



Morgenthau vs. Morgenthau? “The Six Principles of Political Realism” in Context

Jonathan Cristol

Abstract

*Ironically, the most famous section of Hans Morgenthau’s classic *Politics Among Nations*, “The Six Principles of Political Realism,” was not part of the original work. Nonetheless, their addition as an introductory chapter to the work from the second edition of the textbook and the subsequent frequent excerpting of that passage out of context have led to a misunderstanding of classical realism.*

Introduction

Hans J. Morgenthau’s “Six Principles of Political Realism” has become such a staple of introductory international relations classes the world over that it comes as a surprise to many that they are nowhere to be found in the original edition of his *Politics Among Nations*, published in late 1948 by the New York publishing house of Alfred A. Knopf.¹ The “Six Principles” did not make their first appearance until more than half a decade later when they constituted an introductory chapter to the second, expanded edition of *Politics Among Nations*.² Although the “Six Principles” have remained an integral part of every subsequent edition of the now classic textbook, including the complete and abbreviated versions edited by Kenneth Thompson and his collaborators after Morgenthau’s death in

1980,³ they are often read on their own, out of both historical and literary context. The resulting reading of the “Six Principles” gives rise to a somewhat different picture of classical realist⁴ international relations (IR) theory than does *Politics Among Nations* as a whole or Morgenthau’s other works.

The casual reader of classical realist theory—and how much more casual could one be than someone who has read only the “Six Principles,” often excerpted in anthologies for use in introductory IR courses⁵—often remarks that the theory is best described as follows: States pursue the national interest without regard for moral, ideological, or legal concerns. It is, according to this view, an amoral, or potentially immoral, theory. However, Morgenthau is quite clear that morality is not only important in international relations, but that it has a rightful and proper place in foreign policy decision making.⁶ This aspect of classical realism is the source of a recent, small but growing, body of literature both on classical realism and on Morgenthau in particular.⁷

A close and careful reading of the “Six Principles” shows that indeed Morgenthau did not intend his theory to be amoral, but the more (in)famous statements about power and morality contained in its words obscure the subtlety contained in both the principles and in Morgenthau’s general theory in particular. In both its emphasis and its tone, the chapter differs from both the rest of the book and from

much of Morgenthau's other work. In this article I will argue that the "Six Principles" are the product of a particular historical context that resulted in their simplifying and distorting Morgenthau's general theory.

What the "Six Principles" Say

The "Six Principles" emphasize power over morality. All of the principles' strong statements regarding morality show it in a negative context. It is portrayed as something that statesmen should avoid in policymaking. In this section, I discuss the emphasis on power, objectivity, and rationality and the apparent negative view of morality and show the more subtle ways in which morality finds its way into the chapter.

Morgenthau's first principle, "politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature," is perhaps the most different of the principles from Morgenthau's other work.⁸ This principle emphasizes both objectivity and rationality. He says explicitly that we can presume that the statesman always "acts in a rational manner."⁹ From this principle it appears that Morgenthau viewed rationality favorably, as it makes it possible to predict what policy a policymaker will choose: "we put ourselves in the position of a statesman who must meet a certain problem of foreign policy under certain circumstances, and we ask ourselves what the rational alternatives are...and which of the rational alternatives this particular statesman, acting under these circumstances, is likely to choose."¹⁰ The words *particular statesman* are important, and in keeping with Morgenthau's emphasis on intelligent, prudent statesmen as the key to good foreign policy but outside of the larger context, the reader comes away with the emphasis on rationality.

This emphasis on rationality hews closely to the "scientific" aspect of foreign policy that Morgenthau argued against in *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, published in 1946 and, to a lesser extent, continued to do the following year in *Politics Among Nations* itself. This emphasis is particularly ironic, for in *Scientific Man* Morgenthau calls rationalism an "intellectual, moral, and political disease."¹¹ In fact, Morgenthau argues that rational decision making is not necessarily wise because it can be based on an irrational impulse that leads to the policymaker picking the most rational choice from a list of entirely irrational options. He writes, "The triumph of reason is, in truth, the triumph of irrational forces which succeed in using the processes of reason to satisfy themselves."¹² Morgenthau's distaste for rationality and for the scientific method in politics finds its way into *Politics Among Nations* itself. In a brief discussion of "rationalistic philosophy," he writes, "The use of the scientific method," the epitome of rationality, "in politics, was and is a political fallacy in domestic affairs... In the international field...the belief in the limitless power of the scientific formula has become particularly prolific—and particularly ineffective";¹³ this despite his use of language in the "Six Principles" like *hypothesis* and his emphasis on objectivity and rationality.

