War, Peace, and International Political Realism

Perspectives from The Review of Politics

edited by

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Introduction
The Enduring Relevance of International Political Realism

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Serious intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s were compelled by international events to reexamine their understanding of the nature of man and his social institutions. Existing theories of the human condition—especially the dominant, optimistic liberal tradition in America—seemed woefully incapable of explaining World War I (which cost 20 million lives), the rise of German fascism and World War II (which killed roughly 70 million people), and the onset of the Cold War with the totalitarian Soviet Union (a conflict which, in the shadow of nuclear weapons, threatened to annihilate mankind).

It is not surprising that political realism, with its tragic view of man’s drive for power and the inevitability of conflict among states, would blossom in this environment. Less obvious is why many scholars who were instrumental in developing the realist approach, including European secular Jewish émigrés such as Hans Morgenthau, would find a hospitable home for some of their seminal work in The Review of Politics, a new, Catholic opinion journal based at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. To be sure, the Review had emerged as a leading journal of politics and political theory soon after its first issue was published in 1939, and the founding editor, Waldemar Gurian, himself an émigré well known in European circles, had a brilliant mind, intellectual curiosity, and an exceptional personality, qualities that attracted innovative thinkers from extraordinarily diverse backgrounds and disciplines. Moreover, the leadership at Notre Dame (notably under Father Theodore Hesburgh) genuinely encouraged free and open inquiry into both political and religious matters, welcoming contributions from Catholic, non-Catholic, and nonreligious authors alike.
But the main reason why the Review emerged as one of the most influential sources of commentary about the origins of international conflict and war was the shared intellectual orientation of the journal’s contributors. Four core tenets united this diverse group of prominent thinkers: (1) an obligation to confront the big and difficult questions about international politics; (2) a recognition of the fundamentally tragic nature of relations among humans and states; (3) a rejection of historical optimism and its persistent belief in the perfectibility of man through religious purification, scientific progress, or any other rationalist project; and (4) a belief in practical morality—that is, a deep commitment to moral political action despite the inherent complexity and constraints of the world and the inevitable limitations of human knowledge and reason.

This set of core concerns, beliefs, and values stood in stark contrast to the prevailing approaches of the mid-twentieth century. Despite or because of the horrors of global war, political scientists were focusing on increasingly trivial matters, while American society remained mostly wedded to a liberal progressive vision that called for the eradication of selfishness, ignorance, and evil from domestic and international politics. Through the mechanism of right reasoning and carefully designed institutions, power politics would (once and for all) be replaced with a more benign, democratic, lawful, and pacific order. The Review’s writers offered a less comforting—but also more realistic—alternative, which recognized that the best one could do in navigating international affairs was to balance the morally desirable with the politically possible.

Half a century later, the arguments and advice contained in these essays seem just as relevant for current debates on international politics and American foreign policy. The decade of the 1990s—with its plethora of international and intra-state conflicts and general foreign policy confusion—undermined the idea, or at least the hope, that the end of the Cold War would be followed by a liberal millennium of democracy, capitalism, and peace. And, of course, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, seemed to obliterate the universalistic beliefs and aspirations of the latest generation of liberal progressive cosmopolitans. Yet many of the same ideas and policies critiqued in the Review decades before are manifest in foreign policy discourse and behavior today. For example, it is difficult to think of a major contemporary international political issue where conflicting participants (states, leaders, groups) do not make
political judgments in the name of absolute right and wrong, do not portray
their own actions as wholly righteous and those of the other as utterly mis-
guided, if not altogether evil, and do not hold out the prospect of total vic-
tory to attract greater support for their cause. In contrast, the Review authors
understood that politics itself was defined by the never-ending struggle for
power among self-interested actors—not by some kind of contest between
the forces of pure good and evil that is resolved in favor of one or the other,
depending on the circumstances.

