

Morality and foreign policy essay

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Morality and Foreign Policy Morality is held to express the grand aspiration to do right by all humanity. Although it may sometimes be taken as an element of national policies, it is at heart distinct from, and in tension with, purely national interests. Those interests are not thought of as chiefly moral, but as “pragmatic” or “political.” These terms usually mean that national interests center on preserving if not enhancing the wealth and power of a nation’s government and people. Hence, morality is fundamentally something apart from national interests, so that however often the two may coincide in practice, sooner or later morality must be subordinated to national claims, or vice-versa.

Neo-Kantian moralists often stress that certain moral considerations are part of the very definition of, at least, American national interests. Writers like Shue have done a service in arguing persistently for the relevance of morality to American foreign policy and international affairs. But the neo-Kantian moralists have not fully captured the genuine wisdom about practical possibilities contained in realism. Neo-Kantians constitute the very core of American national interests. Indeed, they give moral standing to imperatives to provide for national welfare and defense so long as the nation does not permanently abandon the precepts that give its existence moral value. Those precepts are not best understood, however, as embodying transcendently based universal principles of social justice.

Rather, they express the nation’s reflectively chosen moral goals—to respect human liberties throughout the world and to advance them, initially and especially, at home. This view encompasses the concerns for actual consequences, and the recognition of certain national claims, which form the

strengths of the realist perspective, without sanctioning the dismissiveness toward morality realism can foster. (Beer and Hariman, 1–30) And while it does not overcome the real differences in private and public perspectives on humanitarianism and national claims, it does clarify those differences and their moral appropriateness in ways that may make healthy dialogue and cooperation between governmental and private agencies more feasible. Contemporary international moralists like Henry Shue and Charles Beitz do articulate some widely shared moral intuitions. Usually, Morality is considered superior to national self-interest, as something universal and enduring, applicable to and for all human beings. For this reason, Shue has such force when he writes in this volume that there are some things one simply “ does not do” and “ some things one must do,” and when he asserts that “ clear thinking” can demonstrate what truly is humanitarian aid and what is actually only military assistance, or at best compensation owed for past injustices. Amidst the obscuring smog of political rhetoric, such crisp assertions can come as a breath of fresh air. (Shue, 1980)And when morality speaks through the pens of most recent international moralists, it speaks almost exclusively of distributive justice.

That is overtly the focus of the relevant books by Beitz and Shue. In his paper here Beitz adds a more elaborate framework of constraints, mandates, and ideals. That framework does not, however, alter his basic identification of universal morality with justice alone. As Beitz indicates, “ principles of international justice” provide “ the grounds for both constraints and mandates.” Thus he really present only with a contrast between “ just principles” and “ ideals,” such as the promotion of freedom, the ideal Shue

attributes to the United States. And Shue treats his principles of justice, expressed in constraints and mandates, as more authoritative than “ our own ideals.

” (Beitz, 123–36) From the fundamental difference in the presumptions they make about the moral status of the American polity, there flow quite different structures to the moral obligations U. S. governmental and private humanitarian agencies believe they possess. It may be useful to summarize those structures in the simplest possible form. If Americans believe their nationhood rests on their shared commitments to liberty then the basic structure of their government’s obligatory moral goals is threefold, with the goals arranged in order of moral priority. First, the United States must strive to avoid violating the fundamental liberties of all human beings, citizens and non-citizens alike, at home and abroad.

This requirement entails some conception of what constitute fundamental human liberties, and this is of course a controversial question. But Americans who take their principles seriously must nonetheless strive to answer that question as honestly as possible, in light of available moral knowledge and experience, and then to abide by their answers. That means they can infringe the basic liberties of others only when their own basic liberties are at stake—a sadly common occurrence, yet not so common as governments sometimes assert. Second, governmental agencies should attempt especially to establish policies and institutions that enhance the secure possession and enjoyment of such liberties for Americans. Since the first objective has moral priority, this enhancement cannot properly be sought through violations of what Americans acknowledge to be basic human liberties. But within the <https://assignbuster.com/morality-and-foreign-policy-essay/>

bounds of that constraint, American officials can properly place the interests Americans share ahead of the claims of others.

