

The satiric vision of politics: Ethics, interests and disorders

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Ian Hall

Australian National University, Australia

Abstract

In *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (Lebow, 2003), Richard Ned Lebow argues that a ‘tragic understanding of the political’ provides the best ontological and epistemological foundations for a theory of International Relations. This article challenges that claim. It argues that other literary modes of representing social life can offer equally strong bases for international theories. To that end, it examines the ‘satirical vision of politics’ with reference to satirists as diverse as Aristophanes and Erasmus. It concludes that satire can provide just as good a form of political education as tragedy and just as robust a foundation for the kind of theory Lebow prefers.

Keywords

International Relations theory, political realism, satire, tragedy

wisdom requires a sense of proportion, which is only another word for a sense of humour.
(Georg Schwarzenberger, 1948: 313).

Introduction

In *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (Lebow, 2003), Richard Ned Lebow calls attention to what we might call — after Hayden White — the ‘deep structure’ of the narratives that underpin International Relations (IR) theory (White, 1975: ix). Lebow’s concern is to examine the structures of the various stories that inform political realism, in particular. Realism, he argues, is a powerful theory in analytical terms, but presently flawed by its apparent incapacity to ‘adjudicate between competing claims of ethics and security’ (2003: 15). Lebow argues that this problem can be resolved if realists stopped attempting

Corresponding author:

Ian Hall, Department of International Relations, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, Hedley Bull Centre, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia.

Email: ian.hall@anu.edu.au

to render their theories into sets of empirically falsifiable propositions and instead re-grounded their thinking in a 'tragic vision' of the political. Tragedy, he claims, provides us with a representation of politics that best conveys the realities of political life, especially in international relations. As such, the 'tragic vision of politics' provides both a superior form of moral and political education and a proper basis on which to build a better theory of international relations than those we already have (Lebow, 2003: 364).

Lebow is not alone in advancing these arguments for a 'tragic vision' nor is he the only international theorist to take literature seriously as a mode of theorizing.¹ In the 1940s and 1950s, many classical realists utilized the concept of tragedy in their work (Butterfield, 1950; Morgenthau, 1946; Niebuhr, 1938; Smith, 1995; Spirtas, 1996; Thompson, 1960; Thompson and Myers, 1977). A thin notion of tragedy may be located too in later realist texts (Bacevich, 2008; Mearsheimer, 2002), and a more substantive one can be found in contemporary normative theory in IR that is sympathetic to classical realism (Beardsworth, 2008; Brown, 2007; Mayall, 2003; Rengger, 2005). In the main, however, the 'tragic vision of politics' has been subjected to the most extensive examination in political theory and in classics (Carter, 2007; Croally, 1994; Euben, 1986, 1990, 1997, 2007; Gregory, 1991).

In its strongest form, the 'tragic vision' implies that political life, and indeed human existence itself, is in some essential way intrinsically tragic. Life is tragic, according to the vision, either because human beings are flawed, and thus unable always to do the right thing by ourselves and others, or because we are doomed to exist in a predicament in which it is impossible always to do good. Life is tragic, in other words, because we are predisposed in some way to fail to achieve our ideals, no matter how good our intentions might be.² In its weaker form, the 'tragic vision' merely argues that tragedy, as a form of art, best *represents* the nature of political life (which may or may not be intrinsically tragic), especially for the purposes of political education. To use Hans J. Morgenthau's terms, on the first understanding, tragedy is a 'quality of existence'; whereas on the second, it is merely a 'creation of art' designed to convey a moral or lesson (quoted in Lebow, 2003: 308).

Lebow's case for a tragic vision is a powerful one, blending — as we shall see — both understandings of the 'tragic vision', but it raises a number of important questions for international theorists. Most obviously, it asks whether a realism grounded in tragedy is indeed the best kind of international theory — a question that has already been addressed in a series of responses to Lebow's book (Brown, 2007; Rengger, 2005; Williams, 2005). Less obviously, it also asks two further questions. The first is whether other forms of fictional representation and other literary genres — comedy, for example, romance, or satire — also have lessons which political and international theorists might learn.³ What, moreover, might these lessons be? Is it the case, for example, that while tragedy teaches realist lessons, romance teaches liberal or radical ones? Or might realist concepts be equally well conveyed by comedy? Secondly — and more broadly — Lebow's 'tragic vision' poses one further problem, namely, the proper relationship between scholarly social-scientific theory and literary fiction. While Lebow argues that tragedy is a good teacher of realism, he does not spell out the implications of this argument for scholars themselves. Ought we, as academic students of IR, write tragedies? And in what form — as plays or novels or television programmes?

None of the existing responses to Lebow's book address these questions, so this article aims to take up that challenge. It argues that tragedy is not the only literary genre capable of providing a valuable political education and grounding the best kind of international theory. It suggests instead that others — notably satire — are at least as good, if not better. Satire is an arguably less obtuse and more palatable mode of conveying ideas for moralists with political intentions and, partly for that reason, political satire is far more common in Western and (arguably) non-Western literature than overtly political tragedies. But while satire is a potent mode of political education, this article also argues that it is not one in which academic students of IR can easily engage. While satirical representations of international relations could be studied by scholars, it is less clear that they could or ought to be written by theorists. To use Whitley's (2000) phrase, the 'intellectual and social organization' of IR militates against the writing of literature rather than academic articles or monographs. For this reason, this article concludes, any attempt to ground an international theory in a literary genre faces greater obstacles than Lebow allows.

What follows is in five parts. The first part looks more closely at Lebow's attempt to sketch out the tragic vision and its relationship to realism. The second outlines what satire is and what it can do in a political context. The third part illustrates the uses of satire as a means of analysing international relations and advancing an international theory. The fourth part examines how satire works as a mode of political education — specifically, how it appeals to an audience to encourage their disapprobation of the behaviours being satirized and their approbation of the satirist's moral rules. The fifth part explores the possibility of a 'satiric vision of politics' comparable to Lebow's tragic vision — an international theory grounded in a satiric account of political life.

