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‘Un-cancelling the future’: Kantian ethics and the Ukraine war

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Abstract
International Relations discussion of the Ukraine War has revived an interest in ethical foreign policy debates that were central to the discipline in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This short article seeks to draw an important distinction in articulations of liberal idealism between the early post-cold war period and today. The key point is that liberal internationalism in the post-cold war period assumed that a liberal international order was able to literally come into being, realising the Kantian cosmopolitan imaginary. However, the realisation of a liberal international also brought a problematic sense of closure, an end to imaginaries of progress. The discussion of this crisis of modernity was often displaced to debates over globalisation and, more recently, the Anthropocene and catastrophic climate change, rather than directly referencing the international order itself. In analysing the Ukraine War as the first war articulated as enabling the repair of this closure, able to ‘un-cancel’ the future, this article seeks to bring the concerns of temporal closure and international order together. It is suggested that the drive to project a liberal futural imaginary marks a return to Kantian ethics with a clear separation between liberal ideals and the ‘evil’ of empirical reality itself.

Keywords
ethical foreign policy, anthropocene, Kantian ethics, Ukraine war

Introduction

One of the most talked about moments in the Ukraine conflict has been President Zelenskyy’s treatment in the White House at the hands of US President Donald Trump and Vice President JD Vance. It is this moment, on the 28th of February 2025, and more particularly the shocked European responses, which is at the heart of this contribution to the special section. This paper argues that the Ukraine was important to European states not merely in relation to the realpolitik concerns of Russian aggression but also ideologically, in terms of European soft power, Europe’s centrality to the international liberal order. In supporting Zelenskyy, European states were ‘un-cancelling’ the future, reasserting a faith in liberal internationalism, lost in the experience of foreign policy failures

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in the Balkans and the Middle East. As will be analysed below, Zelenskyy was very much presented as a figure of purity and futural potentiality in relation to European political leaders, perceived to be suffering from a loss of popular legitimacy. This fantasy projection, casting Zelenskyy as central to liberal aspirations, was very publicly undermined in the White House at the end of February 2025. However, this clash, between two different imaginaries of the international liberal order, has been poorly understood. Much of the problem was put down to personal and affective friction between the T-shirt wearing Zelenskyy and the suited and booted Americans (Wendling 2025) but underneath the superficiality of dress style lay a difference in expectations.

As will be argued below, Zelenskyy's relation to the European elites was one of fêted saviour, he was not just at war with Russia but also representing European values and futural possibilities. This was not the case in relation to Trump's America. Zelenskyy was not understood to be doing Trump a favour in either military or ideological terms. There is little wonder then that the question of (in) gratitude came up. From the Trump administration's perspective, Zelenskyy was not a morally superior being, come to provide lessons and inspirations in European liberal values, but merely an East European state leader with jumped up pretensions of grandeur which were prolonging a regional conflict. Rather than Trump and Vance being grateful to Zelenskyy for Ukraine's struggle and sacrifice they felt (as we saw on international TV all too clearly) that it was Zelenskyy who should be a little more grateful to the US for its financial and military support.

Up until this point, one of the most striking aspects of the ongoing Ukraine War, following the extension of the Russian incursion in 2022, had been the moralisation of the conflict, portrayed as an existential struggle (Fazal 2022). This moralisation went well beyond the articulation of the national and security interests at stake for the US and European powers, keen to defend both European borders and to deter other 'Great Powers', such as China, from expansionist ambitions (Beaumont 2025; Fazal 2025). Military, strategic and diplomatic support for the Ukraine had become a 'moral imperative' (Rubenstein, 2023) for policymakers and academic commentators across the political spectrum. So much so that it had been argued that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's mobilisation of 'ethical values' was central to the course of the conflict (Parmelee et al., 2024; Rosół, 2024; White, 2023; Žotkevičiūtė-Banevičienė, 2022) and many commentators, academics and political leaders thereby utilised a moral register for guiding policy responses, rather than a diplomatic or strategic one (Kögler, 2023; Milliband, 2022; Tallis, 2023).

