



Do Morals Matter?

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34 notes/highlights

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1 Introduction: American Moralism



This "city on the hill" approach has a long pedigree; while it is not purely in the Jeffersonian tradition, it eschews activism. 32

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City on the hill

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2 What Is a Moral Foreign Policy?

*It is a mistake to oppose moral intuition and reasoning. Both intuition and reason are parts of our moral responses. * Morality involves both conviction and prudence. In expressing this biological moral impulse, our sense of moral obligation draws upon three main social sources: a sense of conscience that can be religiously or individually informed, rules of common morality that society treats as obligations, and codes of professional and personal conduct that define the duties associated with our social roles.*

Moral intuition and reason

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According to the writer Garry Wills, the Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter was our most religious president and taught Bible classes all his adult life, including during his White House years. Nonetheless, Wills points out, the religious right rejected him when he was president, and in 2016 the religious right supported Donald Trump, voting "in overwhelming numbers for our arguably least religious president."

Carter/Trump, religious voters

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One, discussed in the preface, is the ultra-realist view that ethics has nothing to contribute because there are no real choices in foreign policy and only one's own country counts—though that of course is a moral choice. Another misconception confuses a president's

moral character with his moral consequences, and still another makes judgments based on moral rhetoric rather than result

Moral judgement for presidency is not about character or rhetoric

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"America first" must be tempered by what Thomas Jefferson called "a proper consideration for the opinions of mankind."

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America first and Jefferson

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Good moral reasoning does not judge presidential choices based on their stated intentions or outcomes alone, but on all three dimensions of intentions, means, and consequences.

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Moral reasoning and intention

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President Nixon argued that "when the president does it, that means it is not illegal," 12 and President Trump has suggested that he could pardon himself, thus putting himself above the law. 13

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President above the law

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Jimmy Carter noted that "the presidents who have taken our country to war are looked upon as stronger and more able than the ones who tend toward peace. But that doesn't bother me." 14

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Carter on presidents who go to war

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But while Weber respected the role of conviction in core beliefs, he warned against too much purity in politics: "Whoever seeks the salvation of his own soul and the rescue of souls, does not do so by means of politics." 1

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Weber on ethics on conviction and ethics of responsibility

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Some Americans live by a fundamentalist ethic based on rules written in the Bible, the Koran, or some other religious text. However, in the philosophical traditions of the eighteenth-century liberal Enlightenment that guided the founding fathers and are still the dominant traditions for many Americans today, ethicists distinguish a rule-based approach associated with thinkers such as Immanuel Kant from a consequentialist approach associated with utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

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Rules-based or consequentialist approach

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People sometimes appeal to a third tradition called "virtue ethics" that can be traced back to Aristotle and the ancient Greeks (or in a non-Western culture, Confucianism). It pays attention to the cultivation of virtuous traits of character and emphasizes the morality of the person overall more than the morality of a particular decision. Moral virtues are our dispositions to do what is morally commendable. Character is more than personality. It is the sum of virtues that push a lifetime of decision in certain directions rather than others.

Moral virtues and character

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Even though moral philosophy may often seem a very different enterprise in the hands of Mill, Kant and Aristotle—the one neglecting what the other takes to be of chief importance—we have noticed many common themes and even many shared conclusions among these writers."

Complementarity

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imaginary veil of ignorance about our initial relative positions to illustrate justice as fairness. 28 Act as though you did not know how well off you were.

John Rawls, veil of ignorance

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The first child says, "I made it"; the second says, "I am the only one who can play it"; and the third says, "I have no other toys." 29 To whom should you give the flute? Even with a thought experiment about deciding behind an imagined veil of ignorance, the principle of justice as fairness does not solve all cases.

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Institutions as a neutral figure Teach children to decide among themselves Random solution

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Winston Churchill once argued that particularly in wartime, the truth may be "so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies."

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Churchill, lies during wartime

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In the latter cases, we might excuse a president's omission unless the United States had been a significant cause of the problem. General Colin Powell called this the "Pottery Barn principle"—if you broke it, you have an obligation to pay for it. Redressing an act of commission can add an additional moral dimension to consider.

