

Agency and International Relations: An Alternative Lens

Written by Joseph Royo

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JOSEPH ROYO, AUG 28 2012

On July 26, 2012, agency in the international sphere revealed itself in the following forms. Turkey warned it would not tolerate Kurdish rebels from Syria operating in Turkey.[1] The United States considered lending aid to Syrian rebels.[2] NATO surged supply trucks through Pakistan into Afghanistan.[3] “Little Papa” rapped about nonviolence at a peace jam in Camden.[4] A truck bomb killed 11 people in Pakistan.[5] Taking into account these variant forms, what is ‘agency’ and why is it important for understanding the dilemmas of international politics? How is agency realized in different schools of thought? Agency is a cross-domain conceptual framework useful for analyzing international political dilemmas. Synthesizing the agency biases across theoretical schools of thought reveals a more comprehensive analytical picture than those viewed through a particular theoretical lens.

What is Agency?

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, agency, in the context of international relations, refers to the following:

The capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power

A person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved[6]

One way to think about this definition is by comparing the relationship between responsibility (or blame) and potential for impact. This produces four generalized alternatives, as depicted in Figure 1.[7] Along one spectrum is the level of responsibility placed on the actor or medium, through which agency takes place. For instance, the Westphalian state retains a high level of responsibility for its actions relative to its citizens and relative to its relationships within the broader international community. Along the other spectrum is the potential that agent has to achieve an end. End is distinguished as *an end* rather than *the end* to differentiate between intended outcomes and the potential to achieve any outcome. Again, the Westphalian state demonstrates high potential to achieve an outcome or end. Hence, within the comparative range of responsibility and potential, the Westphalian state, as an entity that produces outcomes, falls within quadrant IV.

Figure 1

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In the Abstract (Theory)

Realism

Hans Morgenthau, in large part, defines the Realist perspective regarding agency. That perspective relies on the exercise of power. He says, "Power may comprise anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man." [8] For Realists, like Morgenthau, the exercise of power resides within intellectually tangible entities. The most significant entity is the state. Along the spectrum of potential, the state is the highest power agent. Morgenthau contends that the "nation-state as the ultimate point of reference of contemporary foreign policy." [9] The most basic agent is man. Realism recognizes man is an entity with the capacity to exert power; however, in the international arena, states compete with other states.

Reinhold Niebuhr expands on Morgenthau's assertions of power to include government institutions as international agents. He argues, "the authority of government is the ultimate force of national cohesion." [10] He makes the distinction that government wields the power, not necessarily a nation or a state, because, for Niebuhr, the nation is a territorial representation of characteristics held within the state. [11] In other words, people with languages and cultures and religions and a political commonality comprise the nationality of the state. Therefore, a nation or a state is artificial, whereas the government is the reality. Turkey's warning to Syria and Kurdish rebels is an example of Realist agency, as demonstrated by Turkey's exertion of its right to self-preservation. [12] Thus, be it a state, a nation, or their government, the Realist notion of agency is through a political structure.

Man himself certainly exhibits agency according to Realism. Morgenthau addresses this, noting that state representatives "may follow the dictates of [their] own conscience" when they conduct foreign policy. [13] They use individual agency to act and are held personally responsible for their actions. Morgenthau suggests that in those cases, they do so without necessarily representing the state. [14] He disclaims, though, that the potential for individuality in the governing of a society of states makes the possibility for international morality "impossible." [15] Individual agency is, therefore, a distribution of state power, which, in effect, weakens the agency of the state.

One of the Realist agency tensions is the tension between the power of the individual and the power of the state. As states cede power to individuals, states' agency along the potential spectrum decreases while maintaining responsibility as the primary actor internationally. Similarly, Niebuhr sees the unity problem as stemming from tensions between classes. [16] Either way, accordingly, the natural response by states domestically, which transcends internationally, is to struggle for power. Where that fundamental struggle for power should occur is based upon the agency of state politics rather than individual agency. Morgenthau sees this agency tension as problematic because an abundance of agents leads to incoherent and inconsistent moral rules. When moral rules lack consistency, the unity of states internationally falters, paving the way for both a competition between states over "ways of life" and unsustainable inconsistencies when dealing with dilemmas. [17]

One such example is in dealing with human rights issues. Morgenthau believes that allowing the individual to apply agency through norms of humanity actually erodes the cohesive agency of the state, making it vulnerable to competitive powers. This is because the interests (power) of individual agents and state agents conflict. He contends, "the defense of human rights cannot be consistently applied in foreign policy because it can and must come in conflict with other interests that may be more important in a particular instance." [18] Hence, for Realism, maintaining state agency is vital for international order, over individual agency, because the state has greater potential to achieve international balance.

