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What is Classical Realism?

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Abstract: Jonathan Kirshner misrepresents classical realism in fundamental ways. His wants to reclaim classical realism, but he never tells us what it is or engages other scholars who have developed the paradigm. He pleads for a more sophisticated realism but spends much of the book engaging neorealism and 'hyperrationality.' He foregrounds Thucydides but reads him superficially and indefensibly in terms of contemporary realist tropes. He asserts – incorrectly – that classical realism eschews abstract formulations but then offers his own. I critique his formulation, reading of Thucydides, and offer an overview of classical realism. I argue that classical realism is an ethical project embedded in a tragic understanding of life. It foregrounds human miscalculations, misjudgments, and their causes, sees tight connections between domestic and foreign policy, and the values that motivate both; and regards great powers as likely to be their own worst enemies.

Keywords: classical realism; Thucydides; tragedy; ethics; rationalism; Morgenthau

Classical realism is an increasingly prominent paradigm. It situates some prominent analysts of international relations – among them, Thucydides, Hans Morgenthau, and John Herz – in an intellectual and ethical tradition that offers more sophisticated and policy relevant insights into the conduct of foreign policy than other strands of realism. I will elaborate the core assumptions of classical realism in an overview of the writings of Thucydides and Morgenthau. But first I will offer a short review of Jonathan Kirshner's *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Kirshner 2022).

Jonathan Kirshner's is an enigmatic book. Its goal is to reclaim classical realism, but he never tells us what it is. He pleads for a more sophisticated realism but spends much of the book engaging neorealism and 'hyperrationality.' He foregrounds Thucydides but reads him largely in terms of contemporary realist tropes. He asserts – incorrectly – that classical realism eschews abstract formulations but

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then offers some. Perhaps strangest of all, he never engages the literature on classical realism or shows how his understanding of it is similar to or differs from those of other IR scholars.

At the outset, Kirshner asserts that the purpose of his book “is to elucidate and approach to the study of world politics – classical realism – and to demonstrate why that paradigm is a productive and valuable one” (1). He makes numerous passing references to classical realism and has a chapter entitled ‘What is Classical Realism?’ But he never tells us what classical realism is or refers to the work of other scholars who have elaborated or explored the paradigm. His goal appears to be to differentiate his approach from neorealism and rationalist approaches to IR. The closest he comes to defining classical realism is an effort to distinguish it from neorealism and hyperrationality by asserting that in contrast to these approaches it emphasizes uncertainty, politics, agency, and contingency, and is analytically modest in its avoidance of abstractions (23).

Kirshner offers at best an extremely ‘thin’ version of classical realism that ignores it most distinguishing characteristics. He shows no recognition that classical realism is an ethical project embedded in a tragic understanding of life; foregrounds human miscalculations, misjudgements, and their causes; sees tight connections between domestic that foreign policy and the values that motivate both; and regards great powers as likely to be their own worst enemies. Kirshner is constantly looking over his shoulder at neorealism and rationalism and uses them as jumping off points for thinking differently about international relations. This is a great injustice to classical realism, whose approach to politics long predates these Johnny-come-latelies and is so fundamentally different that it does not enter easily into a dialogue with them. It also means that Kirshner, who uses the language and concepts of neorealism and rationalism, cannot construct a meaningful depiction of classical realism.

Kirshner’s critique of both neorealism is old hat. It advances arguments that others have made for decades. Neorealism dropped like a stone at the end of the Cold War, and for good reasons. Why waste time on it, or consider that it needs to be addressed in any way? Rationalism is alive and well, but Kirshner says less about it offers nothing new in the way of criticism.

In the absence of any definition of classical realism, Kirshner is free to include and exclude anybody he wants. He describes – correctly, in my view – Hans Morgenthau, Raymond Aron, and Stanley Hoffman as classical realists, but does not mention John Herz. He embraces E. H. Carr, who was a Marxist, a set of beliefs that might be considered the antithesis of classical realism. Even stranger is his inclusion of Robert Gilpin, a fellow traveler of neorealism. He admires Carr and Gilpin because they were open to contingency, but so are many theorists who have no relationship to classical realism.

