

Restraining Imperial Hubris: The Ethical Bases of Realist International Relations Theory

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Abstract: This article discusses key arguments about international ethics developed by leading post-World War II realist scholars of international relations—notably, Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, and Arnold Wolfers. I first critique the still widespread misconception that post-WWII realist scholarship does not fundamentally differ in its ethical outlook from either Hobbesian moral skepticism or Machiavellian thinking in the “reason of state” tradition. Thereafter, I elucidate the moral foundations of twentieth-century realism and point out some of its inherent tensions and inconsistencies. Finally, I discuss the realists’ consequentialist critique of forcible democracy promotion and their warnings against unrestrained U.S. unilateralism. I conclude by assessing the relevance of these arguments to twenty-first century international relations.

Restraining Imperial Hubris: The Ethical Bases of Realist International Relations Theory

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Once the balance of power is broken, once a particular nation secures a predominant position in the state system, it will be tempted to continue to expand its power vis-à-vis the other states. If the United States broke through the present bi-polar balance, its objectives (for example, of eliminating tyranny) would probably become unlimited too.

Arnold Wolfers, realist IR scholar, 1958¹

Students of American politics and society have long observed that America's own distinctive adoption of Enlightenment thinking and related liberal universalism has led to the development of an unhealthy messianic streak in the country's foreign policy. What American citizens want, it is often believed, others everywhere ought to naturally want as well. The next logical step is to assert that the United States has a "moral duty" to deploy its formidable power internationally as a means to ensure that individuals everywhere can benefit from the liberties that Americans enjoy at home. This leaves the temptation of crusading interventionism abroad constantly looming on the horizon, based on what Louis Hartz identified long ago as an absolutist American impulse to "impose Locke everywhere."²

The phenomenon has been usually interpreted as the result of America's peculiar historical experience: on the one hand, the absence of a powerful feudal class antagonistic to liberal ideas left the Lockean faith in universal natural rights virtually unchallenged; on the other hand, the success of early continental expansion combined with the lack of powerful and threatening neighbors led to a widespread belief among American citizens in their country's international omnipotence that remained virtually unchallenged until the aftermath of World War I.³ Sometimes American statesmen merely deployed the rhetoric of a cosmopolitan "mission" instrumentally, while their true goal was to advance the nation's interest and improve its security through expansion. That was, for instance, clearly the case of the late Thomas Jefferson and of John Quincy Adams. On other occasions, American presidents genuinely internalized the belief in a moral mission to change the world, such as in the case of Woodrow Wilson, and more recently, Ronald Reagan as well as George W. Bush. In all those instances, arguments about the "export" or promotion of cosmopolitan values abroad were regularly adduced as a justification for American military interventionism, which made it much easier for domestic public opinion to swallow the costs of similar projects.⁴

Leading post-World War II realist scholars of international relations, such as Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, Arnold Wolfers, and Robert Tucker have always

perceived the idiosyncratic appropriation of classical liberal ideas by American statesmen and public opinion as counterproductive – and often outright dangerous – for both American interests and global stability at large. This article offers an interpretation of American realism in international relations (IR) that roughly spans the latter half of the twentieth century. It can be seen as part of an ongoing intellectual enterprise to rediscover and reevaluate the ethical underpinnings of American realist scholarship on international relations.⁵ The article's primary focus will be on the above-mentioned generation of post-World War II realist scholars, who all displayed a keen interest in the ethical dimensions of foreign policy and international relations more broadly. (I call them "American" because they spent most of their academic careers in the United States, although Morgenthau and Wolfers were *émigrés* of European origin). Occasional references to more recent examples of realist IR theory will be made where thought appropriate, to illustrate elements of continuity and change within the realist tradition. This being said, contemporary realist scholarship on international relations is largely devoid of self-consciously normative analyses.⁶

In the first part of the article I address the still widespread misconception that post-WWII realist scholarship on international ethics is not fundamentally different from either Hobbesian moral skepticism or Machiavellian thinking in the reasons of state tradition. I show that this view of "realism" as monolithic is fundamentally incorrect, as any close reading of Morgenthau's and his followers' quite nuanced writings on international ethics suggests. Thereafter, I discuss the pivotal role played by normatively laden concepts such as the "national interest" and "prudence" in twentieth-century American realism. I show how the realists' normative arguments calling for constant *prudence* and *restraint* in U.S. foreign policy crucially build on Max Weber's ethics of responsibility, as well as on older notions of practical wisdom. In the final part of the article, I focus on the realists' pessimistic views on forcible democratization and "humanitarian" military intervention and assess the relevance of their arguments to contemporary world politics. I conclude by suggesting that contemporary realist IR scholars need to explicitly reengage with and develop further their forebears' normative thinking on international relations, lest realism forfeit its comparative advantage as a critical theory of international relations.

1. Realists as Moral Skeptics? Think Again

Political realism since Thucydides has emphasized the role of power, and conflicts over the accumulation of power, as the fundamental driving mechanisms of all political relationships. In the anarchic environment of international relations more than anywhere else, the pursuit of power by sovereign political units – *states* in the modern context – has been regarded as essential towards securing their survival. Hence, the traditional realists' focus on power and the balance of power constitutes both a helpful *analytical device* intended to capture the brute realities of the political world and a *normative expedient* that allows one to emphasize the necessary requirements for successful statecraft. The realists' emphasis on competitive dynamics and the systemic constraints

resulting from pervasive international conflict typically left little space for arguments about the putatively binding character of universal moral norms. Political realists until the early twentieth century thus roughly fell into either of two camps: first, the followers of Machiavelli in the reasons of state tradition, who argued that the moral code guiding political leaders ought to be more “flexible” and permissive than the morality of ordinary citizens; second, radical moral skeptics in the Hobbesian tradition, who held that in the anarchic and utterly competitive zero-sum environment of international relations, there can be no place for moral considerations whatsoever.

Niccolò Machiavelli and his followers in the reasons of state tradition (*ragione di stato*, *raison d'état*, *Staatsräson*) have consistently argued that the Prince, i.e. the statesman, is not bound by ordinary morality when it comes to advancing the interests of the state and securing its survival internationally. In other words, those moral principles that normally apply to the behavior of individuals are now subjugated to the interests of the state and the community it represents. Following Machiavelli's own view, the prince ought to act in accordance with the good whenever possible, but he should be ready to commit evil deeds when either necessary or expedient for the sake of successful statecraft. The prince can thus ultimately not be bound by the same moral precepts that apply to ordinary men, “because it is often necessary [for the prince] to operate against his own faith, as well as against charity and humanity, in order to preserve the state.”⁷ This is the classical argument from *raison d'état* about an ethical dual standard: one applicable to ordinary individuals and another, more flexible one, guiding the leaders of sovereign states. The Florentine philosopher's idea that “necessities” of state limit the applicability of universal moral precepts to foreign affairs became the leading strand of continental European thinking on international relations for nearly half a millennium.⁸

Full-blown international moral skeptics in the Hobbesian tradition typically go one step further. Instead of attempting to deal with the phenomenon of moral conflict in international relations, they deny the applicability of moral standards to foreign affairs altogether. The classical moral skeptic from Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*, to Hobbes himself and his twentieth-century disciple, Carl Schmitt, essentially contends that “might makes right” and that any assertion of universal moral principles is meaningless in the absence of a powerful Leviathan with the ability to enforce them.⁹ International relations is the realm of *a-moral* behavior by definition, given the absence of a sovereign power capable of enforcing common moral guidelines above and beyond the state. Hobbes himself observes that sovereign kings are permanently “in the state and posture of gladiators,” i.e. a state of war, among themselves. Modern international relations thus most closely resemble the primitive state of nature, in which life is thought to be nasty, brutish, and short. Once Hobbes has established that states find each other in such an international state of nature, he proceeds to debunk any facile assumptions that universal morality – i.e. “natural law” – can guide state behavior under similar circumstances. States must be constantly concerned about their security and cannot act morally without putting their own survival at risk: “Where there is no common Power, there is no Law: where no Law, no Injustice.”¹⁰

The Machiavellian and Hobbesian picture of international relations and their related views on international ethics were hugely influential in continental European realist scholarship throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Once the peace treaty of Utrecht (1713) had officially recognized the pursuit of the balance of power as a guiding principle of European international relations, references to supra-national papal authority virtually disappeared from diplomatic practice, and consequently appeals to Christian natural law and universal morality also became much less frequent. However, continental European realism in the Machiavellian and Hobbesian tradition, with its emphasis on “necessities” of state at the expense of moral considerations, is not adequately representative of Anglo-American thinking on international relations.¹¹ This also applies to twentieth-century American realism: although developed to a considerable degree by European émigrés, it could not entirely reject the Anglo-American tradition of morally engaged theorizing about international affairs that had so deeply shaped the American ethos. Recent cosmopolitan critics of twentieth-century American realism have thus been somewhat too quick in equating the tradition of political realism as such with radical Hobbesian moral skepticism.

