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"Navigating Moral and Strategic Quandaries: The Morality of Non-Intervention in Humanitarian Crises"

Extended Abstract:

Questions surrounding Michael Walzer and John Stuart Mill's framework of Just intervention delve deep into the intricate moral and strategic considerations surrounding humanitarian intervention during a crisis. The paper navigates the complex terrain of maintaining order while upholding moral principles by examining various perspectives, from ethical objections to intervention to the consequences of failed interventions. The essay scrutinizes the blurred lines between moral duty, self-determination, and the noble intentions of humanitarian intervention, emphasizing the need for a well-defined threshold for intervention. Drawing insights from contrasting historical cases such as Rwanda in 1994 and Libya in 2011, the paper intricately dissects the nuances of humanitarian intervention, arguing for a balanced view that recognizes the significance of responding to genocide, stability, and self-determination while advocating for the morality of non-intervention as a normative and ethical practice, when the threshold of intervention is not met. States should be able to enjoy a moral right to nonintervention.

This essay argues that non-intervention can be seen as a moral argument, not just a strategic one. The following avenues of non-intervention encompass a diverse range of moral arguments and normative considerations, such as pursuing stability, boundaries of the international community, consequences of intervention, and a legitimate threshold of

intervention. The ethical objections to intervention fall into three broad categories, according to Jennifer Welsh (2003): those arguing that the moral duty of the statesman is to their citizens, those arguing that self-determination is compromised by intervention, and those arguing that humanitarian intervention has negative consequences which overrule its noble intentions (pp. 58-59).

Even though there have been successful interventions in the past, every crisis deemed a “humanitarian crisis” is not worthy of intervention. There are moral considerations to take into account prior to intervening, such as destabilization of a region, counter-intervention, and mission creep. These are all horrendous strategic failures seen under humanitarian interventions of the past. As Walzer (2006) argues, “Humanitarian intervention belongs in the realm, not of law but of moral choice.” (p. 102). Therefore, the decision to intervene is a moral argument which should be judged on an ad hoc basis. Walzer’s threshold for intervention suggests: “Humanitarian intervention is justified when it is a response (with reasonable expectations of success) to acts that shock the moral conscience of mankind.” This paper will offer that a threshold for intervention must be clearly defined with a consequentialist moral outlook that respects the self-determination of people in all parts of the world.

This paper will be informed theoretically by Walzer’s framework of a “just intervention” within his book “*Just and Unjust Wars*” and John Stuart Mill’s 1859 essay “*A Few Words on Non-intervention*” and his outlook on a state's right to self-determination and a principle of self-help. This framework will examine consequentialist outcomes of interventions through a utilitarian and moral lens while critiquing the liberal and Western-centric frameworks of humanitarian intervention. In his chapter on humanitarian intervention within *Just and Unjust*

Wars, Walzer posits that all arguments surrounding humanitarian intervention are not just strategic but moral arguments (101).

In particular, this essay moves beyond a Millian approach, looking at cases such as Rwanda, where the threshold for a just intervention was met and the foreign policy community failed to act. According to Walzer (2006), thresholds of a just intervention also took place in cases like Bangladesh in 1971 or Cambodia in 1977 (pp. 101-108). A question beckons: Could the United States and the UN support a localized response to catastrophes that does not forward a paternalist agenda? Postcolonial scholars such as Robin Dunford and Michael Neu (2019) argue that Western-led humanitarian intervention, under the current approach outlined within the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine (R2P), legitimizes a moralistic form of militarism, hindering the true goal of preventing mass atrocities. Dunford and Neu purport that R2P does not bring into the picture the damaging practices of intervention that exist already in the global south; it ignores the atrocity of mass avoidable death and suffering that takes place as a matter of routine due to the existing colonial and paternal legacies that are produced politically and in part by the actions of the international community from interventions (pp. 1081-1082).

When confronted with a humanitarian crisis at hand, Walzer suggests a rule of absolute non-anticipation that should be forwarded; “we must respond to the evil that men do” in the present and not “the evil that they are capable of doing” or have done in the past.” (Walzer, 2006, p. xiii). When observing the case of Libya in 2011, it is essential to look at the anticipation of the humanitarian intervention versus the reality. It is unclear if Muammar Gaddafi’s forces were ultimately going to enter Benghazi and slaughter innocent protestors or if the target was the rebel militants (Kuperman, 2013). Nonetheless, NATO intervened under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine to protect civilian life and quickly changed the mission's objectives to

back the rebel leaders without observing the consequences of creating a massive power vacuum in the Middle East, contributing to civil wars in Syria and Mali in the coming years.

Delving into the complex discussion of intervention and the moral arguments for non-intervention. This paper explores the ethical considerations, consequences, and challenges associated with intervening in conflicts for humanitarian purposes. Various viewpoints and theoretical perspectives are forwarded, from the utilitarian, communitarian and consequentialist approaches of Walzer and Mill to the postcolonial approach of Neu and Dunford to highlight the moral dilemmas between upholding self-determination, sovereignty, and the responsibility to protect. The overarching argument underscores the importance of a thoughtful, case-by-case approach to intervention, emphasizing the need to balance humanitarian concerns with potentially unforeseen consequences and the ethical importance of respecting the sovereignty of nations through the norm of nonintervention.

Moving forward, the norm of nonintervention is more critical today than ever; with conflicts bubbling up worldwide, calls for military intervention will increase. Considering the destabilizing and morally reprehensible actions of NATO's intervention in Libya, even well-intentioned interventions designed to promote liberty should be approached skeptically. The empirical record of history shows few successes, with the most likely success outcome being a localized form of humanitarian intervention as seen in Bangladesh and Cambodia. Furthermore, concerns that humanitarian intervention might slide into a wider conflict are legitimate and must be taken seriously. At the same time, states are responsible for pursuing international justice where they can; they cannot jeopardize other fundamental values of nonintervention in the process.

