Herbert Butterfield, the English School and the civilizing virtues of diplomacy

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One of the things you ought to be discussing is the question whether the sheer technique of diplomacy really adds anything to the life of the world—does diplomacy do more than simply oil the wheels of international intercourse—has it a creative rôle so that it can achieve something apart from what power as such can achieve—and what are the limits of what diplomacy can do, especially when it has to grapple with power?[1]

Does diplomacy matter, and can the study of it yield anything of importance for our understanding of what happens and what ought to happen in international relations? I shall attempt a response to these questions by examining Herbert Butterfield's thought on the institutions and processes by which the members of an international society represent themselves and their interests to one another. My inquiry is prompted by two considerations. The first is a rather narrow scholarly concern with the way Butterfield's place in the English School has been interpreted by proponents of the latter's revival in recent years. He is in danger of being written out of the story as a man who did much to get one of the English School's precursors, the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics (British Committee), up and running, but whose own intellectual contribution to its work was at best modest, and at worst at odds with the real spirit of inquiry and speculation which animated the subsequent development of the committee's work.[2]

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[1] Herbert Butterfield, undated submission to C. A. W. Manning on the establishment of an undergraduate programme in International Relations at the London School of Economics, Butterfield papers, file 295, Cambridge University. The paper was read for him, December 1948. For this and Manning's response see file 531.

[2] Ian Hall's 'History, Christianity and diplomacy: Sir Herbert Butterfield and International Relations', *Review of International Studies* 28, 2002, pp. 719–36, will, I am sure, do much to stimulate further interest in Butterfield. The British Committee on the Theory of International Politics was set up principally by Herbert Butterfield with encouragement from Kenneth Thompson and funding from the Rockefeller Foundation in the late 1950s. Other figures associated with its founding were Martin Wight and Hedley Bull. The key concept associated with their work was the idea of an international society which, to an unspecified extent (contested to this day), is said to mitigate the effects of international anarchy. For an excellent interpretative history of the committee and the 'English School' to which its deliberations gave rise see Tim Dunne, *Inventing international society: a history of the English School* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

This interpretation is based on an overly narrow sampling of Butterfield's work which excludes from consideration his historical research, his essays on historiography, and his commentaries on Christian ethics and the great international questions of his day. Thanks not least to the contributions of scholars working in the English School tradition in recent years, a broader conception of what it means to theorize about international relations has emerged, making it easier to include writings such as these as both evidence for and contributions to our discussions.[3]

My second, and more important, reason for revisiting Butterfield is that within the broader corpus of his work is to be found a way of getting beyond the important, but necessarily first-order discussions of the nature of international society which continue to be the subject of the most interesting English School debates. Considerable progress has been made in this regard in recent years by scholars who have deployed the techniques of historical sociology to build upon the British Committee's insight that international societies should be regarded primarily as historical phenomena.[4] These gains have been purchased, however, at the expense of putting another British Committee insight, that international relations are nothing more or less than the conduct of human beings informed by their reflections, at risk by emphasizing the structural and technological conditions which constrain and enable what happens.[5]

The members of the British Committee maintained that at the heart of what happens and what might happen in international relations lies diplomacy, and that at the heart of any worthwhile theory of international relations must lie a theory of diplomacy; but neither they nor anyone else subsequently were able to do much with this insight. What has emerged, instead, is a series of reflections on the requirements of good diplomacy in general which seems to rest heavily on the experience of a particular historical epoch. Butterfield's own contributions to the published work of the British Committee, his essays on the balance of power and the new and historical (as he termed it) diplomacy, are prime examples of what some have characterized as nostalgia for a rather uncritical and selective portrayal of the international relations of eighteenth-century Europe, what Butterfield calls 'the golden age of diplomacy'.[6] However,

[3] See e.g. Ole Waever, 'Four meanings of international society: a trans-Atlantic dialogue', in B. A. Roberson, ed., *International society and the development of International Relations theory* (London: Pinter, 1998), p. 80; Roger Epp, 'The "Augustinian moment" in international politics: Niebuhr, Butterfield, Wight and the reclaiming of a tradition', International Politics Research Paper no. 10 (Department of International Politics, University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1991); and, more recently, Charles Jones, 'Christianity and the English School', paper presented at the annual convention of the International Studies Association, Chicago, 2001.

[4] See e.g. Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International systems in world history: remaking the study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[5] For an exchange on the extent and the significance of this tilt towards structures, see Ian Hall, 'Still the English patient? Closure and inventions in the English School', and Barry Buzan and Richard Little, 'The "English patient" strikes back: a response to Hall's mis-diagnosis', both in *International Affairs* 77: 4, Oct. 2001, pp. 931–46.

[6] 'The balance of power' and 'The new diplomacy and historical diplomacy', in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, *Diplomatic investigations* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966). All sources cited below are Herbert Butterfield unless attributed otherwise. The 'golden age' quote is from his notes for a lecture on 'The character of eighteenth century diplomacy,' Butterfield papers, file 328, Cambridge University.