Kantian Liberalism

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For liberals, the opposite holds true. Kantian liberals, characterized by Fernando Tesón, define agency in terms of the power of individuals. Tesón says, “the Kantian tradition in political philosophy (domestic and international) is the tradition of autonomy-based freedom, the rule of law, the empire of reason, and the primacy of individual dignity over nationalist, state-centered concerns.”[19] Individuals frame their morality through laws, which are derived from reason.

Just as Realism theory deals with competing “ways of life,” liberalism, too, deals with competing ideologies but in a fundamentally different way. For Realists, the contest is over which ideology is better on the basis of dominant interests. For liberals, the contest is a matter of superiority on the basis of moral supremacy. The latter creates a more nuanced international relations dilemma because agents compete over moral correctness. Therefore, the agent who believes his/her moral foundation is superior to that of another inherently accuses the other, in effect, of being morally wrong. In the Realist version of the international arena, two competing moral sets can coexist. In the Kantian, liberal international arena there is only room for one set of universal morals. A significant international dilemma is one that involves determining which moral set is most universal. According to Tesón, Kantian liberalism believes in the supremacy of the republican constitution.[20] It would seem, then, that in relative terms, the sliding scale of potential would afford the most moral agent greater potentiality to achieve an end.

This is a problematic liberal dilemma because it reinforces revolutionary war whereby suppressed agents seek to overthrow or supersede the agency of state authority. Tesón confirms this by challenging perceived Kantian notions of individual rights of revolting against tyranny.[21] Moreover, the root of liberal agency introduces justifying war against inferior moral authorities, those that are not republican, in favor of republican authority.[22] This means that morally superior, republican (democratic in Tesón’s terms) states have a responsibility to intervene in states without similar moral norms to correct them. The United States demonstrates this in the aforementioned example by pledging to support Syrian rebels if they effectively seize strongholds.[23] The implication of greater responsibility gives significant agency potential both to the republican superiority and to the revolting oppressed because the fundamental responsibility is to promote proper morality.

In practical terms, this kind of agency is subjective, which is why Tesón claims that intervention is reserved “only for the most serious forms of human rights violations.”[24] Yet, since a perspective, liberal agency is based on moral superiority, and since morality is based on human reasoning, one must wonder who quantifies “the most serious...human rights violations?” Liberal, individually based agency is seemingly more deterministic, as opposed to being an inherent need. Hence, the capacity to use force increases because “force is justified to defend the liberal state against outside threats and, in extreme situations, to rescue victims of brutal oppression or similar situations in *illiberal* states.”[25] Therefore, the liberal agent not only has a responsibility to rescue the illiberal, but the illiberal revolutionary also has the freedom to act against authority without responsibility.

English School

The capacity for action in the Realist and Kantian liberal schools of thought is generally simple. It takes the form of a tangibly understandable entity, such as a state or a person. Neither theory necessarily accounts for the agency of other actors on the international scenes. The English school, which attempts to merge the differences by balancing aspects of both Realism and Kantian liberalism, opens the door for, alternatively, more complex notions of agency.

The English school recognizes the primacy of state sovereignty, similar to Realism. Hedley Bull explains the tenets of the English school by identifying that states maintain “supreme jurisdiction over its subjects and territory.”[26] States represent an element of agency within an international society of states.[27] However, they are not the only element. States exist together with other states in a form of society, which also exhibits collective agency. The society of states is an especially important aspect of international order, necessitating special attention for its preservation.[28] Agency appears more comprehensive, with varying levels of capacity and purposes. On the one hand is the Realist principle of state agency. On the other hand is a Kantian/liberal principle of collective or universal agency. In the

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middle, the English school introduces a different form of agency through commerce and trade. Bull characterizes the blend as the following:

The modern international system in fact reflects all three of the...Hobbesian, the Kantian and the Grotian traditions: the element of war and struggle for power among states, the element of transnational solidarity and conflict, cutting across the divisions among states, and the element of co-operation [sic] and regulated intercourse among states.[29]

When dilemmas arise, the English school offers more options in terms of the agency for response. One example is the introduction of an outlier, in terms of agency, as with transnational terrorist networks, like Al Qaeda. Barak Mendelsohn argues that these free radicals damage both the state itself and the international society.[30] Their (terrorist) agency affects the sovereignty of states by directly infringing on it. Yet, they do so with relatively little cost or responsibility to their own sovereignty, since they are not considered sovereign. Mendelsohn suggests they also challenge the international society of states because Al Qaeda is not a state itself. He says, “[o]ne of the main tenets of the society of states is the acceptance of states as the only legitimate authority to use force.”[31] Al Qaeda upends that principle by claiming its own agency and participating against the presiding framework.

