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Inconsistency as Consistency: An Optimal Policy for Human Rights

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Title: Inconsistency as Consistency: An Optimal Policy for Human Rights

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Abstract. This article contrasts two common cognitive approaches employed by United States (US) politicians in furthering human rights throughout the world.

Human rights can be defined as fruits of life that people should be able to enjoy just by virtue of being people. When these fruits are denied, human rights violations are said to occur. As opposed to civil rights--much more dependent on social, cultural, and political tradition and authority and conceived as routes to human rights--human rights often are thought to transcend the temporal and the situational. This is the case even though a close reading of history certainly suggests that conceptions of human rights have changed in different parts of the world at different times in different situations--as has the very notion of there being anything conceived as human rights. To suggest otherwise is to fall victim to the historiographical fallacy of reinterpreting the past through the socially constructed realities of the present.

One common cognitive approach to furthering human rights is to reify the concept as the be-all and end-all of human welfare. As part of this reification, not only is the same conception of human rights assumed to be required or desired everywhere, but also this conception is sought to the virtual exclusion--if necessary--of all other goals of human welfare. A related corollary is that these other goals of interhuman and intrahuman welfare will fall into place once human rights are assured. This corollary contains an implicit theory of psychology that the goals of human welfare are symmetrical. The dynamics of psychodynamic conflict do not exist. Neither do the approach-approach conflicts of behaviorist motivational theory.

In foreign policy, this cognitive approach renders the conception of human rights and governments' compatibility with it as a litmus test that must be the linchpin of foreign relations. Inconsistency with this litmus test renders even that politician with the most benign intentions as an accomplice in mortal sin. Human welfare demands this to be the case.

Another common cognitive approach to furthering human rights is based on a different implicit psychology--that the goals of human welfare can be asymmetrical and conflictual. With this approach the conception of human rights is but one of a number of positives--others involving the many aspects of physical, psychological, and spiritual beneficence. (The fact that some human rights advocates state that human rights comprises all of these aspects may work against the advocates' goals. For to have a concept mean everything is to have it mean nothing. And the something that this nothing will entail can too easily be managed by the most totalitarian of governments to develop a humane image belied by the human welfare of its citizens.)

In foreign policy, this cognitive approach requires, depending on circumstances, a continual balancing act, a strategic-moral calculus in an ever-changing world, and the waxing and waning of the objectives of furthering human rights and of developing and employing consonant strategies and tactics. What is consistent is the quest for human welfare. But consistency in all related matters will be more suggestive of stupidity, ignorance, sloth, and immorality than of a shining point of light.

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In the best of hands, the first approach can too easily become automatic, instinctive, mindless, self-righteous, avoidant of and resistant to questioning, and generative of consequences that cumulatively may not be the most supportive of human welfare. In the best of hands, the second approach often is more psychologically and spiritually taxing, more complex, and, perhaps, more open to the consequences of policy.

In a world of change, inconsistency in policy, strategy, and tactics is not necessarily a vice. For human rights advocates to charge otherwise may be their human right but also a human wrong. (See Carozzi, A. F., Bull, K. S., Eells, G. T., & Hurlburt, J. D. (1995.) Empathy as related to creativity, dogmatism, and expressiveness. *Journal of Psychology*, 129, 365-373; Harries, O. (October 26, 1997.) Virtue by other means. *The New York Times*, p. E15; McCormick, J. M., & Mitchell, N. J. (1997.) Human rights violations, umbrella concepts, and empirical analysis. *World Politics*, 49, 510-525; Orton, R. E. (1995.) Ockham's razor and Plato's beard: or "The possible relevance of the philosophy of mathematics, and the problem of universals in particular, to the philosophy of mathematics education, and the problem of constructivism in particular." *Journal of Research in Mathematics Education*, 26, 204-229; Woloshyn, V., & Stockley, D. B. (1995.) Helping students acquire belief-inconsistent and belief-consistent science facts: Comparisons between individuals and dyad study using elaborative interrogation, self-selected study, and repetitious-reading. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 9, 75-89.) (Keywords: Cognition, Human Rights, Typology.)