2. The Cosmopolitan Philosophers’ Misguided Attack on Realist International Ethics

The equation of twentieth-century American realism with Hobbesian international moral skepticism was first suggested by Charles Beitz, a cosmopolitan philosopher currently at Princeton. In his influential 1979 book *Political Theory and International Relations*, Beitz contends that political realism flatly denies the applicability of moral standards to international relations. In the book’s opening chapter, Beitz goes so far as to assert that “the realists’ skepticism about the possibility of international moral norms” is today dominant among American IR theorists and has attained “the status of a professional orthodoxy.”¹² This is not very persuasive, given that political realism has traditionally found it quite difficult to establish itself on American campuses and with reactions to it being outright hostile among U.S. public opinion at large.¹³ Apart from some quick remarks on Machiavelli and *raison d’état* – which Beitz conflates with radical moral skepticism claiming that they are “without a difference” (23) – the only realist that Beitz engages with in some detail is the seventeenth-century classic Thomas Hobbes. Given Beitz’s limited review of the realist literature and his almost exclusive focus on early modern classics, his sweeping conclusions about a putative moral skepticism on the part of “political realists” in general are hardly persuasive. Beitz’s highly stylized account of political realism has the flavor of a straw man, deliberately set up for subsequent easy debunking by a committed cosmopolitan philosopher.

The philosophical critique of realism was subsequently developed further by Marshall Cohen, in an influential piece titled “Moral Skepticism and International Relations.”¹⁴ Cohen again equates all political realism with the Hobbesian stance of radical moral skepticism, according to which issues of justice and injustice do not arise in the (international) state of nature. Like Beitz before him, Cohen argues against what

he perceives as the utter moral skepticism of realist IR theory, asserting that international conduct must indeed be open to moral assessment: "Even in the international state of nature it will not be permissible to attack . . . those who do not constitute a physical threat."¹⁵ In other words, universal moral rules *do* apply to international relations and the behavior of sovereign states should be judged accordingly.

Cohen also insists that the sophisticated, "complex moralist" will not apply moral rules blindly, following the early Christian maxim *fiat iustitia, pereat mundus* ("let justice be done and the world may perish"). Quite the opposite; the sophisticated moralist will always take the expected consequences of one's actions into account when judging political behavior from an ethical standpoint. Cohen thus acknowledges that "moral rules often have exceptions" and that "we do nothing wrong when we act within an exception," as long as we can convincingly and narrowly articulate its parameters.¹⁶ According to Cohen, greatest flaw of realist thinking from Hobbes to Morgenthau would consist precisely in its failure to appreciate the phenomenon of moral conflict. In their dogmatic worship of power, all realists elevate international politics *above* morality: the realist fails to appreciate "that we are sometimes morally justified in defaulting on our obligations, . . . in doing dark and terrible things", and he therefore develops superficial "political" justifications that short-circuit the role of international morality altogether.¹⁷

Cohen is right to assert that there are sometimes compelling *moral* reasons – derived from consequentialist ethics – for defecting from the rules of ordinary morality. But ironically, this is exactly the argument developed by several twentieth-century realists, from Morgenthau to Kennan, Wolfers, and others. Cohen's reductionist caricature of realist thought thus inevitably obscures its true complexity. With the exception of Hobbes himself, virtually every modern Anglo-American realist would wholeheartedly agree that international conduct should be open to moral assessment.¹⁸ In addition, the most sophisticated realists, such as Hans Morgenthau in particular, emphasized that any violation of the fundamental rights of others ought itself to be *morally* justified. Morgenthau went so far as to argue that universal moral duty always ought to be considered first; every deviation from it ought to be painstakingly justified, and some deviations from the universal code would be morally proscribed altogether.¹⁹ This deeply ethical realism is hardly compatible with the international "moral skepticism" decried by cosmopolitan philosophers such as Beitz and Marshall Cohen.

3. Hans Morgenthau and the Principled Rejection of Machiavellian *Raison d'état*

Morgenthau's contribution to modern international relations theory, both empirical and normative, is seminal in many regards. His vast academic production displays a virtually constant tension between, on the one hand, his desire to *explain* international politics from a scientific point of view, and on the other hand, his equally strong urge to engage in *normative* political theory and advise American statesmen on the requirements for successful as well as morally responsible statecraft. Hence,

in his best-selling classic *Politics Among Nations* (first edition 1948), Morgenthau deliberately attempted to construct a general positive theory of international relations, with relatively simple, law-like propositions derived from historical experience. His assumption that statesmen across time and space “think and act in terms of interest defined as power”, whatever their ultimate ends, has become a cornerstone of realist scholarship in international relations.²⁰ Morgenthau’s contribution to normative IR theory, though less well-known today, can be considered almost equally seminal.

Morgenthau’s analysis of international morality includes both an empirical study of the prevailing moral convictions held by foreign-policy leaders and an explicitly normative political theory. The first part of Morgenthau’s analysis, where he studies international morality as an *empirical* phenomenon starting from the beliefs of statesmen and ordinary individuals, resembles the intuitionist approach to international ethics developed by another seminal realist figure, the Englishman E.H Carr. Writing in the late 1930s, Carr had asserted the existence of a socially constructed, thin international moral code allegedly “binding on states,” which could be derived from the moral convictions of ordinary men about international ethics. Carr mentioned in particular the injunction not to inflict “*unnecessary* death or suffering on other human beings,” as well as the duty to observe international treaties as parts of this international moral code.²¹ However, Carr’s intuitionist and unabashedly empiricist account of international morality is ultimately flawed, since it reduces what *ought to be* – and thus the possibility of normative social criticism – to what individuals actually *perceive* to be normatively binding.

Morgenthau’s own views on the empirical dimension of international morality are politically conservative as well as somewhat contradictory: on the one hand, he believes that really-existing international norms were much stronger in the context of eighteenth and nineteenth-century European diplomacy, where aristocratic rulers allegedly formed a genuine “international society” that provided for a high degree of international order. The advent of democratic nationalism starting in the late nineteenth century irrevocably destroyed this aristocratic international society and with it “the universal, supranational moral rules of conduct,” which previously had imposed a system of limitations on the foreign policies of individual nations.²² Yet some international moral norms continue to persist and indeed new ones have emerged, notwithstanding the fragmentation of what used to be a much more cohesive aristocratic European international society. Most significantly, according to Morgenthau, “the avoidance of war itself” – and of preventive war in particular – has become a widely shared moral goal among statesmen only since the early twentieth century. Notwithstanding the brutality of the two World Wars, the “almost general dismay” among most of Europe’s political leaders when war finally became unavoidable “contrasts sharply with the deliberate care with which, as late as the nineteenth century, wars were planned and incidents fabricated for the purpose of making war inevitable.”²³ Morgenthau’s conclusion is that we are today quite far away from the picture of a Hobbesian state of nature, devoid of any applicable moral norms. He makes this point quite forcefully:

There is the misconception, usually associated with the general depreciation and moral condemnation of power politics . . . that international politics is so thoroughly evil that it is no use looking for moral limitations of the aspirations for power on the international scene. Yet, if we ask ourselves what statesmen and diplomats are capable of doing . . . and what they actually do, we realize that they do less than they probably could. . . They refuse to consider certain ends and to use certain means, either altogether or under certain conditions, not because in the light of expediency they appear impractical or unwise but because certain moral rules interpose an absolute barrier. *Moral rules do not permit certain policies to be considered at all from the point of view of expediency.*²⁴

As long as the state's survival is not unambiguously at risk, merely advancing the state's interests internationally does not justify the breaking of universally accepted moral rules. Morgenthau's views on the relationship between expediency and morality are not simple, and as one sympathetic scholar observed, they may not be "entirely consistent."²⁵ Still, it can be shown that Morgenthau's international political theory is utterly incompatible with the Machiavellian logic of *raison d'état*, according to which promoting the good of the state always justifies infringements on ordinary morality by the statesman.

