

# The Tale of a 'Realism' in International Relations

Written by Hartmut Behr and Xander Kirke

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/06/13/the-tale-of-a-realism-in-international-relations/>

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It is a widely held opinion in the discipline of International Relations (IR) that there is a tradition of political thought in Western history which could be labelled 'realism'. 'Realism', as it were, is associated with an outlook on the behaviour of political leaders, political communities, and the 'structures' of the relations among political communities (be they modern states, antique *poleis*, or Renaissance city states). Selfishness, recklessness, mutual mistrust, and power-seeking and survival-securing strategies are thought to produce (and be reproduced by) structures of anarchy among political communities, 'international' self-help systems, security dilemmas, the permanent potentiality of war and violence, and unrestricted politics of 'national interests'. This outlook is associated with several canonical figures of political thought, who are regarded as representatives and founders of these theorems and who have been subsequently heralded as 'heroic figures' of IR – namely Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Hans J. Morgenthau. [1] The birth, promotion, and advancement of this narrative are not only the result of fundamental simplifications and misreadings [2] of the philosophical complexity of these authors, due in no small part to the ideological interests of a (Cold) War-driven discipline of IR during at least the second half the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but are also an epistemological consequence of attempts of the scientification (Behr, 2010) of social theory since the emergence of 19<sup>th</sup> Century positivism. All of this led to the neglect and ignorance of the normative and ethical positions of mentioned authors.

### Normativity in International Political Theory

Contrary to mainstream IR reading of the authors mentioned, they all display a strong normative commitment to the *self-constraint* of political leaders and humans in general. This normativity is characterised by *two features*. Firstly, it derives from universalistic ontologies which refer to a common good for humankind. Secondly, it is inspired by and results in an ethics about political order and human behaviour. Both of these points differ substantially from the assumptions about (a) 'realism' in IR. Furthermore, the 'realist' description of the world has no historical precursor to the political philosophy of GWF Hegel, who seems to have founded and advanced the concept of 'national interest' based upon a particularised view of international relations which privileges national mores instead of advancing universal ethics (Hegel, 1991, 1995; Smith, 1983; Stern, 1989).

Authors from Thucydides to Kant were not ignorant of political, social, cultural diversities, and different peoples and political communities. However, there appears to be a 'meta-vocabulary' and intellectual 'super-structure' (Bartelson, 1995) which enables the amalgamation of those diversities into one body of humanity and ethics. Whilst these ontologies still had exclusionary moments, difference itself was generally not regarded as *inherently* problematic. War was not justified solely on the grounds of differences, and peaceable recognition of those differences was the guiding idea in, for example, Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, but also Morgenthau.

Thucydides's praised or condemned the greatness, courage, but also misdeeds of Athenian, Spartan, Lacedaemonian, Corinthian (etc.) leaders alike. He also did not attribute responsibility for the Peloponnesian War to one party over others, [3] but blamed hubris and selfish moralities, which his political and legal ethics seek to prevent (Behr, 2010). Machiavelli, often decried as a reckless power politician, dismissive of ethics and justice, alludes to a more comprehensive and peaceable ontology which promotes regionalism based on republican virtue, which avoids capricious, glory, and power-obsessed arbitraries of princes (Book I.59, *The Discourses*). Hobbes's vision of relations among states is far from a natural state of 'war of all against all'; he advocates a universality which

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sees in all political communities an operating mechanism between sovereignty, legitimacy, and security which demand an ethics of self-constraint and responsibility of every sovereign (Behr & Heath, 2009; Williams, 1996; Behr & Roesch, 2013). Despite writing more recently, similar misinterpretations of Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* are frequent. In the *Preface* Morgenthau (1948) states that it was not a theoretical writing on international relations, but a counter-ideology against Fascism, Stalinism, and liberalism. Further, Morgenthau wrote from a historically sensitive and politically specific standpoint, dealing with the likewise contingent transient mode of nation-states and patterns of relations among them; he never intended a 'great theory' on international politics.

Further to this, none of these authors held anarchy as the guiding principle for political behaviour of state leaders or relations among political communities. All their ontologies are informed by metaphysical principles which operate side-by-side with individualistic politics.

