

The basic concepts and principles that are presented in this short lecture are all drawn from Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations; The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Morgenthau is one of the main proponents of the realist tradition.

1. Political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature.
  - a. One such fact is that human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since ancient times. Human nature is fixed and must be acknowledged for what it is.

The goal of politics is to improve society, but to do this it is first necessary to understand the laws by which society lives. For realism, theory consists in ascertaining facts and giving them meaning through reason. A theory of politics must be subjected to the dual test of reason and experience. Human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece endeavored to discover these laws.

2. The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concepts of interest defined in terms of power.
  - a. We assume that statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power, and the evidence of history bears that assumption out. That assumption allows us to retrace and anticipate the steps a statesman has taken or will take on the political scene.

Since political realism is guided by interest defined as power intellectual discipline is imposed on the observer and rational order is put into politics. This makes a theoretical understanding of politics understandable. A realist theory of international politics will guard against two popular fallacies: the concern with motives and the concern with ideological preferences. We cannot conclude from the good intentions of a statesman that his foreign policies will be either morally praiseworthy or politically successful. If we want to know the moral and political qualities of his actions, we must know them, not his motives. Political realism does not require, nor does it condone, indifference to political ideals and moral principles, but it requires a distinction between the desirable and the possible - between what is desirable everywhere and at all times and what is possible under the concrete circumstances of time and place. Not all foreign policies have always followed so rational, objective, and unemotional a course. The contingent elements of personality, prejudice, and subjective

preference, and of all the weaknesses of intellect and will which flesh is heir to, are bound to deflect foreign policies from their rational course. One fallacy in the interpretation of reality is that instead of acknowledging competing and intractable issues one substitutes for it a reality peopled by evil persons. Another fallacy is the idea of sovereign equality of all nations when it is undeniable that some nations have significantly more power than others. The modern fact of interdependence requires a political order which takes that fact into account. Realism holds that no problems are really insoluble, given well-meaning, well-financed, and competent efforts. To hold that elimination of the "individuals" responsible for some social problem will solve the problem avoids coping effectively with a threatening reality.

3. Realism assumes that its key concept of interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid, but it does not endow that concept with a meaning that is fixed once and for all.

- a. The idea of interest is the essence of politics and is unaffected by the circumstances of time and place.
- b. The kind of interest determining political action in a particular period of history depends upon the political and cultural context within which foreign policy is formulated.

The goals that nations pursue in their foreign policy can vary greatly, but the idea that a nation pursues its own goals is timeless. Power may comprise anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man. Thus power covers all social relationships which serve that end of establishing control over other men. This can take the form of physical violence, to the more subtle psychological ties by which one mind controls another. Power covers the domination of man by man, both when it is disciplined by moral ends and controlled by constitutional safeguards, and when it is an untamed and barbaric force which finds its laws in nothing but its own strength and its sole justification is in its own aggrandizement.

4. Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action. But it is also aware of the tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action.

- a. Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation, but that they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place.
- b. Realism considers prudence – the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions – to be the supreme virtue in politics.

There can be no political morality without prudence; that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly

moral action. Ethics in the abstract judges action by its conformity to the moral law. Political ethics judges action by its political consequences. By way of example, Morgenthau uses Abraham Lincoln who during the civil war usurped many civil liberties and made war against Americans in the Southern States. He did this otherwise immoral act in order to preserve the union and its constitution which gave men liberty and freedom. Lincoln stated:

I do the very best I know how, the very best I can, and I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.

5. Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.

a. All nations are tempted, and few have been able to resist the temptation for long, to clothe their own particular aspirations and actions in the moral purposes of the universe.

The equation between a particular nationalism and the counsels of Providence is morally indefensible. It is exactly the concept of interest defined in terms of power that save us from both that moral excess and that political folly. If we look at all nations, our own included, as political entities pursuing their respective interests defined in terms of power, we are able to do justice to all of them.

6. The political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere, as the economist, the lawyer, and the moralist maintain theirs.

a. The political realist is not unaware of the existence and relevance of standards of thought other than political ones. However, as a political realist, he cannot but subordinate these other standards to those of politics.

The political realist thinks in terms of interest defined as power, the economist in terms of interest defined as wealth, the lawyer of the conformity of action with legal rules, and the moralist of the conformity of action with moral principles. The economist asks, "How does this policy affect the wealth of society, or a segment of it?" The lawyer asks, "Is this policy in accord with the rules of law?" as so forth, but the political realist asks, "How does this policy affect the power of the nation?" The realist subordinates these other concerns to politics and he parts company with other schools when they impose standards of thought appropriate to other spheres upon the political sphere.

Morgenthau concludes with the assertion that the "Promise of Diplomacy" is in nine rules. Four fundamental rules and five rules that are prerequisites for compromise.

#### **Four Fundamental Rules**

1. Diplomacy must be divested of the crusading spirit.
2. The objectives of foreign policy must be defined in terms of the national interest and must be supported with adequate power.
3. Diplomacy must look at the political scene from the point of view of other nations.
4. Nations must be willing to compromise on all issues that are not vital to them.

#### **Five Prerequisites of Compromise**

1. Give up the shadow of worthless rights for the substance of real advantage.
2. Never put yourself in a position from which you cannot retreat without losing face and from which you cannot advance without great risk.
3. Never allow a weak ally to make decisions for you.
4. The armed forces are the instrument of foreign policy, not its master.
5. The government is the leader of public opinion, not its slave.