In the conclusion, I argue that satire may offer a superior form of political education to tragedy, but that recognizing this point places international theorists in a difficult position. To utilize satire and participate in political education through satirizing political practice may place theorists beyond the bounds of accepted conventions for scholarship, but to not engage with satire leaves them as mere spectators to both international relations and fictional representations of international relations.

Tragedy and the tragic vision

For Lebow, tragedy offers the best means to gain a fuller understanding of 'power and influence, the relationships between interests and justice, agency and structure, domestic and international politics, and the importance of community for domestic and international order' (2003: 40). To do this, international theorists must accept the tragic nature of the 'human condition' and limit their analytical and political ambitions (Lebow, 2005: 329). 'Greek tragedy', Lebow argues:

was based on the empirical observation that there is no relationship between justice and suffering. It advanced a counterintuitive thesis: that efforts to limit suffering through the accumulation of knowledge or power might invite more suffering. Tragedy confronts us with our frailties and limits, and the disastrous consequences of trying to exceed them. [Sophocles'] *Antigone* explores the limits of power, and [his] *Oedipus Tyrannus* those of reason. All tragedies

remind us of our mortality and how it differentiates us from the gods. ... Tragedy encourages us to develop and use our analytical faculties, but to be equally attentive to our imagination and feelings, to balance inference with prophecy and to recognize that the world is full of contradictions that we cannot resolve. (2003: 20)

The tragic vision, in other words, in more than just a vision or a mere creation of art: it is an ontology, epistemology and moral compass all in one.

Lebow does not, however, abandon tragic art altogether. He thinks Athenian and Shakespearean tragic plays have served in the past as vehicles of political education and continue to offer valuable insights into the human condition. Like Aristotle — but unlike Plato — and like the German Idealists he maintains that art can impart knowledge (Lebow, 2003: 43–47). Lebow recognizes, of course, that these art forms and the tragic genre itself have not been perennially popular — rather, they flourish only at particular moments in Western history when old norms and practices are being challenged by new ones. In such periods of what Lebow calls ‘modernization’, tragic art, philosophy and political theory come to the fore to explain the sources and implications of these social disruptions (2003: 25).

What, then, do they teach — particularly about international relations? Above all, they teach one to ‘know one’s limits’. This is the ‘starting point for our reflection about our relationships with the wider world’ (Lebow, 2003: 309). From this insight evolve both practical ‘strategies for reconstituting or renegotiating order’ and a re-grounded classical realist theory (Lebow, 2003: 258). Shaped by this tragic vision, the wise political practitioner will recognize that all politics, not just international relations, is driven by the *animus dominandi*, that alliances both enable and constrain, that honour motivates as well as greed and fear, and that the national interest must be formulated in terms of a deeper understanding of power than just a material measure (Lebow, 2003: 258–284). With this in mind, they should confront modernization by trying to reconcile the old and the new, aiming to restore lasting and legitimate order without recourse to excessive force or hubristic rationalism (Lebow, 2003: 284–304). Beyond that, however, tragically based classical realism offers no policy prescriptions, reflecting Morgenthau’s historicist conviction that all political situations are too different from each other to permit the formulation of any general rules or laws of politics.

The tragic vision thus speaks to practitioners, but it also teaches theorists how to think. Theorists must start, Lebow argues, with ‘an ontology that builds on the polarities of life that are problematized by Greek tragedies and Thucydides’ (2003: 360). We must discard the Enlightenment fiction that human beings are ‘egoistic, autonomous actors’ and accept that they live in communities, where conflict is the exception rather than the norm (Lebow, 2003: 360, 366–379). For Lebow, ‘[s]ocial theories must represent, not suppress, the diversity and inherent instability of human identities, interests and motives, and their complex interactions with the discourses, social practices and institutions they generate and sustain’ (2003: 374). And tragedy also provides us with a theory of knowledge. Lebow argues:

Tragedy suggests, and classical realists affirm, that all knowledge is local, temporally bound and quickly negated because of the feedback loop between *logos* and *erga*. Such understandings,

moreover, should never be confused with wisdom, which represents a holistic understanding of the human condition and the possible ends of human life. (2003: 360)

This ‘holistic understanding’, he thinks, must blend abstract theory and practical knowledge together into a higher wisdom.

How might this be conveyed to a concerned audience of practitioners, citizens and scholars? Lebow argues that ‘epics, plays, dialogues and histories’ must once again take their place alongside social-scientific theory as proper means to ‘communicate abstract knowledge’. He asserts:

The tragic vision would lead us to understand narrative and more scientific forms of presentation, and ideographic and nomothetic approaches, as capturing another tension, in this case in the production of knowledge. Each form of inquiry and expression makes us aware of the limits of the other, and, together, might prompt deeper insights than either can produce alone. Inquiry and praxis and art and science might also be understood as components of an underlying unity of the sort that guides practice and sustains communities and identities. (2003: 380)

We must take seriously, in other words, not just tragedy-as-ontology, but also tragedy-as-art, because art is capable of penetrating to the ontological in a way that social science is not. This belief justifies, for Lebow, his use of a fictional short-story — ‘Nixon in Hell’ — to open his book, as well as his liberal use of ideas from Sophocles, Aeschylus, Shakespeare and others in the remainder of the text.

Crucially, however, this argument does not just create a space for the discussion of only tragic art by international theorists. It also opens the door to other genres or literary forms, like romantic drama or poetry. Admittedly, Lebow is explicitly dismissive of comedy, associating it with what he takes to be the distinctive mode of history favoured by the ‘Enlightenment project’ (2003: 375).⁴ But his overall argument offers no obvious reason why — if art can indeed make a contribution to our wider understanding of politics or international relations — other kinds of art should not be discussed. Certainly, this seems to have been the ancient Greek view, which was that the ‘central aim’ of all art is, as Lowes Dickinson observed, to represent the ‘human character and human ideals’ (Lowes Dickinson, 1947: 213). For them, all art thus had ‘moral content’ (Lowes Dickinson, 1947: 214) of direct bearing on social and political life.

