

Morality in international politics: A realist understanding

Pavan Kumar

Guest Faculty & Ph.d. Candidate, International Politics Division, Center For International Politics, Organization And Disarmament, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Abstract

Machiavelli has been accused of being immoral for giving 'cruel' advice to the prince in *The Prince*. Dictums like 'ends justify the means' have largely been associated with Machiavelli without going into the details of the Prince and understanding the circumstances in which it was written. If the world around us is uncertain, then, the kind of policies which should be adopted by the statesmen is dictated by questions of survival and necessity and not any abstract morality. Machiavelli never supported the opinion that Prince needs to be immoral. This paper is an attempt to understand realist morality in international politics. To do that, writings of Machiavelli, Morgenthau and other prominent realists are interpreted.

Keywords: morality, realism, international politics, machiavelli, morgenthau

Introduction

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This paper is divided into five sections. The first section deals with the issues of concepts of morality using Kantian literature and other political philosophies. The questions as to how and why personal morality is different from the morality of the statesmen and group are discussed. What makes something moral and immoral?

The second section deals with the anarchic nature of international politics and options available to political leaders for the issues of morality and necessity (Politics among Nations). In the third section, issues of Morality, Prudence and necessity are discussed by *The Prince*. Why has Machiavelli given such "Immoral" advice to the Prince? Can that advice be considered immoral? Or has the political environment asked for such advice and actions?

In the final section, the relevance of Machiavelli's *The Prince* will be discussed in the context of an anarchic international political order for the modern statesmen. Choices are determined by the necessity for survival and not by the international ethics and morality.

International Politics, Realism and ethics

Ethics have always been the issue area of political science and international relations. The debate over Ethics is as old as the discipline of International Relations is. There are many points of view in this debate. This includes two major categories. One is Deontologists who believes that words have their importance regardless of consequences and outcomes of acts.

Another is consequentialist who believes that words or action in themselves have no importance without is the consequence. There can't be any watertight separation of these two categories, but this is done to make it simpler to understand. The author will focus on consequentialist in detail because the purpose of this paper is to draw a thread among the realist theories of and issues of morality in realism.

Realist debate ranges from Thucydides, Machiavelli to Hobbes, E.H. Carr and Hans.J. Morgenthau. But their concern and understandings were different. For Hobbes, there is Jungle out there, and there is no superstructure to punish the violator so actors should focus on their survival. There is no justice in the state of nature, and they have only one duty that is to preserve themselves (Hobbes, Leviathan ch.seventeen, 224, ch. 14, 184). For Machiavelli anarchic nature of international politics absolves the state of any moral duties. Actions of the prince should be guided by *necessity*, not the abstract morality (Machiavelli the Prince). E.H Carr and his *Twenty Years Crisis* is one of the finest text where writer believes that morality nothing more than the product of power and powerful will always use for its interests (Carr 1946) ^[2]. In the words of Hans J. Morgenthau, there can't be any morality without prudence. Survival of the nation should be the priority before any abstract morality (Morgenthau 1948) ^[7]. In the History of Peloponnesian War, Thucydides creates another realm of morality where the balance of power becomes the key tenets of theoretical interpretation. So structural forces of Balance of Power and compulsion become important than any treaty, law or morality (Thucydides 400 B.C, 1972) ^[8].

All of these writings, of realist thinkers, been accused of immoral and amoral by other schools of theorists, and this paper will try to argue that how the morality of state is different from the morality of individuals. And what options are available in front of a statesman in the situation an anarchy and morality of state becomes supreme over other morality. This paper will also go into the detail of *The Prince* and will reinvestigate the moral issue of the book.

Section 1

Defining Morality

Morality can be defined as the differentiation of intentions, decisions, and actions between those that are "good" and those that are "bad" (Johnstone, Megan-Jane 2008).

Descriptively morality can be considered as personal or cultural values, codes of conduct or social mores. It does not connote objective claims of right or wrong, but only refers to that which is only considered right or wrong. It is not about what it is but what considered as it is. Normatively morality can be considered as whatever (if anything) is right or wrong, which may be independent of the values or mores held by any particular peoples or cultures. Ethics is about principle, but it is more than principle. It is about the interpretation of these principles as well as choices and action. This shows the importance of judgment in interpreting principles and in choosing and action by these principles (Nardin 1992) [4, 5]. The institution of morality is more interested with duties that arise from the rules or precepts that constitute it. This particular action can be categorised into two categories one is consequential, and another is deontologists. Some ethical judgments are moral in the restricted sense that they involve the application of principles of right conduct (deontologists). On the other hand, consequentialist is concerned with the acts as desirable or undesirable according to the outcomes they produce, or as virtuous or vicious according to the character they display.

