Morality and International Relations
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One of the perennial debates in discussions of international relations is the role of morality. The current debate over the use of torture illustrates the controversial nature of this issue. Polls show a slight majority of Americans support torture as a means of interrogation. Should foreign policy officials consider the moral implications of what they do, or should they pursue the nation's interests without regard to the moral consequences? Clearly, these are not either/or choices; rather, it is a matter of degree. Nonetheless, for the sake of discussion, we will speak of those as "ideal types."

Those who advocate "realpolitik" argue that national self-interest is the only consideration in formulating foreign policy. According to this theory of international relations, a nation has no permanent friends, or permanent enemies—only permanent interests. Moral rules are relevant only to the extent they support national interests. International institutions should be used when they support national interests, ignored when they do not; thus, this approach takes an *amoral* stance. This roughly corresponds to a "might makes right" approach to the conduct of international relations. Proponents of this approach are not willing to give up any national sovereignty to international institutions or international law. This amounts to a policy of unilateralism except for temporary coalitions that last only as long as the coalitions are useful to support national interests. Advocates of this approach often consider themselves to be tough-minded realists as opposed to what they consider the tender-minded idealists who advocate an approach based on morality. While proponents of this approach do not reject the moral factor, it is more for appearance rather than substance, that is, they pay lip service to morality because of the utility value.

Others argue that enduring world order will come only when nations adhere to some common values and rules of conduct that settle differences in a peaceful manner. This, of course, requires that nations be willing to surrender some of their sovereignty to those rules and to international institutions such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and the World Court. Most proponents of this approach do not insist that a nation surrender all its sovereignty or that it avoid all instances of unilateral action when the vital interests of the nation are at stake. Rather, the idea is that every effort should be made to strengthen moral conduct of nations, the rule of international institutions, and the rule of law. Moreover, the proponents of this approach argue that even if one adopts an amoral view, it is in the *national self interest* to be viewed as holding to moral principles.

Most governments recognize the value of being viewed as moral in their policies and actions; rarely does a nation act with force without cloaking its action in moralistic terms. This is for the benefit of both the domestic audience as well as the international community. Such masking of national self-interest in the rhetoric of morality was certainly effective in Germany and Japan during WWII as well as the Allied nations. It is usually effective for domestic audiences when the government has an effective information/propaganda program, even in a democracy such as the United States.

To base foreign policy on moral principles is quite different than going on a moral crusade to promote one's own version of what is good for the entire world. As Hans Morgenthau observed:

"Nations no longer oppose each other...within a framework of shared beliefs and common values, which imposes effective limitations on the needs and means of their struggle for power. They oppose each other now as the standard bearers of ethical systems, each of them of national origin and each of them claiming and aspiring to provide a supranational framework of moral standards which all the other nations ought to accept and within which their foreign policies ought to operate. The moral code of one nation flings the challenge of its universal claim with messianic fervor into the face of another, which reciprocates in kind. Compromise, the virtue of the old diplomacy, becomes the treason of the new; for the mutual accommodation of conflicting claims, possible or legitimate within a common framework of moral standards, amounts to surrender when the moral standards themselves are the stakes of the conflict. Thus the stage is set for a contest among nations whose stakes are no longer their relative positions within a political and moral system accepted by all, but the ability to impose upon the other contestants a new universal political and moral system recreated in the image of the victorious nation's political and moral convictions." Politics Among Nations, New York, Knopf, 1978.**

Working toward international moral order based on shared values requires a great deal of patience. It is difficult to achieve agreement on other than abstract values and rules that lend themselves to a wide variety of interpretations. What constitutes "terrorism" is a good example. When violence against civilians is defined in terms of the justness of the cause, one person's "terrorist" is another person's "freedom fighter". "Human rights" and Genocide are nebulous terms open to a wide range of interpretations. The effectiveness of these moral concepts depends to a large measure on the voluntary response to world opinion, usually expressed through the international institutions involved. Few of these institutions have the ability to enforce their judgments. In the case of the U.N., the Security Council must take action, and each of the permanent members has veto authority. When one of these five permanent members vetoes a resolution passed overwhelmingly by the body, it implies a rejection of moral consensus. Used sparingly when one's vital interests are involved is understandable; flagrant use reflects disdain for multilateral approaches to world order and an arrogance of power.

One can make the case that it is in the long-term interest of all nations—even the powerful—to build world order based on moral consensus. In the short term, a nation may serve its national interests by ignoring the moral dimension of foreign policy. This builds resentment among other nations, however, and promotes retaliation by coalitions that can retaliate. In the long term, this can destroy the effectiveness of the moral dimension of world order and lead to reliance on "might makes right". History shows that no nation stays on top forever. The time to strengthen international moral order is when one is on top. Henry Kissinger comments at the end of his book, Does America Need a Foreign Policy: "America's ultimate challenge is to transfer its power into a moral consensus, promoting its values not by imposition, but by their willing acceptance."