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Omission commission

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Machiavelli warned, "those who rely simply on the lion do not know what they are about . . . He who has known best how to employ the fox has succeeded best." 38 FDR was a fox who eventually acted like a lion

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Machiavelli lion/fox

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A frequently cited example is when Winston Churchill attacked the French fleet in 1940 and killed some 1,300 Frenchmen rather than let the fleet fall into Hitler's hands. Churchill referred to that crisis of British survival as a "supreme emergency,"

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Churchill realism

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Kennedy, Reagan, and Obama, for example, framed their policies in ways that attracted support both at home and abroad. Nixon and Trump were less successful in attracting those outside the United States.

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Home/abroad attraction

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Writing in 1651 after the bloody English civil war in which the king was decapitated, the realist Thomas

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Hobbes imagined a state of nature without government as a war of all against all where life was nasty, brutish, and short. In contrast, writing in a somewhat more peaceful period a few decades later, the liberal John Locke imagined a state of nature as involving social contracts that permitted the successful pursuit of life, liberty, and property. †† Today, liberals say that while there is no world government, there is a degree of world governance, and anarchy has limits.

Locke, property Jefferson, pursuit of happiness


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 *They argue that "the variable that matters most for liberals is interdependence. For the first time in history, global institutions are now necessary to realize basic human interests." 51 Cosmopolitans are more skeptical of national sovereignty than liberals and stress the common humanity of individuals. However, these simple mental maps are not exclusive and in practice, presidents have mixed all three mental maps of world politics in inconsistent ways in different contexts when they formulate foreign policies. As we shall see in the following cases, most presidents have been "liberal realists with a touch of cosmopolitanism."*

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Liberalism cosmopolitanism

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 *Realism is the default position among the mental maps that most presidents use to chart their course in foreign policy, and given a world of sovereign states,*

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realism is the best place to start. The problem is that many realists stop where they start rather than realizing that cosmopolitanism and liberalism often have something important to contribute to an accurate moral map. When survival is in jeopardy, realism is a necessary basis for a moral foreign policy, though not sufficient. The question again is one of degree. Since there is never perfect security, the moral issue is what degree of security must be assured before other values such as welfare, identity, or rights become part of a president's foreign policy.

Realism + liberalism/Cosmo?


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 *When some realists treat such trade-offs as similar to Churchill's decision to attack the French fleet, they are simply ducking hard moral issues. It is not enough to say that security comes first or that justice presupposes some degree of order. Presidents have to assess how closely a situation fits a Hobbesian or Lockean mental map, or more likely where an action lies on a continuum between security and other important values.*

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Hobbes Locke tension

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 *Realists argue that intervention can be justified if it prevents disruption of the balance of power upon which order depends. Liberals argue that nations are groups of peoples with a sovereign right to determine their own fate that is enshrined in the UN Charter. Intervention can only be justified to counter a prior*

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intervention or to prevent a massacre that would make a mockery of self-determination. 53
Cosmopolitans prioritize justice and individual human rights to justify humanitarian intervention. In practice, these principles often get combined in odd ways.

Realists Liberals Cosmopolitans


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 *Victorian Britain had debates about using force to end slavery, Belgian atrocities in the Congo, and Ottoman repression of Balkan minorities long before Woodrow Wilson became the American president. 54*

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Victorian British humanitarian interventions

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 *call for a "Reaganite foreign policy," they tend to mean the moral clarity that went with Reagan's simplification of complex issues and his effective rhetoric in presentation of values. Not only is this inadequate one-dimensional moral reasoning for reasons explained earlier, but it also mistakes the success of Reagan's moral leadership, which included the ability to bargain and compromise as he pursued his policy.*

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Reaganite foreign policy Nonetheless, clear and clearly stated objectives can educate and motivate the public. The key question is whether Reagan was prudent in balancing his aspirations and the risks of his goals and objectives. Some people have argued that his initial rhetoric in his first term created a dangerous degree of tension and distrust in US–Soviet relations that increased the prospect of a miscalculation or accident leading to war, but it also created incentives to bargain, which Reagan later put to good advantage when Gorbachev came to power in Reagan's

second term. In terms of consequences, Reagan undoubtedly advanced the national interests of the United States, though most of the credit for ending the Cold War and the Soviet Union belongs to Gorbachev. In any event, Reagan took good advantage of the opportunity in a manner that was not limited simply to insular American interests.