With all of this in mind, I argue in what follows that at least one genre, satire, is just as capable of grounding a *realistic* — if not perhaps a ‘realist’ — vision of politics that fulfils Lebow’s objective of reconciling the demands of ethics to interests.

What is satire?

Satire is a moral art ‘intended to attack vice and folly’, using ‘wit and ridicule’ as its principal weapons (Griffin, 1994: 1). The Western satirical tradition can be traced back to the Greeks, to the satires of Aristophanes and Euripides, and includes substantive contributions from the Roman poet Horace, medieval writers like Chaucer, as well as great modern satirists like Miguel de Cervantes, Alexander Pope, François Rabelais or Jonathon Swift. Satire is also a significant feature of non-Western cultural and literary traditions,

including those of China, India and the Islamic world (Ball, 2003; Feinberg, 1971; Freedman, 2009). A number of important political novels written by non-Western authors, including Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Fatal Eggs* (1925), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) or Chan Koonchung's *The Fat Years* (2011), are satirical by design. Satire may not be a universal trait, but it is more than a purely Western invention. As John Dryden famously observed in his *Discourse concerning Satire*, 'Scoffs and Revilings are of the growth of all Nations' (Dryden, 1693).

Satire tries to balance the fictional and the real in order to amuse and to educate in more or less equal measure. 'Like polemical rhetoric', Griffin argues:

it seeks to persuade an audience that something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous; unlike pure rhetoric, it engages in exaggeration and some sort of fiction. But satire does not forsake the 'real world' entirely. Its victims come from that world, and it is this fact (together with the darker or sharper tone) that separates satire from pure comedy. Finally, satire usually proceeds by means of clear reference to some moral standards or purposes. (1994: 1)

Satire is not limited to any particular literary form, though in the modern world it appears most often in the novel, on television and in film. Indeed, as Griffin notes, satire is marked by its variety. It can be embodied in an 'epistle, letter from the country, lampoon, epigram, session of the poets, advice to a painter — to say nothing of parodic forms'; it can take the form of a 'fantastic voyage' or a 'dialogue of the dead' or a 'learned anatomy' (Griffin, 1994: 3).

In general, satire tends to make substantial use of irony, of saying the opposite of what the author and the audience know is (or ought to be) the case, in order to draw attention to an inconsistency or contradiction.⁵ Perhaps the most dramatic example of the satirical use of irony is Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' (1729), a feigned treatise arguing that the diet of the Irish should be supplemented by requiring them to eat their own children. Swift used irony to provoke his readers' horror and emphasize his underlying message — by making such a palpably callous and immoral argument, he highlights more clearly the injustice of the everyday condition of the people and the thinking that perpetuates it (Wittkowsky, 1943).

None of this should be taken to suggest that satire can be reduced to irony. As Northrop Frye argued, satire is a particular form of irony, which he termed 'militant irony', underpinned by clear 'moral norms' and 'standards' (1973 [1957]: 223). Satire is indeed distinguished by the moral purpose or intention of the satirist. The satirist is moved to satirize in order to draw attention to vice or folly and — sometimes, but not always — to try thereby to correct it.⁶ The satirist is convinced that, as Dryden put it:

'Tis an Action of Virtue to make Examples of vicious Men. They may and ought to be upbraided with their Crimes and Follies: Both for their own amendment, if they are not yet incorrigible; and for the Terrour [sic] of others, to hinder them from falling into those Enormities, which they see are so severely punish'd [by the satirist], in the Persons of others. (Dryden, 1693: 10)

But rather than merely exposing and denouncing vice or folly, as one might in a simple indictment, the satirist mocks the particular vice or folly for comic purpose, seeking to educate through laughter or at least through playfulness (Feinberg, 2006 [1964]: 7).

The satirist does these things in the belief that this kind of political and moral education works better than the alternatives. Erasmus justified his satirical *Praise of Folly* (1511) in exactly these terms, writing to his friend Maarten van Dorp that these advantages of satire as opposed to other literary forms were:

well understood by the famous sages of antiquity who chose to present the most salutary counsel for life in the form of amusing and apparently childish fables, because truth can seem harsh if unadorned, but with something pleasurable to recommend it can penetrate more easily the minds of mortals. No doubt this is the honey which doctors in Lucretius smear on the rim of a cup of wormwood which they prescribe for children. And the sort of fools which princes of earlier times introduced into their courts were there for the express purpose of exposing and thereby correcting certain minor faults through their frank speech which offended no one. (Erasmus, 1994 [1515]: 141)

This understanding of the function of satire is echoed by many other satirists, from the Juvenal, who claimed he was moved to write his *Satires* by the contemporary corruption of Rome (Juvenal, 1999), to Jonathan Swift, who argued that satire was ‘with a moral view design’d / to cure the vices of mankind’ (quoted in Griffin, 1994: 26).

The moral object of satire does not, however, tie it to a particular political ideology in the way that Lebow argues tragedy is tied to political realism. Satire can be used by authors of varying political beliefs (Griffin, 1994: 149–160), giving credence to the suggestion that whilst people of different political views may prefer different kinds of jokes, no one political ideology has a monopoly on humour (Wilson, 1990). There are conservative satirists, like Horace, Erasmus, Swift or Evelyn Waugh, who aim to recall their audience to traditional values, and more radical satirists, like Lucian, Joseph Heller, Margaret Atwood or Will Self, who call attention to the hypocrisy of elites that preach one thing and practice another.⁷ Satire can be intended either to sustain or to subvert the ‘dominant social order’ (Griffin, 1994: 2). Satirists often display scepticism or detachment, but this is generally kept in tension with adherence to some set of moral norms or political principles to prevent it from collapsing into cynicism or nihilism — an issue discussed in more detail below.

