

Superpower Ethics: An Introduction

Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

The term “superpower” was first used toward the end of World War II when it became apparent that two countries—the United States and the Soviet Union—would emerge with a much greater capacity to shape the postwar world than any of the other great powers. In a sense, Tocqueville’s nineteenth-century prophecy has come true: two countries have continental-scale economies and rank first and second in the size of their gross national products. The same two countries have more than 50,000 nuclear weapons, an awesome destructive potential some 25 times greater than the arsenals of the other half dozen states with nuclear weapons.

How do such states behave? How should they behave? Is there little to choose between them in ethical terms? If not, why not? These are some of the questions addressed below by three authors with different vantage points. Ali Mazrui is a Kenyan who sees both superpowers as morally corrupted in their behavior by their excessive size and power. Pierre Hassner admits a difference between the superpowers but presents a starkly realist European view of the degrees of freedom in their actions. Stanley Hoffmann gives an American interpretation of how the two countries behave and how they would have to change if they were to act better.

..... **I**

The debate over superpower ethics gained new prominence in the controversies surrounding the policies of the Reagan administration and its proponents’ counterattacks on the issue of “moral equivalence.” For example, when E.P. Thompson debated Caspar Weinberger at the Oxford Union in February 1984, he called the United States and the

USSR “two terrorist states,” which “both speak exactly the same language.”¹ Former Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick has asserted, “If it is no longer possible to distinguish between freedom and despotism—the United States is a free society; between consent and violence, we are a society based on consent; between open and closed societies, we are an open society—then the erosion of the foundation of a distinctively Western, democratic civilization is already far advanced and the situation is serious indeed.”²

Kirkpatrick is right as far as she goes. She is wrong, however, if she thinks that her response can suffice as a defense of American policy. Weinberger made that mistake in the Oxford debate. In answer to a student’s question about the difference between Soviet and American clients, he argued that “the difference is very clear, American support for any regime, puppet or not, can be changed by the voters.” To which another student replied: “If you are beaten and tortured by those regimes, is it a more moral act because Congress approves of it instead of some general?”³ Weinberger’s answer conflates two questions: who we are and what we do. Both are important, but the answer to one is not a satisfactory answer to the other. A democracy can be good and do evil—sometimes even when it is trying to do good.

Within the Western ethical tradition, there is attention to motivation, means, and consequences. The consequentialist tradition—which includes but is broader than utilitarianism—places emphasis on outcomes. The deontological, or Kantian, tradition stresses following rules and having the right motives as sufficient for judging the morality of actions. The aretaic, or Aristotelian, tradition stresses an ethics of virtue rather than an ethics of consequences. It can be described as the difference between an emphasis on the integrity of “who I am” as against an emphasis on the consequence of my choices—an ethics of being versus an ethics of doing.

We need both rules and the weighing of consequences in moral reasoning, and the sophisticated consequentialist will consider the broader and longer-term consequences of valuing both integrity of motives and rules that constrain means. He or she will also realize the critical role of rules and attention to means in maintaining moral standards in complex situations.

One of the most common pitfalls in moral reasoning is “one-dimensional ethics.” An action is said to be justified because it has good

.....

¹ Barton Gellman, “The Weinberger-Thompson Debate,” *The American Oxonian* 18 (Spring 1984) 115–19.

² Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, address before the Royal Institute in London on April 19, 1984, reprinted in the *Department of State Bulletin* 84:2089 (Washington: GPO, August 1984) 62.

