

Hans Morgenthau, 1948. *Politics Among Nations*, (New York: Knopf) Chapters 1 and 2.

*Summary:* Morgenthau seeks to develop a comprehensive theory of international politics, which he terms political realism. In contrast to idealism (which assumes the “essential goodness and infinite malleability of human nature and the ability of politics to live up to moral standards), realism assumes that the world is composed of opposing interests and conflict among them is inevitable. Realism is fundamentally concerned with power rather than morality or material interests. M. includes strong assumptions about human nature – humans are not naturally good and conflict is the natural outcome of the search for power, not of misunderstanding.

Six Principles of Political Realism:

- (1) *Politics is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature.* This means it is possible to develop a theory that reflects these laws and to differentiate between truth and opinion. We can “put ourselves in the position of a statesman” and predict what he should rationally do.
- (2) *Interest is defined in terms of power.* This sets politics apart from other spheres of action, such as economics (interest defined in terms of wealth). Because we can assume a definition of interest, we do not have to concern ourselves with questions of “motives, preferences, and intellectual and moral qualities of successive statesmen.” Nonetheless, M. later says that intellectual capability can affect a statesman’s ability to comprehend the essentials of foreign policy and translate them into political action. Not all foreign policies will follow the rational course predicted by realism, due to personal weaknesses and collective irrationality – wrong ideas that have become popularly accepted, despite reality. M. makes normative claims, too – “rational foreign policy” is “good foreign policy” because it “minimizes risks and benefits and, hence, complies both with the moral precept of prudence and the political requirement of success.”
- (3) *Interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid, but whose meaning can change.* M. defines power broadly as “anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man.” Also, the centrality of the nation state is changeable over time. “While the realist indeed believes that interest is the perennial standard by which political action must be judged and directed, the contemporary connection between interest and the nation state is a product of history, and is therefore bound to disappear in the course of history.”
- (4) *Universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in the abstract; the circumstances of time and place must be considered.* The state must place its survival above all other moral goods. Thus, prudence – “the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions” is the “supreme virtue in politics.” Actions are judged by their consequences.
- (5) *The moral laws that govern the universe are distinct for the morals of any one nation.*
- (6) *The difference between political realism and other schools is real and profound.* Realism maintains the autonomy of the political sphere and, while recognizing that different facts of human nature (“economic man”, “religious man”, etc.) exist, judges that “political man” – interested only in power – is the appropriate facet for the study

of politics. “Legalistic-moralist” standards are appropriate to other spheres, not to politics.

*Critiques:* (from Waltz) M.’s focus on human nature as the source for power seeking requires strong assumptions. Waltz turns the focus onto structure as necessitating power-hungry states for security reasons.

The concept of power is broadly defined and does not distinguish between resources that give states power (economic, military) and the act of one state exerting power over another.