Morgenthau was undeniably influenced by the tradition of *raison d'état*, mainly through the writings of Heinrich Treitschke and Friedrich Meinecke, two late nineteenth-century German theorists of *Machtpolitik* ("power politics") who had fiercely rejected the cosmopolitan enlightenment of the French revolution.²⁶ Elements of Meinecke's tough-minded critique of cosmopolitan liberal "idealism," in particular, seem to have found their way into both Carr's and Morgenthau's writings. However, Morgenthau unambiguously rejected Meinecke's organicistic notion of the state as the source of all value and the resulting cultural relativism. Morgenthau firmly believed in the existence of a universal moral code that ought to guide responsible statecraft.

Unlike Carr, Morgenthau moved well beyond the mere empirical description of socially embedded norms about international morality. He developed a quite sophisticated normative theory about what *ought to be* the proper role of morality in international relations, based on deductive reasoning from first principles and underpinned by his assumptions about human nature. Morgenthau the political realist identified an "ineluctable tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action."²⁷ But he always stopped short of adopting the ethical dual standard of *raison d'état*, according to which the Prince is from the outset held to a much more flexible moral code than ordinary human beings. Certain kinds of behavior are plainly and simply proscribed by universal morality, except for conditions of extreme necessity that need to be narrowly articulated and imply a very high burden of proof. Supreme necessity exempts the private individual *and* the statesman alike from ordinary moral requirements; hence the difference between private and public morality may be a matter of degree but it can never be one of essence, contrary to what Machiavellism implies.

Morgenthau's reasoning on international ethics emerges most clearly from his first major publication in English language, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (1946).²⁸ The

book is framed as a fulminating attack against the positivist conviction that an understanding of the world in terms of rational assumptions borrowed from the natural sciences is all that is needed for controlling the social and political world. Morgenthau insists that this is impossible, since it is not poised rationality but rather man's constant *struggle for power* that governs a political world full of tragedy and contradictions.²⁹ The source of this struggle is explained by Morgenthau's deeply pessimistic assumptions about human nature: man is naturally evil, driven by an inherent desire to dominate others. Power is a necessary means for exercising domination, as well as for securing one's own survival. "Every man is the object of political domination and at the same time aspires toward exercising political domination over others."³⁰ This is Morgenthau's famous postulate about the *animus dominandi*, which he saw as characterizing the human condition and which he derived almost verbatim from Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944).

Morgenthau, like Niebuhr, thought that the individual's aspiration for power over his fellow citizens has been tempered within the modern territorial state, thanks to the threat of sanctions and the inculcation of a sense of loyalty toward one's own national community. However, far from being fully extinguished, the individual's desire for power is merely channeled into the legal fiction called "the state." No coercive apparatus inhibits the state from the pursuit of power internationally: "there is no centralized authority beyond the mechanics of the balance of power, which could impose actual limits upon the manifestation of its collective desire for domination."³¹ In such a world of domination-seeking revisionists, the international situation of anarchy with its resulting deep insecurity would compel even the hypothetical peaceful outlier who did not necessarily want to dominate others to accumulate power as a means to securing his own survival.³²

One might expect that after presenting such a dire picture of international politics as a constant competition for power, Morgenthau would closely circumscribe if not altogether dismiss the applicability of moral criteria to foreign policy. Morgenthau the theorist of power politics undeniably abounded in the use of hyperbolic language about international "tragedy" and threats to national survival, mainly to alert the "sentimentalist" American statesman – intent upon spreading virtue abroad – to the harsh new realities that confronted U.S. foreign policy in the early decades of the cold war. There is also an undeniable tension in Morgenthau's insistence that states need to *maximize* their own power to increase their chances of survival, sometimes by means of continental expansion, and his appeal to universal moral restraints on the use of force internationally.³³ On the other hand, Morgenthau the normative political theorist understood that consistent Machiavellism would challenge the very existence of universal moral standards and thus ultimately our common humanity, by treating individuals as objects or means instead of full ethical subjects. He thus rejected Machiavelli's pre-eminently political man, fearing that he "would be a beast, for he would be completely lacking in moral restraints."³⁴

According to the doctrine of *raison d'état*, when the statesman is confronted with a choice between two actions, of which only the first is ethical, while the second has a

better chance of advancing the nation's welfare, he ought to choose the latter. But for Morgenthau, universal morality sets up hedges that cannot be torn down upon mere considerations of political expediency. The main reason for this is that it is impossible to prove by "objective standards" that the welfare of one's own group or nation justifies the misery inflicted on others:

[O]ne cannot prove from the point of view of universal and objective ethical standards that the good of the end ought to prevail over the evil of the means; for there is no objective standard by which to compare two kinds of happiness or of misery or the happiness of one man with the misery of another. That the welfare of one group is or is not too dearly paid for by the misery of another has always been asserted but has never been demonstrated.³⁵

Even in the ruthlessly acquisitive and competitive world of international relations, Morgenthau contends, the responsible statesman ought to be constantly guided by a sophisticated appreciation of the moral code. Alliance politics and the resulting international balance of power ensure that in spite of fierce international competition, state survival is *not* constantly at stake, which leaves substantial room for moral restraint. Hence, notwithstanding Morgenthau's gloomy description of international politics, he *explicitly rejects the ethical dual standard that underlies the reasons of state tradition*. The moral code that ought to guide the statesman, he insists, is not fundamentally different from that governing the behavior of ordinary individuals. This cannot be emphasized enough, in view of still widespread assumptions to the contrary among even some sympathetic reviewers of Morgenthau's work.³⁶ It may now be worth looking in more detail at the normative IR theory developed by Morgenthau and his realist followers in the United States.

4. Responsible Statecraft in Defense of the National Interest

Hans Morgenthau, the seminal twentieth-century realist in American IR theory, clearly recognized the role of moral restraints on foreign policy. But the list of realist IR scholars with an explicitly moral outlook on foreign affairs could be much expanded, to include, with various qualifications, influential figures such as Reinhold Niebuhr, George Kennan, Arnold Wolfers, Robert Tucker, and Kenneth Thompson.³⁷ All those individuals were concerned with understanding and explaining the regularities of modern international relations, while at the same time "educating" American foreign-policy leaders to the pursuit of an effective and morally responsible statecraft under the daunting circumstances of the Cold War. Perhaps most important, they were all deeply concerned with what Morgenthau had identified as America's sense of "mission" in foreign policy and the related constant temptation towards crusading interventionism abroad.³⁸ The emergence of the Soviet Union as a second nuclear-armed superpower and an international "peer competitor" with the United States posed a supreme danger to American national security and required – more than ever – that foreign policy leaders combine

prudent self-restraint with the necessary pursuit of power as a means to securing their nation's survival.

How is Morgenthau's principled refusal of *raison d'état*, which was explicitly or implicitly followed by most of the above-mentioned realist scholars, compatible with the dog-eat-dog picture of Cold War international relations that the realists themselves were actively promoting, and where structural factors appeared to be all but compelling? One possible line of argument, which no self-respecting realist could have openly pursued, would have been to conclude that nothing – not even the goal of state survival – justifies the violation of universal moral principles. According to the cosmopolitan moral viewpoint, what ultimately matters is the survival of individuals, and that could presumably be secured even within a global empire. But political realists have rarely questioned the goal of state survival, both as a normative *desideratum* and as an assumption guiding much empirical research on international relations.