## Ethics in pre-19<sup>th</sup> Century 'International' Political Theory

### *Thucydides: ethics and historical theology*

Otto Luschnat (1978) argues that Thucydides's intention was to evoke criticism of war and the devastation of ethics according to his theological historiographical approach, designed to express consternation not through overt moral outcry, but through 'plain' reporting. Thus, the ethical dimension was always present for both author and audience without need to be explicitly stressed (Creed, 1973). Thucydides (2001, 3.82-84) criticised the moral deterioration of war as an inversion of normality: of the admiration of affected sophistication and the corollary mocking of noble simplicity, with intelligence losing out to force; of the regard of prudence as cowardice; and the substitution of impulsiveness for manliness. The virtue of obtaining balance between two opposite extremes perished because of selfish and hubristic behaviour during war. Thucydides' ethical approach is symbolized by the concept of 'sophrosyne' [4] which derives from Greek 'sophron', meaning 'sound and prudent mind'. The particularization of party interests inverted this value, leading to the loss of the pre-war common political ethics between Sparta and Athens. His ethical framework also demonstrates an admiration for legal and political justice through an equal distribution of rights and privileges among the Athenian citizens (*isonomia*) (Vlastos, 1953, p.350-351), emphasising the moral constitution of the *polis* and transcending selfish class and individual interests, and promoting courage, honour, a sense of duty, fair-minded toleration, and cosmopolitan acceptance of foreigners. The political life of a *polis* and the relations among *poleis* then depend upon its and their ethical constitution, while the political community is informed by the virtues of their individual members.

### *Machiavellian virtue (virtù)*

Machiavelli values political stability (Crick, 2003) due to his belief in the inevitable rise and fall of all political orders; a 'cycle through which all governments pass' (Crick, 1983, p.109). Consequently, the greatest challenge for a political community is to avoid decline as long as possible. According to Machiavelli, stability is best maintained by small republics, since they take longer making decisions due to constitutional structures which ultimately produce more moderate outcomes (Crick, 1983, p.259). Whilst he realises that states may harbour ambitions to increase their influence, power, and glory, he envisions a more peaceable international order through confederations of republics. Republics would be most reliable because they would 'abide by their agreements far better than do princes' and large, powerful states (Crick, 1983, p.259; Gaubatz, 1996, p.109-123). This aspect of Machiavelli's normative esteem of international treaties is constantly neglected in IR.

International politics, like domestic politics, requires, Machiavelli argues, *virtù*. The basic meaning of *virtù* is the capacity 'to do the job well' and is comparable to Aristotle's (2009, 1139b, 5-17) *techne*. Pursuing the art of one's profession with excellence is a demonstration of *virtù*. In political terms, virtue means the possession of 'civic spirit' (Crick, 2003, p.46) which is necessary because a republic's stability depends on citizens' readiness to subordinate their own interests to a common good. Machiavelli claims that a city relying on the *virtù* of its citizens is most capable of resisting domestic disorder and decline.

In Ancient and medieval imaginations of political order, virtue comprised actions in accordance with harmony and a

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divine order of concord. Machiavelli claims the opposite: conflict, he argues, is the natural condition of politics, but its management and civilisation create *and* demand political virtue. If conflict was eliminated, then *virtù* would stagnate and political leaders would degenerate into hubris. *Virtù*, hence, always implies political ethics (Ball, 1984); specifically an inner-worldly ethics [5] arising from moral and practical political knowledge and experience. However, the goal of acting ethically in this sense is not glory or power, but the realisation of republican order which, due to the existence of civic spirit, is most resistant to the rise and decline of political communities. Virtue never exists in the 'useless method' of oppressing others, or in hegemonic and imperial alliances 'in which you reserve to yourself the headship, the seat in which the central authority resides, and the right of initiative' (The Discourses, p.283-385). Subsequently, diplomacy is central to Machiavelli. He is regarded as the 'founder of modern diplomacy' who advocated diplomatic relations with neighbouring states by permanent ambassadors and embassies instead of the then usual practice of just *ad hoc* delegations (Berridge, 1997, 2001; Wiethoff, 1981).

