

The Apparent Myth of Morality and the Reality of Genocide

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Nobody has openly pronounced that stopping genocide is immoral or that allowing genocide to proceed is moral. It would, therefore, seem that since no one is capable of posing an argument contradictory to these statements, they must be inherently true beyond debate.

How is it then, that on numerous occasions, the world has proven itself to be quite content to sit idly by while so many are brutally murdered? What happened to the moral imperative? What happened to morality in general? To understand these questions an analysis of the underlying motives that seem to dictate the actions of the nations of the world might prove illuminating. What seems to become overtly evident, though, is the fact that self-interest, or the lack thereof, ultimately rules the world, while morality is discreetly pushed under the rug.

Barack Obama has said that, “preventing, suppressing, and punishing genocide is a moral imperative... [and] we cannot sit idly by as innocent people are indiscriminately killed” (Cheadle and Prendergast xii). Professor Elie Wiesel has similarly declared that, “not to urge our elected officials to intervene and save innocent lives [...] is to condemn us on grounds of immorality” (Cheadle and Prendergast xi). Nobody has openly pronounced that stopping genocide is immoral or that allowing genocide to proceed is moral. It would, therefore, seem that since no one is capable of posing an argument contradictory to these statements, they must be inherently true beyond debate.

How is it then, that on numerous occasions, the world has proven itself to be quite content to sit idly by while so many are brutally murdered? What happened to the moral imperative? What happened to morality in general? To understand these questions an analysis of the underlying motives that seem to dictate the actions of the nations of the world might prove illuminating. What is quite evident, though, is the fact that self-interest, or the lack thereof, ultimately rules the world, while morality is discreetly pushed under the rug. There are many reasons for this being so, some more obvious than others. Yet it would seem that St. Paul professes a profound wisdom in his letter to Timothy when he proclaims, “Those who want to be rich are falling into [...] a trap [...] For the love of money is the root of all evils” (1 Tim.6.10).

Since the concept of morality is being drawn into question, it becomes essential to at least try to define morality. This, however, is not an overly simplistic task, for, as many realize, “There are ‘deep conflicts over what human flourishing and well-being...consist in...Aristotle and Nietzsche, Hume and the New Testament are names which represent polar opposites’”(Perry 23).

It would, thus, be a fruitless and futile excursion to try to define what morality is or should be, particularly considering such realities. This, however, does not mean it is impossible to draw certain conclusions as they relate to morality. As mentioned above, there seems to be very little, if any, debate over whether genocide is a moral practice. Then it would not be unreasonable to stipulate that there exists, at least in the majority of the world, a consensus that genocide is immoral.

To put all of this into context it would be beneficial to have at least a general understanding of the world's most recent genocides. In 1992 the collapse of Yugoslavia and the consequent civil war created an environment ripe for centuries-old tribal resentment to escalate and culminate in genocide committed by the Serbs against Bosnian Muslims. It is estimated that 200,000 Muslim civilians were systematically murdered and 2,000,000 became refugees (Glover 137). The genocide in Rwanda, beginning on April 6, 1994, had similar roots and pedigrees as the genocide in Bosnia. Old tribal feuds and resentments between the Hutu and Tutsi, fueled by propaganda, escalated into the slaughter of an estimated 800,000 Tutsi in a terribly short span of three months. An estimated 150,000 to 250,000 women were also raped during this time. Those souls constituted approximately one-tenth of the population of Rwanda (Human Rights 3). Given these statistics, one hardly needs anything else to appreciate the gravity of this occurrence. Despite the moral imperative that is quite apparent, meaningful action on behalf of the international community was once again absent while hundreds of thousands were cruelly murdered. Darfur, the world's most recent genocide, has shown that history does indeed often repeat itself. The call "Never again" has faded and once again the international community is unwilling to take meaningful action. It has been estimated that around 400,000 have perished, and along with these statistics are the accounts of terrible suffering, rape, and brutal murder of men, women and children (Cheadle and Prendergast 5).