Difference between individual morality and morality of the nation-

Individual Morality cannot be compared to the morality of the group. And the state is one of the largest group of human society. Love, hate and jealousy play a large part in the interaction among individual and individual morality. Those individuals who sacrifice their lives for other human beings are praised, but it is not true about the nation states. States have policies to stop the flow of refugees even if there life is in danger in their home country. To stop the immigration can be considered immoral outside the state but the citizens of the country it is a necessary step from the side of the state. In the words of E.H. Carr

"It is not the ordinarily accepted moral duty of the state to lower standard of living of its citizens by throwing open its frontiers to an unlimited number of foreign refugees, though it may be its duty to admit as large a number as is compatible with the interests its own people." (Carr 1946 pp.201) [2].

So states can indulge in the issues of morality outside its boundaries in so far it does not hurt the interests of its citizens. Acts which are considered as immoral in personnel affairs are praised when done for the group and society or state. It becomes the moral duty to promote the welfare and further the interests of the group as a whole (Carr 1946) [2]. Nationalism and dying in a war for a country is the example of state morality because killing the others is immoral in individual spheres when other has not done anything to you but this other is the creation of the state which demands the rationality to behave rationally in an anarchic world.

"There is a profound difference between individuals and nations; the former have their vices and their passions which are continuously leading them to do wrong; the others are fictitious beings whose agents are generally the most intelligent and most ethical of their time. And even where

intelligence and morality are lacking, the public opinion contains them within the limits of duty."

(Laurent 1879, cited in Schiffer 1954, again cited in Wight 1966)

Section 2

Why individual morality cannot replace the morality of state? Anarchy is the answer

The International Arena is an anarchic arena where there is no one to order and no one to follow. (Waltz 19 seventy 9). If the motivations behind the struggle for power and the mechanism through which it operates were all that needed to be known about international politics, the international scene would indeed resemble the state of nature described by Hobbes as a "war of every man against every man." (Hobbes cited in Morgenthau 1948 p.219) [7]. In domestic society or politics if an individual violates the law or norm there are a mechanism to check that violation for the present as well as for future. Three types of norms of rules of conduct operate in all higher societies: ethics, mores, and law (Morgenthau 1948) [7].

In domestic societies and politics these are enforceable with the help of law and state machinery but in international politics and society (if take into consideration) there is no mechanism to enforce the law. This lack of any world government is the cause of war. War happens because there is nothing to stop it (Waltz 1979). Domestic politics and theories of domestic politics are about good life and justice, but international politics and theory of international politics are not about good life or justice, it is about survival (Wight 1966). In the sphere of survival, there cannot be any good life or good conduct. Conducts of states are guided by prudence and necessity, not by any abstract moral principle. (Machiavelli and Morgenthau). Political leaders might have their set of morality but when it comes to the issue of state, action should be guided by state morality.

Section 3

Morality and realist tradition

Realism has a rich tradition on morality, but this morality is different from the morality of deontologists. Prudence and necessity guide realist tradition of morality not by any abstract philosophical ideas. In the words of Machiavelli political leaders should focus on how people behave rather than how they should behave:

"Many writers have dreamed up republics and principalities such as have never been seen or known in the real world. And attending to them is dangerous because the gap between how men live and how they out to live is so wide that any prince who thinks in terms, not of how people do behave but how they ought to behave will destroy his power rather than maintaining it. A man who tries to act virtuously will soon come to grief at the hands of the unscrupulous people surrounding him." (Machiavelli, translated and edited by Bennett 2010) [6].

This section of the paper will go into the detail of moral issues in writings of Hobbes, Machiavelli, Thucydides, Spinoza, Rousseau, Carr and Morgenthau.

Thomas Hobbes, Anarchy, Realism and Morality

Thomas Hobbes can be considered as the founding father of coherent tradition of realism in politics which is used by many international relations scholar for their analytical and

theoretical purposes. In his analysis in *Leviathan* psychology of individuals and states in an anarchic environment lead them to be fearful and uncertain about the intentions of the others. There is a state of war of all against all. There is a jungle out there. So in the state of nature in international politics, states are left with only one option for their survival that is a self-help and always prepared for war (Hobbes ch.1, 13 cited in Forde 1992) [4]. People and states have only one duty in anarchy, and that is to preserve them. So states have a duty to build up arms so that no one can harm its interests and they (states) are authorised to do whatever they can for their survival.