International Relations scholarship has long been sceptical of moral and ethical understandings, suggesting that these are trumped by the realist grounds of economic and political interest. In the case of the Ukraine War, it is not difficult to articulate these 'realist' grounds. Stephen M. Walt has questioned the common assumption that there is a black and white moral case for supporting the Ukraine (2023). Commentators, that are critical of the near universal Western support for the Ukraine, have deployed the *Realpolitik* line of argumentation, seeing the West as pursuing a dangerous 'proxy war' against Russia (Hughes, 2022; see other articles in this special issue). John Mearsheimer has also famously argued that NATO expansion is the cause of Russian aggression in the Ukraine; for Mearsheimer this is no big mystery but 'Geopolitics 101' (2014, 5). Advocates for the Ukraine, on the other hand, have tended to emphasise the importance of moral and ethical reasoning, Bejamin Tallis, for example, has argued that international policy towards the Ukraine should be the foundation for the new strategic approach of 'neo-idealism':

> This is an approach that can not only defend but renew our free societies and help spread their values. The first pillar, value primacy, reflects neo-idealism's morally based approach to geopolitics; it conceives of core liberal democratic values as ideals to strive for – and sees these values as our most fundamental interests. (Tallis, 2024, 5)

In this reading, support for the Ukraine is in the interests of Western states in that it not only 'defends' but '*renews*' core Western values, which are presented as '*ideals to strive for'*. This formulation is important as it suggests that the international sphere is being instrumentalised to retrospectively construct Western liberal democratic ideals. Rather than assuming liberal democratic values as the natural grounds for liberal international assumptions, there is a suggestion that where the grounds should be there is instead a void that needs to be filled.

This article focuses upon this 'void', driving the moral and ethical case for the support for the Ukraine. In doing so, it emphasises the importance of rethinking the role of ethical and moral claim-making in the international sphere. In fine, this article seeks to make two key points. Firstly, it provides an analysis of Western commentary on the Ukraine War as an example of contemporary moves to use the foreign policy environment to articulate a futural imaginary of an ethical international order. What is undergoing ethical reconstruction is the modernist imaginary of a world in which there were clear lines of meaning, clear divides between right and wrong, civilized and uncivilized. An imaginary that international politics was an expression not so much of grubby national interests and international dependencies, but of universal liberal values, carried by Western states and expressed via discourses of national pride and purpose.

It is the contemporary recognition that claims of Western ethical superiority cannot be empirically grounded which is the concern that I wish to highlight. It is this concern that drives their futural projection, to provide a retrospective sense of meaning and purpose to both national and international policy elites. A second point is that this framing of international responses, addressing a broader problem of meaning via support for the Ukraine, brings back into focus, liberal, idealist and ethical understandings of the international sphere in the early post-cold war period. However, what is unique today is the clarity with which these claims are articulated as a liberal futurity 'to come' rather than claims that can be taken for granted or assumed (see also Chipato and Chandler 2024). The consideration of this aspect of futurity, rather than the assumption that Western values can be taken as given in the present, enables the casting of a light on how International Relations scholarship misread 'ethical foreign policy' when it was initially iterated in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The response to the discrediting of ethical foreign policy in the 2000s, with the failures of liberal internationalist interventions in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan, can then be seen as more than necessitating a rethink in terms of planning, organisation and technical or pragmatic adjustments. There has been a recalibration of ethical and moral claims to recognise the loss of legitimacy and exhaustion of liberal universalist assumptions. The claim that the Ukraine conflict seeks to 'un-cancel the future' plays therefore on Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's analysis of 'the slow cancellation of the future', in the disillusionment with grand narratives of liberal progress (see Beradi 2011, 18). This article reads the Western response to the Ukraine War, as a key example of the ethical foreign policy of the 2020s, responding to precisely this disillusionment in the field of international relations.

