

# A Moral Vindication of Morgenthau's Classical Realism

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FRANCESCO BORTOLUZZI, DEC 26 2015

Realism is often accused of being an amoral and bellicose doctrine in international relations. Yet, realism in IR is such a broad church of approaches that it is difficult to defend or counter such accusations without narrowing one's enquiry to some extent. This essay will therefore deal primarily with Hans J. Morgenthau's theory of classical realism, chosen for his foundational importance in the discipline of IR, and it will endeavour to show two things: first, that despite the widely held belief that Morgenthau advocates the separation of political and moral action, the two are necessarily tied, making his classical realism a moral theory of IR. Secondly, that classical realism is not a bellicose doctrine since it actually calls for a prudent and reasoned foreign policy, based on moral principles that are a constitutive feature of the national interest and that reject the naked pursuit of power alone.

It is widely assumed that "the essence of international realism is its belief in the primacy of self-interest over moral principle, of necessity and therefore *as of right*, in international politics" (Forde 1992, 62; original emphasis), which seems to imply that either self-interest is in itself a moral principle or that morality must be excluded from the equation. In other words, we are left to consider realism as either an immoral or amoral doctrine. However, neither option seems to hold much sway when talking about classical realism in IR, since the doctrine's main argument is "that states must find the appropriate balance between power and morality as they strive to achieve the national interest, which always has national survival as its minimum" (Cristol 2009, 242). The search for this balance between power politics and morality is especially evident when examining the work of prime classical realists like Hans J. Morgenthau. Yet, "the misleading cliché that 'Morgenthau finds moral considerations unfit for the necessities that characterise politics, particularly international politics'" is singularly ubiquitous and ingrained in IR literature (Scheuerman 2007, 513).

This fundamental misunderstanding of Morgenthau's classical realism is due primarily to his book *Politics among Nations* (2006 [1948]) and its selective reading in IR courses and textbooks (Cristol 2009, 238). The book and later revisions were Morgenthau's radical and frontal attack on what he believed to be an excessive reliance on liberal utopian ideals in American foreign policy during the 1950's with their disregard for the notion of power (Cozette 2008a, 12; 2008b, 670). The addition, upon suggestion of the book's editor, of the "Six Principles of Political Realism" (Morgenthau 2006, 4-16) was particularly damaging in focusing the casual reader's attention merely on power and rationality, leaving the profound morality of Morgenthau's theory obscured (Scheuerman 2007, 513; Cristol 2009, 238).

For morality is indeed a constitutive feature of Morgenthau's classical realism (Pin-Fat 2005; Scheuerman 2007; Cozette 2008b). Holding true to the realist tradition in political science, Morgenthau considers human nature as egotistical and driven by a lust for power (Donnelly 1992, 86), but throughout his work he categorically refuses to condone the separation of standards for moral and political action. In *Scientific man versus Power politics* (1962 [1946], especially chapter VII), Morgenthau addresses the dual standard question by systematically rejecting it, affirming that "no civilisation can be satisfied with such dual morality" and that "the same ethical standard applies to both" (1962, 178-180/195-196).

Morgenthau is acutely aware of what can be dubbed the *tragedy of politics* (1962, 201-203), namely the constant and irresolvable tension between Man's lust for power and the actual realities of power politics that constrain it. For Morgenthau and other classical realists, it is true that "international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power"

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(2006, 29), but it is also equally true that this struggle cannot carry on unrestrained even if power is a basic feature of human existence (1962, 168-169).

