

MORALITY AND ETHICAL REASONING

IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

You should use this reading to examine your views about the role of morality in international relations and how to apply ethical reasoning to decision and policy making. While it is important to understand the various concepts, it is more important to understand what you yourself believe.

Examples of Moral Issues Drawn from American Diplomatic History

The Use of Nuclear Weapons Against Japan. In the spring and summer of 1945, the American government debated how to bring the war against Japan to an end. The fighting on Iwo Jima and Okinawa and intelligence reports foretold heavy allied casualties if Japan were to be invaded. The estimates were not precise, but the view was that more than 100,000 American battle deaths could be expected. If this number were accurate, the final battle against Japan would have cost more than 25% of the total American battle deaths of World War II. In addition, there would have been the Japanese military and civilian battle deaths and other non-battle deaths arising from an extended war. Estimates of these are even less precise, but many believe the number could have been more than two million. The use of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki cost the lives of more than 120,000 Japanese, mostly noncombatants.⁽¹⁾

The moral argument for the use of the nuclear weapons is that lives were saved. The deaths of 120,000 were justified by the saving of more than two million lives. A counter argument is that immoral means cannot be justified by the ends.

Individual Morality of Statesmen. In 1929, Secretary of State Henry Stimson withdrew the Department of State's support for cryptanalytic services because "gentlemen do not open each other's mail."

In 1960, the USSR shot down an American U-2 airplane, which was taking aerial photographs of the Soviet Union. The U.S. first denied the U-2's mission and then, at President Eisenhower's insistence, admitted the lie but said it would continue the surveillance. Premier Khrushchev could not disregard the open admission and statement that the U.S. would continue its overflights. This would give the Americans the right to violate Soviet territory. The result was a break in relations between the two countries.

In 1977, shortly before a decision was to have been announced in NATO of full allied agreement on the deployment of enhanced radiation weapons, President Carter, for what may have been purely personal moral reasons, abruptly changed his mind regarding those weapons. His behavior embarrassed the heads of government in Europe, who had come to support the weapon at the insistence of the U.S., and damaged severely the ability of the U.S. to work on other major issues within the Alliance.

The moral argument for these actions is that leaders should act in accordance with their own moral values. The counter is that while an individual statesman may follow his own conscience, "the prohibitions found in interpersonal morality cannot be mechanically transplanted into a code of conduct for public officials."⁽²⁾ "Saints can be pure, but statesmen, alas, must be responsible."⁽³⁾

The Anything But Communist (ABC) Approach to Third World Countries. During the Cold War the United States often judged the merits of the government of a third world country, not in terms of its relations to its people or its behavior, but in terms of whether it was "communist" or not. With the criteria of what was communist often poorly defined, the decisions seemed to be based on the view -- if you are not with us, you are against us. While the actual policy issues were complex,⁽⁴⁾ in many cases the U.S. found itself supporting corrupt and dictatorial governments that were committed to the status quo and stability rather than governments and political movements more representative of the populations and attempting to develop in the face of extraordinary political, economic, and social problems. Examples are Mobutu in Zaire, Marcos in the Philippines, the military in Guatemala, Somoza in Nicaragua, Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, the military in Pakistan, Pinochet in Chile, and the Shah in Iran.

The moral argument for the ABC approach is that, given the ideological and military threat of communism, there was no other choice. The spread of communism threatened core interests of the United States and denied the possibility of the development of democracy in these countries. A counter argument is that every situation offers choices. Ethical reasoning requires case-by-case judgments of facts and values, not a simplistic choice between black and white.

Complexity of Issues. The current American policy toward the Republic of China is an example of how the conflict of issues and moral norms make the judgment of the moral nature of policy difficult. China is a communist state with a long history of human rights crimes. It is a state that potentially threatens the U.S. and today can cause war over Taiwan. It is a state that could become strong enough economically and politically to counter U.S. influence in East Asia. China is also a state and a community of people that is undergoing rapid change, especially economic, but apparently also politically. It is a state whose economy serves as an attraction for American business and as an engine for internal social growth. It could become a state with which the U.S. can have friendly relations. American policy is a mix of apprehension based on a potential threat and of optimism that social change will cause political change and democracy.

That policy tries to balance justified moral concerns with attitudes about what will be the consequences of American involvement in China. Since "ought" can be seen as implying "can," what is viewed as right must be bounded by what is likely to be possible. However, what is possible and likely is hard to predict, especially in situations where the outcome is dependent on social-economic influences on the political process.