Additionally, it should be noted that there has been quite a lot of debate over whether what is happening in Darfur is indeed genocide. Most are able to recognize, though, that this debate is a means of shirking responsibility to intervene in Darfur perpetuated by the international community. It is essentially a means of ignoring morality and with the debate grounded in definition one can hardly pass an evaluative judgment. This occurred at the genocide in Rwanda. As Major Brent Beardsley, currently a peacekeeper in Rwanda, points out, "For days, weeks, and months the discussions went back and forth between those who labeled the catastrophe a genocide ... and those who argued that the situation in Rwanda was not a genocide but 'just gross violations of human rights, crimes against humanity and war crimes' (as if these were acceptable crimes to ignore)" (Beardsley 79). Even during the genocide in Bosnia, this trend was evident. Three people, in fact, resigned from the State Department under the Clinton administration in disgust because the government incessantly misrepresented the facts in order to remain uninvolved (Glover 139). The U.S. government has declared Darfur as a genocide, however, and many around the world likewise classify it as such.

The argument over state sovereignty is similarly evoked when intervention on grounds of genocide is debated. This argument in itself is rather superfluous, for it assumes that nations have the right to commit genocidal acts against their governed people and that morality should effectively be thwarted by country borders. There has been recognition of the ridiculous nature

of this claim among the international community. This can be seen in the Responsibility to Protect norm which states, “The duty to prevent and halt genocide and mass atrocities lies first and foremost with the State, but the international community has a role that cannot be blocked by the invocation of sovereignty [...] The international community, through the United Nations, also has the ... responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity and its implications” (United Nations). Although the debate over state sovereignty has not been completely resolved, one can see that the U.N., at least in principle, does not accept state sovereignty as a perception that should block intervention when it relates to stopping genocide.

Heedless of these facts, the debate over the issue of genocide continues. As James Forsyth recognizes in his article “Realism and Darfur,” the advocates of intervention “have portrayed intervention in Darfur as a moral imperative—which it is—but have focused little on winning over foreign-policy realists to their cause” (Forsyth). Whether intentional or not, he nevertheless exposes the ugly truth that morality is nothing more than a side note and that self-interest is paramount in motivating people and nations to act. It is simply not enough to proclaim that we should do something because it is the right thing to do. One has to provide an incentive and this is ultimately what Forsyth attempts to accomplish in his article. He states that, “there is a strong national-interest case to be made for intervention in Darfur. The failure to act is weakening the U.S. position on a continent of increasing importance to American energy needs and the fight against terrorism” (Forsyth). These claims are clearly in response to many “realist” sentiments that the U.S. does not have an overwhelming interest in Darfur that would justify intervention.

Barack Obama also understood that morality is not enough of a motive for the world to act. He similarly argues that, “eradicating genocide will make Americans safer [for] History has taught us that murderous regimes that target their own people rarely confine their murderous ambitions within their borders” (Cheadle and Prendergast xiii). He also says another reason America should be concerned about genocide is, “we all made a promise” to “Save Darfur” (Cheadle and Prendergast xiii). One wonders, though, how effective the desire to keep a promise should prove when morality, of all things, does not seem to be enough to motivate the world to stop genocide.

China’s relationship with the Khartoum government of Sudan also illustrates, quite poignantly, how self-interest reigns supreme over morality. Sharath Srinivasan tells us, “China has emerged as Sudan’s most important trading partner and, arguably its most important international friend” (Srinivasan 55). How this relationship developed is easy to see when one considers the fact that between 2000 and 2004 China consumed eighty percent of Sudan’s oil exports. In 2006 Sudan’s imports from China amounted to about U.S. \$1.5 billion. In addition China also has extensive oil investments in Sudan’s oil infrastructure, including a 41 percent stake in the Petrodar Operating Company and a 95 percent stake in Sudan’s oil block 6 by the China National Petroleum Corporation (Srinivasan 61).

Considering the fact that China has grown to be the world's second largest importer of oil, it is not hard to fathom why they would be reluctant to potentially spoil such a fruitful economic relationship with the Khartoum government. Naturally, by condemning the Sudanese government for the crime of genocide, they would be opening up the government to prosecution

by the International Criminal Court. This would clearly have many implications for China and its near trade monopoly with Sudan. This relationship obviously has serious implications when it comes to the issue of genocide and, consequently, morality, for “As Ahmed Diraige, chairman of the Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance has put it ‘The Chinese have a United Nations Security Council veto and also have oil interests in Sudan’” (Benjamin 8).

