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Source: *Social Research*, Vol. 61, No. 4, Sixtieth Anniversary 1934-1994: The Legacy of Our Past (WINTER 1994), pp. 853-876

Published by: [The New School](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971063>

Accessed: 22-04-2015 14:00 UTC

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# Hans Morgenthau, Realism, and the Scientific Study of International Politics

BY ROBERT JERVIS

POLITICAL SCIENCE is a very trendy discipline. Few books or articles are cited a decade, let alone a generation, after they are written. When scholars die, their ideas often die with them, although they may be reinvented later and trumpeted as new. Hans Morgenthau is a rare, if partial, exception to this generalization. Students still read his work, especially but not exclusively *Politics Among Nations* which to a large degree made the field; scholars still cite his work, even if they have not read it recently or carefully and even if their main objective is to attack it; and, perhaps more importantly, there is much to be gained by re-reading his books and thinking about what he has to say. Morgenthau wrote too much for me to even attempt a summary, and, like any subtle and supple thinker, he voiced too many contradictions to permit ready distillations. As both a detached scholar and a passionate observer of world politics, Morgenthau sought to have his general philosophy guide his views on specific issues and yet to remain open enough to allow his observations of the wisdom and folly—usually the latter—around him alter some of his most deeply-held beliefs. In a world in which scholarship and public policy are increasingly separate, in which highest academic prestige goes to those who construct the most abstract and apparently

**SOCIAL RESEARCH, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Winter 1994)**

rigorous models, and in which a fascination with everyday politics, let alone the hope to improve the welfare of humankind, is seen as antithetical to the attempt to discover the laws of politics and in which an ability to see several sides of a hotly contested issue is seen as an insufficient commitment to the correct cause, Morgenthau's approach is not a popular one. And yet because he had so much to say about so many timeless questions, scholars find it impossible to avoid him.

Like so many scholars who formed the founding generation of the American study of international politics, Hans Morgenthau was a refugee from the Nazis, and his European education and experience provided a breadth of outlook and an historical orientation which gave him insights, which came more slowly to more parochial American students, and simultaneously blinded him to important aspects of American policy, especially its domestic roots. He reserved some of his deepest scorn for ideas which, if not uniquely American, are particularly prominent in American social science and political thought. More specifically, he sought to tame Americans' optimism about human nature, science, and reform. Epitomized by Woodrow Wilson, much American public opinion, many political leaders, and a distressingly large number of scholars equated good intentions with a successful foreign policy, assumed that democracy could control if not extinguish base human instincts, believed that democracies could avoid wars and that a peaceful world could encourage democracies.<sup>1</sup> I suspect that in the 1940s and 1950s, when Morgenthau's ideas first received widespread attention, both some of his appeal and some of the objection to his arguments stemmed from his darker, more European view of world politics.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, most of what Morgenthau wrote for American audiences was written during the Cold War, and it was in this context that his writings proved so influential. It is an exaggeration with some truth to see American writings on international politics before World War II as preoccupied by legalism and American foreign policy in that era to have

neglected national power. To scholars, statesmen, and an informed public which believed that the USSR was a grave menace to American security and Western values, that an assertive American policy was necessary to cope with this threat, and that many American traditions were a hindrance in this new world, many of Morgenthau's arguments were both enlightening and useful. Of course, his influence should not be overestimated: the experience of Hitler was a greater sponsor of Realism than any written text could be. But people who were responding in what was for them an unprecedented way by actively participating in the balance of power were greatly comforted by the idea that their behavior was not only appropriate for the moment but was grounded in world history and the necessary conduct of nations.

