

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.

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.