

Carr vs Morgenthau on Political Realism

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A Short Comparison: E.H. Carr versus Hans Morgenthau's Six Principles of Political 'Realism'

Hans Morgenthau once proffered a critique of E.H. Carr that suggested his work was marred by a 'relativistic, instrumentalist conception of morality', [1] a critique that was later echoed by Hedley Bull and others. [2] Reversing their roles, Carr would have described Hans Morgenthau's work as containing too little realism and too much utopianism to be truly valuable. The disjuncture between the competing claims is a direct product of Carr's critics, such as Morgenthau, lacking a thorough understanding of the dialectical nature of Reason and the function of the state, found in its most prominent form in the work of German Idealist G.W.F. Hegel. [3] Thus, this paper will demonstrate the superiority of Carr's realism whilst outlining how, in comparison with Morgenthau, it is counter-intuitively Morgenthau who is by far the more utopian of the two authors. In order to render its critique, the paper will apply Carr's dialectical methodology to Morgenthau's six points whilst turning Morgenthau's 1948 critique of Carr back on to Morgenthau. By doing so the paper will show conclusively that Morgenthau, far from providing a theory that demonstrates rational objective laws of politics grounded in reality, instead provides nothing more than a tautology running counter to reality. Carr, by seeking to discover the rational within the real, rather than impose rationality upon the real, will be shown to be the more sophisticated of the two theorists, and a true 'realist'.

That which is the axiomatic problem with, and conversely the cardinal sin of theorists as defined by Morgenthau, is 'reinterpreting reality' [4] to fit theory. From the very outset Morgenthau avails himself of the same problems he incorrectly diagnoses in the work of Carr. Morgenthau's first principle of political realism is built on a belief that 'politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their root in human nature.' [5] And those beliefs that form the basis of a theory of politics, are subject to the dual test of reason and experience. [6] In advocating 'objective laws' that are by necessity universal, Morgenthau puts the cart before the horse, or in a Kantian sense, the categories of thought before thought itself. As Carr is acutely aware, Kant's 'Copernican revolution' describes objects as conforming to knowledge a priori, rather than knowledge conforming to objects a posteriori, and in its most potent form in Hegel, is the argument that man simultaneously creates and experiences his phenomenological existence. [7] Or to restate the problem in simplistic terms, knowledge of 'objective laws' is itself subjective, as it requires thought determinations. Thus Carr – as opposed to Morgenthau – seeks to render intelligible the underlying rationality and thought determinations at work in a given situation by dialectically deconstructing the historical given. [8] Carr, in contradistinction to Morgenthau, seeks to understand the ideas that reflexively condition the interests of actors, bringing us to Morgenthau's second principle.

Morgenthau's second principle of political realism states that political realism uses the 'concept of interest defined in terms of power as the main signpost with which to find its way through the landscape of international relations'. [9] This second principle further compounds the problems diagnosed in his first principle. To reverse and return Morgenthau's overarching claim against Carr in his 1948 article, Mr. Morgenthau, 'philosophically so ill-equipped, has no transcendent point of view from which to survey the political scene and to appraise the phenomenon of power'. [10] Morgenthau's 'concept of interest defined in terms of power' [11] as an 'autonomous sphere of action and understanding', [12] designated the task of bringing 'systemic order to the political sphere', [13] suffers from both relativism and is conversely, deterministic.

Morgenthau, distinguishing between reality and theory through his analogy of a picture contrasted with a painted

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portrait, advances the view that political realism must present a 'theoretical construct of a rational foreign policy that reality can never achieve'.^[14] To follow his analogy Morgenthau wants the picture, which shows everything as it is in reality to resemble, as closely as possible, the painted portrait that highlights human essence and interpretation.^[15] By arguing in this fashion, Morgenthau is suggesting that political realism should use theory to create policy for reality, without first endeavoring to understand reality or how reality is interpreted. When subject to the dual test of reason and experience,^[16] the theory – as a subjective interpretation of a subjective viewpoint disconnected from an understanding of reality and separated from other spheres such as economics^[17]– provides nothing more than a relativistic conception of the world that creates its own forward momentum. As Carr correctly understands, Reason rationalizes and structures interests and desires^[18]. Morgenthau's theory when subjected to reason and experience creates a fully self-contained and self-referential feedback loop that acts as its own ideology, seen prominently in his third principle.