Kirshner understandably turns to Thucydides in his first substantive chapter. Fair enough, as many of us regard him as the founder of classical realism. But Kirshner analyzes him less as a classical realist and more as a run of the mill modern realist who is focused on anarchy and its consequences, the balance of power, and national character. He tells us "from beginning to end [Thucydides] reminds his readers of the stark consequences of anarchy," and how "everywhere the balance of power profoundly shapes decisions" (23). Thucydides offers a far more nuanced account of both anarchy and the balance of power and how other factors come into play. For him, it was the war that brought about anarchy, not the other way around. The Sicilian expedition, which proved a near-fatal enterprise for Athens, was carried out in violation of the balance of power – as Nicias warned.

For Kirshner, national character 'looms large' in Thucydides. But his use of it is more nuanced that Kirshner acknowledges. The Corinthians describe great differences between Athenians and Spartans, but there is as much variation within each polis as there is between them. The Spartan war party behaves like Athenians in its willingness to embrace a risky initiative and make light of the dangers. The Spartan general Brasidas is Athenian in his quickness and imagination, while the Athenian Nicias displays Spartan caution. National character, like the balance of power or deterrence – which fails on every occasion in Thucydides' narrative – is one of the many tensions intended lead us to deeper levels of analysis.

Kirshner notes Thucydides' belief in fear, honor, and interest as principal foreign policy motives but focuses largely on fear and secondarily on interest. Honor is ignored even though it is central to Thucydides' narrative and to present day international relations. It is arguably the principal motive for Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and what drives more than anything else the conflict between China and the U.S. for primacy.

When applying Thucydides or his understanding of classical realism to the modern world he makes such observations as "raw power is not a determinant source of influence in the modern world" (238). Only a neorealist would object to such a claim. The real question is the nature of influence, which classical realists, beginning with Thucydides, understand rests only in part on raw power (*kratos*) or its display and exercise (*dunamis*). Here too, a deeper understanding of classical realism or of Thucydides might have provided the language for addressing the problem of influence.

So what is classical realism? I believe I coined the term at the turn of the century to describe a tradition of thought about international relations. I did so in recognition that traditions are often invented ex post facto to justify and confer status on a research program. I know that Morgenthau saw himself as part of a tradition, but never called it classical realism or referred much to Thucydides. He acknowledged Nietzsche and Weber as the most direct influences on him. I argue that it is

nevertheless fair to consider him a classical realist because of his turn to tragedy, concern for ethics, focus on the relationship between domestic and foreign policy, and above all, his recognition that great power are generally their own worst enemies. Still, a tradition, and this includes classical realism, is generally an ex post facto organizing principle used to highlight commonalities among earlier writers of any kind and to foreground them. It is often invoked, classical realism was, to offer an outlook, approach, or paradigm at odds with the conventional wisdom.

If the classical realist tradition begins with Thucydides, it might be said to include Machiavelli – but not Hobbes – Carl von Clausewitz, and a number of modern theorists, most notably Hans Morgenthau and John Herz (Behr and Williams 2017; Erskine and Lebow 2012; Lebow 2003; Molloy 2014; Scheuerman 2009; Sylvest 2008; Williams 2005, 2007). Like all forms of realism, it recognizes the central role of power in international relations, but also its limitations. It advocates building influence, whenever possible, through shared interests and persuasion. It stresses sensitivity to ethical dilemmas and the difficult choices they entail, and the need for leaders to accept responsibility for their choices.

Classical realists recognize – and Kirshner does too – that communal bonds are fragile and easily undermined by the unrestrained pursuit of unilateral advantage by individuals, factions, or states. When this happens, time honoured mechanisms of conflict management such as alliances and the balance of power, can not only fail to preserve the peace, but make domestic and international violence more likely (Lebow 2003). Like Greek tragedians, classical realists tend to regard history as cyclical, in the sense that efforts to build order and escape from fear-driven worlds, while they may succeed for a considerable period of time, ultimately succumb to the destabilizing effects of actors who believe they are too powerful to be constrained by law and custom.

The importance of community for classical realists directs our attention to the ever-present tensions between the interests of the community and those of its members, whether individuals or states. Thucydides and Morgenthau believed that a well-functioning community is essential to the intelligent formation and pursuit of individual interests. The principles of justice on which all viable communities are based also allow the efficient translation of power into influence. Membership in a community imposes limits on the ends and means of power. And failure to subordinate goals to the requirements of justice leads to self-defeating policies, especially those of overexpansion. Classical realists understand that great powers are successful powers and that success engenders hubris. It is a category error that encourage actors to see themselves outside of and above their community, and this, in turn, blinds them to the need for self-restraint. For Thucydides, this was the most fundamental cause of Athens' decline, which he documents not only in its actions but the change in vocabulary that accompanies them.