In this respect, the Ukraine War expresses a rearticulation of the drive for policy coherence previously expressed in the 1990s and 2000s but reworked in ways which increasingly rely upon a futural imaginary rather than naturalised assumptions of liberal values as timeless and as historically illustrated and legitimised by Western state actions. In contemporary attempts to use the Ukraine War to 'un-cancel the future', the gap between Western state historical practices, in terms of coloniality, Indigenous dispossession, racial capitalism and environmental despoilation, and the claims of universal humanity of liberal idealism are laid bare. The articulation of 'Western values' as a promise 'to come', both exposes the vacuum at the heart of the international order and seeks to conceal this vacuum through the imaginary of futural and retrospective reparation.

The Ukraine war and liberal futurity

This article reads the European and American responses to the Ukraine war, up until the change of US administration with the re-election of Donald Trump in November 2024, as an example of contemporary moves to use the foreign policy environment to articulate an imaginary of liberal futurity. This conceptual framing is in some ways straightforward: political discussion and media coverage of military conflict tends to always point beyond literal, strategic, or battlefield questions, to those of existential meaning. Thus, wars are discursively framed in the context of the fears and concerns of their times. However, there is also something counter-intuitive about this point because the contemporary crisis of confidence in liberal modernist certainties tends to discursively focus upon the concerns of climate change and environmental crisis, often under the rubric of the Anthropocene. This crisis of liberal modernist assumptions is one that seems very distant from the policymaking concerns of international peace and conflict where the concerns of *realpolitik* traditionally take centre place.[1]

In International Relations journals, military conflict – for example, the Ukraine War as the 'final twentieth century war' (O'Brien, 2022) - and imaginaries of the Anthropocene, as a 'posthuman political aesthetic' (Wamberg and Thomsen, 2017), have been largely treated separately, as if war was somehow 'modernist' and the Anthropocene was 'postmodern'. Two topics, two temporalities, two methodological frameworks, two different scholarly communities. However, the wager of this article is that if the Anthropocene is the contemporary condition we are in (see Chandler et al., 2021), rather than an organisational and policy question of addressing climate change, then we should be able to see how the loss of confidence in liberal modernity and its affirmative imaginaries of progress is played out in the Ukraine War, as in any other policy sphere. In fact, to push the point further, the Ukraine War seems to be a perfect case study of the vacuum at the heart of the crisis of liberal futurity. The sense that the liberal international project is coming to a close is palpable in attempts to exploit Zelenskyy's rhetoric to 'remoralise' the international arena.

There appears to be a mismatch between the international attention given to the Ukraine War and events on the ground. On the strategic level, little seems to be happening for long periods with the war largely stuck territorially. However, on the international level, the Ukraine has been very successful in garnering more and more diplomatic weight along with high-level statements of political support and promises of more military equipment. For example, the European Union has risked its own political unity by strengthening support for the Ukraine, forcing Poland, Hungary and Slovakia to accept Ukraine grain exports which threaten their own domestic economies (Moens and Brzeziński, 2023). US president Joe Biden supplied the Ukraine with long-range army tactical missile systems (ATACMS), expanding the possible range of missiles that can be used in Russian territory (Graham-Harrison, 2023). Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau (Yang et al., 2023) and the UK Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, have also promised long-term commitments, in Starmer's case, announcing a 'historic' 100-year partnership in January 2025 (Harding, 2025).