Morgenthau's third principle of political realism 'assumes that its key concept of interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid'.^[19] It is this third principle that forms the hard inner kernel of unalterable 'truth', at the center of Morgenthau's tautology.^[20] By conceptualising power in this way, Mr. Morgenthau however inadvertently, 'discover[s] a new morality in the political world with only the vaguest notion of what morality is'.^[21] Interest, defined in terms of 'power' is for Morgenthau a form of 'political morality', because at base, morals are the rules and norms that govern a society, in this case the political society in the international sphere. By adopting the nation-state as the 'unitary actor within the international sphere'^[22] Morgenthau 'lose[s] sight of the forces which are actually involved'.^[23] In the work of Hegel, feeding into the thought of Carr, the nation-state is an ethical whole. The state is the objectification, or institutional form of morality, as the subjective rules and norms that govern a society. The state and society, through a process of mutual determination, reflexively condition each other. As Morgenthau should be aware as he taught courses on Aristotle, and for a time pursued a relationship with notable scholar, Hannah Arendt,^[24] virtue is at base, learnt. Finding themselves in a community with existing norms and laws, citizens 'practice' virtue through their compliance with prevailing institutions. In times of conflict and sudden change, or simply when challenged, citizens reflect on their experience of those norms and laws and develop practical knowledge, derived from experience, that their interest in both substantive and particular form is contained and preserved in the state's interest and end. In effect the citizens develop 'rational habits' and through objectification of their experiences in the form of art, religion and philosophy in time, alter and condition the interests of the state. As Carr argues, the state is an organic whole subject to change throughout history. Interest, contra Morgenthau, is conditioned by the culture and the prevailing ideas within the state and is affected 'by the circumstance of time and place'^[25] as the state is an objective form of 'right'. Different states have different forms and variations of right that reflexively condition the interests of the states,^[26] and can not always be determined in terms of power. This misunderstanding of power entirely negates Morgenthau's fourth principle.

Morgenthau's fourth principle of political realism states that 'political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action'.^[27] Morgenthau's political realism is correct that 'universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation',^[28] maintaining that 'they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place'.^[29] However as has been argued, Morgenthau lacks a coherent definition of what morality is and how it interacts with interests. Or how moral principles are filtered through time and place. Different societies have developed different moral codes, which are objectified in the institutions of the state altering its outward character and relations. The state is morality written large, it is an ethical whole. The state is an organic union that grows out of society, not a top down implementation. The state can not be judged by universal moral principles, because morality itself is not universal. When states come into conflict in the political sphere having different conceptions of 'right', all states involved in a conflict can and do, contra Morgenthau, invoke 'Right'. From the perspective of each state, due to its own conditioned view of the world, it always has 'Right' on its side. It is Morgenthau's own worldview and his apparent belief in a 'God'^[30] and its derivative 'universal moral law'^[31] that prevents Morgenthau from understanding Carr's work. Or to restate the problem, Morgenthau's position stands 'unfortified by a transcendent standard of ethics'^[32] because his own conception of morality is transcendental,^[33] forming the limit to his thought and leading us to his fifth and sixth principles.

The fifth principle of political realism for Morgenthau states that 'political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe'.^[34] However, as has been argued, it is

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the belief in 'universal moral laws' and a contrasting lack of understanding regarding the role of ideas and the function of reason that inevitably drives a stake through Morgenthau's attempt at theory. Morgenthau's sixth principle of political realism acts as a rhetorical device that retroactively justifies Morgenthau's preceding principles. The sixth principle of political realism is no more than a justification derived from his tautology that attempts to strengthen it, whilst distracting from the normative truth claims previously made. Morgenthau does not need to have an explicit claim as to how the world 'ought to be', as the 'ought' already adheres in his analysis. It is the self-referential aspect of Morgenthau's tautology that allows it to retroactively appear to be the correct in any given situation, even though the solution propounded by Morgenthau has 'no logical connexion with the conditions which created the problem'.[35] However, in order to be most fair to Morgenthau, let us turn to a more direct comparison with Carr.

Carr wrote his book *The Twenty Years' Crisis: 1919-1939* as a direct challenge to the utopianism of the 'interwar idealists'[36] of his day. Carr's position is one of dialectical opposition, as for Carr, it is the tension between utopian and realist thought that engenders change and gives rise to 'times becoming'. It is the tension between the two positions that results in the potentially favourable transmogrification of ideas. Morgenthau on the other hand has a similar, if slightly pessimistic view of the world.[37] Morgenthau's work, *Politics Among Nations*, was also set in opposition to the prevalent thought of his day, the 'liberal faith in reason and progress'[38] he felt dominated foreign policy. This view, thus lead Morgenthau to form a position that at base has almost all of the mechanics of Carr's theoretical position. The critical difference between Carr and Morgenthau is that Morgenthau never recovered a coherent definition of the function of reason. As Carr correctly understands, ideas, purpose and interest form an inseparable triad held together by reason that acts as the locus of action. Reason engenders understanding via experience, conditioning interests and desires. In its most mature form in the work of Hegel, partially derived from Kant, is found the understanding that 'mind' creates the world, and world history is the history of mind's progress. Or to quote Hegel himself:

