

HANS J. MORGENTHAU AND THE THREE PURPOSES OF POWER

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PRELIMINARY NOTE

This only slightly language-edited draft version is an analysis of Morgenthau's understanding of power, as I finished it in May 2017 during my sabbatical at Cornell University. I intend to turn it into the three opening chapters of a book. It is written mainly based on primary sources (i.e. a close reading of Morgenthau's writings), and I intend to systematically include secondary sources in the revision.

I presented the text at a Theory Seminar at the London School of Economics in March 2018 and received very helpful comments. Felix Berenskötter and Nicholas Onuf have also been so kind as to provide extensive comments on the text. All of these I will try to integrate in the revision/extension into three chapters.

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HANS J. MORGENTHAU AND THE THREE PURPOSES OF POWER

Hans Morgenthau fled his native Germany for Geneva (Switzerland) and Madrid (Spain) before arriving in the USA not long before the outbreak of World War II. Of secular Jewish origin, he had seen his native country, and many of its citizens, become engulfed in violent anti-Semitism and anti-intellectualism. Whatever his misgivings about the Weimar Republic, the rise of Nazism revealed the high value of a pluralist society and a state of law. The world was given another chance, perhaps its last in an age of nuclear weapons. To use this chance, Morgenthau's aim was to uncover the profound causes of what he saw as inescapable power politics whose intensity had dangerously increased through a historical shift starting in the 19th century.

A new form of nationalism systematically undermined the classical morality and moderation of domestic and international affairs.¹ It was both an indicator and source of a world order dangerously out of control. Connected to the rise of the liberal-constitutional state in 19th century Europe², it became part of its demise. At home, even before Nazi power in 1933, Morgenthau witnessed the militarisation of German society with the SA and the intimidation, if not worse, of large parts of the population. Once abroad, he could follow how nationalism was used in Nazi Germany to define its 'true' citizen and then curtail, if not abolish, rights for any other. Eventually, in the name of the German nation and Aryan race, the Nazi state eliminated any political, judicial and media checks and balances. Social groups hence stripped of any defence, their systematic killing could follow. Domination had turned total.

Nationalism informed a ruthless system of external expansionism, too, replacing the classical system of checks and balances in world affairs. After World War I, the right to national self-determination became the cornerstone of world order. It was not to be checked or enabled by a balance of power or by concert diplomacy. Instead, collective security would provide the ultimate limitation of war. Collective security stands for a deterrent system where countries agree to support fellow countries collectively against military aggression. Faced with the threat of such overwhelming response, countries would rationally desist from aggression since it would never pay; war itself would become irrational. Morgenthau never did believe in this; and when Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 went fundamentally unchallenged, he declared: 'a whole period of international relations and of international law comes to a close. Now, collective security is definitely dead, even

¹ It is remarkable how little Morgenthau mentions colonialism in his writings. Obviously, the 19th century can be seen as the last century of international 'moderation' only by entirely ignoring all wars not directly opposing great powers on the European continent. This neglect is also curious, since colonialism would fit his theory of an inevitable spill-over of the domestic will to power abroad, when the 'new frontiers' have been exhausted and great powers meet in a finite zero-sum position (see e.g. his analysis of the USA in Morgenthau 1962c).

² In contrast, for an analysis that stresses the role played by creoles, i.e. American-born English and Spanish descendants, in the creation of modern nationalism, see Anderson 1991, chapter 4.

as an ideological device.³ For him, there was no escape from state egoism. As he wrote at some point, a collective security system would be either impossible or unnecessary. If states were reliably able to put international norms over their national interest, collective security was not needed; if they were not, it would not work.

Worse, so Morgenthau, nationalism had undermined the modicum of moral checks and balances of earlier international society. The common values and beliefs shared by the aristocratic European society of the 18th century did not abolish conflict, which is impossible, but limited its scope. The nationalism and democratisation of politics in 19th century Europe undermined the system's legitimacy and so destroyed its functioning. The transnational aristocratic elite gave way to a new elite only accountable to its own demos (at best). Universalist ethics gave way to 'nationalistic universalism', or the attempt to mould the world according to one's own image under the pretence of being universally valid.⁴

For, in a deep psychological sense, nationalism had replaced religion. At the very moment more (but not all) individuals obtained political franchise, they faced a world increasingly 'disenchanted', to use Max Weber's earlier expression.⁵ Political ownership was more widely shared, while its purpose was lost in a world where religion no longer gave support and orientation. Man, so Morgenthau, faced his existential loneliness⁶, and the nation became the last provider of community and meaning. 'Thus, carrying their idols before them, the nationalistic masses of our time meet in the international arena, each group convinced that it executes the mandate of history, that it does for humanity what it seems to do for itself, and that it fulfills a sacred mission ordained by providence however defined. Little do they know that they meet under an empty sky from which the gods have departed.'⁷

In this way, Morgenthau put together an overall picture that is bleak. He diagnosed a world out of balance, unchecked, in which individuals seek material security and love; societies create and then destroy always precarious liberties; and nations meet potentially unfettered by any morality that could sustain a moderate balance of power. It is a world in which both domestic rule and inter-state war can become total. A politics that would be able to halt the interconnected phenomena of totalitarianism and total war was for Morgenthau a moral imperative. If (the lust for) power was at the base of this predicament, as he argued, (the balance of) power was also a necessary part of the solution. For him, understanding the phenomenon of power was hence fundamental for the scientific diagnose and the practical therapy of politics in the 20th century and after.

Power is central and ubiquitous in his political analysis and theory. When providing

³ Morgenthau 1938–39, p. 123.

⁴ Morgenthau 1948c, p. 88.

⁵ Weber 1988 [1919].

⁶ Morgenthau 1962a (gender attributes as in the original).

⁷ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 196; 1948c, p.99.

diagnose and therapy, Morgenthau does not use a single theorisation of power, however. He uses power for different purposes and with different meanings. Hence, this chapter is as much a way to use power analysis to make sense of Morgenthau as it is a way to use Morgenthau to get a first sense of how the book envisages the analysis of power. Starting a book on power in International Relations with a chapter on Morgenthau is not merely a conventional nod to one of the fathers of power politics in the discipline. Instead, its main interest consists in highlighting different concerns for which we look for an understanding of power. For classical realism, they are manifold. This chapter will focus on three central ones. Morgenthau uses power in political theory for understanding the very nature of politics. Then, the lust for power is a central part of his understanding of human nature that, in turn, founds the possibility and circumscribes the kind of scientific theory possible in the social sciences. He proposes a fundamentally utilitarian theory of action in which the national interest in terms of power determines state behaviour and the balance of power as the backbone of any world order. Finally, after having thus carved out the specifically 'political' in human affairs in the will to power and its effects, irreducible to law or economics, and after having based a science on this anthropological regularity which explains the regularity of state behaviour, he uses power as a 'medium' of political practice to understand and advise effective but also ethical statesmanship.

The purposes of his power analyses are hence threefold. First, power serves to define the specific logic of politics in the social world, hereby providing the ontological anchoring of Morgenthau's approach. Second, power is the central explanatory factor in a utilitarian theory where states seek either the preservation, expansion or demonstration of power. Finally, Morgenthau looks for an ethical usage of power in a foreign policy strategy, a praxeology of the lesser evil. Although his own way of tying this package of ontological, explanatory and practical-normative purposes may be unique, those purposes are intrinsically connected to the reasons for which we use the concept of power – even though many of those purposes and meanings will be temporarily lost during the next decades of International Relations (IR).

1. POWER AND THE NATURE OF POLITICS – POLITICS AND THE NATURE OF POWER

Morgenthau's earlier writings aim to carve out a specific logic of politics. According to him, neglecting the specifically 'political' in the social world was responsible for the dire understanding of world affairs that led to catastrophe in the first half of the 20th century. Being a lawyer by education, he opposed the attempts of positivist law to keep both morals and politics out of its self-understanding, as if legal validity could be achieved without them. Becoming a scholar of politics by vocation, he saw the pernicious role played by (a certain take on) liberalism that reduces ethics and politics to rational teleology and scientism, eventually subsuming the study of politics under economics. Finally, with an eye on philosophy, he qualifies the autonomous logic of politics as never divorced from morality. A pure Machiavelism is just as much a utopia as the harmony of interests. In short, law and economics cannot be thought without the political, and cannot subsume it; but neither can the logic of politics be divorced from morality.