Bearing this in mind, the point I wish to make in this article is that discussions of international conflict involve much more than some imagined objective assumption of 'national interest'. International Relations as a disciplinary project, in fact, has long recognised that international policymaking cannot be read off some metric of pre-existing interests but rather the opposite is the case, that political interests are autonomous from any other sphere, dependent upon political and cultural context (see, for example, Morgenthau 1993, 4-19). Even though this understanding of national interests, as not being narrowly materialist but also ideologically grounded, is central to classical realism, contemporary approaches to IR read interests in a particularly reductive way. For this reason, it is important to bring the Ukraine war into the broader context of the Western political

malaise; the fear that the liberal telos of progress is over and that the future has been 'cancelled'. This sense of malaise is nowhere more clearly expressed that in concerns over catastrophic global warming and that planetary climate change has already taken the Earth past fundamental 'tipping points'. This sense of futural closure is often expressed through discussions of the Anthropocene, held to be an era of human-induced climate crisis (Chandler et al., 2021).

This article suggests that international policy discussion mobilising support for the Ukraine War could, in fact, be analysed in much the same way as more obviously 'Anthropocene' discourses are. By this, I mean that 'Anthropocene' discourses are expected to project understandings of modernist limits and to negotiate the loss of Western confidence and superiority, while war and conflicts are expected to be analysed in more pragmatic policy terms. Perhaps a way into a different reading of the Ukraine War could be through James Cameron's 2009 science fiction film *Avatar* where destructive conflict is played out between the colonial humans on a depleted Earth and the Na'vi, blue-skinned humanoids who live in harmony with nature on the planet Pandora. The film is about Jake's human journey from a destructive colonial mode of extractivism to a renewed appreciation of the importance of living with other beings who share our environment. It is through the engagement with the indigenous Na'vi that humans (and the film's audience) can be potentially transformed for the better. In Avatar, the engagement with the Indigenous non-Western 'Other' enables 'values' to overcome 'interests', but the key point is that these are values that were already lost under acquisitive extractive modes of Western being. In the Anthropocene, the Na'vi are necessary to realise both the extent of this loss and to overcome it too, in fact, to reclaim the 'reality' of what it means to be human.

It could be argued that Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy plays the very same role for the West. His seemingly naïve desire for democracy, freedom, and the market and to be included in any available Western institutions reminds Western leaders of what they have lost. Zelenskyy is seen to express 'real' European or Western values and desires (Tanno et al., 2023), as opposed to the actual ones, discredited by neoliberalism, entrenched inequalities and racial exclusions. As Benjamin Tallis (2023) states:

> Citing principle after moral principle, Zelenskyy has appealed to parliaments, leaders, and peoples across the West to help his country by giving them the hard power tools they need to fight – and win. He has encouraged people and politicians to relive the heroic moments of their history and confronted them with examples of where they failed to live up to their ideals.

Like the indigenous Na'vi, Zelenskyy and the Ukraine struggle itself, are cinematically read as providing an affirmative futural imaginary at a time when Western and European political institutions appear broadly discredited. By intervening to save the Ukraine we do not save ourselves, in some realist or interest-based understanding, but something else entirely: we save our *future* selves by becoming better, realer, or truer to our 'values' and our 'interests'. If the Anthropocene is about cancelling the future, then the Ukraine War is discursively framed in opposition to this: the war, in the words of Ukraine advocate Tallis, writing in this journal, can be seen as one of existential importance in enabling Western elites to 'un-cancel the future' (Tallis, 2020).

Ethical foreign policy

The desire to 'un-cancel the future' shines a new light on liberal internationalist understandings of ethical foreign policy at the end of the cold war in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The definition of an 'ethical' foreign policy, and the means of its realisation, still remain the subject of disagreement

among academic analysts of International Relations. However, there is a general consensus that Western government policymakers experimented, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with explicitly taking on board normative and ethical concerns, shifting away from a 'realist' approach in which a more narrowly conceived national interest was the basis of policy-making.[2] This policy shift meant that the declarations of 'ethical foreign policy' emanating from the governments of leading world powers were often uncritically taken at face value and assumed to be 'simply the right thing to do'.

