
REALISM REVISITED: THE MORAL PRIORITY OF MEANS AND ENDS IN ANARCHY

Author(s): LEA BRILMAYER

Source: *Nomos*, 1999, Vol. 41, Global Justice (1999), pp. 192-215

Published by: American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24219683>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
Nomos

JSTOR

REALISM REVISITED: THE
MORAL PRIORITY OF MEANS
AND ENDS IN ANARCHY

LEA BRILMAYER

The taste for simpleminded moralism is a luxury that most state leaders feel they are not in any position to indulge. It is a luxury, they feel, that is reserved for those who make a living moralizing (like academics) and for those (like human rights activists) who are far enough removed from having any influence that they need not seriously worry whether their proposals might be seriously naive. The men and women who make decisions on behalf of sovereign states feel that they cannot afford to choose a plan of action by whether it would please philosophers. The responsibility that comes with leadership puts them always in a position of having to make difficult choices, and the sorts of things they weigh are not well captured by simpleminded moral rules that have appeal in the academy.

Are state leaders cynical to feel this way? Does this rejection of moralism mean a rejection of morality? Are state leaders who take a skeptic's view of international legalities any worse because of that? Are they fooling themselves when they tell themselves that as leaders, they have a right (or duty) to turn away from moral recipes of right and wrong? If they are—if they are merely cynically rationalizing their immoral conduct with high-minded talk about state interests and international realities—then how is

it that apparently decent and obviously committed people feel this way when put in that position? What is there about being in a position of leadership that makes a decent human being doubt moral rules?

We know that some state leaders are truly cynical and immoral, and at the other end of the spectrum are the occasional saintly figures who never deviate from what strict principles require. But between the polar opposites of Machiavelli and Gandhi fall the large majority of persons making international decisions. They tend toward realism—toward a school of thought that emphasizes practicalities and state responsibilities instead of moral rules of right and wrong—but are often strongly influenced by ethical considerations. While realism often masquerades as moral skepticism, flaunting its contempt for naive idealism, many “realists” in fact consider themselves more truly moral than the “idealists” they castigate. This chapter is an examination of the moral compass that guides them in their better moments.

My sympathies are increasingly with these morally sensitive realists, but the point here is not to show that they are right and idealism is wrong. Their ethical position must first be constructed, for their affirmative position has been obscured by their louder negative rhetoric, condemning simpleminded moralism. Two philosophical arguments are central to this reconstruction. The first is that the moral appeal of realism lies in the fact that as a species of consequentialism, it is well situated to meet the problems that all deontological approaches inevitably confront. Realism is an ethic of consequences, and because it chooses means solely with an eye toward their accomplishment of those chosen ends, it need not in theory worry that it is paving the road to hell with good intentions. That is a worry in practice only, because in theory if the road leads to hell, then the intentions are the wrong ones. The second is that the reason that it can sell itself as a distinctively international theory is that it is in the international context that the problems posed by deontology appear most glaring. In well-governed domestic societies, deontological reasoning and consequentialism tend to converge; we can act, in most instances, with the moral confidence that “right” actions will have “good” results. This is not

true, however, in the international setting, where the hell to which good intentions lead is terrible and not unlikely.

This chapter concludes with some suggestions about how these arguments point toward a reconstruction of realism that highlights its ethical dimensions. It starts with a short discussion of which “realism” it is we seek to reconstruct.

I. WHICH REALISM?

Realism is the “bad boy” of international jurisprudence. The realist perspective has come to be equated with scientific cold-heartedness, with a Machiavellian disregard for moral decency, with a ruthless focus on one’s own interests, and with a calculating willingness to do whatever must be done to advance those interests. When international moralists set about the task of arguing for ethical principles of international relations, the preliminary target usually is international realism, for realism is seen as antithetical to moral principles. It is hard to deny the appeal of setting about things in this way; there are enough realist statements to the effect that “moral argument has no place in international relations,” that the temptation to take them at face value—and to shoot them full of holes—is virtually irresistible. Here, however, we resist that temptation and try to distinguish those varieties of realist thought that exhibit complete moral skepticism from those that are more sympathetic to the moral point of view.

There are several important strands of realist thought, each with different moral characteristics. An important one is neorealism, which focuses on a supposedly objective analysis of the interaction of different state units in an anarchical state system. Neorealism professes a lack of interest in normative questions, and instead it focuses on “scientific” analysis. It is not a moral interpretation of realism and does not aspire to be. What interests neorealists is more the mechanics of the structure of the international system than the quandaries and dilemmas that statesmen and stateswomen face. The loudest voices in the “morality has no place in international relations” chorus are neorealists, who are not interested enough in taking moral argument seriously to acknowledge the space that ethics leaves for a

nuanced balancing of pragmatic considerations. Neorealists are not interested in moral argument, and although they are entitled not to be, they would be better off simply leaving it at that rather than insisting that no one else should be.