Morgenthau's stress on the centrality of the national interest was particularly important. Although many scholars—myself included—have felt it to be maddeningly vague, the concept was particularly important in the American context for what it denied: that states should follow either sub-national or supra-national interests. Both were highly tempting to Americans. Lacking a strong state and being a nation of immigrants, the United States often had trouble maintaining a foreign policy that was guided more by external than by internal factors. In the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants strongly opposed policies that could be seen as pro-British; isolationism was particularly strong in the middle west in part because of the large German population; after World War II Eastern European voters were adamant that their countries of origin not be sacrificed to the USSR. To the post-war foreign policy establishment, which saw itself as cosmopolitan and having risen above such parochialism, it was very useful to realize that concerns of segments of the population could legitimately be put aside in favor of the wider good. But not too wide a good; while the United Nations might develop into a real instrument of world order, the United States could not afford to rely on it or to seek the common benefit of mankind unless this also

served American interests. There was nothing cynical in this; countries would not thrive—and might not survive—if they were excessively idealistic or altruistic. This is not to say that the statesmen of the early Cold War years were more prone to see conflicts between what was good for their state and what was good for others than were those in other eras. Nevertheless, Realism's injunction that states not seek to reshape the world was useful in both restraining some of the statesmen's wilder schemes and, more importantly, in giving them a language with which they could justify their policies to the American public. Of course there is an irony here: it can be argued that, in the end, the policy of containment did re-order world politics.

As central to Morgenthau's analysis as the national interest was power. Indeed, for him the two were very closely related. Perhaps his most famous sentence is that "the main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power" (Morgenthau, 1978, p. 5). Despite the importance of the concept of power to him, he never analyzed it with the care and sophistication it deserved, however. The discussion in *Politics Among Nations* is not much different than that which could be found in less important textbooks. While he noted some of the obvious sources of national power, he never discussed many of the less obvious aspects of power to which modern political science has devoted much—but perhaps not enough—attention.<sup>3</sup> Even by the time Morgenthau started writing, Carl Friedrich had made the important point that power was often reflected in anticipated reactions—that is, an actor who apparently got his way may not have been powerful but may have been tailoring his demands to what he thought others were willing to give (Friedrich, 1937, pp. 589–91). The crucial need to separate the resources that might contribute to power from the notion of power itself was also established relatively early. It was crucial to an understanding of power to see that it was highly relational and

context-bound and so was not readily fungible. An actor could have power over another in a particular area without being able to sway others on that question or influence the same actor on different issues. Indeed, this crucial fact helps explain why the concept of power could not serve the same function as the concept of money in the economy, thereby preventing the discipline of political science from following its sister discipline in fruitfully developing very abstract models. Although this was a conclusion with which Morgenthau strongly agreed, his failure to deeply explore the concept of power robbed some of his arguments of much of their force.

To say that the national interest must be defined in terms of power does not say exactly what it is. Morgenthau's conception of Realism in fact does not lead to specific policy prescriptions or detailed propositions for empirical research.<sup>4</sup> While it may be possible to condemn a particularly egregious policy as diminishing a nation's power, a wide range of courses of action remain. This may disturb a statesman looking for more detailed guidance, but it did not upset Morgenthau, who realized that statesmanship could not be reduced to formulas. He sought a realism that would tell statesmen how to think and what factors to think about, not what specific conclusions to reach. Thus, it was quite possible for people who were equally true to the precepts of Realism to advocate diametrically opposing policies. An obvious example is American policy in Vietnam. Although Morgenthau not only disagreed with the American intervention but had trouble understanding how any sensible person could advocate it, in fact many of the arguments for the war could have been bolstered by footnotes to *Politics Among Nations* and among the policy's architects were people who had been figurative and literal students of Morgenthau.

If the fact that Realist reasoning could reach contradictory conclusions was upsetting for statesmen who were looking for ambiguous guidance, the fact that Realism does not readily yield testable propositions has been a source of frustration for

political scientists who sought to make their discipline more of a science. Of course, this did not bother Morgenthau. For him, it made no sense to try to rigorously deduce propositions from fundamental axioms. This would have so oversimplified politics as to produce a caricature. Furthermore, it implied the existence of one dominant value and vastly underestimated the role of contingency in politics. For Morgenthau, it was a philosophical error of the most fundamental kind to equate the practice and study of politics with science (Morgenthau, 1946). Of course, Morgenthau felt that his views were based on and borne out by international history, but he never tried to develop tight links between his arguments and either specific incidents or an array of international events, as political scientists now do. He never seriously considered alternative explanations or tried to show how the course of international politics was incompatible with them and consistent with his views.