Classical realists recognize that change and transformation are inevitable (Lebow 2003, 2018; Molloy 2014; Scheuerman 2011). They think of political systems in terms of their principles of order and the ways in which they help to shape the identities of actors and the discourses they use to frame their interests. For Thucydides and Morgenthau, changes in identities and discourses are often the result of modernization processes. They bring about changes in the power and standing of domestic and 'state' actors, amd also in the conceptions of order and what sustains it. Hegemonic wars are more often a consequence than a cause of such a transformation – of ideas and practices, more so than of power. Shifts in hegemony are the outcome of wars, not their causes. This different understanding of cause and effect has important implications for the kinds of strategies classical realists envisage as efficacious in maintaining or restoring order. They put at least as much weight on values and ideas than they do on power.

Thucydides and Morgenthau understand politics as a struggle for power and unilateral advantage. The differences between domestic politics and international relations are of degree, not of kind. Military capability and alliances are necessary safeguards in the rough-and-tumble world of international relations but cannot be counted on to preserve the peace or the independence of actors. Order, domestic and international, ultimately rest on the strength of community. When states and their rulers are bound by a common culture, conventions, and personal ties, competition for power is restrained in its ends and means. In this context, a balance of power might prevent some wars and limit the severity of others. In the absence of community, military capability and alliances are no guarantee of security, and can provoke wars they were intended to prevent. States like Athens, and leaders like Napoleon and Hitler cannot be deterred. Morgenthau understands the seeming paradox that the balance of power works best when needed least.

Contemporary realists define interest in terms of power. For the most part, they equate power with material capabilities. According to Kenneth Waltz (1979, 153): "the political clout of nations correlates closely with their economic power and their military might." Many contemporary realists also believe in the primacy of self-interest over moral principle, and regard considerations of justice as inappropriate, even dangerous foundations on which to base foreign policies. At best, appeals to justice can serve to justify or mask policies motivated by more concrete material interests. Classical realists consider capabilities only one source of power and do not equate power with influence. Influence for them is a *psychological* relationship, and like all relationships, based on ties that transcend momentary interests. Justice enters the picture because it is the foundation for relationships and of the sense of community on which influence and security ultimately depend.

The first level of Thucydides' history depicts the tension between interest and justice and how it becomes more acute in response to the exigencies of war. It

reveals how interest and justice are inseparable and mutually constitutive at a deeper level. In his funeral oration, Pericles describes Athens as a democracy, but Thucydides (2.37.1) considers the constitutional reforms of 462-1 to have created a mixed form of government (*xunkrasis*). Behind the facade of democracy, he tells us, lay the rule of one man – Pericles (Thucydides, 2.37.1, 2.65.9-10). The democratic ideology, with which he publicly associated himself, moderated class tensions, and reconciled the *dēmos* to the economic and political advantages of the elite. When the gap between ideology and practice was exposed by the behavior of post-Periclean demagogues, class conflict became more acute and politics more vicious, leading to the violent overthrow of democracy by the regime of the Thirty in 404 and its equally violent restoration a year later. Justice, or at least a belief in justice, was the foundation for community.

Athenian imperialism underwent a similar evolution. The empire was successful when power was exercised in accord with the social conventions governing Greek speech and behavior. Post-Periclean Athens consistently chose power over principle, lost its *hēgemonia*, alienated allies, and weakened its power base. In 425, during the Mytilenean debate, Cleon tells the assembly to recognize that their empire is a despotism (*turannis*) based on military power and the fear it inspires (Thucydides, 3.37.2). In 416, the Athenian commissioners in the Melian Dialogue divide people into those who rule and those who are subjects (Thucydides, 5.95) To intimidate allies and adversaries alike, they acknowledge their city's need to expand runaway imperialism of this kind stretched their resources to their breaking point. Interest defined outside of the language of justice is irrational and self-defeating.