The satiric vision of politics

International relations have been the subject of a number of notable satires, like Hugh Thomas’s darkly comic portrayal of the British Foreign Office in *The World’s Game* (1957), Graham Greene’s *Our Man in Havana* (1958), which poked fun at contemporary practices of espionage, Stanley Kubrick’s movie *Dr Strangelove* (1964), which ridiculed the absurdities of the wilder fringes of nuclear strategy, or indeed Tom Lehrer’s songs of nuclear war. The subject has given rise to a number of utopian or dystopian novels that are partly satirical, such as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which satirizes political realism, among other things (see Hall, 2007), or Chan Koonchung’s *The Fat Years* (2011), which satirizes what purports to be the Chinese elite’s vision of a new world order. There are also many works of science fiction that contain satirical treatments of war and international relations, including Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*

(1969) and Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). For all of these writers, the genre offers a potent means of political education akin to that Lebow posits for tragedies. But, like Lebow's study, they raise a number of questions about the relationship between literary genres and political theories, as well as about the respective virtues of tragedy and satire as modes of transmitting political ideas.

In the *Tragic Vision of Politics*, Lebow argues that tragedy has a direct relationship with a certain kind of political thinking and — by extension — political practice. Like Peter Euben and many others, Lebow maintains that ancient Greek tragedy was written, performed and understood as a mode of political education. For Euben, tragedy was a 'political institution' in Athens 'analogous to the Assembly and the Council' and a 'democratizing institution' that 'maintained a cultural equality that helped constitute and legitimate political equality' (1997: 73). Lebow also posits that a strong connection existed between tragic drama and Athenian politics, seeing tragedy as a response to modernization that allowed the Athenians to transmit old values into a new world and to convey ethical lessons (2003: 24–25, 361, 363). He also thinks:

Although culturally bound in form and language, tragedies have universal import. They are [as] relevant today as they were to fifth-century Athenians because we also live in a transitional era where old and new values are often in conflict in our minds, in our society and increasingly in the world at large due to the spread of Western cultural and economic practices. (2003: 363)

For Lebow, then, tragedies were a core component of ancient Athenian social life and a key element in political education in that polity, and they ought to play a similar role in the contemporary world.

There are, however, three problems with this case. First, the role of tragedy in ancient Greek political life is arguably not as clear as Lebow or Euben suggest — indeed, among classicists it is a 'hotly debated' issue (Carter, 2007: 21). While a number of classicists do maintain that there was a close connection between tragedy and Greek democracy — specifically that tragedy fostered and maintained democratic values (e.g. Goldhill, 1987, 2000; Maier, 1993; Seaford, 1994) — many others dissent from this view. Jasper Griffin, for example, argues that the fact that the 'heyday of Attic tragedy' occurred at the same time as the point at which Athens had a democratic government may just be coincidental (Griffin, 1998: 47). Carter agrees, arguing that '[t]he natural political home of tragedy ... [is] heroic monarchy', not democracy. Far from there being some kind of determinative relationship between tragedy and democracy, the refinement of Attic tragedy at a particular moment of Athenian history might be a function of something else, such as changing religious beliefs or just a need for novel entertainment.⁸ For Plato, indeed, the appeal of tragedies to Athenians indicated an excess of sentimentality in their society, rather than any specific political need for that particular dramatic genre (quoted in Griffin, 1998: 55; see also Plato, 1987: 373–374).

Second, classicists are divided too as to what — if any — political lessons Athenian tragedies actually teach. As Carter insists, much depends on one's definition of the 'political' (2007: 65–73). If it is defined broadly, as anything that concerns the organization of human communities, then tragedies can be read as political. But if the political is deemed

to refer only to the management of the affairs of the *polis*, then many classicists argue that Attic tragedy has very little to say on this subject, and that which is said is said only obliquely (Griffin, 1998: 49). There are, to be blunt, far easier and more accessible ways of saying what some have interpreted the tragedies to say. Similarly, there are much simpler forms of political education, as Pericles demonstrated in the Funeral Oration, Socrates showed in philosophical dialogue or Aristotle did in reasoned treatises. Even Athenians, in other words, did not think it necessary to resort to tragic drama every time they wished to convey a political message to a wider audience (see especially Aristotle, 1991).

Third, Attic tragedies were not performed to Athenian audiences in isolation. They were performed as parts of wider festivals, above all the Dionysia, which involved other things and other kinds of dramatic performances. These festivals had political elements — for example, the tribute given by Athenian allies was displayed at the Dionysia and speeches were given praising fallen heroes of the *polis* (Goldhill, 1987: 60–61). But tragedies were not the only kinds of dramatic performances presented to the audience. At the Dionysia and Lenaia festivals, comic and satirical plays were also performed. The programme commonly involved a ‘tetralogy’ by each of the three tragic poets — ‘four plays consisting of three tragedies and a more humorous satyr play, so called because it had a chorus of satyrs’ (Carter, 2007: 16) — and five comedies, as well as singing competitions. Many of these comedies also included satirical material, sometimes even singling out particular Athenians for ridicule (Carter, 2007: 23).

Unlike the tragedies, moreover, Athenian satires were far more overtly political in content and intent. Whereas there are few allegories of contemporary political events in Attic tragedy, there are a number in the comedies and satires of the time. Take, for example, Aristophanes’ *The Birds*, performed at the Dionysia the year after the Sicilian expedition had come to its disastrous end, in 415BCE. Like Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, but with a great deal more wit and economy, *The Birds* points to Athenian militarism and hubris as the causes of war. The two central characters, Euelpides and Pisthetairos — sons of ‘Athens, land of lovely — warships’ (Aristophanes, 1961: 26) — set out to found a new city and avoid the annoyances of Athens. They find the perfect place in the sky, among the birds, with whom they create ‘Cloudecuckooland’ and then challenge the Gods themselves for the sovereignty of the world.