The citizenry's common national membership is, after all, understood to rest precisely on mutual commitments to assist compatriots in the collective endeavor of providing for what they judge to be shared lives of freedom. Even so, on this view the commitment to freedom for all remains a defining element of America's national aims. Hence the final objective must be for the United States to strive similarly to promote liberty for non-nationals, insofar as it can do so consistently with the prior two goals. This is an objective that will sound reassuringly internationalist to some and dangerously interventionist to others. Its very real potential dangers can be diminished if Americans remind themselves that while they believe their commitments to liberty are morally correct, and while they have every reason to defend those commitments against those who claim authority to override them, they still must recognize that their beliefs are at best matters of practical wisdom, not certain knowledge. (McMahan, 75–101) Hence it is appropriate for the United States to try to persuade states and peoples with different moral traditions of the propriety of liberal values; to enhance the opportunities of others when it can do so in non-coercive ways; and even for the U. S.

to prevent clear violations of the liberties of others when it can do so without great risk to its own citizens or innocent parties. But the limits of moral knowledge mean that it is proper for the United States to approach other nations in a spirit of tolerance and willingness to compromise on some differences, instead of attempting to impose forcibly the values it finds compelling on those to whom they are as yet alien. This three-part system of

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national moral obligations obviously leaves much unsettled, yet it does take stands on some controversial questions, including whether compatriots have special claims. Hence it is not vacuous. The structure of moral obligations for private humanitarians is simpler yet, being twofold. Humanitarian agencies find it equally appropriate, to take the ban on violating any person's basic liberties as a first priority. Then they strive to help meet the basic needs of the most helpless and endangered persons they can reach. In some instances, those needs may be met best by helping people to remain in or return to their homeland, where natural disasters, for example, might otherwise compel them to leave.

(Nincic, 29–55) In other instances, the most beneficial aid may be transport away from dire conditions to a nation that can provide safe harbor. But as suggested above, private humanitarians will not otherwise attach any special value to helping persons maintain the life of any particular polity. Indeed, they may well believe that the existing world system, dominated by nation-states, ought to be ultimately transcended so that human needs can be better met by different institutions. These differences in national and private moral perspectives inevitably issue in different senses of what is genuinely humanitarian. United States officials cannot be expected to view as truly humanitarian any policy which threatens fundamental interests of the national life that Americans regard as a morally valuable form of communal freedom.

Instead, denigrations of Americans' nation-centered interests will seem morally wrong. Furthermore, governmental decision makers are likely to regard as genuinely humanitarian any policy that truly enhances basic

liberties for non-nationals, furthering their third, less mandatory, moral objective. This fact partly explains their temptation to label even military actions aimed at “ liberation” as functionally “ humanitarian.” (Brilmayer, 192–215)As Henry Shue observes, sometimes that label may seem appropriate; he gives the example of supplying guns or, presumably, gunners to a village threatened by tigers. Yet describing even non-military aid to wars of liberation as “ humanitarian assistance” obviously threatens to turn the third moral goal of American policy into a rationale for imperialism. Given this risk, given the cautions about America’s right to impose its values on others noted above, and given the real violations of basic liberties that inevitably occur when a government supplies weapons, soldiers, or logistical support for battles waged against human beings, it seems clearly preferable for American policymakers generally to limit their uses of the term “ humanitarian.” It could most plausibly be confined to non-military assistance aimed at meeting material hardships of non-combatants.

Yet equally clearly, there will be contexts when this usage strikes not only U. S. officials but many outside observers as unduly confined—morally grey areas, where the most humanitarian deed possible seems to be to risk involvement in combat in order to help supply the basic needs of the oppressed. Careful probing of competing moral claims and the empirical possibilities for success in various courses of action are necessary for adequate judgments. Furthermore, the structure of their moral obligations helps indicate why U. S.

officials will often be very reluctant to hold that “ compensation,” not “ humanitarian aid,” is in question when they offer aid to persons harmed in

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the course of protecting what they take to be morally appropriate American national interests. And again this issue will often be legitimately cloudy: the priority U. S. governors must accord to protecting American lives and liberties can drive them to measures that may almost unavoidably harm others. There will be real disputes over whether these measures were truly called for or not.