Attitudes toward Morality in International Relations

Earlier in this course, we developed three core national interests, one of which is about the survival of the political and cultural values of the United States. How much emphasis one places on this core interest compared to the core interests of physical survival and safety and human development will depend on one's attitude toward morality. Additionally, what one accepts as the appropriate ways to achieve a state's interests will also depend on one's attitude toward morality in international relations.

The two primary questions about morality in international relations are - what should its role be and what is its role?

-- Among many people, including the realists, the answers are determined by the anarchic nature of the world. With each state solely responsible for the security and well-being of its people, morality should play a role only when it is beneficial to the state's interest. Because political behavior is guided by many considerations, including morality, however, moral values do play a part in determining goals, policies, and action.

-- Among other people, the answers are less tied to the state and its responsibility to its people. They arise out of man's moral nature and an extension of that nature to the institutions that man has created. For these people, moral values not only do play a part in international relations, they should play a significant part in determining goals, policies, and action.

In American studies of international relations there are four primary attitudes regarding morality - moral cynicism, moral skepticism, state moralism, and cosmopolitanism. With some important exceptions, the cynic and the skeptic are among the first group who see no role or a lesser role for morality. The state moralist and the cosmopolitan, on the other hand, are among the second group who see a significant role for morality.

Moral cynicism. This attitude is based on the belief that there are no moral values that have meaning in human behavior. Since there are no moral values, there is no need to be concerned about morality in international relations. "The strong do what they have the power to do, and the weak accept what they have to accept."⁽⁶⁾ In other words, might makes right. The fundamental rule is to do what is necessary to get what the state needs.⁽⁶⁾

Moral skepticism. This attitude accepts the validity of moral values in human behavior but denies that validity in international relations. Morality applies to individuals, not to states and institutions. Morality stems from the individual who has a soul and develops wider significance when there is a community of individuals who share values of rights and obligations. In international relations there is no community and, therefore, no basis for developing shared values. Moreover, there are no institutions to provide the order necessary for maintaining shared values by which to guide and judge the behavior of states. There is no common international morality.⁽⁷⁾

Because of the anarchic structure of international relations, the chief responsibility of statesmen is national security. They have the moral obligation to protect their state, its society, and the people. The fundamental rule is to protect the state's security and interests.

State moralism. This attitude argues that states are moral creations and, therefore, are morally legitimate. National boundaries have moral significance because the states represent their people who have come together for common purposes and who have a sense of community. A fundamental rule is that each state is sovereign within its borders, and other states should not intervene in the domestic affairs of a state. Avoiding involvement inside another state avoids acting against the moral rights and obligations of that state's individuals.

The state moralists believe in a common international morality that transcends the values and traditions of specific cultures. They believe that states have obligations to conform to "relevant moral rules that are capable, in principle, of requiring sacrifices of self-interest."⁽⁸⁾ The norms of this common morality, they believe, are broadly accepted, or based on international law, or found in specific doctrines, such as the *just war* doctrine, or derived from agreements developed in international institutions and regimes. Therefore, the behavior of states should be guided and judged by the norms of

an international morality, which give precedence to the moral rights and obligations of states.

Cosmopolitanism. Those who hold this attitude believe there is a common international morality that is based on the rights and obligations of individuals. Only persons as individuals, not states or institutions, are morally significant. International relations take place not only in a society of states but also in a society of individuals. The fundamental rule for all states is to protect human rights and advance the well-being of individuals. States are obligated to protect and support its individuals. If the state fails, its legitimacy is questionable. If the state fails in a massive manner, the state loses its moral standing, and other states are obligated to intervene to defend the universal human rights.

This view seeks universal fairness. Because each individual is an equally significant moral being, all human beings are to be treated equally.

Although usually focused on human rights, the cosmopolitan will generally believe that the state should act and be judged in accordance with the values of the common international morality. This common morality differs from that of the state moralist in that the cosmopolitan believes that what is a moral obligation for an individual is a moral obligation for a state, unless there are specific international norms that set different standards. The emphasis remains on the individual.

Bedeviling both the state moralist and the cosmopolitan is the question of moral relativism -- the belief that moral values arise from societies, each with different cultures, political/economic structures, and historic experiences. If this were true, there can be no universal or common international moral norms to be considered and applied. Between the two poles - complete relativism and universalism - is a spectrum of views. Strong relativism would argue that morality is determined principally, but not entirely, by societies. Weak relativism, on the other hand, would argue that moral values are broadly independent of the influence of society. The problem is evident when one, seeing the variety of societies in the world, recognizes that, unless one agrees with either pole, one's view must be an interpretation of how critical a role society plays.⁽⁹⁾

Ethical Reasoning -- The Application of Moral Values

Whereas morality is about values, ethics is about the application of those values, the struggle to put moral values to use in the world. Ethical reasoning is the analytical process of bringing moral values into decision making.