The international response to Al Qaeda after September 11, 2001 has been twofold. First, the United States defended its right to sovereignty, exercising the full limits of its agency as a state by invading Afghanistan. After a successful overthrow of the Taliban government, the United States, then, leveraged its invigorated agency to wage a separate campaign against another illiberal regime – Iraq. Second, the larger international society has rejected the Al Qaeda non-state actor. Mendelsohn claims the international society “has been resilient and resolved to eliminate the network.”[32] The force of NATO converged on Afghanistan, demonstrating collective agency in terms of military and political power. NATO went along with the U.S. to invade Iraq, but not with the same vigor as was done with Afghanistan. Arguably, NATO tempered its agency toward Iraq, while the U.S. spent its agency. NATO and the international community did not necessarily share the same motive as the United States for invading Iraq. This is why Mendelsohn suggests that NATO and the IC’s responses to Al Qaeda were in large part to preserve the structure of the society of states. In both responses, the United States and NATO/IC sought to maintain both the potential and responsibility of their agency.

In the Ambiguous

Pacifism

The aforementioned examples account for less ambiguous forms of agency. They are the major players on the international scene. Other manners of agency exist in forms that are more ambiguous. For instance, the act of nonviolence is a form of agency that some argue may be the most potentially potent form of agency. David Cortright defends the pacifist tradition through his history of peace movements. He notes that religions have played a major role in instigating peace.[33] Religion has also played a major role in instigating war. Hence, religion and religious zeal carry a form of agency that could appear in all four quadrants of the spectrum.

As mentioned, the principle of nonviolence is a form of agency. Cortright contends, “Nonviolent resistance has indeed become ‘a force more powerful,’” because “It offers a third way, distinct from war and inaction, for addressing the challenge of injustice.”[34] The agency of nonviolence takes a great amount of blame for its participants because they must suffer in order to make a statement. That statement, however, if effective, is far-reaching. The power of nonviolence is not so much in the struggle between the accuser and the accused; it is in the associated agency it provides, particularly when reaching third party viewers. Cortright illustrates this by recounting nonviolent movements led by Gandhi. Boycotts and other nonviolent measure “applied pressure on adversaries and forced them to change by withdrawing consent and undermining their ability to exercise power.”[35] Ironically, the undermining aspect of nonviolent agency elevates the morality of those oppressed over the oppressors.[36]

Martyrdom

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Religious zeal can lend agency to either individuals or groups of individuals or even entire religious movements. Recently, the act of martyrdom seems to have risen, in terms of the agency potential executed by predominantly militant Islamist groups. Karin Fierke discusses the agency of suicide bombers. She notes that not only is the individual who commits the act of suicide a powerful agent, the community of believers that support him/her self elevate their agency by providing sense of a contextually senseless act.

She says:

In so far as human bombs are a relatively small proportion of the population from which they are drawn, the structure of the game does not constrain, in the sense of limiting the options of individuals to a choice to give up their lives. It is more accurate, in this context, to say that the rule constitutes a particular form of agency, by situating the act within a type of context, and thus meaning, where the choice and the action have 'sense'. [37]

The martyr, in today's Western understanding of the term, introduces not only a new dimension of agency; the martyr introduces a new range of dilemmas. How does a state protect itself against a martyr? How does a state prosecute the agents of martyrdom? These questions relate to the religious and political struggle against an ideology that itself is another form of agency – militant Islam. Moreover, from a post-structural view, the linguistic use of *martyr* increases the agency of that particular act. From a Western perspective, martyrdom, in the Christian biblical sense, may have lost its agency because the term is ostensibly antiquated. Western impressions of Islamic martyrdom, however, instill a sense of concern, confusion, and fear. [38] Martyrdom, linguistically, achieves a duality of agency depending on the focus. Thus, the martyr, through seemingly random acts of terror, is a multi-dimensional agent who must be dealt with in terms of provisions set forth by perspectives like that of the English school, through a breadth of power-based and idea-based options.