This is one of the areas, moreover, where often the best results will not be reached by endlessly wrangling over the precise nature of American compensatory obligations. American policymakers are usually more receptive to arguments that focus on how they can best proceed in fulfilling their goals, including American commitments to advancing human capacities for free lives, than to contentions premised on their alleged immoralities. And their focus may be valid enough, if officials recognize that American involvements in others' hardships, however defensible, normally constitute good reasons for giving the needs of those persons higher priority on the national agenda. (Oppenheim, 218–33) The more straightforward structure of moral obligations for private humanitarians renders their choices somewhat less complex. Again, they can usually define humanitarian assistance simply as the provision of non-military aid that helps meet the immediate needs of natural or political disaster victims, without considering how their actions affect the long-term capacities or inclinations of governments to provide individual and communal freedom for aid recipients. Sometimes, however, those considerations will seem unavoidable. When resources are scarce and the American government is providing adequate aid to one side of a military

conflict, humanitarian agencies may decide they should devote their energies to helping the other side.

But this will inevitably be labeled partisan, “ political” assistance, and in fact it may prove important to the viability of the political movement in question. Even providing refugees with transportation may shape the political character of the regimes thus emptied of dissidents, and of those landed with many new immigrants, in ways that affect the capacity and willingness of the regimes to provide for the basic needs and liberties of those they govern. (Hoffmann, 22–38) In short, when private humanitarians take actions that U. S. officials see as buttressing political forces hostile to liberty and even more when they appear to aid movements that threaten American national interests, such assistance will inevitably be depicted officially as not genuinely humanitarians, perhaps even as unlawful. Yet if private humanitarians were simply to adopt the U. S.

government’s presumption in favor of the moral validity of American interests, they would betray in principle, and at times in practice, their deepest commitments to the welfare of all human beings. This no government can realistically expect them to do; and given the vulnerabilities of all governments’ moral claims, no government can morally expect them to do so, either. (Lake, 771–3) Thus there will inevitably be conflicts between private humanitarians and governments in general, and the U. S.

government in particular, over what constitutes genuine moral obligations and genuine humanitarianism. Sometimes these differences form tragic obstacles to the attainment of objectives that may be deemed worthy from

almost any moral point of view. Yet in two ways, this picture of the views of the U. S. government and private agencies toward humanitarianism gives some grounds for optimism. First, the disagreements these contrasting perspectives ineluctably generate can often be not destructive but truly useful.

Each side has the potential to correct the characteristic blind spots of the other. On this account, the U. S. government is, after all, committed to respecting basic liberties for all as a first priority and also to promoting them when possible.

Yet its belief in the moral significance of American national interests can lead it to neglect to honor adequately basic liberties of outsiders and to slight real opportunities for their advancement. Since private humanitarians strive to attend equally to the needs of all, they can be valuable critics of the U. S.

government's excessive parochialism, calling it to conform to its own best principles. At the same time, private humanitarians ought in theory to acknowledge that forms of communal life can often be essential interests of those they assist. Yet their concern for the immediate material needs of individuals may lead them to give little weight to these concerns, even though viable polities are necessary for the provision of basic resources and opportunities in the long run. U. S. policymakers can frequently be counted on to provide reminders of this reality of the contemporary human condition, so extensively ordered into nation-states and other particular communities. Moreover, that if both sides appreciated the inherent differences in their moral perspectives just sketched, and if they also bore in mind the

arguments against moral absolutism, they might be better equipped to engage in perceptive and open-minded critical dialogue with each other. Such dialogue would enable them to realize these mutual corrective functions more effectively.

Secondly, and finally, there are considerable areas of moral agreement as well. The most plausible definitions of basic liberties all recognize that they are not really provided through abstract legal or political rights alone. They require the achievement of actual conditions that give people meaningful opportunities. Those conditions plainly must include capacities to meet persons' basic material needs. The priority that Americans as a people accord to respecting fundamental liberties and to advancing them not only for themselves but for others thus involves a significant commitment to helping the needy, at home first but also abroad. Many Americans, moreover, understand that commitment as stemming in part from the religious beliefs for which private humanitarians often speak. And if the other elements of the analysis offered here also have merit, then increased attention to the substance of these partly differing moral perspectives, especially to their basic moral goals, and to what those goals imply for progress in the world may help to identify areas of agreement more effectively than an insistence on the absolute rectitude of a particular moral view, or an emphasis on the strict apportionment of responsibility for past inequities.

The basic contrasts between governmental and private outlooks would, to be sure, be affirmed, not overcome, by adopting the understanding of liberal morality and humanitarianism reviewed here. Even so, that understanding

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might in practice foster better communication and cooperation in the realization of what would be regarded as morally worthwhile and humanly beneficial public and private endeavors. Works Cited Beer, Francis A., and Robert Hariman, Realism and Rhetoric in International Relations. In Post-realism: The Rhetorical Turn in International Relations.

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