

ISSES vs. OUGHTS
IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INTRODUCTION

A striking feature of recent discussions of international relations is the dispute between rival approaches to understanding these relations, particularly with regard to the place and nature of moral considerations.

On one side are the realists, whose approach hails back at least to Machiavelli, Hobbes, and von Clausewitz,¹ and whose thinking has dominated the field since World War II. In its modern form, realism is a theory of how international relations work, the goal of which is to provide both explanatory and predictive power within a logically consistent framework.² The attempt to explain political reality is of course not unique to realism. What differentiates it are the features of the political landscape which it regards as most salient for explaining political behavior, namely national interests and the dynamics of power. As Keohane puts it, three assumptions are key:

(1) states...are the key units of action; (2) they seek power, either as an end in itself or as a means to other ends; and (3) they behave in ways that are, by and large, rational, and therefore comprehensible to outsiders in rational terms.³

On the realist view, international relations is a game of power-seeking in which each nation-

¹ Although Machiavelli and Hobbes are often cited in support of realism, there is controversy over whether their views actually provide such support. There is an extensive literature on Machiavelli on this point; on Hobbes, see Beitz (1979), pp. 27–34.

² Morgenthau (1973), p. 3.

³ Keohane (1986), p. 7; see also Morgenthau (1973), p. 27.

player advances its interests as much as possible under the circumstances. Players arrive at fairly stable equilibria when they attain balances of power, as between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Realism, then, is primarily descriptive, not normative, in nature: it sets about explaining how things are and leaves what to do up to others; i.e., it yields only hypothetical moral imperatives.⁴ And realists tend to be a bit jealous of its explanatory power. As Spanier puts it, “Realism reveals the critical features of international politics. Without it, an understanding of the subject is impossible.”⁵

Opposed to the realists (hence I shall call them antirealists) is a cluster of schools of thought: global humanism, legalism, liberal internationalism, political idealism, and utopianism. By lumping them together I do not mean to suggest that there are no significant differences between them. Rather, I do so simply because of a feature they all share which sets them apart from realism: the belief that conditions are not to be left as they are, but should be improved. Spanier’s definition of what he calls the “idealist approach” puts it well; it is

A school of thinking that focuses on how nations *ought* to behave in order to eliminate international conflict and create greater international cooperation and peace.⁶

War and hunger should be eliminated, human rights assured, the environment protected, and so on; and these are to be accomplished by changes in the way nations think and behave. Where realists are devoted to understanding divorced from considerations of how things ought to be,

⁴ I say “primarily” descriptive because it is description that realists spend most of their time on, and it is their success at description that they seem most proud of. They are not all opposed to making recommendations, however; see chapter 32 of Morgenthau (1973).

⁵ Spanier (1987), p. 682.

⁶ Spanier (1987), p. IV of the glossary, his emphasis. Also see Gurtov (1991), p. xiiif; Walzer (1977) is an extensive argument for moral constraints on and in war.

antirealists are devoted to change, based on a moral vision of a better world.

The tension between the two approaches cannot be missed in the literature. Each side spends a good deal of its energy distancing itself from the other, often unkindly. Realists tend to see antirealism as naive, even destructive;⁷ Spanier writes it off as a failure, discredited by events leading up to World War II.⁸ For their part, antirealists regard realists as failing to see the moral side of what they examine (particularly when examining war), and as inculcators of an immoral complacency.⁹ In short, realists accuse antirealists of neglecting the issues; antirealists accuse realists of neglecting the oughts.

I will not attempt to resolve this long-standing dispute, although I think it is resolvable to a fair extent. My intention here is only to survey it briefly, and along the way point out what I think is an interesting symmetry in the respective accusations and counteraccusations of the disputants: each manages to accuse the other of failing at their own strong suit. Lastly, I will point out a dynamic peculiar to the dispute which may help to explain its enduring character.

THE REALISTS LOOK AT ANTIREALISM

There is some bias built into the name “realism”; it suggests its opponents are against reality, “unrealistic” in the normative as well as the literal sense of the word--and this indeed is how Halle, Morgenthau, Spanier, Sumner, and others see antirealism. To take an example from Sumner:

The worst vice in political discussions is that dogmatism which takes its stand on great principles or assumptions, instead of standing on an exact examination of things as they are and human nature as it is.... An ideal is formed of some higher or better state of things

⁷ See Morgenthau (1973), pp. 16–17, Keohane (1986), p. 8, and especially Halle (1987).

