

INTRODUCTION TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS:
ETHICS IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

by

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INTRODUCTION

In international relations, nation-states often have to decide on foreign aid or, in times of a crisis, try to justify strikes that could harm innocent people. The purpose of this essay is to discuss these two issues and to state the author's opinion on morality and fairness in world politics.

ETHICAL PROBLEMS

Morality and Foreign Aid

Despite the agreement that there is a gap between the standards of living in developed and Third World countries, it depends on the particular method of interpretation whether this gap is increasing or decreasing. By just looking at mostly monetary and economic criteria, it seems like the poor countries are falling farther behind the developed ones; the author, however, shares the views of Rosenberg, Birdzell, and officials of the United Nations Development Programme that this is a one-sided and thus somewhat deceptive argument. The Human Development Index takes into account other variables like life expectancy and education and seems to be more credible. This index

indeed shows a closing of the gap. The efforts most governments of developed countries make therefore seem to be effective if not even sufficient (Ray, 428).

Without doubt, there is a limited obligation of rich states to help poor countries. It should be made certain, though, that the help is aimed at turning the receiving state into a stable democracy having an improving economy. Short-term foreign aid like food might be necessary in certain crises; in the long run, though, it may often even be harmful and drive the state further into dependence.

The author believes that the main reason for such an obligation, though, should be the commitment of the developed country's government to its own subjects. A flowering economy in a well-run democracy usually represents a good trading partner, especially if it is coming out of the semi-dependence many African countries face. It is the duty of a government to improve the standard of living for its people; therefore, increasing trade, fostering economic interdependence, and thereby improving its own economy ought to be a primary goal.

As a corollary, it becomes apparent that a nation-state's government is principally responsible for matters inside its own borders; in the mostly anarchic system of international relations, it should not have any further obligations. It is the author's view, though, that moderate foreign aid, on the order of what is done today, for the reasons stated above, will always improve the donor country's situation as well.

Ethics of High Casualties

In a very similar way, the same approach yields an answer to the question whether the application of a force that could result in a large number of innocent victims can be justified. Since it is a government's obligation to protect its subjects and improve their standard of living, it has to take actions that minimize negative effects on its citizens. In times of a crisis, like war, it may be impossible to avoid that such actions inflict heavy damages on another nation-state, including killing many humans in the other nation that may not have been directly involved in the conflict.

A rightfully elected democratic government that represents its people has to carefully weigh the arguments for and against such measures, taking into account both the short-term and the long-term effects, since they may be very different from each other: An unnecessarily drastic strike, for example, might promise immediate advantages like natural resources or political stability within the aggressor; in the long run, however, it may result in sanctions by the international community that by far outweigh the advantages.

As a result, one comes to the conclusion that the use of a force that would kill large numbers of innocent people can only be justified by a nation-state if it is to prevent its own people from suffering a similar attack. The threat has to be imminent and overwhelming. Both an action too weak or too strong would lead to a sub-optimal outcome for the nation-state. The moral justification of such a measure can then be derived from its protective nature (Ray, 422).

APPLIED MORAL STANDARDS

The moral standards applied by the author to the issues discussed above strongly follow the philosophy of utilitarianism, in contrast to deontological theories. Deontologists believe that the morality of an act can be assessed independently of its consequences, i.e. they are either inherently good or bad. Utilitarianism, on the other hand, states that the actions are to be judged depending on their results, and that actions as such have no moral value.

The author's opinion makes use of utilitarianism in stating that neither foreign aid nor use of a force of mass destruction is good or bad in itself. In the first case, wisely organized foreign aid may help improve the economies of both countries, while ill-planned or excessive aid may harm the needy country or even both. In the second case, a massive attack might protect a nation-state's own citizens while sacrificing another's, thus in the author's opinion making it justifiable; a not justifiable strike, on the other hand, could bring international sanctions upon the aggressor, causing a net impairment of its own situation.

In the end, it is only the well-being of the people that is of direct moral significance (McCaughan). In the anarchic system of international relations, it is a nation-state's government that represents it and looks after its interests; therefore, the government's primary concern has to the satisfaction of its own people. In a conflict, this gives the government the right and duty to value the well-being of its own subjects over that of others and take the necessary actions, knowing that the opposing government will do the same for its people.

MORALITY IN WORLD POLITICS

Morality and fairness should certainly play a role in world politics. In the same situation, all humans should be treated equally, i.e. they should have the same rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As far as this is possible, this should be ensured using international law; however, due to the diversity of human cultures and ways of life, those laws often have to be limited to a basic set of rules that is shared by all societies. In addition to this lack of uniformity, the international system is anarchic, and there is no government that could rightly make, apply, and enforce international law. As a consequence, international law can only be made if nation-states volunteer to abide by it. Nation-states agree to do so only if it is in their own interests, and as long as they are considered sovereign, this will not change (Ray, 444).

National sovereignty, although it might prevent the application of international law, is not a bad concept, though: Due to the inhomogeneous nature of human cultures, a local government is more apt to understand the customs and values of its people, resulting in differing but more suitable laws. A world government that replaces sovereign states and that is able to implement international law might be forced to make invalid generalizations.

CONCLUSION

There certainly should be morality and fairness in international politics. It is the author's belief that this fairness actually exists to a certain degree; it is, however, a result of individual nation-states in an anarchic system, each caring for its own people.

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