore, I first want to clarify to what academic tradition my thesis belongs. My thesis adopts a method from political theory, meaning it does not involve empirics as evidence throughout my argument, but instead theoretical logic and coherence. Political theory can be seen as a subfield of philosophy and political science, and it regards 'conceptual, normative, and evaluative questions concerning politics and society' (List and Valentini, 2016:1). Yet, this thesis is on the topic of international relations and not on domestic political theory. Thus, my thesis can be placed within the field of international political theory or global political theory (Hutchings, 1999, 2010; Stullerova, 2020; Floyd, 2016) which 'combines the interest in the real world problems within political theory with the more traditionally established interest in normative theorizing' (Stullerova, 2020:720).

This literature is distinguishable from international relations theory in that it engages in normative political theory which traditionally has been more concerned with domestic state theories. As such, it touches more explicitly upon normative questions such as ethics, justice, and rights within the international realm (List and Valentini, 2016:6). Students in international relations commonly encounter theorists such as Mearsheimer, Keohane, and Ikenberry, yet these mainly write *explanatory* theories (sometime referred to as empirical or causal theories) on how states organize themselves in the international arena. These theorists, regardless of them being realist or liberal institutionalist, do not engage with normative questions on ethics in international relations per se.[4]

Yet, this thesis will nor adopt a method of international ethics. As explored earlier, many theorists writing in normative political theory tend to treat ethics and politics as two separate spheres and thus write political theory as 'applied ethics'. In contrast, this thesis places itself specifically in the field of international political theory given that it treats morals and ethics as an integral part of the political sphere, following Shklar's thought. Thus, it necessarily engages with normative political questions without being 'applied ethics'. Hence, this thesis speaks to both international ethics theory and international relations theory, in that it sees normative questions as inseparable from political questions.

As I am writing in an overwhelmingly empirical research environment, it might be fitting to elaborate on my thoughts about writing in political theory. In the introduction to his book

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[4] Yet, they inevitably tend to be bound up in numerous normative assumptions, see Hutchings (1999:2)

Should Global Theory Get Real (2016), Jonathan Floyd claims that there are three growth areas in political theory that we can specifically connect to global political theory; '(1) 'Global justice', (2) 'just war' and (3) the non-identical twins of realism/moralism and ideal/non-ideal theory.' (Floyd, 2016:93). He observes that whereas the two first areas can be considered as 'incredibly ambitious research programs', considering the seemingly large gap between academia and real politics, 'the third worries about that precise gap. And there is a lot of worrying about that gap.' (ibid). My thesis falls right into this third area.

As for what role ideas play in the realm of knowledge and politics, I stand firmly, together with Shklar, in not seeing ideas as 'immediate emanatory of social interests', without realizing that 'ideas in their turn structure experience and there is an interplay between various levels of social experience rather than a simple line of cause and effect' (Shklar, 1966:10). As a student writing in international liberal political theory, one should aim for ideological self-consciousness. As elaborated on earlier, liberalism enjoys an 'analytical hegemony' (Sterling-Folker, 2015:45) given its 'unique status as the official ideology of the most powerful state in the world, the United States' (Griffiths, 2011:14). Liberal political theory, along with much realism, has arguably been part of promoting a western agenda by 'equating a benign or desirable world order with US interests' (Sterling-Folker, 2015:45). Hence, as a liberal political theorist you should understand and reflect on your role as part-taking in the construction of the dominant world order. Yet, it should be stated that the aim of this thesis is not to give political guidance concerning the survival of the liberal world order. Rather, it is to better understand liberalism, but of a very different kind than the positivist forms of it, in an attempt to contribute to analytical pluralism and ideological self-consciousness in liberal political theory.

3.1. Interpretivist Research Design

Political theorists rarely comment on questions of 'how' and 'why' in their theoretical works. Rather it is often believed that one's method is self-explanatory given the theoretical endeavor of the piece and that the analysis is of greater importance. Yet, it is of course not a question of having or not having a method, but rather of whether you reflect on that method or not (Leopold and Stears, 2008:1). Also, by reflecting on our methods we become more aware of our implicit methodological assumptions and can ergo write more coherent and mindful political theory.

This thesis will adopt an interpretivist research design, meaning that it adheres to the ontological view of reality as socially and intersubjectively constructed. When engaging in interpretivist research there are some methodological criteria one needs to comply with. For

instance, reflexivity, which refers to the researcher's characteristics, engagement, and circumstances that affect the research process (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012:100). Consequently, I need to think about how my subjectivities cannot be separated from my research. I will not elaborate further on this here and now, seeing how this sort of reflexivity and, further, ideas on how research in political theory can be conducted in terms of its subjective nature, is continuously part of the analysis in this thesis.

Moreover, this thesis follows a method sometimes referred to as 'the study of ideas', considered to belong to the category of qualitative textual analysis, focusing on meaning and meaning-making processes (Esaiasson et al. 2017:211). The concept of idea analysis refers to different combinations of aims, purposes, research problems, and analytical methods that we can use when studying political messages (Beckman, 2005:11). This thesis will study historical works and engage in both interpretation and analysis.

In the study of historical works, there are some different approaches available. Three big schools on the method of interpretation are contextual method, hermeneutic method, and normative political theory (Tralau, 2012:77). The contextual method is associated with the ideas of the historian and political theorist Quentin Skinner, who maintains that historical works need to be explored from the context of how the author in question viewed these issues and his or her realities. This means that words and arguments need to be put into context and then interpreted, rather than using them to answer contemporary political questions. Hence, the student will not focus on the validity of the claims made as a normative theory.

Normative political theory, in its traditional sense, is less concerned with the interpretation and contextualization of the text and more interested in the validation of arguments in the text. In some instances, when the purpose lies completely beyond any interest in the author, the question of correct interpretation is considered completely irrelevant (ibid:75).

Hermeneutics, on the other hand, is a method derived from the German philosopher Gadamer, and can be considered as a combination of the two other methods. Gadamer held that historical works can have much to say beyond their meaning in their own contemporaneity and that there is a possibility of many different legitimate interpretations given that we turn to these works with different questions and concerns. However, he also stresses that any or all interpretations cannot be reasonable, but that the interpreter needs to apply some historical sensitivity through a consideration of linguistic conventions and historical contexts of thought. The hermeneutic method is necessarily normative since our motivation for doing this type of political theory can be found in the quest for an understanding of political issues between the author in question and contemporary academia. Thus, we study these works because we

genuinely think they have something valuable to say on contemporary political issues (ibid:76-77).

The method of this thesis will primarily look like the hermeneutic method since its purpose lies in a greater understanding of Shklar's theories and her ambitions, and in a better understanding of our contemporary world and how to tackle its political questions. Hence, while I am primarily interested in examining a theoretical solution for how to think about ethics in international relations, an interpretation of Shklar and her work is necessary, given that it is specifically her contribution to this question on ethics that I am interested in.

It is, perhaps, especially important to incorporate the contextual aspect when looking at Shklar's theories, given her epistemic skepticism which emphasizes the need for an appreciation of our own lives and beliefs in our political theory. Some theorists have studied Shklar's work and misunderstood her *summum malum* as a moralistic categorical imperative arrived at prior to the activity of politics (see Whiteside, 1999; Fives, 2020a, 2020b). One could argue that this could be avoided by truly appreciating the extent to which Shklar wrote her political theory as a reaction to real-world politics and how, therefore, her political theory is deeply nested in political realities.