Morgenthau's second principle presents a similar problem. Perhaps the most famous sentence in international relations theory comes from Morgenthau's second principle of political realism: "The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power."¹⁴ Morgenthau sets international politics as its own intellectual sphere. An economist may study the world in terms of wealth and a theologian in terms of religion, but the political realist studies the world in terms of power. Morgenthau writes, "[T]he concept of interest defined as power...makes the theoretical understanding of politics possible."¹⁵ Power is

the “currency of diplomacy” and is what a state needs in order to satisfy its various interests. This idea of power is that power functions as both a means and an end. It is an end because states wish to survive and are uncertain about other states’ intentions. It is a means to satisfy particular interests, which go beyond mere survival. Morgenthau thus observes: “Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim.”¹⁶ Morgenthau certainly emphasized the role of power in all of his writing, and it is central to the classical realist argument. However much it is emphasized in this principle, power is not the only factor for Morgenthau, and in fact there could be instances in which it is not even the overriding factor.

Morgenthau does mention morality in the second principle when he asserts that “political realism does not require, nor does it condone, indifference to political ideals and moral principles, but it requires indeed a sharp distinction between the desirable and the possible.”¹⁷ Although Morgenthau here says that one should not be indifferent to moral principles, the statement is heavily qualified and is buried in a section of the work that has little to do with morality. Elsewhere in the same book, however, he notes, “The fact of the matter is that nations recognize a moral obligation to refrain from the infliction of death and suffering under certain conditions despite the possibility of justifying such conduct in the light of a ‘higher purpose,’ such as the national interest.”¹⁸ What is important about that statement is the recognition that there are certain acts that states will not undertake for moral concerns, even if they are power maximizing, and that Morgenthau did not oppose this behavior. Certainly if the survival of the state was at stake, morality would rightly be thrown out the window, but in circumstances short of state survival it is an important limiting factor on states’ actions.

Morgenthau never intended his theory to lead to the conclusion that people or states are obsessed only with power at the expense

of moral considerations, and he and other classical realists explicitly stated otherwise. Indeed, reading into and beyond the famous six principles, Morgenthau’s brand of realism and classical realism more broadly seem to embody a powerful (if antiperfectionist) moral sensibility.¹⁹ Murielle Cozette, a specialist on classical approaches to IR at the Australian National University, points out that *Politics Among Nations* is a polemic against the liberals who thought that science and reason could solve all of humanity’s problems.²⁰ It thus emphasizes the role of power to an even greater extent than Morgenthau himself may have intended. In fact, realism is imbued with the moral spirit that the realists argued was *also* present in human nature. The classical realists sought to bring power back into IR theory and to create a theory that completely favored neither “utopia” nor “reality.” As Reinhold Niebuhr argues, “it is significant that men cannot pursue their own ends with the greatest devotion if they are unable to attribute universal values to their particular objectives.”²¹ The naked pursuit of power is politically untenable and personally undesirable. It may also make for bad policy. E. H. Carr writes that “pure realism can offer nothing but the naked struggle for power which makes any kind of international society impossible.”²² Good policies combine both power and morality. As Cozette notes, “For Morgenthau then, political action is characterized by a central antimony which is composed of two poles between which it oscillates: the lust for power and [the desire for moral behavior].”²³ She points out that after the publication of *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau argued that “politics is not simply defined by a struggle for power, but is also, to some extent, a struggle for moral leadership,”²⁴ and makes the case that Morgenthau emphasized power when “he perceived that foreign policy in the U.S. was dominated by liberal thinking” and later “highlighted the importance of ideals, values, and purposes in foreign policy” when policymakers took his ideas about power “too literally for his own liking.”²⁵

Thus while classical realism claims to be “rooted in objective laws governed by human nature,” human nature is more complicated than a simple lust for power: “Human nature is characterized by both an insatiable lust for power *and* a profound need to act in conformity to what man regards as ethically right.”²⁶ This duality results in a tragic struggle in which people consistently attempt to act morally correct by choosing policies deemed morally sound, but “the evil element of politics will ensure that man’s ethical aspirations are defeated.”²⁷

Morgenthau’s fourth and fifth principles both focus on the potentially devastating consequences of overly moral state behavior. Indeed, the fourth principle begins “Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action” but warns that “universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation but they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place.”²⁸ The latter half of this sentence acknowledges that morality, used appropriately, can be used as a basis for judgment, but the overall tone of the principle is negative toward moral behavior as a guiding principle for states. The fifth principle focuses on the conflation between a state’s own moral principles and the “moral laws that govern the universe.”²⁹ This mistake can lead to a “crusading frenzy” with the potential consequence of the destruction of the state itself.³⁰ There is little to argue with in either of these principles. I discuss them here only to show the overall negative tone toward morality. I do not take issue with the argument presented.