For him, such attempts to evade or reduce politics were not just hopelessly misguided; they were positively dangerous. Not seeing the way democracies, markets and the international legal order are all ultimately dependent on the distribution of power and the potential conflict of actor interests could not produce but hapless politics. Its policies would simply clash with the reality of the world, as he saw it. Understanding the specificity of the political is hence fundamental to make ends realistic and means appropriate. For Morgenthau, power is the essential element for understanding the specifically political that has eluded practitioners and observers alike.

Politics as a critique of legal self-sufficiency

In its opposition to natural law, legal positivism is in principle related to political realism in IR.⁸ It recognises as legal rules only those that have been established (posited) by subjects of international law, in particular states. This positive law contrasts with natural law based on the existence of rights and norms that reason can derive from human nature. Natural law is universal and determines the legal validity of norms, whether or not governments recognise them. Despite legal positivism's insistence on that which is, rather than what should be – a focus akin to realists and shared by Morgenthau – he advanced two main criticisms which made him endorse a more sociological approach⁹ and explicitly reserve a place for universal ethics. For him, law was fundamentally dependent on both politics and the underlying social forces.

He argued that legal positivism conceives of the legal realm, sources and effect of law in a manner that is too autonomous and 'self-sufficient'¹⁰. Legal problems

⁸ Bobbio 1981.

⁹ For a discussion, see Meiertöns 2015.

¹⁰ Morgenthau 1940, p. 263.

would be all resolvable by the mere interpretation of positive law. In this view, positivistic legal theory can conceive of politics only as a residual category to that which is legal because conducive to a solution by positive law.¹¹ For Morgenthau, this errs in many regards relevant for the analysis of law, politics and power.

First, it sees all legal conflicts in international affairs as fundamentally similar. Yet, Morgenthau made a distinction between legal conflicts which are within the normative system and those which challenge the very underlying logic of the normative order, something he calls 'tensions'.¹² For the latter, the reference back to the established legal order is not part of the solution, but part of the problem: law cannot substitute itself for politics where fundamental visions and interests clash. He would refer to Nazism and its rejection of an international society, the challenge posed by Leninist anti-imperialism and later decolonisation as moments which are about the principles itself, not just their interpretation or application. Focusing only on positivist law mistakes the problem, indeed even the legal problem itself.

Second, legal self-sufficiency cannot understand the very nature of norms. Although legal positivism claims to be empirical not metaphysical, it makes two mistaken moves, becoming too narrow and too broad at the same time. It is too narrow when it includes in the list of valid norms only those which are derived from legal state acts. This neglects norms that generate elsewhere. Such norms are not derived from states positing law, but, at times, constitute in themselves what makes such positive law possible in the first place, such as the norm of sovereignty.¹³ Without fundamental norms such as sovereignty, we would not be able even to delimit the subjects of international law of the positivist tradition.

Inversely, a self-centred focus of positivist law ends up including norms as valid which *de facto* are not, and which a (scientific) positivist mind, looking only at what there actually is, should exclude. To make this argument, Morgenthau focuses on the role of sanctions. According to him, negative sanctions (punishments) are constitutive of legal validity and hence of the very existence of a norm. If a norm is not backed by the expectation of a negative sanction, it cannot be said to have legal validity, for it is this threat of reprisal, which, for Morgenthau, is the mechanism to make individual behaviour converge towards the normative system. This does not necessarily entail that such sanctions will actually be effective in imposing a certain behaviour. But without sanction, there is no cost, let alone changed behaviour; there is, literally, no valid norm. For him, the decline of the toothless Versailles order was proof of his approach.¹⁴

Both limitations point to a fundamental error in legal positivism: it does not see that all legal rules are ultimately dependent on a substratum of social forces, or what he

¹¹ Morgenthau 1933, p. 38.

¹² Morgenthau 1933, p. 78. See also 1948b, pp. 343–346.

¹³ Morgenthau 1936, p. 3, and 1940, p. 269, 272.

¹⁴ For the argument in this paragraph, see Morgenthau 1935, pp. 479–490; 1936, pp. 16–17; 1940, pp. 265f., 276.

also calls the 'political', which 'determines the content of norms, which influences their validity, and on which depend the very fact and manner of its realisation.'¹⁵ Indeed it is part and parcel of international law itself, when, for instance, it intervenes in the assessment of international disputes. 'The precepts of international law need not only to be interpreted in the light of the ideals and ethico-legal principles which are at their basis. They need also to be seen within the sociological context of economic interests, social tensions, and aspirations for power, which are the motivating forces in the international field, and which give rise to the factual situations forming the raw material for regulation by international law.'¹⁶

Politics as a critique of scientism and economics

Morgenthau's critique of legal theory was fundamental. Just as Max Weber before, he moved away from law toward what he perceived as truly empirical sciences. The disciplinary migration took place in the USA where he took up professorships in Political Science. His expectation and hope was to find there the intellectual and ethical place that law was unable to offer. He was to be disappointed again.

In a somewhat parallel manner to his critique of legal self-sufficiency, he criticised the US academic study of politics for being both too detached from its philosophical underpinnings, and yet not empirical enough, taking its hopes for reality. While positivism had defined ethics and politics out of its realm, the liberal scientism he encountered in the US academy had reduced ethics and politics to utilitarianism and economics. The faith in the effectiveness of law had been replaced by faith in the effectiveness of reason, again unable, as he saw it, to capture the logic and evil of politics. No good policy advice could come out of this. For the 'international scientist', the 'supreme value is not power', as it is for international politics, 'but truth.' 'There is essentially nothing to fight for; there is always something to analyse, to understand, and to reform.'¹⁷ Morgenthau was in for yet another wrecking exercise bearing a standard of 'power'.

That even the academic study of politics had misapprehended the role of power may have come as a surprise to his peers. Yet Morgenthau would insist that while the discipline acknowledged an important role of power, it was reduced to being a residual, rather than a fundamental, feature of the human condition.¹⁸ This neglect of the 'stark facts of politics'¹⁹ informs a view where rationality is all that is needed

¹⁵ Morgenthau 1936, p. 19 (all translations are mine).

¹⁶ Morgenthau 1940, p. 269.

¹⁷ Morgenthau 1946, p. 101.

¹⁸ The following presentation will not always follow Morgenthau's idiosyncratic terminology in *Scientific Man vs Power Politics*. The book endorses science already in the preface, defending the purpose of looking for general causes of events, while then apparently repudiating it ('scientism'). He criticizes conservatism and liberalism, while being arguably both: conservative in his vision of human nature and the role of violence, his cyclical vision of history, and his form of elitism, yet liberal for the defence of pluralism and individual rights. Finally, he endorses a rationalist theory of action (158), rational social planning (152) and an ethics of practical reason, while lambasting rationalism. I will occasionally avoid his catch-all conceptualisations and replace them with more precise terms.

¹⁹ Morgenthau 1946, p. 97.

for conflict resolution, where science can provide the blueprints which would reform the world and relegate power politics to the dustbin of history. 'The very field of politics thus becomes a kind of atavistic residue from a prerational period.'²⁰ His critique of this rationalist *Zeitgeist* comes in two steps. He opposed the way politics is merged into science, and then science reduced to a certain take of economics.

The reduction of politics to science became possible with the advent of rationalism. Morgenthau constructs rationalism as a philosophical teleology in whose future all conflicts can be resolved without violence. Rationalism's main assumption is that man, through reason, is perfectible. Seen in this way, all violent conflicts are simply a temporary expression of a reason that has not yet come to its fruition. To change this, science should become a replacement of politics altogether, since the knowledge of the laws of the social world are accessible through reason, and realisable in practice through science.

Although Morgenthau would be the last to deny improvements in human civilisations, he would assume neither that they are here to stay and further progress, nor that reason can overcome what he believes to be the hard core of the human as a political animal.²¹ Human perfectionism will find its limits in the essence of politics, which is 'the aspiration for power over men', the *animus dominandi*.²² The irrational lust for power is pursued in a necessarily violent game. 'Even where legal relations hide relations of power, power is to be understood in terms of violence, actual and potential; and potential violence tends here [SG: in world politics] always to turn into actual warfare.'²³ For Morgenthau, politics is not just an atavism, a 'disease' or 'evil finally overcome', but part of the 'autonomous forces which engender historic necessity in their own right and not as a mere deviation from reason.'²⁴ (Political) Science in the name of rationalism can pretend to substitute politics, but only at our own peril.