As William Scheuerman's revisitation of *Scientific man* shows at length (2007, especially 513-524), Morgenthau's conception of morality arises directly from power relations and is to an extent universal because of this: since man's insatiable desire for power cannot be met and conflicts with others, justifications must be found for restraining the use of power, in this way it is possible to transcend the natural instincts and passions that characterise human nature, thus attaining a basic moral code (see Morgenthau 1962, 168-169). As Murielle Cozette puts it, "for Morgenthau then, political action is characterised by a central antinomy which is composed of two poles between which it oscillates: the lust for power and [the desire for moral behaviour]" (2008b, 669; Cristol 2009, 240). There is a "a curious dialectic of ethics and politics, which prevents the latter, in spite of itself, from escaping the former's judgement and normative direction, [which] has its roots in the nature of man as both a political and moral animal" (Morgenthau 1962, 177), and for Morgenthau "a man who was nothing but 'political man' would be a beast, for he would be completely lacking in moral restraints" (2006, 15). These necessary moral restraints, so crucial in making Morgenthau's classical realism a moral doctrine, are also instrumental in shielding it from accusations of bellicosity.

For classical realists (international) politics is a struggle for power, and war is "a standard, if destructive, instrument of statecraft, a continuation of politics by other means" (Donnelly 1992, 100). Does this imply classical realists are always aggressive and willing to fight? Not in the least. Morgenthau may have considered politics as a struggle for power, but he never intended it to be just that (Cozette 2008b, 270). He was as much against wishful liberal utopias (for their disregard for the actual realities of human nature and power politics) as he was against predatory Machiavellian ones for their separation of moral and political action, which enables statesmen to justify nearly all violence in their lustful pursuit of power, effectively turning man into a beast (Scheuerman 2007, 516/522).

For classical realism, statesmen's basic charge is that of ensuring the survival of the state, and their main signpost in this endeavour is that of national interest defined in terms of power. However, provided that for Morgenthau "man cannot hope to be good but must be content with not being too evil" (1945, 13), the driving principle for statesmen in pursuing the national interest must be that of doing the *lesser evil* as much as possible (1962, 201-203). Morgenthau was of the opinion that "the naked pursuit of power is politically untenable and personally undesirable" since it is often conducive to bad foreign policy, while good policies are the result of both power and moral considerations (Cristol 2009, 240). The national interest itself is thus instilled with morality in classical realism: politics is as much as a struggle for the definition of good and evil as it is about power (Cozette 2008b, 671). War may be necessary, but moral constraints still apply.

Therefore, a good foreign policy, according to Morgenthau and classical realism in general, is the result of the action of brilliant political leaders and their ability to understand the tragedy of politics. When they act politically, they must do so by considering the merits of each case, following the lesser evil principle and adopting a prudent and reasoned attitude constrained by moral and ethical considerations: Churchill was a prime example of this, while Hitler and Stalin showed the dangers of naked power politics without moral restraints (Scheuerman 2007, 516).

This is why Morgenthau came to the conclusion that "politics is not simply defined by a struggle for power, but is also, to some extent, a struggle for moral leadership", as his opposition to US involvement in the Vietnam War demonstrates (Cozette 2008b, 670-671). This struggle for moral leadership is not free of dangerous implications, since the definition of a moral code through the national interest can easily lead to totalitarian and imperialistic practices (see Pin-Fat 2005). Nonetheless, Morgenthau believed that morality (as the universal product of power relations) granted enough ground for the reconciliation of opposing national interests provided they are moderate and not hubristic (2006, 13).

It will appear evident by now how, as far as classical realism is concerned, one must disagree with the accusation that realism is an amoral and bellicose doctrine. Indeed, for a doctrine to be amoral it must show no concern with morality, and for it to be bellicose it must constantly demonstrate aggressiveness and willingness to fight. Morgenthau's classical realism is neither, although the casual reader can easily be convinced of the opposite. As it has been shown in the first part of this essay, classical realism is very much concerned with morality, to the point of it

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being a constitutive feature of the doctrine. It also advocates for a prudent and reasoned foreign policy, infused with a morality which checks it against hubristic aspirations of power, as the second part exemplified. This essay's conclusion may not be viable for every strand of realism in IR, but it stands as a strong, negative response to general accusations of amorality and bellicosity towards classical realism.

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