Following E.H. Carr, Morgenthau openly recognized that the nation-state was far from ideal as a political organization for the nuclear age. However, Morgenthau in particular also emphasized that powerful nation states – however imperfect – still offered the best available path to security under present world-historical circumstances. Morgenthau also agreed with Kant that a world state would almost necessarily be despotic, due to the absence of a global demos and greatly unequal abilities for self-government in different parts of the world. The mere survival of individuals within a despotic world-empire would hardly be satisfactory from a normative viewpoint.³⁹ Moreover, once the protective barrier of national sovereignty has been forfeited, even that limited goal could not be taken for granted, as suggested by the fate of Czechoslovak Jews following their nations' "peaceful" capitulation to Hitler's advancing army in March 1939. Hence, for Morgenthau and his realist followers, the defense of national independence was necessary to preserve the deepest moral values that we ultimately cherish. In other words, Morgenthau and several other traditional realists believed that state survival is in the modern world a *necessary condition* for value:

In the absence of an integrated international society, the attainment of a modicum of order and the realization of a minimum of moral values are predicated upon the existence of national communities capable of preserving order and realizing moral values within the limits of their power.⁴⁰

That explains the realists' passionate insistence, in some of their more policy-oriented writings, on the defense of the "national interest." The concept of the national interest, prominent in much realist scholarship on international relations, is notoriously difficult to pin down. As one present-day realist has aptly observed, at a minimum the concept denies that states should follow either sub-national or supra-national interests. Both have often been tempting to America, a nation of immigrants with organized ethnic lobbies domestically and strong ties to the immigrants' nations of origin abroad.⁴¹ Morgenthau himself was perhaps not always as clear and as consistent as he could have been on the subject of the national interest. But it emerges with sufficient clarity from

his writings that he considered national security, defined as the state's *political survival*, to be the ultimate and non-negotiable core of the national interest:

The national interest of a peace-loving nation can be defined only in terms of national security, and national security must be defined as integrity of the national territory and of its institutions. National security, then, is the irreducible minimum that diplomacy must defend with adequate power without compromise.⁴²

Virtually all post-WWII American realists converged on this point. The defense of the national interest narrowly defined in terms of state survival may thus sometimes excuse the violation of universal moral standards, under conditions of extreme necessity. Of course, the realist view leaves substantial room for interpretation, given that a major power like the United States may have to deflect potentially fatal threats to its national security by means of an activist foreign policy, especially when facing a revisionist peer competitor like the Soviet Union. Arnold Wolfers, one of the most lucid realist minds, pointed out that a small nation may consider its survival at stake only when its territory is directly attacked, while a major power in a situation of heightened international conflict will consider "any shift in the balance of power that favors its adversary as at least an indirect threat to its own survival."⁴³

Morgenthau insisted that when survival is at stake (which, for a major power like the U.S. in a situation of global conflict, included major adverse shifts in the balance of power), the statesman cannot avoid a necessary action merely because it is unjust according to universal moral standards. The pursuit of a perfectionist ethics under similar circumstances would probably lead to a morally worse outcome (i.e. massive human suffering and possibly state death) than what can be expected to follow from the evil under consideration (e.g. threatening nuclear destruction as a means to successful deterrence, or the violation of civilian immunity in total war). The fact that state survival is at stake, however, does not actually mean that "anything goes" and that political expediency becomes the only benchmark against which political action is to be measured. Morgenthau's thinking in this regard is more explicit than that of most other Anglo-American realists: under conditions of extreme necessity that seriously threaten the goal of national survival, morality itself *excuses* the violation of prima facie universal principles, although it can never provide a full-fledged justification. Morgenthau's responsible foreign policy leader is thus a deeply tragic figure, who must be able to live with the heavy moral burden of deciding to abandon universal justice and knowingly committing evil, when the most likely alternative would be self-abnegation leading into one's own destruction.

But even where universal morality is abridged in the face of a threat to national survival, Morgenthau's ethics retain a powerful constraining element: true moral judgment in situations of heightened international conflict, where systemic imperatives are truly compelling, manifests itself in choosing "among several expedient actions the least evil one."⁴⁴ In other words, even political necessity always leaves room for discriminatory moral judgment, so that the *least evil* of possible actions ought to be purposefully

chosen – perhaps even at the cost of increased risks to oneself. Several others among the most influential American realists would have broadly agreed. For instance, Robert Tucker points out in his more analytically detached style that appeals to necessity are “not incompatible with the acceptance of restraints on state action, so long as the restraints do not jeopardize independence and survival.”⁴⁵ Hence, for Tucker like for Morgenthau and others, there is no question about the desirability of imposing moral restraints on state action, and those restraints that can be observed without vital sacrifice are always imperative. Critics have pointed out that Morgenthau and most of his realist colleagues were exceedingly vague in defining what this ethics of lesser evil actually entails.⁴⁶ But the traditional American realists naturally rejected a full-fledged moralization of politics, which they thought impossible. They believed – closely following Max Weber – that responsible political action could not be reduced to precise formulas; the best that the theorist could do was to tell the statesman how to think beginning from universal moral principles and what factors to think about when balancing those principles against the requirements for successful political action.

The content of this ethics of lesser evil – or ethics of responsibility – becomes further clarified in the emphasis put by several realist scholars on the concept of *prudence* as a guideline for responsible statecraft. Morgenthau called prudence “the supreme virtue in politics.”⁴⁷ In a first approximation, prudence can be seen as stressing the consequentialist aspect of realist IR theory; prudence first of all implies a careful weighting of the consequences of alternative political actions. However, it would be wrong to reduce the concept of realist prudence to a mere consideration of “what is possible” in international relations, implying a dispassionate strategic calculus aimed at selecting the most appropriate means to achieve some given end. Rather, it appears that in most traditional realist scholarship, “means are matched to ends within a context in which the *choice of means and ends alike is constrained by ethical principles.*”⁴⁸ This suggests that the entire notion of political ethics underpinning American realism is quite heavily influenced, not by Machiavellian *raison d'état*, but by the older Thomistic notion of prudent statecraft, which itself has deep roots in the Aristotelian conception of practical wisdom. It was Reinhold Niebuhr, the Protestant theologian and an important realist figure in his own right, who combined Augustine's utter pessimism about human nature with the Thomistic notion of prudent self-restraint. Niebuhr thus established a coherent and deeply moral political theory that seems to have had great appeal for secular scholars such as Morgenthau and Wolfers. Niebuhr crucially believed that individuals and nations alike are largely driven by egoism and pride, which he saw as resulting in an inherent “will-to-power” and domination. Yet he also laid the foundations for the ethical outlook that was to characterize subsequent generations of realist scholars, emphasizing that “even the collective behavior of men stands under some inner moral checks;” and in the mid-twentieth century more than ever “the peace of the world require[d] that these checks be strengthened.”⁴⁹ In many regards, Morgenthau did little more than reformulate Niebuhr's Christian universalism and his ethics of lesser evil for a secular audience of foreign-policy experts.

The realists' absorption of the Aristotelian/Thomistic view of practical wisdom can be seen as one of the main reasons why they did not accept that international relations can be a fully rule-governed activity. If international relations were fully moralized and specific rules governed each individual foreign-policy decision, this would presumably eliminate the need to engage in complex moral trade-offs when state survival is believed to be at stake. However, once again, political realists believed that this would be impossible and probably undesirable. The uncertain nature of international politics, with unexpected feedback-loops resulting from complex patterns of strategic interaction, necessarily requires sustained political and moral judgment by the actual policy maker. As Robert Tucker adequately put it, "whether prudence permits the observance of restraints, and if so what restraints, are dependent upon circumstance and cannot be answered in the abstract."⁵⁰ Hence the central role of the *morally responsible statesman* in realist international relations theory; someone who is allowed substantial discretion in deciding what morality requires under particular circumstances and when conditions of "supreme necessity" apply.

Notwithstanding their pessimistic outlook on human affairs, most traditional American realists recognized that "survival" is not always immediately at stake in international relations. As Arnold Wolfers put it in his famous analogy: even in the darkest days of the Cold War international relations did not fully resemble a "house on fire," which would have left individual statesmen with no room for deliberation, simply compelling them to run towards the exit. Rather, the appropriate analogy was that of a house merely "overheated," thus leaving sufficient room for moral and political choice although the temperature was not always comfortable.⁵¹ The traditional American realists all seem to have agreed – either explicitly, or more implicitly in the context of their broader theory – that whenever national survival is not unequivocally at stake, responsible statecraft *cannot* be simply reduced to a matter of choosing the lesser evil among available policy options. In slightly different terms: whenever international systemic imperatives are not compelling, responsible foreign policy makers ought to choose *the most effective policy actually compatible with the moral good*, with the latter defined by universal standards. Morgenthau himself came to stress in some of his later writings that whenever survival is not at stake, morality should be seen as proscribing any deviation from the moral code altogether:

Morality is not just another branch of human activity, co-ordinate to the substantive branches, such as politics or economics. Quite to the contrary, it is superimposed upon them, *limiting the choice of ends and means and delineating the legitimate sphere of a particular branch of action altogether*. This latter function is particularly vital in the political sphere."⁵²

Notwithstanding the almost Kantian overtones of this latter quote, it seems that for Morgenthau and his fellow American realists, the possibilities for moral behavior in international relations depend almost entirely on the qualities of the statesman; i.e. essentially his moral and political wisdom. Morgenthau is representative of much realist

thinking, when he argues that politics is an art, not a science, and that what is required for its mastery is “the wisdom and the moral strength of the statesman.”⁵³ What the scholar can do is to illuminate the inherent tensions between the moral code and the empirical constraints that influence the determination of foreign policy, and this the traditional American realists attempted to do throughout their academic careers.

