An Altruistic Approach to Human Rights Policy

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the confluence of altruism and human rights policy along the areas of humanitarian assistance, environmental rights, and the right to health. First, the paper will establish the possibility of altruistic actions in state behavior and clearly delineate which actions qualify and to what extent they are altruistic. Then, the paper will analyze whether altruistic behavior has had a positive impact in the three examples of human rights policy mentioned above. Finally, the paper will offer suggestions to engrain altruistic thinking and sustainable approaches to human rights in international policy.
A tree falls in the woods and no one is around to hear it fall except a lost hiker looking for the main road. The tree happens to crush the den of a family of foxes and closes off their only exit. The hiker spends the next hour cutting off branches and moving the tree aside. There are no reporters to record the events and no photographers to capture the moments. In fact, there is no one in the vicinity of five miles to witness the hiker’s action. Was the hiker’s action altruistic or self-interested?

Neel Burton, an internationally-recognized psychiatrist, summarizes the arguments of many philosophers, including Nietzsche and Aristotle, who think the aforementioned question’s distinction is one without a difference, “Altruistic acts are self-interested, if not because they relieve anxiety, then perhaps because they lead to pleasant feelings of pride and satisfaction; the expectation of honor or reciprocation; or the greater likelihood of a place in heaven; and even if neither of the above, then at least because they relieve unpleasant feelings such as the guilt or shame of not having acted at all” (Burton, 2012). In other words, the hiker only moves the tree to feel satisfaction in his own capability and to avoid guilty feelings associated with inaction. But Burton still argues that there are some acts that can be counted as altruistic if the element of self-interest is characterized by one of two qualities: 1) accidental, 2) secondary and non-determining (Burton 12). In context of the hiker’s situation, she could be completely interested in saving the home of the animals and the good feelings are only a fortunate result of her pure-intentioned actions, or she could realize that her action will make her feel better about herself but the larger casual factor for her action was the obligation she felt to protect the home of the foxes.

Now that the basic possibility of altruistic actions has been established, there is the potential to analyze the influence of altruism in international relations. Altruism is important to understand, because its effects are often ignored in discussion of state action in favor of larger
theories of realism and liberalism. First, realism and liberalism are both explanations that race toward self-interest in different ways, overlooking altruism in the process. While realism explicates that states will attempt to maximize their own power, liberals believe that cooperation serves as a vehicle for the state’s ultimate self-interest. Outside the two traditional theories, other alternative international frameworks like idealism and constructivism offer spaces for altruism. Decision-making based on ideas, or external causes like human rights and humanitarian concerns, could create a cosmopolitanism idealist model that would include altruism as a major component. Additionally, even constructivist theories which focus on the psychology of decision-makers, or the mindset of the hiker, could incorporate the pure selflessness of leaders in some actions. Ultimately, the category of the school of thought is not as important as the recognition that there are trade-offs and distinctions within each one. The prominent theologian Reinhold Niebuhr developed a perspective known as Christian realism which recognized “moral and political factors” equally important in global politics and insisted that, “we can save mankind from another holocaust only if our nerves are steady and if our moral purpose is matched by strategic shrewdness” (Niebuhr, 1948). Clearly, there are gaps and spaces in foreign policy theory where altruism plays an important role.

Altruism is best clarified when analyzed in the context of one specific area of foreign policy – human rights. Since the formation of the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, human rights has entered into the discourse of state policy but is also often ignored like altruism in theories of international relations. For instance, despite the UN’s declarations of support for universal human rights, its budget for human rights activities is smaller than that of the Zurich Opera House and the UN’s World Health Organization budget functionally the same as that of one large university hospital system (Fasulo, 2004). Many
activists have called for stricter standards for participation in the Human Rights Commission, but these were met inconsequential reforms. In fact, the problems that mire international human rights policy – standards which are unclear and arbitrary, difficulty to isolate from other problems, and deviation from the dominant self-interest paradigm – mirror those present in the incorporation of altruism in international relations. Thus, the paper will analyze the current influence of altruism and outline future opportunities for the incorporation of altruism for addressing international human rights issues in three different contexts: humanitarian aid and intervention, universal environmental rights, and the human right to health.

