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POLITICAL THEORY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Hans J. Morgenthau on Aristotle's the Politics

Anthony F. Lang, Jr.

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Hans J. Morgenthau on Aristotle's
The Politics

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Series Foreword

Cathal J. Nolan

International relations is a thoroughly humanistic subject. All its actors are human beings, or they are institutions and organizations built and controlled by human intention and maintained by daily decision making. Individual states, which emerged as the most powerful and decisive actors on the world stage over the past 350 years, are not reified constructs with an independent will or social reality beyond human ken or volition. Properly regarded, they are wholly human constructs. All states are designed for, and are bent to, the realization of goals and aspirations of human communities. That is true whether those ambitions are good or evil, spiritual or material, personal or dynastic, or represent ethnic, national, or emerging cosmopolitan identities. So, too, is the international society of states a human construct, replete with its tangled labyrinth of international organizations, an expansive system of international law which creates binding obligations across frontiers, ancient norms of diplomacy and ritualized protocol, webs of economic, social, and cultural interaction, and a venerable penchant for disorder, discord, and war.

Immanuel Kant observed with acute accuracy, “Out of the crooked timbre of Humanity, no straight thing was ever made.” The endless drama of human affairs thus gives rise to motley events, decisions, and complex causal chains. At the international level, too, we encounter the foibles of human beings as individuals and in the aggregate, and come upon a mix of the rational and irrational in human motivation. All that makes formal “modeling” of international politics a virtual impossibility—a fact which is itself a source of deep frustration to idealistic reformers and social scientists alike. On the other hand, precisely because international relations is so deeply humanistic a subject, it is a rich realm for the exercise of broad political and moral judgment. It is a natural arena for serious ethical reflection by and about those who frame foreign policies and practice statecraft. It

is proper for scholars and informed citizens to praise or censure leadership decisions and actions. In short, as in all realms of human endeavor, moral judgment is not only implicit in every decision or action (or inaction) taken in international relations, it is a core duty of leadership, an apt function of scholarship, and a basic requirement for any educated citizenry.

These facts are clear, and even self-evident. At its classical best, political science understood them and therefore drew its questions from the conversation across time of the great political thinkers, as well as from current policy debates, to examine both in a rich discourse which was historically and philosophically aware, even as it was rigorous and well-grounded empirically. In contrast, much contemporary political science purports to describe and explain international relations through elaboration of objective “laws” of politics or economics, which entirely overlook its humanistic character. At its modern and postmodern worst, the discipline is prone to mere methodological preoccupations, striking elaborate poses about arcane topics, and impenetrable prose. For instance, positivism’s search for a “rational choice” model of human conduct assumes that individuals are “rational actors” who purposively seek to maximize their interests. In seeking a universal, deductive theory (broadly modeled on academic economics, where similar methodologies are employed with little explanatory success), too many political scientists eschew historical or philosophically informed case study in favor of a crude reduction of all politics to formal models. These usually engage extreme simplifications, couched in an obscurantist terminology, which model what was already known or is obvious, or they are so generalized that they account for nothing specific. Over that thin substance is then spread a thick veneer of false rigor, packaged in mathematical formulas which are, and are intended to be, intimidating to the uninitiated. Left out is the fact that most things of lasting importance in human affairs may be explained, not by “rational choices,” but by ideology and ignorance, blundering and stupidity, courage and self-sacrifice, enlightened vision, fanaticism, or blind chance (what Machiavelli called *fortuna*).