Classic realism provides a more nurturing environment for moral reasoning than neorealism does, because it lacks neorealism's overblown pretensions to scientific purity. Classical realism—the realism of Morgenthau, Niebuhr, and Kennan—is the school of thought that best captures the sympathies of statesmen and stateswomen. Two themes coexist in classical realism, one that might be called *national interest realism* and one that might be called *realist morality*. National interest realism may perhaps be the dominant thread, although it is not the one of dominant interest here. It emphasizes the duty statesmen have to their own nations, as opposed to duty to the interests of the global community at large. National interest realism has moral overtones because it speaks of duty. But it does not overtly incorporate any duty to outsiders. There are many reasons to think that it in fact leaves room for such consideration and that it is therefore entirely compatible with realist morality. For this reason, I will briefly mention national interest realism once again at the end of this chapter. They are different threads, however, and need to be untangled.

The thread from which national interest realism must be separated—the one of primary interest here—is realist morality. Realist morality emphasizes that in order to be truly ethical, realist diplomats should take a hardheaded look at the long-term effects of what they are doing, rather than acting on narrow moralistic principles. The defining characteristic of this realist morality is the conviction that simplistic moralism tends to backfire in the long run, that it is counterproductive in terms of its own announced goals. This version of classical realism shares some characteristics of “national interest” realism: the sense of responsibility to those who are affected by one's decisions, and the elevation of this responsibility over commitment to abstract moral principle. We will see that a defining element of both is their consequentialist character: they concern themselves more with the actual effects of a decision than whether the decision is made in accordance with some preconceived set

of moral rules. But if national interest realism is taken at face value, it sees the statesperson's constituency as including only conationals. Realist morality need not be limited in this way, however; the consequences of a statesperson's actions generally may also matter.

It would not be wise to claim that this realist morality is the best (most accurate) interpretation of realism or that inconsistent versions of realist thought are somehow not authentic. Even to the extent that realist morality is authentic, it probably does not encompass all the different positions that realist thought covers. For example, realism is typically understood to focus exclusively on the actions of states (as opposed to private individuals or nongovernmental organizations), and some versions of realism go as far as insisting that only the systemic interactions of states (as opposed to their internal workings) are of interest. This position is not a consequence of realist morality; it is entirely beside the point in our discussion. Further adding to these difficulties, realist writings are often unclear about their moral positions, making it difficult and probably unproductive to stake out claims to authenticity. In any event, such debates about what "realists" as a group believe are of interest mainly to intellectual historians. There is probably no single "most authentic" interpretation of realism, and even if there were, appropriating that title would not be my objective. A better way to describe the enterprise here is that we are trying to determine whether a morally appealing version of realism can be constructed. If many realists choose not to adopt it, that is their business.

The morally appealing construction of realism that I offer here is grounded in the conviction that the consequences of a diplomat's actions are morally more important than whether those actions are right in some isolated and abstract sense. Stated perhaps too simply, it rests on the premise that diplomats must sometimes be willing to employ morally unattractive means when these are necessary to achieve morally desirable ends. Consider some examples of arguments usually thought to exhibit realist characteristics. Realists sometimes observed that Jimmy Carter erred in withdrawing support for the shah of Iran on the grounds of the shah's human rights abuses. The long-term consequence (so the realist argument goes) was a far more

repressive government's coming to power, one over which the United States did not have as much moderating influence. Similarly, boycotts of Chinese products or economic sanctions against South African goods were sometimes said to be counter-productive because boycotts tend to isolate outlaw regimes, simply driving the governments in question to take an even harder-line stand. In addition, it is claimed, such boycotts backfire because it is the poor and helpless of society that they hurt the most.

Similarly, a realist might argue for nuclear deterrence, knowing very well that nuclear weapons are terrible and that deterrence creates some probability that they might be used. He or she might argue that nuclear deterrence by "responsible" powers is the best way to avoid an even greater catastrophe, such as a despotic power acquiring nuclear weapons and using them to intimidate the rest of the world into submission. A realist might argue that one should support certain regional powers rather than others because in the long run a balance of power is the most stable and therefore the best situation that can realistically be achieved. Or a realist might argue that it is sometimes necessary to violate international legal principles of nonintervention because a nearby nation is having a seriously destabilizing effect on the region as a whole.

These are realist arguments, even though they clearly contain moral elements. They are realist in the sense that they try to take a "realistic" look at what will actually happen as a result of taking a moral stand. They contain moral elements because the actual consequences are then evaluated from a moral point of view. In all these cases, the "realist" point of view is characterized by both pragmatic analysis of the likely results of actions and sensitivity to the moral overtones of the likely results. The realist morality places priority on ends rather than means and on the goodness of the consequences rather than the abstract rightness of the actions viewed in isolation.

This is the thread of realism that we want to focus on here.