In order to further understand altruism’s influence in international relations, humanitarian aid and intervention will be analyzed in terms of the many different objectives underlying the decision to give aid. Ever since the Marshall Plan in 1948, the number of nations and quantitative amount of resources involved in foreign aid has expanded dramatically. In the case of the Marshall Plan, the clear, strategic objective was to contain the influence of the Soviet Union through establishing interdependent economic relationships with European nations. This strategic motivation was further confirmed in cases of Vietnam and Kuwait where foreign aid and the transfer of military equipment predated an eventual military occupation. Another aspect of the strategic element of foreign aid can be found in the economic benefits it often provides. For instance, the Marshall Plan opened up new markets for U.S. goods after World War II and created sustainable export relationships with many countries for U.S. companies.

But there are also instances where humanitarian intervention did not have a direct benefit for the provider, and there is some evidence that these instances have been increasing in frequency ever since the Cold War. Several United Nations peacekeeping missions, including those to Haiti and especially Somalia, provide some evidence of altruistic behavior. In fact, some
experts have developed models to measure the correlation between altruistic, humanitarian concerns and foreign aid, finding that foreign aid is increasing in the degree of altruism (Seigle, 1999). One particularly determinative conclusion from the model was the finding of a correlation between the reduction of the standard of living and the likelihood that the country would be provided with foreign aid. In response to the recent Syrian crisis, the United States has provided nearly $1.4 billion in food, clean water, medical care, and relief supplies to Syrian citizens (Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). But even this sum pales in comparison to the largest ever appeal from the United Nations for Syrian aid – 6.5 billion. According to UN estimates, nearly three-quarters of Syria’s 22.4 million population will require humanitarian aid in 2014 including high risks of starvation (BBC News, 2013).

Despite the positive results from studies and empirical examples, foreign assistance must always be held in suspicion, because of its close link with military intervention. The current motivation for Brazil in their peacekeeping role for the United Nations offers a clear example of this concern. Brazil’s expansion of its peacekeeping mission to take leadership over the Haiti operation, the UN’s third-largest current mission, has led some analysts to claim its decision stems from Brazil’s desires to increase security in Brazil’s domestic situation and modernize its military, ultimately increasing its credentials as a global power. More specifically, Brazil’s peacekeepers conduct joint exercises with the police in many of Brazil’s toughest slums and it has helped integrate new strategies into Brazil’s military mindset (The Economist, 2010). While the mission in Haiti has undoubtedly improved human conditions and increased stability, the drive behind the mission is Brazil’s desire for increased international status.

In some cases, UN military interventions have severely backfired because seemingly altruistic motives were revealed to be flimsy and unsustainable. One such example is the UN
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intervention in Somalia. In March 1993, the Security Council mandated the UN coalition to undertake a peace enforcement mission to end the civil war and begin the state-building process. Originally planned as a multilateral, cooperative approach to humanitarian intervention, the operation failed in all aspects – the UN-led troops suffered massive casualties, the United States withdrew their forces after public backlash to gruesome civilian casualties, and Somalia was left as an unstable state dominated by warlord factions (Nalbandov, 2011). But this case study also articulates a structural defect with the UN that prevents the sustainable success of any peace enforcement mission. The Somalia mission perfectly captured the excessive burden carried by the US troops in peace enforcement activities which resulted in an essentially unilateral mission composed of contingents from many states who were unwilling to provide necessary equipment to their soldiers (Nalbandov 2011). Even to this day, Somalia tops the list of the Failed States Index for the sixth year in a row and deals with massive amounts of widespread poverty, insurgency crime, and food insecurity. Indeed, the Somalia case is a stark reminder that altruistic motivations collapse when states face budgetary constraint and scrutiny for mission failures.

Although there is some credible evidence that altruism is playing a larger role in foreign assistance provision, the main determining factors are still rooted in overall strategic motivations expressed through economic and military ambitions. Any model that applies altruism to foreign interventions to protect human rights must be cognizant of this context. One model which could offer a more productive and sustainable approach to humanitarian intervention is the adoption of a model of asymmetric reciprocity. This model combines the altruism of humanitarian intervention with the justice of reciprocity by stating states should be compelled to intervene in situations where they would want other countries to intervene if they were in the same situation (Miller, 2000). It is necessary to accept that state-based interventions will not be completely
altruistic as Miller states, “We ought to admire humanitarian interventions, in other words, not on the condition that they arise from pure or disinterested motives, but on the condition that they aim to produce good for others” (Miller, 2000).