Similarly, the Review authors in this volume would have found much to
criticize in the way political leaders have responded to the rise of Islamic ter-
rorism. The Review contributors likely would have recognized this force as a
serious threat to Western civilization, and been skeptical of any approach that
privileged diplomacy, negotiation, and dialogue as the primary means of di-
rectly dealing with such a threat. However, U.S. leaders’ calls for total strate-
gic and moral victory in a war on terrorism, as well as the use of religious im-
agey and the Christian faith to defend this central policy objective, would
have been seen by these Review authors as counterproductive and even dan-
gerous. Unlike radical Islamic fundamentalists, and contrary to the hyperbolic
claims of some critics, the administration of George W. Bush did not back up
its “you are with us or against us” rhetoric with a murderous crusade to convert
the benighted. But the Review contributors would have rightly counseled the
need for greater political humility, moderation, and understanding of the
many conflicting interests involved in marshalling an international coalition
to deal with this global threat.

The essays in this volume are drawn almost exclusively from the first two
decades of The Review of Politics. Contributing authors include prominent the-
orists such as Morgenthau and Herbert Butterfield (each setting forth semi-
unal ideas later found in Politics among Nations and History and Human Relations,
respectively), commentators such as Waldemar Gurian and Kenneth Thomp-
sion, and policy practitioners such as George Kennan and Paul Nitze, as well as
other like-minded and prominent European émigrés such as Hannah Arendt
and Stefan Possony. Together, these works exemplify the core postwar roots
of what we now know as the realist tradition and demonstrate the enduring
relevance of realist insights for contemporary international relations scholar-
ship and foreign affairs.
The Responsibility to Ask Big Questions

The Review contributors in this volume felt compelled by the events of their era to reconsider the timeless philosophical questions about the nature of man, society, and politics. Their approach did not represent a retreat from the brutality of international affairs to the safe confines of the ivory tower. In fact, as discussed below, Morgenthau and others relentlessly criticized both the theoretical abstractions of political theorists and the mathematical models of social scientists for having little relation to political reality. Rather, the motivation to ask big questions was based on the view that contemporary experiences could be understood only by probing beyond immediate historical facts to gain a deeper perspective on the perennial problems and truths of politics. And a deeper understanding of either domestic or international political phenomena required a clear picture of human nature. “It is a truism to say that events happen only once,” as Kenneth Thompson writes (in chapter 9 in this volume). “But perhaps more important, those events are the manifestation of social forces which in turn are produced by the drives and tendencies inherent in human nature.”

For the authors in this volume, what had emerged in international politics from beneath the surface of the legal and institutional arrangements of the interwar period was a struggle for power—“elemental, undisguised, and all-pervading,” in Morgenthau’s apt description. Totalitarianism threatened not only whatever justice and stability seemed to exist in political life, but also the dominant interpretations of the political world itself. In other words, the truly important questions raised by the problems observed in the real world were more philosophic than scientific in nature. For example, one could try to trace the historical rise of German fascism, but a valid understanding of that phenomenon would necessarily rest on philosophical reflections about the nature of power, political ideology, law, governance, public opinion, tyranny, democracy, and the relationships among these forces. In short, posing philosophical questions about the nature of man and society was essential to the task of understanding contemporary world politics.

The willingness to grapple with deeper truths—whether religious or secular—about the human condition as a way to explain international politics placed the Review authors in direct opposition to prevailing trends in po-
political science and society at large. Neither existing approaches and methods in the field of international relations, nor the liberal intellectual tradition of modern times, could provide an acceptable understanding—much less a valid guide for dealing with—the forces of nationalism, imperialism, totalitarianism, and the struggle for power among states. In “Reflections on the State of Political Science” (chapter 12 in this volume), Morgenthau vigorously defends the necessity of political philosophy for political science and takes his colleagues to task for failing to grasp that fundamental point: “Contemporary political science, predominantly identified with a positivistic philosophy which is itself a denial of virtually all of the philosophic traditions of the West, has, as it were, mutilated itself by refusing itself access to the sources of insight available in the great philosophic systems of the past.”

The particular content of the Western philosophic tradition that contributors to the Review wished to defend and preserve is discussed below, but it is worth noting here that the disparagement of political philosophy common in modern social science was only one of several reasons why many of the authors in this volume intensely disliked that enterprise. The dislike did not signify opposition to developing theories, drawing generalizations, or pursuing greater analytical rigor. In fact, the Review authors viewed themselves as “realists” because of their outspoken advocacy for sober, objective, and reasoned analysis and empirical research. In their discussions of the development of the field of international relations, Gurian, Thompson, and Morgenthau (chapters 5, 9, and 12 in this volume) commend the progression from pure description of current events to the study of recurring patterns and empirical testing of explanations. But they thought that the study of international relations was heading in the wrong direction both substantively and methodologically.