Much of the play concerns the dishonesty of men and temptations of power — Euelpides and Pisthetairos enlist the birds by flattery and outright deception, telling them they were once the kings of men and even the ‘primal lords of Creation’ (Aristophanes, 1961: 52). They persuade the birds to build city walls and then to:

reclaim your sceptre from Zeus.

If he shilly-shallies or fobs you off with a lot of excuses,

proclaim a Holy War, a Great Crusade against the gods. (Aristophanes, 1961: 57)

As a first step, the birds demand that human beings worship them in place of the gods, promising — as the Athenians did to their subject-allies, if Pericles is to be believed (Thucydides, 1974) — better government than anyone else can offer:

Unlike our smug opponent, Zeus,
 we'll stop corruption and abuse.
 NO ABSENTEE ADMINISTRATION!
 NO PERMANENT VACATION
 IN THE CLOUDS!
 And we promise
 to be scrupulously honest. (Aristophanes, 1961: 69)

Having thus won over human beings, the birds take on the gods, who are now desperate and impoverished for lack of sacrifices (Aristophanes, 1961: 120). The gods treat for peace with the birds, giving up Heaven in the process to the two Athenian tricksters Euelpides and Pisthetairos.

What sort of political education would an Athenian audience derive from this ironic fable? The satiric vision of *The Birds* is certainly far more accessible than contemporary 'tragic vision' and the central message is clear, as it is in Aristophanes' other comedies, including the anti-war plays *The Acharnians* and *Lysistrata*. Like most satirists, Aristophanes uses crude, bodily humour when he wants to remind his audience that, for all the airs and graces some people may affect, we are all human in the most basic ways. Even the gods are not immune from rough treatment: when Iris, daughter of Zeus, launches into a high dramatic lament, Pisthetairos responds, at least in William Arrowsmith's translation: 'Listen, lady, stow that tragic guff' (Aristophanes, 1961: 103).

The Athenians are portrayed not as the godlike paragons Pericles describes in Thucydides, but as restless, frequently dishonest and greedy, and Aristophanes goes out of his way to lampoon particular stock characters of Athens — the pompous priest, the pretentious poet, the portentous fake prophet, the officious but corrupt military officer, and the legislator with a law for every occasion (Aristophanes, 1961: 76–92). The main lesson is clear: human beings are deeply prone to folly, and folly breeds calamities like that so recently suffered by Athens in Sicily. Although the Athenian pair triumph in *The Birds*, their folly could just as easily have brought them crashing to the ground.

The 'satiric vision', in other words, appears much more readily and obviously political than the tragic. Moreover, the literary realism satire utilizes in the description of people is designed to inculcate a realistic appraisal of human nature and potential. This is intended to underpin a more measured approach to thinking about social or political issues. It does so, in Aristophanes' case as in those of Juvenal, Erasmus, Swift, Huxley or Koonchung, by encouraging us to accept what Frye calls the 'low norm'. Satire, he notes, 'takes for granted a world which is full of anomalies, injustices, follies, and crimes, and yet is permanent and undisplaceable [sic]' (Frye, 1973 [1957]: 226). The key 'principle' of the 'satiric vision' is that:

anyone who wishes to keep his balance in such a world must learn first to keep his eyes open and his mouth shut. Counsels of prudence, urging the reader in effect to adopt an *ieron* role,⁹ have been prominent in literature from Egyptian times. What is recommended is conventional

life at its best: a clairvoyant knowledge of human nature in oneself and others, and avoidance of all illusion and compulsive behaviour, a reliance on observation and timing rather than aggressiveness. This is wisdom, the tried and tested way of life.... The *eirón* of the low norm takes an attitude of flexible pragmatism. (Frye, 1973 [1957]: 226)

Together, this implies that the ‘satiric vision’ might not merely serve as a form of political education, but also as a teacher of realism in the everyday sense of the word, and thus underpin a realist theory in the way that Lebow claims that tragedy can do.

Indeed, Lebow himself gives tacit acknowledgement to the role that satire can play. He deploys satire extensively in the short story with which he opens the *Tragic Vision*, ‘Nixon in Hell’. Placing Nixon in an imagined Hell is an attempt to arrest our attention through irony — as well as through extensive use of the grotesque, in his descriptions of tortures and bed-bugs — and Lebow makes his strongest political points through satire. The story includes darkly funny observations — the Devil’s helpers, for example, update Hell to keep pace with ‘human innovation’. This includes installing IT facilities to permit virtual torture, thereby freeing ‘more assistants for administrative tasks, always a crushing burden in eras of extraordinary growth’ (Lebow, 2005: 1). To capture his character, Lebow invites us to laugh at Nixon’s folly rather than drily detail his crimes: ‘Nixon was ... unhappy about the way he was being treated in Hell. Maybe he was a sinner, although assuredly not a murderer, but he was also a VIP. Nobody had met him at the gate’ (Lebow, 2003: 5).

Deftly but inadvertently, Lebow thus demonstrates the power of satire as political education before we even get to his account of tragedy. But what does satire teach? For Lebow, as we have seen, tragedy supposedly helps us adjudicate between the ‘competing claims of ethics and security’ on the way to a more realistic realist theory. Tragedy does this, he thinks, by reminding audiences of the dangers of hubris and the inevitability of nemesis for those who overreach their bounds. Thus tragedy teaches us to be modest in our aims and make compromises to principles when their untrammelled pursuit threatens to bring the world crashing down around us, refuting the moralistic injunction *fiat justitia et pereat mundus*. But as rules of conduct, these are surely flexible and prone to abuse.

Critics have long argued that appeals to the ‘tragic’ nature of political decisions — such as those made, for example, by British advocates of appeasement like Neville Henderson, in his *Memoirs* (see Namier, 1948: 68–70, 127, n. 1) — are often cloaks designed to hide amoral reasoning or poor judgements. Claiming that a particular choice was in some way ‘tragic’ gives it not just the patina of respectability, but a sense of high drama that seeks to elevate it above the base — and neither may be warranted. As Aristotle observed in his *Poetics*, tragedy actually ‘aims at representing men ... as better than in actual life’ — unlike comedy, which represents them as ‘worse’ (Aristotle, 1997: 4).