The “Six Principles,” which Morgenthau claims are not a “systematic exposition of the philosophy of political realism,”³¹ emphasize that states need smart, prudent statesmen who know the proper place of morality in political decision making. That there is a proper role is acknowledged. Indeed, Morgenthau writes that “A man who was nothing but ‘political man’ would be a beast, for he

would be completely lacking in moral restraints,”³² but it is overshadowed by the negative aspects of morality in international politics and the positive aspects of power, prudence, and intelligence (all good things too, I might add).

The “Six Principles” in Context

Despite his claims to the contrary, it is hard to conceive of the “Six Principles” as anything other than an attempt to systematize Morgenthau’s highly complicated theory. While complicated itself, it reads as an attempt to systematize the rest of *Politics Among Nations* into a theory with outsize weight on power and with morality consistently underweighted. The implication of the “Six Principles” is that states will always act rationally in an attempt to maximize power, but the rest of the book focuses extensively on constraints on state behavior and power maximization, including international law, international morality, and world public opinion. That the “Six Principles” differ from the rest of the book can be attributed at least in part to the fact that they were written at a different time, but why were they added at all when all they do is confuse the overall message in an attempt to simplify it? To answer that question I look first at the role of power in classical realism generally and then offer a possible reason why Morgenthau added the “Six Principles” in particular.

The emphasis on power in classical realism becomes understandable when one considers the social and academic context in which the theory developed. French historian of international relations theory Nicolas Guilhot sheds new light on the critical role of power in classical realist theory, arguing that the postwar IR theorists emphasized power in an attempt to force a complete break between the disciplines of political science and international relations,

an attempt that, in the United States, eventually failed.³³ The political scientists emphasized science and rationality in an attempt to “scientize” the discipline. Power “introduced irrational elements such as psychological drives, charisma, or a deep-seated *libido dominandi*.... The focus on power politics entailed the risk of moving away from the standards of naturalistic science and regressing to speculative and ideational constructions.”³⁴ Thus power in classical realism is only partially rooted in the material world. Despite what Morgenthau wrote in his “Six Principles of Political Realism,” power is not necessarily “objective.” Morgenthau wrote, “Political power is a psychological relation between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised. It gives the former control over certain actions of the latter through the effect that the former has on the latter’s minds. That effect derives from three sources: the expectation of benefits, the fear of disadvantage, and the respect or love for men or institutions.”³⁵ It is easy to see that one state has power over another state, but it is less easy to understand from what source that power derives. The inability to quantify power, despite some potential objective standards,³⁶ is one reason why there was an intellectual battle between the political scientists and the international relations theorists. It is interesting to point out that power was seen by the political scientists as something not necessarily rational but was still emphasized by Morgenthau in the first principle.

The failed attempt to break international relations away from political science came at about the same time that Kenneth Waltz began arguing for a more empirical theory of international relations (albeit, in his early work, one based largely on logical deduction).³⁷ Waltz presaged a turn from “classical realism,” which was a rejection of the “scientization” of international relations, to “neorealism,” which subjected IR theory to the “rigor” of political science.³⁸ The “Six Principles” became necessary to add to the larger book,

originally designed to be a textbook for undergraduate students, as a response to the argument that Morgenthau’s theory lacked the proper scientific qualifications of the discipline.³⁹ It is supremely ironic that Morgenthau, who wrote an entire book dedicated to the idea that the scientific method and the empirical approach to international politics were deeply flawed at best and catastrophic at worst, would be forced by circumstance to add a (relatively) more scientific and more systematic section to his book.

Conclusion

Classical realism argues 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. That the moral element has been excised from many contemporary accounts⁴⁰ is unfortunate, and I believe that because of an overwhelming emphasis in the academy among nonclassical realists on the “Six Principles” as the apotheosis of classical realism, we are left in a situation in which “Morgenthau’s position [is]...deeply at odds with what now passes for realist theory.”⁴¹ This situation is a hell of Morgenthau’s own devising, first for succumbing to the intellectual and disciplinary pressure of the times and adding the “Six Principles” to *Politics Among Nations* in the first place and second for making them so compelling on their own that they have been taught on their own in universities around the world for more than half a century.

