

# dominate

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# Rawl's Borders

Echoing the spirit of the American Revolution, founding father James Wilson wrote that “All men are by nature equal and free.” His words ring true today, and represent one of the major victories of the enlightenment—the idea that all peoples are created equal. In its time, this idea has toppled tyrants, and brought freedom to millions. It’s because of this fundamental belief in human equality and solidarity that I stand Resolved: That governments have a moral obligation to assist other nations in need.

To provide clarity, let’s define terms:

## Definitions

Government is defined by the New Oxford American Dictionary as *“the governing body of a nation, state, or community.”*<sup>1</sup>

A moral obligation is “an obligation arising out of considerations of right and wrong” according to Princeton Wordnet.<sup>2</sup>

Assistance to other nations in need is defined according to the The Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ call for furthering basic rights “indispensable for [human] dignity” through “national effort and international cooperation.”<sup>3</sup>

With these essential terms defined, let’s review my overall position in the round:

## Value

The resolution poses the simple question: is there a moral obligation to assist impoverished nations? To answer this question, it’s crucial that we have some idea of what a nation’s moral obligations actually are. That’s why I propose the value of universal human rights. I believe that the further realization and expansion of human rights represents the highest goal of governments. This central purpose is the source government’s moral prerogative to assist other nations.

## Criterion

Governments can promote universal human rights through fulfilling their obligation to assist impoverished nations.

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<sup>1</sup> New Oxford American Dictionary 3rd edition © 2010 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Princeton University "moral obligation." WordNet. Princeton University. 2010. <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=moral%20obligation>

<sup>3</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 22, Adopted 10 December, 1948. <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#atop>

## Contention 1: Rights Are Fragile

All humans have rights. This axiomatic statement is the basis of our highest moral codes, and best systems of ethics. It gives rise to empathy, compassion, fairness, and standards of right conduct. But human rights are fragile, and don't exist by default. Rather, they require several conditions. For rights to exist, justice must be meted out on a fair and impartial basis and society must respect its members' autonomy, privacy, and culture. Absent these conditions, human rights don't exist.

But it's not enough for society to merely *not intervene* in one's liberty. True universal human rights require a minimum standard of living, and the ability to better one's lot. One would be hard pressed to tell a poor soul enveloped in grinding poverty that he's really free. Psychologist Abraham Maslow calls this a "hierarchy of needs"—arguing that people must have access to basic elements of survival like food, water, and health resources before they can enjoy meaningful rights. Lack of these essentials threatens more than mere quality of life, it's actually dehumanizing. Therefore, human rights require more than a little: they require *both* a basic respect for the rights and values of our fellow man, and a minimum standard of living.

## Contention 2: Rights Trump Borders

James Madison in the *Federalist Papers* rightly calls justice the goal of all government, and even of all civil society. Societies are established to protect their members from various threats to their liberties, and to build a framework in which communities can organize and grow. The purpose of government is simply to promote the rights of the individual - responsibilities of nationalism, conquest, or amassing national wealth go beyond this mandate, and hallmark a government that's overstepped its legitimate authority. This leads to the realization that government's purpose isn't to prefer the rights of citizens, but to promote rights impartially.

This is perhaps best explained through taking note of diminishing returns. Rich nations spend inordinate amounts ensuring every last bit of quality of life for their citizens. Simultaneously, people in developing nations finance much of this prosperity through low cost manufacturing, yet live on next to nothing. We're faced with the very real choice of whether to value our happiness above the very lives of others. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy poignantly notes that borders divide the privileged from the oppressed, and rich from poor, leading to the perverse situation where "*Being born on the right side of an arbitrary line can sometimes literally mean the difference between life and death.*"

Reparative justice can also create cross border moral obligations. A key phenomena of globalization is that many of the benefits accrue to wealthy nations, while many of the costs are borne by poor countries. Pollution, resource conflict, and resource depletion all disproportionately harm poor nations. As the rich world benefits financially from globalization, it's almost indisputable to say that we morally must shoulder some of the burden through environmental and humanitarian assistance.

### Contention 3: Countries Must Contribute

Given that human rights are of the utmost importance, and aren't diminished by the human construct of national borders, I believe it's evident that governments do have a moral obligation to protect the most vulnerable.

Recognizing this obligation brings different races, and cultures into solidarity. Assistance to those in need broadens our national horizons, and forges ties of understanding between nations. This leads to the very real benefit of expanding our idea of duty beyond our "tribe." The acute need for this sort of comprehensive moral thinking is gruesomely illustrated in the 20th century violence in Northern Ireland. Although the Irish Troubles have their causes in an array of religious, political, and ethnic factors, the defining motif has been nationalism—a sharp and unrelenting policy of using the vehicle of the nation state to advance religious and cultural objectives. Thinking of our moral obligations in a broader context of humanity is imperative to eradicating such racism and nationalism that tells us to confine our sense of duty to self and neighbor.

The other implication of international assistance is projecting the idea that people are more important than nations. As countries like Syria and North Korea try to hide massive human rights abuses behind the facade of "national sovereignty," it's increasingly necessary for nations to prioritize human rights over the nation state. Human progress in this century will be very much tied to our ability to value the dignity of the individual human over the harsh commands of nations and cultures.

John Rawls summed up my position in his statement that "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override." It's my argument that we ought to recognize this supreme importance of the rights of the individual, and seek to promote it universally—here, and abroad.