The Review writers repeatedly warned their academic colleagues about a looming cult of irrelevance in political science, whereby scholars seeking refuge from challenging and unpleasant truths about contemporary power politics were increasingly finding comfort in the analysis of trivial topics and reliance on barren quantitative methods. Writing at the dawn of the behavioral revolution, the authors in this volume were adamant that the study of international relations and the social sciences more broadly were being led astray by the natural science model. “Empirical science,” as Morgenthau (chapter 12) describes the most vigorous branch of political science in his day, “tries to
develop rigorous methods of quantitative verification which are expected in
good time to attain the same precision in the discovery of uniformities and in
prediction to which the natural sciences owe their theoretical and practical
success.” Similarly, in “On the Study of International Relations” (chapter 5),
Gurian notes the modern tendency to seek to explain everything in interna-
tional politics with mechanistic, one-dimensional explanations deriving from
geography, economics, or the distribution of raw materials. The big problem
with these approaches is that they fail to grasp the fundamental object of the
social sciences: man. That object—man—should not be approached, as Mor-
genthau argues, “as a product of nature but as both the creature and the cre-
ator of history in and through which his individuality and freedom of choice
manifest themselves. To make susceptibility to quantitative measurement the
yardstick of the scientific character of the social sciences in general and of po-
litical science in particular is to deprive these sciences of that very orientation
which is adequate to the understanding of their subject matter.” The inade-
quacy of the quantitative method for understanding the essential topics of po-
litical science thus results in the study of lesser phenomena that do lend them-
selves to a certain measure of quantification, such as voting behavior. When
applied to more crucial phenomena—power, freedom, tyranny, nationalism,
conflict—the quantitative method can at best only confirm and refine knowl-
edge which a theoretical approach has already discovered. Thus, in a conclu-
sion as depressing for how long ago it was written (1955) as much as for its
content, Morgenthau remarks that “much of quantitative political science has
become a pretentious collection of trivialities.”

These authors understood that when confronted with real-world politi-
cal affairs, modern political science tended to retreat into a realm of self-
sufficient abstractions. Foreshadowing the emergence of rational choice theory,
Morgenthau describes the impact of a “new scholasticism” in political science,
where a scholar “tends to think about how to think and to conceptualize about
concepts, regressing ever further from empirical reality until he finds the logi-
cal consummation of his endeavors in mathematical symbols and other for-
mal relations.” Morgenthau then offers a revealing comparison between mod-
ern political science and modern art (which he suggests points to a “common
root in the disorders of our culture”):
Both retreat from empirical reality into a world of formal relations and abstract symbols, which on closer examination either reveal themselves to be trivial or else are unintelligible but to the initiated. Both share in the indifference to the accumulated achievements of mankind in their respective fields; Plato and Phidias, St. Thomas and Giotto, Spinoza and Rembrandt have no message for them. That divorce from reality, contemporary and historic, deprives both of that wholesome discipline which prevents the mind from indulging its fancies without regard to some relevant objective standards. . . . Both abstract political science and abstract modern art tend to become esoteric, self-sufficient, and self-perpetuating cults, clustered around a “master,” imitating his “style,” and conversing in a lingo intelligible only to the members.

The retreat of modern social science into what they viewed as trivial substantive and methodological topics, with no relevance to the great political issues in which society has a stake, was especially galling for the realist authors and editors of the Review because it clashed with their basic understanding of the purpose of the intellectual. From their perspective, scholars have a social responsibility to confront contemporary problems of great public importance, grapple with the deep philosophical questions raised by these problems, and communicate their views to society so as to influence policy debates in positive ways. The experience of the first half of the twentieth century had refuted many of the dominant assumptions and expectations about international relations, be they radical, liberal, or conservative. Political science, armed with a healthy appreciation of the inherent limits of social science, was obligated to respond with newer and better understandings.