3.2.   Material

This thesis involves the study of Shklar's liberalism of fear and will therefore focus on Shklar's essay on this specific topic, *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989). However, it will also include other works by Shklar, in which her liberalism is explored, as primary sources. These include *Political Theory and Ideology* (1966), *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (1998), *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (1957), *Decisionism*, (1967 [1964]), *Legalism: Law, Morals and Political Trials*, (1986 [1964]), *The Work of Michael Walzer* (1998 [1989]) and *Ordinary Vices*, (1984). The reason I include more of her works and not just her essay *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989) is because my research aims and questions demand me to not only interpret but also reconstruct Shklar's liberalism of fear. As I am interested in Shklar's contribution to international political thought, which is an academic field Shklar never explicitly wrote in, I will use Shklar's other works to better understand her views of morals, international law, epistemic doubt, and so forth, yet only in the purpose of better understanding her theory on liberalism and its distinct international dimension.

However, as Skinner reminds us, there are some things one should be cautious about when interpreting and reconstructing historical works by a certain theorist. More specifically, if you choose to look at the full literature written by one theorist, one needs to be careful not to

force a coherence between the works, that is not to try to create a closed philosophical system, since it is reasonably the case that political theorists change their opinion and views on things throughout their lives (Skinner, 2002:68). As previously stated, Shklar was specifically clear in her intentions as a political theorist in that she did not intend to create a systematic theory of politics (1989:24). This thesis will try to respect her wishes and will therefore focus on one aspect of her political thought, the liberalism of fear.

4. Analysis

This analysis will first illustrate how Shklar's liberalism of fear, based on a *summum malum*, has a cosmopolitan element that allows the theory to make sense of ethical reflection beyond single political societies, i.e. nation-states. Second, it will be argued, through a consideration of Shklar's criticism of international relations realism and some common critique posed towards the liberalism of fear, that Shklar's liberalism of fear distinguishes itself from other realist and/or liberal theories in its deep skepticism. Third, we will go on to explore to what extent a liberalism of fear can be affirmative in regard to international political doctrines, by examining an attempt to make sense of the international doctrine of the RtoP with the help of the liberalism of fear. Lastly, we will. by looking at the relationship between liberalism and skepticism, explore the purpose of international political theory following Shklar.

Consequently, this thesis will conclude that while Shklar's liberalism of fear can be considered a coherent alternative to other international political theories, we should be careful when considering it as affirmative in the sense many other contemporary political theories are. The liberalism of fear and its distinct skeptical grounding instead suggest an altogether different way of doing political theory which encourages international political debate to be more oriented towards real-life conflict resolution and less interested in dogmatic ideological conflict. Hence the liberalism of fear serves as a distinctly political theory that attempts to make better sense of liberalism and dispositions that most people, reasonably, already feel or believe.

4.1.   Pain and Cruelty- A Cosmopolitan Principle

The liberalism of fear takes as its 'basic units of political life… the weak and the powerful' (Shklar, 1989:27). Why? Because it focuses on damage control. In all political constellations, there are inevitable power inequalities given the operation of police, military, and government.

These inequalities remind us that there is always a threat of war and tyranny. This power imbalance, suggesting that 'there is evidently always much to be afraid of' (ibid:27), viewed as a basis of political society, must therefore, following Shklar, ground all realist political theory. The freedom Shklar subscribes to is freedom from suppression and abuse of the defenseless caused by this inequality of power. As such, her theory is based on the assumption, 'amply justified by every page of political history', that 'some agents of government will behave lawlessly and brutally in small or big ways most of the time unless they are prevented from doing so' (ibid:28). Thus, one of the central tenets of the liberalism of fear is that all governments are coercive.

Further, the liberalism of fear can accommodate value pluralism both in terms of political and religious reflection. The only doctrines the liberalism of fear must reject are those that do not separate between the private and the public. That is doctrines allowing public authorities to control the private businesses of citizens. According to Shklar, in liberalism, the line between the public and the private must always be drawn given 'the primacy of toleration as the irreducible limit on public agents' (ibid:24). This line is indeed alterable and not historically permanent, but it needs to always exist, since without a proper separation between what is private and public, liberalism will not serve as a doctrine of true toleration. Consequently, the sole most important purpose of the liberalism of fear is to 'secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of political freedom' (1989:21). In other words, it is a liberalism aimed at allowing every adult to make as many effective and free decisions as possible without fear.

Hence, Shklar refutes the claim that Thomas Hobbes can be considered the father of liberalism as she argues that no form of liberalism can give public authorities the unconditional right to impose their beliefs on a people[5]. Further, she repudiates formulations of liberalism as a danger towards religious orthodoxy and faith and as such necessarily agnostic, relativistic, nihilistic, and atheistic. In response to such accusations, she underscores that one must differentiate between psychological affinities and logical consequences to see that the liberalism of fear, as a distinctly political doctrine, is not linked to any scientific or religious doctrine, even if it might be more psychologically compatible with some than with others (ibid:24).

Hence, Shklar's theory begins with a *summum malum*, which she claims 'all of us know and would avoid if we could' (ibid: 29). This *summum malum* is 'cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself' (ibid). Yet, why is it necessary to put cruelty first to secure conditions necessary for political freedom? Because cruelty, and the fear it inspires, are the most severe obstacles to individual freedom. Fear, Shklar sees, is both a mental and physical reaction, natural to all humans as well as to all animals. She writes that 'to be alive is to be afraid' and makes the

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[5] This has for instance been claimed by Leo Strauss (1986:166).

connection that fear is one of the most basic survival instincts of human biology (ibid). Yet, she adds that the fear we specifically want to avoid is the one of pain caused by people who aim to hurt or kill us, rather than fear of avoidable pain, which is rather a healthy fear. Further, political fear means we not only fear for ourselves but also for others, thus, 'we fear a society of fearful people' (ibid). Hence Shklar's liberalism of fear is grounded in the idea that:

> the experience of cruelty changes the fundamental conditions in which its victims go about their daily lives, as well as the assumptions they make about themselves and others, about who and in what they can trust, about who they can count on for support (at one end of the spectrum) or not to harm them (at the other end). (Spencer, 2019:198).

Consequently, fear of cruelty paralyzes political courage and liberal deliberation, and so, cruelty, and the fear it creates, act as an obstacle to individual freedom.

What does Shklar mean by her concept of cruelty? She differentiated cruelty in the form of sadism, which is a cruelty that has no ends but is an end and, hence, a personal inclination. Instead, she speaks of public cruelty which is made possible through the power imbalance between a people and its coercive government or other governments. This cruelty can be a 'deliberate infliction of physical pain' or it can be 'secondarily emotional pain' (ibid: 29). While the liberalism of fear sees that some amount of fear will always be implied in any system of law, given that it is one basis for counteracting the breaking of laws, it attempts to minimize fear caused by 'arbitrary, unexpected, unnecessary, and unlicensed acts of force and by habitual and pervasive acts of cruelty and torture performed by military, paramilitary, and police agents in any regime' (ibid).

Fear is a physiological process and consequently, the fear of cruelty and Shklar's *summum malum*, can, 'without qualification', be considered universal (ibid). Hence, Shklar's *summum malum* has a cosmopolitan dimension in that it sees cruelty *everywhere* as something that should motivate political action. She writes:

> Unrestrained 'punishing' and denials of the most basic means of survival by governments, near and far from us, should incline us to look with critical attention to the practices of all agents of all governments and to the threats of war here and everywhere (Shklar, 1989:37)

Thus, all who suffer, regardless of their relationship to the observer, should be considered. When we appreciate this cosmopolitan aspect of Shklar's liberalism of fear we come to see how this theory, based on the principle of 'putting cruelty first', can be argued as 'fundamentally designed to serve the world in which the ethical horizon surpasses boundaries of established political communities' (Stullerova, 2019:67). Hence, Shklar's liberalism of fear accommodates a distinctly international dimension. Accordingly, we should explore further how Shklar's liberalism of fear can make sense of international politics and therefore, how it can be considered as an international political theory. We will first explore the coherence of Shklar's skepticism, to see how it is a distinct feature of her thought which allows her liberalism of fear to bring light to new ways of doing international political theory.