Such a belief in the force of reason has the effect of importing the use of a scientific approach and standards of economics into the study of politics. International politics becomes akin to business competition in which 'business enterprise becomes the standard for the evaluation of governmental activities, the "business administration" the ideal of governmental perfection.'²⁵ Moreover, Morgenthau's critique joins E. H. Carr's earlier attack on the 'harmony of interests'²⁶ and the belief that interconnected interests, say through trade, would diminish the risk of war, if

²⁰ Morgenthau 1946, p. 28.

²¹ Not all philosophies that are in the rational Enlightenment tradition would assume these, either.

²² Morgenthau 1946, p. 45.

²³ Morgenthau 1946, p. 50. This statement contradicts an earlier distinction between the means of politics proper and collective violence or war, where the two domains, following Clausewitz, are set apart. See Morgenthau 1933, p. 62.

²⁴ Morgenthau 1946, p. 32, 71, and pp. 38–39 respectively.

²⁵ Morgenthau 1946, p. 29.

²⁶ Carr 1946, chapter 4; Morgenthau 1946, pp. 75–77.

not abolish it altogether. Here again, solutions are reduced to being of a merely technical nature, and the specificity of politics is lost.

In a move that would set the study of international politics apart from other social sciences²⁷, Morgenthau insisted in the perniciousness of what came to be called the 'domestic analogy', that is, the mistaken transfer of processes and mechanisms from the domestic to the international realm.²⁸ The major difference is the absence of a central sanctioning authority in world politics, which is, however, the very condition that allows partially harmonious economic relations in domestic affairs. It is the state's sovereignty, and the imposition of the legal order by the dominant class, which is the distinctive political element that makes a qualitative difference. In general, Morgenthau believes that the 'conditions which make the application of the scientific methods to domestic politics at least a temporary and partial success are entirely and permanently absent in the international sphere.'²⁹ Economics cannot be the model for a science of international politics, being both the wrong type of science and having a mere residual conception of politics to start with.

Politics as ethical and necessarily evil

To define the specific logic of politics, Morgenthau conceptualises the will to power as a psychological constant. Seeking, maintaining and demonstrating power are the three basic forms of political behaviour. This political will to power has a marked tendency to trespass all rational limitations.³⁰ Therefore, the sphere of politics is intrinsically connected to conflict and violence, and history an ongoing struggle with no redemption. From here, one could have easily expected a more or less clean line towards a Machiavellian vision of ethics in which the ends of power justify any means. Yet however often Morgenthau used his harsh language to ridicule what he sees as the blind ideology of others, he reserved an important place to ethics in his understanding of man, politics, and world affairs. As he did in general, he would infer from the existence of normative order and moral behaviour back to the psychology of men, to human nature. Power is constitutive of the sphere of politics; but it is not its exclusive component.

Already in his early legal writings, he insisted that denying the existence of a universal morality, or even of natural law, flew into the face of reality. Again, legal positivism did not live up to its empiricist credentials. In its opposition to natural law, legal positivism simply excluded it from the normative sphere: if it shall not be valid, it cannot be present. Yet, Morgenthau saw this as an exclusion done *a priori* with no empirical justification, a kind of 'negative meta-physics' as he called it, that is, the ultimately metaphysical position to exclude any *empirically existing*

²⁷ Guzzini 1998, pp. 10–11.

²⁸ Bull 1966, Suganami 1989.

²⁹ Morgenthau 1946, p. 85 and p. 103 (quote).

³⁰ This is from an early formulation in Morgenthau 1933, pp. 42–43, 69, but this remains constant over time.

metaphysics.³¹

For not only are morals empirically present; they are indeed the necessary condition for a functioning legal and political order that assures compliance by the citizens on the one hand, and limitation on the holders of power, on the other.³² Morals guarantee social order. Since any order is more effective, the less sanctions need to be applied for achieving compliance, it depends on the morals of its citizens to restrain their potential to violate the law. Moreover, precisely for the political aspect of any order, it is not the legal order that ultimately limits ruling power, but the balance of social forces and the underlying morals to which power holders keep allegiance. With the breakup of such a moral anchor, power stays unchecked.

Although he saw a difference in the very setup of the domestic and international order, it did not follow for him that states were pursuing power politics unfettered by moral concerns. There has always been a difference between what states could have done in terms of their national interest and what they actually did. States do recognise moral obligations despite being able to justify their violation in terms of the national interest.³³ Put differently, even though states always follow their national interest, some things do simply not enter their calculus.³⁴ It is not that interests come first and are then checked by morals; morals are already part of the interests and their calculation. The scope and content of such moral restraint is no constant, however. Indeed, Morgenthau was so concerned about the 20th century because it had shown how states could end up abolishing all moral limits to their national interest formulation.

In other words, Morgenthau's picture of the sphere of politics is two-sided. On the one hand, as seen above, '[t]o the degree in which the essence and aim of politics is power over man, politics is evil; for it is to this degree that it degrades man to a means for other men.' The aspiration to hold power over others, the *animus dominandi*, being 'the constitutive principle of politics as a distinct sphere of human activity' implies that whatever final aim an actor may have, power is always the immediate aim.³⁵ Trying to hold power over others therefore means using them as a means to an end. Here, Morgenthau follows Kant's second moral imperative, according to which one should never use humans as a means, but always as an end. Given the nature of the sphere of politics, this cannot, however, be avoided, according to Morgenthau. In politics, we cannot escape evil.

On the other hand, politics is nonetheless not devoid of morality. Power constitutes the sphere of politics, but it is not alone. Morgenthau linked this intrinsic presence

³¹ Morgenthau 1936, pp. 2–3 and Morgenthau 1940, pp. 268–269.

³² For this paragraph, see Morgenthau 1945b, p. 147.

³³ Morgenthau 1948c, p. 82, and *verbatim* Morgenthau 1948b, p. 177.

³⁴ Morgenthau 1938–39, pp. 125–126, and *verbatim* Morgenthau 1939, p. 483; Morgenthau 1948c, pp. 79–80 and *verbatim* Morgenthau 1948b, pp. 174–175. There are however passages where it sounds more like the classical realist sequence of interest and ethical restraint, like, for instance, in Morgenthau 1945a, p. 5 and *verbatim* Morgenthau 1946, p. 176.

³⁵ Morgenthau 1945a, p.14, and *verbatim*, Morgenthau 1946, p. 195.

of morals back to the 'nature of man as both a political and a moral animal.'³⁶ 'The lust for power as ubiquitous empirical fact and its denial as universal ethical norm are the two poles between which, as between the poles of an electric field, this antinomy is suspended. The antinomy is insoluble because the poles creating it are perennial. There can be no renunciation of the ethical denial without renouncing the human nature of man....'³⁷ Whatever defenders or critics of the alleged Machiavellism of international conduct may say, the moral assessment of power has always been part of politics, too, and states can and often do politics of the 'lesser evil'.³⁸

³⁶ Morgenthau 1945a, p. 5 and *verbatim* Morgenthau 1946, pp. 177–178.

³⁷ Morgenthau 1945a, p. 17 and *verbatim* Morgenthau 1946, p. 201.

³⁸ In this vein, Morgenthau (1948a) criticises Carr for lacking a transcendental viewpoint of morality that leads him to become an apologist of power. (Although the first charge may be correct, the implication is not.)

2. POWER AND A THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

With hindsight, it is curious that Morgenthau became such a reference theorist for the post-war US discipline of International Relations.³⁹ His type of theorising, although not marginal, clearly did not fit the evolution of Political Science to which IR belongs in the USA, not the least in his own department in Chicago. In a scathing critique of *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry*, by leading Chicago professor Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan he took these eminent authors to task for trying to build a political theory from a 'straightforward empirical standpoint'.⁴⁰ For Morgenthau, that made no sense. Empirical inquiry is dependent on the underlying philosophical framework that provides the meaning to the analysis which otherwise would stay 'blind', just as much as political philosophy needs empirical verification for not becoming speculative. By not explicitly providing and defending the philosophical framework that necessarily underlies all empirical inquiry, let alone making philosophy and empirical analysis consistent (in an 'organic relationship'), he viewed their book as an indicator of the 'tragedy of political science and of philosophy in America'. By falling for some easy empiricism that makes their analysis 'without direction and barren of meaning', two 'superbly endowed minds' end up being no more than *dilettante*. With colleagues like this ...

