First Paper:

Moral Standards in International Relations

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IR 210

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January 9, 2020

IR is not merely a general playing field but a complex network of subdivided groups of states. Within a given group, states may have a range of characteristics, interests, or prevailing beliefs in common. Moral standards are one of these shared facets, and they have a myriad of effects within the dynamic scene of IR. While ethical standards are transient and relative rather than universal, they nonetheless shape the behavior of states with overlap in moral ideology through authority, social pressure, and public sentiment.

First, it is important to establish the transience and relativity of ethics. Liberalism happens to be the widely accepted political ideology in the West founded on egalitarian principles, but its current moral standards differ from those past. In the 1820's Greek War for Independence, Western Europe viewed the Ottoman Empire as immoral according to their Liberal-Christian worldview and intervened to save Christian lives, disregarding tens of thousands of Muslim lives (Finnemore 1996, 58-59). Today, however, Western Europe would call this discriminatory. Moreover, shifts in ethics are not solely towards a moral perfection. Harold Koh explains how within a decade of the US pledging to abandon torture, the practice returned under the Bush administration (2008). The US passed a moral checkpoint yet backtracked soon after.

Ethics are not objective but rather subjective by nature. Janoff-Bulman et al. finds in their research that different political orientations evoke particular moral standards (2016, 9). In 2018 Heiphetz studied morality among children, concluding that the resulting similar judgements of morality in the experiment suggest that "religious people may ground their ethics in religious beliefs" (3). While other factors, like power, play a part in the legitimation of ethics, Carr is wrong when he claims "ethics is a function of politics;" (1939, 41) the standards are a function of ideology such as religion or political alignment.

Since ethics is linked to ideology and a large number of diverse ideologies are held by individuals, groups, and states, it follows that ethics itself is relative. An action viewed as appropriate by one state might appear abhorrent to another. The World Health Organization, among other NGOs, is strongly "opposed to all forms of [female genital mutilation]" and as a result spends 1.4 billion USD per year to eliminate the traditional practice (2020). While states backing the WHO act under the pretext of fulfilling moral obligation, the people whose cultural practices are forcefully ended likely have significantly differing views. Other examples abound: the Soviet Union's efforts to spread socialism and the PRC's promotion of Han identity through subjugation of the Uighurs seem abominable from the Euro-centric perspective, while they are probably morally justified in the opposing viewpoint.

Within any given sub-sphere of states of a common ideology, morality influences behavior in three ways: through authority, social pressure, and internal sentiment.

More powerful states acting jointly under their assessment of human rights abuses is an instance of morality engendering authoritative intrusion. Similarly, transnational advocacy groups use the material capabilities of stronger states through the boomerang effect to squash mutually agreed upon evil. Their "common ideological commitment" and the disadvantaged group's request move powerful actors to "defend a shared cause," applying pressure until the target realigns with their sense of morality (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 15).

Social pressures also play a part. The UN is an organization that consolidates ethical norms into "international laws" which serve as a form of peer pressure. NGO's use information and accountability tactics to make politicians feel obligated to uphold certain agreed upon moral standards in order to "save face." Finnemore corroborates that "states are very sensitive to charges that they are 'normatively backward'" in reference to the US's attempt to quell incoming

accusations of racist intentions by intervening in Somalia. Additionally, in contemporary politics, humanitarian intervention is virtually entirely multilateral in order to avoid suspicions of self-interested, immoral intentions (1996). A dissenter might claim that simply acting in line with moral standards does not change how states unequivocally act in their own self-interests. Moral standards certainly don't nullify self-interests, but they do indeed shape them.

Lastly, the moral beliefs of citizens impact their state's foreign policy. The first leg of the Kantian Tripod, that in democratic systems, people who bare the impacts of society now have more representation, has widespread implications. Stein finds that empirically, "the most violent states are those with the most vengeful citizens" (2019, 1), suggesting that people's ethics rise to the surface and impact international-level decision-making.

Take the world of religion as an analogy. Just as the believers of a common religious doctrine act, to some degree, according to authority from their minister, desire to appear moral in front of peers, and personal convictions of right and wrong, so do states act according to the ideological bases they share with others. Christians and Muslims would likely disagree with each other's moral standards, but within their respective ideological spheres those standards command considerable influence.

Another counterargument is that even if states share an ideological basis and sense of ethics, the international field itself is immutably amoral due to its anarchic quality. This point fails to acknowledge the reality of change. The international realm is a dense, complex web of social understanding in which things are always evolving (Finnemore 1996, 67). The realm is but a whole of the parts which constitute it, and as the units change, naturally, so does the whole (Lumsdaine 1994). Humans and technology have changed significantly over the last few centuries, and so have the norms of state behavior.

Morgenthau famously argues that politicians, knowing that "the political act is inevitably evil," (Morgenthau 1945, 18) must avoid moral standards tied to ideologies and simply choose the least bad action. However, when assessing which action is the relative best, some ethical decision-making process must still be employed. Whether that perspective is utilitarian or the rational prioritization of national interests, it is regardless a moral framework used to judge consequences and act.

Exceptions do exist; there are situations in which IR is amoral and the application of ethics does not work as outlined above: when states of comparable stature and contrasting moral beliefs collide. As Professor Rathbun explained, the "duty not to harm others is contingent on their respect for our own rights." When other states do not line up with our ethical convictions, yet simple intervention or pressure is not possible, morality loses its significance. The CPR has been undercutting international human rights agreements for its own personal state interests for some time now with moral pressuring leading nowhere (Maizland 2019). Ultimately, the less any two states overlap in their shared ethical beliefs, the less impactful those beliefs are.

Acknowledging the complexity and diversity of layers within IR helps in understanding the role of morality in the field. Impermanent ethical standards influence state action through authority, social pressure, and public sentiment, but they are rendered insignificant without an alignment of underlying ideologies.

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