

On Self-Interest

Self-interest cannot correctly be invoked as a guiding principle in moral or legal cases. By Nazneen Ahmed

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, the US and UK were seeking to legitimize their imminent military aggression by obtaining a UN Security Council resolution sanctioning it. One of the non-permanent members of the Security Council at the time was Pakistan. During those tense days, when the outcome could have been decided by a single vote, the dictator of Pakistan, General Musharraf, was asked which way Pakistan would vote. His answer was uncomplicated: in Pakistan's self-interest.

This was stunning for anyone looking at the situation from an ethical perspective or with an awareness of history. A decision involving war, the deaths of thousands, and the military takeover of a sovereign state was about to be made, and one party involved in making that momentous decision was cheerfully indicating it would vote, not on the basis of evidence relating to the case or the principles governing the various issues involved, but on the basis of its own interests!

In the general's view, questions of legality and morality were non-starters. And history, apparently, had no lessons to teach. The UN, and all the cooperation and diplomacy it stood for, was irrelevant when strong men discussed their mutual interests. Law was a joke at the expense of the powerless. Weak nations were to be toyed with by the powerful. And, in this brave new world, the weak deserved what they got. Me Tarzan, no problem.

Mr Musharraf made no bones about showing how far he was prepared to take self-interest. A dictator can speak his mind, freely, and without having to bother about pesky constituents. But what are we to make of the fact that media commentators and democratically elected leaders did not find the general's thinking inappropriate?

The reason that nobody cared, or even noticed, is that self-interest is today granted unlimited legitimacy and is honoured as pragmatism. Self-interest is now an ideal, in the pursuit of which legality and the common good have become mere inconveniences to be overcome. Self-interest has been raised to an eminence where it is the only guiding principle needed to make any decision. Hang morality, legality, the others! What does it mean for me?

So, does self-interest have unlimited legitimacy as a guiding principle? Or is it valid as a guiding principle only up to a point?

First, we need to distinguish between self-interest used as an instrument of behavioural analysis and self-interest used consciously to guide one's own behaviour. In the former case, we are judging how *others* would behave assuming they would act in their own interests. In the latter case, one evaluates *one's own interests* in order to make a decision (though one may also use other criteria to reach a decision; for example, the interests of somebody dear to one or the ethics involved).

Now let us consider self-interest as a guiding principle. Life in a free and democratic society is predicated on self-interest. When we vote, we vote for our interests. Democracy assumes that people vote in their own interests. When we decide between two jobs or clothes to buy, it is self-interest that determines the choice. Self-interest is a fine guiding principle as long as the decision it influences does not directly affect anybody else. When that decision directly affects somebody else, it is time to bring in other criteria. For example, it may be in your interest to take a posting to another country, but that would require your partner to sacrifice a promising career opportunity. Clearly, the decision to stay or go should depend on your interests as separate individuals and as a couple. In this kind of case, self-interest must be modified by the requirement of the common good.

In situations like that in the example above, a mutually agreeable solution can generally be reached. In some cases, however, agreement is not reached, and the law is invoked. In these cases, it is expected that the conflicting parties act in their own respective interests. The judge,

however, is supposed to rule on the case according to the law—not according to his or her personal interest.

In the Security Council, Pakistan found itself in the position of juror, and should have arrived at its verdict on the basis of the facts and the law—not on the basis of its own interests. For Gen Musharraf to have used Pakistan's Security Council seat to obtain rewards in exchange for a vote is to have seriously misunderstood the role of the Security Council and its members. The general may not be alone in thinking like he did. It's just surprising that self-interest has come this far without being challenged.

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SIDEBARS

Self-Interest First

The punters know that the horse named Morality rarely gets past the post, whereas the nag named Self-Interest always runs a good race.

– *Gough Whitlam, Australian politician (1989)*

A New Era

In a world where freedom, not tyranny, is on the march, the cynical calculus of pure power politics simply does not compute. It is ill-suited to a new era.

– *Bill Clinton, US President, 1993–2000*

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The Optimist

I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will.

– *Antonio Gramsci, Italian political theorist, Letters from Prison, (1949, transl. 1993)*

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The invasion and occupation of Iraq is the result of a crude and mechanical way of thinking. According to this line of thinking, people are abstractions, whose death or suffering is not to be considered. What counts is some grand plan. This way of thinking is nothing but a [refined barbarism](#). It is leading to confrontation and conflict. And it is shaping the framework of thought.

People who argue for an end to the occupation of Iraq are not just spoilers who have no positive suggestions to make. In [Constructive about Iraq](#), we indicate the error of the present policy and point to a way forward.

Ahmed Chalabi and George Tenet take the blame for the false information submitted to gain approval for the invasion of Iraq. The Bush Administration continues to get away with a war started on the basis of lies. See [Chalabi Did It!](#).