It is quite natural for people to believe their values are the true values for the entire world and to judge others negatively when they reject those values. This reaches the most intense level when those values are religious beliefs, but this tendency applies also to secular values. The problem comes when nations try to impose their values on others. In his classic article "Morality

in Foreign Policy", <u>Foreign Affairs</u>, 1985, George Kennan warned the United States against demanding that the world adopt our version of democracy and economic systems as we understand them. These are not necessarily the future of all mankind, nor is it the duty of the United States to assure that they become that. Moreover, he says much of our foreign policy is the result of pressures from politically influential special interest elements within the society. He warns against:

> **"…what might be called the histrionics of moralism at the expense of its substance. By that is meant the projection of attitudes, poses, and rhetoric that cause us to appear noble and altruistic in the mirror of our own vanity, but lack substance when related to the realities of international life."**

Kennan argued that where the United States has real interests in intervening in the internal affairs of another country, actions—and the reasons therefore—the intervention "should be carried forward frankly for what they are, and not allowed to masquerade under the mantle of moral principle."

How far a nation goes in considering morality in the conduct of foreign affairs is a difficult boundary to draw, especially in the area of economics. All moral theories include some concept of distributive justice, which includes the distribution of economic benefits. How far does a wealthy nation such as the United States go in sharing its wealth with less fortunate countries? In addition to foreign aid, trade policies affect the distribution of wealth. There is little consensus on what is just and unjust in these matters. Some argue that the duty of government is to meet the needs of its citizens without regard for the fate of others. Here again, one need not chose all or nothing in considering the moral dimension. Most would agree that the "Marshall Plan" at the end of WWII was not only a moral thing to do, but that it was a practical policy that was in the long-term interest of the United States. Currently, the U.S. ranks at the bottom of industrial nations in the percentage of its GDP that goes to foreign aid. And even that small amount goes largely to two recipients—chosen for their strategic importance rather than on economic need. Other issues, e.g., global warming, pollution, are more controversial.

The fact that nations and other groups attempt to mask their actions in moral righteousness indicates recognition of the importance of being perceived as basing one's action on moral principles. Undoubtedly, many leaders sincerely believe they have the moral high ground; too often, however, this is no more than a ploy to rally faithful followers to a cause since citizens need to believe they are supporting a just and moral effort. In a rare moment of candor at a press conference in 1990, Secretary of State James Baker said we were preparing for the Gulf War to protect our access to oil. The outcry caused the administration to focus on demonizing Saddam Hussein as another Hitler. Interest in oil was not cited thereafter as a principal motive; rather, it became a moral crusade—and it worked. Some argue the ploy worked too well—when Sadam Hussein was not deposed, President Bush's approval ratings dropped precipitously.

Many view the recently announced National Security Policy as, in essence, a policy of *Pax Americana* justified by our dominant military and economic power and the moral belief that our value system represents "the end of history". We are morally justified in imposing our political economic, and social systems on the rest of the world because we believe these values are best for the entire world. We have also endorsed assassination of heads of State and preemptive strikes against suspected threats. These have important consequences for international law.

Terrorism[1]

Terrorism presents a special moral problem, whether it is domestic or international in scope. The first hurdle is coming to a consensus on a definition of terrorism. In the most general sense, terrorism can be defined as the use of violence against a target when the intended effect is the psychological impact on a wider audience in order to achieve political goals. Some limit the definition to apply only when the specific target is noncombatant civilians. In the past, different agencies of the U.S. have used approximations of this definition. If one accepts this definition, the carpet-bombing of cities in WWII, by both sides, can be classified terrorist acts. The use of atomic bombs on Japan was, in fact, deliberately designed to terrorize the Japanese into surrendering. President Truman's diary and the planning minutes attest to this purpose. All participants in WWII used such measures. They were routinely morally justified as avoiding greater violence. Thus, the atomic attacks avoided the costly invasion of Japan, which most analysts agree would have resulted in millions of deaths, both civilian and military.

This rationale may in fact suffice as a moral justification of the acts, but it does so by arguing that the ends justify the means. Some ethicists reject the notion that ends can justify means when the act in itself is immoral. This is not universal, however, and experience shows that most people often justify acts that are immoral per se, but where the consequences of the act can justify it. Thus it becomes a calculus that weighs the pros and cons if the consequences can be shown to further a "just cause". Those who bomb abortion clinics and/or kill doctors who perform abortions, as well as those who justify the use of weapons of mass destruction, follow this reasoning.

Terrorism is the force of choice for domestic dissidents and the militarily weak in international affairs because it gives them an asymmetrical advantage, especially if they cannot be readily identified. Non-government groups conduct much of international terrorism such as the 9-11 acts. While they may have the support of governments, these connections are difficult to prove. This limits the counter-terrorist efforts because over reaction against broad targets can generate more hostility and lose moral legitimacy for the counter terrorism effort.