The crisis of confidence in Western political leadership and ideological purpose, clear in the exaggerated projections of the Ukraine War, as a struggle through which the future of the liberal international order can be reclaimed, can be read back to the concerns of ethical foreign policy in the early post-cold war years. The difference is that in the 1990s and 2000s there were a set of assumptions that the international order could easily be recast in term of liberal universalist aspirations, i.e., that the implosion of the Soviet Union meant that liberal modernity had triumphed. Today, liberal modernist assumptions of progress and of universal values stand exposed as problematic. These 'values' are themselves seen as open to question and, for many commentators, to be to blame for the contemporary crisis of the environment and its colonial and Eurocentric underpinnings. It is this seeming exhaustion of liberalism at the level of ideological legitimacy that necessitates the idealist advocacy for the Ukraine in futural terms. In many ways, as stated above, the call to 'un-cancel the future' reveals the void at the heart of liberalism, the fact that once the cold war conflict was taken away there was no original or underlying universal community waiting to take its place.

The Anthropocene could be seen to have put the question of liberal values in doubt, particularly the ideological telos of liberal progress at the heart of the modern ontology which presupposes the 'human', 'civilization' and the international state system itself as emerging processually from 'barbarism', the 'state of nature', or the natural state of 'anarchy'. It is this telos which legitimated the liberal order of international hierarchy and exclusion. In the 1990s and 2000s, it appeared to scholars of International Relations that this telos was either playing itself out, having come loose from the artifical constraints - the 'freezing' of the cold war - or was about to take-off, given a new dynamic energy from the final establishing of a unifying ground. The drive to use the international arena as a materialisation of this liberal telos, of Western mission and purpose, could be seen in the justifications for a host of post-cold war policy initiatives including major international involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, former Yugoslavia, East Timor and Sierra Leone (Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, 1996; Wheeler, 2000).

For many commentators, this new beginning, the recasting of the international order in moral universal rather than strategic terms, was given clearest expression in 'international community' support for military intervention in the 1999 Kosovo war.[3] The historic transformation marked by this conflict was emphasised by Czech president Vaclav Havel, speaking in April of that year:

> But there is one thing no reasonable person can deny: this is probably the first war that has not been waged in the name of 'national interests', but rather in the name of principles and values. If one can say of any war that it is ethical, or that it is being waged for ethical reasons, then it is true of this war. Kosovo has no oil fields to be coveted; no member nation in the alliance has any territorial demands on Kosovo; Milosevic does not threaten the territorial integrity of any member of the alliance. And yet the alliance is at war. It is fighting out of a concern for the fate of others. It is fighting because no decent person can stand by and watch the systematic, state-directed murder of other people. It cannot tolerate such a thing. It cannot fail to provide assistance if it is within its power to do so (Falk, 1999, 848).

The US-led military intervention against Afghanistan in 2001 was also couched in the ethical language of caring for others rather than merely the narrow pursuit of the interests of state. In addition to stressing US national interests in responding to an attack on its major symbols of economic and military dominance, the US establishment and the coalition of supporting states stressed the humanitarian nature of the military response, which included the dropping of food and medical provisions. President George W. Bush described the bombing of Afghanistan as an action of 'generosity of America and our allies' in the aid of the 'oppressed people of Afghanistan' (Bush, 2001). The US defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, argued that the military action was in line with previous US-led interventions in Kuwait, Northern Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo 'for the purpose of denying hostile regimes the opportunity to oppress their own people and other people', adding that: 'We stand with those Afghans who are being repressed by a regime that abuses the very people it purports to lead' (Rumsfeld, 2001).

In the discipline of International Relations, among the many explanations forwarded to explain the importance of interventionist 'ethical' foreign policy in the 1990s, two broad approaches stood out. The first approach was a gradualist one, which argued that the shift to prioritising the interests of those in other countries was part of a slow evolution of universal human rights concerns since 1945.[4] The second approach argued that there had been a radical break, explained through a focus on qualitative changes in international society. In the first approach, post-1945 history was often described as an 'evolutionary process for international human rights law' (Robertson, 1999, xiv; Wagenseil, 1999). Often this 'evolution' was described in a number of stages. Thomas Buergenthal (1997) analysed three: the normative foundation of human rights in the UN Charter and the International Covenants of 1966; followed by the stage of institution building with the establishment of the UN Human Rights Committee and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in the 1970s; and the third stage, that of implementation in the post-cold war era with the 1993 UN Vienna Declaration on Human Rights, which stated that the 'promotion and protection of all human rights is a legitimate concern of the international community'.