Thucydides' parallel accounts of Athenian domestic politics and foreign policy indicate his belief that coercion is a grossly inefficient and ultimately self-defeating basis of influence. The sophist Gorgias (*c.* 430) personified *logos* (words) as a "great potentate, who with the tiniest and least visible body achieves the most divine works" (Diels and Kranz 1956, frg. 82, B11). Employed in tandem with persuasion, it "shapes the soul as it wishes." Thucydides leads us to the same conclusion. Persuasion can maintain the position of the "first citizen" (*stratēgos*) of Athens vis-à-vis the masses and that of the hegemon vis-à-vis its empire and effectively mask the exercise of power. To persuade, leaders and great powers must live up to the expectations of their own ideology. For Athens, this meant providing benefits to citizens and allies, and upholding the principles of order on which the polis and its empire were based.

Perhaps the most frequently quoted line from *Politics Among Nations* is Morgenthau's assertion at the outset that "the concept of interest defined in terms of power" sets politics apart "as an autonomous sphere of action' and makes a theory of politics possible" (1960, 5). Morgenthau then subverts this statement to

develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between interest and power. These contradictions can be reconciled if we recognize that Morgenthau distinguishes between theory and in practice. The former aspires to create an abstract, rational ideal based on the underlying and unchanging dynamics of international politics. It represents the crudest of templates. Policy is always concrete, rarely rational, based on all kinds of compromises, and often made in the absence of good information – or more likely in ignorance of available information.

The contrast between theory and practice is equally apparent in Morgenthau's conceptualization of power. He thinks of power as an intangible quality with many diverse components, which he catalogues at some length. But in the real world, the strategies and tactics leaders use to transform the raw attributes of power into political influence are just as important as the attributes themselves. Because influence is a psychological relationship, leaders need to know not only what buttons are at their disposal, but also which ones to push in diverse circumstances. There are no absolute measures of power because it was always relative and situation specific. Levers of influence that 'A' could use against 'B' might be totally ineffectual against 'C'. The successful exercise of power required a sophisticated understanding of the goals, strengths, and weaknesses of allies, adversaries, and third parties. But, above all, it demanded sensitivity to the others' needs for self-esteem.

People seek domination but most often end up subordinate to others (Morgenthau 1947, 145). They try to repress this unpleasant truth, and those who exercise power effectively employ justifications and ideologies to help them do this. Whenever possible, they attempt to convince those who must submit that they are acting in their interests or those of the wider community (Morgenthau 1958, 59). "What is required for mastery of international politics", Morgenthau insisted, "is not the rationality of the engineer but the wisdom and moral strength of the statesman" (1948, 172).

Like Thucydides, Morgenthau understands that adherence to ethical norms is just as much in the interest of those who wielded power as it is for those over whom it is exercised. He makes this point in his critique of American intervention in Indochina, where he argues that intervention will fail and erode America's influence in the world because the ends and means of American policy violate the morality of the age. There is a certain irony to Morgenthau's opposition. Two decades earlier, he had written *Politics Among Nations*, in large part to disabuse an influential segment of the American elite of the naive belief that ethics was an appropriate guide for foreign policy and that international conflicts could be resolved through the application of law. Intervention in Indochina indicated to him that American policymakers had 'over learned' the lesson; they had embraced *Realpolitik* and moved to the other end of the continuum. Morgenthau is adamant that morality,

defined in terms of the conventions of the epoch, imposes limits on the ends that power seeks and the means employed to achieve them (1947, 151 – 68).

For classical realists – and for Machiavelli – justice is important for two different but related reasons. It is the key to influence because it determines how others understand and respond to you. Policy that is constrained by accepted ethical principles and generally supportive of them provides a powerful aura of legitimacy that helps to reconcile less powerful actors to their subordinate status. Influence can also be bought through bribes or compelled by force, but influence obtained this way is expensive to maintain, tenuous in effect, and usually short-lived. By contrast, a demonstrable commitment to justice can create and maintain the kind of community that allows actors to translate power into influence in efficient ways.

Justice is important in a second instrumental way. It provides the conceptual scaffolding on which actors can intelligently construct interests. In this respect, a commitment to justice is a powerful source of self-restraint, and restraint is necessary in direct proportion to one's power. Weak states must generally behave cautiously because of external constraints. Powerful states are not similarly restricted, and the past successes that made them powerful breed hubris, encourage their leaders to make inflated estimates of their ability to control events and seduce them into investing their assets and reputation in risky ventures. As in Greek tragedies, these miscalculations often lead to catastrophe, as they did for Athens, Napoleon, and Hitler. Internal restraint and external influence are thus closely related. Self-restraint that prompts behavior in accord with the acknowledged principles of justice both earns and sustains the respect and leadership that makes efficient influence possible.