It was this rejection of the essence of the scientific method that caused many later scholars to feel that however well-founded his premises and however wise his insights, there were grave limitations to the utility of his approach. To go further, it was argued, much more rigor was called for; scholars had to develop *theories* of international politics from which they could deduce testable propositions. The foundations for the study of international politics had to be driven deeper into bedrock by first finding principles of human behavior; upon this one could build a structure that was more consistent and more ambitious than was possible using Morgenthau's more intuitive framework (Waltz, 1990). Thus, the most influential current theory (Waltz's Neorealism) shares many of Morgenthau's basic premises but proceeds with greater rigor (Waltz, 1979). Like Morgenthau, Waltz and those who have followed him stress the importance of power and the national interest and put to one side variations in domestic politics and societies and decision-makers' beliefs and values. Explicitly for these theorists and implicitly for Morgenthau,

the reason for this focus is the assumption that the international environment exerts sufficient compulsion on its members so that their behavior usually will be only marginally affected by their internal characteristics. The power of these theories has permitted scholars to draw from them many important propositions and to point to new areas that can be fruitfully explored. The price of this parsimonious theorizing, however, is to omit a range of factors that Morgenthau felt were vital—for example, the multiplicity of goals that states can seek, the role of morality, and statesmanship itself. Thus, many of those who criticize Waltz and Neorealism have come to more deeply appreciate Morgenthau's approach.

But both Morgenthau's approach and Neorealism share one important and troublesome attribute: they are descriptive and prescriptive. That is, implicitly or explicitly they simultaneously seek to explain how states *do* behave and to point out how states *should* behave. While this dual mission is not illegitimate, it raises two related analytical problems. First, it is a bit anomalous to be telling statesmen that they must follow the inevitable laws of international politics. Since the laws describe how statesmen must behave, at least in general outline, it makes as little sense to instruct them as it does to tell leaves to appear in the spring and fade in the autumn. In fact, Morgenthau seemed particularly impatient with American statesmen, who he thought were especially prone to fail to conform to the laws he had discerned. Second, failings are not only those of individuals states and statesmen but of the theory as well. When statesmen disregard the laws or, to use language in current use, behave sub-optimally, the theory would seem to be disconfirmed. Thus, American behavior in Vietnam posed real problems for Morgenthau and Waltz. They believed the policy to be inconsistent with the way their theories led them to think states should and did behave.<sup>5</sup> Morgenthau did not explicitly try to explain the contradiction between misguided American policy and his arguments but implied that the gap was further evidence of human irrationality. Waltz confronted

the question more directly and incorporated the aberrant behavior into his theory in the form of an argument about the tendency of states to “overreact” to conflicts in the peripheries of a bipolar world. This claim does not fit well with the structure of the rest of his argument, however.<sup>6</sup> So what Morgenthau and Waltz make inadvertently clear is that it is difficult to develop an argument that both explains and prescribes.

### *Unusual Elements in Morgenthau's Realism*

Although Morgenthau inspired many scholars to develop his ideas of power, the national interest, and the international system into a more rigorous and parsimonious theory, it would be a great mistake to neglect the elements in Morgenthau's analysis that do not fit this tidy analysis. Indeed, it is the very presence of complicating and unruly factors that defined politics for Morgenthau. It was largely because of them that he felt that science—in his conception of it—could only be misleading when applied to the understanding or practice of this realm (and it is partly the willingness to put these areas aside that enables others to pursue a more scientific approach). Particularly important are Morgenthau's emphasis on ideas, morality, and diplomacy.

