

Oxford Handbooks Online

The Ethics of Realism

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The Oxford Handbook of International Relations

Edited by Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal

Print Publication Date: Aug 2008

Subject: Political Science, International Relations, Political Theory

Online Publication Date: Sep 2009

DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199219322.003.0008

Abstract and Keywords

This article focuses on the standard realist argument that international politics ‘is a practical exercise and not a moral one’, that ‘no ethical standards are applicable to relations between states’, and that ‘universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states’. The article also looks at the idea that the ‘reality’ of international politics ‘justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing’. It is shown that such categorical denials of the ethical dimension of international relations, although rooted in important insights, are both descriptively inaccurate and prescriptively perverse. Realism is best read as a cautionary ethic of political prudence rooted in a narrow yet insightful vision of international politics.

Keywords: international relations, international politics, universal moral principles, states, realism

THIS and the preceding chapter treat political realism¹ as a loose but distinctive tradition of international theory centered on four propositions.

1. *Anarchy*. The absence of government makes international relations a qualitatively distinct domain of political action.
2. *Egoism*. Individuals and groups tend to pursue self-interest narrowly defined.
3. *Groupism*. Politics takes place within and between groups.
4. *Power politics*. Egoistic groups interacting in anarchy generate a politics of power and security. “International politics are always power politics” (Carr 1946, 145).

The priority of the pursuit of power marginalizes *all* other objectives. This chapter focuses on the standard realist argument that international politics “is a practical exercise and not a moral one” (Kennan 1954, 48), that “no ethical standards are applicable to relations between states” (Carr 1946, 153). “Universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states” (Morgenthau 1954, 9). The “reality” of international politics “justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing” (Niebuhr 1932, xi).

(p. 151)

I show that such categorical denials of the ethical dimension of international relations, although rooted in important insights, are both descriptively inaccurate and prescriptively perverse. Sophisticated realists, however, acknowledge that the “realities” of power politics are but one dimension of an adequate theory or practice of international politics. Initial appearances to the contrary, most leading realists grant ethics a necessary if subordinate place in international relations—although they generally fail to grapple with the contradictions between this account and their more familiar calls for an amoral foreign policy.

Realism fits the structure of this part of this *Handbook* quite well. It has typically been understood by its leading

proponents and critics alike as both an explanatory account of the way the world is (the subject of the preceding chapter) and a set of prescriptions, based on this reading of political “reality,” for how societies and their leaders ought to practice international relations (my subject here). The difference in substantive focus, however, leads this chapter to deal with a rather different part of the realist literature. Where the preceding chapter focused on relatively recent work by (primarily American) social scientists, this chapter draws primarily on the work of earlier generations. Part of the reason is that social scientists today are much less inclined than their predecessors to address moral issues in their professional work. No less important, though, is the unrivaled power and vitality of the arguments of these “classical” realist authors.

1 Moral Relativism

Some realists claim that morality is relative to a particular community rather than widely shared across states, societies, or cultures. For example, E. H. Carr (1946, 2, 87) claims that “morality can only be relative, not universal.” “Supposedly absolute and universal principles [are] not principles at all, but the unconscious reflexions of national policy based on a particular interpretation of national interest at a particular time.” George Kennan (1954, 103, 47, 36) similarly contends that “our own national interest is all that we are really capable of knowing and understanding” and counsels against assuming that “our moral values ... necessarily have validity for people everywhere.” Kennan even claims that “in most international differences elements of right and wrong, comparable to those that prevail in personal relations, are—if they exist at all, which is a question—simply not discernable to the outsider.”

In fact, however, we can and do have considerable knowledge of the values and interests of others. Numerous international issues do involve genuine questions of right and wrong. And in contemporary international relations there is widespread agreement, for example, that aggressive war is impermissible and that genocide is a legitimate subject of international concern and action.

(p. 152)

The breadth, depth, and policy implications of such shared values certainly are matters of intense controversy. The claim that political values are merely national, however, is descriptively false. An admirable caution against an inappropriate belief in the universality of one’s own values has been overgeneralized into a deeply mistaken denial of shared values.

Kennan (1985–6, 206) also confuses the discussion when he claims that the national interest is a matter of “unavoidable necessit[y]” and therefore “subject to classification neither as ‘good’ or ‘bad’.” This is clearly false. Any “necessity” is neither natural nor inescapable. And unless the national interest is in some sense good, there is no obvious reason to follow it.

