

Book Review: Rwanda and The Moral Obligation of Humanitarian Intervention

by Blog Admin

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*The 1994 Rwandan Genocide that took the lives of approximately 800,000 men, women and children is etched into our memories as one of the most acute failures of intervening in human rights violations. In **Rwanda and The Moral Obligation of Humanitarian intervention**, **Joshua James Kassner** contends that the international community had a moral obligation to intervene and therefore unrolls a convincing argument for a significant reform of the normative framework governing international relations. This argument bears unquestionable urgency but regrettably fails to move beyond the oft-debated Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework. Reviewed by **Lucas Van Milders**.*



Rwanda and The Moral Obligation of Humanitarian Intervention. Joshua James Kassner. Edinburgh University Press. November 2012.

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[Joshua James Kassner](#)'s assessment of our moral obligation to act whenever human rights are violated on a massive scale, such as during the Rwandan Genocide, situates itself firmly within a tradition of scholarly work that critically engages the prevailing norms of our international system. This is immediately apparent from the title, which refers to one of the most controversial and dazzling challenges of International Relations after the Cold War on the one hand, and an example of what is generally agreed upon as one of its disastrous and devastating consequences on the other.

Although invoking the memory of one of the most severe tragedies of the second half of the 20th century might seem a self-evident argument in favour of a more progressive defence of humanitarian intervention, Kassner's engagement with Rwanda is reduced to such an extent that its inclusion in the title might be called into question. A more fitting subtitle could therefore be: Why did the international community fail to act? According to Kassner, there are conditions that induce an "all-things-considered reason for action" (p. 11). These entail a violation of the basic right to physical security, a guarantee that states do not need to make internal sacrifices, the protection of a community of moral significance, that international peace and security will not be compromised unjustifiably, that those bearing the obligation are capable of effectively fulfilling this obligation, that intervention will not worsen the situation, and that intervention will not undermine the presumption against non-intervention (p. 83). When these conditions are met, as was the case in 1994 Rwanda, there is an irrefutable obligation to act.

Underneath this argument runs a clearly articulated critique of the value we put on state sovereignty. Conservatively clinging to the importance of sovereignty seems to be outdated since it is one of the key arguments in favour of an absolute norm of non-intervention. Kassner has by no means the intention to expel this norm out of hand, since this would open the door for an international system where interventions (such as the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003) would become prevailing policies conducted by those states that hold power. A middle ground between these two extremes would therefore be a rebuttable presumption (rather than the norm) of non-intervention, according to Kassner. Non-intervention would at all times be the favourable option. Yet in the context of all-things-considered reason for action, this presumption would have to be rebutted. This can only be done by placing less normative weight on the importance of state sovereignty, which in turn can only be achieved through the implementation of a new normative framework of International Politics. Eventually, this leads Kassner to put forth such an amended framework, which includes a rebuttable presumption of non-intervention. This rule would enable the guidance of the behaviour of states but nonetheless be capable of answering the demand of morality in the international arena (p. 124).

This theoretical narrative takes up the majority of the book (chapter 1-3) and eventually opens into a transition to practice by engaging the R2P framework. This might not come as a surprise since there is an unquestionable resonance of Kassner's constitutive conditions for humanitarian intervention with the R2P framework's reliance on Just War Theory. In order to move beyond a merely different articulation of the same framework, Kassner exposes the heavy reliance of the R2P framework on the ineffective Security Council as one of its crucial shortcomings. Referring to Rwanda's seat in the Security Council as a rotating member in 1994 as one of the major causes of inaction, Kassner proposes a different approach that puts more emphasis on subsidiarity as a key principle to guiding the actions conducted by (sub)regional political bodies like the African Union and other security institution like NATO.

The problem with this reasoning is that Kassner places himself on the defence with regards to explaining the inclusion of the first three chapters, which cannot help but bring the R2P framework to mind. Leaving out the theoretical section in favour of a more elaborate assessment of a revised normative framework would not only have prevented this predicament, it would have also avoided the failure of not offering a more insightful perspective on the moral obligation to intervene in the case of human suffering than the flawed R2P framework. A more fundamental way out of this predicament might be to ponder the question whether it is not the flawed framework but rather the enterprise of constructing a context-independent framework itself that inhibits any prosperous outcome. Although Kassner's inclusion of (sub)regional political bodies might be an essential element of such an approach, the question whether this framework can be applied on other examples of humanitarian intervention is yet to be answered.

In short, *Rwanda and the Moral Obligation of Humanitarian Intervention* can be embedded in a strand of literature that was triggered by the Rwandan genocide and in turn culminated in the R2P framework that sought to prevent such tragedies in the future by reforming the international system. Written nearly two decades later, Kassner's legitimate attempt to rearticulate the necessity of this reform while being aware of the shortcomings of the R2P framework unfortunately does not seem to move beyond it.

Lucas Van Milders worked as a Commissioning Editor for [e-IR](#). He has an MA in Philosophy and International Relations and obtained a MScEcon in Security Studies at Aberystwyth University. Currently, he intends to do a PhD on Humanitarian Intervention and Aristotelian Virtue Ethics. [Read more reviews by Lucas.](#)