If a belligerent wishes to brand acts of terrorism against it as immoral, it must find a definition that distinguishes the type of terrorism used by it and its allies from that of its adversaries. In the case of the current "war against terrorism", declared by President Bush, this presents problems. It is useful to rally the American people by stating the effort in moralistic terms of good versus evil and rejecting any suggestion that the terrorism is any way related to U.S. behavior. Another way to isolate the Islamic terrorists is to define terrorism to exclude actions of nations or their military. Recent definitions by U.S. Government Agencies in fact offer such definitions, restricting the label to non-nation activity. This restricted definition, of course, denies legitimacy to the only means of violence available to the weak and takes away the

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[1] The following discussion is designed for students who wish to be analytical in their approach to the subject of terrorism. In the current environment created by the 9-11 tragedies, it is difficult for any American, including this author, to contain emotional hostility toward any suggestion that the acts could be defended on moral ground. Some of the following, if publicly stated, would be considered by some as unpatriotic at best and probably traitorous. I will state categorically that I would volunteer on a suicide mission to kill Osama bin Laden, so you may know where my sentiments lie. But this kind of emotional response will not serve us well in the long run and may indeed keep us from solving the real problem. Any honest academic endeavor, however, must strive to be analytical and set emotions aside. I ask the reader to do that as far as possible. Much of my language criticizing U.S. policy is derived from non-U.S. media, statements of foreign leaders, and experience in the Middle East, where I taught a one-week ethics course in late 2001 to 21 senior officers of the Omani Air Force.

reciprocal advantage. This word-smithing may appeal to the militarily powerful, but non-nation terrorist groups may argue that the ends justify the means if their terrorist acts result in a change in U.S. policies that they label as unjust. Moreover, they may argue, those U.S. policies involve a form of economic and military terrorism—economic against Iraq, Cuba, etc. and militarily against the Palestinians, Nicaragua, etc. It all depends on whose ox is being gored; one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. Each side is convinced of its moral high ground. It then becomes a contest for convincing the rest of the world that your version is the valid definition.

Summary:

The jury is still out on how successful the current foreign policy of the United States will be in its fight against terrorism and its vision of world order. While the initial response to the 9-11 terrorist acts was overwhelmingly in favor of condemning those directly involved in the attacks, talk of expanding the war to include action against all "terrorism"—and adopting the policy of "preventive wars"—are receiving less than universal support. In fact, there is some indication that if current rhetoric is converted to action against other countries, the U.S. may find itself and Israel going it alone.

Most polls show that the American public believes the policies of our nation are based on the highest moral principles. The common perception is that we "have the moral high ground" in the conduct of our international relations. Surveys reveal that much of the rest of the world sees it differently. Even in the case of our response to terrorism, much of the world rejects our public explanation that the terrorists base their action on hatred solely because we "are free and democratic." Although our government attempts to disconnect terrorism from our policies, much of the world insists that the two are linked. The most common policies that draw linkages to terrorism, especially in the eyes of the Mid East and Muslim communities, are the quest for cheap oil and unwavering support of Israel. The Long Commission report, which investigated the terrorist attacks on American Embassies and the USS Cole, warned against divorcing these attacks from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Other sacred cows of America's value system that underlie our foreign policy include the export of "market economies" and "liberal democracy" (see Kennan's comments above). Many parts of the world see these policies as the exercise of raw power when economic, political, and military power are used to impose these beliefs on others as if they are prerequisites for "freedom and human rights" and legitimacy.

Whether or not criticism of these policies is valid is arguable, but perception is reality from a moral standpoint. World order based on morality requires shared values and beliefs about what is good and bad behavior. There are necessary compromises and this means surrendering some sovereignty in the process. Charters of international institutions such as the United Nations and World Trade Organization usually contain abstract values as the basis for moral order. When nations flout the rules of behavior in these charters, moral order is weakened.

In the final analysis, there is considerable evidence that almost all nations at some time use violence against civilians to terrorize a wider audience to achieve political goals if it suits their interests. Fire-bombing of cities in WWII, by both sides, are an example. If a nation adopts the "realpolitik" approach to foreign policy, it need not attempt to justify its actions morally, but it must be prepared to face the moral condemnation of the international community. A more direct tangible cost is the probability that adversaries will adopt the same practices, e.g., political assassinations and torture of prisoners. Most terrorists dress their actions in moral clothes, arguing that theirs is a just cause and that the ends justify the means. The victims attempt to strip the terrorists of any moral authority for their acts and cast the battle as good versus evil.

Adversaries usually invoke the support of their particular God to buttress their moral legitimacy to conduct war, whether it is conventional or terrorism, as is the case with both Al Qaeda and the United States.