Not surprisingly, then, most realists reject moral relativism, particularly in its stronger forms. Reinhold Niebuhr (e.g. 1932; 1941; 1953) and Herbert Butterfield (e.g. 1960; 1953) are the most prominent of many Christian realists. Among secular realists, Hans Morgenthau (1979, 10) argues that “there is one moral code ... [which] is something objective that is to be discovered” (cf. Morgenthau 1946, 178–80, 195–6; 1962*b*, 43, 237). This view is also shared by no less radical a realist than Niccolò Machiavelli (1970; 1985).

Consider Machiavelli’s conception of “cruelties well used.” “Those can be called well used (if it is permissible to speak well of evil) that are done at a stroke, out of the necessity to secure oneself, and then are not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can” (*The Prince*, ch. 8, para. 4; cf. ch. 17, para. 1). Although morality cannot be applied directly to politics, Machiavelli insists that one must “not depart from good, when possible, but know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity” (*The Prince*, ch. 18, para. 5). Note his very conventional understandings of good and evil. Might does *not* make right. Immoral means are intrinsically bad and thus should be kept to a minimum—and even when necessary must be judged by the standard of “utility for the subjects,” the common public good.

Rather than reject conventional notions of morality and justice, most realists claim instead that these standards either do not apply to (international) politics or are appropriately overridden by other considerations. Human nature, international anarchy, and the special character of the state and statesmanship are the principal grounds

on which realists argue that “other criteria, sadder, more limited, more practical, must be allowed to prevail” (Kennan 1954, 49).

2 Natural Impulsion

The Athenian envoys in Thucydides' “Melian Dialogue” (1982, bk. V, chs. 85–111) present the most radical, and probably best-known, realist rejection of ethics in (p. 153) international affairs. “Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (bk. V, ch. 89). “Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can” (bk. V, ch. 105). As another group of anonymous Athenians claimed just before the outbreak of the war, they acquired and held their empire under “the pressure of three of the strongest motives, fear, honor, and interest. And it was not we who set the example, for it has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger” (bk. I, ch. 76; cf. bk. I, ch. 72).

Even setting aside the difficulties of establishing such “facts” and “laws” and of deriving “ought” from “is,” these arguments are deeply problematic. If the impulse to rule were indeed an overwhelming force of nature, then, following the moral maxim “ought implies can,” conquerors and tyrants might be excused from the requirements of justice. Thucydides' Athenians, however, do not act out of irresistible natural compulsion. Immediately after appealing to the law of the rule of the stronger, they claim that they have treated their allies with greater respect for justice than their position compelled them to do (bk. I, ch. 76). And at Melos they *could* have taken justice into consideration. They chose, rather than were compelled, to act unjustly—in the end, killing all the men and enslaving the women and children, because the Melians refused to abandon their neutrality.

Even if “all men lust for power” (Morgenthau 1962a, 42), most realists appreciate that such impulses are not inevitably overwhelming. For example, Thomas Hobbes (1986) in Chapter 13 of *Leviathan* stresses the roots of violent conflict lying in the passions of competition, diffidence, and glory, and the associated desires for gain, safety, and reputation. He concludes the chapter, however, by noting that human nature also includes passions that incline us to peace, as well as reason, which allows us to devise alternatives to war. Likewise, Niebuhr, although he emphasizes “the universality of ... egoistic corruption” (1953, 13), also insists that we are, and always remain, under a moral obligation to struggle against our fallen nature. “The Christian doctrine of original sin with its seemingly contradictory assertions about the inevitability of sin and man's responsibility for sin is a dialectical truth which does justice to the fact that man's self-love and self-centeredness is inevitable, but not in such a way as to fit into the category of natural necessity” (1941, 263).

This vacillation between one-sided and bifurcated accounts of human nature reflects a tension that, as we shall see, runs through realist arguments. Realists regularly, sometimes spectacularly, overstate the nature and significance of the “facts” that constrain the pursuit of moral objectives in (international) politics. Yet some realists—often the same individuals in more reflective moods—recognize that these “facts” do not justify, let alone require, amoral power politics.

(p. 154) 3 Anarchy

International anarchy, the absence of government above the level of the state, regularly leads realists to argue that “the cleavage between individual morality and international morality corresponds to the difference between social relations in a community and those in a society bordering on anarchy” (Schwarzenberger 1951, 231). But international relations simply is not a domain where “the law of the jungle still prevails” (Schuman 1941, 9). And it is obviously false to claim that “states in anarchy cannot afford to be moral. The possibility of moral behavior rests upon the existence of an effective government that can deter and punish illegal actions” (Art and Waltz 1971, 6). Just as individuals may behave morally in the absence of government enforcement of moral rules, so moral behavior is possible in international relations.