⁸ Spanier (1987), pp. 12–14.

⁹ For examples of the former view see Walzer (1977), pp. 4ff, and Wasserstrom (1970), pp. 78–84; for the latter see Gurtov (1991), p. xiii, and Gilpin (1986), p. 319.

than now exists, and almost unconsciously the ideal is assumed as already existing and made the basis of speculations which have no root.... The whole method of abstract speculation on political topics is vicious. It is popular because it is easy; it is easier to imagine a new world than to learn to know this one; it is easier to embark on speculations based on a few broad assumptions than it is to study the history of states and institutions; it is easier to catch up a popular dogma than it is to analyze it to see whether it is true or not. All this leads to confusion, to the admission of phrases and platitudes, to much disputing but little gain in the prosperity of nations.¹⁰

Antirealists, according to Sumner, are guilty of sloth, pursuing the easy rather than the true. And antirealists are victims of a peculiar psychopathology; they come to mistake their ideal for the reality, and thus base themselves on what does not exist, dooming themselves to impracticality and time wasted on pointless argument. This view of antirealism as anti-real was shared by Frederick the Great, who, in response to the utopian proposal of the Abbé de Saint Pierre said “The thing is most practicable; for its success all that is lacking is the consent of Europe and a few similar trifles.”¹¹

There is a strong note of pride to be found in realist writings, at being among the few who do the drudgery that must be done, at being truly in the know. The appraisal of antirealists is sometimes clearly scornful; Halle regards them as making a show of morality to advance their own careers.¹²

But there is also the opinion that the unrealism of antirealists is not just contemptible but dangerous. Halle subscribes to it; for example:

Now take the situation of Britain and the United States during the 1930s. The threat of war was looming ever larger.... As this threat increased, the advocates of peace and disarmament...became increasingly active.... Advertisements were placed in popular magazines.... Masses of students in the British and American universities took the so-called Oxford Peace Pledge, whereby they swore, in the hearing of the would-be aggressors, never to fight for their country. Public pressure was generated to prevent Britain and the United States from building up military forces and armaments to meet the

¹⁰ Sumner (1914), pp. 245–6; quoted in Morgenthau (1973), p. 17f.

¹¹ Quoted in Keohane (1986), p. 8.

¹² Halle (1987), pp. 145, 147.

growing menace. And all this was done in the name of a morality that, if sufficiently abstracted from real circumstances, could be regarded as genuine.

Today it is hard to doubt that this peace movement helped to bring on a war that might have been averted. ...it contributed importantly to keeping Britain especially, but the United States as well, psychologically and physically disarmed, preventing them from taking such measures as would have deterred the entire course of aggression.¹³

Halle approves of morality, but argues vehemently that applying absolute moral principles to politics without appreciation for concrete circumstances leads to supreme disaster. Such morality, which sees the world in black and white terms, is moral in principle only; when applied to reality it is grossly immoral. The world is not black and white, right and wrong; in the practice of international affairs, it is not a matter of choosing the right, but of opting for the least evil course of action.¹⁴

To hear the realists tell it, then, antirealists are deluded, lazy, self-aggrandizing, and deeply hypocritical: for all their concern with morality, antirealists do not appreciate the immoral consequences of following their own advice. Or so it seems through realist eyes.

But the antirealism pummeled by Halle and others is partly made of straw. For one thing, it is worth noting that Halle's interpretation of the role of the peace movement in starting World War II is not necessarily shared even by other realists. Spanier notes that hindsight has affected our view of those events. At the time it was not at all clear to the participants on the Allied side that Hitler was girding for war. Germany's military buildup was interpreted as necessary to achieve parity with the Allies and thereby eliminate the unfairly weak position Germany was placed in by the Treaty of Versailles. Besides, the horrors of World War I were still fresh in

¹³ Halle (1987), p. 147f. Similar criticism of upholding morality in the face of circumstance is common in realist writings: Machiavelli is famous for it, and see Gilpin (1986), p. 320, and Morgenthau (1973), pp. 10–13. [Note that Halle appears to think hawkishness is the safe route, forgetting that hawkishness can be seen as provocation and used by enemies to launch pre-emptive strikes.]