Morgenthau's status as a, if not the, leading theorist becomes more understandable when one takes into account the specificity of IR and the specific historical context. As a field of study, IR has always been closer to political practice than most social sciences. Realism as a school of thought has also played such an important role because it uses the language of practice. Whereas social sciences usually develop an observational language with its own terms, realist theory shares the language of diplomatic practitioners. By providing the philosophical underpinnings for a worldview already given, Morgenthau could mobilise the language of diplomatic practice and institutionalise it in his theory. His theory echoed and spoke to practitioners, literally. Meanwhile, at a moment when US academic departments were developing the contours of a new discipline, his post-war textbook *Politics Among Nations* responded to a demand. His theory was going to speak to generations of students.

Still, this endeavour required that the philosophical underpinnings be brought into an 'organic relationship' with empirical inquiry. Morgenthau needed to translate his philosophical tenets into theoretical propositions. Human psychology or human nature were the foundation on which he built his theory of action. And here, paradoxically, despite all the criticisms of rationalism and utilitarianism as philosophies, his theory ends up being a version of a rational theory of action, once human drives are taken into account. Here the aspiration to hold power over others became the 'general causes of which particular events are but the outward

³⁹ For an empirical assessment of Morgenthau's role as an exemplar of the realist school and his leading status in the discipline, see Vasquez 1999.

⁴⁰ Morgenthau 1952, the quotes are from pp. 233, 234.

manifestation.⁴¹ Power moves from being the ontological anchor of his philosophy to the central explanatory factor of his theory.

Power as a psychological relation

When defining the specificity of the political, or the logic of politics, Morgenthau always referred back to human nature. He did not derive this by reference to biological or other sciences, but treated it as a universal ontological tenet verified as an 'undeniable fact of experience'.⁴² Fundamental for the understanding of politics is the aspiration for power over others, the *animus dominandi*. It is one of the three drives common to all of man: to live, to propagate, and to dominate, which are the basis of any society.⁴³ Elsewhere, he listed as universally common psychological traits and elemental aspirations 'the desire to live, to be free, and to have power.'⁴⁴

Although the expression 'to have power' is usually referring to a concept of power that is a property of a holder, Morgenthau uses it in terms of a relation. In general, power refers to 'man's control over the minds and actions of other men.' Political power is that particularly subcategory which does not involve actual violence in the asymmetrical relation, which would be military power. The threat of violence, however, is part and parcel of a psychological relation, as he calls it. In this way, Morgenthau makes a distinction between actual violence and political power, but includes both within his general approach to power. For both have an effect on B's actions. His definition, reminiscent of Weber's definition of *Macht*, then runs as follows: 'Thus the statement that A has or wants political power over B signifies always that A is able, or wants to be able, to control certain actions of B through influencing B's mind.'⁴⁵ This definition has many significant and problematic facets.

First, the definition moves from the description or definition of power as a relation to the use of power as an explanatory factor. Although the slide seems innocent, it may not be, as the book will later discuss. As seen, initially Morgenthau defined power as an asymmetrical psychological relation. Putting it this way, power does not explain; it is simply the descriptive term to characterise a significant form of asymmetrical relation. Or, indeed, such asymmetrical relations correspond to a theoretical definition on what is or constitutes power in his theory. In the definition, however, he slides from power as a relation to the statement that A 'has power' in a relationship that explains behaviour. A's power is the ability to control certain actions of B. A has the ability to influence B's behaviour, or, put differently, A can cause B's behaviour. B's behaviour can be explained by A's power. A definition becomes a causal claim.

Second, the definition insists on the psychological moment that political power

⁴¹ Morgenthau 1946, p. v.

⁴² Morgenthau 1948b, p. 18.

⁴³ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 17.

⁴⁴ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 199.

⁴⁵ Morgenthau 1948b. The quotes in this paragraph are from p. 13 and p. 14.

takes a passage point through the mind of B. This is the strong relational component in the definition. Power is not a property of A, but needs to pass via B; it derives from this relation. Such a stance is in the Weberian tradition, where *Herrschaft* is defined by the capacity to have one's order obeyed. The person obeying is a crucial component in a power relation. Weber saw famously in different types of legitimacy the source for this acceptance: tradition, habit, and reason. Yet, when it comes to the discussion and examples, Morgenthau seems to reduce these three to just one: the cost-benefit analysis of gains or losses. In other words, A affects B's mind mainly by making it more or less costly to engage in certain behaviour, by deterring compelling, and (later) also bribing B.⁴⁶ This can also happen inadvertently. As he noted, any inclusion of A's preferences into the calculus would be sufficient for qualifying as political power, 'in so far as his preferences influence the actions of other men.'⁴⁷ For the same reason, Morgenthau saw power whenever B's behaviour has come to conform to A's preferences.

This is consistent with his earlier legal analysis in which legal validity was related to the cost-benefit calculus of citizens who have to face certain sanctions when violating norms. In both cases, Morgenthau starts from a utilitarian calculating actor and sees egoistic behaviour curtailed only by 'the threat of severe punishment or under the overwhelming moral and social pressure generated by war or other national emergencies of a spectacular character.'⁴⁸ The scope of power or legal effectiveness is measured by the extent to which B's individual behaviour conforms to A's preferences (politics) or the general normative order (law), respectively.

In this way, Morgenthau's approach displays many quite typical binaries of power analysis that are, as the book will later show, not unproblematic. For one, power can be understood as a type of asymmetrical relation between A and B, i.e. as *domination*, while at the same time be used as a causal factor in the explanation of B's behaviour, i.e. as *influence*. He translates a theory of domination into a theory of action. Then, *political power* includes a genuine psychological relation when B adapts to A's preferences without the use of direct violence, whereas *military power* or *force* does not. Power is relational in the sense that it lies in the way A and B relate to each other; but the actual analysis relies on a utilitarian theory of strategic interaction in which behaviour is determined by the calculus of the balance sheet between the benefits of satisfied innate drives and the cost of external sanctions.

The national interest defined in terms of power

Morgenthau has become (in)famous for the idea that international politics is based on the national interest, which, in turn, is defined in terms of power.⁴⁹ The concept of national interest also has an important practical component to which we will

⁴⁶ For the role of bribing and positive sanctions in foreign policy, see Morgenthau 1962b.

⁴⁷ In this way, Morgenthau anticipates the 'law of anticipated reactions', which responds to the puzzle of whether the situation where B complies without A doing anything can count as an exercise of power.

⁴⁸ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 333.

⁴⁹ Morgenthau 1960, p. 5.

come later. In this section, we are primarily interested in its place for Morgenthau's explanatory theory. There, the national interest plays a crucial role, since it is the junction between the ontologically posited drives which constitute the logic of politics and the utilitarian theory of action which explains political behaviour. It is that which makes power move from an ontological anchor to the prime explanatory factor. Put differently, the two roles of power so far encountered meet in the national interest: power as an innate drive for behaviour (of A), and A's power causing B's behaviour in a social relation.

As mentioned above, there are different drives. Although the drive to dominate others is just one among many, it acquires a dominating position as compared to the others. This is partly due to Morgenthau's explicit focus on politics, but not only. It also stems from his view that politics, not law, economics or anything else, defines a social order. It is hence not just his analytical focus on politics but his theoretical primacy given to the political which explains that power becomes primordial for his theory. If that sounds circular, it is; but then Morgenthau does not derive one from the other. He provides no theoretical deduction; he simply posits their joint prominence as an ontological fact verified by historical experience.⁵⁰

Hence, 'the desire to live, to be free and to have power' ends up reducing the first two into the last. Indeed, Morgenthau starts his section of power, with 'International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim.'⁵¹ Without power, there is no ability to pursue life or achieve freedom. In one stroke, power becomes the indispensable means and the inescapable aim, i.e. that which defines the preferences of an actor. From here, the will to power becomes the general term which can subsume all interests of actors. According to Morgenthau, as we have seen, political action therefore falls into three categories only, namely to maintain a position of power, expand it, or demonstrate it. It is the politics of the status quo, of imperialism and of prestige. Given the utilitarian calculus, the policies correspond to strategies that allow the maximisation of the national interest expressed in terms of power.