**The Tragedy of Man and Politics**

The realist view of human nature and international politics is a pessimistic and tragic one. Man is capable of great love, kindness, and sacrifice, of course, but realists recognize that all humans are also motivated in no small part by greed and a lust for power. All social relations are therefore marked to some
degree by a clash of these selfish desires, regardless of our good intentions and aspirations. In fact, what defines the essence of politics as a social institution is the struggle for power. This intrinsic contest for influence and power is present within states and other domestic political communities, but it is often subdued by effective laws, government, or shared norms. The competition for power among groups of individuals (i.e., states) on the international scene, however, is particularly intense because those controlling factors are largely ineffective in the absence of a common authority. Thus, the unremitting struggle for power in international politics, which sadly but frequently manifests itself in violence and war, is an inevitable result of human nature.

Some contributors to the Review emphasized the religious sources of man’s flawed nature, while others maintained a secular view. Whether because of original sin, nature and biology, or some other cause, the arena of politics is fundamentally tragic—we can imagine a better world, but our own actions necessarily render it impossible. Different philosophical bases exist for the tragic stance found in these essays, but the idea of a fundamental conflict between ethics and politics pervades all of them.

The Review authors believed that human nature was imperfect. These flaws would always prevent us from developing perfect institutions. For Morgenthau, the fundamental problem is that man is corrupted by his insatiable drive to dominate others. Like all animals, we have natural appetites and desires and are driven by the basic impulse of self-preservation. Beyond safeguarding the conditions necessary for existence, however, we also possess an innate drive for self-assertion—a desire to assert ourselves as individuals against the world, thereby discovering our own power. This drive can manifest itself in many ways—for example, by overcoming physical barriers in the natural world, competing in sports, or writing books and articles. Whenever man, acting alone or in concert with others, seeks to control others he has entered the political sphere. Unfortunately, because man’s natural urge to dominate others would be satisfied only if every other human became the object of his domination, the lust for power is effectively unquenchable. Thus, all politics is defined by the permanence and ubiquity of the struggle for power.²

The animus dominandi lies at the heart of the human predicament, but other contributors to the journal—who were no less persuaded than Morgenthau of man’s flawed nature—emphasize how even the well-intentioned
search for mere physical security (that is, the impulse of self-preservation) paradoxically generates anxiety, mutual fear, and conflict. International relations scholars today are familiar with this dynamic, as developed by Robert Jervis in his 1979 article, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” but all of the basic features are found nearly three decades earlier in the Review in Herbert Butterfield’s article, “The Tragic Element in Modern International Conflict” (chapter 8 in this volume). Butterfield argued that the great conflicts in world politics are too often mistakenly described in simplistic terms of good men fighting bad. In reality, at the heart of these conflicts one often finds a tragic human predicament that “would have led to a serious conflict of wills even if all men had been fairly intelligent and reasonably well-intentioned.” To illustrate his argument, Butterfield poses a hypothetical scenario between the United States and the Soviet Union. He asks readers to suppose that both Russia and the United States fear the strategic consequences of a defeated Germany falling into the other side’s camp. Assume also that both American and Russian leaders are moderately virtuous (“as men go in politics,” Butterfield adds), comparatively reasonable, motivated solely by national self-interest, and uncertain about the intentions of the other side. According to Butterfield, this situation still presents “a grand dialectical jam” (“a terrible deadlock”; an “irreducible dilemma”), where the greatest war in history could be produced “without the intervention of any great criminals who might be out to do deliberate harm in the world. It could be produced between two powers both of which were desperately anxious to avoid a conflict of any sort.” In other words, war could occur merely because the objective each side sought was vital for national security but also mutually exclusive. Butterfield argues that this kind of situation, which he felt typified the intractability in the human condition itself, is the basis for most tensions in the real world of international relations.

Butterfield further argues that the situation is potentially worse than that of two insecure states being drawn into a conflict that neither side desires. Any outbreak of violence is also likely to be “embittered by the heat of moral indignation” because neither side can recognize how its own fearful actions generate counter-fears in the other. “Neither party sees the nature of the predicament he is in, for he only imagines that the other party is being hostile and unreasonable.” The resulting “shrieking morality of that particular kind which springs from self-righteousness” will make the conflict more intense.
than it would have been “if the contest had lain between two hard-headed eighteenth-century masters of realpolitik.”