Once more, the archetypical realist argument stretches an important insight well beyond the breaking point. The absence of centralized enforcement of norms and agreements will increase the incidence of immoral or illegal behavior. But *all* national interests and objectives run up against anarchy. No one would argue that we should abandon pursuing economic interests or stop trying to avoid war with our adversaries because anarchy

complicates realizing such objectives. Similarly, anarchy does not require abandoning ethical goals of foreign policy. The difficulty of achieving particular ethical, economic, military, or political objectives in anarchic orders is no reason never to try.

4 Reason(s) of State

Perhaps the strongest realist arguments appeal to the nature of states and statesmanship. The doctrine of *raison d'état* (reason(s) of state) holds that, "where international relations are concerned, the interests of the state predominate over all other interests and values" (Haslam 2002, 12). In international relations, it is claimed, the interests of one's own political group appropriately take priority over the interests of other groups and other normative considerations. Because the "primary obligation" of any government "is to the *interests* of the national society it represents," "the same moral concepts are no longer relevant to it" (Kennan 1985–6, 206; 1954, 48).

Such arguments, however, are ethical arguments. They concern *which* values are appropriate in international relations, not whether foreign policy is appropriately subject to normative evaluation. "Power politics may be defined as a system of international relations in which groups consider themselves to be ultimate ends" (p. 155) (Schwarzenberger 1951, 13). Thus Morgenthau (1951, 33) talks of "the moral dignity of the national interest," and Heinrich von Treitschke (1916, 54) considers the state "a high moral good in itself."

Unfortunately, though, realists rarely present an explicit defense for choosing *these* values over others when they conflict. *Raison d'état* arguments usually simply draw our attention to the values associated with states and other political communities. Other rationalities and normative standards typically are set aside rather than argued against. And the limits that other values place on the pursuit of national interests and values are generally ignored.

5 Survival

A more limited, and more powerful, realist argument appeals to the preemptory value of (national) survival. For example, Henry Kissinger (1977, 46) argues that "the statesman manipulates reality; his first goal is survival." Robert Tucker likewise claims that "the statesman has as his highest moral imperative the preservation of the state entrusted to his care" (Osgood and Tucker 1967, 304 n. 71). When survival truly is at stake, all else may indeed appropriately give way, much as domestic law and most moral theories permit private individuals to use deadly force in self-defense.

Survival, however, rarely is at stake. It simply is not true that "the struggle for power is identical with the struggle for survival" (Spykman 1942, 18). Only rarely is it the case that "the system forces states to behave according to the dictates of realism, or risk destruction" (Mearsheimer 1995, 91).

Other national interests, though, no matter how "vital," lack the preemptive force of survival. They must be balanced against competing political, legal, moral, and other imperatives. The resulting dilemmas are real and important. But realists typically ignore these problems. And at their worst they advance the monstrously misguided claim that national interests ought always to take precedence over all other values in the decisions of statesmen.

6 The Office of the Statesman

Turning from states to statesmen, realists regularly argue that different standards apply to the public actions of national leaders and the actions of private individuals (p. 156) (e.g. Carr 1946, 151; Kennan 1954, 48; Thompson 1985, 8). Like other professionals, statesmen have a professional obligation to give priority to the interests of their "clients." Much as a defense lawyer is ethically bound to (within certain limits) give an aggressive defense to a guilty client, and a doctor (within certain limits) is required to do what is best for her patient rather than society as a whole, so a statesman is, by the nature of her office, required to do what is best for her state and its interests. "Unlike the solitary individual who may claim the right to judge political action by universal ethical guidelines, the statesman will always make his decision on the basis of the state's interest" (Russell 1990, 51).

This regularly leads to policies that treat the lives and interests of nationals and foreigners differently. For example, Western embassies evacuated their own nationals but few locals when the genocide began in Rwanda in April

1994. Morally problematic as this may be, we not only expect and regularly accept but often even demand such behavior. National leaders are agents charged with a special *ethical* responsibility to protect the rights and further the interests of their citizens, the principals for whom they work.

The resulting foreign policy may be “amoral” in the sense that it is not shaped or directly judged by the principles of ordinary morality. It is, however, neither “value free” nor beyond ethical or other normative limits. Much as an attorney is obliged to divulge knowledge of a future crime planned by her client or a doctor is prohibited from purchasing an organ for her patient, there are limits on how statesmen may legitimately pursue the interests of their citizens.

Some limits arise from international law and the ethical (and other) norms of the society of states.² For example, today states may legitimately use force only in self-defense and only within the restrictions imposed by the laws of war and humanitarian law.