### *Ideas*

The question of the relative importance of ideas and material interests, or, more usefully, the interrelationships between the two, have been central to social science from the beginning. In the post-war era, American scholars of security studies have been particularly concerned with this question, examining the roles of military doctrine, statesmen's theories of conflict (especially deterrence versus the spiral model of

conflict), beliefs about whether offense or defense has the advantage, and images of other states.<sup>7</sup> Using a cognitive approach to the study of foreign policy, scholars have examined how beliefs and perceptions form, change, and both affect and are affected by behavior.<sup>8</sup> More recently, students of international political economy have come to realize that a purely materialist approach is inadequate (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993).<sup>9</sup>

Many studies begin with a ritual assertion that Realism, being deeply rooted in unchanging material interests, ignores the role of ideas. Perhaps such a Realist model could be developed, and in places Waltz's approach comes close to this, but it is foreign to Morgenthau's analysis. For all his stress on the importance of the national interest, which he often implied was objective, he clearly saw that statesmen can conceive of their interests in quite different ways, are moved by deep psychological forces, need to develop intellectual constructs to make sense of their world, and often are prisoners of inaccurate or inappropriate beliefs.

Indeed, an understanding of the power of ideas is closely related to the description/prescription tension in Morgenthau's thought. The prescriptive element in his scholarly writings, not to speak of his frequent essays on current policies, would be pointless if he did not think both that people might be persuaded by them and that changing people's ideas would lead to changes in foreign policy. His whole discussion of the importance of power and the national interest was designed to establish in the American mind the view that he believed was proper and which I infer he thought was literally foreign to the traditional American approach to foreign policy.

Let me just take two other examples of his concern with statesmen's beliefs, one quite specific and the other general. To start with the former, Morgenthau believed that American security policy in the Cold War was badly flawed by the tendency to examine nuclear weapons within the conceptual framework that was appropriate for conventional weapons

(Morgenthau, 1964, 1976). Because they render meaningful military victory impossible, nuclear weapons fundamentally alter the traditional relationship between force and foreign policy. When victory was possible, arms races and the quest for military superiority made sense. But as long as both sides have second strike capability (that is, can destroy the other side even if the other launches a surprise attack), the only way to prevent a nuclear war from devastating both sides would be to agree on rules that would limit the conflict. The destructive power of the weapons, the difficulties of wartime communication, and the hold of human emotions would make such limits impossible, however. Thus, mutual vulnerability has created dilemmas which traditional military strategy, far from being able to solve, only serves to compound.

Trapped as they were in pre-nuclear ways of thinking, many analysts and decision-makers pursued traditional solutions such as nuclear superiority and the development of complex war plans. At bottom, this approach constituted a failure to accept the realities of mutual vulnerability and mutual deterrence. Although I would fault Morgenthau for not fully appreciating the arguments with which he disagreed or probing the intellectual, institutional, and political reasons for the American stance—which was generally paralleled by Soviet policy—I think that his insight was acute and indeed relied heavily upon it in my two books on nuclear strategy (Jervis, 1984, 1989). Without arguing that American defense policy was founded simply on an intellectual error, that the dispute was entirely amenable to empirical evidence and careful reasoning, or that we can ever forget to ask who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged in domestic and bureaucratic politics by the success of alternative views, I think that Morgenthau was correct to argue that one cannot understand the policy alternatives or international outcomes without grasping the content, origins, and implications of alternative views about how nuclear weapons affect world politics.

Even more at odds with the stereotype of Realism is

Morgenthau's two-fold argument that people's beliefs about the world are deeply affected by their past political struggles and that they are prone to fail to understand this. Central to his attack on Liberalism's exaggerated faith in the power of reason and the associated attempt to reduce politics to science is his view that knowledge is contingent, depending on the conditions and interests which lead people to hold it. Those who believe that all realists conceive of knowledge as independent from experience and self-interest, who think that they have made a fundamental discovery when they argue that people's sense of their social world is in significant measure socially constructed, and who think that they are the first to grasp the close interconnections between power and knowledge have never read *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*. In a penetrating and lucid analysis, Morgenthau shows that much of modern Liberalism fails to understand the contingent nature of its own knowledge. The person who argues that scientific reasoning allows him to fully understand politics is in fact a "true dogmatist who universalizes cognitive principles of limited validity and applies them to realms not accessible to them" (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 220).