4.2.   Shklar's Skepticism

Shklar's liberalism of fear is of a peculiar sort as it is rooted in her deep epistemic skepticism. She defined the word liberalism most modestly as a political doctrine, rather than a 'philosophy of life' (Shklar, 1989:21). Her version of liberalism stands out among other celebrated forms of theoretical liberalism in that it is distinctly political. Meaning that the fear it aims to reduce and eliminate, which serves as the ultimate obstacle to individual freedom, is overwhelmingly generated by states and their governments (ibid). Thus, it answers a political question and not a philosophical one, as it begins and ends within the realities of politics. Liberalism grounded in Rawlsian or Kantian theory has a different relationship to philosophy than Shklar's. Such theory tends to study morality as *a priori* to politics, and consequently, they tend to be more philosophically grounded than political (Sleat, 2014:28).

Consequently, Shklar distinguishes the liberalism of fear from a liberalism of natural rights and a liberalism of personal development. The former, she writes, 'envisages a just society composed of politically sturdy citizens, each able and willing to stand up for himself and others', and the latter argues that 'freedom is necessary for personal as well as social progress' and that these conditions are necessary for morality and knowledge to develop (1989:26-27). Shklar attributes these types of liberalism to John Locke and John Stuart Mill, respectively, but quickly refutes them in their lack of historical memory. Similarly, Shklar commented on some tendencies in realist thought in the study of international relations, claiming that in the pursuit of questioning the logic of idealist or legalist theories, some realists end up using the same foundationalist tactics as the theories they are criticizing. To better understand Shklar's

skepticism and what role it plays in her theory, we should first explore her historical sensitivity, and later move on to her critique of international relations realism.

4.2.1. Historical Sensitivity

The liberalism of fear pursues great historical sensitivity as it not only pays attention to, but is grounded in the history of political suffering. Already on the second page of her essay *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989) Shklar notes that students of political theory need to be cautious of one historical fact when considering liberalism as a political ideology. Namely that 'liberalism has been very rare both in theory and in practice in the last two hundred odd years' (ibid:22). She adds that this fact is undeniable if we consider that Europe is far from the only inhabited part of the globe. Further, she notes that the United States only became liberal after the Civil War, and then 'often in name only', and only if black people were denied the status as members of society (ibid). In central Europe, it was institutionalized first after the Second World War, in which case it was imposed by the victors of one of the most brutal wars of our times. She goes on to state that Eastern Europe, as well as Eastern Asia, has only lately seen the development of liberal institutions (ibid).

The point of Shklar's short historiography of liberalism is not to encourage disputes about its quality. Rather it is to show that liberalism cannot be taken for granted as a given quality of human society, as it has historically been considerably absent. One might think this fact to be blatantly apparent and claim that liberalism, as innate to modernity, is only possible in a predominantly secularized world. However, Shklar makes the point that even if we conceptually can understand the complexity of intellectual history we still tend to simplify and generalize liberalism and its relationship to modernity. The reason for this, she claims, is that 'liberalism is a latecomer' and was developed in post-reformist Europe (ibid:23). According to Shklar, Liberalism has its origin in tensions within Christianity between demands of orthodoxy and faith and demands of morality and charity. These tensions caused many Christians, when faced with the brutalities of religious wars, to turn to a 'morality that saw toleration as an expression of Christian morality' (ibid). Slowly, this turn towards principal toleration led to a belief that individuals need to make their own decisions about important matters in their lives without interference from authorities, a belief that seemed arguably liberal. However, Shklar notes that principled toleration is not political liberalism. She writes 'liberalism does not in principle have to depend on specific religious or philosophical systems of thought. It does not have to choose among them as long as they do not reject toleration' (ibid:24). Hence, she warns

us not to view liberalism as philosophically evident since such an understanding would inevitably cause one to not fully understand historical contingencies and the real vulnerability of liberalism.

4.2.2.   Shklar's Critique of International Relations Realism

That Shklar was well-read in the area of international relations is evident in much of her political thought (Stullerova, 2019:68; Hoffman, 1989). Especially in her work *Legalism* (1986 [1964]) where Shklar identified puzzles that international relations theorists, to this day, are still dealing with. Like her friend and colleague Stanley Hoffman, Shklar was overwhelmingly fascinated by international relations realism. At the time she was writing, international relations theory was not distinguished as its own field to the extent it is today, and hence, Shklar, who was more interested in classical political theory, seemed still to have encountered the works of Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and John Herz. Yet, Shklar had, along with praise, some criticism to offer these theorists.

In her essay on decisionism, she writes that the realist's focus on virtuous statesmanship was 'conservative and backward-looking' and she calls the approach a 'neo-Machiavellian doctrine' (Shklar, 1967 [1964]). Bessner and Guillot (2015) praise Shklar for providing a critique of neo-realism and its efforts to produce a systemic view of international relations without dealing with the issues linked to the paradox she identified as being that 'the systemic approach to international relations was not only reacting against, but was also premised on, the decisionist basis of classical realism' (Bessner and Guilhot, 2015:107). In other words, she saw that in neo-realists' attempts to create systems able to produce correct outcomes in instances of international anarchy, they had simply replaced 'decision' with 'system' (ibid:110).

However, when we consider her views on legalism, Shklar had, in fact, a lot in common with international relations realists. Like them, Shklar believed that an over-reliance on legalism in an international context could be harmful as it does 'considerable violence to political actualities' (Shklar, 1967 [1964]:34-35) in creating illusions of knowledge which make for delusional confidence (Shklar, 1989b:1140-1141). Yet, Shklar was not satisfied with the solutions put forward by realists at the time, given that these attempted to separate a distinct sphere of politics, from spheres of law and morality. Accordingly, Shklar's problem with mid-century international relations realism was that it looked suspiciously a lot like an ideology. Shklar was deeply skeptical of the post-war Europe 'end of ideology thesis' (ibid: 5). Instead, she argued that ideologies are an inescapable part of political reality and that we therefore constantly need to consciously think about our own predispositions. Realists, however, she argued, were at that time not doing so (Shklar, 1966:1). Hence, Shklar saw that the realist's separation of spheres was

similar to the formalism of juristic thought, and it could thus not provide any better solution to 'counter the ills of positive international law' (Stullerova, 2019: 72). To understand from where Shklar's critique of international relations realism is derived we should turn to her critique of legalism.

Legalism is not only the name of one of Shklar's most famous works but also a concept she uses to refer to 'the ethical attitude that holds moral conduct to be a matter of rule-following, and moral relationships to consist of duties and rights determined by rules' (1986 [1964]:1). She saw that legalism was 'the reigning ideology of the legal profession and a broader social outlook' (Hall, 2022:6). Shklar criticized legalism on the basis that it adopted a way of thinking about social practices where they are structured into 'claims and counter-claims under established rules' (1986 [1964]:10), and where there could exist as an impartial form of authoritarian power that could resolve conflicts (Hall, 2022:7).

Consequently, Shklar believed that nineteenth-century liberals could be blamed for turning liberalism into a conservative force by encouraging legalism in international affairs (Stullerova, 2019:73). It was this sentiment Shklar shared with realists as she saw that they too were 'despairing liberals' (1986 [1964]:125). However, Shklar believed that something was missing in international relations realism, namely, 'a heavy dose of scepticism' (Shklar, 1967 [1964]:17). Stullerova (2016) has earlier argued that ontological doubt is, in fact, a fundamental part of political realism, and one could argue that it is specifically this characteristic that allows Shklar's realism to distinguish itself from theorists such as Morgenthau, Niebuhr, Kennan, and so forth. Stullerova writes about Shklar in opposition to realists:

> where they seek to protect international affairs from the conservative
> forces of international legalism by keeping each sphere of social action
> separate and by strengthening the exclusively political sphere, she invites us to
> think of the purposes and limits of law, purposes and limits of politics, and
> purposes and limits of morality (2019:74)

Shklar also made some interesting comments on the work of her friend and colleague Michael Walzer's theory on just and unjust war. Her critique, instead of focusing on the discussion of criteria for just war, was interested in questions connected to the impacts of discussing justice and injustice of war on our moral psychology and how these discussions could result in sanctioning cruelty (1998 [1989]). At this point, Shklar again distinguishes herself from other realists. According to Walzer, realists believe that in war the categories of humane and

inhumane do not apply (2015 [1977]:3-16). Further, realists use the concept of necessity to make sense of our moral considerations concerning war (ibid:4). Yet, Shklar did not see this as a possibility since for her war was a situation completely devoid of justice. Hence, she writes 'War, in this view, is not an extreme moral situation; it is wholly devoid of any moral compensation save personal courage' (1984:80). Thus, we come to see in Shklar's critique of international relations realism how she differentiates herself from other realists in political thought through a deep commitment to skepticism which makes her distinctly humble in her theoretical endeavors.

