

Dixie Valle

### The Extent of Moral Obligation in the International Arena

Morality has been a consistent theme when discussing international relations on the news, in governments, and the discussion of political philosophers. Realists, cosmopolitans, and morality of states have debated and critiqued the role and extent morality has in international relations. They have all discussed the intricacies of morality and its place or lack thereof in international relations; however, they all act upon different core assumptions. Realists' theory acts on the assumptions of self-interest and anarchy, while the morality of states theory acts on the assumption of self-determination and state autonomy. In comparison to these two theories, the cosmopolitans theory is based on the assumption of people's intrinsic value. Realists' response to the morality of states would be based on their conflicting perspectives between individual right to autonomy and self-interest. Moreover, realists' response to cosmopolitans would revolve around the risk of compliance.

Realists make the claim that morality should not have a role in foreign policy because of their assumptions that we live in a state of international anarchy. Domestically, hierarchy exists within states which allows civility; however, internationally "anarchy prevails" because there is no overriding power.<sup>1</sup> Donnelly argues that "because of the absence of international government, each state must provide its own protection through self-help" (Donnelly, 2000). He continues to explain that states act on their own accord of self-help in the interest of power resulting in other states being threatened. whether that's the goal or not. In this cycle of anarchy, self-interest is

---

<sup>1</sup> Donnelly, Jack. "TWENTIETH-CENTURY REALISM." *Traditions of International Ethics*, edited by Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 85–111. Cambridge Studies in International Relations.

perpetuated in order to merely survive as a state. Therefore, morality is unbeneficial to implement in international relations when it comes to states because of the nature of anarchy internationally. Realists, like Thucydides, claim that the implementation of morality leads to more violence rather than basing international relations off of realism. Thucydides cites the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens in which Athens wants to invade Melos, a Spartan colony. Athens applied power in their strategy while Melos applied principles of morality. As stated before, this led to Thucydides' claim that politics based on realism are less “bloody” than those based on morality.<sup>2</sup> Realists believe in human nature being self-interested ; therefore, making international relations exist in a state of anarchy. Every state serves its own people because there is no international government which inhibits morality from being implemented internationally. There is no obligation to base off international policy on ethics and proves to be unbeneficial according to Thucydides. Thucydides suggests that more practical and effective strategies are strategies of power. Realism is not the dislike of morality but rather acknowledging states acting on their own self-interest.

On the other hand, morality of states has the core assumption of self-determination and state autonomy which can conflict with the core assumptions of realism, self-interest and anarchy. Morality of states do believe that there is a moral obligation to one's own state; however, they also believe there is moral obligation internationally. Morality of states disagree with the international state of anarchy that realists claim which dissolves them from moral obligation and instead believes that states' right to autonomy creates moral obligation internationally. This moral obligation is the principle of non-interference. The principle of non-interference restricts states from interfering in other states even in times of struggle. States

---

<sup>2</sup> Forde, Steven. “CLASSICAL REALISM.” *Traditions of International Ethics*, edited by Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 62–84. Cambridge Studies in International Relations.

should assess their own struggles and find their own way towards freedom. An example of morality of states thought being applied is Nicaragua in 1978. Sandinistas' attempted to overthrow the Somoza government although receiving immense popular support, the Somozas shut down the Sandinistas rebellion. However, a year later the Sandinistas took down the Somoza government.<sup>3</sup> Luban acknowledges the first failed attempt but also makes the acknowledgment that if there had been an international intervention “this internal process of bargaining and commitment would have been cut short. And then the character of the new regime would have been determined by the intervening state together and with whatever faction of rebels it chose to support.”<sup>4</sup> Morality of states thinkers discuss the lack of self determination when other states interfere and place value on self-determination and only make an exception on the principle of non-interference in unique circumstances. Further than that, Luban acknowledges that any international interference in the Nicaragua events of 1978 would have resulted in foreign countries deciding another countries’ national affairs. Nicaragua’s state autonomy would have been taken away if there were intervention.

Realists' response to the breach of state autonomy based on interference would argue the lack of moral obligation in the international state of anarchy. There is no moral obligation to interfere or to not rather to do what is in one’s own self-interest. Not interfering can put one’s own nation at risk by choosing what considerably could be the weaker option. Realists claim that “. . . the primacy of self-preservation dictates that individuals are required to take no significant risks to comply with them.”<sup>5</sup> Forde continues to discuss that only a contract with “a

---

<sup>3</sup> Gurowitz, Amy. (2021)

<sup>4</sup> Walzer, Michael. "The moral standing of states: a response to four critics." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1980): 209-229.

<sup>5</sup> Forde, Steven. “CLASSICAL REALISM.” *Traditions of International Ethics*, edited by Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 62–84. Cambridge Studies in International Relations.

sovereign power” could enforce these obligations; however, there is no such power internationally. Morality of states cite the social contract; but, this contract is only enforced domestically within a state. The social contract applies to citizens who choose to live in a nation and therefore abide by laws to receive certain securities. Realists would emphasize the lack of existence of such a contract internationally because there is no overriding power to create such a contract. There is no obligation to not interfere and respect the state's autonomy in a state of anarchy in which moral obligations can not exist because of the international state of being.

Cosmopolitans’ core assumption on people’s innate value shapes the belief of international moral duties countering realists' lack of moral obligation internationally based on the international state of anarchy. Cosmopolitans are broken down into two, deontologists and consequentialists. Deontologists focus on the morality of intent while consequentialists focus on the morality of the outcome. Cosmopolitans claim “ the citizen of a nation is also a citizen of the world whose basic duty is to the good of mankind in general.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, moral obligations extend beyond the domestic to international obligations. This is in disagreement with realists who only apply morality domestically. Realists apply this reasoning because of the state of anarchy the world exists in. Realists like Kant emphasized the categorical imperative to treat others as they have intrinsic value and we should treat them as that. This explains the extension of moral obligation to the international arena because all people have value.<sup>7</sup> If all people have value we should treat them as such; therefore, state borders are not a correlation of moral obligation.

---

<sup>6</sup> Bentham, Jeremy. [1789] 1970. Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart. London: Methuen. 1843. Principles of International Law. In The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham vol. 2, ed. John Bowring. Edinburgh: William Tait.

<sup>7</sup> Gurowitz, Amy. (2021)

Realist response revolves around the risk of compliance internationally contradicting the anarchic state of nature.<sup>8</sup> Borders are enforced in realist thought emphasizing moral obligation nationally but not internationally. This is because of anarchy prevailing internationally. As mentioned, cosmopolitans believe that perpetual peace can be achieved through international alliances. Realist thought does not believe in international alliance because there is no overriding power that can hold this alliance accountable to hold the moral obligations. There is no higher power binding them to these moral obligations compared to nations that have their people and the government which bind them together.

In conclusion, international relations is more complex than it is presented because of the different assumptions different actors and states make. Realists assume self-interest and anarchy, morality of states assumes self-determination and state autonomy, and cosmopolitans assume individualism. Realists' responses are rooted in their assumption of the international arena living in anarchy towards morality of states and cosmopolitans. While there is no correct philosophical thought in the world of international relations, it is important to continue to think of the state's moral obligations as it is deeply linked to the overall improvement of society.

---

<sup>8</sup> Gurowitz, Amy. (2021)