1. Realism's main complaint against idealism is its lack of concern with the consequences of actions. Idealism backfires. The attractions of realism are precisely the

- difficulties of deontological forms of moral reasoning, and vice versa.
2. Comparable problems arise in any situation in which deontological reasoning and consequentialist reasoning diverge; they are not limited to cases involving international decision making. The tension between “realism” and “idealism” is endemic to all leadership and is not peculiar to international relations.
 3. The realists nonetheless are not completely wrong to see international decision making as distinctive, because it is in international decision making that deontological reasoning about means and consequentialist reasoning about ends are most likely to diverge. Although the same moral dilemmas can arise in either domestic or international decision making, they are actually more likely to occur in the international context, and when they do arise, they are more often intractable.
 4. The reason for this is precisely the feature of international politics that realists find so compelling: the fact that there is no centralized power to enforce international law.

In sum, realist morality is based on the proposition that in situations of anarchy—international affairs being one such situation—the consequences of one’s actions should be given higher moral priority than the moral attractiveness of the means that one employs.

II. REALISM AND “MORAL RECIPES”

Although this is not the place for elaborate digressions into the finer points of moral philosophy, it is helpful to situate the disagreement between the realists and those they criticize in the broader context of moral debate. The disagreement can usefully be understood as an example of the familiar debate between consequentialist and deontological moral theory. The mood of realist morality is one of impatience with simplistic moral rules and, therefore, with morality as a whole (with which simplistic moralism is erroneously equated). This can easily be

appreciated if one keeps in mind the sort of idealism that realists object to.

The idealism that is the chief target of the realist scorn involves a simpleminded application of moral rules, what one might call *moral recipes*. This label, though dismissive, is an apt one because realists are, in fact, dismissive of moral reasoning as they understand it. Precisely the thing that realists object to is that (in their view) morality attempts to impose preconceived and oversimplified conceptions of how to act. In response, it is entirely appropriate to point out that morality is not necessarily the set of preconceived simplistic “dos” and “don’ts” that realism seems to think it is. Morality has room for exceptions, for subtlety and doubt, for rebuttable presumptions, and for a balanced consideration of a variety of factors depending on the circumstances. The naive moralism that realism attacks is more or less a straw man. But if what we want to understand is how the realists see their own moral vision, it helps to start by contrasting it with what they see themselves rejecting. Even if what they reject is a straw man, understanding what that straw man looks like and why they find it so upsetting is instructive.

Take, for example, the realist rejection of absolute principles of human rights. Idealists (according to the realists) make blanket statements that violations of human rights ought to be condemned in every case or that it is always immoral to lend one’s support to governments that violate their citizens’ human rights. Another example is the use of chemical weapons or land mines. Is it always wrong? Idealists (the realists fear) wish to say so categorically. What about violations of international law, for instance, principles prohibiting armed aggression? Realists expect idealists to counsel that international law must always be obeyed. Should countries sometimes repudiate their treaty obligations or, even worse, violate their treaty obligations secretly? Again, the idealist is painted as one who addresses issues of this sort dogmatically and categorically.

What makes such positions “deontological” is that the actions in question are judged by some intrinsic moral quality instead of in terms of their consequences. Using chemical weapons or violating human rights is wrong regardless; it is intrinsically wrong. In some circumstances, it may improve things overall if chemi-

cal warfare is used or armed aggression is initiated. The reason is that the opponent one faces may be so evil that the benefits outweigh the suffering caused by the means that one engages. But those means are not, for that reason, any less the source of suffering, and this suffering may be inflicted on innocent people. Someone who is inclined to see things in deontological terms looks at the act itself—starting a war, supporting human rights abuses, engaging in deceit or spying, employing destructive weapons, killing innocent civilians, violating one's treaty obligations—and condemns it without taking into account the countervailing long-term reasons that might be offered in the action's defense. These long term-reasons would be relevant from the point of view of the consequentialist, who wants to know all the effects (long and short term) that a particular action will have.

The realist's scorn for what is seen as simpleminded and naive insistence on absolute compliance with moral rules does not necessarily arise out of any lack of respect for human well-being and human rights. Certainly, most classical realists would prefer a world in which there was more respect for human rights rather than less, for both themselves and the rest of the human race. The disagreement lies instead in the realist belief that human well-being and human rights are further advanced in the long run if the effects are calculated pragmatically and in the realist belief that this long-term calculation is what matters. A simpleminded application of moral recipes (in this view) backfires because it does not take into account the complexities of international relations.

We gave some examples earlier. Withdrawing political support for the shah of Iran (it was argued) backfired because the end result was the coming to power of a regime that was an even worse violator of human rights. Boycotting the goods of countries with repressive regimes will backfire if it causes economic dislocation and injury to the least advantaged in the boycotted country or if the boycott simply isolates the human rights offender (or fails to work altogether because other countries do not observe it). A country that refuses to employ certain types of weapons or tactics can put itself at a disadvantage, with the end result being the systematic extinction of exactly those nations

that behave most scrupulously. These are the sorts of arguments that realists are willing to consider and (when appropriate) to make. The realist position is not that it never pays to take principles into account, but that there is no guarantee that deciding on principle will have the desired effect. One should always be aware that others may act out of self-interest. One should always make a clear-sighted calculation of how best to achieve the goals one has in mind and act on these clear-sighted calculations rather than on naive assumptions about how one wishes the world to be.

