

# MORALITY AND FOREIGN POLICY

Prudence has an important place in foreign policy, writes **Owen Harries**

Introducing a collection of essays by John Stuart Mill, the distinguished American historian Gertrude Himmelfarb remarks of one essay, ‘It is on a subject much wanting in thought: foreign policy and international morality’. I begin by quoting Himmelfarb’s remark because, though it was written nearly half a century ago and much has happened since, it is still true: the connection between foreign policy and morality remains ‘a subject much wanting in thought’.

It is not, of course, wanting in words or assertions. The intense debate about Iraq and American foreign policy over the last three years has mainly been a moral one. We have read and heard millions of words on such matters as a

‘Manichean’ global contest between good and evil, the impropriety of trying to remain neutral in that conflict, the moral authority of the United Nations and ‘the international community’, the right and wrong of the pre-emptive use of force and intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states, ‘exporting democracy’ and democratic governments deliberately misleading—that is lying to—their citizens. But there has been little attempt to spell out coherent positions on these questions, to relate particular circumstances to general principles, or to acknowledge and confront the difficulty of discussing moral issues in the peculiar conditions and circumstances of international politics. What follows is a very tentative attempt to do so some of those things.

**Owen Harries** is a Senior Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies. A longer version of this essay is published as Occasional Paper 94, available from CIS.

## Two contrasting traditions

I’ll begin by looking at two widely held and sharply contrasting views on the subject, views that one is likely to hear expressed in any bar, common room, board room or dinner party.

The first, in its extreme version, is that morality in foreign policy is like snakes in Iceland: there ain't any. A slightly more moderate version allows for a minor role at the margins. But essentially foreign policy and international politics are seen as necessarily amoral—not immoral but amoral—activities. This view is often accompanied in the popular mind by a good deal of resignation or cynicism, and with the assertion that 'they are all the same'. In intellectual and academic circles it is associated with the realist school.

The second widely held belief is that there is only one morality and it applies in all circumstances. There is no distinction between the standards that states should be held to and those that apply to individuals, or between those that apply in domestic politics and those that apply in international politics. This view is often held by small-l liberals, which is why they tend to spend much of their political energy expressing anger, indignation and disappointment at the failure of governments in general, and especially their own, to live up to accepted moral standards in their international behaviour—to be, among other things, compassionate, generous, forgiving, humane, honest, tolerant and, not least, consistent in their treatment of others. But, as we have been witnessing recently, it is a view of things that can also be found among conservative and religious groups who believe that, as the values they hold are the only valid ones, they should prevail universally, and that their government's foreign policy should be dedicated to ensuring that they do.

Now in beginning with these two popular (and polar) positions, you may think that I am just setting up straw men. If so, you are wrong. Each has a long and distinguished intellectual pedigree, representing in simplified form a central tradition of thought about the behaviour of states in their relationship with each other.

Those who maintain that international politics is essentially an amoral activity can look back two and a half thousand years and quote Thucydides to the effect that in relationships between states, 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must', and that is the beginning and end of the matter. They can quote Machiavelli in the 16th century. They can quote Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century.

The essence of the realist argument is simple: International politics is, of necessity and in a special sense, power politics. There being no international government, no enforceable law or authority, and hardly any sense of community or common identity, anarchy in the strict sense prevails. That being so, when push comes to shove, as it often does in this game, there is no arbiter, no umpire, except power. As Hobbes laconically observed, when there is no agreement as to which suit is trumps, clubs are always trumps. In the absence of legitimate and effective authority, a human nature that is basically selfish, aggressive and suspicious will assert itself.

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Power and self-interest: these constitute the essence of international politics, and ultimately everything else must yield to them. Morality is an unaffordable luxury in such circumstances, one that can only be indulged in small doses and at the margins.

