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Hans Morgenthau’s Anti-Machiavellian Machiavellianism

Benjamin Wong

There is still no agreement regarding the moral basis of Hans Morgenthau’s political realism. While some critics continue to associate his realism with the teachings of Machiavelli and Hobbes, others maintain that he draws from the Judeo-Christian tradition originating with St. Augustine.¹ The difficulty in comprehending Morgenthau’s moral orientation is largely due to the apparent contradiction between his key theoretical concept of interest defined in terms of power, which leads necessarily to the subordination of morality in political life, and his insistence at the same time on the existence of universal moral laws that are ‘absolute and must be obeyed for their own sake’.² This essay attempts to address...(text continues)
and to resolve this contradiction, but in the context of a striking puzzle that has hitherto escaped the notice of the critics of Morgenthau. The puzzle revolves around the relation between two critical texts that were published close to each other, namely *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (SMPP hereafter) and *Politics Among Nations* (PAN hereafter).³

PAN was first published in 1948.⁴ In the preface to the third edition published in 1960, Morgenthau says with an evident note of chagrin,

> I am still being told that I am making success of the standard of political action...[and] of course, I am still being accused of indifference to the moral problem in spite of abundant evidence, in this book and elsewhere, to the contrary.⁵

The protest is justified in part by the moral arguments that had been developed in SMPP, published two years before PAN in 1946. As critics have long recognised, these arguments constitute the clearest expression of Morgenthau’s moral orientation. Anyone familiar with the moral arguments in SMPP, however, would realise that it would be virtually impossible to reconstruct them on the basis of the moral arguments supplied in PAN. But if the moral arguments in SMPP are crucial in clarifying Morgenthau’s moral perspective in PAN, then why did he not point this out himself? Judging from his complaint above, he clearly had every incentive to do so. Yet there is no relevant reference to SMPP in PAN.⁶

Why is there no reference in PAN to those chapters in SMPP where Morgenthau’s moral views are specifically articulated? What harm is there in alerting readers of PAN to SMPP? Why merely allude to it in such a fashion that readers would have to be sufficiently motivated to rummage through a host of writings before stumbling on it?⁷ The significance of this deliberate silence on

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4. PAN has gone through six editions. The latest edition appeared in 1985 and was edited and revised by Kenneth W. Thompson. In light of the argument of this article, it is worth noting that all the prefaces to the earlier editions have been taken out of the most recent edition of PAN.

5. PAN, xiv. The controversy surrounding the reception of PAN is alluded to in the second edition published in 1954, see PAN, xvi-xvii.

6. SMPP is mentioned in the preface to the fourth edition published in 1966. But in this instance Morgenthau calls attention to it in order to refer his readers to his own ‘philosophy of the social sciences in general and of political science in particular’, as quoted in PAN, xii. In the body of the text there is one reference to SMPP. In this case the reference is to the discussion in SMPP of the conflict between economic and political thought, see PAN, 56 n. 4. There is one other reference to SMPP in the sixth edition, which was revised by Thompson. But there again the reference is made in the context of the questionable attempts to impose economic solutions on political problems, see Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics Among Nations*, 6th ed., revised by Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 9 and 9 n. 2.

6. The reader could conceivably stumble upon the relevant chapters of SMPP by taking note of the reference to Morgenthau’s *Decline of Democratic Politics* in the course of his criticism of the legalistic-
SMPP cannot be underestimated. For, while PAN has grown to become an influential textbook in the field of International Relations, SMPP has conversely sunk into virtual obscurity. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that most students of international relations know of Morgenthau only through PAN, and perhaps only in terms of its ‘twelve misleading pages on “six principles of realism’’. 8 No wonder controversies continue to circulate around the moral basis of Morgenthau’s political realism, and this of course has the undesirable effect of distorting and even confounding the understanding of his political enterprise. As it is clearly in his interest as a political theorist and a moralist to inform readers of SMPP in PAN, it seems to defy reason why he has consistently failed to do so.

This article will argue that there are sound strategic reasons for the absence of references to SMPP in PAN. Taken by itself the moral position in PAN is inconsistent with the moral position in SMPP. But the moral position in SMPP actually permits, or even logically entails, this sort of inconsistency. To put it simply, the moral position in PAN reflects the teaching and the implications of the moral politics of the lesser evil presented in SMPP. In other words, to fully understand the moral character of Morgenthau’s political realism we have to take seriously the implications of his radical account of the inevitability of evil in politics.

All who participate in politics, whether directly or indirectly, are subject to the workings of evil. Evil in politics cannot be eliminated but only mitigated. For, as Morgenthau says, ‘The end of Machiavellianism...is not just around the corner. It is not of this world at all. If it were, salvation from evil would be of this world’. 9 As Morgenthau understands it, the teachings of Machiavelli entail ‘the permanent exemption of political action from ethical limitations’. 10 Machiavellians follow the ways of the lion (force) and the fox (fraud or deception). 11 It is the characteristic of political men to ‘disguise, distort, belittle, and embellish the truth’. 12 Therefore, one needs to be Machiavellian in order to deal with the Machiavellians of the

moralistic approach to international politics in the opening chapter ‘A Realist Theory of International Politics’, see PAN, 12 n. 3. The footnote calls attention to the work and in particular to the chapter, ‘The Problem of the National Interest,’ where there is an explicit reference to the relevant chapters in SMPP; see Morgenthau, The Decline of Democratic Politics, 106 and 106 n. 19.