There can obviously be legitimate doubts about the intrinsic moral integrity of foreign policy leaders in the modern world, and the inherent faith in the moral qualities of the “statesman” that underlies much traditional realist scholarship is probably unwarranted. However, one does not need to conclude from this that the realist approach to international ethics is therefore necessarily flawed. Quite to the contrary, the traditional realists’ excessive reliance on the moral qualities of the statesman is *not* coessential to their IR theory and their political ethics in particular. The insistence by Morgenthau and other realists that universal morality closely circumscribes what actions are admissible in foreign policy, including under circumstances of apparent extreme necessity, is not incompatible in principle with contemporary notions of inclusive democratic deliberation on matters of foreign policy. Presumably, traditional realists such as Morgenthau would today participate in the democratic public debate, as they did for most of their lives, suggesting that even in the face of new strategic challenges such as the rise of transnational terrorism, foreign policy should react with great prudence. In other words, the nation’s elected political leaders – crucially checked and guided by the politically active citizenry – ought to be given the necessary incentives to accept the burden of universal moral responsibilities.⁵⁴

5. Are “Humanitarian” Military Interventions at all Possible?

The traditional American realists conceived of morality as imposing largely *negative* constraints on foreign policy. That is, morality limits the means that can be employed in the pursuit of national ends and constrains the selection of ends themselves; but morality according to the realists does not impose any positive duties of charity or magnanimity when dealing with foreigners. George Kennan is quite representative of the realist tradition, when he insists that some of the most significant possibilities for the observance of moral rules “in American foreign policy relate to the *avoidance of actions that have a negative moral significance*, rather than to those from which positive results are to be expected.”⁵⁵ In a self-help world of international anarchy, moral prudence and constant restraint are the only things that can prevent us from spiraling into a Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes* – a war of all against all. But the realists are quite skeptical about the view that American foreign policy – or the foreign policy of any powerful nation, for that matter – ought to be guided by the assumption that we have *positive* moral duties towards our fellow human beings abroad.

American IR scholars in the realist tradition thus reject the idea that powerful, rich nations have a moral duty of assistance or “humanitarian intervention” in the face of state oppression, civil war, or other large-scale violations of human rights abroad. The traditional realists discussed in this article did not explicitly assert the existence of a

morally binding norm of international non-intervention. It might still be possible, as one influential scholar recently suggested, to see the principle of non-intervention “as a summary of the sort of principles that a cautious or ‘soft’ Realist would most want to have govern the international system.”⁵⁶ However, the realists’ opposition to most instances of allegedly humanitarian interventionism in the post-WWII period largely relies on *consequentialist ethical considerations*, rather than principled moral argument. Humanitarian interventions abroad that are not required by the national interest ought to be avoided, because their outcomes are expected to be undesirable. Being slightly more specific, the traditional American realists maintained that humanitarian military interventions are to be rejected on the basis of a three-fold consequentialist argument: first, such interventions rarely live up to the lofty humanitarian intentions of those “idealists” who promote them, which means that they are at best futile and at worst outright noxious for the foreign societies being targeted; second, by squandering precious national resources, they impose an unnecessary burden on the intervening state itself, which may increase its strategic vulnerability elsewhere; and third, since other states can legitimately question the intervener’s humanitarian credentials, each military intervention may engender negative feedback from other states, thus undermining world order more generally.⁵⁷

Traditional realism, including in its twentieth-century American variant, is based on a pessimistic view of human nature and more generally questions the perfectibility of political relationships. Hence, traditional realist writings on IR are permeated by a deep skepticism concerning the very possibility of enforcing human rights and democratic self-government abroad, in the absence of the necessary socio-economic prerequisites. It was once again Morgenthau who laid out the framework that was to guide realist international relations scholars for decades to come: those who wish to blindly transpose Western democratic institutions abroad, he argued, do “not see that democracy . . . functions only under certain intellectual, moral, and social conditions.”⁵⁸ The belief that there are certain social prerequisites for sustainable constitutional government has a long pedigree in Western political thought, reaching as far back as Aristotle. This position questions the possibility of “exporting” liberal democracy to countries that are not yet ripe for it, while it leaves open the possibility of (largely endogenous) democratization in the future.

The realists’ pessimism concerning the possibility of promoting democracy, human rights, and stable governance abroad by means of military intervention was largely shaped by their observation of America’s war in Vietnam. The leading realist figures – from Morgenthau, to Kennan, and Tucker – all took an active part in the American public debate on military intervention in Vietnam, which they opposed without exception. The war in Vietnam was not in America’s national interest, they argued, because the spread of communism in South-East Asia was a home-grown phenomenon that was largely independent of Soviet imperialism and thus irrelevant to American national security. The United States during the Cold War should have focused on the bipolar balance of power and the containment of the Soviet Union, while stopping short of a crusade against communism as such.

Robert Tucker was speaking for most of his fellow realists, when he insisted that “the American involvement in Vietnam represented, more than anything else, the triumph of an expansionist and imperial interest,” which had submerged the narrower and more conventional security interest expressed in the policy of containment.⁵⁹ America’s leading realists understood fairly soon that this imperial intervention was inexorably doomed to failure, since one could not impose a hand-picked “democratic” government on an unwilling or at best indifferent people in a deeply divided country torn apart by social revolution. According to Kenneth Waltz, who emerged in recent decades as the leading neo-realist scholar, failure in Vietnam did ultimately not matter much internationally. However, it provides “a clear illustration of the *limits* of military force in the world of the present as always”; military force cannot impose an effective political order, the more so if a country is torn apart by factional warfare.⁶⁰

Notwithstanding America’s debacle in Vietnam, the most pragmatic realists have now and again acknowledged that the deployment of American power abroad in the pursuit of moral goals is not necessarily doomed to failure *in principle*. The problem is rather that if foreign interventions are to succeed in toppling tyrannical regimes and establishing sustainable democratic institutions abroad, they need to be followed by lengthy occupations, implying great costs in terms of American lives and resources and at the risk of eliciting fierce nationalist reactions. One does not need to espouse Kennan’s conservative view that American public opinion is naturally fickle on foreign policy, to see that there might be problems in terms of sustaining the necessary political will for such protracted interventions, particularly when not everything is going as smoothly as initially planned.⁶¹ There is sufficient evidence to suggest that the messianic cosmopolitanism inherent in the American ethos, which can easily slip into military adventurism abroad, is much less reliable when it comes to sustaining an intervention over several years. However, such protracted interventions (or “peacebuilding operations” as they are now commonly called) have become all but necessary for the sake of sustainable institutional reconstruction and permanent pacification. It is for those reasons – even the most pragmatic realists conclude – that American efforts to advance moral goals abroad by means of military interventions are extremely unlikely to succeed *in practice*.

The inherent problem has been nicely summarized by the realist IR scholar Robert Tucker, who saw a resurgent imperial temptation in American foreign policy at the end of the Cold War:

The difficulty is not that our purpose of ordered liberty can never be effectively pursued through the use of force; the experience of the successful occupation imposed upon Germany and Japan in the aftermath of World War II demonstrates otherwise. But unless war is the only way to defend truly vital interests . . . it is unlikely that we will be willing to complete the circle and accept the responsibilities that the use of force imposes on us. [Recent experience shows. . .], that isolationist sentiments among the public, expressed above all in the desire to avoid casualties to American troops and to avoid protracted engagements, may nevertheless be combined with an interventionist disposition to produce an explosive mixture.⁶²

Some realists have attempted, rather less convincingly, to go one step further and derive *moral* conclusions from these observed practical difficulties. Without the ability to enforce human rights abroad and compel democratic change at reasonable costs to oneself, their argument goes, the question of moral responsibility cannot even arise in the first place.⁶³ Morgenthau himself adapted the Roman law principle *ultra vires nemo obligatur* (nobody is bound beyond one's ability), to support his rejection of positive international duties: "It is this impossibility to achieve – even with the best of intentions and the most extensive commitment of resources – what is presumed to be morally required that negates the moral obligation."⁶⁴ In slightly different words: if the evidence suggests that we cannot achieve what would be good in the abstract, there is no reason to squander precious resources in the pursuit of utopia. The realists' skepticism appears appropriate as far as the promotion of democracy by means of military force is concerned; toppling a tyrannical regime is not sufficient to establish a flourishing democracy abroad, as the present quagmire in Iraq once again unambiguously suggests. On the other hand, following the realists' own setup of the argument, they might have to recognize the existence of a wide-ranging if imperfect duty of humanitarian military intervention, if it could be shown that multilateral interventions, for instance, can achieve beneficial results under circumstances of localized ethnic conflict and/or institutional collapse.

