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The Moral International Sphere as a New "Civic Virtue"

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Abstract

Liberal political theory, the predominant paradigm at least since the 1970s, rules out as oppressive the imposition of any substantive notion of a "good way of life" and proposes instead a neutral conception where each individual should have the right to pursue his or her own preferred project of life. This opposition of an ancient "virtue" and a modern "freedom" seems challenged by current debates about morality and the responsibility to protect innocent civilians from massive crimes. The moral outrage of the international community may be interpreted as a signal of a perhaps minimal notion of civic virtue, which translates in the concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

Keywords

Human rights, Syria, Responsibility to protect, United Nations, Morality, Politics

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The Moral International Sphere as a New "Civic Virtue"

by Claudia Heiss

Liberal political theory, the predominant paradigm at least since the 1970s, rules out as oppressive the imposition of any substantive notion of a "good way of life" and proposes instead a neutral conception where each individual should have the right to pursue his or her own preferred project of life. This opposition of an ancient "virtue" and a modern "freedom" seems challenged by current debates about morality and the responsibility to protect innocent civilians from massive crimes. The moral outrage of the international community may be interpreted as a signal of a perhaps minimal notion of civic virtue, which translates in the concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

The incredible amount of suffering of the Syrian population at the hands of its own government has not, Raghida Dergham's article claims, been met with an adequate response by relevant international actors such as the UN Security Council and the Arab League. NGOs like Amnesty International, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, Human Rights Watch, and the campaign network Avaaz urged early in August for international pressure to make the Syrian authorities allow an investigation by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. These organizations showed their agreement with Dergham's criticism when they requested that the Council's Presidential Statement amplify its goals. It was broadly perceived that the UN Security Council's Presidential Statement was too little, too late: "now the Security Council has *finally* spoken," read the NGOs' joint [letter](#).

The number of victims is no longer in the hundreds, as Dergham wrote on August 5, but in the thousands. The proportions of the human rights violations by the Syrian government and the intervention of the UN Secretary General led certain actors who were initially reluctant to condemn Syria to slowly change their public stance. Behind the growing acceptance of the principle that countries and international organizations have a responsibility to protect civilians from mass atrocities there is a moral definition of basic solidarity between human beings. The civic republican concept of "virtue," often rejected as anachronistic, seems to be alive in the moral outrage shared by most of the world in the face of such a flagrant abuse of power.

Since Benjamin Constant distinguished between [the liberty of the ancients and that of the moderns](#), the republican notion of "virtue"—which for Aristotle applied only to a small community of Athenians—has been dismissed as a particular model of the good life and replaced in political discourse by the idea of freedom to choose among different options. However, public outrage and an inescapable sense of empathy towards other human beings show that morality plays an important role in politics. As Michael Sandel argues in his bestselling book [Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do](#), "the conviction that justice involves virtue as well as choice runs deep."

Determining what is right and what is wrong involves a moral judgment, and international institutions have proven an important field to discuss and translate into action such judgments. I do not argue that the moral consensus of the international community is an absolute truth, of the kind of a Platonic idea. It is rather a definition built through deliberation. The asymmetries of influence and power in this process are an important issue that requires attention.

Why did R2P make it into resolution 1973 on Libya but was not adopted with regard to Syria? This difference in the treatment of two cases that showed some important similarities and occurred roughly at the same time contributes to the moral outrage implicit in the article reviewed. Today, wherever civilians are exposed to mass atrocities, the prevailing wisdom indicates that there is a responsibility to act. It is the experience of recent massive deaths that could have been prevented that led to this conclusion. At the same time, particular interests and complex political relations may explain why certain countries have been slow or plainly opposed to a concrete action by the UN to stop the murder of innocent civilians in Syria. A purely moral analysis should annul these considerations, and focus instead on the lives at stake.

It is not the desire to impose any particular way of life, but the protection of innocent lives that authorizes international intervention. The new international "civic virtue" based on the protection of human rights should not be confused with a substantive project of regime change, as critics of the Libyan intervention have argued. Political freedom and democracy must be constructed by the citizens of each country and cannot be imposed. But at the same time, the international community has a moral duty to protect a people struggling to reclaim basic civil and political rights. The dictatorships of Latin America in the 1980s are a good example of how big a difference the human rights policies of the international community can make at home.

*[Claudia Heiss](#) is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Universidad de Chile's INAP. She obtained her PhD from the New School for Social Research with a dissertation on states of constitutional exception, and an M.A. from Columbia University. She also graduated as a Journalist at Universidad de Chile. She has published a co-authored article about the 1989 reforms in *Chile in the journal Latin American Politics and Society* (2007) and a co-authored chapter on civil society and democracy in the book "La experiencia ciudadana" (Catalonia 2006). She also published an article about John Rawls (2007) and book reviews for *Revista de Ciencia Política* and *Bulletin of Latin American Research*.*