

An Ethical Dilemma: How Classical Realism Conceives Human Nature

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DARCY FORSTER, JAN 10 2019

Classical realism is a theory of international politics that emerged in the 1930s as a response to the dominant, idealistic liberal internationalism of Wilsonian America (Chiaruzzi 2011, pp.36). Realism ultimately hinges on a conception of human nature that has been delineated from particular thinkers and philosophers of the past (Buzan 1996, pp.2). By adhering to the proposition that the natural state of humanity is one of conflict, and the international sphere is ultimately anarchic, realism constructs a political system that attempts to fortify international order through the mediation of power and warfare (Chiaruzzi 2011, pp.37). Although providing realism with its apparent validity, close analysis of its underlying 'objective' claims helps to shine light on its weaknesses and downfalls. While realism established itself within the West as one of the most poignant political models of the 20th century—and still bears influence on the politics of the contemporary—it can be argued that its claims only remain valid within a vacuum. While attempting to present a realistic vision of international politics, realism instead relies on a reductionist understanding of the human condition—which in turn corrupts the political theory's fundamental attempt to ground politics in reality (Boucher 2003, pp.149, 156, 199). The strengths associated with structuring politics around statements of absolute truth are evident in and of themselves. However, doing so inevitably binds politics to a vision of history that is unchanging (as exemplified by Morgenthau 1978). This ultimately denies the potential for international relations to be seen as a process effected by progress or metaphysical development—an issue worth addressing.

Realism sought to present a much more faithful depiction of the international realm, highlighting the often-pessimistic elements of human nature rather than ignoring, or setting ideals beyond them. The realists derived their understanding of humanity from a historical lineage of thought often considered to begin with Thucydides and reemphasised later on by Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes (Chiaruzzi 2011, pp.37). These theorists all developed and contributed varying aspects to classical realism, but the common thread associating them to realism is the assumption that humanity is fundamentally characterised by conflict (Chiaruzzi 2011, pp.36). At its most rudimentary, realism claims to purport a politics of what 'is' rather than what should, or could be as the liberalists were often accused of doing (Chiaruzzi 2011, pp.36). This evokes a claim to objective reality that had supposedly been missed by political interpretations of the past, and works to establish realism as being a theory born of rational truth. Machiavelli was a 16th century Italian renaissance philosopher who was most credited for writing the politically instructive book titled *The Prince*. Evidence of the realist desire to ground politics in 'real truth' can be established as early as this:

...it being my intention to write a thing which shall be useful to him who apprehends it, it appears to me more appropriate to follow up the real truth of a matter than the imagination of it... he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation. (Machiavelli 15.1)

Machiavelli's interpretation of the 'real truth of the matter' is a politics that transcends morality. As evident in the quote above, he draws a distinction between what ought to be done and what is done—proclaiming that one is better off to ignore their feelings of moral duty than to follow them. It is clear enough to assume here, that Machiavelli is suggesting that morality is not a feature of fundamental reality, and only hinders the pursuit of true politics. It is from this claim that Machiavelli's theory of the *doctrine of necessity* is substantiated, which proposes that morality should

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be subordinated under the politics of the State (Chiaruzzi 2011, pp.37).

In congruence with the Machiavellian tradition of suspended morality, another integral theorist known as Thomas Hobbes laid further foundation for the theory of classical realism with his iconic work *Leviathan*. The 17th century English philosopher emphasises the brutish elements of humanity, to the extent that he understood it to be the most fundamental mode of existence (Hobbes 1651, pp.78). His antidote to this despairing disposition of humankind was a transferral of one's individual rights to a higher power (such as the state) so as to enter into a *contract* with a higher authority along with everyone else around you— as they too would transfer their rights and relinquish their capacity for acting brutishly against one another (Hobbes 1651, pp.82). Allegiance to a higher state power would provide people with a transcendent entity to 'keep them all in awe' of (Hobbes 1651, pp.82). This relationship, as theorised by Hobbes, would postpone the conflictual tendencies of humanity and facilitate peace. Aptly being coined *social contract theory*, this function was understood to be the way in which people collectively operate within a sovereign state without essentially killing one another. However, the same thing cannot be said for the international realm, as states seem to exhibit the same brutish characteristics of an individual however, without the transcendent authority to be in 'awe' of. A realist may argue that the rise of Nazi Germany was at least in-part, a result of the absence of any international body of authority. The brutishness, in this case, that the state of Nazi Germany exhibited, was not revoked to any higher supranational power, leading to one of most irrevocable atrocities of the 21st century. Consequently, the international realm is ultimately seen as anarchic within the framework of classical realism because of this very problem—a lacking in an overarching authorial body. This in turn, fundamentally influences the way in which realist politics considers international relations. Given that human nature is essentially brutish in the Hobbesian sense, Machiavelli's doctrine of necessity becomes justified in so far as— states will inevitably be drawn to conflict, resulting in the necessity for nations to bear the responsibility of self-preservation at the cost of morality (Chiaruzzi 2011, pp.38).