The inclusion of prestige may be curious in this regard. Indeed, Morgenthau at some point includes 'a desire for social recognition' as a 'potent dynamic force determining social relations and social institutions.'⁵² This would quite upset the general setup, since recognition and domination would give rise to quite different social theories of action. But when he discusses the main reason for including the politics of prestige, he sees it mainly as a means for achieving the two other types of policies. If sanctions are the main ordering principle, and if an order is all the more stable the less one actually needs to use sanctions to achieve conformity of the rule (law) or behaviour that reflects the power holder's preferences, then imprinting

⁵⁰ This opens a circle of how we can establish a theory from historical experience when, at the same time, we are told we need a theory to understand that historical experience. I will return to this later.

⁵¹ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 13. See fn. 36 for earlier verbatim citations.

⁵² Morgenthau 1948b, p. 50.

a sufficient 'reputation for power' is a crucial means of domination. The reputation of power may make the use of sanctions unnecessary and diminish the cost of imposing an order or prevailing in a relation. A politics of prestige corresponds to this reputation for power and fits his idea of power as the inevitable immediate aim.⁵³

Besides reducing interests to power, Morgenthau saw the drive for power as insatiable; it is persistent. Morgenthau is explicit that the purpose of behaviour, the interest of an actor, is not just survival, but something that can never really be secured. In a crucial passage, he writes:

... the desire for power is closely related to the selfishness of which we have spoken but is not identical with it. For the typical goals of selfishness, such as food, shelter, security, and the means by which they are obtained, such as money, jobs, marriage, and the like, have an objective relation to the vital needs of the individual; their attainment offers the best chances for survival under the particular natural and social conditions under which the individual lives. The desire for power, on the other hand, concerns itself not with the individual's survival but with his position among his fellows once his survival has been secured. Consequently, the selfishness of men has limits; his will to power has none. For while man's vital needs are capable of satisfaction, his lust for power would be satisfied only if the last man became an object of his domination, there being nobody above or beside him, that is, if he became like God.⁵⁴

Power in Morgenthau's explanatory theory is hence derived from an 'ever unstilled desire' which, in turn, is relative in that it aims to maximise rank as compared with others. The national interest defined in terms of power becomes hence the causal constant, the explanatory dynamic in the theory.

By reducing the theory to one in which all interests can be expressed in terms of power and where rational actors weigh the costs and benefits of their move for the fulfilment of power, i.e. for the improvement or stabilisation of rank, Morgenthau proposes a fundamentally utilitarian theory of action, where power is the value to be maximised. In addition, the explanatory theory is not just utilitarian in its insistence on interest maximisation, but also basically behaviouralist. A behaviouralist theory of action 'black-boxes' motives or the actual calculus of

⁵³ For an example of its usage, see his critique of US politics in Vietnam, where the US understanding of the politics of prestige was completely wrong, in Morgenthau 1965, pp. 9–20 ('shadow and substance of power').

⁵⁴ Morgenthau 1945a, p. 13 and verbatim Morgenthau 1946, p. 193. This produces a tension in his theory, though. If the drive for power is the Promethean ambition to become like God, then any domination of nature, including social nature, too, is an 'ever unstilled and limitless' desire for humans. The drive for the control of nature, physical or social, is just as irrationally unstoppable as the drive for power of which it is part, since it is instrumental to maximise rank. The scientist teleology where humankind aspires for a divine place by eventually controlling nature is hence part of a limitless desire and cannot be stopped by whatever reasonable definition of the national interest. If a really rational national interest is possible, the drive for power can be limited; if it can be limited, his anthropological foundation and anti-rationalist critique does not hold. In the end, Morgenthau would provide a solution to a problem of his own making.

individual agents. All we need is externally given rationality and behaviour from which we can infer such calculus. Morgenthau's use of the national interest explicitly abstracts from motives and ideologies.⁵⁵ According to him, we cannot know what motives really are, and should not see ideological preferences as anything more than means in the politics of power. Hence all the analysis has to do is to establish the most rational course in terms of the national interest defined as power. Effectively black-boxing the actual preferences of any actor, assuming preferences as externally given (the national interest) and then comparing them to the actual behaviour makes this a specifically behaviouralist approach to rational action.⁵⁶ All these other items are not needed; all can be subsumed under an interest in power. As he says, it is an assumption borne out by history.

Hence, the 'national interest' achieves a quite important translation for Morgenthau: through it, the specifically political logic in the drive for domination becomes the causal constant that drives the explanation. That explanation, in turn, is a form of utilitarianism that black-boxes all actual preference formation, since all can be subsumed under the drive for power as the inevitable immediate aim. And it is a drive that can never really be satisfied. As we will see later, this will also allow the political scientist to use it as the rational measuring rod to assess actual policies. Power, the political actor, is what drives politics as such – and is the distinctive focus of the political observer. Its predictive power derives from this constant drive for maximising power either by protecting a favourable status quo, changing it via imperialism, or by having it respected at lowest cost through a policy of prestige.

The balance of power and the nature of a theory of international politics

Morgenthau's theory of international relations is based on the national interest defined in terms of power, which, in turn, is a limitless drive for rank maximisation. Simply aggregating such individual behaviour is enough to see the collective outcome as a balance of power, defined as 'an actual state of affairs in which power is distributed among several nations with approximate equality.'⁵⁷ It should therefore come as no surprise that Morgenthau says that a balance of power is 'of necessity'; it is but a logical implication of the strategic interaction of states that seek to maximise their rank. If everyone wants to get higher, the effect will equal out. Since the balance is in constant flux⁵⁸, this is to be seen as a general tendency, rather than as specific state (despite his own definition). Yet Morgenthau would not be himself if he did not complicate this straightforward analysis.

He introduced a first complication unwittingly. When presenting the balance of power as an equilibrium, he imported suddenly a theoretical logic that is no aggregation of individual behaviour, but the functional necessity of a 'social

⁵⁵ Morgenthau 1960, pp. 5ff.

⁵⁶ It is not a behaviouralist theory of action, but a normative theory of rational behaviour. For this, see chapter 3.

⁵⁷ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 125, fn. 1.

⁵⁸ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 131.

homeostasis'. This produces a profound theoretical tension. On the one hand, we have a utilitarian theory of rank maximisation; on the other, the balance of power is no aggregate of individual actions, but an autonomous system, and 'it is the purpose of all such equilibriums to maintain the stability of the system without destroying the multiplicity of the elements composing it.' Indeed, '[s]ince the goal is stability plus the preservation of all elements of the system, the equilibrium must aim at preventing any element from gaining ascendancy over the other.'⁵⁹ Without apparently being aware of it, Morgenthau combined a utilitarian theory of action with a functionalist theory of equilibrium. Yet, the explanatory logic is very different and cannot be combined. The first is individualist, where the parts explain the logic of the whole, whereas the second is holist, where the whole is more than the sum of its parts and acquires a dynamic of its own ('the equilibrium' has a 'purpose'). Whereas power is obviously crucial for the first derivation of the balance of power, it is less central for the second, since here the purpose of the system takes over. It is reasonable to assume that Morgenthau did not really mean a functionalist approach, but added an argument that looked useful in the defence of his power approach.⁶⁰

A second complication is the relationship between power and morality, or the balance of power and the normative context in which it is embedded. In both the utilitarian and functionalist account, the balance of power is an inevitable mechanism, 'of necessity', as Morgenthau wrote. But then, this contradicts his view of politics as being never divorced from morality. If all legal norms derive from their political substrata, as he wrote, the political substrata, in turn, cannot be thought independently of the normative context. Hence, any political mechanism, such as the balance of power, is dependent on an underlying shared normative commitment. In particular, if the balance of power is to provide stability to the international system and hence limit the frequency and scope of conflict, national policies need to share a common understanding about its role. In his words: 'Before the balance of power could impose its restraints upon the power aspirations of nations through the mechanical interplay of opposing forces, the competing nations had first to restrain themselves by accepting the system of the balance of power as the common framework of their endeavors.'⁶¹ Deprived of such 'common moral standards, and a common civilization, as well as of common interests, which kept in check the limitless desire for power... the balance of power is incapable of fulfilling its functions for international stability and national independence.'⁶²

This produces a marked tension between a balance of power that is once treated as logically necessary and once as historically and normatively contingent. The

⁵⁹ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 126 and 127.