Given these problems — and in the light of Lebow’s own satire — the satiric vision may be a preferable starting point for international theorists. Although satire can involve high drama, it uses its capacity to shock, enrage and amuse as a counterpoint to emphasize the ‘low norm’ of human behaviour, the everyday grubbiness or sordidness of social and political life. In so doing, satire can point — as it does in the work of Erasmus or de Mandeville or Orwell — to a politics that is more balanced and sanguine in its attitude to

folly. This point is made in Georg Schwarzenberger's review of Morgenthau's *Scientific Man vs Power Politics*, a book which he found excessively melodramatic precisely because of its insistence on the *tragedy* of the human condition. Morgenthau, he thought, lacked the 'sense of proportion' that comes from having a 'sense of humour'. 'If Professor Morgenthau could be inoculated with this virus', Schwarzenberger wrote, 'the tragedy entitled Misery and Grandeur of Man might become a tragi-comedy, and as such present a truer picture of the strange hybrid between God and beast, called scientific man' (1948: 313–314).

Satirical persuasion

The value of satire depends not just in what it can teach, but how it teaches.¹⁰ Like tragedy, satire appeals to emotion as well as to reason. For that reason, it also merits the attention of international theorists, who have latterly started to recognize the role that emotions play in theories and practices of international relations (see Bleiker and Hutchison, 2007; Crawford, 2000; Jeffery, 2011; Lebow, 2005; Mercer, 2006; Steele, 2010). As these works acknowledge, an account of how emotions — particularly fear — motivate people is central to both realist and liberal theories (Crawford, 2000: 120–123; cf. Lebow, 2005; Mercer, 2006). Emotional responses to events have been seen to affect perception, cognition and evaluation in political actors (Crawford, 2000: 133–145). And some theorists think emotions play a central and inescapable role, together with reason, in the moral judgements and political choices made by individual actors in international relations (Jeffery, 2011; Steele, 2010).

Both tragedies and satires of international relations highlight the role that emotions can and do play in informing theories and shaping practice. Lebow argues that '[t]ragedy and classical realism do not so much solve problems as they deepen our understanding of them by engaging our intellect and emotions' (2003: 59). It does so, he thinks, by eliciting our sympathy for the tragic hero. We might not agree with him or her (or with their choices), but we recognize that they have found themselves in a difficult predicament and that they do not necessarily understand its parameters. By playing on our sympathies in this way, using pathos, tragedy invites us to intellectual reflection on the wider meaning of the subject's story, especially on the limits of any human being's understanding of their situation and their ability to transcend or escape it (Lebow, 2003: 363–366).

Satire operates in a more complicated way. Like tragedy, it can use pathos, appealing to the emotions rather than the intellect of the audience. Unlike tragedy, however, the emotional appeal is not just intended to elicit sympathy with the subject. Satire also aims to amuse and to unsettle. Satirists normally aim to make their audience laugh, if only sardonically: they do aim to elicit some joy. But satirists often also intend to make their audience angry, uncomfortable, discontented, restless or irritated with the subject of the satire. Joy at the satirizing of the wrongdoer is tinged with annoyance at the wrong being satirized and irritation at the knowledge that one might oneself be prone to the same follies. Erasmus's letter to Maarten van Dorp, justifying his *Praise of Folly*, captures this complex mixture well: in satire, laughter is the 'honey which doctors in Lucretius smear on the rim of a cup of wormwood which they prescribe for children' (Erasmus, 1994 [1515]: 141). Satire, in other words, is not merely entertainment — it also invites its

audience to affirm the (often implicit) moral code of the satirist and perhaps even to uphold it in their own behaviour.

Satire thus takes us further than tragedy and — arguably — satire is generally more successful than tragedy in achieving its objectives. It invites disapprobation of the wrong and the wrongdoer it satirizes, but rather than simply asking us to reflect in general on the limitations of what humans can achieve, it also invites approbation of a particular moral code, that which the satirist is implying. It asks us to make two sets of moral judgements — one about the subject of the satire and one about the norms the satirist is suggesting are superior — and in so doing appeals not merely to our reason, but to our emotions. In so doing, it demonstrates what Jeffery has called the ‘indispensable role’ that emotions have in ‘processes of ethical deliberation ... and the practical application of ethics to a range of moral dilemmas in contemporary international relations’ (Jeffery, 2011: 144). But where do these moral judgements lead in terms of theory and practice?

Satirical realism

As we have seen, most scholars of satire agree that it is not linked to any one political ideology. It can (and has) been used by conservatives and radicals, liberals and socialists. It is used to draw attention to a variety of moral rules, but it cannot function without some sense of what those rules are, a belief that they matter and a conviction that there is a social value to pointing to those rules and breaches of those rules. Satire invites both disapprobation of what is being satirized and approbation of the satirist’s own moral code. Satire is, after all, a *moral art* that ‘demands a high degree both of commitment to and involvement with the painful problems of the world’, as well as the ‘high degree of abstraction from the world’ that allows folly to be seen and described in the starkest terms (Hodgart, 2010 [1969]: 11). It is not art for art’s sake, nor is it just amusement for no purpose but amusement.

Like tragedy as Lebow conceives it, satire offers no particular doctrine or policy prescriptions, but rather provides an ontology and an epistemology that could be used as building blocks for theory and guides for practice. Lebow’s tragic ontology places individuals in an ever-changing social context — there is no Hobbesian pre-social state of nature — and mires them in value-pluralism. It also makes claims about human nature, especially about psychology, arguing that individuals are not rational egoists but rather complex entities with competing drives and unstable identities (Lebow, 2003: 378–379; see also Lebow, 2008). Lebow’s epistemology flows from this ontology: given both our psychologies and our contexts, he argues, our ‘general knowledge’ of things will always be limited and most knowledge about politics and international relations will be particular (Lebow, 2003: 384–386). Combined, this ontology and epistemology form the basis of what Lebow regards as his more realistic classical realism.