10. Ibid., 175-76.
11. See Machiavelli, The Prince, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 69 and 78-79. Morgenthau clearly appreciates the value as well as the limitations of the Machiavellian approach to politics; see, for example his comments on Machiavelli in PAN, 231-32 and in The Purpose of American Politics, 323. Although Morgenthau thinks well of Machiavelli’s notion of virtú, it ought to be recalled that Machiavelli applies that term to villains like Agathocles (see chapter 8 of The Prince). For an instructive account of Machiavelli’s mode of teaching and communication and the extent to which Machiavelli was Machiavellian, see LeoStrauss, Thoughts on Machiavelli (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 15-53. Morgenthau’s appreciation of this mode of communication is partly reflected in the preface to the second edition of PAN where he cites Montesquieu’s plea to the readers of his The Spirit of the Laws. See PAN, xvii.
world. Accordingly, Morgenthau engages in the Machiavellian mode of deception to moderate the Machiavellianism that pervades political life. This underlying strategy helps to explain and to resolve the apparent contradiction between the moral arguments in PAN and SMPP. More importantly, the analysis of the relation between the two texts reveals a complex mode of thought that would deepen and enrich our appreciation of the uniqueness of Morgenthau’s political realism. The essay will propose that it can also help to reinforce his continuing relevance by sketching how his mode of thought may be used to engage postmodernist theorists of International Relations on their own terms.

In view of the complex nature of the relation between the moral arguments in PAN and SMPP, it would be necessary to set out as clearly and accurately as possible the main structure of the arguments in each text. The following sections will present the moral arguments in PAN and SMPP respectively, both to show the apparent contradiction between the two arguments and to articulate the underlying mode of thinking that reconciles them.

**Power and Morality in Politics Among Nations**

PAN does not present a comprehensive theory of international politics. For, as Morgenthau claims, such a theory would require ‘a systematic exposition of the philosophy of political realism’, which is not the intention of the text. Its objectives are much more limited but by the same token much more urgent. PAN was written to address the growing antagonism between two superpowers locked in deep ideological conflict. In the main, the text confronts the prejudices of an audience steeped in the moral, political, and intellectual tradition of liberalism. More to the point, PAN has to deal with two related problems that demand immediate attention. First, with the international problem pertaining to the Soviet Union; and second, with the domestic problem regarding the dominance of a school of thought that, according to Morgenthau, distorts the reality of political life and in doing so corrupts America’s foreign policy objectives towards the Soviet Union as well as the rest of the world. Of the two problems, the second is clearly the more fundamental. And it is precisely its confrontation with the dominant liberal tradition that led to the accusation of Morgenthau’s indifference to the moral issue of power.

In keeping with Morgenthau’s defence against that accusation, the very first chapter of PAN shows him grappling with the problematic relation between morality and politics, particularly in the realm of international relations. As it is well known, the opening chapter spells out the six main principles of political

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13. Ibid., 4. Ultimately the difficulty of fully grasping the nature of Morgenthau’s thought has to do with his failure to provide a systematic exposition of his underlying philosophy.

14. In some ways PAN imitates and is perhaps intended to supersede Thucydides’ account of the lessons of the Peloponnesian War, which similarly grew out of reflection on the conflict between the two greatest powers of the time. Thucydides after all did not have to reckon with the possibility of total war brought about by the existence of weapons of mass destruction.
realism, of which two are devoted to the role that morality plays in politics. Before examining Morgenthau’s approach to the question of morality in politics, it would be helpful first to summarise all six principles:

P1. Political realism believes that politics is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature.
P2. The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power.
P3. Realism assumes that its key concept of interest defined in terms of power is an objective category that is universally valid, but it does not endow that concept with a meaning that is fixed once for all.
P4. Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action. It is also aware of the ineluctable tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action.
P5. Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.
P6. The difference between political realism and other schools of thought is real and profound.

The first three principles appear to constitute a set in that the concept of interest defined in terms of power is intended to reveal a rational account of man’s political behaviour. P2 stands out as Morgenthau leaves no doubt that the concept of interest is fundamental to the understanding and practice of political realism. As a result of its emphasis on power, the concept inevitably raises the question regarding the moral basis of political realism. Beginning with Morgenthau’s treatment of the political role of morality, the following sub-sections will reconstruct Morgenthau’s attempt to reconcile the key concept of interest defined in terms of power with the demands of morality.

The Defence of Universal Moral Values

To begin with, it is noteworthy that Morgenthau provides no fully developed arguments to support his assertions regarding the objective laws of human nature (P1) and the moral laws that govern the universe (P5). Consequently, it is not clear how these laws relate to each other. Nonetheless, P4 and P5 do show that political realism takes seriously the question regarding the relation of morality to politics. Furthermore, in his elaboration of P4, Morgenthau says that both the individual and the state ‘must judge political action by universal moral principles, such as that of liberty’.15 But, in keeping with the precept of that principle, he immediately adds the qualification:

15. Ibid., 10.
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Yet while the individual has a moral right to sacrifice himself in defence of such principle, the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation of the infringement of liberty to get in its way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival. 16

While the state must judge in terms of universal moral principles, its actions must, however, conform to the moral principles of national survival. Two sets of moral principles are clearly involved here. And it is implied that actions in accordance with the moral principles of national survival may violate universal moral principles. But so long as states operate within the confines of the moral principles of national survival, why should they bother about judgments pertaining to principles of universal morality? In short, what role does universal morality play in Morgenthau’s theory of political realism?

One answer is offered in P5. All states, according to Morgenthau, succumb to the temptation of cloaking ‘their own particular aspirations and actions in the moral purposes of the universe’. 17 Accordingly, the distinction between national and universal morality helps to expose this duplicity. In other words, the idea of universal morality appears to be useful insofar as it helps to reveal the moral limitations of the state. One practical implication of this limitation is that states so exposed might feel compelled to moderate their ambitions.

Another and perhaps more concrete answer is offered in chapter sixteen of PAN, which discusses the issue of international morality. There Morgenthau makes the following argument:

A foreign policy that does not permit mass extermination as a means to its end does not impose this limitation upon itself because of considerations of political expediency. On the contrary, expediency would counsel such a thorough and effective operation. This limitation derives from an absolute moral principle, which must be obeyed regardless of considerations of national advantage…This point cannot be too strongly made…[The] fact of the matter is that nations recognise a moral obligation to refrain from the infliction of death and suffering under certain conditions despite the possibility of justifying such conduct in the light of a ‘higher purpose’ such as the national interest. 18

The injunction against mass extermination is the most explicit moral statement Morgenthau makes about the content and application of universal morality. On the basis of this argument it would seem that universal moral principles do operate directly to limit the conduct of states, albeit under certain conditions. This is not to say that, even if those conditions exist, states would necessary observe the injunction against mass extermination. But states that do not, would have violated a

16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 11.
18. Ibid., 240, emphasis added.
universal moral imperative, and thus subject themselves to universal condemnation.