The second view—that there is, or should be, no serious problem in passing judgment on the behaviour of states, because the same moral standards apply to them as to individuals—also has a long and distinguished ancestry. It is to be found in the work of Immanuel Kant at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was strongly represented by the Dissenting Radicals and Liberal Free Traders of Victorian England, men like Richard Cobden and John Bright. It was a strong (though not exclusive) component in the make-up of that great and complicated Liberal statesman, William Ewart Gladstone. And it was (and is) a fundamental belief of American Wilsonian liberals. When he took the United States into World War I in 1917, Woodrow Wilson made that explicit:

We are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and responsibility for wrong shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among the individual citizens of civilized states.

But the problem remained: how to get from here to there, from the existing selfish power politics to the pacific and enlightened order in which morality in its full sense would prevail? Nineteenth century liberals put their faith in two processes: at home a gradual reform of the state, giving a progressively greater democratic voice to the people, at the expense of the vested, selfish and bellicose interests that dominated politics at the time; and abroad the establishment of international free trade, whereby intercourse between the peoples of the world would increase, ignorance would be dispelled, and interdependence would create strong bonds. This is a belief that is still alive and well, one that provides the core assumption of many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) today.

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In the meantime, to reduce the danger and damage caused by the existing state, liberals for the most part—with some striking exceptions driven by moral outrage—advocated a minimalist foreign policy, almost a kind of British isolationism—and this when Britain was the dominant state in the world system. For an active policy, it was believed, would inevitably lead to imperialism and war.

But such a minimalist approach to bringing about a moral transformation of international affairs—waiting patiently for democracy, education and trade to do their work—has not been the only response of those who hold this view of morality. Others have believed that a determined effort of will should be made by democratic states to speed up the process, using not only ‘world opinion’ but their political power to do so: that is, in effect, using power politics to put an end to power politics. This is what Woodrow Wilson attempted to do in 1919, by committing the authority and power of the victorious democracies to install a new international moral order. It is what George W. Bush claims to be

attempting today. As Paul Wolfowitz was at pains to insist in a recent interview, American power is being used to ‘release basic human desires to be free and prosperous and live in peace’.

### The limits of realism

In a brief compass, I have tried to describe fairly two major opposing views—popular as well as intellectual—of the role of morality in foreign policy and international affairs. I believe that they are both seriously flawed.

As for the first—that foreign policy is essentially an amoral activity—the realist analysis that underpins it has been indispensable in countering illusions and maintaining a sharp distinction between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, at a time when many have been concerned to obscure or ignore it. But realists often go further than that and make two related assumptions that seem to me to be false.

The first is that, since in a state of international anarchy the foreign policies of all states are necessarily dominated by a concern with security, those policies are essentially similar in moral terms. The second is that, since it is the state of anarchy that is the crucial determinant, the internal conditions of states—and therefore any change in those conditions—are essentially irrelevant to the shaping of foreign policy.

The first of these assumptions receives its popular echo in the worldly-wise cynicism that ‘they’re all the same’, all selfishly pursuing their own interest. Well, yes, they do all pursue what they understand to be their interests, and when they believe these interests to be seriously endangered they will all show considerable ruthlessness in defending them. In World War II, to take a disconcerting example, the British killed many more civilians with their bombing of German cities that were ever killed by the German blitz on Britain. But when this terrible truth is acknowledged, it is still true that the moral stakes in that war were enormous. For the difference between a world dominated by a victorious Nazi Germany and one dominated by the United States and Britain—the *moral* difference—would have been huge.

Similarly in the Cold War it is true that each superpower—the United States and the Soviet Union—was pursuing its own national interest. But again, after all the flaws in the former had

been given their due weight, the moral difference between the interest of an imperfect democracy and a repressive Stalinist dictatorship was enormous. There was not, as was often claimed by Western anti-anti-communists, a ‘moral equivalence’ between the two sides. In other words, even though it is true that all states are concerned to protect and further their own interests, those interests often differ in morally relevant (and crucial) ways. They are not morally ‘all the same’.

As for the second realist assumption—that the internal conditions of states, and any change in these conditions, are irrelevant to their international behaviour—its falsity was surely exposed conclusively by the experience of dealing with two totalitarian regimes in the last century. It was precisely the assumption made by Neville Chamberlain (a conservative realist, not a sentimental liberal) that there was an essential continuity in German foreign policy—that the foreign policy of the Weimar Republic and that of Nazi Germany were basically similar and that, despite his histrionics, Adolf Hitler was a compromising politician with whom one could cut a deal—which led British policy astray.