World history is not the verdict of mere might, i.e. the abstract and non-rational inevitability of a blind destiny. On the contrary, since mind is implicitly and actually reason, and reason is explicit to itself in mind as knowledge, world history is the necessary development, out of the concept of mind's freedom alone, of the moments of reason and so of the self-consciousness and freedom of mind.[39]

Thus for Carr, contra Morgenthau, analysis and interest are 'inextricably blended'[40] as in the process of analysing the facts, the theorist alters them.[41] Both Carr and Morgenthau hold forms of a utopian hope in progress. Carr aspires to mass democracy and Morgenthau for a type of Kantian world state.[42] Carr holds out hope whilst seeking to render intelligible the underlying rationality and thought determinations at work in a given situation by dialectically deconstructing the historically derived ideas. Carr is attempting to discover rationality, reason as mind in the world, without imposing rationality onto reality[43] or doing what Morgenthau considers the cardinal sin of theory, 'reinterpreting reality'[44] to fit. However, Morgenthau's sustained suspicion of reason[45] leads him to downgrade its place in his overall theoretical position, likening it to 'a light, which by its own inner force can move nowhere'.[46] Conceptualising reason in this way leaves Morgenthau's work in a precarious position, as reason here becomes something that merely registers objective facts that 'ought' to be universally followed. However if reason merely registers objective facts, a political actor cannot possibly be wrong at the moment of action, as he believes he follows a universally applicable, rational map in the form of interest defined in terms of power.[47]

Morgenthau 'self-consciously adopt[s] the view adumbrated by Max Weber that the methodology of the social sciences consist[s] not in uncovering general laws, but in constructing inherently partial and one-sided ideal types'.[48] This however, allows his own political activism to be read as inconsistent with his 'ontological claim that politics is governed by laws impervious to our preferences'.[49] Morgenthau's theory as a formulation of Weber's 'ideal type', is not of reality, but is rather an 'instrument of elucidation and understanding...it is a utopia'.[50] Weber himself contended that his theoretical work, translated into the political sphere, 'entails a synthesis of idealism and realism...where as the [responsible] political scientist must keep the two elements apart'.[51] Morgenthau advocates this Weberian separation in his dictum that the intellectual speaks truth to power.[52] However as Carr notes, 'it has often been argued that intellectuals are less directly conditioned in their thinking than those groups whose coherence depends on a common economic interest, and that they therefore occupy a vantage-point au-dessus de la mêlée'.[53] Carr goes on to explain that although Morgenthau's Weberian methodology may be a 'sound theoretical

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concept, in practice it can only be realised if the intellectuals confine themselves to the proverbial ivory tower and avoid any involvement in the political sphere'.[54] Carr correctly understood, contra Weber and Morgenthau, that the instant an academic or intellectual engages in any form of debate, their 'theory ceases to be purely analytical, taking on a political, or utopian'[55] character. In the case of Morgenthau, it is action that imparts momentum to his tautology. Decades before Morgenthau, Carr correctly 'diagnosed the impracticality of speaking strictly truth to power'.[56] Or in its most basic form, Carr realised that in the process of analysing facts the 'political scientist' alters them and when disseminated, those facts further alter political thought and practice. It is the recognition of the role of reason, and the accompanying acknowledgement that 'realism too, often turns out in practice to be just as much conditioned as any other mode of thought' that leads to the conclusion that Carr is more deserving than Morgenthau, of the title 'realist'. It is Morgenthau's failure to recognise the role of reason subverting utopian and realist thought to create the ground for action, that renders Morgenthau's utopian tautology untenable and politically pernicious.

To conclude, this paper has argued that E.H. Carr would have described Hans Morgenthau's work as containing too little realism and too much utopianism to be truly valuable. In doing so the paper has demonstrated that Hans Morgenthau's six principles of political realism form a self-referential tautological system, detached from reality, that engenders its own ideology. As has been argued, Morgenthau's lack of a central place for Reason is a major structural fault in his principles of political realism and his overarching theory in general. As has been shown, Carr does not suffer from the same fault. It is the tautological nature of Morgenthau's six principles, forming the pillars of political realism and the self-engendering ideology they create, that opens the way to criticism of Morgenthau's work as lacking realism and containing excessive utopian traits. In effect, Morgenthau's principles of political realism engender a pessimist's utopia, in which reason merely registers facts and no political actor can ever possibly be wrong at the time of action, because they believe they follow a universally applicable rational map in the form of interest defined in terms of power.