Machiavelli, Virtue, Fortuna, Necessity and Morality

Two words in *The Prince* are most repetitive. One is *Virtu* and other is *fortunate*. Both of them are used around sixty times. Scholars interpreted them differently, and this paper will also interpret *fortunate* differently. General translation of fortune is luck, but here Machiavelli is using the term in a completely different sense. He intends to equate *fortunate* as the outcomes or conditions which are beyond the control of states or statesman or *The Prince*. And *virtu* is translated as the strength of a state, statesman or the prince regarding politics in an anarchic sphere. When new principalities are acquired through colonisation, which was the reality of that time, the ruler should not use violence to suppress them as much as possible. It is better to be feared than loved, but if the rule of the prince is hatred, then it is impossible to maintain that principality. The ruler should not change the law of that nation as much as that law is not harming the interests of the ruler (Machiavelli ch.1 to 3).

In the case of *fortuna*, states are dependent on the others. They do not have their independent strength to fight for the worse. Alliances and mercenaries are a kind of *fortuna* because you cannot be sure about their reliability (My interpretation). Man must be either won over or killed is an extreme understating of Machiavelli which is the result of bad nature of human in his conception. He believes that this has been the story of past. So either you make alliances or capture them. By *virtu* he means the strength of statesman or state capability. If you're military power is enough to fight an attack on its territory and *fortuna* has a very less role to play. But if military power and defence is not enough then they have to rely on the *fortuna* solely.

Machiavelli is blamed for being amoral, but some of the explanation given by Machiavelli in *The Prince* are in contrast to this arguments. One of that arguments is regarding wickedness, power and glory. In chapter 8 named Principalities obtained through wickedness, he says

“If you study the actions and career of this man (Agathocles), you will see little if anything that could be attributed to *fortuna*: he became a prince, as we have just seen, not through anyone's favour but by steadily rising in the military profession, each promotion involving countless difficulties and dangers: and once he had his principalities he held onto it, boldly, through many hostilities and dangers. And you would not see anything you could attribute to *virtu* either for it cannot be called a *virtu* to kill one's fellow-citizens, to deceive friends, to be without faith or mercy or religion: such methods may bring power but won't bring glory”. (Machiavelli ch.8).

But no doubt he is extreme realist thinker on Morality. He endorses imperialism and suggests ways to control the newly acquired principalities but one issue needs to be taken care

whenever we consider this argument, and that is Machiavelli is suggesting this in the times when there is no supreme authority to punish violator. If you do not behave by necessity, then others will behave like that (imperialist manner), so it is not about how it should be but how it is. Realist policies are guided by reality and circumstances around you. Machiavelli believes that under the circumstances of international politics, a preemptive attack is justified, indeed required by prudent policy. The prudent state acts before its neighbours become a serious threat. And in self-defense war is justified, this is in reaction to hostile and anarchic nature of international politics. Obeying moral code can lead to one's risk of survival. He argues that the moral rules simply do not correspond to “the order of things.” On the contrary, this natural order punishes those who attempts to play not by its rules but by moral rules instead (Forde 1994) [4].

International morality stops statesman to behave in a way which is not corresponding to the reality of the world. Machiavelli does not say that you should never behave morally, but this is based on conditions and circumstances. It is based on the necessity or the law of political actions. Unnecessary, immoral behaviour creates obstacles at domestic level as well as international level. *Fortuna* cannot be trusted, and you have to rely on your *virtu*.

When it comes to the observance or keeping the words regarding international treaties, he suggests that since men are wicked and do not observe faith with you, you also do not have to observe it with them. A prudent prince cannot observe faith nor should he when such observance turns against him, and the causes that made him promise have been eliminated. (Machiavelli, cited in Forde 1994) [4]. But in domestic affairs morality has a big role to play. If citizens of the principalities hate the prince, his days are coming to an end.