There are, however, several internal difficulties with both arguments. For a start, both arguments presuppose not only the existence of universal moral laws, but universal agreement regarding the nature and content of those laws. The first argument in particular presupposes that the state can distinguish between its own morality from the moral laws that govern the universe. But this is questionable on the basis of Morgenthau’s view about the character of the postwar state. His account of the modern phenomenon of nationalistic universalism, in which states actually and not hypocritically identify their national values as universal ones, shows that it is unreasonable and perhaps even unrealistic to assume that states can easily discriminate between universal and national values. The second argument is also similarly weakened by the problem of nationalistic universalism. But even assuming agreement on the existence of universal moral laws, that argument is compromised by the conditions Morgenthau attached to the application of the injunction against mass extermination. Firstly, because Morgenthau himself does not specify the terms of those conditions, and secondly, because even if he should specify those terms, they may not meet with universal agreement.

All this shows that the appeal to universal moral laws as a necessary mode of judgment is highly problematic in practice, if not in theory. This is not to suggest that Morgenthau is unaware of the problem. As noted above, his account of the phenomenon of nationalistic universalism already anticipates it. Indeed, it could be said that the phenomenon, which reflects the intensity of the ideological struggle between the two superpowers, poses the greatest challenge to the very principles of political realism that Morgenthau is attempting to advance. For this reason it is imperative that we fully understand his account of the phenomenon of nationalistic universalism, which, as we shall see, is inseparable from his analysis of the psychology of the individual.

**Nationalistic Universalism and the Human Psyche**

First, it is important to note that, for Morgenthau, the history of Europe prior to World War II did show that universal, or at least shared trans-national, moral values did in fact periodically influence the behaviour of European states. That state of affairs, however, no longer obtains today or is gradually being eroded. The present state of affairs is characterised by the global emergence of the phenomenon of nationalistic universalism, which is in truth the manifestation of ‘a secular religion’. Morgenthau is no doubt referring mainly, though not exclusively, to the increasing ideological polarisation of liberalism and communism. What is most

19. Ibid., 259-60.
20. In the sixth edition, Thompson adds that one cannot overlook the element of relativism in the relation between moral principles and foreign policy; see PAN, 6th ed., 275.
22. Ibid., 339.
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alarming about this phenomenon is that it threatens to engulf the world in a struggle, the ‘ferocity and intensity’ of which is ‘not known to other ages’. In other words, it is a phenomenon that is particularly new and exceptionally dangerous.

The cause of it, according to Morgenthau, can be traced to the twin forces of democracy and nationalism: ‘While the democratic selection and responsibility of government officials destroyed international morality as an effective system, nationalism destroyed the international society itself within which that morality operated’. Previously, international morality was assured by the presence of an aristocratic ruling class that subscribed to supranational rules of natural law informed by Christian, cosmopolitan, and humanitarian elements. The French Revolution and its legacy altered that state of affairs. Rather than diluting the bonds of international morality, the revolutionary combination of democracy and nationalism was expected to strengthen them by replacing aristocratic rule with popular government embodying the aspirations of liberated peoples all over the world. In actuality, the combination produced nation-states, each with a moral code of its own. Having thus destroyed the foundations of international morality, these forces were further transmuted to produce the phenomenon of national universalism. Now, according to Morgenthau, this phenomenon occurs because the individual, who no longer believes in the existence of international morality, is nonetheless ‘too strongly attached to the concept of universal ethics to give it up altogether’. So he is compelled by this dilemma to identify the morality of the nation with the commands of supranational ethics. Paradoxically, it is the individual’s attachment to the belief in the existence of universal values that is responsible for the emergence of nationalistic universalism. Hence, to deal with the problem posed by this phenomenon one has to understand the psychology of the individual.

Morgenthau takes the view that human nature is pluralistic. Simply put, there are different aspects to a person’s character: ‘Real man is a composite of “economic man”, “political man”, “moral man”, “religious man”, etc’. With respect to the political aspect of man’s nature, Morgenthau says that ‘the drives to live, to propagate, and to dominate are common to all men’. The struggle for power is therefore a perennial problem of human existence. Yet because man is also moral,

23. Ibid., 263.
24. Ibid., 254.
26. Ibid., 254-55.
27. Ibid., 256. For accounts of Morgenthau’s view of the problems of democracy, see SMPP, 41-74 and The Purpose of American Politics, 197-292.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 259.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 14.
32. Ibid., 37.
the human mind in its day-by-day operations cannot bear to look the truth of politics straight in the face. It must disguise, distort, belittle, and embellish the truth...[for] only by deceiving himself about the nature of politics and the role he plays on the political scene is man able to live contentedly as a political animal with himself and his fellow men.33

Rooted, as it were, in the rationalistic tradition of the West, modern ideology is especially seductive as a means to salve the uneasy conscience of man. Ideology, as Morgenthau understands it, is the ‘more or less conscious disguises of a situation, the true recognition of which would not be in accord with the political actor’s interest’.34 Every political actor is, at the very least, vaguely aware of his duplicity. The more engaged an actor is in the struggle for power, the greater is the need for him to hide his self-serving intentions behind the mask of a political ideology.35 Seen in this light, nationalistic universalism comes to sight as the most recent and most potent form of the escape from the grim and bitter truth of political life.