Alternately, the “critical theory” school in political science rejects any epistemology holding that reality exists separately from the academic observer and is therefore objectively knowable to any real degree. All knowledge about international relations instead merely reflects the biases and power interests of the observer (the usual suspects are racial, class, or economic elites). Scholars are warned against the attempt to achieve objective knowledge of the reality of international relations, which traditionally was the moral and intellectual *raison d’être* of their profession. Rather than seek to impartially map out, explore, and explain the international society of states and its complex subsystems and mores—a feat said to be impossible—scholars are to directly engage and change the world (even though that, too, ought to be impossible, if they are unable to understand it in the first place). Too often, this leads to polemical studies which purport to unmask elites whose pervasive and corrupt power is said to sustain and operate a fatally unjust international system. There is much intolerance and angry posturing here as well, in calls for “exposure” of fellow-traveling academic approaches identified

as legitimizing and reinforcing irredeemably illicit power structures. In sum, in its epistemological assertion that all knowledge is radically subjective or merely political, critical theory denies the possibility of objective knowledge or the value of other scholarly traditions.

This series does not support the contention that all significant political action is reducible to rational choice, or that it is impossible to acquire objective knowledge about world affairs. Instead, it promotes a classical, humanistic approach to international relations scholarship. It is dedicated to reviving and furthering the contribution to understanding made by classical studies—by knowledge of history, diplomacy, international law, and philosophy—but it is agnostic regarding the narrow ideology or specific policy conclusions of any given work. It supports scholarly inquiry that is grounded in the historical antecedents of contemporary controversies, and well versed in the great traditions of philosophical inquiry and discourse. The series recognizes that, at its most incisive, international relations is a field of inquiry which cannot be fully understood outside its historical context. The keenest insights into the meaning of economic, legal, cultural, and political facts and issues in contemporary world affairs are always rooted in appreciation that international society is a historical phenomenon, not a theoretical abstraction or a radical departure from prior experience. Hence, the series welcomes interdisciplinary scholarship dealing with the evolution of the governing ideas, norms, and practices of international society. It encourages a dialectic rooted in abiding intellectual, ethical, and practical interests which for centuries have concerned and engaged intelligent men and women as they tried to reconcile the historical emergence of modern states with wider or older notions of political community.

This series is especially interested in scholarly research on the varied effects of differences in power—whether economic, political, or military—on relations among nations and states. The causes of war and the supports of peace, both in general and concerning specific conflicts, remain a core interest of all serious inquiry into international relations. Similarly, there is an enduring need for studies of the core requirements of international order and security, and of international political economy, whether regionally or globally. Also welcome is scholarship that is concerned with the development of international society, both in the formal relations maintained by states and in broader demands for political, economic, social, and cultural justice on the subnational and even individual level. Finally, the series promotes scholarly investigation of the history and changing character and status of international law, into international organization, and any and all other means of decentralized governance which the states have invented to moderate their conflicts and introduce a measure of restraint and equity to the affairs of international society.

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Foreword

Most of us who have reached a certain age have some vague memory of reading Aristotle as part of our secondary or undergraduate curriculum. Literature majors were introduced to *The Poetics* and its famous analysis of Greek tragedy. History and political science students were directed to *The Politics*—the philosopher’s classic treatise on the formation and maintenance of the state. Regardless of what one read, most readers came away with two basic impressions: First, that Aristotle was a wise man; second, that wise as he was, he was not exactly relevant to our contemporary life. Certainly, for many of us growing up in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, Aristotle was a marginal figure on our “must read” list. As Hans Morgenthau puts it so bluntly in his opening remarks, “[W]hat has an old guy who lived almost 2,500 years ago to tell us about contemporary political problems?” What indeed.

Of course, Morgenthau’s question was rhetorical, and over the course of several semesters he proceeded to answer his own question in profound and compelling ways. In a sense, then, we might think of this book as the long answer to a short question. But what an answer it is!

The reader of this volume is in for an almost magical ride through time—back to the early 1970s when Richard Nixon occupied the White House, when war raged in Vietnam and the antiwar movement raged at home, when women and minorities took their issues to the streets, and when countless Americans wondered what had become of the comfortable status quo that had reigned over our land virtually unbroken since the Second World War. It was during this period—one we now view as a watershed in American social, cultural, and political history—that Hans Morgenthau chose to deliver a series of lectures on Aristotle’s *The Politics*, on the work of an “old guy” who lived and died some two and a-half millennia earlier. And it is a testament to the genius of Morgenthau that he did so.