### *Ethics in Hobbes*

Hobbes's social contract is widely understood as a mechanism for domestic political order with no relevance for relations among states. The view of many IR scholars is that the absence of a social contract among international actors results in the state of nature with recurring wars among states. [6] They neglect his social and political theory of conflict, the role of natural law, and the relation between legitimacy and sovereignty, and the thus resulting impact of the social contract on inter-state relations in the form of an ethics of self-constraint (note the exception of Taylor, 1938).

Consider Hobbes's references to conscience, rationality, and fear. It seems to be a popular assumption in IR that fear and passion, implanted naturally in human beings, are responsible for conflict. However, fear and passion are not the main reasons for conflict and war in Hobbes (Boucher, 1998, p.151; Hoffman, 1963, p.319). Instead, Hobbes views 'natural Philosophy' and religious ideologists, and even class interests, as instigators of revolution, war, and conflict (1968, p.686-687). The progression from conflict to rational action results from the human capability to use reason grounded on experience-based evidence. Yet if only chaos has been experienced, then it necessitates *abstract* reasoning. 'Addition' and 'subtraction' (*more geometricus*) attach the decisive added value by one intellectual operation, which 'links the past with the present', (Ashcraft, 1978, p.38) a new reason and judgement of 'entering into agreements' which creates a leap from a state of nature into politics.

Experience of conflict, evaluated by logical reasoning, leads individuals to choose to relinquish insecurity, ruin, and chaos. The sovereign's legitimacy to exert power over its citizens depends on its success to guarantee safety for its citizens – the essential purpose of the social contract (1968, Ch.21, Ch.30). Thus, there is a vital interdependency between sovereignty, the legitimacy of the sovereign's power, and the provision of security. However, before agreeing to subordinate themselves to a common sovereign body, people were 'free' – though lived in permanent fear and insecurity. The sovereign's exercise of power ceases, however, if it fails to guarantee security, thus returning individuals to the state of nature (1968, p.272). This mechanism is based on the inalienable 'Right of Nature' (*ius naturale*) (1968, p.189) – i.e. liberty – resulting in a 'Law of Nature' (*lex naturalis*) which remains valid even under the social contract. If the sovereign breaks its obligation to ensure security and the lives of its people are threatened (again), the law of nature prevails over the political law of the social contract. This 'mechanism' thus represents a regulative function of foreign policy conduct, qualifying conditions and constrains through the matter of legitimacy. [7]

This contradicts most disciplinary readings of Hobbes. Firstly, there is a fundamental relation between domestic and international politics, and the state is not a unitary actor. Secondly, there is a self-constraining element in foreign and international politics linked to legitimacy. Thirdly, there is a notion which delegitimises offensive, preventive, and/or hegemonic war fought in order to create alliances or target potential threats. There is no anarchy 'out there', no haphazard disorder, and no dualism between 'inside' and 'outside'. Finally, Hobbes's holds that liberty and peace are the principle aims of politics corresponding with the fundamental law of nature and the general rule of reason (1968, Ch.14).

### *Morality and Ethics in Morgenthau*

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Morgenthau defended himself against misinterpretations of his writings by US colleagues (1947, 1959, 1946, 1962a) by critiquing positivist and behaviouralist trends in IR (1946, 1962a), and of immoderate power politics in the name of 'national interest' (he publicly opposed the Vietnam War and the Nuclear Arms Race). Morgenthau regarded 'national interest' as an ethically self-critical device (1962, 1970a; Williams, 2005) and actually criticised the nation-state as a principally conflictive pattern in international politics (1962b, 1962c). He asks for universal ontologies to overcome the division of the world into particularised and solipsistic (national) units, thereby surmounting the disastrous ideological conflicts of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries (1962c, 1963, 1970b).

