



ETHICS IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS 101

**CARNEGIE
COUNCIL** *for Ethics in
International Affairs*

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INTRODUCTION

The international community is under strain. Major powers are opting to act alone, resolving their conflicts through war instead of peaceful means and rejecting the international cooperation that is required to solve the world's most pressing issues. In the 21st century, new technologies and shifting political realities have made climate change, nuclear weapons, and the regulation of artificial intelligence—among many other issues—topics of existential importance. To resolve these issues, citizens and leaders will have to go beyond their narrow interests and draw on a deeper set of values and core principles to work toward a better world.

At Carnegie Council, we believe in the principles of international cooperation, democracy, fidelity, and humanitarianism. These principles guide our work as we set the global agenda for an ethical future, and we believe they can helpfully guide decision-making when interests clash or when trade-offs are required. Ethics helps us to look beyond our own self-interest to consider the interests of others and recognize the importance of solving these problems together.

We hope that this guidebook will provide you with an understanding of how to apply ethics in international affairs along the lines of “ethical realism,” a view of morality in global politics that takes seriously both the role of ethics and a recognition of the nature of power and its relationship to national interests.

After reading this guidebook, visit the resources on our website—such as our *Ethics & International Affairs* journal; *Values & Interests* podcast; *Ethics Empowered: Leadership in Practice* event series; and Classroom Resources—to get a deeper understanding of the emerging ethical issues we face today.



[CARNEGIECOUNCIL.ORG](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org)

THE MISSION

of Carnegie Council is to empower ethics by identifying and addressing the most critical ethical issues of today and tomorrow.

Carnegie Council's Principles

At its core, applied ethics in international affairs is a willingness to move beyond a purely realist approach, and, instead, commit to infusing moral considerations into a decision-making process. To do so, Carnegie Council is committed to four principles:

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The commitment to international cooperation is a moral proposition because it goes to the essence of ethics—recognizing what is common for all, while managing the intrinsic and inevitable differences between and among people. To simply assert power is irresponsible and, in the end, counterproductive. To retreat entirely is similarly unprincipled and short-sighted.

DEMOCRACY

The defense of democracy in the U.S. and globally requires confronting autocrats who discriminate based on ethnicity, gender, and religion, and who deny basic freedoms to their citizens.

FIDELITY

Fidelity means honesty, integrity, and a good-faith effort at serving the truth. Rhetoric certainly matters, and in an age of disinformation, leaders must fight against lies, willful deception, and deliberate misrepresentation of facts.

HUMANITARIANISM

The humanitarian imperative is the duty to save lives and alleviate suffering through humane and equal treatment. As violence and cruelty abound in conflict zones around the world, mounting effective humanitarian responses remains the essential moral imperative of our time.

WHAT IS ETHICS?

In our everyday lives, we constantly make judgments about right and wrong or describe things as good or bad.

Ethics is about how things ought to be, not simply how things are or are likely to be.

Ethics forces us to look beyond our own immediate interests and consider the interests of others, as well as look to values, rules, standards, rights, or obligations to guide our behavior.

ETHICAL REALISM stresses the necessity of ethical considerations in international affairs. But how ethics can be invoked to limit the narrow pursuit of self-interest requires understanding what ethics is and how ethics works in practice.



"ETHICS IS

about making the effort to evaluate competing points of view and then truly caring about the impact of the choices you have made. Ethics is not some cure-all for the world's problems, but it is an actual process for finding solutions."

JOEL ROSENTHAL

President, Carnegie Council
for Ethics in International Affairs

ETHICS IN PRACTICE

ETHICS IN PRACTICE

Ethical deliberation involves:

- Identifying goals or outcomes
- Finding ways to satisfy these outcomes or goals (means)
- Assessing and revising these goals and means using our standards, values, principles, duties, and rights

Ethical deliberation is best done with others, especially those most affected by an action or policy. On our own, we cannot see the full picture and are less clear on how our decisions affect others. We also tend to be biased toward those decisions that benefit us.



Ethical Values and Frameworks

There are three main ethical frameworks in the Western tradition that can guide ethical deliberation, each of which emphasizes a different aspect of the ethical decision-making process. These frameworks can also draw on and be integrated with diverse religious traditions.

Consequentialism (such as utilitarianism)

What matters is the outcome. The ethical action is the one that produces the most desired consequences.