I shall argue that elsewhere in his writings are to be found the elements of not just a theory of diplomacy between sovereign states, but what amounts to a theory of how human relations are and might be conducted between groups that seek to live separately from one another and hold this separation to be both good and desirable.[7]

This diplomatic theory of international relations is grounded in Butterfield's philosophy of history, and especially his conviction, borrowed from the German Historical School and developed in his own essays on historiography, that it is impossible to understand fully the life experiences and priorities of those separated from us by time and space. It recommends, on the basis of the necessarily incomplete and partial understanding with which the subjects of his own historical research conducted their affairs, a position of emotional distance and intellectual detachment from most of the great international issues and the terms in which they are argued over at any particular time. And finally, Butterfield's Christian ethics suggest how diplomats ought to conduct themselves and how they ought to enjoin those they represent to conduct themselves. In a world of separate, partial and, in their respective judgements of one another, imperfect people, right conduct should seek to embody self-restraint and charity towards others.

Diplomacy

'Diplomacy' is a notoriously tricky term. People like to use it because the word conveys a certain weight to what they want to describe thus, composed in equal parts of status, power, mystery, ambiguity and, less certainly, virtue. They use it, however, to convey many and different things. Particularly in the United States, people use the term as a synonym for statecraft, foreign policy and, indeed, international relations in general. Henry Kissinger's book *Diplomacy* might accurately have had any one of these terms as its title, but—with the possible exception of 'statecraft'—none of them would have conveyed so well both the general scope of the human activity and the part he sets out for judicious observation and agency within it.[8]

In contrast, others often insist that the term 'diplomacy' should be reserved for the way in which accredited representatives of sovereigns, or those organizations established by sovereigns to serve their collective purposes, contribute to the making and implementation of policies which are decided upon by political leaders. To do otherwise, in their view, is to commit a formal error with practical consequences. The least of these is that the observer will fail to grasp, and probably underestimate, the importance of professional diplomats for an understanding of what happens in international relations. The greatest is that such wrongheadedness about what is and what is not diplomacy will lead to a

[7] For another approach to recovering prescriptive pluralism in the English School tradition, see John Williams, 'Territorial borders, toleration and the English School', *Review of International Studies* 28, 2002, pp. 737–58.

[8] Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

systematic depreciation of the work of diplomats, together with the resources and the conditions they need in order to function effectively.

Finally, there exists what we may regard as the common usage of 'diplomacy' to signify a particular way of conducting human relations involving the application of intelligence and tact by people who can respond to special calls on what are common qualifications and virtues.[9] In this conception is contained the idea of communicating without causing unnecessary or, at least, unwanted offence. To be a diplomat in this sense is generally regarded as a good thing, for there are many difficult things in life which have to be communicated to those who will not want to hear them. The fact that people may not want to hear what is to be communicated, however, opens up the possibility that dirty work is afoot and has to be concealed or obscured. In its common use, therefore, the idea of diplomacy carries troubling connotations, and to call someone a good diplomat is not always a compliment.

The argument implied here over how diplomacy is properly to be defined cannot be settled decisively, not least because other people will continue to use the term in different ways. Nor should we want to declare it settled in this sense, for all that will result in is the need to break off relations with those who persist in refusing the diktat. In what follows, therefore, I will use the term 'diplomacy' in a particular version of the common usage outlined above, namely to suggest a way in which relations between groups that regard themselves as separate ought to be conducted if the principle of living in groups is to be retained as a good, and if unnecessary and unwanted conflict is to have a chance of being avoided. This prescriptive conception of diplomacy is derived from Butterfield's argument that we should look to the accumulated historical experience of relations between sovereign states, as these are conducted principally by professional diplomats, if we want to understand how international relations might be made more civilized. Its application, however, is not restricted to the relations between sovereign states.

Diplomacy and the British Committee

In their own treatments of diplomacy, Butterfield and his colleagues provide considerable evidence of the slippery character of the term. They use it in different ways from one another and, at times, in different ways within their own writings. Bull, for example, explicitly identifies different uses of the term and then indicates the one in which he is interested and about which he intends to write. Wight and Butterfield, in contrast, sometimes write about diplomacy as the activity of diplomats and sometimes as the core component of the whole ensemble of international relations (usages which are not necessarily inconsistent with one another). Nevertheless, there is little room for doubt that diplomacy, however conceived, was supposed to lie at the centre of the British

[9] Nevile Bland, ed., *Satow's guide to diplomatic practice* (London: Longman, Green, 1958), pp. 1, vii; M. Bernard, *Four lectures on subjects connected with diplomacy* (London: Macmillan, 1868), p. 148.

Committee's quest for international theory. The committee's most well-known collection of published papers is called *Diplomatic investigations*, and here the term 'diplomatic' is not merely a synonym for 'international relations'. As Butterfield and Wight make clear in their preface, they are not interested in foreign policy or the limits or uses of international theory so much as in 'the diplomatic community itself'. The 'assumptions and ideas of diplomacy' as a matter for investigation they rank second only to 'the nature of the international states-system itself'. Indeed, on one occasion Wight calls the diplomatic system the 'master institution of international society'.[10]

Yet, as Neumann notes, the rich flow of reflections on the idea of international societies prompted by the British Committee's work has not been matched by a comparable output on diplomacy from either the original members or their successors.[11] It is not so much that they did not try. Explicitly devoted to diplomacy, we have among the British Committee's published works the two essays by Butterfield noted above, a chapter by Bull, an essay and lectures by Wight and a book by Watson. However, these efforts have been either largely ignored or judged to be less fruitful than the rest of their work.[12]

Butterfield's two essays in *Diplomatic investigations* suggest why this is so. The first begins by examining the origins of the idea of the balance of power, but the essay's centre of gravity lies in asserting what the consequences of a balance of power system existing between states must be for what they do. Conduct oneself with restraint, Butterfield says, and ally with others against those who do not. Ignore the first injunction and you will eventually come unstuck. Ignore the second and possibly everyone will come unstuck. These injunctions are given a law-like quality for emphasis because Butterfield believed that they had been forgotten, ignored or actively rejected by the great powers in the first half of the twentieth century, with devastating consequences.