In light of these revelations it is not hard to understand why policy makers in the international community act in the manner they do. That is, the politicians and governments in most countries exist, at least in theory, to promote the general welfare of their citizens. Yet in the international community things are quite different. As Robert Hind explains, “in foreign policy the situation is different. The politician is an in-group member. He sees it as his duty to do his best for his own country” (Hinde 162). This relationship leads to an interesting paradox. On the one hand, within the individual national communities, people charge their politicians and governments with their personal welfare and advancement. On the other, within the international community, the world has charged these same governments and their politicians with the same task of advancing the welfare of the world. As one can see, and as history has shown, these two charges are quite often at odds. As Rebecca Hamilton similarly realizes, “It makes little sense to speak of the political will of those in power when, as now, the system they are working within is structurally aligned with the idea that the comfort and well-being of people ‘here’ matter more than life or death for people ‘there’” (Hamilton 205). It is this self-interest that seems to have arrested the will of the world to pursue what has been declared a moral imperative.

This phenomenon is not remote to nations and the world community, however. Individuals make similar considerations on a daily basis. How many of us have been unwilling to go out of our way to help someone in need because we had something more pressing to do? How many of us have callously walked by a homeless person on the street, because we perceive them to be a drug addict or alcoholic? An April 24, 2010 headline in the *New York Post* states, “A heroic homeless man, stabbed after saving a Queens woman from a knife-wielding attacker, lay dying in a pool of blood for more than an hour as nearly 25 people indifferently strolled past him, a shocking surveillance video obtained by The Post reveals” (Livingston, Doyle and Mangan). This is quite a revealing and troubling illustration of this human tendency to ignore the plights of others, even when they are right before one’s eyes dying in a pool of blood. Once again one is compelled to ask, what happened to morality? It is hard to answer with one-hundred percent certainty. Perhaps all of those people had some other life threatening issues of their own. Perhaps they simply didn’t notice. It would seem though, that they simply did not care, and they were reluctant to go outside of their self-interest to help another, or that they simply could not be bothered. Sadly, when we superimpose this foible of human nature upon the world at large, we ultimately get an ineffectual United Nations and the perpetuation of the terrible offense of genocide.

The religions of the world are not ignorant of this fact either. Indeed Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all offer the promise of eternal life and happiness in unity with God for leading a moral life. They all also threaten with eternal damnation and suffering as a consequence for not leading a moral life. Even here the influence of self-interest is recognizable. These religions are aware that people are not going to be moral simply for the sake of morality.

Even for agnostics there is a “Golden Rule” to morality which Robert Hinde identifies as “*Do-unto-others-as-you-would-have-them-do-unto-you.*” (Hinde 1). Even this golden rule, however, has a component of self-interest attached to it, which is the undesirability of another reciprocating the wrongs of one’s self. Of course Hinde is also quite aware that despite this, “in the commercial world people do the best they can for themselves, in war soldiers kill, [and] politicians distort the truth to please the electorate” (Hinde 1). Perhaps these people believe the chances of being wronged in turn are unlikely, or because the gains outweigh the ills of their actions. In a similar light, maybe the reason why the majority of the world does not seem overly determined to stop genocide is because they perceive the chances of becoming a victim of genocide as rather slim; hence, they feel remote and detached from its terrible realities.

One could argue that the ills of world and life are not nearly so simplistic as to be caused by mere self-interest. This is true. There exist in the world many moral dilemmas. Additionally, the difficulty of defining morality is a problem in itself. Furthermore, establishing consequences for immoral action, especially on an international level, poses its own daunting challenges. The erosion of state sovereignty by the international community is certainly an issue worth considering. The premeditating causes of genocide, its effects, and the humanitarian issue are likewise quite complicated and often debated. Therefore the world and its many ills are not that unduly simplistic. Yet genocide hardly seems to be a moral dilemma, by any stretch of the imagination, in the eyes of the world. It would thus seem that the issue is quite simple in being either a moral imperative or not. One must conclude that it is a moral imperative since no one has declared otherwise. Regardless of this, the world has repeatedly failed to stop genocides as they are occurring. The reason for these failures ultimately seems to be the self-interests of the nations that constitute the international community overriding the principal of morality. Is it therefore a moral imperative to stop genocide in the world? Has mankind succeeded in doing so? Through analyzing the patterns and motives of nations, as well as people, it is apparent that this is because self-interest is the overwhelming force of influence in the world, and morality is quietly ignored. Money, oil, economic interests, political interests, and even time are subjects the world holds in great esteem; all of them are apparently more valuable than morality, and human life, especially when that human life cannot provide these things to the world in return. It would seem, thus, that St. Paul was not necessarily one-hundred percent accurate in proclaiming the love of money to be the root of all evils in the world. Yet he was not one-hundred percent wrong either. For indeed, what the love of money represents (the overwhelming disregard for others in the name of self-interest and self-gain) would seem to be the root of all evil.

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