Whether man seeks power over his fellow man because of a natural urge for self-assertion or simply in the cause of self-preservation, there is no escaping the evil inherent in politics. In “Reflections on the State of Political Science” (chapter 12), Morgenthau asks, “Why is it that the political act, in its concern with man’s power over man and the concomitant denial of the other man’s freedom, carries within itself an element of immorality and puts upon the actor the stigma of guilt?” Kenneth Thompson, in his discussion of the great realist contributions of Reinhold Niebuhr, Butterfield, Morgenthau, and E. H. Carr in “The Study of International Politics” (chapter 9), notes the “indisputable fact that ethics and politics are in conflict wherever man acts politically. That is the case because it is the essence of politics that man chooses goals and objectives which are limited and therefore equitable and just only for particular groups and nations.” Only in the human imagination can policies and political acts be purely uncorrupted and undefiled by injustice. “As soon as we leave the realm of our thoughts and aspirations,” Morgenthau writes elsewhere, “we are inevitably involved in sin and guilt. While our hand carries the good intent to what seems to be its consummation, the fruit of evil grows from the seed of noble thought. We want peace among nations and harmony among individuals, yet our actions end in conflict and war. We want to see all men free, but our actions put others in chains as others do to us. We believe in the equality of all men, and our very demands on society make others unequal.” In short, politics inevitably generates “dirty hands”—it necessarily entails some dose of evil.

The very act of acting destroys our moral integrity for two reasons. First, there is the problem of our natural limitations: we are unable to control all of the consequences of our actions (some of which will inevitably impinge on others) and we are unable to completely satisfy all competing moral ends through our actions (in order to satisfy one legitimate moral end we inevitably must neglect others). But the paramount reason politics entails doing evil is that its essence and aim is the struggle for power over men, “for it is to this degree that it degrades man to a means for other men.” Evil corrupts all politics, but especially international politics. For Niebuhr, a society “merely cumulates the egoism of individuals . . . into collective egoism so that the egoism of the group has a double force.” Similarly, as Thompson writes, “This universal as-
pect of the corruption of absolute justice in the realm of politics finds its outstanding expression in international morality. There my nation’s justice means oftentimes your nation’s injustice; my nation’s security and the requirements assigned thereto may appear as the cause of your nation’s insecurity.”

Once one comprehends the tragedy of human nature, the problems and challenges of contemporary world politics can be seen in their true light. From Morgenthau’s perspective in the year after World War II ended, the drop of evil which inevitably spoils the best of intentions had transformed “churches into political organizations . . . revolutions into dictatorships . . . [and] love of country into imperialism.”7 In analyzing the rise of fascism and communism in Europe, Kennan tried to disabuse Americans of the comforting belief that they were somehow different from the German and Russian people: “The fact of the matter is that there is a little bit of totalitarian buried somewhere, way down deep, in each and every one of us.”8 Arendt, Morgenthau, and Thompson all warn of a dangerous crusading nationalism, where nations see themselves as the repositories of values and ideas that are good for all mankind and hear a calling to extend the benefits of their system to peoples everywhere. The human desire for self-determination is thus transformed into a national mission aimed at, as Arendt describes it, “bringing its light to other, less fortunate peoples that, for whatever reasons, have miraculously been left by history without a national mission.”

In summary, human nature being what it is, the Review authors had a deep distrust for solutions to real world problems that were based on a plan to fix men’s souls. Thompson recounts how the evangelist preacher Billy Graham once proclaimed that if all men were Christians there would be no nuclear problem. Niebuhr responded, “Not if we fail to develop a viable nuclear policy.” Realists were not silent on a strategy for developing viable foreign policies, but in comparison, their persistent condemnation of perfectionist illusions was deafening.

The Imperfectibility of Man

Many of the scholars, writers, and editors who contributed to The Review of Politics in the 1940s and 1950s shared a basic skepticism of the liberal, or