Man, because he is a composite, is necessarily conflicted. The clash between the moral and political aspects of himself transforms him into an unwitting and hence an unself-conscious Machiavellian, ironically because he cannot bear to see himself as one. In view of this problem it is Morgenthau’s purpose to expose this fact of man’s existential condition such that he can begin to deal with this aspect of his Machiavellianism. This, accordingly, is accomplished through the concept of interest defined in terms of power, as spelt out in the second (P2) and third (P3) principles of political realism.

*The Realist Conception of Interest*

The concept of interest defined in terms of power is, for Morgenthau, the key concept of political realism. As the main signpost, it is supposed to provide the crucial link for ‘reason trying to understand international politics and the facts to be understood’.36 More precisely, the concept is intended to demarcate the realm of politics as an autonomous sphere subject to its particular laws of motion. These laws are inherent, albeit hidden, in man’s essential nature as a political being.37 In revealing these laws, the concept helps to impose rational discipline upon the observer of politics on the one hand, and to provide rational discipline in the thought and action of the practitioner of politics on the other. The concept is therefore designed to achieve both an intellectual as well as a practical purpose. In both cases the intended outcome is the same: to rationalise the understanding and practise of politics. A further consequence of the use of this concept is that its user,

33. Ibid., 15 and 93.
34. Ibid., 92 n. 1.
35. Ibid., 93.
36. Ibid., 5.
37. The analogy of the painted portrait conveys this point, see ibid., 8.
the political realist, must of necessity subordinate all other standards of judgment to the political one.38 That is to say, the political standard derived from the concept of interest understood in terms of power must take precedence over moral considerations. So there is a sense in which it would seem true to say that in PAN Morgenthau does eventually arrive at a position that is, to all intents and purposes, indifferent to morality. Yet this does not explain how the concept can be harmonised with those principles that stress the need to judge in terms of universal moral standards.

Given the problem posed by the conflicted nature of the human condition and its relation to the phenomenon of nationalistic universalism, it would be pointless for Morgenthau to insist on the autonomy of universal values as the objective standard to evaluate the conduct of states. For what is the objective standard to one state would appear as a particular but disguised expression of nationalistic interest to another state. But this is precisely where the concept of interest is most relevant and helpful. For it teaches that however states may define their goals ‘power is always the immediate aim’.39 And in view of the phenomenon of nationalistic universalism, states must strive for universal power in order to realise their aspirations whatever they might be. It appears that the concept is used, at least initially, to intensify the pursuit of power while preserving the particularistic moral orientation of states.40 But to think of interest in terms of power is actually to think in terms of the means to the realisation of one’s ultimate objectives. This mode of thinking is instrumental and to that extent rational. Thus, the intensification of the pursuit of power proves to be the means to rationalise the action of states. Furthermore, in the context of modern warfare, the intensification of the pursuit of power confronts states with the dread prospect of mutual and total destruction. And it is in virtue of the mutual recognition of the likelihood that a war of such magnitude could in fact occur that would help to call into being the mechanism of the balance of power, which can operate properly only under conditions of rationality. As it turns out, this mode of reasoning is an adaptation of the Hobbesian state of nature teaching: of the war of all against all. Fear of violent death sobered and so rationalises the mind.41

But although the balance of power contributes to the stability of the international system, it alone is insufficient to sustain it. According to Morgenthau, an international moral consensus is necessary to sustain a genuine balance of power.42 This consensus, however, cannot arise without an existing international balance of

38. Ibid., 12.
39. Ibid., 29.
40. Consider what Morgenthau says about the unreality of the balance of power; see ibid., 215. For a criticism of this (perhaps erroneous) understanding of Morgenthau’s view of the balance of power, see Martin Griffiths, Realism, Idealism, and International Politics (London: Routledge, 1992), 60-70.
41. As a result of the war of every man against every man, reason ‘suggesteth convenient Articles of Peace’. See Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, ed. C.B. MacPherson (Penguin Books, 1961), 188. Consider also what Hobbes says about the differences between unregulated and regulated or prudential trains of thought. The latter, according to Hobbes, comes to be as a result of strong passions, see ibid., 95.
42. Morgenthau, PAN, 221-28.
power that is predicated on the rationality of states. The international moral consensus, moreover, would not be identical to the moral laws that govern the universe. Nonetheless, it would reflect commonalities among competing national values. No state in such a context could argue that its values, which it alone considers to be universal, are not recognised at all by the international community. So long as the moral consensus reflects values that nations can each call their own, it would provide the normative element necessary to preserve the pre-existing balance of power. And the concept of interest defined in terms of power is meant precisely to bring about the conditions necessary for the operation of a genuine balance of power. In this way the key concept of interest defined in terms of power is intended to pave the way for the possibility of a renewed international moral consensus in the postwar system of states.

This strategy of working to introduce order in a situation of anarchy indirectly through the modality of instrumental reason, while simultaneously appealing to the particular universalistic aspirations of states, conforms in essential respects to a rationalistic and power-centric model of political thought associated with Machiavelli and Hobbes. This helps to explain why PAN is so often read as an extension of that political model. And even though PAN does eventually argue for the necessity of a universal moral consensus to sustain a genuine balance of power, the operative framework does transform the notion of morality into a consequentialist one. That is to say, morality in PAN is not desired for its own sake. This view of morality, however, contradicts the non-utilitarian view of morality presented in SMPP. So the question naturally arises whether it is possible to reconcile the two conceptions of morality. To answer this question we need to turn to the moral arguments in SMPP.