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[1] Morgenthau 1948: 134; The statement that E.H Carr would have described Hans Morgenthau's work as too much realism and too little utopianism to be truly valuable, appears at first glance to be a direct reversal of Morgenthau's critique of Carr. Unfortunately, Morgenthau's reading of Carr in the 1948 issue of *World Politics* is itself a misrepresentation of Carr's thought. Though Morgenthau reviewed several of Carr's works, he was unable to fully grasp the fluid and dialectical nature of Carr's position, leading him to the conclusion that Carr's later works never fully escape 'the dark realist shadow cast by *The Twenty Years Crisis*' (Howe 1994: 278). In contradistinction, Morgenthau never escapes the shadow cast by his own tautological system (Nicholson 1998: 78) and the debate between Carr and Morgenthau closely resembles the disparity between Hegel and Nietzsche (Petersen 1999).

[2] Howe 1994: 278

[3] The continued mention of Hegel in support of both sides of the debate, and the inherent difference in interpretations combined with differing understandings of 'reason', necessitates the inclusion of Hegel. See Carr 1939: 11; Petersen 1999; and for a completely incorrect reading of Hegel in defense of Morgenthau, see Lebow 2007: 61.

[4] Morgenthau 1978: 7

[5] Morgenthau 1978: 4

[6] Morgenthau 1978: 4

[7] Carr 1939: 12-13; Hegel 1977: xv-xvii.

[8] 'To comprehend what is, this is the task of philosophy, because what is, is reason' (Hegel 1967: 11). See also Carr 1939: 11.

[9] Morgenthau 1978: 5

[10] Morgenthau 1948: 134

[11] Morgenthau 1978: 5

[12] Morgenthau 1978: 5

[13] Morgenthau 1978: 5

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[14] Morgenthau 1978: 8. Emphasis added.

[15] Morgenthau 1978: 8

[16] Morgenthau 1978: 4

[17] Morgenthau 1978: 5

[18] Based entirely on the place and function of reason in their overall systems, the debate between Carr and Morgenthau, can be reconceptualised as a debate between structural and classical realism.

[19] Morgenthau 1978: 8. Emphasis added.

[20] Nicholson 1998: 68

[21] Morgenthau 1948: 134

[22] Palan & Blair 1993: 385

[23] Palan & Blair 1993: 386

[24] Rosch 2013; See also Lebow 2007: 68.

[25] Morgenthau 1978: 8

[26] The conditioning of states by society also occurs at the level of international relations. Value is generated as claims are mediated in, and between states engaged in international affairs, as the interaction itself reflexively conditions and alters value and directs interest.

[27] Morgenthau 1978: 10

[28] Morgenthau 1978: 10

[29] Morgenthau 1978: 10

[30] Morgenthau 1978: 11

[31] Morgenthau 1978: 10,11

[32] Morgenthau 1948: 134

[33] Transcendent is beyond the limit; transcendental is, or is on the limit, depending upon one's theoretical standpoint. For example, in Kantian philosophy the *Ding-an-sich* (thing in itself) is transcendent. That, which is transcendental, is the unity of apperception, or the self-conscious human subject as the point of active synthesis. Because human cognition has internal limits inherent to it as the point of active synthesis, humans can never experience the 'thing in itself' (*ding-an-sich*) as it really is 'in itself'. No transcendent position is possible, instead, one can only *reason* about the thing.

[34] Morgenthau 1978: 10-11

[35] Carr 1939: 7

[36] Howe 1994: 280

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[37] Cozette 2008: 667

[38] Cozette 2008: 670

[39] Hegel 1967: 216

[40] Carr 1939: 4

[41] Carr 1939: 4

[42] Cozette 2008: 674

[43] Hegel 1967: 11; Carr 1939: 11

[44] Morgenthau 1978: 7

[45] Cozette 2008: 670

[46] Morgenthau 1946: 155

[47] It is prudent to note, if Morgenthau had gone in the other direction and conceptualized reason as something that collates and objectifies data into 'facts', given the rest of Morgenthau's theory, every policy discussion would need to be prefaced with a discussion of the latest discoveries in the field of neuroscience.

[48] Oren 2009: 284

[49] Oren 2009: 284

[50] Oren 2009: 291

[51] Oren 2009: 292

[52] Morgenthau 1970: 15

[53] Carr 1939: 15

[54] Oren 2009: 295

[55] Oren 2009: 295

[56] Oren 2009: 295

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