⁶⁰ His comparison with the equilibria in our human body is indicative (p. 126). Taken seriously, it would imply our organs would fight to gain domination over each other; 'liver now beats heart'. That the equilibrium in a body is based on functional differentiation is not noticed here. Hence, it makes sense to assume that Morgenthau is not aware of the implications and is using a utilitarian model instead.

⁶¹ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 164.

⁶² Morgenthau 1948b, pp. 164–165.

balance of power is here no logical consequence of the *animus dominandi*, the necessitous result of individual power aspirations, as he wrote elsewhere, but an institution of international society that derives from a normative consensus to work in the first place. For it to function, states have to factor its role into their national interest. The balance of power is a self-fulfilling prophecy that functions if actors behave on a common understanding of its functioning. Given his own theory of rank maximisation, it is not evident how this can be derived from the theory. Somewhat paradoxically, hence, the centrepiece of Morgenthau's international theory is either misleading or itself in need of explanation. It is misleading when it simply refers to the results of strategic interaction driven by rank maximisation, since limitless power maximisation cannot guarantee a distribution of power 'with approximate equality'. Yet, when adding factors that fix such an equilibrium, the balance of power has to rely on a shared normative consensus of actors, which provides the primary explanatory gist, but whose origins cannot be derived from rank maximisation.⁶³

In the end, Morgenthau provides a historical explanation, which he simply posits and does not theoretically generate. Since the 16th century, such a common normative understanding as this has evolved in the context of the European society of nations. It shows in the 'non-political' part of international law that derives from the nations' 'permanent and stable interests' that 'exist, for instance, with respect to diplomatic privileges, territorial jurisdiction, extradition, wide fields of maritime law, arbitral procedure.' It originates 'in the permanent interests of states to put their normal relations upon a stable basis by providing for predictable and enforceable conduct with respect to these relations.'⁶⁴ But this origin is historical and contingent; there is no general cause to get there.

This tension translates into Morgenthau's general theory. On the one hand, his approach is surely driven by the concern for the historical preconditions that have brought the state system where it is now and whose historically developed logic needs to be understood so as to allow a policy that can avoid the dual threat of total war and totalitarian politics. On the other hand, he looks for general causes and laws.⁶⁵ As he wrote, 'the social sciences cannot hope to master the social forces unless they know the laws which govern the social relations of men', in which immediate causes 'have their roots in the innermost aspirations of the human soul'.⁶⁶ That makes him waver, at times conveniently for his chosen target of the day, between a more historicist and a more scientist outlook. He does argue that human relations do not fit strict causal models, because the same cause can have multiple effects (multifinality) and the same effect several independently working causes (equifinality). But then, although he uses this argument against scientism in

⁶³ Of course, this opens the question of where such shared consensus would come from. This assumes a theory of learning at the level of international society in which, for instance inspired by realists, 'historical experience' would have become commonly accepted.

⁶⁴ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 279.

⁶⁵ Morgenthau 1946, p. v.

⁶⁶ Morgenthau 1940, p. 284, Morgenthau 1946, p. 95.

the social world, his own vision is close to what those social scientists have been doing. 'The best the so-called "social laws" can do is exactly the best the so-called "natural laws" can do, namely, to indicate certain trends and to state the possible conditions under which one of these trends is most likely to materialize in the future', a science, as it were, based on 'statistical averages and probability.'⁶⁷

That leaves his position and the role of power in the explanatory theory in a limbo. Regularity, for him, is not just in human nature, but in historical, if repetitive, process.⁶⁸ The only part of his theory which can support this regularity are the 'universal laws based on human nature', in other words, the will to power. Yet, as he argues himself, its effects are contingent. This produces a circle: the desire for domination is central for human behaviour, an assumption borne out of history; but then power maximisation should be used independently to explain that very history from which it is derived. Of course, one can always read power into any behaviour *ex post* and declare that this explains regularity. Power becomes the master concept of the explanatory theory, but one which seems oddly unfalsifiable, just as metaphysical as he criticised positivist law to be.

Summary

For the purpose of building an explanatory theory, Morgenthau's version of classical realism very heavily relies on the concept of power. It characterises a psychological relation in which A has power by affecting the mind and then behaviour of B. This makes power analysis a subcategory of causal analysis: B's behaviour is caused by A's power. Moreover, the drive for power over others is innate and virtually limitless. It therefore provides the basis for a theory of action in which we can assume all actors aim to maximise their rank. All politics, and in particular sanctions, contribute to the cost-benefit analysis of rank maximisation. Not only this, but since power is always the immediate aim of any action, it becomes acceptable to assume that all political action can be reduced to rank maximisation for whatever other aim that may be later used. In world politics, this reduction shows in the three aims of state action: maintain, improve and demonstrate their power. There is no need to analyse actual motives. Morgenthau's theory is utilitarian, since it is based on rational maximisation, and behaviouralist, because it black-boxes actual preference formation. Power appears hence in three disguises: the desire for power is the motor and general cause, power resources are the means, and power as rank maximisation is the ends in this theory of action. When applied to world politics, it leads to the balance of power 'by necessity'. However, the

⁶⁷ Morgenthau 1944, p. 178, 179, see verbatim Morgenthau 1946, p. 136, 138. See there 'The social sciences do not need to be brought to the level of the natural sciences; they are already there as far as the logical structure of their laws is concerned.' For a critique that shows how Morgenthau wavers between a view of theory as a framework of analysis that is not empirically testable and justifying his theory for being empirical, see Griffiths 1992, pp. 60–70.

⁶⁸ Morgenthau 1946, pp. 149–152. See also his reply to Martin Wight's (1960) charge that there is no progress in world politics and hence no theory, turning Wight's criticism around such that it is precisely this repetitive feature of world affairs that makes a theory of IR possible, in Morgenthau 1970 [1964]. For a discussion of this positivist move and the circularity of his foundations, see Guzzini 2013, pp. 528–530.

balance of power only functions in the presence of a normative consensus about its functioning, shared by the major actors. That consensus, in turn, cannot be derived from rank maximisation in any necessary logical sense. As it turns out, Morgenthau's theorisation produces more than one contradiction by translating the metaphysical drive for domination into a utilitarian theory of action. Many of his analyses and solutions will return with later writers not always aware of the ancestry or the problems.

3. POWER AND FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY: STATESMANSHIP FOR THE LESSER EVIL

Power responds to a third purpose in Morgenthau's theorising. Besides being the central phenomenon that constitutes the sphere of politics by providing its distinct logic, the *animus dominandi*, and besides being the central concept for explaining political action as rank maximisation, power also serves a purpose in political practice. Morgenthau is also, indeed mainly, interested in how all this knowledge about the nature of politics and the general causes of state behaviour translates into a strategy of foreign policy. In the historical circumstances where the shared norms of the 'Aristocracy International' are no longer binding and informing the national interest, moderation and the limitation of conflict is at constant risk. The rise of a new form of nationalism threatens total war and totalised societies. How can such limitless power politics be avoided? What is the best *use of power*?

With the changed purpose, the expectations about the concept of power also shift. While using power in an explanatory theory, Morgenthau pointed to the inevitability of power politics, to the *animus dominandi* that determines behaviour, and to the formation of a balance of power by necessity. A quite determinist and clean causal reading such as this in his explanatory theory is necessary to establish the scientific credentials for the superiority of realist theory, the necessity for the primacy of power in theorising. It is a disciplinary power move, providing the background authority for policy advice. Handily, this theory is articulated in terms of a practice already given in earlier European statesmanship, which thus becomes justified. To have such authority, the more determinate the concept, the better. Power maximisation and the balance of power are empirically identifiable (and hence to some extent measurable) phenomena.

When interested in the possibilities of statesmanship, however, Morgenthau saw power, the national interest and the balance of power through the eyes of practitioners; and power suddenly appears all uncertain and immeasurable. Diplomacy may be based on Morgenthau's type of science, but for all the contingencies of the real world, it must be practised as art. In this context, the national interest defined in terms of power undergoes yet another metamorphosis. It is as if the explanatory theory is but a fleeting moment for establishing the practical rules of the art of diplomacy, translating the maxims that had helped international society to limit conflict in the past into a new era where some of its conditions no longer apply.