Satire can point in similar directions, but with arguably more economy and by employing a more effective mode of political education that appeals more directly to our emotions and our reason and presents a clearer account of the moral issues at stake. Take again Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*. Like Lebow, the goddess Folly ‘assumes change as the norm’ (Lebow, 2008: ix) — her putative father, Plutus, ‘god of riches himself’, ‘has only to nod his head ... for everything to be thrown topsy-turvy, whether sacred or profane’

(Erasmus, 1994 [1515]: 15). Erasmus/Folly is keen also to highlight the complex nature of human beings:

Jupiter, not wanting man's life to be wholly gloomy and grim, has bestowed [in people] far more passion than reason.... Moreover, he confined reason to a cramped corner of the head and left all of the rest of the body to the passions. Then he set up two raging tyrants in opposition to reason's solitary power: anger, which holds sway in the breast and so controls the heart, the very source of life, and lust, whose empire spreads far and wide, right down to the genitals. How far reason can prevail against the combined forces of these two the common life of man makes quite clear. She does the only thing she can, and shouts herself hoarse repeating formulas of virtue, while the other two bid her go hang herself and are increasingly noisy and offensive until at last their ruler is exhausted, gives up, and surrenders. (Erasmus, 1994 [1515]: 29–30)

Stripped of exaggeration for comic effect, Erasmus's point is akin to Lebow's: human beings are driven not just by reason, as the Stoics or some modern political scientists think, but by passions too. Other satirists have made similar points — some gently and some, like Bernard de Mandeville, bluntly asserting that the passions and the vices that they encourage are actually the true foundations of social order (de Mandeville, 1989).

For Erasmus/Folly, acknowledging these truths is the necessary starting point for prudent political action and political theory rather than the kind of dry scholasticism Lebow derides in modern social science. Indeed, clear-sighted recognition of the reality of human nature rather than obscure philosophizing, they suggest, is the only means by which anyone can learn prudence:

... if prudence develops through experience, does ... possessing a claim to it rightly belong to the wise man who attempts nothing, partly through his sense of propriety, partly through his natural timidity, or to the fool who isn't deterred from anything either by the propriety which he hasn't got or the dangers which he doesn't think about? The wise man seeks refuge in his books of antiquity and learns from them the pure subtleties of what the ancients say. The fool tries everything, meets his dangers at first hand, and thereby acquires what I'm sure is genuine prudence. (Erasmus, 1994 [1515]: 43)

Erasmus's mocking of 'wise men' does not, however, stop there. Erasmus/Folly does not merely emphasize the virtue of prudence, but also that of intellectual humility. He/she also reminds the audience that Jesus himself played 'something of a fool':

He taught [the apostles] to shun wisdom, and made his appeal through the example of children, lilies, mustard-seed, and humble sparrows, all foolish, senseless things.... This also explains why God the creator of the world forbade man to eat of the tree of knowledge, as if knowledge was poisonous to happiness. So Paul openly condemns knowledge for building up conceit and doing harm, and I believe St Bernard had him in mind when he interpreted the mountain on which Lucifer set up his seat as the mount of knowledge. (Erasmus, 1994 [1515]: 126)

In this arch, roundabout and Christian way, Erasmus thus urges precisely the kind of epistemological modesty that Lebow, in a different fashion, recommends.

Erasmus's satire complemented and bolstered his wider political thought, the nature of which demonstrates that although the satirical vision demands realism in an everyday sense of the term, it is not necessarily tied to a 'power political' ideology. In *Praise of Folly*, he holds up his desired manner of government — responsible, just, virtuous, wise monarchy — to the mirror of reality:

Picture the prince, such as some of them are today: a man ignorant of the law, well nigh an enemy to his people's advantage while intent on his personal convenience, a dedicated voluptuary, a hater of learning, freedom and truth, without a thought for the interests of his country, and measuring everything in terms of his own profit and desires. (Erasmus, 1994 [1515]: 105)

This was the precise opposite to the ideal monarch Erasmus earlier described for the edification of Charles V in his *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516), the work in which he sets out his preferred vision of government. In drawing this contrast between the ideal and real, Erasmus demonstrates the particular capacity of satire to maintain the necessary tension between a ruthlessly realistic account of how human beings often are and a set of principles about how they should be, which allows the satirist to balance interests and ethics. If this tension is not maintained, satire collapses into cruelty and cynicism, ceasing either to be amusing or edifying.

Erasmus's friend Thomas More illustrates this well — and with direct reference to international relations — in his *Utopia*. That work satirizes a number of subjects, not least contemporary practices of war and diplomacy, both treated with heavy irony. The Utopians behave in precisely opposite ways to 16th-century European princes. They make, for example, no treaties or alliances, believing them unnecessary and having ample empirical evidence that they rarely hold:

What, they ask, is the good of a treaty? Aren't all human beings natural allies already? And if a person's prepared to ignore a fundamental bond like that, is he likely to pay much attention to a mere form of words? They take this view mainly because, in other parts of the world, kings aren't very scrupulous about observing pacts and agreements. In Europe, of course, especially the Christian parts of it, treaties are universally regarded as sacred and inviolate, partly because our kings are so good and just themselves, and partly because they're so much in awe of the Popes. (More, 2003: 88)

More knew well that the contrary was true, but his irony brings out the full extent of the hypocrisy involved in the real world. The same is also true of his treatment of war. The Utopians fight only in self-defence, reluctantly expose their own citizens to the horrors of conflict, do not believe that war is glorious, refrain from plunder, scrupulously observe non-combatant immunity (More, 2003: 90–98) — all views espoused in Christian Europe, but routinely flouted in practice.

A satiric vision of politics, in other words, allows us to be just as measured about human nature and the human predicament as Lebow's tragic vision, to be just as cognizant of value-pluralism and the gap that often exists between principle and practice, and to maintain the kind of tension between interests and ethics that is needed for what he thinks is ideal statecraft in politics and international relations. Moreover, satire is an

arguably more appealing vehicle for conveying the essence of the ontological and epistemological positions Lebow wishes to teach.