¹⁴ Halle (1987), p. 146.

mind, and because of them the widespread sentiment--not just among students but among political leaders--that there must be no recurrence of it.¹⁵ Arguably, then, it was not the case that a group of fanatical pacifists successfully prevented others from preparing for the war they knew was coming, as Halle's account implausibly suggests.

Furthermore, not all, or even most, antirealists see the world in simple black and white terms. Walzer, for example, spends much of his book examining how varying circumstances and competing moral claims faced in international relations make decisionmaking agonizingly difficult. Nor do antirealists maintain that the morally correct action must be done regardless of the consequences. In fact, aside from Kant, it is hard to find any who hold such a view. Gurtov, for example, bases his criticism of realism and what he calls "corporate globalism" on what he foresees as their undesirable consequences. And neither Walzer nor Gurtov fails to take note of facts as they are; those facts, they maintain, are exactly the problem.

What's left when the straw men are cleared away are some significant but much more restrained criticisms of antirealism. Although there are exceptions, it is nevertheless true that some antirealists make recommendations without enough facts. And in the writings of antirealists, it does not appear that they fully appreciate the moral importance of the national interests which realists tend to uphold as of paramount importance. After all, even though leaders may pursue national interests for other reasons, it is nevertheless arguable that they have a moral obligation to do so for the sake of their citizens.¹⁶ Finally, writers like Gurtov can be longer on dire warnings than on means to overcome the difficulties we face.

¹⁵ Spanier (1987), pp. 48, 196–8.

¹⁶ See Gilpin (1986), p. 320, Morgenthau (1973) p. 10.

AND THE ANTIREALISTS LOOK BACK

In the following passage Spanier--a realist--describes an aspect of the Vietnam War. Let's consider it from the antirealist perspective:

The constraints on the use of force because of domestic opposition to a war tend to narrow the gap between the power of the Western Goliath and the [Third World] David. Goliath, beset by inner doubts about the merits of his cause and accused of ruthlessness, finally gives up since he calculates that the costs of continuing his attempts to coerce David are no longer acceptable. They are disproportionate to the end to be achieved. David, highly motivated by a strong sense of nationalism and determined to win (or, at least, not lose), is encouraged by his enemy's problems, which, he expects, will sooner or later force Goliath to quit. David therefore calculates that the cost of complying with Goliath's demands is far greater than that of not complying.¹⁷

The account is entirely in realist terms of power and prospects of political success. Given what we know of the Vietnam conflict, its lack of moral appraisal is appalling. On this view, it looks as if Goliath just lacked the guts; the question of whether he should have had the guts is not raised. He stops fighting not because it is wrong to continue, but because his calculations tell him he's wasting his time. Realists have been criticized for holding the view that morality has no place in international relations, especially in war,¹⁸ or that its "place" is not as a set of norms by which relations should be guided but rather only as another factor in human behavior which the analyst must take account of while navigating the jungle that is international politics. Spanier's account and the many others like it fuel this criticism.

But it gets much worse, according to antirealists. Gurtov claims that realism itself helps ensure that international politics remains a jungle:

herein lies the essential flaw of Realism itself. For, clearly, if all states live by the iron law that might makes right and that success is the only arbiter of action, then international politics is indeed a jungle governed only by survival of the most heavily armed--a self-fulfilling prophecy. Realism thus contributes to perpetuating the disorderly world that justifies itself, in the manner of a doctor who keeps a patient on medication in order to

¹⁷ Spanier (1987), p. 276f.

¹⁸ See Walzer (1977), pp. 3–4, and Beitz (1979), pp. 5, 13.

ensure future visits. Little room is left for developing alternatives....¹⁹

It is not simply reality that stands in the way of making a better world; it is realism itself. And the order which realism preserves is, according to Gurtov, a humanitarian and ecological disaster getting worse by the day.²⁰

There is a double irony here: while the realist accuses the antirealist of immorality in the name of morality, the antirealist accuses the realist of failing to perceive the reality that their own approach is inimical to the very interests which realists take as fundamental to understanding international politics.

The antirealist critics of realism are guilty of some of their opponents' sins, though, as might be expected given the temperature of the dispute.