### Limited moral liabilities

The second of the two positions maintains that the same morality applies, and applies in the same way, to states as to individuals.

It is true that in thinking of states we normally personify them and treat them as what Hobbes called ‘Artificial Men’, and as moral actors. We speak of ‘France’ doing this or ‘Indonesia’ doing that, and pass moral judgments on their actions. But in this respect states are not unique. We do the same with other collective entities—other Artificial Men—such as public companies, banks, churches, political parties and clubs. We expect certain standards of behaviour for such entities—law abidingness, honesty, fairness, respect for competitors etc. We might even expect a certain level of generosity and compassion from them in some circumstances, but these entities exist for certain purposes, and these purposes set limits on the extent of their virtue. If compassion and generosity were to become the guiding principles of a bank, it would soon go out of business.

Similarly, states exist essentially to promote and protect their own interests and those of

their citizens. Their morality is limited to what is compatible and consistent with that purpose. The standard is different and lower than it is for individuals. Cavour, the statesman who brought about the unification of Italy in the 19th century, once remarked that, ‘If we were to do for ourselves what we are doing for Italy, we should be great rogues’. As it was, he was seen as a great man.

A related point, or perhaps the same point expressed in different terms, is that those who conduct foreign policy are in the position of agents or trustees, not principals. As in the case of trustees, their first and overriding responsibility is not to give expression to their own moral views or preferences, but to secure the interests of those they serve. If they feel that the two conflict and that they are morally constrained from subordinating their own values to their duty as trustees, their proper course is not to insist on giving preference to the former but to resign.

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Also bearing on this is the by now well-known distinction made by the sociologist Max Weber in his essay on ‘Politics as a Vocation’, between two fundamentally different maxims concerning ethical conduct. There is, first, what he terms ‘the ethic of ultimate ends’ which decrees absolute and unconditional fidelity to principle. In this view it is purity of motive, of intent, which is crucial. At its extreme, this is the ethic of the martyr or the saint. Then there is, second, the more mundane ‘ethic of responsibility’, which decrees that one has a responsibility to take into account, as best one can, the foreseeable circumstances and consequences of one’s actions and to adjust one’s sails accordingly. The ethic of responsibility, Weber maintained, is the one appropriate to political life. The responsibility of a political leader is to the well-being of his people and the health of his state, not to the purity of his

own soul, and the two do not necessarily always coincide.

As a general rule, the ethic of ultimate ends appeals more to politicians well removed—practically, psychologically, or both—from office and power. The danger implicit in an approach to foreign policy based on the ‘ethic of ultimate ends’, one which insists on the existence of only one valid and universal moral code which must always be adhered to, is that, by ruling out compromise and flexibility, it will either immobilise, or, if an actor feels powerful enough, lead to a messianic, crusading policy to ensure that the one true good prevails. In the name of untainted virtue, it will

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tend to rule out—as either cynical or feeble—a tolerant, compromising approach to different interests, values and institutions. And, again as we have witnessed recently, when such an approach is adopted by some actors it will tend to produce its mirror image in others and harden the whole climate of international affairs.

### ‘The god of this lower world’

Where, then, does all this leave the matter? In my view it leads to the conclusion that the morality that is appropriate to, and that can be sustained in, the soiled, selfish and dangerous world of power politics is a modest one, whose goal is not perfection—not utopian bliss—but decency. It is, more often than not, a morality of the lesser evil, of prudence. Edmund Burke said of prudence that it is ‘not only the first in rank of the virtues political and moral, but . . . is the director, the regulator, the standard of them all’. He referred to it as ‘the god of this lower world’—the world, that is, of public business and affairs—and he was right.