That this is his preoccupation becomes clearer in the second essay, on new and historical diplomacy. This is, for the most part, a Nicolsonian attack on the conference diplomacy of the League of Nations and the Wilsonian assumptions about democracy and foreign policy on which that system rested. Nineteen-nineteen and all that, he alleges, resulted from 'a facile attempt to pander to the

[10] Butterfield and Wight, *Diplomatic investigations*, preface, pp. 11–12. Martin Wight, *Power politics*, ed. Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 113. It should be noted that Wight tended to use the terms 'system' and 'society' interchangeably, while Bull sought to distinguish between the two. It is useful to think of them as the poles of a continuum along which actual international systems/societies occupy positions determined by the degree to which they manifest accepted conventions and rules about what is and ought to be going on.

[11] Iver Neumann, *The English School and diplomacy*, Discussion Papers in Diplomacy no. 79, March 2002. Three recent exceptions are Robert Jackson, 'Martin Wight's thought on diplomacy' (published in *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 13: 4, Dec. 2002, pp. 1–28), Geoffrey Wiseman, 'Adam Watson on diplomacy', and Andrew Hurrell, 'Hedley Bull and diplomacy', all papers presented at the International Studies Annual Convention, New Orleans, March 2002.

[12] Martin Wight's chapter on diplomacy in *Power politics* and three lectures on the theory of diplomacy in Martin Wight, *International theory: the three traditions*, ed. Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991); Hedley Bull's chapter on 'Diplomacy and international order' in *The anarchical society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977) and Adam Watson's *Diplomacy: the dialogue between states* (London: Methuen, 1983).

masses' by people who should have been asserting 'the continuity of history' and the importance of gaining all we can from historical experience. It is possible, he continues, that 'statesmanship and the rules of policy are not amenable to the kind of arbitrary re-definition that was envisaged in the years after 1919', and that if there are 'rules of diplomacy and laws of foreign policy, then these must be valid for men, women, whites, blacks, monarchies or democracies, cabinets or parliaments'. The 'techniques of diplomacy may change, but rules of policy and the way in which 'consequences proceed out of causes in international relations' cannot. There must be, therefore, 'if not something like a science of diplomacy', then 'at least a ripe kind of wisdom' about 'the nature of diplomacy itself'.[13]

It is not hard to see how both articles provide ammunition for the claim that the English School, in its classical variant at least, is nothing more than political realism with manners. If this is so, then the door to further theorizing about diplomacy is effectively closed. As far as those who agree with the claim are concerned, everything of importance on the subject of diplomacy has already been said by the great thinkers associated with power politics and the rise of the modern states-system and is reflected in the principles of diplomatic theory.[14] All that is needed are reminders from time to time that this is so when theoretical debates become too detached from the 'realities' of international politics. For the rest, the student of diplomacy's time is best spent undertaking empirical studies of a broadly historical nature which confirm the essentials of the business and the underlying realities that provide its character.[15]

In contrast, those who accept neither political realism as the last word on international relations nor the claim that the English School is no more than political realism dressed up seek to imply that Butterfield has not grasped that which was so potentially fruitful in the work of his colleagues, notably Martin Wight. In their view, international relations theory is not a process of discovering and affirming what are mistakenly taken to be fixed and objective truths about the real nature of international relations.[16] It is more accurately seen as both a commentary on and a participant in the process by which the world of international relations emerges from what people actually do and their reflections upon their actions. Butterfield, therefore, has erred in presenting the social world as a law-governed universe in which people possessed of an imperfect but fixed human nature vary only in their ability and willingness to recognize the constraints which circumstance and nature impose upon them.

[13] 'The new diplomacy and historical diplomacy', in Butterfield and Wight, *Diplomatic investigations*, pp. 181–92.

[14] Diplomatic theory here meaning diplomacy's internal account of itself and its operating rules, as opposed to the theory of diplomacy, being external attempts to understand its operations and to suggest how it might operate. The distinction is by no means watertight in practice.

[15] See e.g. G. R. Berridge, Maurice Keens Soper and T. G. Otte, *Diplomatic theory from Machiavelli to Kissinger* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

[16] Neumann (*The English School and diplomacy*) and Dunne (*Inventing international society*), while generous to Butterfield in the attention they pay him, may both be read as passing such a judgement.