Modern realists classify international systems on the basis of their polarity (uni-, bi-, and multipolar). System change occurs when the number of poles changes. This is thought to be the result of shifts in the balance of material capabilities. Rising powers may go to war to remake the system in their interests, and status quo powers to forestall such change. For some realists, this cycle is timeless and independent of technology and learning. Others believe that nuclear weapons have revolutionized international relations by making war too destructive to be rational. In their view, this accounts for the otherwise anomalous peaceful transformation from bi- to multipolarity at the end of the Cold War (Mearsheimer 1990; Waltz 1979; Wohlforth 1994–5).

For classical realists, I noted, transformation has a different meaning and is associated with processes we have come to describe as modernization. It brings about shifts in identities and discourses, and, with them, changing conceptions of security. Thucydides' language (1954, 1.15) encourages readers to draw an analogy between individual pursuit of wealth and Athenian pursuit of power. The

empire is based on the power of money (*chrēmatōn dunamis*). It generates revenue (*chrēmatōn prosodōi*) to build and maintain the largest navy in Greece. Athens is so powerful relative to other city states that it can dominate them by force. For Greeks, tyrants were rulers without any constitutional basis who dispensed with reciprocity and took what they wanted. Gyges of Lydia was the first known tyrant, and not coincidentally, Lydia was thought to be the first city to have introduced money. Like a tyrant, Athens no longer needed to legitimize its rule or provide the kind of benefits that normally held alliances or city states together. Wealth encouraged the 'orientalization' of Athens, a perspective common to Herodotus and Thucydides. It led to a deep shift in Athenian values, superficially manifested in an increasing reliance on force. The quest for honor (*timē*) increasingly gave way to that of material well-being. And *hēgemonia* – rule based on the consent of others – was replaced by control (*archē*) exercised through threats and bribes.

Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War is rich in irony. Athens, the tyrant, jettisons the traditional bonds of friendship and reciprocity in expectation of greater rewards, only to become trapped by a new set of more onerous obligations. As Pericles recognizes in his funeral oration, Athens maintained its *hēgemonia* by demonstrating generosity to its allies. "In generosity," he tells the assembly, "we are equally singular, acquiring our friends by conferring not by receiving favors" (Thucydides 1954, 2.40.4). The post-Periclean empire must maintain its *archē* by constantly demonstrating its power and will to use it. It must keep expanding, a requirement beyond the capabilities of any state. Athenians discover this bitter truth with their crushing defeat in Sicily.

Morgenthau's understanding of modernization is similar. It led to a misplaced faith in reason undermined the values and norms that had restrained individual and state behavior. Morgenthau draws on Hegel and Freud. In his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807) and *Philosophy of Right* (1821), Hegel warned of the dangers of homogenization of society arising from equality and universal participation in society. It would sunder traditional communities and individual ties to them without providing an alternative source of identity. Hegel wrote on the eve of the industrial revolution and did not envisage the modern industrial state with its large bureaucracies and modern means of communication. These developments, Morgenthau argues, allow the power of the state to feed on itself through a process of psychological transference that makes it the most exalted object of loyalty. Libidinal impulses, repressed by the society, are mobilized by the state for its own ends. By transferring these impulses to the nation, citizens achieve vicarious satisfaction of their aspirations, including those that society would otherwise make them repress.

Writing in the aftermath of the great upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century, Morgenthau came to understand communal identity as far from an unalloyed blessing: it allows people to fulfil their potential as human beings, but also

risks turning them into 'social men' like Eichmann, who lose their humanity in the course of implementing the directives of the state.

Thucydides and Morgenthau wrote in the aftermath of destructive wars that undermined the communities and conventions that had sustained order at home and abroad. Neither thought it feasible to restore the old way of life, aspects of which had become highly problematic even before the onset of war. They searched instead for some combination of the old and the new that could accommodate the benefits of modernity while limiting its destructive potential.

