**Assessing the Significance of Ethics in International Relations: “Thick” or “Thin” Accounts in 21st Century World Politics**

**Introduction:**

Ethics play a crucial role in international relations, as they provide normative frameworks and moral guidelines for states’ actions in the global arena. However, there is an ongoing debate regarding the nature and significance of ethics in international relations. Scholars often classify ethical approaches as “thick” or “thin,” with each perspective offering distinct insights into the complexities of world politics. This essay aims to assess the significance of ethics in international relations and explore whether a “thick” or “thin” account is more relevant in the 21st century, by analyzing relevant data and discussing the arguments put forth by scholars.

1. **Understanding “Thick” and “Thin” Accounts of Ethics in International Relations:**
	1. “Thin” Accounts of Ethics:

“Thin” accounts of ethics in international relations primarily focus on minimal standards of behavior and adherence to international norms and laws. This perspective often emphasizes state sovereignty, non-intervention, and respect for human rights as the core ethical principles guiding international conduct. “Thin” accounts tend to be pragmatic and prioritize stability, order, and self-interest over moral considerations. Critics argue that this approach neglects the complexities of power dynamics, inequality, and cultural contexts that shape international relations.

* 1. “Thick” Accounts of Ethics:

“Thick” accounts of ethics in international relations go beyond minimal standards and consider the moral dimensions of global politics. These accounts emphasize the importance of justice, human rights, distributive fairness, and the responsibility of states to address global challenges such as poverty, climate change, and conflict. “Thick” accounts argue that ethical considerations should guide decision-making and state behavior, even if they may conflict with state interests or existing international structures. Critics of “thick” accounts suggest that they can be overly idealistic and impractical in the realpolitik of world politics.

1. **The Significance of Ethics in International Relations:**
	1. Peace and Stability:

Ethical considerations play a crucial role in promoting peace and stability in international relations. The adherence to international norms, such as the prohibition of aggression and respect for human rights, helps prevent conflicts and human suffering. Empirical studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between human rights practices and peaceful relations between states. For instance, a study by Mansfield and Snyder (2005) found that states with better human rights records are less likely to engage in militarized disputes.

* 1. Global Cooperation and Collective Action:

Ethics also contribute to global cooperation and collective action in addressing transnational challenges. Issues such as climate change, terrorism, and pandemics require collective efforts and a shared ethical commitment to finding solutions. The establishment of international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement on climate change, reflects a recognition of the moral imperative to protect the planet for future generations.

* 1. Legitimacy and Soft Power:

Ethics enhance a state’s legitimacy and soft power in international relations. States that uphold ethical principles and demonstrate a commitment to human rights and justice are more likely to gain respect and influence on the global stage. For example, Nordic countries have consistently ranked high in global indices of ethical governance and human rights, enhancing their international reputation and influence.

* 1. Global Cooperation and Collective Action:

Ethics play a crucial role in promoting global cooperation and collective action to address transnational challenges. The Paris Agreement on climate change serves as a prominent example of international cooperation based on ethical considerations. The agreement, adopted in 2015, aims to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The ethical imperative to protect vulnerable populations and future generations from the impacts of climate change is central to the agreement’s objectives.

Similarly, the fight against terrorism requires international collaboration based on ethical principles. Various United Nations resolutions, such as Security Council Resolution 1373, emphasize the importance of respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism. Ethical considerations guide the global response to terrorism, ensuring that counterterrorism measures do not violate basic human rights.

* 1. Legitimacy and Soft Power:

Ethics enhance a state’s legitimacy and soft power in international relations. States that uphold ethical principles and demonstrate a commitment to human rights, justice, and good governance are more likely to gain respect and influence on the global stage.

The World Governance Indicators (WGI), developed by the World Bank, provide data on governance performance worldwide. These indicators measure dimensions such as voice and accountability, government effectiveness, rule of law, regulatory quality, and control of corruption. States that score higher on these indicators are generally perceived as more legitimate and are more likely to exert soft power and influence in international relations.

Scandinavian countries, such as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, are often regarded as exemplars of ethical governance. The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index consistently ranks these countries among the least corrupt globally, reflecting their strong commitment to ethics and good governance. Their reputation for ethical practices enhances their soft power and influence in international affairs.

1. **Assessing the Relevance of “Thick” or “Thin” Accounts in the 21st Century:**
	1. Complex Global Challenges:

The 21st century is marked by complex global challenges that necessitate a “thick” account of ethics. Issues such as climate change, migration, poverty, and inequality require a holistic approach that considers the moral responsibilities of states. A “thin” account may overlook the interconnectedness of these challenges and fail to address the root causes, perpetuating injustices and exacerbating tensions between states.

* 1. Global Public Opinion and Civil Society:

In the age of interconnectedness and social media, global public opinion and civil society have gained significant influence in shaping international relations. Ethical considerations are increasingly important for states to gain public support and legitimacy. Violations of human rights and ethical norms are often met with public outrage and can lead to diplomatic and economic consequences. The Arab Spring and the global response to the Rohingya crisis are examples of how ethical concerns resonate with public sentiment and shape international actions.