There is, however, much more going on in both Butterfield's essays. As the pairing of terms like 'science' and 'wisdom', and 'laws' and 'rules', suggests, Butterfield was aware that, for all his efforts to anchor what he construed as good diplomacy in the realm of necessity, the balance of power does not operate independently of human purpose and understanding. This becomes clear in his discussions of its origins. First and foremost, the balance of power is an idea which acquires a 'conscious formulation' in the course of modern history as sovereigns and their advisers (in particular, Fénelon) develop a 'more enlightened view' of their interests, limiting short-term objectives for the sake of long-term advantage. As Butterfield notes in a letter to a colleague, before the eighteenth century all we see are 'certain ingenious diplomatic moves which *remind* the modern reader of the idea of the balance of power'. An international order, then, is not 'a thing bestowed by nature, but is a matter of refined thought, careful contrivance, and elaborate artifice', and it requires 'the same kind of loyalty and attention which people give to their countries and private causes'. Without this loyalty, one cannot apply the 'rules' of the balance of power because they 'come to appear irrelevant'.[17]

The claim cannot be sustained that Butterfield was unaware of the complexity of the relationships between the idea of a balance of power, the state of affairs the idea attempts to capture, and the course of action within that state of affairs, so presented, that it prescribes. He was, however, unsure what to make of this complexity. An image that he uses several times and credits to Bacon captures both awareness and uncertainty. What Bacon detected, according to Butterfield, was the 'nervous tension' which ran throughout an international system, with no one really trusting any other, but all watching each other's moves, with 'diplomacy being unremittingly awake, and the whole *still* [emphasis added] serving the purpose of peace'.[18] At first glance, this appears to be a 'hidden hand' argument, in which each state's interest freely pursued automatically leads to some kind of general good, but the use of 'still' in the sense of 'even so' indicates that this is not the case. Butterfield may have wished to convince contemporary statesmen and diplomats that, if they wanted things to turn out well, then they had to conduct themselves in a way which embodied the principles, if not the forms, of eighteenth-century diplomacy in Europe. He may have believed that loyalty to the principle of the balance of power and attention to its operation should be regarded as responsibilities of diplomacy and diplomats. His whole argument, however, implies the possibility that diplomats or those they represent might not so choose.

The processes by which such choices, indeed any choices, are made by diplomats and their political leaders are left undeveloped in Butterfield's two published British Committee papers. So long as there are sovereign states (and

[17] 'Balance of power', in Wight and Butterfield, *Diplomatic investigations*, pp. 140, 147; undated letter to Professor Weiner, Butterfield papers, file 466.
[18] 'Balance of power,' in Wight and Butterfield, *Diplomatic investigations*, p. 137.

Butterfield acknowledges the possibility of their passing only in such a way as to suggest that he does not see the state as the same kind of fragile human artifice as the balance of power), then a states-system presents an optimal course of action for each of its members. The wise will recognize it and the brave and good will choose to follow, in the teeth of opposition from the wicked, who accept no restraint upon their appetites, and the foolish, who allow their hopes to subvert their wisdom or the wisdom of others. For a richer sense of the world in which such choices have to be made and the kinds of people who actually have to make them, it is necessary to turn elsewhere, specifically to Butterfield's works on historiography and his own historical research.

Diplomats and progress in Butterfield's historiography and history

As a student of historiography, Butterfield was committed to three interlinked propositions which are of considerable significance for his understanding of diplomacy. The first proposition is his insistence that we must begin by acknowledging the differences, rather than the similarities, between ourselves and those who are distant from us in either time or space, if we hope to gain any sort of sense of them at all. At all costs, we must avoid the conceit of assuming that our understanding of life is shared by others, for this may lead to attempts to impose our preoccupations on others, both theoretically and practically. Butterfield frequently cites, with approval, Ranke's claim that all historical epochs are equidistant from eternity.[19]

In some fundamental and primarily moral sense, human beings share a common understanding of themselves and can recognize this commonality in one another, for 'life is all one and essential experience is ultimately the same.'[20] We all know what it is to be loved, respected and free. We all know what it is to want these things or to be denied them. However, the way in which these values find their expression in the lives of people varies radically by time and space. Thus, Butterfield claims in his first book, the twentieth century differed from the twelfth century 'not merely in its dress, its implements, and its armour, but in its whole experience of life'.[21] The first task of the historian, therefore, is to establish what these differences are and to establish an understanding of people on their own terms by an exercise of 'imaginative sympathy'.[22] Quite simply, we do our best to make their sense of their lives.

Butterfield's second proposition, however, is that people's understandings of their own circumstances are necessarily incomplete and wilfully partial, especially in their disputes with one another. The challenge to the historian and those who would aspire to avoid such conflicts, therefore, is to provide a better understanding of the protagonists than those protagonists had of themselves, seeking

[19] See e.g. *Christianity and history* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1950), p. 66.
[20] *The historical novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), p. 112.
[21] Ibid., pp. 34, 102.
[22] The Whig interpretation of history (London: Bell & Sons, 1931), p. 92.

out, for example, how they came to differ and the points on which they agreed, albeit unwittingly. While we begin, therefore, by taking pity on 'men who had perhaps no pity for one another',[23] we proceed to an analysis which lays bare 'the essential geometry of the problem' and isolates 'the fundamental predicament that required a solution'.[24] Somehow we must develop a degree of detachment and maintain a degree of distance by which we are able to see the quarrels of those whom we study not just differently from how the protagonists saw them, but more completely.