Emotional Expression

Even more ambiguous than martyrdom is the elemental aspect of the martyr's agency; this is the emotion they invoke. At some level, emotion is itself a form of political agency. Similar to nonviolent agency, emotion's power relies on its ability to spread through third party observers. Andrew Ross discusses political emotion as agency and notes that agency comes from the contagious effect of political emotion. [39] Emotion can have a fair amount of potential for achieving *an end* without attaching much responsibility to the source because of emotion's inherency in human nature, along with its spontaneity. He demonstrates, for example, how the infamous 'Bush Shoe' incident was an expression of "attitudes that already existed." [40]

Emotions are particularly powerful agents because they are psychological. [41] Accordingly, humans understand universally similar emotions such as sadness and anger. Furthermore, in today's age of technology, mediums such as video, voice, and social networks are instant vectors to spread contagions. The agency of emotion can literally and figuratively reach out and touch someone – which is the essence of the famous Bell System ad campaign for AT&T. [42] Since forms of agency can be ambiguous or unambiguous, a paradox occurs in the nature of agency's perceived (unofficial) and real (official) power.

Agency Paradox

Michael Walzer illustrates this paradox by exposing one realm of agency in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. This paradox is of the relationship between responsibility and potential for action (Figure 1). Walzer shows how in the military, that relationship is conveyed through the agency given to an officer vis-à-vis an enlisted soldier. This is how Walzer characterizes the difference:

It must be taken into account especially in the case of common soldiers, for officers are more free in their associations and more involved in discussions about policy and strategy. They have a say in the shape and character of the organization over which they preside. Hence, again, the critical importance of command responsibility. [43]

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Walzer implies that the freedom an officer has to engage in the shaping of a military organization through policy discussions and strategic planning carries greater weight. This weight, in essence, is the comparative difference between the agency of an officer and an enlisted soldier. The type of agency that, Walzer implies, diverges. The officer's capacity to express his power exists within an official, on a more accountable plane subject to different standards of jurisprudence. The enlisted soldier wields an altogether different sort of power and influence within a less official and less accountable plane, which is subject to more forgiving standards of jurisprudence.[44]

This is, in part, why Walzer says, "Being an officer is not at all like being a common soldier." [45] The way Walzer uses the term "common" connotes a certain measure of ignorance. That ignorance is, on the one hand, pejorative because it suggests the enlisted (common) soldier should not be expected to critically judge moral hazards. To that extent, the "common soldier" lacks agency with respect to his participation as a piece of a larger group. On the other hand, the "common soldier" retains a license to carry out orders without much regard for the morality of those orders, in so much as the soldier is capable of understanding the gravity of the morality of just and unjust orders. Furthermore, Walzer's implied ignorance of the "common soldier" gives that soldier a freedom to act irresponsibly without being responsible for his actions entirely, since the weight of his actions rest largely on the officer's shoulders. His (the enlisted) freedom *from* responsibility is a form of unofficial agency that an officer lacks.

Responsibility distinguishes the strength of an officer's agency. As an officer advances in rank, earning greater responsibilities, he/she wields a greater capacity to influence matters relevant to war fighting and to national strategic importance. This agency is visible and publicly conferred.[46] Conversely, the capacity of an enlisted soldier to influence matters of national importance is conveyed through less visible means. The soldier does not have the same kind of responsibility an officer has. Although one might conclude they have less of a capacity to act, actually, they have a unique capacity to act through the collective influence of their commonality – their freedom *from* responsibility. Thus, the agency of an officer and an enlisted soldier is reflective of the capacity they each hold. They each have similar potential. The potential to achieve an end related to their responsibility changes their relative agency.

To Act or Not to Act

Cortright illustrates how nonviolence is a relative demonstration of power. The hidden power in agency is in the capacity itself. It is the capacity, not necessarily the execution of that capacity, where power resides. That is why the nuclear option is so powerful. The employment of a nuclear weapon certainly is powerful by virtue of the magnitude of the explosion and casualties induced. The power not to fire, however, is the power of leverage. It is the power of threat and the power of potential. That power exists not in the action but in the inaction. Quite possibly, the ultimate individual and collective form of agency, in terms of the power to perform it and the power it invokes, is the act of not acting. Often war is touted as the last resort. However, Walzer makes a profound distinction that war is not the last resort. He says:

I want to stress that it is not war but civilian resistance that has usually been regarded as a last resort, because war holds out at least the possibility of avoiding the occupation that evokes or requires the resistance.[47]