The Moral Arguments in Scientific Man and Power Politics

SMPP is by and large predicated on the argument that there are non-rational and even irrational forces in human nature that reason cannot command. Hence the attempt to resolve the problems of man by rational or, more precisely, scientific means is bound to fail. This argument presupposes a certain conception of human nature that also serves as the basis for Morgenthau’s moral views. As regards the latter, Morgenthau’s position seems to be that true morality is not justified by reason, but by faith, which is beyond reason. This explains why in SMPP the

43. See the works of Russell, Hans J. Morgenthau and Doyle, Ways of War and Peace.
44. The prerationalist character of his moral views are indicated in his brief account of St. Augustine, see SMPP, 204-5 and PAN, 232. The biblical basis of his own morality is never explicitly identified, and is always only implied through references to commandments of the Old Testament (see, for example, SMPP, 209). Morgenthau does not tell us whether he is a true believer. Curiously, he traces his moral views to the ‘Hebrew-Christian tradition’ which is a rather odd way of describing the tradition. See SMPP, 170 and The Purpose of American Politics, 354-59. At any rate, the commandment ‘thou shalt not kill’ is used in PAN to illustrate the differences among three types of rules of conduct (ethics, mores, and laws), see PAN, 232-33. This commandment, however, is later diluted to the injunction against mass extermination; see PAN, 240.
defence of morality is carried out negatively, that is by showing what morality cannot be, rather than by arguing for the validity of his particular view of it.\textsuperscript{45} In the following sections we shall outline Morgenthau’s view of morality and explore its radical implications.

The moral arguments in SMPP are articulated in chapters seven and eight.\textsuperscript{46} Chapter seven opens with a provocative statement of the problematic relation between politics and morality:

Man is a political animal by nature; he is a scientist by chance or choice; he is a moralist because he is a man. Man is born to seek power, yet his actual condition makes him a slave to the power of others. Man is born a slave, but everywhere he wants to be a master. Out of this discord between man’s desire and his actual condition arises the moral issue of power, that is, the problem of justifying and limiting the power which man has over man.\textsuperscript{47}

Having thus established the context of his discussion of the moral problem of power, Morgenthau then turns to critique various attempts to deal with it.

*The Critique of Rationalistic Ethics*

The critique begins with what Morgenthau regards as the prevailing system of ethics: utilitarianism. Interestingly, he does not deploy the familiar philosophical arguments against it. Rather, he simply asserts that the ‘modern mind cannot be unaware of the existence of ethical conflicts which are solved in defiance of utilitarian standards’.\textsuperscript{48} Accordingly, he does not argue that utilitarianism is irrelevant, untenable, or invalid as a system of ethics. Indeed, he will later go on to suggest that utilitarian ethics is especially relevant in politics because it appeals to ‘the common run of men’.\textsuperscript{49} For now he only asserts that it does not fully comprehend man’s moral experiences.

But precisely because man is aware of contrasting and hence conflicting moral standards, his normal tendency would be either to accept or to reject utilitarianism. If he does the former, he would be inclined to regard his experience of the alternative form of ethics as a sort of psychological aberration. On the other hand, if he chooses the latter, he would feel the compulsion to ‘retire into the realm of pure thought, that is, perfectionist ethics’.\textsuperscript{50} The recourse to ethical perfectionism, however, presents problems of its own. As regards these problems, it is important to note that Morgenthau does not criticise perfectionist ethics as such, but only that

\textsuperscript{45} This has led to the criticism that Morgenthau ‘makes no attempt to actually validate his transcendental ethic’, see Murray, ‘The Moral Politics of Hans Morgenthau’, 106.

\textsuperscript{46} Chapter seven is based on an earlier article; see Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil’, *Ethics* 56, no. 1 (1945): 1-18.

\textsuperscript{47} Morgenthau, SMPP, 168-69.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 170.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 174.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 171.
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form of it that is predicated on ‘the ethical theory and practice of rationalism’. In this connection it is also worthwhile noting that as examples of this form of perfectionism, Morgenthau includes, along with the Wilsonian approach to politics, liberal Protestantism as well as modern Catholicism. This implies that there are forms of Christianity or biblical morality that are not exposed to these problems.

The main problem with perfectionism so understood is that it is politically ineffective. Morgenthau cites the example of the conscientious objector as a case in point. The decision of the conscientious objector not to take up arms in defence of the country does nothing to prevent war. Worse, his influence may even endanger the country. According to Morgenthau, the ineffectiveness of perfectionism is such that the

common run of men will either exchange, permanently or temporarily, a system of ethics which imposes upon adherence to its commands the sacrifice of successful action for one compatible with such action.

Short of abandoning perfectionism for utilitarianism, these men would try to reinterpret their perfectionist ethics so as not to make successful political action impossible. As examples of these attempts, Morgenthau mentions theocracies that glorify government as divine institutions and totalitarian regimes that regard the state as the manifestation of morality on earth. What these regimes would be doing in effect is to retain the perfectionist ethic at the expense of its rationality. This understanding of the reaction to the problems of perfectionism mirrors Morgenthau’s view in PAN of the phenomenon of nationalistic universalism, or at least some variation of it (this may partly explain why Morgenthau devotes considerable space to the critique of perfectionism).

At any rate, the two reactions above do not exhaust the responses to the problems of perfectionism. The two reactions have in common the refusal to recognise the chasm separating political action and ethical standards. There are other responses that are predicated on the awareness of this chasm. In addition, these other responses strive to preserve the element of rationality. For his critique, Morgenthau reduces these responses to three main types.

The first response is to radically separate the realm of political action from that of ethical judgment. Such a response, according to Morgenthau, is associated with Machiavelli and Hobbes. Politics here is treated in an amoral fashion. But this response meets with resistance because ‘[mankind] has at all times refused to forgo ethical evaluation of political action’. So even a Machiavellian has to act

51. Ibid., 172.
54. Ibid., 175.
55. Ibid., 176.
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hypocritically by paying lip service to morality.\textsuperscript{56} In view of this problem, the next response is to construct a dual standard of ethical evaluation; one applying to private, individual life the other to the public, political domain. This solution too is open to question. According to Morgenthau, the dual standard not only renders political morality inferior to private morality, but it also has the effect of legitimising the inferior mode of ethical evaluation.\textsuperscript{57} The third and last response reacts to the difficulties encountered by the dual standard by attempting to justify it on the basis of a higher principle. The result of such an attempt is the classic means–end doctrine, which teaches that the ends justify the means. The problem with this doctrine is that it leads to the negation of absolute ethical judgments altogether precisely because it justifies all human actions so long as they are in service of the ultimate end however conceived.\textsuperscript{58}

All these attempts to reconcile morality with politics fail ultimately because they are predicated on the belief that man is rational and that rationality is intrinsically good.\textsuperscript{59} That is to say all these attempts presuppose that man is in principle morally perfectible. Morgenthau, to be sure, is not denying perfectionism altogether, but only that aspect of it that is based on rationalist principles. To understand the positive account of his morality, however, we need to go through his treatment of the problem of evil.