The language Butterfield uses to make this point, his suggestion that any human problem possesses an essential and underlying geometry which can be laid bare and isolated, would seem to throw us back into the positivist conception of social reality and causation which colours his British Committee papers. However, his third proposition makes it clear that this is not the case. Stripped of all incidental and specific features, Butterfield argues, 'we shall find at the heart of everything a kernel of difficulty which is essentially a problem of diplomacy as such.'[25] To find out what he means by 'diplomacy as such', we must shift our attention from Butterfield's historiography to his actual historical studies, specifically his work on British politics in the time of George III and Lord North, and his study of European diplomacy between Napoleon's defeat of Prussia at Jena in 1806 and Tsar Alexander's seduction by the French cause at Tilsit the following year.[26]

Running through both of these analyses is a specific and limited conception of the kind of progress to which partial people with imperfect understandings of each other can reasonably aspire. The people recovered by Butterfield's historical research are presented not as the bearers of social structures or the agents of historical forces, but as human personalities whose actions are guided by their own understanding of what is happening and what is important. As he argues in his study of the historical novel, every public action is also a private act, the personal decision of somebody; thus personality remains 'the real power' even if its influence is 'not direct, and immediate, and palpable'.[27]

These personalities are distinguished by frailties, strengths and idiosyncrasies. They do not fit well within the conventional understandings subsequently imposed on the periods in which they lived as way stations on the road to the present. For example, George III, that emblem on the barrier to popular representation, sees himself as his people's only safeguard against an ambitious oligarchy which wants to establish itself in their name. Lord North, generally regarded as being instrumental in failing to avoid a war for the American colonies which is eventually lost, asks for nothing more of his monarch than to be relieved of his

[23] Ibid., p. 1.
[24] *History and human relations* (London: Collins, 1951), p. 26.
[25] Ibid., p. 26.
[26] *George III and the historians* (London: Collins, 1957); *George III, Lord North and the people* (London: Bell & Son, 1949); *The peace tactics of Napoleon, 1806–1808* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929).
[27] *The historical novel*, p. 74.

duties, but stays on because they are his duties and he executes them with skill. Tsar Alexander lurches from brave and principled opposition to Napoleon's designs to despair on the basis of premature and over-pessimistic combat reports, before finally throwing in his lot with Napoleon for reasons which, in so far as they are ascertainable, are no less brave and principled. Meanwhile, the court of his Prussian cousin schemes and complains, reckless of its own reduced circumstances and dependence on the forbearance, charity and sacrifice of others. And all around the principals are lesser figures, no less human and, often, no more immune to their own passions, ambitions and wilfulness, adding their own barriers and channels to the flow of events and, on occasion, intervening with decisive effect.

In worlds such as these, progress is certainly not achieved by the triumph of the virtuous over the wicked, for no side in any conflict enjoys a monopoly of either virtue or wickedness. Nor can it always be achieved through the application of reason to the adjustment of substantive interests by negotiation, for even between people of goodwill, many differences are so real and so fundamental as to be non-resolvable, and certainly non-resolvable on the terms of any one of the protagonists.[28] Rather, according to Butterfield, progress is achieved, almost in spite of the protagonists, when the processes of conflict themselves lead to something genuinely new and better. Thus, for example, the growth of toleration and liberty in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England does not result from the triumph of the Whigs, who purported to advocate such values, over the Tories, who were said to oppose them. It emerges from a shared determination to avoid repeating the experience of a civil war and its attendant horrors, which had damaged the protagonists, their causes and the political system in which they sought to advance the latter.[29] In Butterfield's account, maintaining the peace, these people come to believe, is more important than resolving anything over which they wish to argue. Indeed, it is the precondition of success on terms that are worth anything to them.

Periods of peace, according to Butterfield, make possible 'the gradual growth of reasonableness' by allowing 'the healing effect of time' to take the sting and bitterness out of old arguments.[30] Therefore, it is not what people argue about or the directions their positions imply for human history that matter so much as the manner in which they conduct their arguments at critical moments. It is then that we see that, 'over and above the irrationalities of the world, the social pressures and the sheer play of forces, there moves something of a rational purpose, something of the conscious calculations of reasoning and reasonable

[28] Indeed, wilfulness, good and bad, is a considerable part of the problem. See 'Diplomacy', in Ragnhild Hatton and M. S. Anderson, eds, *Studies in diplomatic history: essays in honour of David Bayne Horne* (London: Archon, Longman, 1970), pp. 360–1.
[29] *The Whig interpretation of history*, p. 48. In *George III, Lord North and the people*, p. 8, Butterfield maintains that liberty was saved because the contest was fought and no one won.
[30] *The discontinuities between the generations in history: their effects on the transmission of political experience*, Rede Lecture 1971 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 28.

men.'[31] It is not possible to pin down or fix the subject or content of this reasonableness. Indeed, to attempt to do so is to miss the point, for it would involve the imposition of the necessarily partial view of some upon others. It is, however, possible to identify some of its best exponents, good statesmen and good diplomats, for these people operate in circumstances where it is more important to be skilful in handling disputes than to be right about the substantive points at issue. This may seem an unlikely conclusion to be drawn from Butterfield's own historical narratives, populated as they are by hysterics, neurotics and manic depressives at all levels of statecraft. Clearly, statecraft is a stressful business which has a way of bringing out the worst in those whose nervous constitutions are not robust.[32]