One might view calculations of this sort as cynical, and indeed, they are the opposite of the fuzzy-headed romanticism usually ascribed to Woodrow Wilson or Jimmy Carter. The realist would argue that it is necessary to see people and international events for what they are and not for what one might like them to be. If it is cynical to be realistic about the sort of motivations present in international relations, then the realist is a cynic. But the realist should not, for this reason, be assumed to be immoral. The realist may see herself as simply making the morally best choice under morally difficult circumstances. It is the idealist (according to this view) who is immoral. The idealist is self-indulgent and shortsighted, self-righteous and smug. The idealist is more concerned with maintaining his own moral purity, with keeping his moral hands clean. The idealist (according to this view) cares less about the welfare of the world around him than with some abstract rightness of his own actions.

The realist, in contrast, congratulates himself on his willingness to confront the tragic fact that sometimes well-intentioned actions are not enough. Sometimes for the general and long-range benefit of all, it is necessary to face unpleasant reality and do things one would rather not do. Acting in a way designed to bring about good consequences lacks the moral certainty of acting in accordance with simple moral principles. There is an obvious appeal to simply following the moral recipe, even knowing that "the heavens may fall," that if things go wrong, it is not one's own fault, because one has kept one's own hands clean. This appeal is the intuitive appeal of deontological reasoning. But it is a temptation that realists resist, and they feel themselves superior for having refused the easy moral choice.

Realism feeds on the divergence between deontology and consequentialism. If we could always act in confidence that following simple moral recipes would lead to good results, then why should we turn anywhere more complicated for assistance? Calculating the consequences of our actions is a difficult and uncertain business. It can require that we do unpleasant things, things we find morally unsavory. If we had reassurances that if we did the "right" thing, then "good" would always follow, we would have little reason to take risks and, in particular, little moral reason to engage in the regrettable.

Except for those of us with appropriately equipped religious convictions, such reassurances do not exist. The source of realist morality's appeal lies in our lack of moral confidence, in the uneasy belief that if we do care about consequences, we cannot simply follow the commandments and then leave the rest to divine power. There are too many circumstances in which we know that obeying the rules means playing into evil hands. Moral dilemmas of this sort are fertile ground for realists because they give a moral motivation for departing from moral formulas.

III. THE ESSENTIAL COMMONALITY OF INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC MORALITY

To find examples of such dilemmas, we need only look as far as domestic moral theory. Moral dilemmas force us to confront the sad fact that we cannot necessarily satisfy all our moral intuitions with a single course of action. Circumstances in which every moral theory leads to the same conclusion are unlikely to be interesting, for theory craves dilemmas, and dilemmas arise when strongly held moral intuitions point in opposite directions. For instance, a stock example involves being captured by bandits and taken to a remote area. The head of the gang of bandits has been planning to kill a number of innocent hostages and offers to strike a deal with you. You can select one of the individuals who is about to be killed and shoot that person at point-blank yourself. If you do this (you are told), the rest of the hostages will be allowed to go free. Or you can refuse to get involved, in which case the gang will shoot all the hostages. The dilemma is that if you agree to participate, fewer innocent peo-

ple overall will be killed, but you will have killed an innocent person. If you stick to your moral principles and refuse to pull the trigger, you can tell yourself that the killing that takes place in consequence was not of your doing. But your actions will result in the murder of several extra innocent people.

The stock examples of realist morality have a similar flavor. A certain regime, for instance, has an abominable human rights record. It not only refuses to hold popular elections, but it also represses its own people through torture and gross political intimidation. It requests assistance, and your state knows that any support it gives will only enable the repression to continue. But waiting in the wings is an even more evil regime; one like Pol Pot's or the ayatollah's. Should your state keep its hands clean, refuse assistance, and let the current government go down? Or should it "choose the lesser of two evils," "look to the long run," follow a policy of "constructive engagement" or "containment"? The dilemma is more common than we would like to suppose.

One thing that should immediately be apparent is although the examples of Pol Pot or the ayatollah have an international flavor (they involve regimes in other countries), this is not deeply important to the dilemma they present. If the United States faces a dilemma in deciding whether to support oppressive regimes, in what way is that dilemma theoretically so different from the dilemma of a domestic political opponent? An ordinary Iranian ought to be just as concerned about the long-run consequences of refusing to support the shah as would an ordinary American taxpayer. In both cases, there is a moral question arising from the fact that the probable alternatives are even worse. The "international" flavor of the problem is entirely coincidental because the moral problem confronting the United States is theoretically identical to the moral problem posed domestically.