The scientific ideas of modern Liberalism as applied to politics grew out of the struggle of the emerging middle class against feudalism, aristocracy, and arbitrary rule. This was both understandable and in many senses admirable. The problem, however, lies in the inevitable tendency of the human mind to endow with inherent legitimacy and value the ways of thinking and substantive ideas that served people well in reaching specified ends. Thus, "Liberalism deduced from the limited experience of a certain age universal laws which were found wanting when applied to conditions different from those under which they were originally developed" (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 85). People both universalize their ideas and abstract them from the interests which played a large part in shaping them: the "claim to universality, however, is actually detrimental to [the] scientific claim, since it obliterates the

social and moral determination by which all social science is qualified" (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 167). "In the social sciences, the social conditions determine not only the ulterior purpose but also the object of inquiry, the investigator's relation to it, his assumptions, methods, and immediate aims. . . . In all societies certain results are beyond the reach of scientific inquiry . . ." (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 162). I do not know whether it is more striking that Morgenthau failed to acknowledge that others, especially Karl Mannheim and E.H. Carr, had made parallel arguments and neglected to fully develop this important line of reasoning in his later work, or that both scholars who sought to develop Realism and those who sought to attack it have neglected his analysis.

While Morgenthau's discussion is grounded in his attack on the over-reliance on science and reason in politics, the thrust of his position goes further. Consistent with modern psychology, he sees that beliefs cannot be explained purely by "cold cognition" and instead are influenced by emotion, interest, and self-image. In a way strikingly parallel to the classic study of *Opinions and Personality*, which asks "of what use to a man is his opinions?" (Smith, Bruner, and White, 1956), Morgenthau sees that

reason is like a light which by its own inner force can move nowhere. It must be carried in order to move. It is carried by the irrational forces of interest and emotion to where these forces want it to move. . . . [Because] even though man is dominated by interests and driven by emotional impulses, as well as motivated by reason, he likes to see himself primarily in the light of this latter, eminently human quality. Hence, he gives his irrational qualities the earmarks of reason. What we call 'ideology' is the result of this process of rationalization (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 155).

More recent studies of foreign policy have also explored the extent to which emotional and political needs determine perceptions of other actors and expectations of the chances of success of alternative courses of action.<sup>10</sup> This line of research

raises the question of the conditions under which and the extent to which ideas and beliefs are a function of the person's interests—that is, are superstructure, to use the Marxist terminology. Morgenthau does not venture an answer, which is understandable given the difficulty of the question; his successors have not done much better. But one should at least note the tension between his insight that beliefs about world politics are contingent and his central tenet:

political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws. . . . It believes also . . . in the possibility of distinguishing in politics between a truth and opinion—between what is true objectively and rationally, supported by evidence and illuminated by reason, and what is only a subjective judgment, divorced from the facts as they are and informed by prejudice and wishful thinking (Morgenthau, 1978, p. 4).

In his view that ideas are deeply colored by parochial experience and self-interest, Morgenthau sees that powerful states, even—if not especially—when they are liberal democracies satisfied with the status quo, will often not only say but actually believe that their policies are in the best interests of the entire community of nations. Although a bit less explicit and biting in this regard than E.H. Carr (1939), Morgenthau realizes that human beings do not want to recognize the limits of their own perspectives or the powerful drives of their selfishness. Thus, states are often highly moralistic and, by coming to believe that they are doing good for others as well as themselves, do more evil than was necessary. Liberal democracies suffer the further disability of universalizing the ways in which they overcame tyranny and aristocracy at home. Liberals

equate the distinction between war and peace to the one between aristocratic violence and liberal rationality. Thus Liberalism detached the specific techniques it had developed as instruments of its domestic domination, such as legal pledges, judicial machinery, economic transformations, from their political substratum and transferred them as self-sufficient entities,

devoid of their original political functions, to the international sphere (Morgenthau, 1946, pp. 50–1).