One need only dip into this work to discover that, just as Morgenthau promised in his opening remarks, the concepts and observations of Aristotle were as relevant to the professor's audience in the 1970s as they were to the philosopher's audience in the fourth century BC. Those of us reading this volume today, in the early years of the twenty-first century, quickly come to realize that what Morgenthau says about Aristotle's timeless relevance is no less true about his *own* observations. Indeed, it is almost with a shock that we discover how deeply and immediately Morgenthau's words and thoughts—on the nature of class and government and slavery and women and all the other great issues that these lectures address—relate to our own lives and world today.

As Morgenthau himself says, “[S]ocial and political problems do not change through history,” and of course he is correct. Indeed, given the convincing manner in which Morgenthau demonstrates the relevance of Aristotle to the America of the 1970s, it really should not be too surprising to discover that the Morgenthau of the 1970s is so very relevant to the America of the new millennium. For nearly a century, we at the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs have examined exactly this principle—that there exist certain timeless and ineluctable truths that affect the social and political relationships between and among individuals and, similarly, between and among nation states. This was the vision and mandate of our founder, Andrew Carnegie; and it was the life's work of our friend and mentor, Hans Morgenthau, in whose memory the Carnegie Council has established its annual Hans Morgenthau Memorial Lecture. With this volume, as with the lecture series, we honor that memory.

Joel H. Rosenthal

President, Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs
New York, New York

Acknowledgments

Producing a volume such as this takes many helping hands. Turning Morgenthau's seminars into a published volume was the original idea of Dr. Robert J. Myers, formerly president of the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs. He arranged to have Morgenthau's lectures transcribed from audiotapes and thoroughly edited them. As a student and friend of Hans Morgenthau, Dr. Myers was the first to see the value in this material. He deserves much of the credit for helping to make this book a reality.

The current president of the Carnegie Council, Dr. Joel H. Rosenthal, also deserves a great deal of credit. Perhaps because he wrote about Morgenthau in his own monograph, Joel also saw the value in this material and was instrumental in encouraging its publication. He also provided the time and encouragement to me as program officer at the Council in this and in a number of other projects. In helping to produce this volume, and for all he does to connect the ethical and political, scholars in international affairs owe Joel a great deal.

Others at the Carnegie Council were also instrumental in helping to bring this volume to fruition. Eva Becker, the vice president of the Carnegie Council, created an environment that enabled me to move this project toward completion. Deborah Carroll used her computer skills to turn yellowed pages into usable files. Andrew Reisner, an intern at the Council, read through this material and provided extremely useful comments on its location in classical political theory. Jenny Ruzow, another intern, provided background information on Morgenthau and Aristotle. John Tessitore not only copyedited the text, he added insights and historical references that rounded out the volume. Liz Leiba of Westchester Book Group provided additional copyediting, also improving the volume.

The editorial team at Praeger were extremely patient and supportive, especially Michael Hermann, Hilary Claggett, and Brien McDonald. Cathal Nolan, the editor

of the series in which this volume is located (*Humanistic Perspectives on International Relations*), has enriched the field of international affairs with his tireless efforts to bring ethical and historical themes to bear on international affairs. Kenneth Thompson, Mitchell Rologas and Benjamin Mollov responded to my queries about Morgenthau and the text in a helpful and timely fashion. Matthew and Susanna, Hans Morgenthau's children, who granted the Council permission to produce this material, were kind enough to donate all the proceeds from its sales to the Carnegie Council's annual Morgenthau lecture series.

My colleagues at Albright College provided insights and a supportive atmosphere in which to complete this project. My wife, Nicki, and my children, Teddy and Beatrice, made life fun during the four years it took to finish this book. My mother, Anna Mae Lang, who passed away as I was finishing this volume, was my first and best teacher. As the mother of five children and grandmother of many more, she understood one of the central insights of both Aristotle and Morgenthau—that a truly wise leader knows when to balance the exercise of power with the pursuit of justice.