Virtue Ethics/Character-Based Ethics

What matters is the character or intention of the person acting. An ethical action is one that results from following a virtue, such as honesty or courage, but not being too extreme in following the virtue.

Rights-Based or Duty-Based

What matters is following general moral principles or rules that respect the dignity or humanity of those affected (though non-human animals and ecosystems can be included, too).

Religious Ethical Traditions

Religious traditions often draw on these frameworks but may introduce additional reasons or sources of ethical knowledge, such as through revelation or religious texts.

A Pluralistic Approach to Ethics

These frameworks shift our focus from individualism to a broader consideration for the welfare of all in society.

A pluralistic approach reflects the conviction that solving ethical problems may require drawing from each of these frameworks without endorsing any of these frameworks as the “correct” one. This does not mean all views are equally correct, but that we need to be creative in our ethical thinking.

It draws support from the realization that ethical deliberation should be inclusive, since different groups may prioritize certain values or principles differently than other groups.

Finally, it reflects a commitment to intellectual humility, recognizing that the effects of policies on human and ecological interests are not always recognized by those making the decisions.

THE SCOPE OF ETHICS

Ethics is relevant to individuals, groups, and even institutions.

We don't only make judgments about individual actions. We judge policies as unfair and institutions as unjust, and criticize (or praise) leaders for their character.

THE INDIVIDUAL

The origin of ethics in the Western tradition can be traced back to Socrates (470-399 B.C.), whose life mission—which ultimately cost him his life—revolved around answering the question:

How ought we live?

- Is it ever acceptable to violate our principles or values in pursuit of certain goals?
- Should you work for an organization even if you do not endorse all their values?
- Do we have a duty to whistle-blow even if it may hurt our colleagues or our organization?

THE GROUP

Ethics is relevant to how we organize our groups, how one group relates to other groups or individuals, and what actions or policies our group promotes.

- Can a business pursue profit even if its activities result in harms to the environment or to communities?
- Should an organization pursue full transparency even if it may lead to devastating reputational costs?
- How should a business integrate AI technologies, given the effect it may have on employees or due to concerns about the ethics behind the technology?

THE STATE OR INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Ethics is directed at larger institutions, such as states, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), along with the leaders of these groups.

- Should a country reduce its emissions even if the economic effects may hurt its worst-off citizens or its ability to compete economically with other nations?
- Must a state accept all refugees or can it prioritize certain nationalities over others?
- How much foreign aid must a state give to another state in need?
- How should states work together to regulate the use of space?

Ethics is Ever-Changing

Ethics is not static. New relationships between peoples, new scientific findings, and new technologies create new areas for ethical thought that may change past judgments of which we previously felt certain.

- Increased trade, diplomacy, and alliances create new relations between states that can be organized better or worse.
- New technologies, such as nuclear weapons, artificial intelligence, and advances in drone warfare, lead to new questions on how conflicts should be conducted.
- Scientific studies about the impact of greenhouse gas emissions on the environment make clear how the actions of one state affect all of humanity, as well as the need for global cooperation to solve coordination problems.

Ethics Involves Trade-Offs or Dilemmas

Sometimes new problems arise that may require us to rethink or put aside our previous ethical commitments.

During public health crises, governments may have to grapple with short-term trade-offs between democracy, liberty, and public health in relation to mask mandates, banning large public gatherings, and restricting travel.

Sometimes acting ethically is costly and requires other supporting policies.

While accepting many refugees may be viewed by some as ethically required, states could experience political backlash against refugees and immigrants. This suggests that such decisions cannot be simplistically taken or rejected but require other policies to support and offset the consequences.

How to resolve these dilemmas and trade-offs?

- When values clash or political implications arise, how does this change our ethical deliberation?
- When making an ethical decision, how do we take into account the likely consequences in order to find ways to offset any undesirable consequences?

THE ROLE OF ETHICS IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

UNIQUE CHALLENGES

As our groups get bigger, there are more people involved and more serious trade-offs. At the level of states, where war is always a risk, thinking ethically requires understanding the differences in how ethics interacts with politics and state power.

It also requires considering how to respond to challenges like climate change or nuclear ethics, in which international cooperation is required to ensure that the coordination problem among states is resolved.

The two extreme views in international affairs are realism and idealism, which either minimize the role of ethics or give it too much importance.

Ethical realism offers a third way.