The idea of gradual progress towards institutionalising an ethical international agenda assumed a dynamic inherent in the UN system of human rights provisions which tended to overlook the impact of dramatic changes in the international framework with the end of the cold war (Boerefijn, 1995; King, 1999; Montgomery, 1999). For many commentators, these changes in fact challenged the cold war UN framework and reflected a fundamentally different conception of the relative importance of non-national concerns such as the rights and interests of non-citizens, in relation to UN norms and international law.[5] Claims that ethical policymaking put a duty to protect the rights of the individual above the rights of state sovereignty indicated the break with the earlier framework established by the UN (for example, ICISS, 2001). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 was a non-binding UN General Assembly resolution, which promoted human rights in abstract terms and was not intended to be read as a statement of law or legal obligation (Robertson, 1999, 30, 75; Mills, 1997, 276; Corell, 1997, 519; Ignatieff, 1999). Similarly, the drafters of the 1948 Genocide Convention chose to explicitly reject universal jurisdiction for the crime, Article 6 giving national governments the final responsibility for prosecution of the crime on their territory (UN, 1948).

The second approach emphasised changes in the international sphere which were held to have led to a radical shift in both the language and institutional mechanisms of foreign policy. There was little agreement on which of the many factors had been key to this transformation. For some writers, the challenge to the UN Charter framework of state sovereignty and non-intervention and the rise of the focus of individual rights and new rights of intervention reflected new practical realities. These commentators focused on the changing nature of conflict, problems of 'failed states' and 'complex emergencies' and the increase in the vulnerability of non-combatants since the end of the cold war

(see, for example, Gutman and Rieff, 1999; Jackson, 1990; Kaldor, 1999; Thurer, 1999; Weiss, 1999; Zartman, 1995). For other analysts, the focus was on the new demands of global or international 'civil society', reflecting higher levels of concern about rights abuses around the world due to the communications power of the Internet, CNN, and social media, forcing governments to act to assuage the concerns of voters and civic groups (Robertson, 1999, 373; Annan, 1998, 57).

Both of these framings of a liberal international futurity have the universal imaginary of the human at the centre. The human as a reparative universality able to heal the international order and to ovecome its past of dispossession, racial exclusion and environmental extractivism. Here, the healing power of the international realm as a promise to come or as a transcendental journey towards unification and harmony reproduces, literally, the discipline of International Relations' Kantian underpinnings. Kant's 1795 (1970) essay 'Perpetual Peace' makes exactly the same claims that the 'human race' can be brought 'nearer and nearer to a cosmopolitan constitution' and world citizenship (Kant, 1970, 106). This futural 'perfection' was articulated in opposition to and in reparation for:

> … the *inhospitable* conduct of the civilized states of our continent, especially the commercial states, the injustice which they display in *visiting* foreign countries and peoples (which in their case is the same as *conquering* them) seems appallingly great. America, the negro countries, the Spice Islands, the Cape, etc. were looked upon at the time of their discovery as ownerless territories, for the native inhabitants counted the inhabitants as nothing. In East India (Hindustan), foreign troops were brought in under the pretext of merely setting up trading posts. This led to oppression of the natives, incitement of the various Indian states to widespread wars, famine, insurrection, treachery, and the whole litany of evils which can afflict the human race. (Kant, 1970, 106)