Conclusion

This article has made two claims. The first is straightforward, namely, that satire can serve as a vehicle of political education as good as, if not better than, tragedy. It is for this reason that writers from Aristophanes to Vonnegut have chosen to convey their ideas about politics and international relations in satirical form rather than employing other, less dramatic means. And there is good empirical evidence to support this claim, as others have shown in studies of the effects of satires on political literacy among their audiences (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006, 2008; Xenos and Becker, 2009). The second claim — that the tragic vision of politics is not the only, nor perhaps even the best, grounding for a theory of international relations — is more contentious. I have argued that satire may also offer a basis for a realistic theory, though not because it reminds us of the ubiquity of hubris or the necessity for compromise, but because it insists that we confront the ‘low norm’ in human behaviour and shape our political action accordingly.

The implications of these arguments, however, are less clear. Bringing the satiric vision to the attention of international theorists does open up the possibility of reading and interpreting a series of literary satires for their representations of international relations and their wider cultural influence. Similar work has, after all, already been done with other kinds of literature and other genres, especially science fiction (see, e.g., Bleiker, 2009; Hall, 2007; Paik, 2010; Weldes, 2003). This is also what seems to be envisaged by Lebow in his call for a more ‘holistic wisdom’ about international relations (2003: 385). But, arguably, the study of literature that addresses international theory in a direct or indirect way is a second-order activity to that of theorizing — an extension of literary criticism into the discipline of IR. This is not to say that satires of international relations ought not to be studied — quite the contrary — but simply to say that studying them may not lead to better theory. The wider question is how the ‘tragic’ or ‘satiric’ visions can be utilized by theorists to generate theory about how international relations works and ought to be evaluated.

Here, there seem to be two options. The first involves theorists actually writing satire, going beyond the occasional or incidental use of satiric irony that can be detected in some IR texts (Brassett, 2009) and producing satirical literature, poems, movies or other texts of their own. Some political theorists, indeed, have dabbled in this area — Steven Lukes’ satirical novel of various political philosophical utopias, *The Curious Enlightenment of Professor Caritat* (1995), for example, complements his more ‘serious’ works on Durkheim, power and social theory. But, in the main, professional academic norms militate against producing literary works such as satires in preference to non-fictional books and articles that follow scholarly conventions. In international theory, there are of course some grey areas — discussions of counterfactual histories, for instance, can stray into the realm of fiction¹¹ — but, on the whole, theorists are now required to present the findings of their research in tightly circumscribed ways in order to conform with professional norms and advance their academic careers (Adcock et al., 2007; Whitley, 2000).

The alternative is to use the key insights of the ‘tragic’ or ‘satiric’ visions as foundations for theory. This is the strategy Lebow himself adopts, as he followed the *Tragic Vision* with *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (2008). In the latter book, Lebow treats the tragic vision of the human condition — one in which value-pluralism and the inevitability of change make compromise a necessity — as an ontology. To this he adds a ‘model’ of the human ‘psyche’ which he argues can explain the development of social orders, including those of international relations, over time (2008: 6). The psyche, Lebow argues, is made up of three elements — ‘appetite, spirit and reason’ (2008: 14) — that shape human behaviour. By tracing the relative impact of each of these elements through history, he maintains, we can better comprehend the sources of international order.

A similar theory could be built, as I have argued, using the ‘satiric vision’ as its ontology. If the ‘satiric vision’ is taken to imply that human behaviour accords to a ‘low norm’, that folly, dishonesty, hypocrisy and other vices are commonplace, we could construct a similar model of the human psyche on such foundations and arrive at a similarly ‘realistic’ theory of international relations. Such a theory would likely be almost indistinguishable from Lebow’s, despite grounding it in satire rather than tragedy, since both would assume that human agents face significant challenges to the realization of their moral and political ideals that depend upon human nature and the human condition.

Notes

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- 1 The uses of literature for international theory have been explored in some depth by a number of theorists, particularly by postmodernists. See, for example, Kuusisto (2009) or Welde (2003).
- 2 This conception of tragedy, which underpinned a wider set of religious practices, was widespread in ancient Greece and arguably finds expression in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* and other contemporary texts (Cornford, 2004 [1907]).
- 3 This issue has been discussed in different contexts by Odysseos (2001), de Goede (2005), Bleiker (2009) and Brassett (2009).
- 4 Interestingly, precisely the opposite argument has been made about the Enlightenment, namely, that it tamed and limited comedy, relegating it to the private sphere (de Goede, 2005: 381).
- 5 On the uses of irony in ethics, see Rorty (1989), especially pp. 73–140, and for its specific uses in IR, see Brassett (2009). For Rorty, it should be noted, ‘irony’ means an acknowledgment of the contingency of our moral and political beliefs, and ironists are those who view ethics as a continuing, open-ended conversation or conflict over the good.
- 6 This thesis is questioned by Feinberg, among others, who argue that deeper personal and psychological motivations for satire, such as ‘emotional immaturity, sentimentalism, generosity, insecurity, and romanticism’, need to be explored (2006 [1964]: 105–244).

- 7 There is also evidence to suggest that audiences can take conservative messages from radical satirists and vice versa. See LeMarre et al. (2009).
- 8 The arguments that tragic plays were either religious in inspiration or met a need for entertainment have been made by many scholars, including Gilbert Murray (1940).
- 9 The *eiron* is a particular kind of character in Greek theatre who deprecates other characters to make them look less than what they claim to be. For a brief discussion, see Frye (1973 [1957]: 40).
- 10 I am grateful to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to include this section.
- 11 And even here, opinion is divided as to whether counterfactual history is 'fiction' — see Lebow (2010: 3–28).

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Biographical note

Ian Hall is a Senior Fellow in the Department of International Relations, Australian National University, Australia.