There are two fundamental approaches to ethical reasoning - **moral absolutism**, the strict adherence to moral values and principles regardless of consequences, and **moral consequentialism**, the belief that all moral behavior must be judged by the consequences.⁽¹⁰⁾

Immanuel Kant, the great absolutist philosopher, argued that both the goals and the means must be moral for the policy or action to be morally legitimate. The ends cannot justify the means alone. Promoting justice or achieving the common good by immoral means is immoral. He would not have dropped the bombs on Japan.

The moral consequentialist recognizes that circumstances arise where moral values may conflict and, therefore, argues that choices should be determined by weighing the probable outcomes. The question is how to weigh the outcomes. A school of consequentialism is the utilitarian school. Public policies should be designed and judged by the norm of the greatest good for the greatest number. This school suggests that some human beings in a given situation should be treated more favorably (differently) because of social utility of the greatest good for the greatest number. A utilitarian probably would have dropped the bombs.

For most of us neither school alone is sufficient. Under some circumstances we will behave as absolutists and in others we will weigh our moral options and the consequences.

Consider the following situation. You are an official from the American Embassy in a Central American state that is trying to put down an insurgency. Upon hearing there has been trouble in a village, you drive out to get the facts. As you near the village you see a destroyed military vehicle and three dead soldiers. Upon arriving in the village you see a number of civilians lined up against a wall and a group of soldiers getting ready to shoot them. When you see the commander, whom you know, you ask why these people are to be shot. He replies, "You saw my dead soldiers. Someone among this village either supports the insurgents who did this or are among those insurgents." You ask if there is any evidence that these people, whom you now see to be fifteen, were involved. He replies, "No, but there must be retribution and an example set. Besides, the morale of my men demands revenge."

You argue that his actions are immoral. In reply, he offers you a pistol and suggests that if you shoot three, he will then let the remaining twelve go free. What do you do? Are you a moral absolutist or a moral consequentialist? Disregard the implications for American foreign policy and for your career.

The four attitudes toward morality in international relations, discussed earlier, are not in agreement regarding what ought to be the role of morality and what is its role? As discussed next, they also differ greatly as to how morality should be applied to international relations.

Moral cynicism. The cynic has no need to use ethical reasoning. Morality is important to the cynic only to the degree that moral arguments move and constrain people. The manipulation of values can be a source of power. Additionally, the degree that morality moves people and can be a basis for legitimacy, it becomes a source of soft power. Otherwise, the cynic believes morality can be ignored.

Moral skepticism. The moral skeptic accepts the reality of morality. He, however, can find no common international morality and believes the state must focus on its obligations to its people. The approach to ethical reasoning is through prudence - the choice of policy and actions after a consideration of the consequences that includes moral values. Aristotle and Reinhold Neibuhr argue that prudence is the only way that morality can be applied to politics, domestic and international. Therefore, the skeptic is a moral consequentialist - choice is dependent upon the perceived outcome.

State moralism. The state moralist believes that states have obligations to conform to the norms of moral behavior that are broadly accepted, or based on international law, or found in specific doctrines, such as the *just war* doctrine, or derived from agreements developed in international institutions and regimes. He is an absolute moralist in that there is a common morality upon which the principles are founded but a consequentialist in the application of these principles. For him ethical reasoning requires the following of accepted procedures and principles. Choice is dependent upon the perceived outcome and the weighing of conflicting moral values.

In particular and for some specific purposes, the state moralist relies on two strong ethical traditions - international law regarding sovereignty and the *just war* doctrine.

International law regarding sovereignty postulates a society of independent states with certain rules of behavior. To protect the state from acts of other states, states are not to intervene in the sovereign territory of other states. The state and its people are autonomous. Intervention, the act of one state to influence forcibly the domestic affairs of another state, is immoral. This moral norm of nonintervention, designed to help keep the peace, requires that conflicts be about international matters and not about what one state perceives as its interest inside another state. This norm defends the people of a state from outside predators. It is a basic norm of international law that provides a degree of order and

predictability in an anarchic international system.

There are four generally recognized exceptions: 1) preventive intervention when there is a clear and sufficient threat to the intervening state; its sovereignty is threatened; 2) self-defense by the victim state or a war of enforcement/counter intervention to return a state and its people to autonomy after an invasion of a third state; 3) humanitarian intervention because of massive violations of human rights or genocide; that state has lost its legitimate linkage to some of its people; and 4) intervention to assist secessionist movements that are based on the principle of self-determination, the right of a people to form their own state.