In contrast, Boucher explores a Hegelian understanding of human nature which essentially proclaims that individuals cannot have a 'pre-social existence' like Hobbes would assume (2003, pp.23). Rather than forming social contracts in order to subdue the brutish elements of human nature, and thus dawning civil behaviour, Hegel would argue that human nature instead, emerges firstly out of social interaction. As humans are fundamentally social creatures, social interaction forms us— 'we... cannot do without one another if we are to have any conception of ourselves at all' (Boucher 2003, pp.156). Following Hegel, the brutishness of our nature is not denied nor emphasised, but is rather accounted for as a facet of our sociality that makes up our identity. What the Hegelian approach goes on to do in Boucher's opinion, is formulate a complex understanding of human relations predicated on the basis of mutual recognition, which accounts for the nuances of the human social experience (Boucher 2003, pp.157). In further reference, Axel Honneth—a contemporary interpreter of Hegel's work— regards mutual recognition as the means by which we understand ourselves to be recognised by another individual while in turn, recognising them (1996, pp.16). This mutual recognition allows for firstly, the individual to realise their own identity from another's perspective, and secondly, to develop themselves in regard to what they have newly discovered— highlighting how this process works reciprocally for both parties (1996, pp.17). Ultimately, mutual recognition then, is facilitated by individuals recognising themselves through others, and not through the state as Hobbes would suppose.

The integral distinction between the realist account of human nature and a more Hegelian interpretation, is the 'end goal' that is presupposed by the two theories. The realist account focuses on an immutable condition of humanity to which one cannot hope to correct, nor challenge. Hegel's understanding however, through the process of mutual recognition, suggests the potential for development and change. Brutishness is not merely discerned as the primary mode of human existence, but instead as one potential result of social interaction (Honneth 1996, pp.24). Because of this, human nature seems more complex and open to an array of different facets and experiences—appropriate to the manifold nature of everyday life. This is a valuable aspect of Hegel's work, because the consequence of failing to address human nature in appreciation of its complexity is one of dire consequence. If it is truly in the realist maxim to attempt to provide an accurate and 'real' account of human nature, then it should follow that attempting to reduce the complexity of the human condition down to mere brutishness is selective to say the least.

The objectivity of classical realism is most successfully attained by making the presupposition that the characteristics of human nature at the individual level, continue indefinitely onto the level of the state—that is to say, the state is

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condemned to the same brutish fate that the individual is (Buzan 1996, pp.50). The strength of this claim is evident in the credibility it grants theorists contemplating international relations (Morgenthau's *six principles* exist as strong evidence to the objective power behind the realist perspective). For Morgenthau, the previously outlined lineage of human nature traced back through Hobbes and Machiavelli remain undoubtedly true, and exist as foundation upon which political assumptions and predictions can be made with relative confidence (1978 pp.4-15). This conception of human nature does not alter across time according to Morgenthau, and hence can be treated as transcendent truth (1978 pp.4-15). By claiming to start at an objectively true premise concerning human nature, and having already established the effectual relationship between human nature and the nature of the state, Morgenthau deduces the rest of his political theory with strong, valid conviction (Buzan 2003, pp.50, Morgenthau 1978, pp.4-15). However, for centuries philosophers have contemplated the credibility of objective claims, and even the extent to which they can genuinely be made (Seifert 2014, pp.7, 8). By constructing a theory of international relations around an objective conception of human nature, Morgenthau has been able to deduce absolute principles by which both state and individual are subject to (1978, pp.4-15).

Joseph Seifert is sceptical of the notion of objective truths and offers phenomenological truth in its stead, which ultimately reinstates the importance of subjective experience as being something of substantial value (2014, pp.10). More important than the feasibility of making objective claims about international relations and human nature, is arguably the consequences associated with existing in a world conceived as already objectively determined. This in turn, becomes an ethical question rather than a political one, returning to the long-standing philosophical debate of how one should live in the world. However, the relationship between ethics and politics does not have to be so disparate—what is commonly attributed to Aristotle is the conception of ethics and politics being one and the same (Adkins 1984, pp.29). However, one may suggest that the issue with Morgenthau's politics, and realism at large, becomes more apparent when challenged on ethical grounds. The conception of history as being a self-enclosed system not subject to change, helps realists to perpetuate the world that they theorise (Morgenthau 1978, pp.4-15). Practically speaking however, adhering to a world void of the prospects of development and change would prove dangerously antithetical to how reality is often taken to be. For example, Darwinian evolution supposes change and development to be the very essence of the natural world, and a healthy individual sees themselves for who they might be tomorrow, in hopes for becoming a better person. The point of argument here, lies within the human understanding of processes and the role they play for facilitating a functioning society.

Returning to Hegel, who more openly adheres to a model of human nature that is undergirded by processes rather than fixed objective claims, the subjective development of the individual is emphasised (Honneth 1996, pp.5). As a result of this, a sense for the potential of genuine betterment is upheld. While losing the rational security of the simplistic and reductionist framework of realism, Hegelianism allows room for complexity. Although, perhaps proving harder to derive absolutes from, Hegel's political philosophy seems more appropriate for understanding a world as insurmountably intricate as our own. Hitherto, classical realism has gained the credibility and the poignancy it has due to its attempt to provide an objective understanding of international relations. By laying out fundamental, self-perpetuating claims of reality as seen with Hobbes, Machiavelli, and epitomised by Morgenthau, the inherent longing for certainty in the international sphere is satiated by the realist theoretical model, but it does not necessarily provide a true depiction of how the world is. And while claiming that the realist 'truth' is one of objective and transcendent absolutes, the element of progress, morality and individual development in the Hegelian sense is completely undermined. Subsequently, it can be suggested that realism has manufactured its own definition of reality, one that ultimately reduces the complex nuances of human nature down to simple presuppositions. Rather than being condemned to perpetual brutishness, human nature would both practically and theoretically, be better suited to be conceived, as best we can, in all of its complexity.

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Date written: September 2018