Present-day IR scholars in the contending liberal camp typically argue precisely that there exists such a moral duty for rich and powerful nations to intervene *multilaterally* in civil wars with attendant large-scale civilian suffering, subject to stringent criteria of proportionality. Michael Doyle for instance suggests that multilateral interventions can help to build self-sustaining, self-determining peace and therefore ought not to be judged "by the same tropes we have used to judge unilateral interventions." There are several recent examples of overall quite successful multilateral interventions for the purpose of post-war reconstruction, from Cambodia (1991-'93), to El Salvador (1991-'95), Mozambique (1992-'94), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1995-present), East Timor (1999–2002), Kosovo (1999-present), and Sierra Leone (1999–2005).⁶⁵ With the benefit of hindsight, the realists' sweeping pessimism concerning the possibility of humanitarian military interventions thus appears at least partially disconfirmed by the empirical evidence. It is one thing to argue that even powerful nations cannot "export" human rights and democracy abroad by means of unilateral military intervention; but it is quite another thing to suggest that *any* attempt to affect political dynamics abroad is doomed to failure and thus inherently futile.

6. Cosmopolitan Hubris and the Risk of Negative Feedback from Military Action

The traditional American realists were deeply skeptical about the possibility of successful humanitarian military interventions. While their pessimism concerning the possibility of transposing liberal-democratic institutions abroad by means of military intervention was undoubtedly appropriate, there can be legitimate doubts about their

unwillingness to recognize positive moral duties towards foreigners on grounds that it is inherently impossible to affect political change abroad. But the traditional realists refused to recognize the existence of positive international duties for another set of reasons that had more to do with America's enlightened self-interest, rather than with complex moral reasoning. That is to say, the realists feared that the consequences of recognizing such positive duties would be primarily counterproductive for America itself, as well as for world order more generally. Based on their reading of American history, Morgenthau and others thought that any positive recognition of an international "responsibility for the human rights violations of others" would only further legitimate what they saw as an inherent crusading tendency in American foreign policy, stemming from the belief that American power could be used to "deliver" to the rest of humanity the fundamental rights expressed in the Declaration of Independence. If not constantly restrained, this messianic impulse could lead to a dangerous form of interventionist hubris that could undermine America's own security. By equating "power and virtue," U.S. foreign policy might disconcert its allies and greatly increase the risk that the conflict with the Soviet Union might spiral into mutual destruction.⁶⁶

Morgenthau himself was particularly concerned that the moralistic "sentimentalism" of American foreign policy during the early decades of the Cold War might inadvertently spiral into a deadly conflagration with the Soviet Union, or at any rate lead the United States into a position of strategic vulnerability. America's chief strategic imperative, as he saw it, consisted in the maintenance of a proper balance of power in Europe and to a lesser extent in Asia, as a means to containing Soviet imperialism and preserving the achievements of Western civilization. But America's crusading moralism and anti-communism – as expressed most vividly in the 1947 Truman doctrine – were seriously hampering the pursuit of such a rational foreign policy.⁶⁷ On the one hand, Morgenthau thought that the defense of democracy in Europe was appropriate and constituted an intrinsic part of the defense against Russian imperialism. On the other hand, the situation in South-East Asia was fundamentally different: the spread of communism in Asia had little to do with Soviet expansionism and was more often than not the product of autochthonous social revolutions. Hence, misguided efforts to prop up "democratic" (i.e. essentially anti-communist) regimes in that part of the world by means of military interventions could not advance the American national interest. Indeed, such interventions – justified in public as a defense of "cosmopolitan" democratic values – might be outright injurious to America's national interest. They risked putting local populations irrevocably at odds with the United States, once domestic revolution was quite inevitably going to overthrow the weak pro-Western governments.

Other traditional realists broadly agreed that America's crusading and excessively ideological foreign policy, from the Truman doctrine to the war in Vietnam, had been squandering precious resources and increased the risk of a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. According to Robert Tucker, for instance, America's cosmopolitan hubris had clearly jeopardized the nation's "narrower and more traditional security interests."⁶⁸ At least equally worrisome, American "sentimentalism" was alienating potential allies and literally pushing socialist and other non-aligned states into the

Soviet sphere of influence. Morgenthau in particular insisted that rather than fighting like Don Quixote against the windmills in a desperate attempt to prevent the spread of communism in the developing world, the United States should seriously engage with communist governments wherever possible in an attempt to sever their ties with Moscow. For instance, the United States should have more seriously engaged communist Yugoslavia, which could have demonstrated “in practice that the Communist form of government is not necessarily identical with Russian imperialism.”⁶⁹ That would also have reduced the perception of an inherently threatening America among other socialist or non-aligned regimes. Crusading anti-communism in the name of putatively cosmopolitan values undermined America’s strategic flexibility and made any serious “consideration of the other side’s interests and point of view, the precondition for a conciliatory and accommodating diplomacy,” by definition impossible.⁷⁰

The realists’ prescription for a successful American foreign policy was thus ultimately quite straightforward: the American national interest, rationally and restrictively defined, demanded the maintenance of a stable balance of power between the two superpowers. This required that America court potential allies everywhere, including among communist governments and other non-democratic regimes, which could obviously not be achieved by unambiguously signaling that one was committed to containing the spread of communism as such. According to the traditional realists, public statements that the U.S. was going to defend freedom everywhere, particularly when followed by military action justified on those grounds, risked engendering negative feedback (i.e., reactions by other states) that might undermine American security. This reasoning, although developed in the specific context of the cold war, is in principle still relevant even under today’s radically changed international circumstances. Present-day realists insist that even a unipolar American hegemon is far from being all-mighty. America needs allies and friends to pursue its vital security interests, which range from curbing the spread of weapons of mass-destruction (WMDs), to fighting transnational terrorism and crime, to re-building failed states that may be a source of broader international instability.

Self-consciously moral reasoning has been largely displaced from realist IR scholarship since the emergence of putatively more scientific neo-realist theory in the 1980s. Nonetheless, even the latest realist analyses of U.S. foreign policy include a prescriptive element, based on consequentialist considerations that focus on the long-term utility of specific policies from the point of view of the American national interest. Realist IR theory has increasingly come to emphasize that *threat perceptions* matter greatly in determining international alliance behavior and related strategic balancing. Present-day realist scholars have suggested that smaller states are likely to support (and possibly ally with) those major powers within the international system that appear to be least threatening on average. Conversely, the argument goes, those same small states will balance against or at least distance themselves from great powers whose foreign policy is perceived as inherently threatening and aggressive.⁷¹ These analyses acquired a new meaning with the end of the Cold War: realist scholars perceived that

the greatly increased freedom for American foreign policy in the 1990s might lead to a resurgent imperial temptation, based on traditional “idealist” messianic impulses inherent in the national ethos. With the reach and effectiveness of America’s military now clearly unrivalled, the Wilsonian temptation to justify military interventionism abroad as a means of boldly *extending* freedom in the world was again looming on the horizon.⁷²

Contemporary realist scholars point out that given America’s extraordinary military predominance, smaller states can not really “balance” against the United States in any meaningful way. Yet crusading American idealism, which culminated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, has promoted widespread perceptions of the United States as a revisionist and potentially *threatening* nation. Similar perceptions, which are particularly widespread in the Middle East and among Muslim-majority countries more broadly, clearly undermine the advancement of American interests in the world. Traditional U.S. allies in Europe and elsewhere have also been disconcerted by what many of their citizens perceive as an unabashed manifestation of American imperial hubris. Robert Pape has been most outspoken among contemporary realists, suggesting that the widespread perception of threatening American intentions has already led others to “soft balance” against the United States. In other words, Pape suggests that smaller states have begun to use international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements to “delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies.”⁷³

What could seriously frustrate America’s foreign policy is not so much the fact that individual states may speak out against the U.S. at the United Nations (a practice that has, incidentally, been going on for decades), or deny the use of military bases on their territory. Rather, it is the refusal of those states to cooperate with the U.S. in curbing the spread of WMDs, fighting transnational terrorist organizations, and rebuilding “failed states” that have increasingly challenged American interests abroad and might impose significant costs on U.S. foreign policy. Growing support for terrorist organizations as a means to attack America’s resolve in the Middle East, or the attempts by Iran and North Korea to acquire nuclear weapons, can also be seen as clear-cut reactions to the perception of threatening U.S. intentions. Some of the most senior contemporary realists have concluded from this that the United States ought to work hard to improve its image in the world, by swallowing its pride and urgently curbing its messianic interventionism abroad, to comfort its allies and win new friends or at least avoid making new enemies in the future.⁷⁴ The contemporary realists’ argument is thus straightforwardly consequentialist: crusading military interventionism abroad reduces America’s ability to shape world events according to its economic and political interests; it may also undermine U.S. national security in the long run and is, for these reasons, incompatible with any notion of national advantage, rationally conceived. The traditional realists discussed in this article would probably not have fundamentally disagreed. Yet the latter’s serious engagement with political theory, their quite sophisticated notion of prudence and their ethics of responsibility allowed them to appeal to American statesmen and public opinion at large by referring to widely held values and moral reasoning. This

inevitably left the traditional realists with more far-ranging tools of public persuasion at their disposal, compared to their contemporary followers who rely on exclusively empirical arguments.