The *Just War* doctrine comes from Greco-Roman philosophy and grew within the early teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. It provides a framework for judging 1) the justice of going to war and 2) the justice of the means of carrying out war. The main principles of this doctrine are:

-- Non-intervention in the sovereign territory of another state except to halt injustice; the cause of the war must be just. This principle is affirmed in the UN Charter under Article 2.4.

-- All peaceful means must have been exhausted before resorting to war.

-- The use of force is just only if it is carried out by a legitimate government.

-- The aims of the war must be limited to achieving justice and proportional to the goal of a just peace.

-- There must be a reasonable chance of success.

-- War must be fought in a just manner. This principle, called *jus in bello*, requires states at war to discriminate between combatants and noncombatants and to use means to achieve their aims that are proportionate to the goal of a just peace. Aspects of this principle are contained in the Geneva and Hague Conventions and American military policy and law. The Hague Conventions are designed to prevent people from becoming victims of war. The Geneva Conventions are designed to protect and assist victims of war.⁽¹¹⁾

Cosmopolitanism. The cosmopolitan is a moral absolutist. The means and the ends must be morally desirable. Moral values must be applied in policy and action. Whereas the state moralist is focused on the state, its sovereignty and its moral quality, the cosmopolitan is focused on the individual. State action must be justified by considerations of human rights and well-being. Although the cosmopolitan might apply the two ethical traditions of the state moralist, there would be little concern for the sovereignty of the state if it clashed with the needs of individuals. Moral precedence is given to the rights and needs of individuals over all else.

Because this attitude requires that morality be the significant, or at least a significant, factor in decision making, ethical reasoning is less important to the cosmopolitan. The decision process must apply the appropriate moral values to the issue.

Ethical Reasoning in International Relations

In discussing ethical reasoning in international relations, it is important to remember that individuals make decisions, not states, cultures, institutions, agencies, or organizations. These individuals will differ in their attitudes toward morality and in its role in international affairs. There will be disagreement in the same manner as there will be disagreement over what is the national interest and the best way to achieve any interest.

The skeptics, state moralists, and cosmopolitans will generally agree, however, on the following:

-- Morality does play a role in international relations, even if only the minimal role accepted by the cynics. Moral arguments do move and constrain people and leaders. Morality is real, even if its norms may not be universal.

-- However, the international system lacks a strong consensus on moral values. Its institutions are weak compared to those of functioning states representing communities of people. In the situation of anarchy, there is no superior power to a state, no common legislature, no central executive, no strong judiciary, and no enforcement power. Moreover, international situations are often more complex than domestic situations. Causality is more complex, making it more difficult to

predict the consequences of policies and actions.

-- Nevertheless, rudimentary law and existing institutions and regimes provide enough order to allow some important moral choices. Additionally, there are large areas of international relations that are based not on conflict or potential conflict, but cooperation through bilateral relations, international institutions and regimes, and international law and custom. Despite its weaknesses, international law affects state behavior because it provides predictability and legitimacy. Predictability in behavior, following the rules, is necessary for vast range of international interactions from aircraft flight control to diplomatic immunity. Legitimacy -- what is viewed and accepted as being right -- is a source of power. If other states believe that what you are doing is right, then the likelihood of achieving your goals is increased. Acting against international law carries burdens, both at home and abroad.

-- There are even moral choices during war enshrined in law and custom, mostly derived from the *just war* doctrine. There is room for choice even in the brutal environment of war. At a minimum the military commander and his political leaders must consider the consequences of their decisions.

The decisions regarding foreign policies come out of a complex process in which many individuals representing competing institutions, agencies, and organizations will participate. As we will see when we study the foreign policymaking process of the United States, policies reflect a multitude of influences and views. The decisions that emerge from that process are the result of the complex interaction among all those who are involved. Each will try to make happen what he believes is best from his perspective. In the end, choices and takeoffs will have been made among individuals with different views on morality.

Ethical reasoning is based on choice among alternatives, all of which need not be moral. In a complex world, there often will be the need for tradeoffs between interests and moral values. Moreover, states are not like individuals. When individuals act as leaders of states, they have obligations to others, most importantly their people.⁽¹²⁾ Yet, while we need not judge their actions according to standards of individual morality, we should be able to judge the moral quality of those actions. Additionally, we should expect that the decision process, in which these individuals participate, was based on ethical reasoning.