\textit{The Problem of Evil}

For Morgenthau, evil is a permanent human problem. He begins his analysis by stating that all human actions are reducible to acts of individuals. Accordingly, the evaluation of human action must revolve around the moral character of individual deeds and intentions.\textsuperscript{60} In acting we cannot always avoid harm to others. The reason is that we cannot control the chain of events that are initiated by our actions. What we do to benefit some individuals often comes at the expense of others. We may defend these actions on the grounds that we genuinely did not intend to cause harm to others. But, according to Morgenthau, even if our intentions are good we cannot avoid being implicated in evil. For the problem of evil or harm to others does not just apply to actions. Our good intentions are corrupted even before they reach their intended goal as a result of the mental choices we make.\textsuperscript{61} In life we are always confronted with competing choices and moral demands that we can never fully satisfy. In terms of his public life, a man has to choose between Caesar and God; in private, he has to choose between friends or family members. In no case can he hope to satisfy each and every one of his obligations. Indeed, this state of affairs points to an even more disconcerting problem of the ethical life.

\textsuperscript{56} See PAN, 94-95 and Russell, \textit{Hans Morgenthau and the Ethics of American Statecraft}, 155.

\textsuperscript{57} Morgenthau, SMPP, 178-80.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 185-87.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 187.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 189.
An ethical situation is one that concerns one’s relatedness to others. The commands of ethics entail that we act for the benefit of others, that is unselfishly. The ultimate result of this demand is that we sacrifice our lives for the sake of others. But in this case we destroy our ability ‘to contribute at least a certain share of unselfishness to the overwhelming demands of the world’.\(^\text{62}\) Short of making the ultimate sacrifice, the ethical situation is such that we cannot attend to the needs of others while neglecting our own:

The attempt to do justice to the ethics of unselfishness thus leads to the paradox of the ethical obligation to be selfish in order to satisfy the moral obligation of unselfishness at least to a certain extent.\(^\text{63}\)

Moral agents, therefore, cannot avoid being selfish in discharging their duties to others. The problem, however, does not end there. Man’s selfishness is further corrupted by his desire for power, which is the manifestation of our political nature. Selfishness is first and foremost directed at survival; accordingly it can be satisfied in principle.\(^\text{64}\) The desire for power, on the other hand, revolves around our relative position or status among other human beings. And that position or status can only be completely satisfied with the domination of humanity. For this reason the desire for power is unlimited in extent. But the distinction between selfishness and the desire for power is only an analytical one. In practice they cannot be separated. The desire for power is ‘present whenever man intends to act with regard to other men’.\(^\text{65}\) That is to say the desire is latent in our ethical actions. The desire for power, however, expresses itself most fully in the arena of politics, and according to Morgenthau, ‘[t]he degree in which the essence and aim of politics is power over others, politics is evil’. Indeed, the evil in political life is ‘the paradigm and prototype of all possible corruption’.\(^\text{66}\) And as the political aim of success is inconsistent with the ultimate aim of ethics, politics is necessarily and inevitably evil.

Although evil is therefore a permanent feature of political life, what is most disturbing for Morgenthau is the convergence of two factors in the postwar international environment. The first is the role of modern ideology leading to the phenomenon of nationalistic universalism. The other is the adoption of the means-end doctrine to assuage the uneasy conscience of the modern political actor. This doctrine in practice deludes its practitioners to depreciate the element of power, or the desire for power, in the belief that in time the fundamental problems of politics can be resolved.\(^\text{67}\) Meanwhile, however, it is this belief that allows the practitioner to rationalise acts of injustice. Morgenthau therefore regards this as ‘the ultimate

\begin{itemize}
  \item \text{62. Ibid., 191-92.}
  \item \text{63. Ibid., 192.}
  \item \text{64. Ibid., 192-93.}
  \item \text{65. Ibid., 194.}
  \item \text{66. Ibid., 195.}
  \item \text{67. Ibid., 198-200.}
\end{itemize}
moral corruption through power...a formidable perversion of the moral sense itself, an acquiescence in evil in the name of the very standards which ought to condemn it’. 68

For Morgenthau, the condemnation of power politics may be justified from the Augustinian perspective. But this perspective cannot apply to the situation at hand. For modern ideologies are fundamentally secular: ‘for an age that believes no longer in an immortal god, the state becomes the only God there is’. 69 Yet at the same time, man cannot escape the problem of evil. In Morgenthau’s view any attempt to gloss over this problem only aggravates it. Man has to face up to the fact that he cannot avoid evil in political life. The choice is always between the greater and lesser evil. At the end of the day he must recognise political life for what it is and the evil that is entailed by it. Having thus established the nature of political life, Morgenthau concludes his argument with the following prescription:

To act successfully, that is, according to the rules of the political art, is political wisdom. To know with despair that the political act is inevitably evil, and to act nevertheless, is moral courage. To choose among several expedient actions the least evil one is moral judgement. 70

But in many ways this is easier said than done. For it would seem unrealistic and unreasonable to expect most statesmen to live up to this teaching. Morgenthau himself cannot be unaware of this. As he says, ‘[o]nly the greatest moral courage and intellectual penetration could comprehend the full measure of this corruption and still not destroy the faculty to live and act’. 71 This ultimately is the problem that confronts Morgenthau’s project. Most men would rather die than live the way prescribed by his moralism. So how can he make the teaching of the evil of politics public without people—in particular statesmen and politicians—recoiling from it? Must not Morgenthau somehow violate this prescription to render it more palatable? In other words, must he not engage in an act of evil—in this case an act of deception—to advance the moral character of his teaching? And is PAN the result of the deliberate dilution of this teaching of the evil of politics? In this regard, we should note that in PAN Morgenthau only mentions the politics of evil once, and this is clearly in striking contrast to the frequent use of the phrase in SMPP.

