

**Wolfers, "Statesmanship and Moral Choice," Chapter Four of *Discord and Collaboration*.**

Week 1, IR field seminar

This essay attempts to resolve the apparent discrepancy between the morality attributed to individuals in their private capacities and in their conduct of foreign affairs. Wolfers argues that the discrepancy stems not from different standards of moral conduct, but instead from the differing circumstances in which individuals and states find themselves.

In a nonperfectionist (rather than absolutist) ethic, otherwise deplorable conduct is justified if the cause being served is worth the value being sacrificed, and if no less morally reprehensible means are available. Thus, what may appear to be unavoidable necessities of state are, in actuality, moral choices in which particular circumstances dictate the sacrifice of one value in the service of another, higher value. That morally shocking behavior is so pervasive in the international arena results from the fact that enmity frequently dominates over amity in international politics, and vital national interests, if not national survival, are often at stake.

Governments cannot, therefore, always pursue amity in their relations, but neither must they elect never to seek it. Depending on the particular circumstances of a foreign policy decision, statesmen must often turn to the tactics of power politics, but must also be prepared to employ such methods as patience and compromise.

The choice to pursue national interests over other, more humane concerns will also depend upon the statesman's hierarchy of values, as well as the values of the nation as a whole. Nationalistic ethics place vital national interests, including survival as well as less pressing political and economic goals, above such values as legal consistency or humane treatment, while nonnationalistic or humanistic ethics often question the primacy of national interests in the hierarchy of values. The nonperfectionist ethic cannot resolve these conflicts, but instead specifies a process for making moral judgments within which the conduct of statesmen may be assessed.