Nonetheless, Shklar too, especially in regard to her essay *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989), has been the subject of critique posed by skeptics. This critique, most often, concerns the idea that her *summum malum*, can 'without qualification' be considered universal. Consequently, some claim that her *summum malum* and the argument that it can ground a theory of liberalism betrays her realist non-foundationalist views as it is based on a universal when Shklar herself pertains that universals cannot ground political theory (Fives, 2020a, 2020b; Benhabib, 1996; Gutmann, 1996; Whiteside, 1999). We should now explore this critique to see why it arguably fails to grasp the full meaning of Shklar's skepticism.

4.2.3. Skepticism Compromised

Some scholars argue that by 'putting cruelty first', Shklar compromises on her epistemic skepticism. Whiteside (1999), for instance, argues that a skeptical philosophical position cannot ground a liberal theory, which is precisely what Shklar argues it can. He claims that Shklar's early skepticism allows her to endorse 'little more than constitutionalism and social toleration' (ibid:501). What follows is a 'barebones liberalism' that cannot justify her liberal values and views on equality (ibid). Further, he claims that in her early career, Shklar viewed her liberal views and political aspirations as simply a political ideology reflecting her political preferences and that there could be no intellectual generalizable defense of liberalism (ibid).

It is the 'cruelty first' principle, or her *summum malum*, that, according to Whiteside, causes her to overstep the boundaries of a skeptical political theory. The critique is premised on the fact that Shklar's skepticism rejects any notion of 'thick conceptions of the human good' or 'ponderous philosophies of social causation' (ibid:508). Consequently, Shklar rejects Walzer's conception of justice which is based on the ability to interpret social goods in a particular culture and distinguishing 'core values' of that particular culture (ibid:505). However, Whiteside believes that Shklar's own liberalism of fear does not meet these skeptical criteria. He argues that when Shklar puts cruelty first she creates a theory in which it is the concern for cruelty that motivates

all forms of opposition towards 'patterns of social interaction that promote cruelty-in some cases', and because 'inequality makes cruelty tempting', her liberalism of fear must be egalitarian (ibid:513).

Up to this point, we need not necessarily question Whiteside's reasoning. Yet when he claims that her *summum malum*, the fear of cruelty as the ultimate evil, jeopardizes her skeptical grounding and ultimately makes her theory incapable of handling ethical pluralism, we should note some potential misconceptions of her theory. Shklar argues that even after we have discovered that our liberal values have no rational necessity, we can have a deep respect for them given their ability to 'overturn prejudice and nativism' (ibid:506). In response, Whiteside claims that to make this assumption there 'must be something about moral reasoning that transcends cultural particularity' (ibid:516). Consequently, Whiteside claims that her argument for an egalitarian position demands 'a reflexive conception of rationality' that is not supported by her skeptical position (ibid).

Additionally, he argues that ethical pluralism cannot support toleration (ibid:509). His objections are first, that her belief in the inevitability of social diversity looks like historical determinism, which she herself rejected, and second, that this belief cannot serve as a reason for why social diversity then *ought* to be promoted (ibid:509). Thus, when faced with questions on whether we should strive for more or less diversity, for instance in questions on migration, we must turn to *unskeptical* reasoning, and hence, away from Shklar's ethical pluralism (ibid:513). Before we go on to see why this is not necessarily the case we should consider the full implications of this critique, and hence, understand why it has been included in this analysis.

The premise of Shklar's liberalism of fear is that it is distinguishable from other non-skeptical forms of liberalism, in its ethical, cultural, and intellectual plurality. But this value-pluralism only holds so long as her theory remains sufficiently skeptical. If her liberalism of fear, and the *summum malum* it is based on, requires us to leave skepticism and turn toward foundationalist ethical thinking, then her liberalism can no longer serve as a more realist alternative to its competing forms of liberalism. In such a case, Whiteside would be right to argue that there is an impasse between skepticism and Shklar's liberalism and that we do indeed need more than skepticism to make judgments in matters of justice. However, one need not come to this conclusion.

Whiteside's critique of Shklar's theory does not fully appreciate in what sense Shklar's liberalism of fear was a distinctly political theory and that putting cruelty first is a matter of 'promoting the cause of political freedom' (Hall, 2023:10). First, we need to clarify what exactly Shklar meant when she wrote that the liberalism of fear begins with a *summum malum*: 'that evil is

cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself' and that 'To that extent, the liberalism of fear makes a universal and especially a cosmopolitan claim, as it historically always has done' (1989:29).

This claim, in addition to her writing in *Ordinary Vices*, on how choosing cruelty as the worst thing we do does not need further justifications as most liberal and human people already hold this to be true (1984:44), has led some theorists to argue that Shklar's theory 'possessed easy intelligibility which made for quick and universal agreement about principles' (Robin 2004:145). However, it was never Shklar's intention to construct a principled theory of politics based on the universality of a *summum malum*. When she writes that 'the fear of systematic cruelty is so universal, moral claims based on its prohibition have an immediate appeal and can gain recognition without argument' she instantly adds that 'one cannot rest on this or any other naturalistic fallacy' (1989:30). Shklar constantly stresses that people will never agree on what vice to put first. Hence, what she tries to offer is a liberalism of fear that can endure these differences 'in the relative importance that various individuals and groups attach to the vices' (1984:4).

Thus, she never claims in *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989) that 'putting cruelty first' does not demand any further justification. In fact, she writes that even if 'putting cruelty first' should *reasonably* be accepted as the first principle of liberalism, 'liberals can begin with cruelty as the primary evil *only* if they go beyond their well-grounded assumption that almost all people fear it and would evade it if they could' (1989:30, Emphasize added). Further, she writes that if the prohibition of this *summum malum* can become recognized as necessary for the dignity of persons 'it can become a principle of political morality' (ibid). Hence, it becoming a 'principle of political morality' happens as a *political* process, it is not something that we arrive at philosophizing about it. Thus, the liberalism of fear does not rest on some 'moral philosophy in its entirety. It must in fact remain eclectic' (ibid:30). Hence, her point is that most people who advocate some form of moralist liberalism would rationally defend 'putting cruelty first', as long as they accept that avoiding the bads suggested by Shklar is necessary for achieving the specific moral aims connected to their specific theory, or if 'the bads the liberalism of fear highlights are so weighty that their avoidance should prevail over other considerations' (Hall, 2023:12). Once again we must remember that Shklar never intended to formulate a simple generalizable theory of liberalism. Rather she was constantly aware of the extremely complex realities the principle of 'putting cruelty first' was dealing with. Hence, in *Ordinary Vices* (1984:6) she even compared her endeavor with 'a ramble through a moral minefield, not a march toward a destination'.

In light of this insight, we should come to see that Whiteside's claim that Shklar's theory presupposes a 'reflexive conception of rationality' misunderstands the extent to which Shklar

emphasized that theoretical argumentation often cannot solve fundamental disagreement, and rather that 'putting cruelty first' is something most liberals reasonably can agree with without theoretical persuasion. Hence, Whiteside's critique treats Shklar's theory as if it tries to prove something. Yet, as will become apparent later in this analysis, Shklar saw political theory as a sense-making process rather than a tool for settling discussions on political matters.