* 1. Normative Shifts and Evolving International Law:

Normative shifts and evolving international law reflect the growing significance of ethics in international relations. The development of international criminal law, the establishment of the International Criminal Court, and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle demonstrate an increasing recognition of the moral responsibilities of states. These developments indicate a movement toward a “thicker” ethical account, demanding action in the face of grave human rights abuses and atrocities.

1. **Assessing the Relevance of “Thick” or “Thin” Accounts in the 21st Century:**
	1. Complex Global

s and advocate for the protection of human rights. Their work contributes to shaping international norms and practices based on ethical considerations.

* 1. Normative Shifts and Evolving International Law:

Normative shifts and evolving international law demonstrate the growing significance of ethics in international relations. The development of international criminal law and the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) reflect a commitment to justice and accountability. As of September 2021, the ICC had investigated and prosecuted individuals for crimes committed in countries such as Sudan, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Central African Republic. These cases demonstrate the importance of ethical considerations in addressing gross human rights violations.

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle is another example of an evolving norm in international relations. R2P asserts that states have a responsibility to protect their populations from mass atrocities and that the international community has a responsibility to assist states in fulfilling this duty. The 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, which incorporated R2P, reflects the ethical recognition of preventing and responding to mass atrocities.

d) Complex Global Challenges:

The 21st century presents increasingly complex global challenges that demand a “thick” ethical account. Poverty and inequality remain significant concerns worldwide. According to the World Bank, as of 2020, more than 700 million people lived in extreme poverty, surviving on less than $1.90 per day. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive ethical approach that considers distributive fairness and the moral obligation to reduce poverty and inequality.

In terms of conflict and peacebuilding, the responsibility to protect principle underscores the ethical obligation of states to prevent and respond to mass atrocities. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, armed conflicts have led to significant civilian casualties and humanitarian crises in recent years. Ethical considerations regarding the protection of civilians and the promotion of peace and security play a crucial role in shaping international responses to conflicts.

e) Global Public Opinion and Civil Society:

Global public opinion and civil society continue to shape international relations and emphasize the significance of ethics. Public sentiment regarding ethical concerns influences state behavior and policy decisions. Surveys and polls conducted by organizations like Pew Research Center and Gallup provide insights into global public opinion on various issues, including human rights, climate change, and conflict. These data highlight the importance of ethical considerations in shaping public attitudes and influencing state actions.

Civil society organizations also contribute to the ethical discourse in international relations. Their monitoring, advocacy, and mobilization efforts draw attention to ethical issues and hold states accountable for their actions. For example, Amnesty International’s annual reports on human rights practices provide detailed data on human rights violations and shed light on the ethical implications of state actions.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, ethics play a paramount role in international relations, guiding state behavior, promoting global cooperation, and enhancing legitimacy. The challenges of the 21st century, such as climate change, migration, and global inequality, require a robust and comprehensive ethical framework that encompasses justice, human rights, and global responsibilities.

The influence of global public opinion and civil society has become increasingly significant in shaping international relations. Movements and protests driven by ethical concerns have the power to mobilize societies, create awareness, and put pressure on states to act ethically. The widespread demonstrations sparked by the Black Lives Matter movement and the youth-led climate strikes demonstrate how ethical considerations resonate with the public and demand meaningful change in state policies.

Moreover, the establishment of international institutions and the development of evolving international law reflect the growing recognition of ethics in addressing human rights abuses. The International Criminal Court’s jurisdiction over war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide exemplifies the global commitment to accountability and justice. The Responsibility to Protect principle signifies a normative shift that recognizes the ethical responsibility of states to protect their populations from mass atrocities.

Ethics serve as a guiding compass in international relations, providing normative frameworks and moral principles. The global challenges we face demand an ethical account that encompasses justice, human rights, and global responsibilities. The influence of global public opinion, civil society activism, and evolving international norms underscores the growing recognition of ethics in shaping international relations. By continuously seeking knowledge and understanding, we can strive towards a more just, equitable, and ethically-driven global order.

Furthermore, as we progress into the 21st century, it is essential to acknowledge the interconnectedness and interdependence of the global community. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has profoundly affected every corner of the world, highlights the need for ethical considerations in international relations. The pandemic has revealed the importance of solidarity, cooperation, and equitable access to vaccines and healthcare. Ethical principles such as fairness, transparency, and compassion have come to the forefront in addressing the crisis and mitigating its impact on vulnerable populations.

The evolving nature of global challenges and the shifting dynamics of international relations necessitate ongoing evaluation and adaptation of ethical frameworks. It is crucial to continually reassess the relevance of ethical accounts, taking into account new realities, emerging issues, and diverse perspectives. By incorporating multidisciplinary research, diverse voices, and an ongoing dialogue, we can enhance our understanding of ethics in international relations and develop strategies that align with the complexities of the contemporary world.

In conclusion, ethics form the foundation of international relations, guiding state actions and promoting global cooperation. The challenges of the 21st century require a robust ethical framework that addresses complex global issues such as climate change, migration, and inequality. The influence of global public opinion, civil society, evolving international norms, and recent crises underscores the significance of ethics in shaping international relations. By embracing ongoing research, adaptability, and dialogue, we can foster a more ethical and inclusive global order that seeks to address challenges, uphold human rights, and promote justice on a global scale.