However, the good and the best are also present in Butterfield's narratives. The best statesmen, for example, are identified not by their vision of where they want to take the world so much as by a capacity to keep all the forces in play in their mind. Thus Pitt, not Napoleon, is the great statesman. The best diplomats are not those who serve their masters most faithfully or negotiate most effectively, but those who keep what Butterfield calls a 'mental reservation', the diplomat's equivalent to the historian's sense of distance or detachment, about all that is going on around them. Thus Tolstoy and Metternich, respectively Russia's and Austria's representatives in Paris, work diligently for alliances with Napoleon, all the while loathing him and knowing that all roads will lead eventually to a coalition of the great powers against the tyrant. Their mental reservation or *arrière-pensée* allows them, not only to pursue their masters' policies with their fingers putatively crossed behind their backs, but also to realize that the time is not 'ripe' for doing otherwise.

While Tolstoy's and Metternich's conduct in Paris may be presented as an example of a game between aristocratic elites well played, however, it is not clear why we should be invited to regard it as praiseworthy in any more than a technical sense. Indeed, it might be equally read as a fine example of the sort of cynical and self-serving activity which sent modern diplomacy's reputation into decline in the aftermath of the First World War, a decline from which the growth of democratic nationalism and popular politics has prevented a full recovery. How might actively working to secure an alliance which one believes to be wrong with a regime one believes is wicked and doomed be regarded otherwise? This question is not effectively answered in Butterfield's works of

[31] *George III and the historians*, p. 205.
[32] This point is best made through sketches of the diplomats throughout *Peace tactics*. Andréossy, France's ambassador in Vienna, cannot stand the Austrians and keeps quiet about French motives so that Austria will fear an attack, when the real thrust of French policy is to do all in its power to persuade Austria into an alliance against Britain. Merfeldt, Austria's ambassador in St Petersburg, is pro-British and personally upset by the Tilsit settlement. Starhemberg, Austria's ambassador in London, is also pro-British. He attempts to delay Austria's entry into Napoleon's continental system, and leaks to the French the fiercest part of his representations to the British while hiding the qualifying language with which he always delivers them. Alopeus, the Russian ambassador in London, pursues a freelance policy of accommodation with Britain in conjunction with his unofficial counterpart in St Petersburg, long after the tsar has lost even his pretence of interest in it.

diplomatic history. Indeed, the concluding paragraphs of *Peace tactics* make clear that he is torn between admiration for the diplomacy of the *arrière-pensée* and mental reservation, for which a public platform cannot be mobilized, and concern that the same diplomacy cannot be democratized. In their own world,

> these diplomats are like giants of the financial market, using a specialized science and terminology, pursuing thought in dry categories of their own, and utterly forgetful of the farmer with his corn, the worker at his loom, the small shareholder at his desk, over whose heads the abstruse speculation is carried on, like a kind of fatality, remote and sinister.[33]

Butterfield was no simple realist, content to acknowledge the inevitability of human tragedy but compelled to tell the scientific truth about its unavoidable causes. He had a great deal to say about the way in which distance, detachment and mental reservations might be seen as the great virtues of diplomacy, rendering diplomacy a virtue in itself, but it is to be found neither in his works of historiography nor those of history. It is in his popular writings on Christianity and the great international issues of his time that Butterfield gives these virtues their wider moral content and, in so doing, elaborates his conception of diplomacy as a civilizing influence.

Civilization and Butterfield's Christian sense of diplomatic virtue

Butterfield was a Christian and one for whom his faith informed what he had to say about international relations and diplomacy. Generally speaking, he conformed to the prevailing professional convention of his time that faith is a personal matter involving claims that are not susceptible to empirical tests and proofs. As a consequence, he regarded the fruits of his own historical research as a form of 'technical history', incapable of answering the most important questions about human life and its significance for which people most commonly sought answers. Butterfield engaged those by lay preaching and by commenting extensively on international affairs from a Christian perspective. That faith-based claims pose problems for those who do not share the faith, Butterfield was well aware. They cannot be established by conventional argument, only arrived at by prayer and reflection. Nonetheless, he argues that they provide the foundations not only of one's faith, but also of one's interpretation of life in general. Indeed, Butterfield maintains, each of us obtains our understanding of what life is about, not from the study of subjects like history, but from the application of reflections on our own life to the evidence.[34]

Reflections such as these lead Butterfield to believe that the significance of each person is to be understood in terms of his or her relation to God. People

[33] *Peace tactics of Napoleon*, pp. 319–20.
[34] *Christianity in human history* (London: Collins, 1952), p. 20.

ought to love God and, in so far as they do, all else falls into place; but they are tempted to be wilful, denying Him and committing the sin of self-love in a way which is harmful to both themselves and others. However, people are also capable of exercising self-restraint, feeling sympathy for those who fail to do so, and working for exterior conditions which make self-restraint and resistance to temptation easier. It is the presence of such conditions, identified only by their consequences, and not by any content from a specific place or time, which Butterfield regards as civilization, a system of relations which exist for 'the heightening and enrichment of the human personality itself'.[35] It is good diplomacy, as Butterfield understands it, which may help civilize the conduct of international relations in this sense.