National interests and values, however, may also constrain a state's foreign policy. Consider, for example, the commitment of many states to famine and disaster relief, democracy promotion, development assistance, or human rights. “The national interest” is what the term manifestly indicates—namely, those interests/values that are held by the nation. The insistence of some realists (e.g. Morgenthau 1954, 5, 10) that states define their interest in terms of power reflects a deeply contentious, and descriptively inaccurate, prescriptive theory of foreign policy.

There is no compelling theoretical reason why a state should not place a high value on, for example, fighting communism, or Islamo-fascism, or world poverty. Appeals to *raison d'état* and statesmanship cannot determine what interests the state has or ought to have. These questions of values exceed the reach of the insights of realism.

(p. 157) 7 Prudence

An even more explicitly ethical argument for an “amoral” foreign policy appeals to “prudence,” which Machiavelli defines as “knowing how to recognize the qualities of inconveniences, and ... picking the less bad as good” (*The Prince*, ch. 21, para. 6). Because “one always finds that, bound up with what is good, there is some evil,” Machiavelli counsels emulating the Romans, who “always took the lesser evil to be the better alternative” (*Discourses*, bk. III, ch. 37, para. 1; bk. I, ch. 38, para. 2).

Morgenthau similarly argues that “prudence—the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions—[is] the supreme virtue in politics. Ethics in the abstract judges action by its conformity with the moral law; political ethics judges action by its political consequences” (1954, 9). “Political ethics is indeed the ethics of doing evil ... choose, since evil there must be, among several possible actions the one that is least evil” (1946, 202; cf. Thompson 1985, 13). This is a variant on Max Weber's famous distinction between an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility.³

The public good of one's own state, however, is not the only appropriate standard for judging the actions of statesmen. Prudence does regularly conflict with morality, religion, and other values. There is no reason to believe, though, that it *always* appropriately takes priority over all other values and concerns. And strikingly absent from most realist discussions is any account of how to balance these competing normative demands.

I suspect that much of the realist tendency to exaggerate arises from failing to explore the complex but unavoidable interactions of the demands of power, morality, and statesmanship. Dazzled by the power of their insights into the (undeniably important) limits on pursuing moral, legal, and humanitarian objectives, realists typically fail to reflect systematically on the limits of power politics. And it is particularly tragic for a tradition that emphasizes responsible statesmanship that realists not only fail to grapple seriously with the problems of balancing competing values but that their characteristic exaggerations short-circuit serious engagement with this central issue of statesmanship.

8 Realism and Moralism

A defensible realist ethic is perhaps best seen as a warning against the inappropriate application of moral

standards to international political action. “The realist target (p. 158) is, or should be, not morality but certain distortions of morality, distortions that deserve the name of moralism” (Acheson 1958; cf. Thompson 1985, 5; Lefever 1998, ch. 9; Coady 2005, 123). Thus leading figures such as Carr, Niebuhr, and Kennan explicitly cast their work as a critique of “idealism,” understood as a combination of rationalism, moralism, and legalism.

Here too, though, a valuable caution regularly is unreasonably exaggerated. For example, Carr (1946, 153) claims that “theories of international morality tend to fall into two categories. Realists ... hold that relations between states are governed solely by power and that morality plays no part in them. The opposite theory, propounded by most utopian writers, is that the same code of morality is applicable to individuals and to states.” In fact, though, not only are there many other positions but few people actually hold either of these views. Most people, both lay and professional, understand that statesmen are subject to the demands of competing systems of values. And, on careful examination, we find that most leading realists acknowledge that moral and ethical principles are, as Kenneth Thompson (1985, 22) puts it, “operative but not controlling.”

Carr (1946, 235) himself, in a more restrained moment, argues that “it is an unreal kind of realism which ignores the element of morality in any world order.” Morgenthau talks of “the curious dialectic of ethics and politics, which prevents the latter, in spite of itself, from escaping the former’s judgment and normative direction” (1946, 177) and allows that “nations recognize a moral obligation to refrain from the infliction of death and suffering under certain conditions despite the possibility of justifying such conduct in the light of ... the national interest” (1948, 177). Niebuhr (1932, 233, xxiv) not only insists that “an adequate political morality must do justice to the insights of both moralists and political realists” but argues that the “ultimate purpose” of realist analysis “is to find political methods which will offer the most promise of achieving an ethical social goal for society.”