Since intervention and aid have been historically linked to strategic gains, nongovernmental organizations should be the primary vehicle for humanitarian aid and assistance in situations where the severity of the disruption of a nation’s standard of living does not rise to the level of needed state intervention under the aforementioned asymmetric reciprocity model. The Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group, Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Oxfam International, International Committee of the Red Cross, and Greenpeace represent the most well-known and influential nongovernmental organizations which number over 40,000 in total (Nye, 2013). These organizations have been able to fill in some of the functional gaps in interstate cooperation and provide a vehicle for altruistic tendencies of states and individuals. While the progress achieved by NGOs has been substantial, one noticeable barrier to creating a global consciousness for human rights has been the Western-dominated influence of many NGOs. In fact, the majority of the most enthusiastic promoters of NGOs have been Western donor states committed to universal values promoted by the West (Reimann, 2006). A more cosmopolitan vision of NGO networks would include headquarters in countries besides those in the European and North American continents. Therefore, more NGOs, international organizations, and states should cooperate to form linkages which incorporate the unique values and resources of other countries. NGO’s could engage with Shintoism in Japan to increase support for environmental reform, increase awareness of charity in China through promoting a strong respect for family ties, and garner aid to combat discrimination by honoring Brazil’s celebration of diversity and multi-ethnicity.
Although intervention to protect the basic rights of peoples from other countries is an established issue in foreign policy discourses, the concept of environmental protection as a human rights issue is becoming increasingly prominent. This increasing recognition can be explained through two trends. First, a growing number of global and regional human rights instruments and national constitutions now include some version of a right to environment among their guarantees. Second, many authors now argue that a clearly and narrowly defined international human right to a safe and healthy environment codified through international law can protect overlapping social values that both environmental protection and human rights aim to uphold (Shelton, 1991). Global environmental phenomena, especially in the case of climate change, have already and will continue to affect human rights issues like access to food and water. Thus, it is productive to examine the context of environmental policies and whether the incorporation of altruism will bring about more effective methods to combat environmental catastrophe.

Furthermore, an examination of the underlying reasons behind environmental treaties and policies reveals some of the prescriptive elements of altruism in international policy. The “Save the Whales” campaign promoted by Greenpeace campaign eventually influenced the International Whaling Commission to agree on a moratorium on commercial whaling. (Greenpeace, 2009). Undoubtedly, the actions of international organizations like the IWC and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora have significantly decreased the risk of extinction for whale species (Greenpeace, 2009). In this instance of environmental policy, countries who agreed to accept the ban on whales not only directly hurt their own economic interests by giving up the whale trade, but also committed to create sustainable waters for whale species to maintain their populations.
Within the case study of the “Save the Whales Campaign”, Japan’s actions to deny the commercial ban on whaling represent the strand of environmental actions that are not truly altruistic. Before the IWC’s 57th Annual Meeting, Japan recruited nineteen states to join the IWC, claiming it would help in “paving the way for broader participation by countries interested in the sustainable use of wildlife resources” (3rd Millennium, 2002). These states were non-whaling nations and also did not have substantial financial resources to pay the dues required for membership, so many have speculated that Japan was providing substantial economic incentives, functionally “buying votes” to undermine the past progress of the IWC (3rd Millennium, 2002). Japan’s actions in this instance point to how many countries and organizations use the altruistic masks of “green” and “sustainable” to hide purely selfish behavior. This type of “greenwashing” is also present at the level of small and multinational corporations which utilize the seemingly selfless action of protecting the environment to mask a destructive product. It is important to analyze and understand the motivations underlying a country’s actions toward the environment and human rights, because they determine whether the action is sustainable, deep-rooted solution or merely a temporary, surface-level alleviation.

