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When Humanitarianism Hurts

By [Stephen Wertheim](#).

The language of duty in politics feeds self-delusive moralism. Humanitarian interventionists take note.



A duty to intervene. The responsibility to protect. Never again. This is the language of international ethics in our time. It is the language of justice construed as categorical imperatives. To deny the force of these injunctions is, supposedly, to stoop to the amorality of realpolitik. But to accept them – what would that mean?

If we believe there is a duty to stop genocide, it matters only whether there is genocide. We need think no further. Genocide must be stopped. States must act. All competing values are trumped; politics is adjourned. Never mind what the consequences of a mission to stop genocide might be. No matter if intervention, however intended, seems more likely to do harm than good. Merely inquiring about consequences is subversive. It denies the duty to intervene. For if you think outcomes matter, you have to entertain the possibility that, on reflection, the most humane way to act might fall short of stopping genocide. It might even be to do nothing at all.

Categorical duties in politics are problematic not because they moralize but because they moralize in a particular way. They turn us into Martin Luther. They have us adopt what Max Weber called an ethic of ultimate ends, wherein intentions count for everything and results are left to fate. Now Weber did not fully disclaim such an ethic. He found inspiration from the politician who is normally prudent but one day reaches his limit of compromise and stands his ground. Some risks are worth taking, some revolutions worth trying, and a humanitarian

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disaster might sometimes warrant responses that will probably hurt but just might really help (though the risk is always easier to bear when others will pay most of the price). But the duty to intervene and the responsibility to protect command us to do more. They admit only ultimate ends. They install as the default posture what should be a rare exception – and must be a rare exception if order is preferable to chaos.

Yet who today actually thinks like Luther? No one says projected consequences do not matter. Humanitarian interventionists do not consciously espouse an ethic of ultimate ends. In fact, they typically qualify the “duty to stop genocide” with a proviso requiring capability. As Bill Clinton’s doctrine held, “If the world community has the power to stop it, we ought to stop genocide and ethnic cleansing.”

But this is logically incoherent. The international community almost always possesses the raw physical capability to halt genocides on the global periphery; if really necessary, intervening states could prioritize stopping genocide before all else, conscripting their citizens and so forth. So the question is never whether raw capability exists or does not. No bright line is possible. The only question is what courses of action can realistically be taken, what tradeoffs they entail, and what consequences can be expected to flow from them. Categorical duty cannot mix with this. It requires any proviso to yield a stark yes-or-no because either there is a duty or there is none. Moral necessity thereby eviscerates concern for capabilities and consequences. If the duty is meaningful, the maxim is: “we must do everything to stop genocide.” If the proviso is meaningful, the maxim is: “we should assess what can be done and act prudently.” We cannot have necessity and preserve our choice, too.

The incoherence of Clinton’s proviso is less important than why it endures and, more generally, what makes the politics of moral imperatives dangerous. The language of absolute obligations enchants us. It draws on a moral purity that aspires to transcend the political. It shifts our gaze from concrete questions of what can be done in this world to maxims of right and wrong in an abstract fantasy world. Insisting on our duty to act, it makes the paramount question whether *we* are moral, not how to act to benefit others. Will we accept our duty? When we vow “never again,” will we mean it? In this moral world, projecting likely consequences is beside the point. *Whether* to act becomes untethered from *how* to do it. Preoccupied with ideas of abstract duty and feelings of angst, we struggle to consider practical alternatives or to take the relief of others’ plight as seriously as that of our own. Thinking itself is impaired.

Since the late 1990s, humanitarian discourse has been marked by an unselfconscious ethic of ultimate ends. Everyone claims the consequences matter; close examination shows they think otherwise.

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Samantha Power's *A Problem From Hell*, the wildly popular 2003 Pulitzer winner, epitomized this blindness. Power condemned a century of American inaction against genocides. Objecting to inaction as such, Power shrunk from recommending what exactly the United States should have done. She never explained how any particular intervention would have unfolded. That an intervention might backfire was never contemplated. She insisted, of course, that outcomes mattered, that the point was to save people from slaughter, and this is surely what she told herself, too. Yet the feebleness of her analysis suggests consequences did not truly register in her calculus.