Realists rightly remind us of the dangers of ignoring “realities” rooted in groupism, egoism, and anarchy. A narrow vision of “the national interest defined in terms of power” (Morgenthau 1954, 5, 10) certainly deserves consideration in debates over a state’s international objectives. But arguments that “no ethical standards are applicable to relations between states” (Carr 1946, 153) and that “universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states” (Morgenthau 1954, 9) not only cannot bear critical scrutiny but prove not even to reflect the considered views of most leading self-identified realists—despite their unfortunate tendency to repeat and emphasize such indefensibly exaggerated claims.⁴ As John Herz (1976, (p. 159) 11) notes, “the mitigation, channeling, balancing, or control of power has prevailed perhaps more often than the inevitability of power politics would lead one to believe.”

9 The Contributions and Limits of Realism

The implication of the preceding assessment is that realism is best read as a cautionary ethic of political prudence rooted in a narrow yet insightful vision of international politics.⁵ But realism can avoid encouraging a monstrously distorted foreign policy only if we take to heart Carr’s insistence (1946, 89) that “we cannot ultimately find a resting place in pure realism.” “Political action must be based on a co-ordination of morality and power.” “Sound political thought and sound political life will be found only where both [reality and utopia, power and morality] have their place” (Carr 1946, 97; cf. Schwarzenberger 1951, xv).⁶

We must also guard against a very different sort of exaggeration. Not every appeal to anarchy, egoism, or groupism is realist, in either inspiration or application. Analysts of virtually all traditions and theoretical perspectives take anarchy as a defining feature of international relations. Only radical cosmopolitans, libertarians, and anarchists challenge the assumption of groupism. Most ethical traditions and moral theories see the struggle with egoism as central to the problems of moral action. Realism does not have a monopoly or copyright on these explanatory variables, let alone on conflict.

Nonetheless, the combination of anarchy, egoism, and groupism, leading to strong pressures to conflict-generating power politics, does give realist analyses a recognizable style and character—and value. So long as realism does not claim too much for itself, its central place in the discipline is deserved. Realism, however, is not, and cannot be, the general theory of international politics or international ethics that many of its proponents present it to be.

I thus share William Wohlforth’s stress, at the end of the preceding chapter, on the importance of modesty among realists. I am, however, less sanguine about (p. 160) the systematic change that he discerns. For example, John

Mearsheimer seems to me hardly modest in his theoretical aspirations or claims and Stephen Walt's arguments (2002; 1997) for "the enduring relevance of the realist tradition" and "the progressive power of realism" are not much more modest than those of his teacher, Kenneth Waltz. Conversely, the more consistent modesty of recent realists such as Charles Glaser or Randall Schweller is no greater than that of, say, Niebuhr, Herz, Tucker, or Glenn Snyder. I see more continuity and recurrence than change. In particular, I expect the peculiar mixture of modesty and exaggeration, and a striking tendency to forget or suppress the limits that one "knows" apply, to remain characteristic of the realist tradition in the coming years.

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The Ethics of Realism

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The Ethics of Realism

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Notes:

- (1) Political realism has no obvious connection with either moral realism, the view that moral judgments refer to or are based on natural or objective features of the world, or scientific realism, the view that theory-independent knowledge of unobservable entities is possible, making it in principle possible to obtain accurate scientific knowledge of the “true” nature of reality.
- (2) If an international society has few if any shared norms and values, that is an empirical fact about that particular international society rather than a general theoretical feature of international relations.
- (3) See Weber's 1919 essay, “Politics as a vocation,” widely reprinted—e.g. in Weber (1958; 2004); cf. also Williams (2005, ch. 5). For an excellent brief account of Weber as a realist, see Smith (1986, ch. 2).
- (4) Joel Rosenthal's social history (1991) of the postwar generation of American realists, *Righteous Realists*, nicely captures the crusading spirit of these critics of moralism, who in their deeply held belief in their own insight and righteousness were unusually prone to exaggerating both the power of realism and the shortcomings of other approaches. Consider, for example, the inaccurate and unfair labels “idealists” and “utopians” with which they regularly tarred analysts who took seriously the demands of morality, law, or reason in international relations.
- (5) Elsewhere (Donnelly 2005, 52–4; 2000, ch. 9) I make a parallel argument about realism as a social scientific theory. For other summary assessments of realism, in addition to the preceding chapter, see Gilpin (1986), Keohane (1986), Doyle (1997), Grieco (1997), Guzzini (1998), Jervis (1998), Vasquez (1998), and Walt (2002).
- (6) Niebuhr (1944, 14–15) similarly stresses combining the insights of “the children of darkness” and “the children of light;” that is, “moral cynics, who know no law beyond their will and interest,” and thus are characteristically evil but wise, and “those who believe that self-interest should be brought under the discipline of a higher law,” who Niebuhr paints as characteristically virtuous but foolish.

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