Indeed, the environment is one arena of international relations where altruism offers massive prescriptive potential as the only way for successful treaties and policies to be established. Utilizing the standard two-stage game model of coalition formation, the Environmental Economics and Natural Resources Group from the Netherlands found that impartial altruism is sufficient to stabilize the creation of a grand coalition on an international climate change agreement, and the reverse casual is also true – the absence of altruism will lead to only a fraction of countries joining the agreement (Weikard et al., 2012). The data shows that no matter how much scientists raise awareness of the disastrous impacts of environmental issues,
the cost-benefit approach of rational policymaking will fail without a dose of sacrifice and service in the name of the global commons. Leaders and states must be willing to sacrifice economic development for the sake of protecting the environment all stakeholders depend on for daily life. In both the cases of “Save the Whales” campaign and international environmental coalitions, altruism is both necessary and sufficient to the creation of effective environmental policies.

After investigating categories of international policy that include altruism as a secondary factor and those that require altruism for success, it is important to determine whether pure altruism even exists. One prominent example was the 2003 World Trade Organization deal which allowed poorer nations to import cheaper generic drugs to fight diseases such as AIDS. The deal was approved by a 146-member executive general council representing many multinational drug companies who would lose their protected trade patents so that many of the smaller and poorer countries who were facing health emergencies could import needed medicine (Reuters, 2003). The WTO decision fulfills the aforementioned criteria for an action to be considered altruistic. First, the element of self-interest, if any exists, is purely accidental. The decision by these states to intentionally disadvantage their own companies so that other countries could receive drugs is on-face a selfless action. Second, even if there was an element of self-interest that existed, perhaps a desire to prevent disease from spreading, it was secondary and non-determining relative to the overall motivation to help these countries. Certainly, the WTO case proves the potential for purely altruistic actions at the international level.

The decision of the WTO member states to protect the human right to health was a landmark case of altruism, but it also reveals the challenges inherent in self-sacrificing actions on the state level. The consensus was only reached after an impassioned plea by the African nations
for medicine to treat AIDS and malaria which had killed millions of people. WTO states had been negotiating and debating over the details of the policy for nearly two years before finally coming to this resolution (Reuters, 2003). The problem of exorbitant prices of patented medicines for developing countries facing public health crises still persists today. Additionally, the WTO as an organization faces criticisms of protectionist policies in the areas of agriculture and textiles which disproportionately affect poor countries (Nye, 2013). But still there is hope for the WTO and similar international organization structures The United States and Europe have abided by costly decisions made against them by the WTO which shows that the WTO can alleviate underlying state desires for power.

Moreover, the 2003 patent deal also communicates some of the common elements that existed in many cases where altruistic behavior was advocated. A distributive justice instinct, an external purpose or ethical obligation, and international organizations were present in all of the actions analyzed that had some element of altruism, and they were all prominently present in the action of the WTO to waive patent protections. More specifically, showing the decision-makers the sufferings of the victims will intensify the ethical obligation they feel. When a united coalition of all the African states made a strong ethical argument for the waiving of patent protections, the representatives from states with corporations who produced massive quantities of generic drugs could only acknowledge their duty to help the millions dying from AIDS and malaria.

Clearly, altruism has a significant role in international relations whether it is merely a secondary influence or a determining factor in the decision-making of states. Different circumstances and situations relating to foreign aid, humanitarian intervention, environmental policy, and disease and disaster relief all include altruism in different dimensions and some
require altruism to be effective and successful. In fact, in an increasingly globalized world, states will have a greater obligation to protect human rights. Though the paper analyzes actions combatting human rights abuses on a global scale, it recognizes the importance of individual commitment. Altruism does not come from theories about state behavior or system behavior but rather from theories about individual behavior. An ethical approach to foreign policy decision-making will not materialize without individuals willing to make sacrifices for greater purposes and ideals.

A Tibetan demonstrator is killed in an uprising. A prisoner endures prolonged abuse in an isolation unit. A Somali refugee suffers through multiple civil war, poverty, and famine. A company dumps non-biodegradable waste into the ocean. A country falls apart. Greenhouse gas emission near the tipping point of catastrophic climate change. A tree falls in the woods. Is there anyone around to hear it fall? More importantly, will anyone do anything about it?
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Works Cited