4.3.   Ethical Confidence

Some critics, often belonging to a political left, reject Shklar's liberalism of fear on a very different basis. For them, it is not that her *summum malum* goes too far from skepticism and that her theory becomes logically incoherent, but rather that her liberalism of fear should be regarded as a form of Cold War liberalism capable only of conservative concerns on egalitarian and liberating political aspirations. In other words, they argue that the liberalism of fear is too minimalist to accommodate any higher political aspirations.

One of these theorists is Samuel Moyn. He argues that Shklar's later theories are characterized by a deep pessimism that allows us to hope for little more than the avoidance of extreme horrors exercised by tyrannical regimes such as the case of Nazi Germany (2019:24). Similarly, Katrina Forrester argues that in claiming the maxim 'putting cruelty first', the liberalism of fear attempts to 'reduce political morality to a moral minimum' as it limits the emancipatory effects of liberalism (2019:148). Yet, while Shklar is surely skeptical of some of the high-reaching political goals we associate with the cosmopolitan political left, there is no reason to think that her skepticism leaves us with an acceptance of status-quo politics and without concern for further political emancipation.

Shklar's motivation for doing political theory could be found in her wanting to find a better understanding of our realities, including the inevitable presence of conflict, and thus revert our eyes towards the powerless members of society. Given that cruelty and abuse of power remain constants in all world societies, liberal theorists, and liberal people in general, should see no problem with a political theory that aims towards protection from such abuses. 'Putting cruelty first' is thus an attempt to encourage liberals not to turn a blind eye to injustices and cruelties which, at the time of Shklar's writing, often were overlooked as a consequence of the moralistic, often self-assured, forms of liberalism. As such, her theory demands from us a specific outlook on politics and political theory. It refocuses our attention towards particular sources of cruelty and oppression as they happen in real concrete situations, which is required if we want to get to grips with public cruelty. Hence, we need a 'better' theory of liberalism than

the 'ideal' ones, one that can satisfactorily make sense of the realities of cruelties and suffering (Hall, 2023:6-7).

Thus, Shklar wrote from the point of view that much political theory is characterized by great privilege (1989:35) and she believed that theorists needed to be reminded that "philosophy' - and political philosophy in particular- 'deals with the experiences of living beings" (Gatta, 2018:93). Shklar's theory asks of us to take cruelty seriously. While this aspiration might seem banal and insipid, in reality, it seems to be a lot to ask for seeing how this was neither done by many regimes in Shklar's time nor is it to this day in numerous countries. Also, and crucially, Shklar's theory never tells us to stop fighting for a better future once the greatest cruelties have been suspended (Williams 2005:60). Shklar does challenge some forms of transformative political ideologies, as she alarms us that when we stop respecting the private realm and the rights of the individual, cruelty, and the fear it creates can quickly destabilize our lives as we know it, protected by liberal values, but she is not against transformative politics altogether (Hall, 2023:25).

Similarly, Andrea Sangiovanni poses a critique of the liberalism of fear that also focuses on its inability to foster high-reaching political aspiration when he writes:

> There is a risk to accepting the 'liberalism of fear' as the last word in politics. There are places and times where such a narrow focus on bare physical and psychological security is exactly what is required, and we do well to keep in mind in such circumstances. But the argument does not generalize well. Should we abandon our concern for more high-reaching political values – such as, say, social equality – in, for example, relatively stable, rich constitutional democracies? To cope with questions like these, the liberalism of fear might try to point to more articulated (and controversial) conceptions of domination, for instance. But the more content and scope the liberalism of fear tries to pack in to its restricted range of values, the less it will be distinguishable from [other] project's. (2009:233)

First, that the liberalism of fear only applies to places where physical and psychological security is extremely lacking reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the liberalism of fear and the concern it stems from. The liberalism of fear, and its beginning in the prevention of cruelty 'was never supposed to be the last word in politics. *It offers an account of what must be dealt with first*' ((Hall, 2023: 27) Additionally, it suggests that the cruelties the liberalism of fear tries to

prevent are not present in 'rich constitutional democracies', and thus that the problem of 'state perpetrated cruelty' is solved in these countries. Yet, this misunderstands and undermines Shklar's emphasis on the differences between the weak and the powerful in society. When we fully appreciate the liberalism of fear's careful consideration of, and point of departure in, the power inequalities present in *all* countries, we should come to see that the problem of gross social cruelty has in fact not been solved, even if some regimes are doing better than others.

Moreover, with realism's worldview in mind, that is perpetual conflict rather than perpetual peace, we should not fool ourselves into thinking that such problems will ever be fully eliminated, and in instances where they reasonably no longer seem to exist, the liberalism of fear should act as a reminder that brutality and cruelty can re-enter our society just as quickly, if not even quicker, as they went away. Thus, the liberalism of fear speaks to 'comfortable liberals' in 'rich constitutional democracies' as it cautions about 'what they have got and how it might go away' (Williams, 2005:60).

The second claim, that the liberalism of fear will lose its uniqueness as it tries to incorporate more 'content and scope' does have some relevance, however, as noted by Hall (2023) we need not be too concerned with this notion. Shklar's theory not only urges us to put cruelty first, but it, following this principle, also encourages us to focus on less serious forms of cruelty, including freedom compromising intimidation, which is necessary to secure the conditions of liberty, while prioritizing the 'testimony of the powerless' (Hall, 2023: 28). Hence, as formulated by Bernard Williams, once:

> basic fears are assuaged, then the attentions of the liberalism of fear will move to more sophisticated conceptions of freedom and other forms of fear, other ways in which the asymmetries of power and powerlessness work to the disadvantage of the latter (2005:60).

As for those who still believe that the liberalism of fears tells us too little about how this more sophisticated conception of freedom will look, or how to think about complex instances of indirect cruelty, we should be reminded of the limits a skeptical political theory sets out for itself. While Shklar's theory should be thought of as an alternative to general liberal theories, as it offers a different way of thinking about the greater project of liberalism, it was, however, and as will be argued in the upcoming section, never meant to be action-guiding on a general level. When addressing local political issues, theorists will necessarily need to adopt local political perspectives, which will not, *per se*, be found in Shklar's liberalism of fear. The point of the

liberalism of fear is instead that such issues will always come secondary to that of prohibiting extreme cruelties. To see this more clearly, we should look at an attempt to make sense of the international doctrine the RtoP, with the help of Shklar's liberalism of fear.

4.3.1.   Example: The Responsibility to Protect

The international dimension of the liberalism of fear proceeds from Shklar's appreciation that questions on ethics surpass the boundaries of single political communities. Hence, her *summum malum,* as argued earlier, has a cosmopolitan dimension in that it sees cruelty everywhere as something that should motivate political action. Thus, 'there are no limits as to who suffers from cruelty, where they are and in what relation they are to me as an observer' (Stullerova, 2019: 79). This cosmopolitan dimension of her theory has however created some confusion and has, in the most serious instances, been accused of ultimately legitimizing perpetual intervention (Anker, 2014) and, in less serious instances, been suggested as able to legitimize international political doctrines such as the RtoP.