People may choose to be bad or good. They can also consciously attempt to shape the conditions which influence their choices and the choices of others in this regard. It is from the tension between these possibilities that the 'drama of human life', with its potential for developing and enriching human personalities capable of understanding, love and charity or of going in the opposite direction, emerges. It is this drama which provides the true measure of all the 'big' stories about the march of history and the rise and fall of specific civilizations which feature so centrally in our thoughts about human affairs.[36] The collapse of Western civilization, for example, would not mean the end of everything. As Augustine had realized when confronted by the fall of Rome, this drama of human life continues and, in the midst of the worst evils, goodness is to be found. Even in the horrors of the concentration camp all was not despair, for wickedness itself provided opportunities for love and charity to blossom.

Throughout history, Butterfield maintains, the great danger emanates from those who do not accept this perspective on specific human projects, and who seek to impose their own conceptions of salvation and right order on the world. Such people transform the 'abstract nouns' which we use 'as a species of shorthand' about political life into 'pervading systems' of control in whose name all sorts of horrors may be perpetrated.[37] For this reason, Butterfield argues, people should not have too much faith 'in projects for saving human nature by the process of rectifying institutions'.[38] There are a few principles 'existing in a rare and lofty realm' to which we cannot attach ourselves too firmly, but 'for the rest, the mundane affairs of men and women and their attempts to deal with them, the mind can hardly attain the mobility which the case requires.'[39] This is a comment to which I shall return.

The principal consequences of Butterfield's religious position for diplomacy and diplomats appear to be as follows. First, because the interests of those they represent are derived from understandings which are necessarily incomplete and partial, good diplomats will realize, in a spirit of humility, that they ought to

[35] *George III and the historians*, p. 205.
[36] *International conflict in the twentieth century: a Christian view* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 15.
[37] *Christianity in human history*, p. 57.
[38] Ibid., p. 52.
[39] *International conflict in the twentieth century: a Christian view*, p. 13.

conduct themselves with restraint and urge a similar restraint upon those who send them. Second, because a full understanding of the imperatives which drive others is impossible, but a recognition of the equal moral worth of others, if not of their imperatives, is right, good diplomats will realize, in a spirit of charity, that they ought to conduct themselves with generosity, and urge a similar generosity on the part of those who send them, in their judgements of the actions and arguments of those who receive them. Finally, recognizing that a good system of diplomacy performs the role of civilizing international relations, in the sense of fostering the conditions within which human personalities are heightened and enriched, and that such a system has its own needs if it is to be maintained and function, its own '*raison de système*', good diplomats will realize that they ought to represent these needs to both those who send and those who receive them.

Butterfield's virtuous diplomacy in practice

What did Butterfield see as the practical implications of this notion of virtuous diplomacy? The picture that emerges from his commentaries is unclear, although always stimulating and sometimes alarming. Butterfield argues, for example, that, during the Second World War, the Allies should have made peace with the Nazis once it became clear that the USSR had become the greater threat, so that the two 'rascals' might be allowed 'to fight it out'.[40] The extent to which this argument rests on a mechanical application of balance of power principles, or upon Butterfield's deeper conviction that Russia posed a greater threat than Germany, even under the Nazis, is hard to tell. What is clear, however, is that Butterfield's argument implies a degree of insensibility to both the practical difficulties and the moral implications of executing such a policy which is, to say the least, surprising.

Three other stands which he took on great international issues of his day were much more clearly derived from his ethical position. The first is Butterfield's conviction that even the great power that is most virtuous and civilized, in terms of its internal values, is more likely to become a threat to peace and international order if it is not kept in check by countervailing force. If communism were to collapse and the United States were left 'as a single giant, lording it alone in the world', and if the US and Britain decided that only a certain kind of democracy was conducive to world peace and that they would tolerate no other systems, then the result, Butterfield argued, would be 'indistinguishable from a project of Anglo-American domination'.[41]

[40] 'Official history: its pitfalls and criteria', in *History and human relations*, pp. 218–19. They should not be allowed to fight to the point where one triumphed over the other, however, for the interests of civilization were served by their operating as a check upon one another. See also 'Aggression', in *Christianity, diplomacy and war* (London: Collins, 1951), pp. 58–9.
[41] *International conflict in the twentieth century: a Christian view*, p. 87; *Christianity, diplomacy and war*, p. 117. On this theme see Paul Sharp, 'Virtue unrestrained: Herbert Butterfield and the problem of American power'. Paper presented at a Workshop on Diplimacy, University of Birmingham, 23 June 2003.

The problem here lies not in the egotism of the great power per se, for it may choose not to impose its values on the world. Nor does it lie in the nature of the values themselves or the extent to which the great power does or does not subscribe to them. It may genuinely espouse them. The problem lies in the act of imposition itself, the pride and self-righteousness it implies, and the denial of others' freedom and right to find their own salvation which it entails. Its diplomats (and others) should urge self-restraint upon the great power tempted to impose its convictions on the world, but the call for such restraint will be rendered more effective by the probability of external resistance.

