

Hans Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace (New York: Knopf, 1960), pp. 3-15, 228-235

Morgenthau is ambitiously extolling the virtues of his realist theory on the nature of all politics. He begins by contrasting it with moralist/idealist theories, and states that to judge between two such diametrically opposed theories, one must determine which is “consistent with the facts and within itself.”

According to Morgenthau, Moralist/Idealists believe in “a rational and moral political order, derived from universally valid abstract principles,” and that with a little more “knowledge and understanding” human beings can achieve this order (3). In contrast, realists believe that the world is divided by opposing interests, leaving moral principles impotent, unless political entrepreneurs are able to balance these interests in a manner that “approximates” morality. Much of their differences come from their divergent views of human nature – idealists believe humankind is essentially good and “malleable”, while realists see human nature as a source of difficulties.

Morgenthau continues by listing six principles of political realism:

1. Immutable laws, determined by human nature – though “impervious to our preferences” – govern politics and society. It is the job of the IR theorist to develop “a rational theory” interprets these laws, though it is essential that their judgment remains objective. In this manner, they examine the facts of political phenomena, but also:  
    approach political reality with a kind of rational outline, a map that suggests to us the possible meanings of [policy]... we ask ourselves what the rational alternatives are from which a statesman may choose... It is the testing of this rational hypothesis against the actual facts and their consequences that gives theoretical meaning to the facts of international politics. (5)
2. Political realism is most concerned with “the concept of interest defined in terms of power.” It assumes that political decision makers act according to their interests, and not individual motives or “philosophic or political sympathies.” As Morgenthau says, “it requires... a sharp distinction between the desirable and the possible” (7). To act according to what is desirable to Morgenthau is defined as irrational, as are actions inspired by “whim” or “personal psychopathology.” Because political decision making is never truly informed by a realistic or rational assessment of interest, the theory takes on a normative aspect, as it “presents the theoretical construct of a rational foreign policy which experience can never completely achieve” (8).
3. “Interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid, but... [it lacks] a meaning which is fixed once and for all” (8). The definition of interest depends on political and cultural context. The content and utilization of power is similarly contingent. “Power may comprise anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man” (9). Oddly, Morgenthau does not acknowledge that in different contexts, international relations has had “points of reference” other than the

nation state. Finally, realists believe that the world may be transformed solely by “manipulating” the constants (interest and power).

4. Realism believes that when political actions have consequences that are preferable to other possible actions, that they are prudent and virtuous. They are not judged by an abstract ethical standard.
5. When nations act, none can exhibit a moral judgment that is universal.
6. Politics is a completely different realm from economics, law, and ethics, since each is concerned with a different sphere. To submit political judgments to the criteria of these other realms is folly.

After saying all this in chapter 1, Morgenthau changes course slightly in chapter 15, where he deals with the limitations of his contention that the only relevant measuring stick of political behavior is “interest defined in terms of power.” He acknowledges that morality, mores, and law actually do play a part in tempering the international environment and reducing the effects of abuses of power. But, how does Morgenthau characterize the “ethics, mores, and legal systems” that hold the great philosophers of power drives, Machiavelli and Hobbes, in contempt? He says they are the result of scheming political leaders, who, eager to rise to power, employ these ideologies “to pacify resentment and opposition” and to mask their true aims. They “keep aspirations for power within socially tolerable bounds” (231).

How do ethics, mores, and law function as influences that moderate conduct and the naked expression of power? Morgenthau states that each rule has two elements: “the command and the sanction.” The first simply designates a particular behavior as forbidden and the second determines how violators shall be punished. As violations of norms increase in severity, the greater the power of the sanction on that type of behavior, which can range from “remorse” (if ethical norms are violated), to “social ostracism” (if mores are violated), to “a rational procedure with predetermined police action” (if a law is violated).

Despite this, Morgenthau scoffs at the contentions of idealist/moralists who would claim that they have mitigated the effects of the struggle for power: “what we call civilization is in a sense nothing but the automatic reactions of the members of a society to the rules of conduct” (234). While they may have reduced its scope, or moderated its abuses, moralists have not removed the struggle for power, only redirected it into several different competitive arena, most notably economic drives for money.