There is much to Morgenthau's analysis, especially the fundamental truth that politicians, like people in their everyday lives, are slow to appreciate the context in which their moral values as well as their empirical beliefs are valid and are quick to extend into one sphere the truths that are derived from another. Interestingly enough, Louis Hartz similarly saw the fundamental importance of the struggle against feudalism in shaping political thought, but did so in the context of explaining why Americans had such a different understanding of politics from Europeans: the former were "born equal"—American society was founded by a middle-class fragment, never underwent a bourgeois revolution against feudalism, and so never developed either strong reactionary or strong socialist strains of thinking (Hartz, 1955).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Hartz explains the American inability to understand many other societies, its pathological fear of revolutions, and its paranoid anti-communism by the ideology that grew out of the very absence of a struggle against feudalism that Morgenthau sees as responsible for the over-reasoned and overly scientific perspective of Western nations that has caused foreign policy debacles. The irony, of course, is that Morgenthau sees the United States as the prime example of what he is describing, yet Hartz shows that America is distinct from Europe in lacking the experience of feudalism and the middle class's overthrow of it.

Although this summary cannot do full justice to Morgenthau's arguments, I hope I have said enough to show that in his understanding that being powerful can lead people to believe that their views are true and benefit others as well as themselves, and in the tension he portrays (without resolving) between interests and ideas, Morgenthau is a much more complex Realist than most current discussions either of Morgenthau or of these subjects would lead us to believe.

*Morality*

In his conception of the role of morality in international politics, Morgenthau again diverges from what most people associate with Realism; many scholars who argue that morality plays a significant role in foreign policy contrast their views with what they take to be Morgenthau's without understanding the latter.<sup>12</sup> It is always good for authors to find someone to disagree with—and there is much to disagree with in Morgenthau's analysis—but it simply will not do to use selected quotations to show that Morgenthau thought that international politics leaves no room for ethical considerations. Indeed, at one point Morgenthau quotes Cavour's famous remark: "If we had done for ourselves what we did for Italy, what scoundrels we would have been!" (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 179).

Those who tell the standard tale of Morgenthau and Realism would not be surprised; they would be surprised, however, at what Morgenthau says next: "No civilization can be satisfied with such a dual morality" (Morgenthau, 1946). Morgenthau's views of the relationship between expediency and morality are not simple, and I do not think they are entirely consistent. But it is clear that he believes that morality does and must play a large role in the selection of national means and goals. "In order to be worthy of our lasting sympathy, a nation must pursue its interests for the sake of a transcendent purpose that gives meaning to the day-to-day operations of its foreign policy" (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 8). Morality can be destructive when statesmen use it to identify the good of the world with the good of their state, if not of themselves personally. Properly conceived, however, morality provides a check on this tendency:

Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe. . . . The lighthearted equation between a particular nationalism and the counsels of Providence is morally indefensible, for it is that very sin of pride against which the Greek tragedians and the

Biblical prophets have warned rulers and ruled. The equation is also politically pernicious, for it is liable to engender the distortion in judgment which, in the blindness of crusading frenzy, destroys nations and civilizations (Morgenthau, 1978, p. 11).

More than is true for later scholars, Morgenthau traces much of the source of the necessary evil in politics to human nature and “the *animus dominandi*, the desire for power” (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 192). Pure selfishness and the desire to gratify basic human needs, such as shelter, food, and security, would only produce some of the conflict we see in our social world because those impulses can often be gratified through cooperation on the basis of mutual respect and equality. “The desire for power, on the other hand, concerns itself not with the individual’s survival but with his position among his fellows once his survival has been secured. Consequently, the selfishness of man has limits: his will to power has none” (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 193).<sup>13</sup> Although the desire to dominate plays a role in all aspects of human life, in politics it is “the very life-blood of the action, the constitutive principle of politics as a distinct sphere of human activity” (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 195). This does not mean that there is no room for morality, but that if it is to be meaningful and effective, it must take account of the demanding realm in which it operates.