Prudence does not mean timidity. In some circumstances it demands firmness, even boldness, in dealing with problems early, while they are still

manageable (in 1936, for example, rather than in 1939). But in a system composed of a large number of independent and conflicting wills, uncertain intelligence, deadly weapons, different cultures and no universally recognised and enforceable authority, it does require modesty—modesty of ends, of means, and—not least—of rhetoric. Strident and extravagant rhetoric—and we have heard a fair amount of it recently—not only raises the international temperature, but the fact that it cannot be lived up to is one of the main causes of public cynicism about foreign policy. A more careful, qualified and intellectually responsible rhetoric might be less inspirational, but it would have a longer shelf-life and avoid a great deal of disillusion and embarrassment.

A prudential ethic places importance on those most mundane of virtues—order and stability. These do not, of course, guarantee a satisfactory state of affairs. They do not constitute a *sufficient* condition for anything. But they are a *necessary* condition for everything whose achievement and smooth functioning require a degree of predictability and continuity: a system of justice, for example, or sustainable commercial relations.

Prudence requires that one is often prepared to settle for half a loaf, rather than making the best the enemy of the good. Compromise is usually an *intellectual* vice, muddle masquerading as tolerance; but, except in the most extreme of cases of dealing with evil, it is a *political* necessity and virtue, especially in conditions in which the alternative is usually a resort to force.

Prudence requires doing everything one can to anticipate the possibility of unintended consequences in a complex environment of autonomous actors and imperfect intelligence. And the more ambitious one’s policies, the greater the scope for unintended consequences, as, again, we have recently been witnessing. Prudence requires care in the setting of precedents that may come home to haunt one (as when, perhaps, in 20 or 30 years’ time, a rampant China will be quoting those now being set to justify its behaviour), and an appreciation of why some rules and conventions have withstood the test of time so well (for example, those forbidding intervention in the internal affairs of other sovereign states, even for the best of humanitarian motives).

Prudence requires resisting the impulse to claim the right to double standards—one for other people, a different and more permissive one for oneself, usually on the ground that one represents higher values or has special responsibilities. This is especially so if one claims to be the setter of standards for others, for how can one expect others to obey standards that one violates oneself, and how in such circumstances can one expect them to accept one's moral authority? There is something intrinsically nutty about using one's claimed moral superiority to justify one's adoption of lower ethical standards. To insist on the right to double standards—as American neo-conservatives like Robert Kagan are explicitly doing today—or to operate blatantly in terms of them, is to undermine one's own moral position and to store up trouble in the form of cumulating resentment and lack of credibility.

It is also true that prudential ethics requires that, in making policy, discrimination takes precedence over consistency. This is for two reasons. First, a country pursues a number of goals which have moral worth: among them justice, peace, freedom, security, prosperity, stability. Unless one believes that all these ends are necessarily and always in harmony with each other, that there is a unity of goods, with each always reinforcing the others in all circumstances—and that is surely a false belief—choices have to be made concerning priorities and balance among goals. They have to be organised into a hierarchy.

Second, the order of that hierarchy, the position of any one goal in it, will vary from occasion to occasion as circumstances change. To quote Burke again, 'circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind'

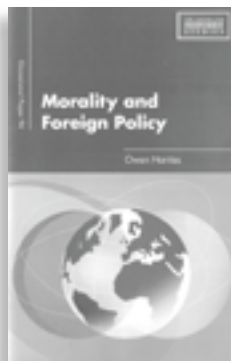
and 'circumstances are infinite, and infinitely combined, are variable and transient; he who does not take them into consideration is not erroneous but stark mad'. Or as John Maynard Keynes once tartly responded to an accusation of inconsistency, 'When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do sir?'

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In any set of circumstances, what is gained in terms of one goal has to be measured in terms of what is endangered or sacrificed in terms of another. In other words, *judgment* is involved, not merely the automatic application of a general principle. The point—and it is a crucial one—is made, somberly, by Isaiah Berlin:

If, as I believe, the ends of men are many and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never be wholly eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.

Not hypocrisy, note, not double standards, but 'an inescapable characteristic of the human condition'. It is a problem that is particularly acute in the realm of international politics.



## Morality and Foreign Policy

By Owen Harries

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