For, despite his status in the discipline, he did not primarily work with his explanatory theory. He mixes different understandings of theory. He clearly wanted to use the idea of a Weberian ideal type, when he wrote that the balance of power, as conceptualised by him, may not be found in reality, but may be evaluated as an approximation to an ideal system of balance of power.⁶⁹ Yet, when he uses the national interest, it is not to provide a Weberian ideal type, that is, a stylized

⁶⁹ Morgenthau 1960, p. 8.

depiction of a certain empirical phenomena that helps us understanding social reality, like the Weberian definition of a state as that political association with a monopoly of legitimate violence. Instead, Morgenthau uses the national interest as an ideal depiction of what the possibly best statesmanship would look like. It is a normative ideal for the statesman, not a hermeneutic bridge to the benefit of a scientific observer. Indeed, this applies for the balance of power too, since it turns out to be a purposeful policy strategy rather than a description of a state of affairs as he defined it in his theory chapters.

Gauging power, or: the art of diplomacy

It is quite remarkable how the determinate language of Morgenthau in his *Politics Among Nations* gives way to a series of chapters whose main function is to show the elusiveness of power. 'Evaluating' power and the balance of power are the major concerns of entire chapters. Although they seem to be connected to his explanatory theory, they are in fact informed by the point of view of the practitioners. Morgenthau provides a checklist of mistakes and reductions that need to be avoided if statesmen are to follow an effective but also morally justifiable foreign policy. Was the neglect of power the culprit in his ontological and explanatory theory, so is the obsession with power the target of his practical politics. That may sound contradictory, but is less so when keeping the different purposes of power and the domains of their analysis apart: informing politics has other demands than establishing a causal theory or a political ontology. Still, by using power as the master concept to link up his three purposes and domains, that muddle is of his own making.

Evaluating power is hard, so Morgenthau, yet crucial. He saw it against the backdrop of the dual lessons of the security dilemma from the two World Wars. The security dilemma refers to a rational behaviour on the individual state level that produces a suboptimal outcome on the collective level. 'International politics can be defined ... as a continuing effort to maintain and to increase the power of one's own nation and to keep in check or reduce the power of other nations.'⁷⁰ This behaviour of seeking more and more power, meant to assure security on the state level, will lead to an arms race potentially out of control on the collective level in the case that everyone follows suit, which is the rational thing to do. By wanting their own best, states produce an outcome that actually undermines it (World War I). Yet, by not playing power politics, they would invite aggression, and hence similarly affect their own security in a negative manner (World War II). That is the dilemma: damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Consequently, overshooting in power maximisation is an ever-present danger of power politics. Knowing how to evaluate power, one's own and the other's, is crucial to putting limits on power politics. This also includes the capacity to correctly show the capacities at hand: showing too much provokes fear and violent

⁷⁰ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 175. This summary statement confuses international politics with foreign policies, something that Kenneth Waltz will later castigate as the 'reductionism' of classical realism. See Waltz 1979.

reaction, and showing too little invites opportunist aggression. The art of gauging power provides the background for a functioning balance of power in that it manages the equilibrium without passing through stages of (too) violent adjustment.

This adds up to two basic aims of any good and morally justifiable foreign policy: seek power to defend rank, and seek a balance of power to provide a political order. The balance of power does not function in a mechanical manner, but needs shared norms and understandings to do so. To achieve these aims, gauging power is important in two ways. If rank maximisation is the aim for state policies, it is important to understand what makes up national power; and if the balance is to work in a smooth manner that manages power shifts, then diplomats must devise means to calculate equilibria. The evaluation of power becomes the crucial element of foreign policy not only for political decisions on where to invest what resources, but also for the multilateral conventions needed to assess an ever-fluctuating balance.

Morgenthau lists eight elements of national power: geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, national character, national morale, and the quality of diplomacy. A list such as this makes it impossible to see an aggregate of 'national power'. Yet, Morgenthau's theory is driven by the limitless drive for power and hence the unavoidable possibility that collective violence be used to achieve it. So, most of the elements are thought in a combined manner as to whether they improve 'military effectiveness'.⁷¹ Hence, the national interest consists in combining policies such as maximising the national combination of these different elements for the aim of military effectiveness.

Such power maximisation cannot really be assessed, however. First, 'effectiveness' does not refer to the elements of power, but to their actual influence: national power is understood as influence, namely that which effectively causes B's behaviour. Morgenthau's phrasing points to the problem that power is influence, but that for any analysis before the event, we only have elements of power (or resources, or capabilities) from which no secure influence can be directly derived. Therefore, Morgenthau is quite explicit that military effectiveness is much more than the military factor alone. Indeed, that would be one of the usual mistakes when thinking national power. It is mistaken to reduce national power to a permanent factor, as if technological and other developments would not affect the importance of the factors themselves or their combination; and so is the reduction of national power to a single factor, such as geography (as in geopolitics), nationalism or indeed militarism.

Having indices of power, but no objective measure of influence, obviously produces a problem for a balance of power to work. Where does the equilibrium lie? Is this state policy only balancing the power increase elsewhere, or is it tipping the balance? Given that national power cannot be really assessed, the only way for this

⁷¹ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 110.

to work is for diplomats to come up with a conventional measure:

The balance of power mechanically conceived is in need of an easily recognizable, quantitative criterion by which the relative power of a number of nations can be measured and compared. For it is only by means of such a criterion, comparable to the pounds and ounces of a real pair of scales, that one can say with any degree of assurance that a certain nation tends to become more powerful than another or that they tend to maintain a balance of power between them. Furthermore, it is only by means of such a criterion that variations in power can be converted into quantitative units to be transferred from one scale into the other in order to restore the balance.⁷²

Whereas in the past, 'the theory and practice of the balance of power' used territory, population and armaments for such a measure, we are in dire need of a reliable replacement, lest 'the balance of power becomes a series of guesses the correctness of which can be ascertained only in retrospect', that is after a war.⁷³

It should be clear that when Morgenthau speaks here about the theory and practice of the balance of power, he no longer refers to an explanatory theory, at least as he conceived it. He uses theory in the sense of 'strategy'. Therefore, the balance of power, defined earlier as a roughly equal distribution of capabilities in the system, is not in any theoretical or logical sense 'of necessity', as he wrote. It overshoots, it needs conventional measures to function in the first place, conventions that may no longer be in place. It is 'of necessity' in a policy/strategy sense, in that if states wish to avoid humiliation or worse, they need to balance the power of others. It is also 'of necessity' in a normative sense, in that if humanity wishes to limit the totalising tendencies of 20th century politics, it requires a functioning balance of power, itself underpinned by a commonly shared diplomatic culture. For this reason, Morgenthau does reserve some significant place for other ordering mechanisms, like international morality, law and world public opinion.

Still, it is important to keep Morgenthau's two meanings of theory apart, explanation vs strategy, the level of the distant observer making sense of behaviour, and the level of the actor who is planning behaviour. Power works very differently in these respective domains, in a manner which Morgenthau's repeated conceptual slide obfuscates. This is to some extent good news for Morgenthau, since it is hence possible to have his contradictory expectations about the concept of power, determinate for an explanatory theory, and elusive for foreign policy strategy. But it is also bad news in that the underlying assumptions actually do not match. In the way he used it, power cannot provide the bridge between the domains.

The power of statesmanship and the ethics of responsibility

When seen from the viewpoint of diplomatic practice, Morgenthau's analysis of

⁷² Morgenthau 1948b, p. 151.

⁷³ Morgenthau 1948b, p. 152.

power is quite different from the utilitarian rank maximisation, although he urges practitioners to assume such behaviour. There are two ways to justify this move. Morgenthau's explicit strategy is the ontological argument that the *animus dominandi* is a human constant, borne out by history, which informs regularity in state behaviour that can be modelled as a utilitarian theory of rank maximisation. The problem with this argument, as we have seen, is its circularity: we know the theory is right, because history tells us; and we know what history tells us, because the theory interprets it that way.