Thucydides, Balance of power and Melian Dialogue

Thucydides and his book on the history of Peloponnesian War is one of the classic examples of the balance of power and reasons for war. The rise of power in Athens inspired fear in the Spartan, and the reason is given that this compelled the Spartans to go to war against the Athenians. Spartan started the war, but they justified the war by saying that rise of by Athens compelled them to go to war. And this is not about the existential to Sparta but a kind of threat which was against the balance of power and allies of Sparta. Treaty was violated, and this can be considered as immoral by many scholars of law and abstract morality and ethics but as Thucydides will say that this moral compulsion like observing the treaty are superseded by compulsion derived from the balance of power. (Thucydides 400 B.C. cited in Forde 1994) [4].

In the view of Athenians, there is nothing wrong in imperialism; it is blameless. It is not limited to Athens only. Whoever gets the power have behaved in this way and will behave in this way. In the Melian Dialogue when Melians argue that Athenians should not destroy the common good of morality which can work for their bad future also, Athenians simply replied that they would be ready for that...

“Melians- Then in our view (since you force us to leave justice out of account and to confine ourselves to self-interests) –in our view it is at any rate useful that that you should not destroy a principle that is to the general good of all men-namely, that in the case of all who fall into danger there should be such a thing as fair play and just deal, and that such

people should be allowed to use and to profit by arguments that fall short of a mathematical accuracy. And this is a principle which affects you as much as anybody since your fall would be visited by the most terrible vengeance and would be an example to the world,

Athenians-As for us, even assuming that our empire does come to an end, we are not despondent about what would happen next. One is not so much frightened of being conquered by a power which rules over others, as Sparta does (not that we are concerned with Sparta now), as if what would happen if a ruling power is attacked and defeated by its subjects. So far as this point is concerned, you can leave it to us to face the risks involved. What we shall do now is to show you preservation your city that we shall say that we are going to say. We do not want any trouble in bringing you into our empire, and we want you to be spared for good both of yourselves and ourselves.” (Thucydides, Book 5.90, 5.91)

Issues of morality does not apply to a relation among big powers and small powers

Athenians to Melians- “Instead we recommend that you should try to get what it is possible for you to get, taking into consideration what we both really think; since you know as well as we do that, when practical people discuss these matters, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.”(Thucydides 5.89)

And later we found that Athenians are correct for accusing Spartans of hypocrisy in condemning their imperialism. Spartans and all other states in history pursue their interests and declaim about justice only when it is to their advantage, and this is an advance in intellectual and moral honesty. (Thucydides 5.105 cited in Forde 1994)^[4].

E.H Carr, Harmony of interests and international morality

E.H.Carr in his book *Twenty Years Crisis* writes that there is no harmony of interests. There is a harmony of interests among powerful only. There cannot be any international morality as morality is the product of power. Lack of a society in the international sphere can be considered the cause for this. Creation of we and they make a divide and stops the progress of any international morality. Good of the whole and the good of the part are not going together. Everybody makes the claim that their civilisation and ethics are the best ethics when they have the power to say that. Professor Toynbee believed that security of British empire means the security of the whole world. In the same way, Hitler also claimed that their countrymen are the bearer of higher ethics. No doubt power is more important than morality in international politics. He writes

“Any international moral order must rest on some hegemony of power. But this hegemony, like the supremacy of a ruling class within the state, is in itself if it is to survive, contain an element of giving and take, of self-sacrifice on the part of those who have, which will render it to tolerate to the other members of the world community.” (Carr 1939, p.213)^[2].

Morgenthau, prudence and morality

For Morgenthau prudence comes before any morality. He believes that there cannot be any morality without prudence. Political leaders should think and act as the interests defined

regarding power. Going for cannot be considered as immoral because safety and security of state come first. It is about survival. The morality of one nation cannot be applied to the morality of all nations. He believes that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulations, they need to be used only according to the necessity. He writes-

“Yet while the individual has a moral right to sacrifice himself in defence of moral principles such as of liberty, the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation of the infringement of liberty get in the way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival. There can be no political morality without prudence that is without the consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action.” (Morgenthau 1948 p.10)^[7].

Conclusion

By these arguments it will be incorrect to consider realism as an immoral theory. From Machiavelli to Morgenthau all discussed the morality and international politics. But their understanding of morality was based upon the realistic assessment of the nature of international politics which is anarchic and power play a key role in determining your survival. The morality of state cannot be compared to the morality of individual. Political morality is different from individual morality. So Machiavelli was right when he suggested the prince not to be dependent on the *fortune* (conditions which are not in your control) but have the *virtu* (your military and economic strength) for your survival.

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