Ethical foreign policy discourses of the 1990s and 2000s tapped into underlying liberal assumptions, particularly prevalent in the academic discipline of International Relations, which assumed a liberal telos underlying world history. This telos of progress and of 'civilization' was one that could only ever exist in distinction to empirical reality, as a liberal futurity 'to come', to be realised. The mistake that International Relations scholars and commentators made was to assume that the liberal internationalist imaginary had been realised literally with the ending of the cold war. It was this 'literalisation', 'materialisation', or we could say 'ontologistation', of the Kantian liberal imaginary that bought an end to the telos.[6] Counter-intuitive as it might seem, ethical foreign policy of the 1990s and 2000s, in literally imagining a universal world in which there would be a reparation for the historical and contemporary 'litany of evils', resulted in the discrediting of international claims to universalism. Once 'the international community' failed to deliver on its promises of international development, liberal institutions and international security, the vacuum at the heart of liberal idealism was exposed. The moment the futurity of liberal internationalism 'to come' was traded for contemporary policymaking legitimacy, the price was the cancellation of the future.

Conclusion: un-cancelling the future?

To conclude this article, it is worth considering the limits of international imaginaries of liberal futurity. While it is easy to empirically draw out the inevitable limits and contradictions of 'ethical' foreign policy when it comes to questions of economic and geo-strategic self-interest, it is more difficult to understand the commitment of Western troops and resources, in situations which appeared to involve little geo-political or strategic interest, in the 1990s and early 2000s. As David Rieff (2000) astutely argued at the time, perhaps a better approach to understanding the attraction of

ethical foreign policy is not necessarily to start with policy outcomes, either in terms of human rights promotion or some other covert *realpolitik* agenda:

> The fact that it is so easy for us to poke holes in the doctrine should give us pause, not lead us to pat ourselves on the back. It should, at the very least, make us wonder where humanitarian intervention fits in and why it has become (along with human rights) a central rhetorical plank of so-called Third Way politics in the West ... [H]umanitarian intervention is important because it is central to the post-cold war west's moral conception of itself ... And in this context what is important about humanitarian intervention is an idea, rather than a practice ... [T]hose who oppose the doctrine should not console themselves with the thought that by refuting its practical applications they have accomplished much of anything.

What is important about ethical foreign policy claims 'is *an idea, rather than a practice'*. It is in fact the crux of the analysis presented here that the importance of the separation between the *idea* and the *practice* of liberal internationalism is taken on board. Looking back from the vantage point of today, particularly as seen through the lens of the international discursive claims around the Ukraine War, the crisis of liberal confidence enables a different reading of ethical foreign policy in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This crisis was already coming to the surface with the end of cold war certainties. It was this vacuum that necessitated the literalisation of a Kantian imaginary that was always futural; that always depended upon an unbridgeable gap between the noumenal and the phenomenal, between the unattainable essence of liberalism and the 'whole litany of evils' that marked its reality.

What appears clearly now, as a crisis of legitimacy for liberal modernist political frameworks, was initially seen in the discipline of International Relations as a sign of liberal confidence, as if there was a realisation of a Kantian idealist imaginary, once the cold war antagonism was removed. In the 1990s and 2000s, ethical foreign policy was understood to naturally, to organically, fill the vacuum of meaning which had previously been focused entirely upon the cold war contestation of America and the Soviet Union, shaping a world of left and right and of existential meaning dependent upon nuclear (in)security. In the 2020s, it is clear that the assumption that liberal modernist underpinnings were somehow given, that they could be grasped literally, as if they were co-determinous with legal documents and new constitutions, was very far from the truth. Thus, the Ukraine War can be seen as the first war against this literalisation, against this temporal closure. In fact, as the first war of the Anthropocene, the first war discursively framed with the goal of 'un-cancelling the future'. The first major international conflict to be addressed with the conscious attempt to return to an international discourse of disavowal, to a discourse of liberalism 'to come'.