7. Conclusion

Recent instances of moralistic and unilateral American military interventionism abroad have negatively affected perceptions of U.S. foreign policy in the world. Present-day realist scholars believe that this may lead to reduced cooperation with the United States in important issue-areas such as trade and security, while also producing increasingly antagonistic reactions to American policies. This article has shown that traditional post-World War II American realists, such as Morgenthau, Kennan, Wolfers, and Tucker, were also deeply concerned with what they perceived as a messianic impulse in American foreign policy to promote cosmopolitan values abroad by means of military force. The traditional realists relied on both *empirical analysis*, which showed how crusading interventionism was contrary to the national interest, as well as more explicitly *moral considerations* to persuade American foreign policy leaders to practice constant restraint. Hence, if there is one common element that unites American realist scholarship in international relations since WWII, beyond the focus on power and the pursuit of the national interest in an often dangerous environment, it is the concern with *restraining American hubris*. Rather than continue to think of realist IR scholarship as being essentially equal to Hobbesian moral skepticism and unabashed worship of the balance of power, perhaps we should acknowledge the realists as genuine social critics who have played an important and healthy role in the context of American democracy.

In conclusion, twentieth-century realism represents a rich and inspiring, although largely negative tradition of argument in international ethics: it counsels against imperial hubris by advocating prudence and moral restraint, and it displays an overall healthy skepticism concerning the perfectibility of social and political relationships. However, the utter pessimism on human nature and politics more broadly – often bordering on outright cynicism – of influential realist figures, such as Morgenthau in particular, appears largely unwarranted today and was probably in large part a disillusioned reaction to the experience of World War II. Perhaps most crucially from a normative viewpoint, the traditional realists all greatly underestimated our moral duties towards other fellow human beings across national borders. Given the awareness of such duties by American citizens, and the influence this awareness has had on U.S. foreign policy, the traditional realists' quite dogmatic denial that such international duties exist ultimately reduced their ability to engage in a fruitful dialogue on the ethical underpinnings of U.S. foreign policy. As E.H. Carr, the founder of modern Anglo-American realism and one of the most eclectic IR theorists ever put it roughly seventy years ago: in order to develop “purposive or meaningful” international thought, followed by action that aims beyond mere self-preservation, realist notions of prudence and restraint ultimately need to be supplemented with the aspirations of liberal universalism; in other words, “utopianism” needs to penetrate the citadel of realism.⁷⁵ Contemporary realists ought to cherish this advice,

by reengaging with and further developing the normative theory of their forebears, to ensure the paradigm's continued relevance in the future.

NOTES

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1. Quoted in Jonathan Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity. Realist Thought in International Relations Since Machiavelli* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 209.

2. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harvest Books, 1955), 13.

3. The first part of the argument can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, Vol. I (Paris: Flammarion, 1981), Chap. 3. The second part of the argument was developed and insisted upon by realist scholars of international relations. See esp. Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, with a new introduction by Kenneth Thompson (Lanham: University Press of America, 1982), 115–138; and his “Understanding American Foreign Policy,” in *Politics in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). But Michael W. Doyle, a leading scholar in the contending liberal tradition, would not fundamentally disagree and indeed highlights that liberal foreign policy “has often raised conflicts of interest into crusades.” Cf. Michael Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs,” part II, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 4 (1983): 324.

4. For a recent history of American expansionism that downplays the role of ideology, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

5. Some valuable research on the ethical dimensions of realist IR theory, and on Morgenthau in particular, has emerged in recent years. See Michael J. Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); Joel H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists. Political Realism, Responsible Power, and American Culture in the Nuclear Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991); Robert Jervis, “Hans Morgenthau, Realism, and the Scientific Study of International Politics,” *Social Research* 61, no. 4 (1994): 853–76; Michael Williams, *Realism Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and William E. Scheuerman, “Was Morgenthau a Realist?,” *Constellations* 14, no. 4 (2007).

6. The emergence of “neorealism” in the 1980s, largely under Kenneth Waltz’s influence, has largely displaced any self-consciously normative thinking from realist scholarship on international relations. Neorealist international relations theory, sometimes also referred to as “structural realism,” insists on the scientific and presumably value-free explanation of international politics according to the nomothetic-deductive method prevalent in the natural sciences. The leading neorealist reference is Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979); For an authoritative introduction to the debate surrounding neo-realism, see Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

7. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1994), 78 (my translation).

8. See Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison D’Etat and Its Place in Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

9. Plato, *The Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Book I; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), Chap. 13; Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

10. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 188.

11. Arnold Wolfers has brilliantly compared the continental European idea of “necessities” of state, resulting from constant threats to national survival, with the Anglo-American emphasis on moral “choice” resulting from the perception of relative security over several centuries, from Thomas More to Woodrow Wilson. Cf. Arnold Wolfers, “Political Theory and International Relations,” in A. Wolfers and Laurence W. Martin, eds., *The Anglo-American Tradition in Foreign Affairs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).

12. Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 15.

13. Robert Gilpin, "Nobody Loves a Political Realist," *Security Studies* 5, no. 3 (1996): 3–26.

14. Marshall Cohen, "Moral Skepticism and International Relations," in Charles Beitz et al., *International Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

15. *Ibid.*, 26.

16. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

17. *Ibid.*, 10.

18. Another possible exception is Henry Kissinger, American Secretary of State under Presidents Nixon and Ford, who seems to have clung to the continental European tradition of Machiavellian statecraft. See in particular his *A World Restored: The Politics of Conservatism in a Revolutionary Age* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964).

19. Morgenthau saw morality as "limiting the choice of ends and means and delineating the legitimate sphere of a particular branch of action altogether." Cf. Hans Morgenthau, "The Moral Dilemma of Political Action," in *Politics in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 325.

20. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Seventh Edition; Revised by Kenneth Thompson and David Clinton (New York: Mc Graw Hill, 2006), 5. Among contemporary realist scholars, the closest to Morgenthau and his assumption that states always seek to maximize power as a means to securing their survival is John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

21. E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939*, with a new introduction by Michael Cox (London: Palgrave, 2001), 141–2.

22. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 259. Incidentally, Morgenthau's views here anticipate much of the argument subsequently developed by the "English School" of international relations. See esp. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

23. *Ibid.*, 247. Morgenthau also seems to imply that with the process of decolonization, the moral norms underlying this new international society have spread beyond the European and North-Atlantic context, becoming progressively universalized. Beyond the *moral condemnation of war*, Morgenthau mentions among the most important norms supported by the present international society of states the *protection of all human life in peace* (which, for example, forbids political assassinations abroad) and the *respect of noncombatant immunity* in warfare (see *Politics Among Nations*, 244–51).

24. *Ibid.*, 240–1.

25. Jervis, Hans Morgenthau, 867.

26. For an illuminating discussion, see Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity*, cit., 183–95.

27. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 12.

28. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

29. *Ibid.*, 204–8.

30. *Ibid.*, 177.

31. *Ibid.*, 197.

32. Morgenthau's pessimistic assumptions about human nature, as one famous critic of realism has cogently pointed out, are probably "as little supported by the evidence of empirical observation as the optimistic humanitarianism of the Age of Reason," against which Morgenthau was vociferously reacting. See Isaiah Berlin, "Realism in Politics," in *The Power of Ideas*, edited by Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 134. On the other hand, Morgenthau's view of human nature, questionable as it may be on empirical grounds, provides a logically compelling rationale for why international anarchy ought to result in a deep security dilemma characterized by a constant struggle for power among states; something that contemporary neo-realists have more trouble explaining. See Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Chap. 2.