Rhetoric and Political Realism

The preceding analysis of Morgenthau’s moral arguments helps to clarify not only the differences between SMPP and PAN, but also Morgenthau’s reluctance in the latter to call attention to the former. As presented in SMPP, Morgenthau’s view of

68. Ibid., 199.
69. Ibid., 197.
70. Ibid., 203.
71. Ibid., 200.
the politics of evil presupposes a moral perspective that is absolute and uncompromising. The argument for the need to discriminate between evils entails a belief in the possibility of discriminating between good and evil. On the basis of his critique of utilitarianism as well as fundamental varieties of rationalistic, perfectionist ethics, we can reasonably infer that Morgenthau’s moral perspective derives from a prerationalistic, perfectionist tradition. He has already indicated his approval of the Augustinian moral perspective in SMPP. As is well known to Morgenthau, the Augustinian perspective includes such notions as grace and salvation, notions that are ultimately predicated on the belief in the existence of a personal, providential God. These notions, however, are not a constitutive part of his account of the moral politics of evil. The moral perspective in SMPP is such that there is, in a sense, no account of salvation from evil. This is perhaps the most radical feature of his moral perspective: the unmitigated nature of evil in political life.

If we were to take the teaching concerning the evil of politics seriously, then it would seem that most statesmen would not be able to conform to the high standards of moral probity expected by Morgenthau. The moral demand on the political actor is that to be true to himself and his moral convictions he must confront the evil of his actions. He must no doubt always choose the lesser evil. But he cannot with a clear conscience escape from the fact that his actions are fundamentally evil. Perhaps only the rarest of political actors could confront the necessarily evil nature of their actions in its full measure without self-destruction. In effect this means that even the most competent of political actors would not likely have the moral courage to see the truth for what it is.

This inherent inability to confront the truth is for the most part the actual existential condition of the great majority of political actors. Morgenthau must therefore accept this condition as a brutal fact of nature. His view of what constitutes the truth of moral life in politics would be resisted for reasons he should well understand. If the truth, in this instance, is by its nature incapable of persuasion, then some other way must be found, if not to convey the truth in its fullness, then at least to secure the outcome that the truth is intended to realise. In short, the truth may not be as important in the practical sphere of activity. What is more important is to work towards the outcomes that come closest to the good consequences envisaged by the teaching of the lesser evil. And in keeping with the logic of the lesser evil, Morgenthau’s moral perspective does allow for the use of deception in furthering a moral agenda. Between telling a truth that serves no useful purpose, or a lie that serves a useful one, the choice for the political realist is obvious.

Turning now to PAN, we can see on the basis of the moral arguments of SMPP the extent to which the moral prescriptions of the latter are violated. Consider the argument that the individual must judge in terms of universal moral principles but act in terms of the moral principles of national survival. This argument legislates a

72. See ibid., 204-6.
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dual standard of morality that is criticised in SMPP. And it is worth recalling that
one of the defects of the dual standard is that it helps to legitimise an inferior
morality. Yet in its advocacy of the moral duty of national survival, PAN does in
effect legitimise an inferior morality. If, however, we review the various
alternatives of flawed moral perspectives, the dual standard could be seen as the
choice of the lesser evil. It is, in the first place, a rational response to the defects of
utilitarian ethics that denies or fails to accord with the human experience of
nonutilitarian moral norms. In the second place, it avoids the moral relativism of
the means–end doctrine. So even though it is defective, it is the least defective
among the available practical, moral alternatives.\textsuperscript{73}

The dual standard also helps to preserve the belief in universal laws, but limits
its application to the private sphere. Moreover, if we recall that the desire for
power conceals itself behind the ideology of universal morality, then it would seem
that the dual standard serves as a restraint on the unlimited quest for power. On the
other hand, the moral duty of national survival accords with the selfish but limited
and not unreasonable needs of individuals and political communities. Hence, in
terms of the practical sphere of politics, the dual standard does accommodate the
lesser of two evil impulses in human nature.

By characterising the fundamental human need in moral terms, the dual standard
also helps to insulate the political actor from the full force of the politics of evil.
Actions that accord with the moral duty of national survival, though inferior to
actions in accordance with universal moral principles, are nonetheless acts of
morality. No statesman who has acted to save his country is likely to be plagued by
guilt, or at least the evil from which he cannot abstain is mitigated by the good that
redounds on his country. Furthermore, in practice, actions in accordance with the
moral duty of national survival are consistent with actions that accord with the
realist concept of interest defined in terms of power. To act in terms of the national
interest understood in terms of power is to act in a way that is rational and
reasonable. And as Morgenthau claims, such actions reflect the exercise of the
virtue of prudence. As virtue is the opposite of vice, one who acts prudently is not
likely to mortify himself. At the same time, awareness that the duty to defend the
national interest is inferior to the duty towards universal laws serves to moderate
the pride and hence the ambitions of the successful political actor.

To put it simply, the strategy in PAN is to shield the political actor from the full
moral consequences of his necessarily Machiavellian actions through a subtle
Machiavellian strategy. As mentioned earlier, all political actors are Machiavellian
in spite of themselves. That is the reason why they are compelled to find
ideological justifications for their actions; otherwise they would not be able to act.
The problem, therefore, is how to induce the political actor to confront his
Machiavellian nature without undermining the actor’s capacity to act, that is to act
with the belief that he is morally justified to act. Morgenthau’s strategy is to lead

\textsuperscript{73} For a criticism of Morgenthau’s apparently contradictory views of the dual standard, see Smith,
\textit{Realist Thought}, 161-63.
the actor to see that by adopting the Machiavellian mode of thought as an instrumental technique he would more likely succeed in fulfilling both his moral and political objectives. That is to say the unself-conscious Machiavellian actor is told to pretend to be a self-conscious Machiavellian for the sake of his moral and political objectives. And since it is only pretence, the actor does not have to confront his true Machiavellian nature. Accordingly, he will re-enact the Machiavellian strategies, which are oriented towards power and self-interest, without having to doubt or to question his moral intentions. And so long as he abides by the rules of the game, as it were, he would perform the role that is in keeping with that of the prudent statesman. As far as consequences are concerned, there would be no significant differences between the actions of a self-conscious Machiavellian and the conscious moralistic political actor who has trained and disciplined himself to think and act in a Machiavellian mode.