There is, however, also another way to argue for the practical advice of such an assumption of rank maximisation. It would be driven not by theory, but by historical experience *tout court*. In the past, when diplomats assumed such behaviour, they were able to find a common ground upon which to devise the measures of power and shared understandings that kept the balance of power in check. Given their success and our recent catastrophic mishandlings, we would be well advised to learn from them. In this way, the assumption is not defended because it is true, but because it served well. The argument is not about the 'world as it really is', but which assumptions would turn out useful for a 'world as it should be' if we were to halt the downward spiral to total politics and war. No human nature and general causes needed.

Although this way would seem more coherent with his general approach, it is obviously less persuasive for all those who propose different conventions to reach the same ethical aim of a more peaceful world. Morgenthau was not convinced that there were other ways; hence the more arguments he could muster, the better. It is this stance that arguably pushed Morgenthau to go for establishing an explanatory theory that should scientifically justify his policy advice, rather than just historical experience. *Politics Among Nations* was written to establish a theory that explains international politics and was used as such in the discipline. But it is possible, and perhaps more consistent, to see it as an *ex post* rationalisation of historical good practice, that is, an attempt to write on that what served us relatively well in the past; 'nostalgic idealism', as Griffiths called it.⁷⁴

This ultimate reliance on a rationalisation of past (best) practice would also explain that Morgenthau found himself so much at a loss when giving general policy advice. As seen, he was very critical of policies that start from premises other than power maximisation. He steadfastly opposed the consequences of liberalism and democratisation that undercut the common knowledge of previous European diplomatic practice. But if history indeed took this turn, how would a new shared knowledge and common interests be established? He spent hundreds of pages decrying all the difficulties of a world order in the present era, but offered only past practices as solutions that, as he analysed himself, could no longer be applied. Deprived of a common moral standard, actors are ever seeking power, and yet powerless to establish a functioning balance of power and world order.

⁷⁴ Griffiths 1992, chapter 4.

It needs special skills and wisdom to square this circle. As argued before, the art of diplomacy consists in gauging power. It is based on power measures. Yet, those measures cannot simply be read off the elements of power, but need to be agreed upon beforehand. The gauging of power assumes a measure, and that measure assumes a shared understanding. If the latter is missing, diplomacy is surely a very special craft. To square the circle, in order to gauge power correctly, diplomacy must pretend to already have a conventional agreement – while concomitantly applying itself to forging one at the very same time.⁷⁵ In a sense, they have to credibly ‘fake it to make it’. The statesman becomes here the heroic figure of Morgenthau’s (and other realists’) texts.

At this point, his repeated appeal to statesmanship may almost acquire the status of a *deus ex machina* who needs both Machiavellian *virtù* (as in: virtuosity, not virtue in our contemporary sense) and *fortuna* (luck, good fate on one’s side). For Morgenthau, here clearly reminiscent of Max Weber, the statesman is a heroic if tragic figure to be sharply distinguished from the mere politician, who is mainly preoccupied by the petty politics of managing and keeping power. Politics being by definition evil, since it uses men as means and not only as ends, has to be handled by people who have the courage to make decisions that will ultimately limit evil. Morgenthau openly endorses Weber’s idea of an ethics of responsibility that judges moral worth by the outcomes and not by however good intentions.⁷⁶ Only history will establish the statesmen’s *grandeur*, since their daily environment will not usually be able to see the good of their action when limiting evil. Only few people – Morgenthau mentions Richelieu or Bismarck – are given this particular ability and luck, the true power of statesmanship. Or, phrased more sceptically, historical hindsight will honour only few people’s actions for having had the luck to turn out virtuosos of power for the purpose of limiting it.

⁷⁵ Sárváry 2004.

⁷⁶ Morgenthau 1945a, p. 10 and *verbatim* Morgenthau 1946, p. 186. Although Morgenthau’s use of Weber’s ‘ethics of responsibility’ is consequentialist, in that it is the final outcome, not the good intentions, that are to be used to evaluate the moral worth of an action, he opposed a consequentialism where all means are justified by the aims. He argued that this would amount to the end of any universalist ethics, which he rejected.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY AND QUESTIONS

1. Morgenthau introduces reflections on power in three contexts and with different purposes: political theory or ontology, explanatory theory, and foreign policy strategy.

He uses power as the central concept in his political ontology with the purpose of setting a sphere of politics apart from other social spheres. To do so, he defines power in terms of a trait of human nature, constant throughout time, the *animus dominandi*, that is, the potentially insatiable will for power over others.

For his explanatory theory, he translates this potentially insatiable *animus dominandi* into a utilitarian theory of action through the idea of interest maximisation. States define their national interest in terms of power. Power is understood not in terms of mere elements, but as actual influence in which A's threat of or actual sanctions affects B's cost-benefit calculus (of rank maximisation), and hence B's will or behaviour. Power becomes here the immediate and potentially ultimate aim of all political action. This gives rise to three forms of action: maintaining, expanding or demonstrating power, or, respectively, protecting a favourable status quo, changing it via imperialism, or having it respected at lowest cost through a policy of prestige. These actions are chosen to maximise rank (power over others). These policies feed by necessity into an overall balance of power which is both origin of and effect on the international order.

For his analysis of foreign policy strategy, dealing prudently with power to achieve a morally acceptable order becomes the measuring rod. Here, the utilitarian theory in terms of rank maximisation translates into a behavioural ideal, again called the national interest, that should inform best foreign policy practice and hold up to assessing actual policies. Whereas rank maximisation assumes a way to measure power, Morgenthau insists in this domain on the elusiveness of power, which cannot be reduced to a single element of power (like the military, for instance), and cannot take the values of factors as constant over time. Gauging power is no science, but an art informed by the conventions of the day that commonly attribute value to the elements. The ideal foreign policy strategy consists in knowing how to use power to limit the effects of the *animus dominandi* or of rank maximisation in a way to limit the violence in the permanent shifts in the balance of power.

2. This raises a series of issues with regard to these different theorisations of power that will accompany us through the different chapters of this book.

There is, for one, the very translations from one domain of power analysis to the other. For Morgenthau, the 'national interest in terms of power' is the crucial link. But is it the only possible one? Do we actually need to have power as a central concept in all three?

Are there ways to found power other than in human nature? Even if it is founded on human nature, is the implication as determinist with regard to action as Morgenthau establishes it? The underlying idea seems to be behavioural

'autonomy', as derived from his studies on sovereignty. This assumes that to achieve autonomy, rank maximisation is the best or even only way. Is it?

Moving to his explanatory theory, Morgenthau establishes a 'psychological' relation as being fundamental to understanding power, but then reduces it to the capacity of sanctions to change the cost-benefit analysis of actors and hence potentially their behaviour. If reputation is so crucial for human nature and power, as he writes, is his analysis sufficient to take account of it? If the relation is crucial for understanding power, one would imagine much discussion of the relationship between power and legitimacy, as was central in Weber's approach – but not much is done here, since all derives from sanctions. Moreover, the approach conceives of power not just as a relation, but as that which causally affects a relation. Power equals cause and influence. Does it?

Finally, when power serves its purpose in a foreign policy strategy, the gauging of power becomes an art that has to rely on common understandings and conventions. Indeed, keeping and adapting such conventions is a central part of the art of diplomacy. Yet, it is not quite clear where these conventions come from and what guarantees their acceptance. If power is potentially insatiable and rank maximisation tends to 'overshoot' the equilibrium, an arms race easily follows, but no convention. The balance of power needs a common measure of power and has historically found one; yet that common measure of power would never have originated if rank maximisation had been the only aim. Morgenthau's foreign policy strategy chimes with a human nature which is not only about power; but it sits uncomfortably with the explanatory theory.

3. Power is used in different domains and for different purposes. It does not come with the same meaning. In Morgenthau, it can stand for *domination* for the purpose of understanding the logic of politics. This includes a collective level, where it stands for political order. But its purpose can also be to elucidate individual *autonomy* and its preconditions. In an explanatory theory, power stands for *influence* when it is used to (causally) explain behavioural change in social relations. All these are concepts of the family of power concepts. Morgenthau produces an approach where one of these power concepts is centrally connected to another. One power constitutes or explains the other. Coming in these multiple disguises, power is always both that which explains and that which is explained, *explanans* and *explanandum*. Much of the potential and the problems of power analysis stems from here.

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