33. For the former view, see Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 218–19. The latter view is found in *Scientific Man*, 201–3; but see also *Politics Among Nations*, 240–51.

34. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 15. In *Scientific Man* he had been even more explicit: “The doctrine that the ethical end justifies unethical means leads to the negation of absolute ethical judgments altogether. For if the ethical end justifies unethical means, the ultimate and absolute good . . . justifies all human actions” (185). Against claims that Morgenthau subsequently altered his views, see also his late essay, “Justice and Power,” *Social Research* 41, no. 1 (1974) 163–75.

35. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 183.

36. For instance, in what is otherwise a brilliant history of realist thought since Machiavelli, Jonathan Haslam erroneously insists that “Morgenthau stood squarely within the Reasons of State tradition” (Cf. Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity*, 195). Robert Tucker, himself an eminent realist with a deep concern for international ethics, also seems to have made the same mistake; cf. Robert W. Tucker, “Professor Morgenthau’s Theory of Political ‘Realism,’” *American Political Science Review* 44 (1952): 214–224. See also Klaus-Gerd Giesen, *L’éthique des relations internationales: Les théories anglo-américaines contemporaines* (Brussels: Emile Bruylant, 1992), 71–8.

37. See e.g. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932); George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962); Robert Tucker, *The Inequality of Nations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); and Robert E. Osgood and Robert W. Tucker, *Force, Order, and Justice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967); Kenneth Thompson, *The Moral Issue in Statecraft: Twentieth-Century Approaches and Problems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966). For a recent collection of essays on these and other seminal realists, see David W. Clinton, ed., *The Realist Tradition and Contemporary International Relations* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

38. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 129–38.

39. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 512–16.

40. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 38.

41. Jervis, “Hans Morgenthau,” 855.

42. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 561.

43. Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, 73. Morgenthau seems to have broadly agreed when he pointed out that “judgments of necessity . . . are relative to the interests and power of the observer.” Cf. Morgenthau, “Inquisition in Czechoslovakia,” *The New York Review of Books*, 13, no. 10 (1969).

44. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 203.

45. Robert E. Osgood and Robert W. Tucker, *Force, Order, and Justice*, 269. The realist diplomat and historian George F. Kennan, although theoretically less sophisticated, also broadly agreed with this line of argument: Kennan did nothing but reformulate the realist ethics of lesser evil when he stressed that responsible American statesmen always ought to go as far as the aim of state survival permits to avoid actions that have “a negative moral significance.” Cf. George F. Kennan, “Morality and Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 64 no. 2 (1985/6): 212.

46. See e.g. Smith, *Realist Thought*, 140.

47. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 12.

48. Jack Donnelly, “Twentieth-Century Realism,” in Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel, *Traditions of International Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 97; emphasis added. On the role of prudence in traditional American realism, see also Joel H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, 47–50.

49. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960 [1944]), 21 and 182.

50. Osgood and Tucker, *Force, Order, and Justice*, 289–90.

51. Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, 15. For a more recent, systematic analysis of how high levels of conflict push international systems towards consistency, thereby reducing – though never fully eliminating – the possibility of choice for individual states, see also Robert Jervis,

System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), Chap. 6.

52. Morgenthau, "The Moral Dilemma of Political Action," 325.

53. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 10.

54. Admittedly, not all traditional realists were committed democrats. George Kennan, for instance, took his faith in the professional and moral virtues of the statesman to its logical extreme: concerned about the naïve sentimentalism of American mass-public opinion, Kennan was clearly flirting with the idea of Platonic guardianship over foreign policy, when he fantasized that "we could, if we wished, develop a corps of professional officers superior to anything that exists or ever has existed in this field." Cf. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 93–4.

55. Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," 212; emphasis added.

56. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: Norton, 1997), 390. Most realists, however, were rather less cautious and did not exclude military intervention as a matter of principle: Morgenthau once went so far as to suggest that it would be "futile to search for an abstract principle which would allow us to distinguish in a concrete case between legitimate and illegitimate intervention." Cf. Hans J. Morgenthau, "To Intervene or Not to Intervene," *Foreign Affairs* 45, no. 3, (1967) 430. Elsewhere, the requirements of the "vital" national interest were interpreted rather flexibly, such as when realists called on America to threaten the use of force against Arab regimes during the 1970s oil crisis. See Robert W. Tucker, "Oil: The Issue of American Intervention," *Commentary* 59, no. 1 (1975): 21–31.

57. American realists mainly developed those arguments in opposition to the war in Vietnam. See e.g. Hans Morgenthau, "Vietnam: Another Korea?," in *Politics in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. III; Morgenthau, "U.S. Misadventure in Vietnam," reprint, *Current History* 88 (1989): 32–4; and Robert W. Tucker, "Vietnam: The Final Reckoning," *Commentary* 59, no. 5 (1975): 27–33. Robert Tucker subsequently opposed also the 1991 war against Iraq, in "Why War?," *The New Republic*, December 10, 1990. For a passionate realist argument against the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "An Unnecessary War," *Foreign Policy* 134 (2003): 51–59. On the other hand, several realists saw the Balkan wars in the 1990s as directly challenging the national interest of major Western European nations, which should thus have intervened militarily. See e.g. George F. Kennan, "The Balkan Crisis: 1913 and 1993," *The New York Review of Books* 40, no. 13 (1993).

58. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 55.

59. Tucker, "Vietnam: The Final Reckoning," 29.

60. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 189–90. The realists' traditional pessimism concerning American efforts to export democracy abroad has been most recently restated by Robert Jervis: "Even if there are no conditions that are literally necessary for the establishment of democracy, this form of government is not equally likely to flourish under all conditions. Poverty, deep divisions, the fusion of secular and religious authority, militaristic institutions, the lack of a democratic tradition and commitment to individualism, and a paucity of attractive careers for defeated politicians all inhibit democracy. [Moreover. . .], movements for reform and democracy may suffer if they are seen as excessively beholden to the United States." Cf. Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

61. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 92.

62. Robert Tucker, *The Imperial Temptation: The New World Order and America's Purpose* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1992), 195–7.

63. See Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 105; Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," 211–12; Tucker, "Vietnam: The Final Reckoning," 33; and Tucker, *Imperial Temptation*, 193–7.

64. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 105.

65. Michael W. Doyle, "Sovereignty and Humanitarian Military Intervention," *MS*, available online at: <http://www.princeton.edu/~pcglobal/conferences/normative/papers/Session5/Doyle.pdf> (last accessed on May 30, 2007), 19. The first to defend multilateral military interventions on grounds that they would offer superior guarantees of impartiality was J.S. Mill, "The Spanish Question," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. 31, Appendix (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1837),

374–75. On recent multilateral peacebuilding operations, see Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Michael W. Doyle and Nicolas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

66. Morgenthau, "The Moral Dilemma of Political Action," 326; see also *Politics Among Nations*, 265–6.

67. The Truman doctrine, pronounced in March 1947, advocated the containment of communism and the defense of free democratic nations everywhere. Morgenthau saw this as the supreme manifestation of a deleterious moralistic "sentimentalism" in American foreign policy. His condemnation of the doctrine was consequently without appeal: "It is obvious that no statesman could pursue indiscriminately a policy of protecting democratic governments everywhere in the world without courting certain disaster" Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 119.

68. Tucker, "Vietnam: The Final Reckoning," 29.

69. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 124.

70. *Ibid.*, 133. For an excellent historical analysis of those issues from a broadly realist standpoint, see John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Chap. 4.

71. Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987). For a slightly different realist argument, which emphasizes that small states will ally or "bandwagon" with great powers that are not only not threatening, but can actually promise substantial rewards, see Randall Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19 no. 1 (1994): 72–107.

72. See e.g. Robert W. Tucker, *The Imperial Temptation*, and for a more recent critique, Jack Goldsmith and Stephen D. Krasner, "The Limits of Idealism," *Daedalus*, 132 no. 1 (2003): 47–63.

73. Robert Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 10. For a critical rebuttal, which insists that minor powers cannot ultimately constrain the global hegemon, see Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "International Relations Theory and the Case against Unilateralism," *Perspectives on Politics*, 3, no. 3 (2005): 509–524.

74. See esp. Jervis, *American Foreign Policy*, and Stephen D. Walt, *Taming American Power* (New York: Norton, 2005).

75. Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 85. The only leading contemporary IR scholar who has fruitfully combined classical liberal notions of morality with realist-inspired consequentialism is Stanley Hoffmann, *Duties Beyond Borders: On the Limits and Possibilities of Ethical International Politics* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981)

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