

From Moral to Amoral

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, MAY 15 2013

When we talk international politics it is surprising how often the discussion turns towards subjects, assumptions and arguments that any normal person might shake their head at.

Take the realist notion that international decision making should be amoral, neither driven by or infirmed by morality, nor especially immoral, either. Rather just reduced to a question of possibilities: can this be achieved or not? Is it worth the cost, political capital and squeeze in relative power, or not?

Usually even cold-hearted business students initially balk at the idea of an amoral political environment. While they may have encountered *Homo economicus* in their first year economics courses, the notion of making decisions about matters of war and peace without reference to what is good or right is a little overwhelming. Throw in a dramatically delivered version of the Melian Dialogue and it is usually enough to leave people shaking their heads at how these realists think. Fast forward a week, though, and I have students in my class coming up with nearly a dozen good reasons why terrorism is justified, among them being 'getting on TV' and 'reaching a bigger audience than protesting'.

The same class spent yesterday's lesson deciding which states in the world 'deserved' the aid of the developed world, and which did not. Though I do admit to prodding and poking a little, most students concluded that the most effective use of aid money and resources would be states that had already begun the road to development, with sufficient infrastructure, education and healthcare to ensure that new money would be effectively spent.

The least well off in the world? Well only one group addressed them directly. Their notion was to find the most depressingly poor, war torn, unhealthy and lonely corners of the earth and...use the money to exploit the locals. I questioned whether these students had, indeed, understood the point of the exercise. They had – they had just decided that the developing world required another wave of imperialism and that easy targets – the modern islands of Melos in the sea of despair – were the best targets for their amoral pursuit of profit.

With this transformation from morally informed person to amoral, power seeking politician clearly evident, at least for some students, I am looking forward to this semester's iteration of the Power Politics game this Friday. I wonder just how the discussions of the last couple of days and the realisation that some students have so embraced the amoral as to justify their ends by any means will affect the game. The whispers I have so far heard have indicated that it certainly will affect the gameplay, with students agreeing they just can't trust some of their classmates to be anything other than self-interested. As a professor, it is going to be rather enjoyable to watch the students tear each other apart and recognise exactly where the amoral world of self-interest inevitably leads – and then to see if they will learn from it in the lessons that follow.

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I, like all in the IR community, was saddened to hear of the death of Kenneth Waltz this week. Robert Murray wrote a wonderful piece for e-IR ('Reflecting on Kenneth Waltz') and there are other tributes paid across the web that are well worth reading.

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Unlike Murray, I never had the chance to meet Waltz in person, yet I knew his work as well as any other student of the field and was in awe of his logic, reasoning and clarity. I checked over my doctoral these this afternoon and there are nearly a dozen of his works in the bibliography. Of course I cited *Man, the State, and War* and *Theory of International Politics*, but there too was his treatise on horizontal nuclear proliferation ('The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better') and his post-Cold War reflection on neorealism ('The Emerging Structure of International Politics'), both superb pieces and ones that I still assign to my students. A quick search reveals I mentioned or cited Waltz more than 560 times in less than 300 pages; the impact of the man on my work was immense and he sets an example for others to follow.

A giant of the field, indeed, and one who will be sorely missed.

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