Indeed, the stock example that philosophers use to drive a wedge between consequentialist and deontological approaches—our example of the bandit gang—itself illustrates that such dilemmas are not peculiar to the international arena. Here, also, a domestic situation provides a dilemma regarding whether one ought to keep one's hands clean by applying simple moral rules or whether one ought, instead, to face unpleas-

ant realities and act to bring about the best set of consequences. The parallels between the “bandit” and the “totalitarian regime” examples are quite striking. In both cases, someone else will behave in an unscrupulous and destructive way if you do not do the morally unpleasant but necessary thing.

The realist condemns moral prissiness, naive beliefs that others can be counted on to follow moral rules, and misplaced confidence that doing the “right” thing will lead to “good” results. But such realism cannot be limited to international morality. If one is convinced that it is better to look at things this way in interstate relations, it is hard to see why one does not do so in domestic moral reasoning as well. In what sense, then, is international morality distinctive? Realists persist in the belief that their approach is somehow most compelling where no central government exists. They cite the absence of world government as somehow justifying the rough-and-tumble practical morality that idealists reject. The belief that “the ends justifies the means” is more appropriate, they think, in international relations. But why, when one can see that conflict between acceptable means and desirable ends is just as much a feature of domestic moral theory as it is of international decision making?

The answer, it seems, lies in an important feature of consequentialism. Consequentialism does not, in theory, rule out any factual circumstance of a moral problem as *a priori* irrelevant. Anything that might affect the calculation of consequences is potentially of moral importance. One such factual circumstance of potential importance is the fact that others cannot be expected to comply with moral rules. From a consequentialist point of view, it certainly matters what the conduct of others in response to one’s own decision is likely to be. To the extent that such responsive conduct affects consequences, it will affect the calculations of what is right or wrong. If the possibility of such conduct systematically sways calculations in one way or another and if others’ conduct is likely to be different internationally than domestically, then one might expect international and domestic moral calculations to work out differently. International consequentialism, in other words, must include in the moral equation the fact that other actors may not comply with legal and moral norms. This can also happen domestically, but in

well-governed domestic societies, such occurrences, though possible, are rare. International and domestic morality are, in theory, identical, but since the practical circumstances of application are different (speaking probabilistically), the results of applying moral theory tend (again speaking probabilistically) are different as well.

It is interesting in this regard that the bandit hypothetical involves an important element of “anarchy,” of having to take into account the imperfect nature of other actors’ compliance with moral rules. There is a sense in which the situation in this (admittedly far-fetched) hypothetical is “anarchical,” just as international relations are. What animates the example is the picture of a group of lawless individuals who are prepared to do evil things. The moral dilemma is a direct result of the facts that others are not prepared to follow moral rules and that there is no effective power for enforcing those moral rules. One wishes that the situation could be resolved by some police force that would rescue all the innocent people and punish those who caused the problem, but the hypothetical is designed to make that resolution seem unlikely. It is precisely to make the situation more “anarchical” that the hypothetical is situated in a remote area where help is likely to be unavailable. Under such circumstances are you supposed to take an action that seems intrinsically immoral, in order to save as many lives as possible? Or to refuse to accommodate yourself to an intrinsically immoral situation? In theory, the question is not very different from the problem of whether statesmen and stateswomen should take into account unpleasant and immoral realities when deciding what to do.

In practice, though, there is a difference. The hypothetical just described is fairly ridiculous. It has to be, for philosophers must go to some extremes to offer domestic “anarchical” situations in which one cannot resolve the tension by simply turning to the state. The reason that the hypothetical problem is located far out in an inaccessible area, where no prospect of help is likely, is to make the chance of intervention as remote as possible. The situation of anarchy must be built into the hypothetical in a rather artificial way. The difference between international and domestic moral theory, then, is that philosophers need not go to such absurd lengths to hypothesize cases in which authori-

tative intervention is unlikely. In the international arena, it is all too likely that no one will come to the rescue when evil-minded people threaten. In the international arena, hypothetical examples are all too plausible. Indeed, they are hardly hypothetical; real examples come easily to mind.

What makes realism seem attractive as a theory of international relations—even to people who have little attraction to consequentialism as a matter of domestic morality—is that the actual cases in which a consequentialist approach to moral reasoning appears compelling are more common internationally than domestically. Internationally, there are more cases (and, more important, more credible cases) in which the consequentialist stakes are high, that is, when following deontological moral rules risks serious harm to others. The gulf between deontological reasoning and consequentialist moral reasoning is much wider in international theory than in domestic theory. In domestic theory, one must strain to think of hypotheticals in which the tension between deontology reasoning and consequential reasoning is acute, for in domestic situations, the state is present in the background. In domestic situations, one can usually “solve” the tension by controlling the evil and aberrant behavior of others through state action. Since realist morality feeds on the divergence between consequentialist and deontological ethics, it gains appeal in international affairs, but that appeal shrinks in importance in ordinary domestic times and situations.