Thucydides wanted his readers to recognize the need for a synthetic order that would combine the best of the old and the new, and avoid, as far as possible, their respective pitfalls. The best of the new was its spirit of equality (*isonomia*), and the opportunity it offered to all citizens to serve their polis. The best of the old was its emphasis on excellence and virtue (*aretē*), which encouraged members of the elite to suppress their appetite for wealth and power, and even their instinct for survival, in pursuit of valor, good judgement, and public service. The Athenians displayed *aretē* at Marathon and Salamis, where they risked their lives for the freedom of Greece (Thucydides 1954, 2.20, 25, 41, 43, 4.81.2). By the end of the fifth century, *aretē* had its meaning transformed from its original Homeric sense of fighting skill, to skill at anything, to moral goodness. Thucydides uses all three meanings, and has Pericles (1954, 2.34.5) introduce a fourth in his funeral oration, where *aretē* now describes the reputation a state can develop by generous behavior toward its allies. Thucydides offers an idealized view of Periclean Athens as an example of the kind of synthesis he envisages. It is the very model of a mixed government that allowed the capable to rule and the masses to participate in government in meaningful ways. It successfully muted tensions between the rich and the poor and the well-born and men of talent, and stood in sharp contrast to the acute class tensions and near stasis of Athens when ruled by demagogues.

Thucydides may have hoped that intercity relations could be reconstituted on a similar basis. The same kinds of inequalities prevailed among cities as within them. If the power of tyrants could give way to aristocracy and mixed democracy, and the drive for power and wealth be constrained by the restoration of community, the same might be done for inter-polis relations. Powerful cities might once again see it in their interest to wield influence on the basis of *hēgemonia*. Power imbalances could be 'equalized' through the principle of proportionality; the more powerful cities receiving honour in degree to the advantages they provided for less powerful cities. Thucydides wrote his history, I believe, at least in part to advance this project.

Thucydides is a stern sceptic and rationalist, but one who supports religion because he considered it to be a principal pillar or morality and conventions. In his view, the radical sophists had done a disservice to Athens by arguing that laws and conventions were arbitrary justifications for economic and political inequality.

Thucydides wrote for a small, intellectually sophisticated elite, who, like himself, were unlikely to accept conventions as gods given. He appeals to them with a more sophisticated defence of convention that does not require rooting it in man's nature. By demonstrating the destructive consequences of the breakdown of conventions, he makes the case for their necessity and the wisdom of those in authority to act *as if* they believed they derived from nature. For Thucydides, language and conventions are arbitrary but essential. His history, like a tragedy, provides an 'outside perspective' for elites to generate a commitment to work 'inside' to restore what is useful, if not essential, to justice and order.

For Morgenthau, the absence of external constraints on state power is *the* defining characteristic of international politics at mid-century. The old normative order was in ruins and too feeble to restrain great powers (1958, 60; 1947, 168). Against this background, the Soviet Union and the U.S. were locked into an escalating conflict, made more ominous by the unrivalled destructive potential of nuclear weapons. The principal threat to peace was nevertheless political: Moscow and Washington were "[i]imbued with the crusading spirit of the new moral force of nationalistic universalism" and confronted each other with "inflexible opposition" (1948, 430). The balance of power was a feeble instrument in these circumstances, and deterrence was more likely to exacerbate tensions then to alleviate them. Bipolarity could help to preserve the peace by reducing uncertainty – or push the superpowers toward war because of the putative advantage of launching a first strike. Restraint was needed more than anything else, and Morgenthau worried that neither superpower had leaders with the requisite moral courage to resist mounting pressures to engage in risky and confrontational foreign policies.

Morgenthau's realism in the context of the Cold War was a plea for statesmen and, above all, American and Soviet leaders to recognize the need to coexist in a world of opposing interests and conflict. Their security could never be guaranteed, only approximated through a fragile balance of power and mutual compromises that might resolve, or at least defuse, the arms race and the escalatory potential of the various regional conflicts in which they had become entangled. Morgenthau insists that restraint and partial accommodation are the most practical short-term strategies for preserving the peace (1948, 169; 1958, 80). A more enduring solution to the problem of war would require a fundamental transformation of the international system that made it more like well-ordered domestic societies. By 1958, the man who twenty years earlier had heaped scorn on the aspirations of internationalists, insisted that the well-being of the human race now required "a principle of political organization transcending the nation-state" (1958, 75–6).

Morgenthau's commitment to some form of supranational authority deepened in the 1970s. Beyond the threat of nuclear holocaust, humanity was threatened by

the population explosion, world hunger, and environmental degradation. He had no faith in the ability of nation-states to ameliorate any of these problems. But if leaders and peoples were so zealous about safeguarding their sovereignty, what hope was there of moving them towards acceptance of a new order? Progress would only occur when enough national leaders became convinced that it was in their respective national interests. The series of steps Europeans had taken towards integration illustrated the apparent paradox that "what is historically conditioned in the idea of the national interest can be overcome only through the promotion in concert of the national interest of a number of nations" (1958, 73).