One way of thinking this through might be to ask: 'What would you sacrifice to un-cancel the future?' or, to borrow Claire Colebrook's expression (2023), '*Who Would You Kill to Save the World?'* The problem with saving our future selves through saving the Ukraine is, as stated, that it is a return to a discourse of disavowal. A disavowal of a Western or European actual past and actual present. The salvation of liberal, Western, modernist, European 'values' can only come at the expense of understanding the actual reality of colonial, extractivist, and racial reasoning at their base. When thinking about 'un-cancelling the future', learning the lessons of the past, or becoming truer to our 'real selves', as Elizabeth Povinelli notes (2021, 38), it is crucial to 'remember the function of the horizon and frontier in liberalism as a mechanism of disavowal'. The war for the Ukraine is a war of disavowal, a war through which it is hoped the 'idea' of modernity, the idea of 'Europe', the idea of 'values' can conceal their rather shabbier reality.

The key point that this article has wished to emphasise is that the discourse of liberal idealism, of liberal futurity, has always, from the time of Kant onwards, been a discourse of disavowal. As such, the articulation of a liberalism 'to come' returns us to a more traditional liberal imaginary in International Relations. The irony of the Ukraine War is that the discourse of 'un-cancelling' the future is actually more true to International Relations' disciplinary roots than the liberal imaginaries that confused and failed to distinguish liberal ideals and realities. In the discipline of International Relations, which was itself a cold war discipline (Halliday, 1994), the void at the heart of liberal governance was covered over by geopolitical and ideological contestation. It appeared that liberal political institutions were in an existential struggle against the Soviet threat, that the politics of left and right provided a contestation that made political structures meaningful and engaging. Without the contestation of the cold war, it was assumed that, with liberalism's 'enemies' defeated, the international order has reached the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1989). In fact, as Fukuyama intimated at the close of his essay, the 'end of history' resulted in a problematic closure that could no longer safeguard the liberal imaginary from its implication in reality's 'litany of evils'. It is this closure that is being fought today in the futural advocacy for the Ukraine's war effort against Russia. Liberal structures of meaning are again recast as futural and 'to come' through a Kantian imaginary of liberal order of 'forever war' (CREES, 2024) that enables this orders' idealisation rather than its realisation.

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Notes

1. Michel Serres (1995) was perhaps one of the first contemporary theorists to directly address international conflict and global environmental concerns across a shared register of concern. His purpose in doing so was precisely to reveal the blind spots in International Relations theorizing concerning issues and conflicts which are not structured in terms of state-based forms of competition.
2. See for example, Smith and Light (2001); Booth et al. (2000). The term 'ethical foreign policy' is used here as shorthand for a projection of an ethical or moral investment in the international sphere. I do not argue that this assertion can be anything other than highly selective. The limits of ethical foreign policy in the late 1990s are dealt with in more detail in a number of works, including Chandler (2002), 82-88; Brown (2001); Economides (2001). My concern here is the parallels with the discursive framing of the Ukraine War rather than a study of foreign policy or foreign trade relations per se.
3. Declared by many commentators to be the first ethical humanitarian war, see for example, Klug (2000); Lord Robertson, 2000, 22. Of course, the term 'international community' was a politically loaded one which attempted to minimise the importance of the opposition to the war from Russia, China, India and many other members of the 'international community'.

4. Human rights concerns were often considered to be the 'litmus test' of ethical foreign policy as they involved the prioritisation of the universal interests of people on the basis of their membership of the human race rather than upon the accidental basis of their citizenship within a particular political entity.
5. For example, Tim Dunne and Nicholas Wheeler (2001, 183) asserted that in acting as a good international citizen in intervening in Kosovo, the British government was effectively 'advancing a new legal claim that challenged existing UN norms'.
6. See Seán Molloy's in-depth engagement, in *Kant's* International Relations (2017), for a closer reading of how contemporary International Relations theorists misread Kant to 'rationalize' and, in effect, to remove, the centrality of the liberal telos of Kant which stretched beyond human capacities for realisation.

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