IV. MORAL CONFIDENCE AND INTERNATIONAL ANARCHY

The reason that the divergence is greatest in international affairs is related to a characteristic of international politics that is frequently cited by realists as an explanation for the reduced importance of ethical reasoning: the supposed “anarchy” of international relations. I have argued elsewhere¹ that this notion of “anarchy” is poorly understood and it should be clear from the preceding discussion that even if it were better understood, it would not (in my view) be correct to say that its existence eliminates the need for moral reasoning. However, if by “anarchy” we mean simply the absence of an institution that enforces interna-

tional moral norms, then this absence does play an important role in moral analysis. When the institutions for enforcing moral norms are imperfect (or absent), it is harder to have confidence that engaging in “right” actions will have “good” consequences. The consequentialist cost of obeying deontological norms is high, and therefore the allure of realism is strongest. In international anarchy, moral confidence is lacking.

What is it about the existence of a well-governed political society that makes it less likely that individuals will face difficult moral dilemmas of choosing between obeying moral precepts concerning legitimate means and the advancement of morally desirable ends? Put in another way, why is it that individuals acting in domestic society can behave according to deontological moral principles without worrying too much about consequences, without worrying that their well-intentioned actions may backfire? Why in most domestic cases do deontological reasoning and consequentialist reasoning tend to converge? What, conversely, is it about international society that deprives people of their moral confidence that doing what seems right also leads to morally acceptable results?

The answers to these questions lie in the ways that good governments actively set out to achieve desirable social states of affairs through the structuring of individual conduct. Governments advance toward social goals by reducing them to their components of individual action and then requiring compliance with those individual standards of conduct. Assume, for example, that a reduction in infant mortality is desired. To achieve this, a government may identify the various causes of infant mortality: premature births due to poor medical care of or substance abuse by the pregnant woman, poor nutrition due to ignorance or poverty, environmental threats such as poor sanitation or polluted water, and so forth. In pursuit of its goal of reducing infant mortality, the government may provide better prenatal care, counseling for substance abuse, improved sanitation, nutritional information, and the like. It does so by requiring certain things of its citizens in an effort to marshal resources to solve the problem. Taxpayers are asked for financial support; the sale of certain drugs is criminalized and warnings are required for others; water quality control is imposed; and so forth.

Virtually every social goal that a government seeks to achieve requires it to break down the problem into its constituent elements, to develop effective means to achieve those ends it finds desirable. Good governments identify morally desirable goals and find means for bringing them about, and a good government uses the coercive power of the state as a way of inducing compliance with the means that it has selected. It reasons backward, from good consequences to effective deontological rules.

Conversely, when a state is considering a rule that seems desirable from a deontological point of view, it is likely to look forward into the future to determine its likely consequences. It assumes the responsibility of evaluating the consequences of the rules of conduct it imposes. If it seems that the rule is likely to backfire, it may either reconsider or take preventive measures to avert the undesirable side effects. If it does its job well, its citizens should be able to trust those rules and comply with them in the relative security that the long-range consequences have been considered. Thus, whether one views political decision as either a forward- or a backward-looking enterprise, good governments act in a way that tends to bring together behavior according to deontological rules with the achievement of overall social benefits. Good governments bestow on their citizens an important moral benefit: the moral confidence that they can do as they think right, viewed deontologically.

Good governments also provide moral confidence in another respect. Not only are its citizens relatively secure in the knowledge that the consequences have been taken into account, but they also act with the confidence that others will also be complying. This is more a question of the government's strength than its moral vision or its policymaking skills. Strong and effective governments are able to discourage disobedience of the rules and remedy the violations that do take place. If a government is not sufficiently effective to provide this moral environment for action, then individuals will lack the moral confidence that others will also do their part. They must be concerned that their well-intentioned actions will fail to be effective or will even backfire. The consequence of noncompliance by others may be that the desired goal is not achieved or that the consequence may actually be that attempts to achieve the goal make things worse.

Take the case of gun control. Probably everyone (even members of the National Rifle Association) agrees that there would be fewer deaths from gunshot wounds if no one possessed guns. But there is disagreement over whether it is possible to achieve this goal (zero gun ownership) by banning guns. Gun control opponents claim that criminals will still be able to get guns: “When guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns” as the bumper sticker says. They raise the possibility that we all will be worse off by requiring law-abiding citizens to hand in their guns, because we will then be prey to those few elements of society that still possess them. Not only do we have to worry that some will simply fail to do their part—by not handing in their guns—but we also have to think about the possibility that some may actively and perversely take advantage of the situation (those who prey on the now unarmed populace).

The gun control example is an interesting one because of the analogues in international relations. There is widespread agreement, for example, that it would be a better world if we could eliminate nuclear weapons, land mines, and chemical warfare. Proposals are continually made to ban these methods of destruction, and the perennial realist reply is that this would be utopian. Outlaw states would get access to these weapons. Not only would we have failed to achieve our objective of banning them, but we also would have actually made things worse because outlaw states would have greater power over the states that did comply. In a world of perfect institutions, individuals would not have to worry about such consequences of their own good-faith compliance with deontological rules. When institutions are imperfect, however (and they admittedly are imperfect internationally), only a deontological “true believer”—or someone with complete confidence in God’s plan for the world—is willing to “do right, though the heavens may fall.”