In a largely neglected, though theoretically vital, piece entitled 'The Commitments of a Theory of International Politics', Morgenthau defines the relations between morality and politics (perceived as power and interests) as consisting of three dimensions, with morality maintaining an independent role in at least two dimensions (1962c). The source of morality which operates as a critical device of practical politics is *ethics*. Morgenthau adopts a pre-modern understanding of ethics in the Antique politico-theological meaning of ethics as anti-hubris, moderation between extremes, and reflectivity on the justifiability, legitimacy, and conditionality of political agency. Referring to the epistemological question of knowledge production and knowledge claims, Morgenthau saw neo-realism and the developing structuralist and positivist mainstream in US International Relations in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s as an expression of anti-ethical hubris and ideology. [8]

Morgenthau understood positivism and structuralism as ideologies that pretend to be removed from the conditionality and contingency of knowledge, and to dispose over permanent and truthful 'facts', 'data', and/or information about ostensibly timeless structures of the social and political world. Consequently, his common perception in IR as a power politician, promoter of 'national interest', and finally as precursor of neo-realism is not only a theoretical anathema to Morgenthau, but also dreadful for him personally, as his testimonials indicate. He decried interpretations by, for example, English School figure Martin Wight, who associated his theories with Hobbesian international 'state of nature' in which morality and law would only be guaranteed by the state. [9]

## Conclusions – Consequences of the Neglect of Normativity and Ethics

IR in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was laced with misinterpretations and intellectual simplifications of political philosophers from throughout the history of political thought. Of course, there can be many interpretations of texts. However, the mainstream of the discipline of IR have displayed an ignorance towards obvious invitations by authors to take into account certain aspects/readings/arguments and have committed selective reading, manipulated referencing, and invested naïve confidence in translations of original texts (Behr & Heath, 2009). These are deficiencies which would be frowned upon in undergraduate essays and which compromise serious scholarship. Such bad scholarship, however, has informed the education of thousands of students, who have reiterated these misperceptions without being cognisant to these flaws. All of this has contributed to the narration of an ostensibly existing 'realism', a 'realist' worldview, and 'realist' political practices.

Why did this happen? We offer two possible explanations.

### *The Reification and Ideologisation Problem*

First, IR mainstream reified the normative implications of the authors discussed and took their analysis of politics as a blueprint of reality and as reality *per se* (Honneth, 2008). This was perhaps a consequence of the scientification of IR which perceived of itself as "value-free" and so excluded the normative content of theory. This blinded IR mainstream to the normativity and ethical dimension of other theories and authors (such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau), who became understood and read as if the 'reality' they are analysing was also *the* image of reality which they would have promoted. This is akin to reading George Orwell as a supporter of despotism since he describes and analyses the reign of pigs. As Timothy Luke (1993, p.225) notes, neo-realists (as proponents of IR mainstream) 'cannot read the unbound(ed)aries of astatist spaces and astatist texts'. [10]

Second, misinterpretations may be caused by ideological interests in the discipline which simplified, manipulated, and misread historical and more contemporary authors/text to ensure their suitability for neo-realist and/or neo-liberal

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visions of US power politics and survival strategies in the Cold War. According to Stanley Hoffmann, IR academia in the United States degenerated into 'kitchens of power' during the Cold War; a diagnosis which parallels with Miles Kahler's observations some 20 years later on the negative stigmatisation of qualitative, historical, and/or normative approaches in IR as 'amateurism'. [11]

Consequently, what appears pressingly important is a renewal of ethics and ontology in IR which – subsequent to deconstructive work unpacking the flaws of mainstream reifications and ideologisations – engages the rearticulating and reconstruction of normative reflections and standards of IR theory and practice. Such renewal appears to be a necessity to overcome the self-perpetuating, self-affirming, and antagonistic dynamics of violent practices and images in both the discipline of IR and practices in international politics. Particularisms and solipsisms have to be surmounted by ontological universalism and political ethics in the sense of ethics as the reflection upon, and deliberation of, the highest form of legitimation and responsibility of political action. This is meant in the sense that there has to be an underpinning universal notion of humanity on which, and only on whose basis, plural and diverse 'narratives' about humanity and politics can be regarded as equal to each other. [12] Therefore, only a universal ontology, which neither focuses on particular, nor excludes any, part(s) of humanity and a political ethics which reflects upon and deliberates this ontological holism, its diversities and pluralities, can serve a renewal of which IR is in need of (Behr, 2014).