³ Barton Gellman, “The Weinberger-Thompson Debate,” op. cit.

motives or because it has good consequences. But in common practice, people tend to make ethical judgments along all these dimensions of motives, means, and consequences. This introduces additional complexity and degree into ethical judgments, as we have to balance competing moral claims.⁴

Proponents of moral equivalence argue that the motives of the two superpowers, stripped of ideological camouflage, are essentially the same: to preserve or expand spheres of power and influence. The United States intervenes to maintain the Monroe Doctrine; the Soviet Union to preserve the Brezhnev Doctrine. According to a defector from the Soviet state-security force, the KGB, quoted in *Time* in 1982:

the Western press attributed several motives to Moscow. . . . What moved the Politburo was the thought that the Muslim revolution in Afghanistan could succeed and that, as a result, the Soviet Union would actually be thrown out of Afghanistan. The repercussions of such a blow to our prestige would be unpredictable. The Soviet Union could not run such a risk. The Politburo was determined to show that the Soviet Union would not be pushed about.⁵

One can imagine the scene in Kabul in December 1979 with the Soviet commander addressing the hapless Havizullah Amin:

So far as right and wrong are concerned, others think there is no difference between the two, and that if we fail to attack them, it is because we are afraid. So that by conquering you, we shall increase not only the size but the security of our empire. We rule the Central Asian land mass, and you are a border state, and a weaker one than the others; it is therefore particularly important that you should not escape.⁶

This is Thucydides's Melian dialogue, with "Central Asia" substituted for "the sea" and "border state" for "island state." Who knows what Soviet motives were, but a realist would have no difficulty finding this formulation plausible. Nor would he or she balk at substituting the words Caribbean, Dominican Republic, and Grenada.

Soviet motives in Afghanistan and American motives in Grenada

.....

⁴ For elaboration, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Nuclear Ethics* (New York: Free Press, 1986) chap. 2.

⁵ *Time* (November 22, 1982) 34.

⁶ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 403.

were undoubtedly complex, but even if we accept the realist supposition that maintenance of a sphere of influence and power was an important and equivalent component in both cases, it does not follow that the two invasions were morally equivalent. This is one-dimensional moral reasoning. Even if we grant similar motivation, there were morally significant differences in the bloodiness of the means, and the probable consequences (in terms of restoring local autonomy) were quite different. Similarly, on a one-dimensional approach, the American intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965 and the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 were similarly flawed, but the American action was partially redeemed by the eventual consequences of creating a more autonomous and democratic Dominican society.

On the other hand, good consequences alone are not sufficient to make an action good. That also is one-dimensional analysis. If a murderer is trying to kill me and I am saved because a second murderer kills my would-be assailant first, the consequences are good, but the action is not. An invasion that has fortuitous consequences is better than one with disastrous consequences, but a three-dimensional judgment might still call it a morally flawed action. This was part of the problem with the American intervention in Vietnam. Norman Podhoretz argues, in *Why We Were in Vietnam*, that our involvement was moral because we were trying to save the South Vietnamese from totalitarianism.⁷ The people who led us were those who had learned from the Munich experience that totalitarian aggression must be resisted even if it is costly. If American idealism was part of the cause of our role in the Vietnam War, that same idealism tended to blind leaders to the facts of polycentric communism and local nationalism as alternative means to America's less idealistic desire to preserve the balance of power in Asia. It also blinded them to the inappropriateness of involvement in a guerilla war in an alien culture and the immoral consequences that would follow from the disproportion between our goals and our means.

..... **II**

In the essays below, Ali Mazrui presents a case for moral equivalence. He argues that despite the difference of motives, the two superpowers' actions have had paradoxical unintended consequences in the Third World. He admits that both superpowers look bad to their neighboring small states but argues that the anticolonial and liberation agenda of the Third World

.....