Matt Sleat has noted that the theoretical debate on the RtoP seems to be stuck in a realist/liberal impasse, where cosmopolitans' claims of moral righteousness come in conflict with realists' emphasis on the supremacy of state sovereignty (Sleat, 2016). Sleat claims that by adopting the skeptical position found in Shklar's liberalism of fear, and thus examining the RtoP, within its distinct political sphere and from its own 'distinct internal normativity' (ibid:68), we can overcome this realist/liberal impasse. The debate on the RtoP concerns both realist and cosmopolitan ideas and claims on international society and state behavior. In general, realists hold that intervention must serve in the interest of the intervenor and that there are no moral principles to guide us on questions about when and how they should happen (see Moses, 2012). In contrast, cosmopolitans argue that given every human's natural right to be protected from great evil we have a moral responsibility to intervene (see Thakur, 2013). Post-structuralist theorists have also posed a critique, ultimately claiming that one universal moral principle cannot offer a legitimation for intervention following the RtoP, but that every case has its complexities and needs to be legitimated on its own demands (Edkins, 2007: 97). Sleat argues that we can surpass this impasse in the debate by exploring how:

> the universality of the fear of cruelty helps us make sense of the moral
> responsibility we have to protect victim-strangers: all human beings can

reasonably fear these evils and hence deserve to live in conditions where they

are protected from them. (Sleat, 2016:76).

Hence, Sleat is arguing that the 'universal moral claim', that is the protection from Shklar's *summum malum*, 'might offer a slender but potentially sufficient way of making sense of interventions as legitimate to and for both parties' (Sleat, 2016:76). One should however not be too quick to think that Shklar's *summum malum* can act as a possible legitimation of the RtoP.

Matt Sleat reads Shklar as attempting to 'identify a single value that all persons consider most important such that it overrides their numerous moral, religious and political disagreements' (Sleat, 2013:100-101). This reading allows for a simple mechanism in deciding on legitimacy in foreign affairs, which should raise some concern, given that Shklar's theories never intended to give simple answers to complex questions. Rather, as Hall suggests, such an interpretation of the liberalism of fear would mean that Shklar, following Fives's (2020a; 2020b) and Whiteside's (1999), arguments, ends up creating her own 'ideology of agreement' while abandoning her earlier skepticism (Hall, 2023:22).

Surely, one can see how Sleat finds a basis for this in *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989) as Shklar writes that 'Because the fear of systematic cruelty is so universal, moral claims based on its prohibition have an immediate appeal and can gain recognition without much argument' (1989:30). Yet, we should then once again look at page 30 in *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989) where Shklar writes that 'liberals can begin with cruelty as the primary evil *only* if they go beyond their well-grounded assumption that almost all people fear it and would evade it if they could' (emphasize added). Shklar is making the point that when asking 'whether the prohibition would benefit the vast majority of human beings in meeting their known needs and wants' (1998: 11-12), we can answer 'in the affirmative', which allows prohibitions against cruelty to be universalized (Hall, 2023:22).

Hence, if we see, following Stullerova, the RtoP as 'a prescription to intervene under conditions stipulated in the principle' (2019:81), this doctrine looks more like the type of international law that Shklar remained greatly skeptical about. Hence, such a doctrine lacks the skepticism that Shklar stressed should accompany all thinking in political and international relations. This also shows why some of the critique of the liberalism of fear posed by the left is misplaced.

For instance, Meister (2012) and Anker (2014) argue that Shklar's *summum malum* essentially creates a moral doctrine that legitimizes imperialistic international doctrines and

perpetual intervention.[6] However, when we fully appreciate Shklar's negative method, we should see that her theory cannot, on behalf of those suffering, justify military intervention. Instead, it encourages us to orient our thinking towards people's suffering while *permitting* 'intervention against those who commit this suffering' (Stullerova 2019:81). The crucial point is that the liberalism of fear never cancels out intervention and action against cruelty, however, it cannot, by itself, answer in the affirmative on questions on when, how, or why, which are questions that the RtoP doctrine tries to answer.

Notwithstanding, if Shklar's liberalism of fear cannot help us solve moral conflicts by advising on what we *ought* to do, and hence, cannot be used as a theory to legitimize or justify certain international doctrines in occurrences of cruelty and brutality, what would such a theory contribute with to international political theory?

4.4.   The Purpose of International Political Theory

In this final part of the analysis, I will try, using my earlier analysis, to summarize more specifically how Shklar's liberalism of fear can be understood in the context of international relations, and in more direct ways explore whether it can be regarded as an affirmative alternative to other theories in international political thought. First, we should explore the relationship between skepticism and liberalism to see how a skeptical theory can accommodate ethical confidence.

4.4.1.   Skepticism and Liberalism

A reoccurring concern when engaging in skeptical thought is the question of how we can stand firmly in our moral convictions and political beliefs in the shadow of skepticism and its friend ideological self-consciousness. What is a belief in liberalism when we no longer have foundational normative principles to base it on? Giunia Gatta, develops in her book *Rethinking Liberalism for the 21ˢᵗ Century* (2018) a view of the liberalism of fear as 'Agnostic Liberalism', as she writes that 'Shklar remained agnostic about the general and theoretical validation of her liberalism, and on its grounding' and that ''putting cruelty first', does not close the *agon*, but rather opens it' (114-115).

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[6] Consequently, Anker claims that 'the War on Terror' can be read as an extension of the liberalism of fear (2014: 795)

On the one hand, Gatta captures with these words an important aspect of Shklar's theory where it distinguishes itself in its content and aims as deeply skeptical. However, the claim that one endorsing Shklar's skepticism can only endorse liberalism in an 'agnostic' sense is somewhat misleading. In fact, such a reading of the liberalism of fear looks similar to Richard Rorty's non-foundational 'ironic' liberalism. However, it will be argued that one should not see it necessary to be liberal only in an ironical sense as a consequence of one's skeptical philosophy. To see why that is, one should explore Richard Rorty's engagement with Shklar's liberalism of fear.

Rorty argued that theorists must take an ironical stance toward their political aspirations in their intellectual pursuit. Rights and wrongs are hence determined by 'pragmatic standards of usefulness' nested in a 'vocabulary' that effectively orders and manipulates the world (Sagar, 2016:375). Consequently, political aspiration cannot be justified intellectually. However, in our practical lives, we suspend this irony and support a liberalism of fear to suspend cruelty and suffering. Rorty engages with Shklar's thought in his most famous work, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989: xv) when he claims that liberals are those who deem cruelty as the worst sin.

The point where Rorty differs from Shklar is in his view that liberal ironism should accept that morals and political commitments stem from their 'historically conditioned community' (1983:584). One implication of a belief in the 'inescapability of ideology' is that any attempt to try to find some position outside 'one's basic commitments and preferences from which one can conclusively justify those commitments to any agent by the sheer force of reason alone' will be fruitless (Hall, 2022:28). Yet, Shklar did not derive her *summum malum* from, or validate her theory on, this kind of shared communal values that Rorty engages with. In contrast, Shklar was unconvinced by cultural relativism.

Shklar rejects the idea that the only legitimate mode of social criticism involves the articulation of 'social immanent values' (1989:34). Instead, she argues that the 'the absolute relativism, not merely cultural but psychological, that rejects the liberalism of fear as both too 'Western' and too abstract is too complacent and too ready to forget the horrors of our world to be credible' (ibid). For Shklar, realizing this is not only necessary to take seriously the victims of the world but also because 'only the challenge from nowhere and the claims of universal humanity and rational argument cast in general terms can be put to the test of general scrutiny and public criticism' (ibid). In other words, allowing for 'open and public review' of traditional practices is the only way to allow for responsible choices to be made, and control authorities who claim to speak for a people they keep in chains (ibid:35). The danger lies not only in authorities who have the power to speak about a 'hidden soul' but when this is done in a manner that is not 'subject to extra tribal review' and hence, 'the arrogance of the prophet and the bard

who pronounce the embedded norms is far greater than that of any deontologist' (ibid). In this light, Rorty's escape to cultural relativism seems 'ideological in the pejorative sense because it serves to obfuscate disquieting facts about the cruelties that our societies have always inflicted – and still do' (Hall, 2022:29).