Whether internationally or domestically, a well-ordered political system gives individuals moral confidence, assurances that if one acts individually according to the system’s rules of action, the consequences will generally work out for the best. This moral confidence comes from the secure belief that by and large, others will act predictably and according to generally accepted moral standards. The structures of political decision

making promulgate norms that effectively integrate individual responsibility with the overall social good, with deontological rules, that is, those that are also acceptable consequentially. These structures also assume the responsibility of making sure that others act according to these rules—they enforce the general rules of behavior—and the task before the individual himself or herself is simply to carry out his or her own part of the bargain, to behave according to those principles in his or her own conduct. The individual who behaves according to moral rules and is well intentioned need not be overly concerned that good intentions will go seriously astray. It is the task of government to control the sort of perverse and aberrant behavior that makes morally well-intentioned actions backfire.

When the government is strong and good, behavior in accordance with its rules of conduct usually produces good results. The reason is that a good government formulates rules of conduct that produce good consequences for society at large and a strong government is able to put them into operation despite the efforts of ill-intentioned persons to evade or frustrate them. There is no ironclad guarantee that behaving according to social and legal rules will never backfire, but there are assurances that circumstances of this sort are exceptional so that the individual who relies on individual standards of behavior can act in moral confidence. Deontology and consequentialism are still in theory quite different ways of approaching morality, and in some circumstances, the two diverge. But as a general and a practical matter, the tension is not acute. The individual who wishes to do what is morally right according to simple rules of conduct can rely on the ability of the government to make sure that others do this also, and he or she can avoid the uncertainties and anxious calculations caused by the awareness that those with whom one interacts may be perversely planning to take advantage of one's own commitment to moral standards.

V. THE MORAL VISION OF REALISM

From the moral realist's point of view, the problem with international society is the absence of political institutions that are both good and strong. Some international institutions are relatively

strong; the Western alliance, for example, is at this point strong enough to force its will on the rest of the world in most instances. But the international institutions that have the strength to structure state conduct do not necessarily do so in the most moral of ways; instead, they tend to advance the state interests of the small number of powerful states that dominate them. Because one cannot count on them to force other actors to comply with moral rules, one must always plan for the possibility that other actors will behave illegally and immorally.

But if the institutions that are strong are not necessarily good, it is also the case that the institutions that are good are not necessarily strong. Some international institutions consistently try to enforce international norms of conduct. Although they are far from perfect, the International Court of Justice, the regional courts of human rights, and various development-oriented institutions of the United Nations come to mind. However, such international institutions that adopt a legal or moral point of view are frequently not strong enough to put that point of view into practice. Even though they might wish to throw their weight behind international principles, they are not in any position to guarantee compliance. This is the source of the diplomat's moral dilemma.

From the realist point of view, statesmen and stateswomen cannot safely assume that "someone else" is providing assurances that individual moral conduct will have good consequences. In domestic society, individual actors assume that if they do their part, they need not worry any further. The lack of assurances along these lines forces every international decision maker to make his or her own strategic consequential calculations. Each time a national leader acts, it is with the knowledge that no moral "safety net" exists. Good intentions and decision according to individual moral principle are not enough. The world is an unpredictable and dangerous place, say realists, with other states poised to capitalize on one's weakness. According to the realist way of thought, this factor must always be taken explicitly into account, unless one simply wishes to throw the consequences to the winds and follow moral recipes.

Caring about the consequences of one's actions internationally inclines one in the general direction of realism. Consequen-

tialism explains the distinctive characteristics of international realism, but it does so in a way that makes realism consistent with morality. These characteristics are its cynicism, its fatalistic resignation to the occasional necessity of doing what seems to be immoral, its emphasis on the duties of leadership, and its condemnation of what it sees as naive self-indulgence on the part of the idealists.

The *cynicism* of realism comes from the willingness to recognize that others cannot be counted on to behave according to principle. Realism is not necessarily cynical in the sense that its practitioners are themselves amoral or immoral, that they themselves are moral skeptics. But realism is skeptical about the purity of others' motives. Realists feel this cynicism to be a prerequisite to any evaluation of the effects of one's own conduct. Naive idealism is condemned for its rosy assumptions about other states' motives. To be cynical, according to the realist, is merely to be clear-sighted. And being clear-sighted is the first prerequisite to being moral.

The *fatalistic resignation* of realism to the occasional necessity to do "immoral" things comes from a belief that what matters about one's actions is the results that they produce, not their intrinsic moral nature or the good intentions behind them. No matter how well intentioned one's actions are or how consistent they seem to be with moral strictures, if at the end of the day they have produced human misery, then the realist diplomat will feel that he or she has not done his or her job well. Accordingly, unpalatable means may sometimes have to be employed to reach desired ends. The moral realist is not happy that this is so; ordinarily he or she would prefer that it were not necessary to cause injury, to engage in deceit, or to violate his or her solemn commitments. But the realist accepts the necessity of occasionally doing these things as the price of assuming leadership.