Thucydides and Morgenthau grappled with successive phases of modernization and their social, political, and military consequences. They understood these consequences, and modernization itself, as an expression of evolving identities and discourses. Human beings were never trapped by their culture, institutions, or language, but constantly reproducing, changing, and reinventing them. The central problem for Thucydides and Morgenthau was that old procedures were being abandoned or not working, and being replaced by new and dangerous practices that had entered without much warning. They recognized that stable domestic orders, and the security that they might enable, could only be restored by some synthesis that blended the old with the new. This synthesis had to harness the power of reason, but make allowance for the disruptive passions that often motivated individuals, classes, and political units. It had to build community, but could not ignore powerful centrifugal forces, especially self-interest at the individual, group, and national levels, that modernization had encouraged and legitimated. The biggest challenge of all was to construct the new order through the willing agency of representatives of the old order in cooperation with the newly empowered agents of modernity.

Given the nature of the challenge, it is not surprising that classical realists are better at diagnosis than, prognosis to use Thucydides' medical metaphor. Thucydides is the most sophisticated of classical realists. Perhaps by design, he offered no explicit synthesis, but contented himself with identifying an earlier synthesis – Periclean Athens – that might serve as a model, or at least a starting point, for thinking about the future. Morgenthau addresses the problem of order at two levels: he seeks stop-gap political measures to buy time for statesmen to grasp the need to transcend the state system. Their works remain possessions for all time, if only because of their insights into human nature, war, and political order. But also because of their recognition of the great difficulty of reconciling tradition and modernity by conscious, rational designs.

Finally, we come to the question of theory. Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 141a–b) thought it unlikely that human investigations could ever produce *epistēmē*, which he defined as knowledge of essential natures reached through deduction

from first principles. Thucydides does not directly engage questions of epistemology, but one can readily infer that he shared this understanding of the limits of social inquiry. One of his recurrent themes is the extent to which human behavior is context dependent; similar external challenges provoke a range of responses from different political cultures. As those cultures evolve, so do their foreign policies, a progression I documented in the case of Athens. There is also variation within cultures. Thucydides' accounts of the Spartan decision to go to war, the plague in Athens, the Mytilenian Debate and civil war in Corcyra reveal that individuals respond differently to the same or similar situation in very different ways.

Morgenthau explicitly denies the possibility of general laws and of predictions based on more limited kinds of generalizations. Morgenthau conceives of the social world as "a chaos of contingencies" but "not devoid of a measure of rationality." The social world could not be reduced to a limited set of social choices because of the irrationality of actors and the inherent complexity of the social world. The best a theory can do "is to state the likely consequences of choosing one alternative as over against another and the conditions under which one alternative is more likely to occur or to be successful than the other" (Morgenthau 1966, 77).

Theōrie, *theōrein*, and *theōrōs* are all post-Homeric words having to do with seeing and visiting. The noun (*theōrōs*) meant 'witness' or 'spectator.' A *theōrōs* was dispatched to Delphi by his polis to bring back a full account of the words of the oracle. He might also be sent to religious and athletic festivals, and it is here that the word picked up its connotation of spectator. Over time, the role of the *theōrōs* became more active; a *theōrōs* was expected not only to describe what he had seen but to explain its meaning.

Thucydides comes closest to the model of the *theōrōs*; he provides readers with a description of events that has interpretations of their meaning embedded in it. Morgenthau conducts independent theoretical inquiries in which brief historical accounts, more properly described as examples, are used for purposes of illustration. But in the best tradition of the Greeks, he aspires to develop a framework that actors can use to work their way through contemporary problems. Morgenthau insists that "all lasting contributions to political science, from Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine to the *Federalist*, Marx and Calhoun, have been responses to such challenges arising from political reality" (1966, 77). Great political thinkers confronted with problems that could not be solved with the tools at hand, and developed new ways of thinking, and often use past experience to illuminate the present. Beyond this, Thucydides and Morgenthau seek to stimulate the kind of reflection that leads to wisdom and with it, appreciation of the need for self-restraint. For all three classical realists, history is the vehicle for tragedy and the teacher of wisdom.

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