At minimum, the process should identify the moral values relevant to the situation, include these norms in the assessment of the policy options, and in coming to a decision weigh the moral consequences of these options. Ideally, from a moralist point of view, the choice should be the most desirable action from among morally legitimate alternatives. At the heart of ethical reasoning are judgments of fact and value that will require tradeoffs. Situations and events must be judged on a case-by-case basis. In any situation, there will be multiple obligations to individuals, communities and states, a variety of moral norms that are applicable to the situation (some of which may be superior imperatives), a complex set of information or lack of information, and issues of causality that make ethical reasoning extremely difficult. A moral decision maker must try, however, and a moral decision making process must include that effort. Even the knotty logic of conflict does not remove the responsibility for moral choice.

That a policy is moral or not requires an evaluation of the goal, the motives and intentions, the means to be used, and the probable consequences.⁽¹³⁾ A moral policy should be justified in all four ways. For instance, moral goals and good intentions are not by themselves enough; the means may be reprehensible and the likely consequences morally unacceptable. Thus, the moral absolutist is recognized. Since "ought" can be seen as implying "can," what is viewed as right must be bounded by what is likely to be possible. A goal that is morally desirable may be impossible to accomplish and, therefore, any effort to achieve that goal may be immoral. Thus, there is room for the moral consequentialist. Additionally, there will remain the need to weigh moral values against each other. Nevertheless, in the end, there will usually, perhaps always, be a gap between what is morally desirable to some, if not most, of the individuals making the decision and what they believe is necessary.

Your Task

You, yourself, already have a foundation that has molded your moral beliefs. You have a preferred approach to morality and ethical reasoning. From your perspective:

- What is the role of morality in international relations?
- Which of the four views of morality is best?
- When it comes to ethical reasoning, are you a moral absolutist or a consequentialist?
- How should ethical reasoning enter into decision making and policy implementation?

In considering international relations and given the lack of useful information, most people develop a hybrid attitude toward each of the above questions. This is usually true even for the moral absolutist, especially when moral norms are in conflict with each other. Regardless of your attitude, you have the responsibility, just as the statesman does, to think and judge effectively and coherently in moral terms. As Stanley Hoffmann argues, while we must admit that there is a huge gap between what is moral and what is likely in international affairs, we should not resign ourselves to the consequences of inaction, but rather take every opportunity to narrow the gap.⁽¹⁴⁾

1. Richard Frank's Downfall: the End of the Imperial Japanese Empire, (New York: Random House, 1999) has a well researched summary of the decision process.
2. Lea Brilmayer, American Hegemony: Political Morality in a One-Super Power World (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), p. 25.
3. Arthur Schlesinger, quoted by Armstutz, International Conflict and Cooperation, (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1999), p. 148.
4. We will discuss several of these situations in our study of Spanier and Hook, American Foreign Policy Since World War II, (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 2001).
5. Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, trans. Rex Warner, ed. M. K. Finley (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 161.
6. The idea of "reason of state" is that a government should make decisions that insures the survival of its state. There are those who, following Machiavelli in The Prince and Discourses, see the state as the highest good of man and society. Therefore, all else must be subordinated to that good. Generally speaking, one can view both the moral cynic and the moral skeptic as holding that attitude, but differing in their attitude toward morality itself.
7. "There are no internationally accepted standards of morality to which the U. S. government could appeal if it wished to act in the name or moral principles." George Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*(Winter 1985-1986), p. 207
8. Charles Beitz, "Bounded Morality: Justice and the State in World Politics," International Organization, vol 33 (Summer 1979), p. 408.
9. See Jack Donnelly, International Human Rights, (NY: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 32-35, for a discussion of moral relativism in terms of human rights.
10. This is neither moral relativism or situational ethics. The first arises from an belief about the relationship of morals to society and the second says that moral behavior is determined by the situation. Moral consequentialism makes no claim regarding how morals are developed or which moral values are used.
11. Bert A. Röling, "Aspects of Criminal Responsibility for Violations of the Laws of War," in The New Humanitarian Law of Armed Conflict, ed. Antonio Cassese (Naples: Editoriale Scientifica, 1979), p. 227n.
12. As Schlesinger has remarked, "Saints can be pure, but statesmen, alas, must be responsible." An approach to individual morality is based on the concept of obligations. Each individual has a set of obligations - self, family, institution, state, mankind, god - that have to be weighed when making decisions. Most of us do not have to put much weight on the state and its responsibilities.
13. A policy already in place and its implementation can also be evaluated by the same four criteria.
14. Stanley Hoffmann, "The Politics and Ethics of Military Intervention," *Survival*, vol.37, no. 4, Winter 1995-96, p. 29.