⁷ Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

means that the Soviet Union has had more beneficial unintended consequences for distant states. One wonders, however, if Mazrui has not discounted too completely the effects of the liberal nature of American society. Even if one regards Eastern Europe and Central America as similar superpower empires,⁸ there are more degrees of freedom for the small neighbors of the United States than those of the Soviet Union. The pluralist domestic institutions whose external relevance Mazrui dismisses make it possible for Nicaraguans to use the American press to influence the U.S. Congress and foreign policy. It is hard to see equivalent opportunities for Poles to influence Soviet policy. Historically, liberal tradition has made the United States at most an ambivalent colonist which sometimes threw its weight on the side of decolonization and change.⁹

When it comes to the question of means, Mazrui is particularly critical of both superpowers' hypocrisy about terrorism and nuclear weapons. Many of his arrows strike home in this area, but to portray terrorism merely as the instrument of the weak overlooks its unacceptable moral dimension—the deliberate targeting of innocents. Attention to just war theory could lead to more careful distinctions in this area, as it might in his blanket criticism of nuclear deterrence as well.¹⁰ Moreover, the consequential aspects of his remedy for the nuclear problem are inadequately spelled out.

Pierre Hassner does not argue that the superpowers are morally equivalent. In fact, he chides Americans who make too much of the issue. He explains that Europeans desire to define national independence by showing disagreement with the alliance leader without losing sight of the fact that they ultimately belong to the same moral and ideological community. Western Europeans hold a double standard regarding superpower behavior. They expect more of the United States than of the Soviet Union because Americans profess higher moral standards. But “when all is said and done, the United States, while the more often criticized . . . is much more popular.” Hassner’s concern is that the moralistic strand in American foreign policy, whether of the Left or the Right, will cause it to fail in the realist duties of a superpower—to provide order and balance. In contrast to Mazrui, Hassner argues that the first duty of a superpower is responsibility for firmness, predictability, and restraint.

Stanley Hoffmann shares Hassner’s concern about order. In an anarchic world of states with no common government, order and peace

.....
⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Game Plan* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986) 255.

⁹ Ernest May, *American Imperialism* (New York: Atheneum, 1968).

¹⁰ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

are critical values. But they are not absolutes, and must be traded off against justice, in the form of both human rights and distributive equity. He sees the existing superpower relationship as a flawed order that provides ambiguous peace while creating and tolerating considerable injustice. Norms against aggression, cooperation on crisis management and arms control, looser spheres of influence, and more emphasis on regional settlement of disputes would permit the superpowers to pursue policies that reduce the cost their order levies against justice. But he admits that this will require changes on the part of both countries—and change in the Soviet Union may come slowly.

How are we to behave in the interim? What room is there for the consideration of the ethical dimension of means when we are locked in a bipolar power rivalry with an expansionist adversary whose Marxist-Leninist doctrine rejects bourgeois morality and sees the goal of proletarian victory as justifying the means? After all, philosophers tell us that “ought implies can.” If we are in the realm of necessity, there is no room for the ethical judgment of means.

The difference in moral views should alert us not to expect the Soviet Union to behave as we do, but would not justify our behaving as they do unless we were continually in the realm of necessity. Utter necessity is rare in foreign policy.¹¹ There usually are choices, and where there is choice, values come into play. To pretend not to choose is merely a disguised form of choice. The statesman who says, “I had no choice,” usually did have, albeit unpleasant. Clarity and honesty in moral reasoning require difficult consideration of proportionality in the weighing of competing moral claims along all dimensions, not seizing easy one-dimensional rationalizations that let the ends always justify the means.

There may be instances in which we choose to act morally despite Soviet behavior because of our desire to preserve our integrity as a society. The question of what we do affects our concept of who we are and vice versa. We are not morally equivalent to the Soviet Union. To ignore Soviet behavior would be foolish, but to use a doctrine of necessity to imitate it would be a particularly ironic way to demean ourselves and to make the doctrine of moral equivalence come true.

Thucydides put it well in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* when he had the Athenians say “those who really deserve praise are the people who, while human enough to enjoy power, nonetheless pay more attention to justice than they are compelled to do by their situation.”¹²

.....

¹¹ Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962) chap. 4.

¹² Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, op. cit., 80.

Unfortunately, the Athenians later forgot this. Americans must not do the same. Balancing order and justice in a world of two superpowers will always present hard choices. The essence of superpower ethics is to confront those choices in their full complexity of motives, means, and consequences rather than to try to escape with one-dimensional rationalizations.