Not all realists hold that morality has no place in politics. Halle's attack on antirealists is both realist and explicitly motivated by moral concerns, as we saw. And Morgenthau--one of realism's foremost spokesmen--holds that realism is not only cognizant of moral commands, but that an important *moral* virtue of realism is that it takes account of the consequences of political action as well as moral imperatives.²¹ Morgenthau, Halle, and Gilpin alike hold that the pursuit of the national interest by a nation's leader is not just (or even) self-seeking, but is morally required: for sacrifice of the national interest is, after all, sacrifice of the interests of its citizens, i.e., depriving them of life, liberty, property, or all of the above.²² In Morgenthau's words,

Political realism does not require, nor does it condone, indifference to political ideals and moral principles, but it requires indeed a sharp distinction between the desirable and the

¹⁹ Gurtov (1991), p. 18.

²⁰ Gurtov (1991), p. 4.

²¹ Morgenthau (1973), p. 10.

²² Morgenthau (1973), p. 10; Halle (1987) *passim*, Gilpin (1986), p. 320.

possible--between what is desirable everywhere and at all times and what is possible under the concrete circumstances of time and place.²³

Finally, I am in no position to evaluate the claim that realism helps perpetuate an unsatisfactory world order, but I think it is safe to suppose it is controversial.

And as above in our appraisal of antirealism's critics, some substantial criticisms of realism remain. I will just mention the following: while Morgenthau *et al.* are quick to defend the morality of realism by reference to the moral obligation of national leaders to their citizens, they are all too quiet on the subject of moral obligations between nations themselves. It is often as if it is taken for granted that the leader-citizen relationship is governed by moral rules, but the nation-nation relationship is not. And Beitz is correct to point out that those who deny the existence of any such obligations on the Hobbesian grounds that "it's a jungle out there" are on shaky ground.²⁴ For on Hobbes' view, it is not that there are no such obligations; rather, only that it is foolish to obey them without the assurance that others will as well. But given the desirability of a world where all obey them, it is worth considering how we may bring about their mutual observance.

AN ENDURING TENSION

Stated in simple terms, realism--insofar as it is descriptive--and antirealism boil down to two rather plausible positions: the former, that we must accurately understand the facts if we are to know whether or how a given interest (whether prudential or moral) may be served; the latter, that the facts reveal an unsatisfactory state of affairs about which something ought to be done.

²³ Morgenthau (1973), p. 7.

²⁴ Beitz (1979), pp. 27-34.

These two stands are not inconsistent with each other. Indeed they seem complementary: realists generally agree that the world situation is far from ideal, and (at least some) antirealists agree that one needs to know the facts of the matter in order to best decide how to improve things. Thus it seems as if the desire to make a better world should motivate the acquisition of a better understanding of it, and this improved understanding should result in better policymaking, which would make both sides happy.

But it does not work that way. And part of the explanation for this lies in the mutual misunderstandings (and genuine disagreements) outlined above. But perhaps another part is that realism--at least one version of it, which I will dub "grim"--contains an extra element, which may be stated as, "and the facts show that the hopes of antirealists are unrealizable." This is Spanier's assessment of the world situation:

In the anarchical environment that persists, the truth is that conflict and the possibility of war can never be abolished. *The best that can be achieved is to manage the system in order to minimize the possibilities of an outbreak of the most violent forms of war.*²⁵

But this is precisely the sort of view the antirealist cannot accept, because it entails acceptance of all but "the most violent forms of war"--and all their attendant destruction, suffering, and loss of life--as inevitable. This, they maintain, just cannot be the best we can do. We ought to make things better. But as the saying goes, "ought implies can"; and grim realists, convinced as they are that their view is based on an accurate understanding of the facts, are steadfast that we cannot. To believe otherwise would be, well, unrealistic; impractical at best, disastrous at worst,

²⁵ Spanier (1987), p. 674. Niebuhr (1950), p. 136, takes a similar line. As indicated, not all realists share the grim outlook. Morgenthau is a notable exception, holding that permanent peace may be achievable through the creation of a world community and then a world state, all of which may be brought about by diplomatic means. See Morgenthau (1973), pp. 487, 495, 546–8. Spanier regards Morgenthau as among the less sophisticated realist thinkers; see Spanier, p. 14.

and that's the way it is.²⁶ So instead of a harmony of interests, we see a tug of war: grim realists like Spanier saying to grow up and accept what cannot be changed, and antirealists like Gurtov arguing that the current situation makes change imperative.

²⁶ There seem to be grounds for controversy on this view between realists: Morgenthau (1973), p. 237, notes that "The avoidance of war itself--that is, of any war--has become an aim of statecraft only in the last half-century." Perhaps it is too soon to tell whether Spanier's conviction is justified.

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