Introduction

Anthony F. Lang, Jr.

From 1970 to 1973, Hans J. Morgenthau conducted what appears to have been a series of graduate level seminars on Aristotle's *The Politics* at the New School in New York City. The seminars were recorded on audiotapes, which were donated to the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs—where Morgenthau had served as a Board member. While the tapes themselves have since been lost, fortunately the seminars were transcribed in 1981, soon after Morgenthau's death. These transcriptions were subsequently compiled and edited by the then president of the Carnegie Council, Dr. Robert J. Myers—himself a former student of Morgenthau—creating a manuscript of approximately 400 pages.

Since that time the manuscript and some related materials have remained at the Carnegie Council. In September 2000 the current council president, Dr. Joel Rosenthal, passed the manuscript on to me to determine whether it would be worth reediting and publishing. Over the next four years I slowly read through them, compared them to Morgenthau's notes and lecture materials from previous classes, discussed them with those more conversant in Morgenthau's work, and reread his published works and the secondary literature about him. The result is the book you hold in your hands.

In this Introduction, I provide some context for this material. I begin by describing Morgenthau's position in the discipline of international relations, explaining why his theories have lost some of their influence in the field. I then suggest a few ways in which these seminars might help reinvigorate an interest in Morgenthau's ideas by orienting the discipline toward some neglected areas of inquiry. I conclude with some explanation of how the seminars were edited by both previous editors and by me.

MORGENTHAU AND THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Hans J. Morgenthau was trained as a lawyer, but claimed he preferred philosophy.¹ His decision to study, write on, and teach about international affairs resulted from a feeling of obligation rather than a deep seeded desire.² His training in law and appreciation for philosophy is reflected in all of his works, but especially in these seminars on Aristotle. Exploring politics for Morgenthau meant taking on essentially contested concepts, grappling with them, and seeing how they applied to events that are taking place in the world around us. These seminars include his reflections on a host of such concepts, including justice, revolution, equality, freedom, and law. In deciding how to organize the seminars, I chose to focus on terms such as these, rather than those more commonly associated with Morgenthau, such as the national interest. This not only reflects the subjects of the seminars presented here but also, I believe, Morgenthau's interests in a way that belies his reputation as a theorist of the national interest alone.

But it is as a theorist of the national interest and power politics that Morgenthau is best known in the discipline of international relations. His *Politics among Nations* is generally regarded as his most important contribution to the field, and today it remains one of the best-selling textbooks of its kind. Initially considered by some publishers as too idiosyncratic, *Politics among Nations*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1948, altered the way in which international relations was taught in the United States. Its mixture of political philosophy, historical case studies, and trenchant analysis makes it accessible to students and scholars alike.

As a result of the success of *Politics among Nations* (it has been through seven editions), Morgenthau's work generated a substantial amount of literature in response. Some authors argued that Morgenthau was not sufficiently "theoretical" or "scientific" in his theories, such as Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics*³ or John Vasquez in *The Power of Power Politics*.⁴ Some claimed that Morgenthau and "the realists," as his followers were called, failed to capture trends that challenge the primacy of the nation state, such as the transnationalism of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in *Power and Interdependence*.⁵ Others chal-

1. For historical background on Morgenthau, see "Fragment of an Intellectual Biography: 1904–1932," in *Truth and Tragedy: A Tribute to Hans J. Morgenthau*, 2nd, augmented ed., Kenneth W. Thompson and Robert J. Myers, eds. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1984 [1976]): 1–17; and Christoph Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001). Morgenthau's papers can be accessed at the Library of Congress, a source upon which Frei drew in writing his biography.

2. See Thompson and Meyers, eds., "Fragment of an Intellectual Biography."

3. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Relations* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishers, 1979).

4. John Vasquez, *The Power of Power Politics*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1983]).

5. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977).