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 *similarities are between George W. Bush and Woodrow Wilson. Both were highly religious and moralistic men who initially focused on domestic issues without any vision of foreign policy. Both tended to portray the world in black and white rather than shades of gray when they responded to a crisis with a bold vision, and stuck to it. Both tried to educate the public, but good teachers need to be good learners, and Bush's impatience hindered his learning. Wilson succeeded initially in educating a majority of the American people about his League of Nations, but he failed because he refused to make compromises with the Senate. In the long term, Wilson's vision was partially vindicated by the creation of the United Nations, but he lacked the leadership skills needed for its execution and implementation in his own lifetime.*

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Similarly between W Bush (who is different from his father H Bush) and Wilson

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 *Small countries have little incentive to pay for such global public goods. Because their small contributions make little difference to whether they benefit or not, it is rational for them to ride for free. But the largest powers can see the effect and feel the benefit of their contributions. Thus, it is rational and in the long-term national interest of the largest countries to lead. That*

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is consistent with America First, but it rests on a broader historical understanding of the current context than President Trump has shown when he uses that term.

America first, global public goods, smaller country (vs transactionalism)

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As Henry Kissinger put it, "To strike a balance between the two aspects of world order—power and legitimacy—is the essence of statesmanship. Calculations of power without a moral dimension will turn every disagreement into a test of strength . . . Moral prescriptions without concern for equilibrium, on the other hand, tend toward either

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crusades or an impotent policy tempting challenges; either extreme risks endangering the coherence of the international order itself." 69
Well-meaning interventions that lack realism can alter millions of lives for the worse. Shakespeare correctly warned about crying havoc and unleashing the dogs of war.

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For presidents, prudence is a necessary virtue for a good foreign policy, but it is not sufficient. American presidents between the two world wars were prudent when they needed a broader institutional vision. Wilson had such a vision but without sufficient realism. Franklin Roosevelt started without a foreign policy vision but developed one on the job. In a world of rapid technological and social change, just tending the garden is not enough. A sense of vision and strategy that correctly understands


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and responds to these new changes is also crucial. In judging a

president's record of pursuing a moral foreign policy that makes Americans safer but also makes the world a better place, it is important to look at the full range of their leadership skills, to look at both actions and institutions, commissions and omissions, and to make three-dimensional moral judgments. Even then, we will often wind up with mixed verdicts, but that is the nature of foreign policy as we shall see in the cases that follow.

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4 The Vietnam Era


 *Memoirs are not history; they are efforts to shape history.*

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Memoires and history

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9 Foreign Policy and Future Choices

 *Particularly important is the rise of Chinese power and the danger that the world will fall into a "Thucydides trap" in which a devastating war is caused by the fear created in a dominant great power by the rise of a new power. 10 Some think the twenty-first century will be devastated by a war of hegemonic transition similar to what happened in the last century, when Britain was challenged by the rise in the power of Germany.*

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Thucydides trap


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 *This second power shift has sometimes been called "the new feudalism," in which sovereigns share authority with a variety of other actors. Technology empowers nonstate actors. They do not replace sovereign states, but they crowd the stage on which governments act, creating new instruments, problems, and potential coalitions. ***

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Second, horizontal shift

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 *Respected commentators such as Martin Wolf of the Financial Times have argued that "we are at the end of both an economic period—that of Western-led globalization—and a geopolitical one, the post-Cold War 'unipolar moment' of a US-led global order. The question is whether what follows will be an unravelling of the post-Second World War era into a period of deglobalization and conflict much like the first half of the 20th century, or a new period in which non-Western powers, especially China and India, play a larger role in sustaining a co-operative global*

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Post unipolar pax americana

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