Restraint in the form of judicial punishment demonstrates a transformation of agency from the perspective of domestic order and international order. When Foucault recounts the transition of punishment from brutal, painful, and barbaric forms to civil, painless (in terms of the body), rehabilitative forms, he unveils an interesting dichotomy.[48] While it may seem that the act of inflicting pain on another person is a sheer demonstration of power, the agency with which that process occurs is simple. As judicial punishment has transformed to more restraining measures, (restraining in the sense that it takes more legal justification to execute a judgment) the process of inflicting a meaningful sentence has become more complex. The complexity under which the current domestic system operates, which making it very difficult to judge, is paradoxically a more powerful form of state and individual agency. In order to convict and punish the accused, the state must demonstrate the legal justification and the moral cause. That gives both the accuser and the accused tremendously more agency today compared to centuries ago. In fact, one could argue that the weight of agency today leans more heavily toward the accused, giving them the power of innocence *until* proven guilty. An individual in the United States may refuse to answer questioning of the accuser until due

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process (indictment). In effect, the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. constitution guarantees an individual their right not to act.[49] Consequently, the burden of proof is on the accuser to overturn the agency of the accused. This reveals an increasing importance of agency in world politics.

Conclusion

Examining dilemmas through the lens of agency expands the international landscape. Agency analysis is an altogether different frame of reference for analyzing international politics. IR schools of thought reflect variant perspectives, yet they maintain at least one consistent thread, the notion of agency. When examining political relationships through the prism of political theories, one's understanding is limited to the scope of competing ideas. An agency perspective broadens the view, offering a more comprehensive picture filled with the nuances from different perspectives. Those nuances are not necessarily competitive, so one is not limited to understanding distributive outcomes – i.e. win/lose. Two or more agency nuances may, in fact, be right, despite originating from competing IR theories. Therefore, agency increases the understanding of international politics generally and the analyzing of dilemmas specifically. The rightness or wrongness of a situation, in this vein, is not explicitly tied to a particular school of thought. Instead, those schools of thought reveal respective dimensions to agency as an analytical tool, working to represent pieces of a more complete picture.

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[1] See <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-turkey-syria-kurds-20120727,0,4304751.story>.

[2] See <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/07/26/us-weighs-more-syria-aid-if-rebels-get-safe-zones/>.

[3] See <http://india.nydailynews.com/newsarticle/50119357c3d4ca6b6f000041/nato-supply-trucks-surge-at-pakistan-border>.

[4] See <http://abclocal.go.com/wpvi/story?section=news/local&id=8750792>.

[5] See <http://india.nydailynews.com/newsarticle/50114794c3d4ca2876000000/truck-bomb-kills-11-in-northwest-pakistani-market>.

[6] See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agency>.

[7] This diagram is meant to portray a conceptual framework for viewing a variety of agency forms. The placement of agency forms in quadrants is based on the author's initial perception; however, further analytical refinement would need to be done to determine more accurately the relative association of various forms of agency.

[8] Morgenthau, p. 11.

[9] Morgenthau, p. 13

[10] Niebuhr, p. 83.

[11] Ibid.

[12] See <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-turkey-syria-kurds-20120727,0,4304751.story>.

[13] Morgenthau, p. 256.

[14] Morgenthau, p. 257.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Niebuhr, p. 112.

[17] Morgenthau, pp. 264 & 267.

[18] Morgenthau, p. 267.

[19] Tesón, p. 104.

[20] Tesón, p. 109.

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[21] Tesón, p. 112. Specifically, Tesón rejects Kant suggesting he was “wrong about the right to revolution.”

[22] Tesón, p. 112.

[23] See <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/07/26/us-weighs-more-syria-aid-if-rebels-get-safe-zones/>.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid. Emphasis added.

[26] Bull, p. 17.

[27] Bull, p. 13. He refers to the structure of international polity as being distinguished by individual and autonomous states.

[28] Bull, p. 16.

[29] Bull, p. 39. Hobbes represents the realism side; Kant represents the liberal side; Grotius represents a rational middle.

[30] Mendelsohn, pp. 58 & 61.

[31] Mendelsohn, p. 61.

[32] Mendelsohn, p. 67.

[33] Cortright, p. 2.

[34] Cortright, p. 213.

[35] Cortright, p. 217.

[36] Cortright, p. 224. He says nonviolent struggles are ways humans reveal divine moral order.

[37] Fierke, p. 162.

[38] Fierke, p. 157.

[39] Ross, p. 122.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ross, p. 111.

[42] See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HO17B-ACRn0>.

[43] Walzer, p. 316.

[44] Walzer, p. 322.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Generals, for instance, are selected and conferred by Congress, an expression of public approval for serving in a

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public capacity.

[47] Walzer, p. 330.

[48] Foucault, p. 11. Kindle p. 10, location 207.

[49] See http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html.

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