REALISM

In its most extreme version, realism in international affairs is the view that what ultimately matters for states is power and narrowly defined self-interest. Ethics, on the most extreme version, has little to contribute.

Realism here is not normative, but mostly descriptive: States simply do focus primarily on self-interest (in terms of power and security).



“A country that demands moral perfection in its foreign policy will achieve neither perfection nor security.”

HENRY KISSINGER

Foreign Affairs, June 1994

However, international affairs are not solely dominated by the pursuit of power.



“Realism alone cannot account for the enormous and influential shifts in expected and required behavior. Norms have shifted, especially in areas of labor rights, human rights, and the treatment of the natural world. Many of these norms are not universally accepted; but it is safe to say that over the past hundred years, we have seen wider and deeper recognition and acceptance of norms such as prohibitions against child labor, expectations of equal treatment for women, and the duty to preserve and protect the natural environment.”

JOEL ROSENTHAL

President, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs

IDEALISM

Idealism is that view that what matters in international affairs is adherence to principles or rules, and that international institutions and international law should be established to guarantee cooperation and ensure peace.



“We owe it to ourselves and to the world, to our own dignity and self-respect, to set our own standards of behavior, regardless of what other nations do.”

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

The Atlantic Monthly, April 1961

One of the earliest influential writings was Immanuel Kant’s 1795 essay “On Perpetual Peace,” in which he argued for the establishment of an international federation that would, among other things:

- Outlaw the annexing or purchase of independent states
- Abolish standing armies
- Prohibit interference in the domestic affairs of other states

“On Perpetual Peace” inspired the creation of the League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations.

While international institutions and law do matter, it is true that states often act in ways that are immoral, uncooperative, and at odds with international law and principles, and many times hypocritically.

States continue to instigate non-defensive wars that are in violation of the United Nations Charter; others fail to provide their citizens with the human rights specified in the treaties that these states have signed and ratified.

A More Nuanced Approach



“The choice is not between moral principles and the national interest, devoid of moral dignity, but between one set of moral principles divorced from political reality and another set of moral principles derived from political reality.”

HANS MORGENTHAU

Politics Among Nations, 1948

ETHICAL REALISM

Combines the two: Ethics and Interests

At Carnegie Council, we believe that both realism and idealism capture something valid, but on their own neither is sufficient.

This means recognizing that power does play a large role and that self-interest matters, but states can pursue policies that are more ethical and inclusive of the interests of others.

At the Council our view, “ethical realism,” filters power through four core principles when deciding on the appropriate course of action.

ETHICAL REALISM IN PRACTICE

At Carnegie Council, ethical realism is on display in our current and past initiatives on:

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

MIGRATION

SPACE

CLIMATE CHANGE

Regulating these issues requires understanding what interests states have and how to achieve agreement to attain the most ethical policy that is also possible.

Conclusion

This flipbook has provided an introduction to ethical thinking in international affairs, offering a basic view of ethics and how it is applied more specifically in the international arena.

We encourage you to consciously practice ethical deliberation in your everyday life to see how often your choices presuppose values or principles. We hope that this will provide you with some basic tools that you can use as an ethical leader in your personal life and in the organizations in which you serve.

This flipbook concludes with two examples, nuclear weapons and climate change, that we encourage you to work through by applying the four principles of Carnegie Council—international cooperation, democracy, fidelity, humanitarianism—as well as the ethical frameworks discussed on page 14.

EXAMPLES TO CONSIDER

AN EXAMPLE

The Case of Nuclear Weapons

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)

There are currently an estimated 12,331 nuclear warheads possessed by nine countries: Russia, the United States, China, France, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea. None of these states have signed the TPNW, nor have an additional 32 states.

Ethical Leadership

- What interests do individual states have in continuing to possess nuclear weapons or developing them?
- What values or principles count against the development and possession of these weapons?
- How would an ethical leader work with other states on this issue?

AN EXAMPLE

Climate Change

As a result of the Paris Climate Accords, 194 states signed and ratified the Paris Agreement, an international treaty which seeks to address global climate change, especially to limit the global average temperature increase to 1.5° Celsius. The United States has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement, and Iran, Yemen, and Libya have not formally ratified.

Ethical Leadership

- What interests would a state have in joining or not joining this Agreement?
- What values or principles count toward joining? What values or principles count against?
- What can leaders at the sub-national level do?



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