Second, and as a modest corollary of the claim that no degree of internal virtue could guarantee external virtue on the part of the great power unchecked, Butterfield argues that no state is sufficiently wicked to be excluded from the international order which diplomacy works to maintain. Every state is the authentic expression of at least some aspect of its people's will and aspirations, and hence enjoys a measure of legitimacy.[42] And even if they are not working for international order, 'we cannot leave anybody out of the system, cannot send any nation or creed or regime or ideology to Coventry.'[43]

The extent to which this claim about the measure of legitimacy which all states enjoy is a categorical one derived from classical first principles, as opposed to an empirical one grounded in shrewd, if disturbing, observations about the relationships between peoples and their governments, even when the latter are wicked and oppressive, is not clear.[44] It is easy to read into these two examples an uncritical assumption that states-systems are the only likely way in which diverse expressions of human identity and freedom can be accommodated and, thus, a complacent inference that any particular states-system must enjoy a measure of legitimacy, even though particular states necessarily privilege some expressions of identity and freedom over others. There may be a strong circumstantial case for arguing the former and strong prescriptive, if pragmatic, grounds for claiming the latter, but Butterfield did not make either.

However, he was by no means as closed on either issue as his British Committee papers might suggest, even in those of his writings explicitly devoted to international theory. Butterfield too had his 'Hagey moment'—less famous than, but predating by several years, Hedley Bull's lectures on international justice—when, towards the end of his career, he speculated on the possibility that the states-system was 'withering away . . . submerged in a feeling for human beings as such' (a development which, if true, he believed provided

[42] 'Morality and international order', in Brian Porter, ed., *The Aberystwyth papers: international politics 1919–1969* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 353. His specific example was the USSR, and he suggested that the possibility existed that, in time, people might come to think that the USSR offered at least part of an answer to how they should come to terms with modernity.

[43] *International conflict in the twentieth century: a Christian view*, pp. 99–120, p. 78.

[44] Butterfield certainly entertained the idea of collective guilt and the possibility of divine retribution, and attracted some controversy for his discussion of the suffering of the Germans during the Second World War in these terms: see *Christianity and history*, pp. 50–3. Retribution, however, belonged to God, not to people.

grounds for concern).[45] And, much more importantly, a considerable part of his own historical research agenda was devoted to exploring the practices by which new social forces in eighteenth-century Britain came, in his own words, to 'emerge into effective politics' and how the civilized ways of doing this without creating greater misery and wickedness were painfully learned.[46] Not only did Butterfield stress that different people see the world in quite radically different terms at different times, he also accepted that their ways of identifying themselves and conducting their relations might also change radically over time.

On only one of the great international issues of his day, however, did Butterfield explicitly exercise that mobility of mind which he believed was necessary when considering mundane human affairs and arrangements. He rejected nuclear deterrence as morally indefensible and believed that those who possessed nuclear weapons ought to destroy them, unilaterally if necessary. This is a matter of some controversy. It has been suggested that Butterfield's unilateralism was a brief phase or position and that he was soon talked down from this particular roof by his colleagues on the British Committee emphasizing the irresponsibility of being meek in a world where the ruthless are prepared to take advantage of you.[47] However, the argument that no system or set of principles can be of sufficient worth to put at risk all human life, and thus the possibility for future good and love in the world, is certainly consistent with the core of Butterfield's ethical position. And those who would threaten such a possibility, let alone carry it out, on behalf of 'abstract nouns' would be just the sort of self-righteous and certain egotists who have, in Butterfield's view, bedevilled human history.

Certainly this was a position about which Butterfield was uneasy. He had little to say about it in his writing on international theory and declined the offer to be honorary president of the branch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament at Cambridge, saying that he did not believe that campaigns on such issues helped.[48]

[45] 'Morality and international order', in Porter, ed., *The Aberystwyth papers*, p. 336. Even so, Butterfield insisted that, because justice was so often no more than interest dressed up, 'love and charity must be above Justice and that diplomacy is in a position to go one better than the law' (p. 350). Elsewhere, Butterfield acknowledged a moral obligation on the part of the rich and the strong to listen to the claims for redress of the poor and the weak. Hedley Bull's *Justice in international relations*, Hagey Lectures (Waterloo, Ontario: University of Waterloo, 1984) is sometimes presented as Bull's opening to the idea that the transformation of international relations might be more than a theoretical possibility. In his 'Notes for a discussion of the theory of international politics' (Jan. 1964), Butterfield identifies political theory as 'the enemy' for presenting people's duties to one another as duties to the state or society. 'I am inclined to believe that we shall not be led very far if we consider the theory of international politics as analogous with any form of political theory': Butterfield papers, file 335, Cambridge University.

[46] *George III, Lord North and the people*, p. 1.

[47] See e.g. Alberto R. Coll, *The wisdom of statecraft: Sir Herbert Butterfield and the philosophy of international politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), p. 3.

[48] In a series of letters between 1960 and 1964, Butterfield made clear both his position on nuclear weapons and his reasons for not campaigning against them. He believed his contribution was better made in other ways, and worried that campaigns might harm the case because of the political company which they attracted (presumably the communist left): file 425, Butterfield collection, Cambridge University. Discussing a British Committee paper, Butterfield said: 'It might be better that the whole world be united in communism than that these methods should be used. It might be better that Christianity should . . . suffer persecution than . . . share power with governments that need the nuclear weapon': file 336, Butterfield papers, Cambridge University.