There are in all two related strategies of deception in Morgenthau’s teaching of political realism. First there is the deliberate silence on the moral arguments of SMPP in PAN. Second, there is the further shielding of the realist political actor from the full moral consequences of political evil in PAN. But as our analysis of Morgenthau’s moral arguments has attempted to show, these strategies are ultimately in keeping with and in service of the moral basis of his political realism. ‘The end of Machiavellianism’, Morgenthau declares, ‘is not just around the corner. It is not of this world at all. If it were, salvation from evil itself would be of this world’.

In a world of Machiavellians, the only prudent strategies are necessarily Machiavellian ones. And the world is Machiavellian precisely because man cannot bear to see himself as a Machiavellian. Man cannot help but delude himself. In so doing he perpetuates the greatest evil on the basis of morality. Drawing on our disposition to delude ourselves, Morgenthau attempts to deceive us into acting amoralistically so as to moderate the evil consequences of our actions. Political realism, as understood and taught by Morgenthau, is moral precisely because it is ultimately anti-Machiavellian in its Machiavellianism.

**Conclusion**

This attempt to explain the moral basis of Morgenthau’s political realism shows that PAN re-enacts the teaching of the evil of politics presented in SMPP. Insofar as that teaching is concerned, it is clear that Morgenthau does not excuse himself from its implications. To communicate, after all, is to act. Furthermore, the intention in PAN is to legislate a realist mode of thought and action:

> Whenever we act with reference to our fellow men, we must sin...[no] ivory tower is remote enough to offer protection against the guilt in which the actor and the bystander...are inextricably enmeshed.

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74. Morgenthau, SMPP, 201.
75. Ibid., 201-2.
In this case, the act of deception in PAN inculpates him in the corruption of political life. He is, to be sure, somewhat insulated from the full impact of the effects of such corruption in that he is neither a statesman nor a diplomat. As a theorist, he acts at some distance from the centre of political life. But what is more important, he acts with the implicit awareness of the nature and consequences of his engagement with that mode of life. In light of this understanding of Morgenthau’s mode of engagement with the recalcitrant problems of political life, we should begin to appreciate the importance of the elements of rhetoric and irony in articulation of his moral and political thought in general and his political realism in particular.

Morgenthau is ironic in that he does not always say what he means and he is rhetorical because he speaks from more than one perspective. These elements of his thought are in keeping with his view of the pluralistic conception of human nature, which compels him to order his discourse to ensure the advancement of his arguments in different and at times conflicting contexts. His psychology, moreover, serves as the basis of his understanding of the nature and actions of states both in themselves and in their relations with each other. Accordingly, these elements point to the need for a radical re-evaluation of Morgenthau’s approach to the study of International Relations. Apart from a more sustained exploration of the moral basis of his political realism, there are other major puzzles in Morgenthau’s thought that warrant renewed attention and treatment. For example, more work is required to resolve his apparently contradictory views of the balance of power as both a rational as well as an ideological structure. At the unit level of analysis, his ambivalent view of liberal democracy and consequently his paradoxical views about the nature of American domestic and foreign policies call out for further clarification. To what extent are his views on these matters contingent upon the particular historical context of the issues in question and on the nature of his audience? How do we determine when he is writing from the perspective of a teacher of political theorists, as opposed to that of a practicing theorist, or a moral critic, or a patriotic citizen?

The reconstruction of Morgenthau’s thought and thinking along the lines suggested here also opens the door for classical political realism to engage the postmodernist theorists of International Relations on their own terms. There are, for instance, striking parallels between Morgenthau’s pluralistic conception of human nature and the postmodern view of the decentred individual or subject. Like Morgenthau, many sensible deconstructionists share an ambivalent view of the

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76. His ambiguous view of the possibility and desirability of a world state also merits examination from this perspective; see Pangle and Ahrensdf, Justice Among Nations, 231-38.

77. Compare, for example, his view in PAN that liberal democracy is ‘the best that any civilization can achieve’, 235 with his understanding that liberalism is historical and not the ‘expression of eternal verities’. See Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘The Tragedy of German-Jewish Liberalism’ in The Decline of Democratic Politics, 247-56.
legacy of liberal democratic thought and practices. As regards the question of morality, there is also a noteworthy convergence of scholarly interests in the influence of St. Augustine on the critical perspectives of Morgenthau and Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstruction. Both thinkers are exceedingly moralistic and yet equally elusive in identifying the basis of their morality. The Derridean ethical notion of the infinite, and hence impossible, responsibility to the other leads to consequences similar to those entailed by Morgenthau’s teaching of the inevitability of evil in political life. Furthermore, a similar mode of thought seems to govern Morgenthau’s view of the inner contradiction of the balance of power and Derrida’s (quasi)transcendental questioning of the conditions underlying the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of social and political phenomena. In short, the prospect of such an engagement promises to enlarge the scope and to reinforce the continuing relevance of classical political realism.

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78. See, for example, the deconstructionist response to Richard Rorty’s defence of liberal democracy in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
80. Compare Morgenthau’s account of the moral dilemma of the political actor in SMPP, 190-91 to Derrida’s assessment of his own moral situation; see Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 70-71. It may be the case that the major difference between the classical realists and the deconstructionists revolves around the degree of injustice that each is willing to tolerate. See Jacques Derrida, ‘Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism’ in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 86.