Consequently, Gatta's reading of the liberalism of fear as a form of 'agnostic' liberalism seems questionable. In fact, it reveals a continued reliance on philosophical foundationalism, even if not a conscious one. The premise that we cannot hold our political beliefs with true sincerity, that is that we can only perceive them as 'agnostic' or 'ironic' once we realize that there are no objective foundations on which they can rest, has not fully accepted the realities of a disenchanted world. If one truly accepts that 'in questions of value there is no absolute point of view, no point of view of the universe, but only our particular human point of view' (Sagar, 2016:375-76) one should not feel uneasy about Shklar's genuine commitment to liberalism, and, of course, neither one's own.

Shklar puts forward a strong case for why we should put cruelty first, based on learnings from our political realities and the history of human brutality. However, the pain and suffering generated by state perpetual cruelty, which arguably liberals would be inclined to sympathize with, 'are not ideological inventions. They are part of the historical record' (Hall, 2022:32). Hence, the principle of 'putting cruelty first' may be 'ideologically inflicted', however, the point is that all feasible political theories must reflect on to what extent we can put our hopes in the good intentions of state power (ibid). Consequently, in the eyes of the liberalism of fear, some political doctrines are more in line with our political realities than others.

With this in mind, we also want to question Nicholas Rengger's critique of what he calls 'dystopic liberalism', a label under which he includes Judith Shklar, Isaiah Berlin, Raymond Aron, and Stanley Hoffman. According to Rennger the dystopic liberal project in international relations attempts to:

> navigate between the Scylla of universalism (whether liberal or of other
> kinds) and the Charybdis of a realism that is William's 'pessimism become
> cynicism' come to life and all the while to retain the central element of the
> liberalism of fear in place (2013:61, referencing Williams, 2008)

Rennger concludes that we cannot 'tame realism without betraying liberalism' and that the liberalism of fear, or any other 'skeptical, anti-perfectionist political philosophy….must be skeptical firstly, and only secondarily liberal, in part simply because of the ubiquity and

multifaceted character of liberalism' (2013:65). However, when we come to see that one's skeptical philosophical dispositions need not undermine one's moral and political commitments, we should understand that while a theory might need to be skeptical first and liberal second, Shklar most likely was not. Neither should any academic engaging in political theory be. If one shares Shklar's skeptical philosophy, one should feel comfortable claiming that we are humans first and theorists second, and consequently, that we are liberals first and skeptics second. Ergo, skepticism and liberalism are not fundamentally incompatible, and one can surely be a skeptic without betraying liberalism.

Seeing how Shklar's theory can be both sufficiently sceptic and liberal one question remains, what can a liberalism of fear, and its unique skeptical character, offer us in terms doing international political theory, and, accordingly, what limitations does it see necessary we accept when engaging in international political theory?

4.4.2. The Limits of International Political Theory

As argued in the previous section on how we can make sense of the RtoP using the liberalism of fear, Shklar's theory cannot by itself justify and legitimize humanitarian intervention in the form of international doctrines such as the RtoP. When we think about this, having in mind that the absolute political priority of the liberalism of fear is to protect individuals from gross cruelty and that the *summum malum* knows no national borders, the liberalism of fear seems to promise more than it can deliver. It allows for compassion for those who suffer. Still, in practice, it cannot offer any guidance on what is to be done.

However, be that as it may, the purpose of a liberalism of fear in an international context is to urge us to *think* more explicitly about those who suffer. In this sense, Shklar's theory is normative in that it suggests that we *ought* to focus more on those instances where people live in extreme fear. Hence there is a distinct difference between the normativity of Shklar's thought and the normativity of say, a cosmopolitan theory. As clarified by Stullerova, Shklar suggests an international norm where we focus our attention on humans who suffer from cruelty beyond our own political communities, and action in accordance is encompassed in this norm (2019:80). However, the norm does not provide any guidance on what needs to be done or how. The answers to these questions will simply vary depending on every unique case.

In other words, Shklar's thought will never suggest what we ought to *do*, only how we ought to *think*. We arrive at this specific way of theorizing about international politics since the liberalism of fear is ultimately based on a negative approach to justice, that is 'putting cruelty first'. The negative approach wants our attention to be focused on the problems associated with

the effects of coercive authority rather than those problems associated with 'making it justifiable to free people' (Yack, 2017:117). Hence it allows us to realize the realities of international politics, without 'approving or justifying this reality' (Stullerova, 2019:80). However, it is still not clear how Shklar's reconstructed international political thought, based on her ethical principle of 'putting cruelty first', can operate as an *alternative* to other theories in international political thought. To see how it can do this we have to look closer at Shklar's view of the sphere of politics, law, and morality.

Shklar criticizes analytical positivism on the basis that it, in its attempt to treat laws and morals as two different spheres, fails to see its own ideological motivations (Shklar, 1986 [1964]:34-35). Likewise, natural law theorists, while not as eager to make moral claims, still assume that if we govern with correct rules, arrived at from an objective understanding of a common good, then the practice of law can escape 'the normal conflicts of pluralistic society' (ibid:38). According to Shklar, this way of thinking stems from a want to make social diversity and conflicting opinions go away, by pretending they do not exist (ibid:122-123). Hence, these practices turn into ideologies of agreement. Shklar's point goes back to the mistaken separation between morality and law, as well as law and politics. Laws cannot be thought of as 'simply there', instead they are types 'of political action' and 'like any other form of political belief and behavior it is a matter of degrees, of more or less, and of nuances' (ibid:143).

Seeing how both human rights doctrines and doctrines on humanitarian intervention are commonly perceived as belonging to the realm of international law, they tend to express some form of 'human rights legalism' (Stullerova, 2019:81). Hence, following Shklar, the purpose of international political theory is to de-ideologize 'human rights and humanitarian intervention without denigrating their value' (ibid:81), and by de-ideologizing, she means that we should try to look at them not as something given and simply there, but as political acts, which involve complexities and nuances.

Following this line of reasoning, the strength and uniqueness found in Shklar's international thought is that it allows for a dynamic 'change-bearing principle', found in her principle of 'putting cruelty first' (Stullerova, 2019: 81). In other words, Shklar's theory, in contrast to forms of legalism or natural law theories in international relations, gives us a way to reflect on our current political practices and to what extent they make sense to us, by giving us a 'highest interest'- that is cruelty 'here and now' (ibid).

In her work, *Legalism* (1986 [1964]: 28) Shklar writes that her political theory is not 'a work of discovery'. Rather it attempts to explore and reexamine, in order to adapt or reject political ideas 'by asking if they give coherent intellectual expression to our political experiences'

(Hall, 2022:18). Hall (2022) presents an interesting and convincing reading of *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989) in which he argues that the essay was most likely written with a certain audience in mind, namely liberals of different strands. Shklar writes in the beginning of *The Liberalism of Fear* (1989) that all strands of liberalism should, despite their differences, focus on securing the 'political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of political freedom' and hence, make sure that every adult is 'able to make as many effective decisions without fear or favor about as many aspects of his or her life as is compatible with the like freedom of every other adult' (ibid:21). This thesis follows Hall in seeing her liberalism of fear as an attempt to encourage fellow liberals to explore their beliefs and practices in consideration of ideological convictions more than an attempt to provide a philosophical justification for why they should, or should not, hold onto these beliefs and practices with confidence (Hall, 2022:22-23). According to this reading of Shklar, the liberalism of fear was never meant to persuade a non-liberal person why he or she should become a liberal. Following Shklar, such an endeavor should not be undertaken in the realm of political theory or philosophy, since it easily collapses into some form of philosophical debate on fundamental moral principles.

Instead, Shklar develops her argument on her *summum malum*, and 'putting cruelty first', as an attempt to make sense of something most liberals and humane people already feel or believe in. Interpreted in this way, we should come to see that Shklar's aim was two-folded. She attempted to encourage her fellow political theorists to focus less on processes of philosophical justifications of liberalism and turn instead towards the realities of political life and all the brutalities they contain (Yack, 2017:116). Surely some theorists will say that Shklar in this sense succumbs to some form of defeatism (Moyn, 2019; Forrester, 2019). However, if we endorse the skepticism that grounds Shklar's theory and many other realist theories in international political theory 'the accusation that this is a lamentable retreat from the 'proper' ambitions of political philosophy is instead what is most properly called into question' (Hall, 2022:25).