## Notes

[1] See more details on this body of literature during the course of our argument, especially below footnote 26.

[2] Talking about misreadings does not suppose that there is one correct reading of philosophical texts; and by no means that we would be in a position to hold such a monopoly. There is a plurality of interpretations and this is precious. However, saying this, we are of the opinion that readings and interpretations are of differing appropriateness, profundity, and justifications, and that such standards should be upheld and defended. And in this regard, the disciplinary mainstream in IR disqualifies itself in its readings of philosophical texts and political thought, since its interpretations of such texts appears deliberately selective, full of cherry-picking and mis-referencing, reading and quoting out of context, etc., and can consequently be called 'misreading'. The narration of 'realism' and a respective tradition is such a misreading, which is why we call it a 'tale'. Thus, this article is basically a demonstration of this fairytale, with some more explanation on and consequences of this in the conclusions. For more on the topic of reading philosophy, see also Rorty, 1984; Behr, 2010, 2014; Behr/Kirke, 2014. Further, when talking about IR mainstream committing these misreadings, we refer mainly to authors from the neo-realist and neo-liberal schools promoting the tale of 'realism'. It is stunningly surprising, however, that this tale, thus the image of a 'realism' as propagated by IR mainstream, seems to be adopted by wide circles of post-structuralism, very much against their own claim to 'go back and read'; see, for example, George, 1994. However, for a much more nuanced approach, see Ashley, 1981.

[3] There is a debate about the occurrences which Thucydides declares as causes for the war; see Sealey, 1957; St. Croix, 1972. Interestingly, Thucydides narrates two reasons for the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War – Firstly, Athenian hegemony and Spartan fear; secondly, the Athenian breach of a peace agreement between Athens and Sparta. IR narratives unexceptionally neglect the 'second' as, for obvious reasons, they do not suit the 'realist' image. See further discussion in Behr, 2010; also Bagby, 1994.

[4] See *The Peloponnesian War*, 2.37, 4.28, 8.64 and 8.97. *Sophrosyne* also features in many of Plato's dialogues and bears the same meaning as in Thucydides; see also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI.

[5] See also Crick's discussion of the relationship between *necessita*, *virtù* and *fortuna* (2003, pp. 47-69).

[6] Such as Kenneth Waltz, John Herz, Hedley Bull, and Martin Wight, all of them largely influential on the discipline of IR; see also, specifically, Keohane, 1983, 1986; Jervis, 1976; Walzer, 1977; Beitz, 1979; Haftendorn, 1991; Forde, 1992; Boucher, 1998.

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[7] This mechanism is most clearly seen, even in a slightly different form, by Williams, 1996; for a critique of a 'realist' seizure of Hobbes, see Walker, 1987; Hanson, 1984.

[8] See further on this, Behr/Roesch, 2013; also relevant here is Morgenthau's intellectual proximity to Hannah Arendt (1951, 1970) as well as his notions of political power; see Morgenthau, 1962d, 1970a; 1971, also Rösch, 2013, 2014.

[9] See here to Martin Wight's review of Morgenthau's *Dilemmas of Politics* (1958) in *International Affairs*, April 1959, and Morgenthau, 1959; another striking example is a 'Letter to the Editor' of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1947) in which Morgenthau refers to a review of his *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* in the same journal and notes: 'I have expressed the exact opposite of certain opinions attributed to me by the reviewer' (p. 173).

[10] 1993, p. 225. What would alternatively be required is a reading of 'realism' as epistemology as, for example, understood by Morgenthau; see Behr, 2013.

[11] Hoffmann, 1977; Kahler, 1997. Representative for this is Keohane's distinction between 'rationalist' approaches in IR and 'the rest', called residually 'reflectivist'; see Keohane, 1988.

[12] To paraphrase David Campbell (see Campbell, 1996); further to this also Levinas, 1994; Alker, 1992; Campbell/Shapiro, 1999; Walker, 2002, 2009.

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