About the Author

Jonathan Cristol is visiting assistant professor of political studies at Bard College in Annandale, New York and the former deputy director of Bard College’s Globalization and International Affairs Program in New York

City. He teaches a variety of courses on international relations theory, including “The Nature of Power,” Bard’s joint seminar with the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Notes

1. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York, 1948).
2. *Idem*, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, 1954).
3. The most recent complete edition is Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th rev. ed., edited by Kenneth W. Thompson and David Clinton (New York, 2006).
4. In keeping with what has become the standard practice of the field, I use the term “classical realism” to describe what Morgenthau called simply “political realism.”
5. See Karen A. Mingst and Jack L. Snyder, eds., *Essential Readings in World Politics*, 3rd ed. (New York, 2007).
6. See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th ed. (New York, 2005), 243–245. Also see Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil,” *Ethics*, vol. 56, no. 1 (1945): 18, for only two examples of Morgenthau’s explicit discussion of morality in international politics.
7. See William Bain, “Deconfusing Morgenthau: Moral Inquiry and Classical Realism Reconsidered,” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2000): 445–464; C. A. J. Coady, “The Moral Reality in Realism,” *The Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2005): 121–136; Murielle Cozette, “What Lies Ahead: Classical Realism on the Future of International Relations,” *International Studies Review*, vol. 10, no. 4 (2008a): 667–679; Murielle Cozette, “Reclaiming the Critical Dimension of Realism: Hans J. Morgenthau on the Ethics of Scholarship,” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2008b): 5–27; Nicolas Guilhot, “The Realist Gambit: Postwar American Political Science and the Birth of IR Theory,” *International Political Sociology*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2008): 281–304; Ralph Pettman, “Power and Morality: A Misleading Dichotomy,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2008): 235–251; William E. Scheuerman, “Was Morgenthau a Realist? Revisiting *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*,” *Constellations*, vol. 14, no. 4 (2007): 506–530; Michael C. Williams, “Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism, and the Moral Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization*, vol. 58, no. 4 (2004): 633–665; and Michael C. Williams (ed.), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (New York, 2007).
8. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 7th ed., 4.
9. *Ibid.*, 5.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, Midway Reprint (Chicago, 1974).
12. *Ibid.*, 155.
13. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 7th ed., 49.
14. *Ibid.*, 5.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 29.
17. *Ibid.*, 6.
18. *Ibid.*, 244.
19. See Jonathan Cristol, “Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations,” Book Review, *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2008): 240–242.
20. Cozette, “What Lies Ahead: Classical Realism on the Future of International Relations,” 670.
21. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Louisville, 2001), 45.
22. E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, new ed. (New York, 2001), 87.

23. Cozette, "What Lies Ahead: Classical Realism on the Future of International Relations," 669.

24. *Ibid.*, 670.

25. Cozette, "Reclaiming the Critical Dimension of Realism: Hans J. Morgenthau on the Ethics of Scholarship," 12.

26. Cozette, "What Lies Ahead: Classical Realism on the Future of International Relations," 669, emphasis in original.

27. *Ibid.* See also Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil," *Ethics*, vol. 56, no. 1 (1945): 1–18. Morgenthau's essay was heavily influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York, 1932).

28. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 7th ed., 12.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 13.

31. *Ibid.*, 4.

32. *Ibid.*, 15.

33. See Guilhot, "The Realist Gambit: Post-war American Political Science and the Birth of IR Theory."

34. *Ibid.*, 287.

35. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th ed., 30.

36. Some potential objective measurements of power are GDP; GDP per capita; military manpower; nuclear weapons; carrier battle groups; and natural resources. All of these are problematic, and no single measurement provides a full picture of a state's "power."

37. See Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York, 1959).

38. See Sean Molloy, *The Hidden History of Realism* (New York, 2006), for a discussion of how Waltz's neorealism supplanted Morgenthau's classical realism as the dominant theory in the field.

39. I do not mean to argue that Waltz himself made that argument.

40. See Pettman, "Power and Morality, A Misleading Dichotomy."

41. Scheuerman, "Was Morgenthau a Realist? Revisiting *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*," 524.

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