To make sense of ethics in Shklar's international thought I will borrow some words from her great admirer, Bernard Williams, as he writes:

> I am, at the time of mature reflection, what I have become, and my
> reflection, even if it is about my dispositions, must at the same time be
> expressive of them. I think about ethical and other goods *from* an ethical point
> of view that I have already acquired and that is part of who I am (2006:51).

If we truly appreciate the inability to cast- off our moral commitments and political preferences when doing political theory, we necessarily also come to appreciate the limits of international political theory, and once we truly realize these limits and respect them it becomes unwarranted to demand much more from Shklar's international political thought than a way to rethink and make sense of our international political practices. However, in the context of the challenges being posed to liberalism in the international arena, this contribution by Shklar, through her theory, the liberalism of fear, should not be underestimated. At the time of writing, a strikingly great amount of people live under constant threats from their governments as a consequence of their sexuality, ethnicity, religion, gender, political opinion, or disability, and every day someone is killed for challenging these authorities and their oppressive tactics. The liberalism of fear should act as a constant reminder to never deprioritize the victims of torture, oppression, abuse, and war in the name of higher political aims.

5.   Summary and Conclusions

This essay has considered Shklar's liberalism of fear in the realm of international political theory. Hence, it has engaged both with the broader discussion on realism and liberalism in international relations theory, and the secondary literature on Shklar. This thesis has argued that Shklar's liberalism of fear concerns questions on ethics beyond state borders, as her *summmum malum* adds a cosmopolitan element to her theory. Hence, her theory has a particular international dimension. Further, it has been argued that through a persistent commitment to skepticism, Shklar's theory distinguishes itself from other international relations realism and mainstream theories on liberalism, resulting in a theory that is both skeptical and liberal. Furthermore, by examining an attempt to make sense of the RtoP using Shklar's liberalism of fear, we have come to see that Shklar's theory cannot be normatively affirmative in the sense most international political theories are. Consequently, it has been argued that Shklar's political theory urges us to consider the limits of, and hence, rediscover the purpose of, international political theory.

We should now look at my first research question: *How can Shklar's theory be both liberal and realist (i.e. how can it foster ethical confidence without compromising on its skeptical demands)?* This analysis has shown that Shklar's theory can be both sufficiently liberal and realist as it takes seriously the inescapability of uncertainty in philosophical thinking and consequently, restructures the relationship between ethical confidence and normative foundationalist thinking. Her theory is,

rather than philosophically grounded, grounded in historical sensitivity and an appreciation of political realities and the victims they inhabit.

Hence, we look at the second question: *How can Shklar's Liberalism of Fear be considered as a 'coherent affirmative alternative' to the international political theories (realist or idealist) she criticizes?* The second part of the analysis focused on how Shklar's theory can be thought of as affirmative. The analysis has shown that Shklar's theory cannot be considered affirmative in advising on what *ought* to be done in normative questions in international relations. Shklar's skepticism, and following humility, instead urge us to think carefully about the extent to which international political theory can answer these questions. Yet, the liberalism of fear encourages us to reevaluate our beliefs and values in the context of new emerging realities. As such, her *summum malum*, while not applicable as a generalizable principle in international relations, gives us a reference point when thinking about justice in international relations and reminds us that cruelty and injustice remain in all parts of the world.

The value of Shklar's theory is in this sense two folded; it gives us new ways of thinking about liberalism and the universal/cosmopolitan aspects of a liberal ideology, while also cautioning us about the fragility of life as we know it in liberal democracies. Hence, the liberalism of fear is much more than a critique of overly idealist theorizing. It gives us insights into how we can do purposeful international political theory, and most importantly, it makes sense of liberalism and liberal values without escaping to foundationalist ethics or cultural relativity.

Yet, one cannot deny that Shklar's thought, as it turns typical normative political theorizing on its head, draws conclusions that will leave some, more confident with positivist theorizing, unconvinced. While she is far from alone in her concerns about political theory being estranged from the real world, her theories are, undoubtedly, unconventional. Yet, regarding liberalism, her insights are, arguably, needed more now than ever.

This thesis argues that Shklar's liberalism of fear has something valuable to say regarding the ongoing liberal crisis, and consequently, on the research problem of this thesis, that is how liberalism can encourage pluralism, while also acknowledging that this pluralism needs to be liberal enough to not become a threat to liberal values. As argued by some belonging to both the poststructuralist tradition as well as the realist tradition, an over-reliance on idealism and moralism in international relations is not only unfruitful but can also be considered harmful when considering the possibilities for, and fragility of, international relations to start with[7]. The existence of a political international society, which is the premise for international relations to exist, requires both value and analytical pluralism. This is not an ideological statement; it is rather

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[7] See for example (with different emphases) Mouffe (2013), Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2001), Morgethau (1967).

an empirical observation about international society that very few supporting the existence of an international society, consisting of independent states, would reasonably question.

History tells us that whishing differences away rarely leads to peaceful agreements. In other words, moralistic international doctrines are seemingly bad diplomatic tools, and consequently, liberal peace theory, and its universalist principles, have been targeted in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s (see for example Dodge, 2013). When attempting to find confidence in liberal progressive international endeavors, facing these realities, Shklar's liberalism of fear makes things just as complicated as they need to be. In other words, that the liberalism of fear gives us little assurance and clarity, compared to rivaling theories, is exactly what makes it worth considering. Especially when reminded that dominant liberal international theory rarely engages in the epistemic questions necessary to start a serious discussion on analytical pluralism (Sterling-Folker, 2015:41). Hence, we should not forget that in international political theory, skepticism, and the possibilities for tolerance and pluralism it allows, are in the minority. Thus, the endeavor of this thesis involves less providing an alternative, as simply trying to encourage a discussion students in international relations rarely encounter.

The most prominent limitation of this thesis connects directly to its purpose, as this thesis attempts modest political theory and ideological self-consciousness. This thesis has argued, following Shklar, that political theory should be considered less action-guiding and more as a sense-making process. Consequently, this thesis has not reached any normatively guiding conclusions but has rather contributed to new ways of thinking about liberalism in international relations, appreciating the changing realities of international society.

Additionally, due to limited time and scope of the project, this thesis has only considered traditional Western works of theory. It is arguably the case that by broadening one's perspective to include non-Western theories on for instance nationalism and cosmopolitanism, one realizes that epistemic skepticism and analytical pluralism is a feature of much political theory not as heavily influenced by Western positivist theoretical trends. These have unfortunately been overlooked in this thesis.[8]

In terms of Shklar's work, there is surely more to be explored. Suggestions for further research include exploring the temporal dimension of Shklar's liberalism of fear and democratic memory. As Shklar's theory is premised on a remembering and appreciation of our societal past

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[8] An example could be the thought of Rabindranath Tagore, especially his work *Nationalism: All the Great Nations of Europe have their Victims in other Parts of the World* (1917). As Tagore was less occupied with solving the amoralist challenge put forward by Scottish enlightenment thinkers, his works show a different way of doing political theory which he shares with several non-western political theorists.

it tells us that when memory is suppressed or manipulated, liberalism becomes jeopardized. Hence, further research could include exploring democratic deliberation and how it connects to a liberalism of fear, as for instance done by Sihang Lou in his *The Liberalism of Fear in China: Hu Ping and the Uses of Fear and Memory in Contemporary Chinese Liberalism* (2023). Also, it would be interesting to further explore the relationship between a state of war and the liberalism of fear, as has been touched upon by Dikovich (2023) in his article on the Ukraine war and the pathic condition. There is certainly much more to be explored in terms of questions on how war reshapes our memory and limits democratic deliberation.

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