U.S. public opinion was no obstacle to intervention, in Power's telling. During any war, presidents benefit from the "rally-around-the-flag effect" we witnessed after Pearl Harbor or before the Gulf War. Never mind that presidents try to avoid launching wars the public will not support, or that Power omitted the counterexample of Vietnam, or that non-humanitarian national interests were at stake in what few cases she did cite. Incredibly, Power overlooked the aftermath of intervention. Troops march in to protect civilians: now what? How soon could they withdraw while leaving behind a decent government? What if counterinsurgency or policing became necessary? Power frequently mentioned the Pentagon's fears of a "slippery slope" but never spelled them out. To her, they were mere excuses not to act. One could say whether action was morally necessary before one knew what action to take. The key question was not what feasible course of action would likely bring the best outcome. "The key question," Power wrote, "is: Why does the United States stand so idly by?" At stake, above all, was the moral standing of America.

It is no accident that Power's book was popular on the eve of the Iraq war. In the years leading up to the invasion, humanitarian interventionists had popularized assumptions that made war against a marginal state seem innocuous at worst and virtuous at best. Quick doses of U.S. military force, they assumed, would easily transform polities on the periphery. George W. Bush followed their lead – not in aiming to stop genocide but in treating a war of choice as a war of necessity and failing to contemplate the aftermath. For Bush, too, deciding whether to go to war did not require imagining all that war logically entailed. And the humanitarian rhetoric deployed to justify the war appears to have emerged from Americans' concern for themselves far more than for Iraqis. Despite all the talk of invading Iraq to free a people, the welfare of those people – including millions of refugees and upwards of 100,000 wartime civilian deaths – has gone shockingly neglected in political decision-making and journalistic reporting. Humanitarianism this superficial and unselfconscious is not nearly an emancipatory force, needing but a few tweaks. It is closer to a menace.

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We have yet to re-imagine a vocabulary for international politics that can rescue ethical action from the blinding excess of our current language. But this much, at least, is clear. A duty to stop genocide cannot be plunked down *a priori*, abstracted from political realities and competing claims. The morality of intervention depends on accommodating such realities and trumping such claims. In short, humanitarian intervention is politics. That means the time to “do something” is over. The burden must now be: know what to do before recommending whether to do it.

Accordingly, the objective of “helping” the needy should replace that of “stopping” offenses. The impulse to confront evil is not the same as the impulse to help. It undermines true humanitarianism by fixating on wrongdoers and distracting us from victims. It injects a moralism that makes matters of implementation seem irrelevant and chokes off our understanding of genocide’s political causes. It also constrains diplomacy domestically, casting the genocidal state as irredeemable and agreement as appeasement. In the public discourse, calls to “stop genocide” far outnumber calls to help victims. The terminology alone should raise our suspicion.

Not least, humanitarian military intervention is war. When “intervention” entails invading a country to halt massive violence, the word is downright Orwellian. “Intervention,” elsewhere performed by God or doctors, evokes moral clarity, clinical precision, and total control – notions both inapplicable and dangerous here. Just war is still war. As Carl von Clausewitz reminds us, war is unpredictable and prone to escalation.

Feasibility is morally relevant. Humanitarianism succeeds only if it helps those it affects. No witness of the last decade or student of modern empire can take for granted that human welfare will improve once well-meaning outsiders grace the scene. Armed invasions to transform polities are complex and bloody affairs, exceedingly difficult to pull off. “We should never be in a position where we are hesitant to stop a genocide because our troops are otherwise occupied,” writes Brookings Fellow Michael O’Hanlon, uncontroversially. The opposite is better. We should always think twice before acting, even if troops are available. We should hesitate in order to ensure war does good. We must imagine the plausible and probable consequences and plan realistically and farsightedly. If war will not do good, we must not go. Such is the difference between moralism and morality.

The “responsibility to protect” norm, adopted by the U.N. Security Council in 2006, commits the international community to protect victims of genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, by force if necessary. The responsibility to protect does not enjoin states to weigh alternatives and act to produce the most humane outcome. Instead, it demands an end-state – that populations be

protected. If the international community achieves any less, it defaults on the responsibility to protect. States must act until the goal is met. This is regardless of whether such actions are likely to help, regardless of whether the goal can be met. "The Christian," Weber wrote, "does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord."

If consequences matter and not just intentions, the responsibility to protect is an irresponsible norm. It makes a promise that cannot be fulfilled. It incites the extremes of reckless action and idle posturing: the former when leaders take the norm seriously, the latter when they finally realize there is no good way to deliver. Either way, expectations will be dashed. The responsibility to protect will discredit its very aim. The way out is to appreciate that the humanitarian and the politician are in the same business. Their calling is to help on this earth as best they can, not to crusade against cosmic evil. If they have an inviolable duty, let it be that.


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13 NOTES

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