For Morgenthau, the rules of morality are not simple, in part because the importance of power in international politics means that judgments must be rendered in particular contexts, thus prohibiting the abstractions that could otherwise guide policy. Indeed, a danger second only to universalizing one’s interests and perspectives is to apply general principles without paying attention to the context in which they will work themselves out. Thus, inter-war Western statesmen who were seeking to build international politics on enlightened principles of justice “were intellectually and morally unable to resist German expansion as long as it appeared to be justified—as in the cases of Austria and the Sudetenland—by the holy

principles of national unification” (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 54). Properly conceived, morality seeks to both further the state’s legitimate interests and respect those of others. It searches for common ground without yielding what the state needs to protect itself. This search is not likely to succeed if states have wildly different conceptions of right and justice. Thus, for Morgenthau a degree of moral consensus among nations is a prerequisite for a well functioning international order. In contrast to more recent analysts like Waltz (and myself), Morgenthau argues that the balance of power arose not only out of the clash of competing self-interests but out of a common culture, respect for other’s rights, and agreement on basic moral principles (Morgenthau, 1978, pp. 221–28; Waltz, 1979; Jervis, forthcoming, ch. 4).<sup>14</sup>

While Morgenthau is maddeningly elusive about exactly what morality requires and the relationship between morality and prudence, he is clear that despite the crucial role for morality in politics, there will always be tension between the imperatives of power and those of morality, and, for this reason, statesmen cannot seek to behave morally in the sense of doing as much good for as many people as possible. “There is no escape from the evil of power, regardless of what one does. . . . Political ethics is indeed the ethics of doing evil. While it condemns politics as the domain of evil par excellence, it must reconcile itself to the enduring presence of evil in all political action. Its last resort, then, is the endeavor to choose, since evil there must be, among several possible actions the one that is least evil” (Morgenthau, 1946, pp. 201–2). I think as important as the willingness to face the necessity to do evil is Morgenthau’s stress that indeed there is choice. Taken to its extreme, Realism argues that because international politics lacks government, the international environment is so hostile that states have little room to maneuver: they are in the realm of compulsion, not choice. But Morgenthau, like his fellow distinguished Realist Arnold Wolfers, realizes that while this is in fact sometimes the case, statesmen rarely are entirely the prisoner of forces beyond their own control (Wolfers, 1962).

*Diplomacy*

Since Morgenthau sees a large role for statesmen and statesmanship, it is not surprising that he also stresses the importance of diplomacy. But this too contrasts with the standard view of Realism as describing and prescribing expansion of control if not of territory, stiff-necked refusal to compromise, and constant threats. But Morgenthau devotes the final chapters of *Politics Among Nations* to diplomacy and includes as its only appendix the Charter of the United Nations. Realism, at least for Morgenthau, implies not only that states must guard their power stakes, but that they must also compromise and trim their objectives to what is feasible. Force and war can never be dismissed from international politics, but in a prudent policy, they usually remain in the background. Morgenthau's rules of diplomacy may seem common sense, but those who know Morgenthau by standard summaries of him may be surprised by them: "Diplomacy must be divested of the crusading spirit"; "Diplomacy must look at the political scene from the point of view of other nations"; "Nations must be willing to compromise on all issues that are not vital to them"; "Never put yourself in a position from which you cannot retreat without losing face and from which you cannot advance without grave risks"; "Never allow a weak ally to make decisions for you"; "The armed forces are the instruments of foreign policy, not its master" (Morgenthau, 1978, pp. 550–58).

Partly because of the influence of the Cold War, a great deal of the study of international politics over the past two decades has focused on bargaining. Of course, this process inevitably involves common as well as conflicting interests (Schelling, 1960), but, nevertheless, the emphasis has been on how states seek to get as much as possible, primarily by the use of threats. As Morgenthau shows, this view is not incorrect, but it is incomplete. Much of international politics consists of a mutual adjustment of interests, and this involves not only exerting one's will over others but understanding what others want and why they want it. The protracted and patient interaction with

others, the exploration of alternative solutions, the accommodation of what others need constitutes the essence of day-to-day diplomacy which, if successful, does not produce those dramatic clashes which have so preoccupied scholars and given them a distorted view of how international politics does and should function.