This emphasis on the *duties of leadership* is the third distinctive attribute of realism. Many realists have remarked that with leadership comes responsibility for others, and this means sometimes having to do things that would be abhorrent to a private party. The truth of this remark lies in the fact that exercising a leadership role means being consequentialist. The duties of leadership include caring about the effect of one's behavior on

others. The leader must be “public regarding,” as opposed to obsessed with maintaining his or her own moral purity. The tragedy that realists see in leadership is that a true leader may sometimes have to be willing to sacrifice his or her own moral scruples out of a sense of responsibility to others.

Finally, realism scorns the *self-indulgence of idealism*. Idealism is seen as the easy way out. Not only does the idealist insist on keeping his or her moral hands clean, at the expense of the interests of others, but the idealist wants to see things as easier than they really are. Moral recipes are cheap and easy to apply (in the eyes of the realist), whereas true moral responsibility requires making decisions in the face of great uncertainty. Not only must one be willing to do the dirty work of leadership, but one also must be willing to do it without any assurances that the consequential calculations that one makes will be proved correct. The realist believes that a leader must be willing to live with the personal uncertainty and insecurity that comes from knowing that having done his or her best is no guarantee. Uncertainty is a fact of life, and those who cannot deal with life’s complexities had better avoid the role’s responsibility.

These basic characteristics are only the first steps toward an outline of what a realist morality would look like. We have described it as a kind of consequentialism. But what kind? One thing that should be clear is that it cannot be as dogmatic as realist rhetoric sometimes seems to be. Such a morality cannot, of course, dogmatically reject the idea of ethics in international relations; it cannot, in other words, equate “morality” with “moral recipes.” It must also remain willing to consider the beneficial consequences of idealism and of respect for legal and moral rules. Sometimes there are strategic advantages over the long run to promoting international norms. By acting consistently and according to moral principles, one might set a good example, encourage compliance by other states, assure others of one’s good intentions, and alter the tenor of international discourse. Such phenomena are sometimes dismissed out of hand as idealistic nonsense. For a consequentialist, however, they cannot be dismissed out of hand. It cannot be taken as an article of faith that principles are always silly or counterproductive; realist morality must be more open-minded to the possible pragmatic

benefits of observing legal and moral norms. This seems clear from what has been said already.

But on other issues, what we have said does not take us very far. In particular, we have said nothing about how the consequences of actions are to be evaluated. Is realist morality a sort of consequentialism that places value on human happiness, so that actions are to be chosen according to some principle of utility maximization? Or is realist morality intent on maximizing something else, such as respect for human rights? Is the objective the promotion of individual liberty? Social equality? The rights of states? Does realist morality even require the maximization of something? Or does it take consequences into account in some other way?

Another open question is how the statesperson is supposed to balance the interests of his or her own state against the interests of others. A predominant concern with one's own interests is not necessarily immoral if, for example, there are moral limitations on which of one's own interests one is allowed to promote. One possibility is that realist morality requires only that a statesperson limit policies to those designed to further legitimate state interests but that as long as a state leader is advancing a genuine state entitlement, any means might be employed. Or one might hold that realist morality actually sees the pursuit of legitimate self-interest as a means to the greater end of promoting state interests generally, that there is some "invisible hand" mechanism in which the pursuit of individual legitimate interests produces the best results overall. Or one might hold that realist morality requires a direct pursuit of the general good, but in a hard-headed and clear-sighted way.

Still another open question is whether to differentiate between the consequences of one's actions for innocent states, as opposed to those that are actually responsible for norm violations themselves. Perhaps there are limits on the means that might be employed when the costs fall on states (or individuals) that obey the rules but no limits on states (or individuals) that have forfeited protection of the rules because of their own illicit conduct. What we have said so far does not help distinguish these positions from one another or to sort out which are the

more appealing (or the more consistent with traditionally realist views).

We noted at the beginning of this chapter that realism has many different threads. The realist morality we have described is only one of them. Some realists (predominantly neorealists) may truly believe that morality has no place in international relations because morality is not “objective” and “scientific.” Other realists may genuinely believe that nothing matters besides aggrandizement of the national interest, defined only in terms of whatever is of advantage to a state in its own view and whatever the cost to outsiders. The version of realism investigated here allows for moral analysis and for the possibility that that moral analysis includes giving weight to the interests of others. It merely insists that the interests of others are often not advanced by following simpleminded moralistic recipes. This is an ethical position, with its own distinctive ethical vision. Although it may be wrong—a question that cannot be pursued here—it cannot be dismissed out of hand as incoherent, amoral, or immoral.

NOTE

1. In *American Hegemony: Political Morality in a One SuperPower World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), esp. chap. 2.