*Realism, Peace, and Domestic Politics*

Toward the end of his career, Morgenthau modified if not renounced some of the important elements of his approach on the grounds that changes in the world had rendered them inappropriate. The existence of huge stockpiles of nuclear weapons meant that superpower war was no longer a viable tool of statecraft (Morgenthau, 1964). Increasing economic interdependence had drawn the developed states closer together, increasing the benefits of peace and the costs of severed relationships (Morgenthau, 1975). This analysis was accurate and important; with the benefit of hindsight, I would argue that Morgenthau did not go far enough, did not see the extent to which international politics among the developed states<sup>15</sup> was being transformed radically not only because of changes in the costs and benefits of war and peace but because of changes in values and the propensity of democracies to cooperate with each other. Morgenthau denied the possibility of the former change or the efficacy of the latter. His stress on the role of malign human nature on the one hand and the powerful role of the international environment on the other left little room for values and domestic regimes. But if human beings have not changed, significant elements of the value system in developed democracies have. The triumph of bourgeois democracy may not be the end of history, but concern for honor, preoccupation with position for its own sake rather than for national well-being, and the drive for national dominance are greatly reduced.<sup>16</sup>

Morgenthau would have trouble with this conclusion. He reserved some of his sharpest comments for those who believed that democracies were fundamentally different, that they could extend the norms and values upon which they were constructed to the international arena. Indeed, Woodrow Wilson and his followers represent for Morgenthau much that was wrong-headed about foreign policy in the twentieth century. Most realists agreed; states were like "billiard balls" in that their internal differences were inconsequential and their behavior determined only by their reactions to one another.<sup>17</sup> But while it is true that democracies are not less willing to fight than are other forms of government, they rarely if ever fight each other.<sup>18</sup> Although it is all too easy to imagine the frail democracies in the former USSR and Eastern Europe going to war with each other, regimes that are not only subject to the will of their peoples but also have stable and well-established institutions are very likely to remain at peace with each other and to cooperate more readily than is true for autocracies or revolutionary regimes. The individualism, faith in reason, and willingness to compromise that Morgenthau had seen as undermining democracies' ability to conduct world politics in a world of hostile states may in fact produce the desired and expected results when they are shared among all the major powers. The expectation that just regimes would eventually triumph and that states could not remain strong if they oppressed their people seemed naive to most realists (myself included). But it may have sustained popular support for Western foreign policies during the Cold War and helped bring about what Morgenthau and so many others thought was impossible: a world in which the most powerful states in the system no longer menace each other.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> There seems to be more than a bit of truth in these propositions, as I will discuss later.

<sup>2</sup> The classic contrast between Anglo-American international thought on the one hand and that of Continental Europe on the other is Wolfers, 1962, ch. 15.

<sup>3</sup> The most complete treatment, with special reference to international politics, is Baldwin, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> He makes the former point clear in Morgenthau, 1958, pp. 75–81.

<sup>5</sup> It is possible, of course, for a scholar's policy preferences to shape his theories and indeed this may have been true for some of Waltz's arguments.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion, see Jervis, forthcoming, ch. 3.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Snyder, 1984; Posen, 1984; Schelling, 1960, ch. 9; Spiegel, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> The literature is voluminous: important works include Wohlstetter, 1962; Holsti, 1967, ch. 2; Jervis, 1976; Larson, 1985; Jervis, Lebow, and Stein, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> For an earlier study along these lines, see Odell, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Janis and Mann, 1977; Cottam, 1977; Lebow, 1981; Jervis, Lebow, and Stein, 1985; Wark, 1985.

<sup>11</sup> This book is perhaps the most important and surely one of the most controversial in the study of American politics and society.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Lumsdaine, 1993, ch. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Much recent scholarship has concerned the conditions under which states pursue relative rather than absolute gains: Baldwin, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> More recently, Paul Schroeder (1994) has developed in rich detail a view that is similar to Morgenthau's.

<sup>15</sup> This qualification is important; international politics in the rest of the world bears much greater resemblance to traditional patterns.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion, see, for example, Mueller, 1989; Jervis, 1991/92; Jervis, 1993.

<sup>17</sup> The analogy comes from Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*. Waltz's powerful theory is built in large measure on denying the relevance of domestic differences for the basic patterns of international politics (*Theory of International Politics*), although he sees their role in setting the details of policy (Waltz, 1967).

<sup>18</sup> The evidence and literature is well summarized in Russett, 1993.

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