A Realist's View of Ethics

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An essential aspect of the human condition is to be implicated in moral and ethical life: to make moral choices, to live in a society that constrains behavior with ethical norms, and to be judged by ethical/moral criteria that others bring to their interpretation of one’s actions. Political realists no less than others are so implicated, yet more often than not they are characterized as being immoral, amoral, or of bringing prudential rather than moral criteria to bear in their decision making. These characterizations are off the mark; realists have thought as deeply about morality in political life as other analysts, and their imperfections as human actors in life’s political dramas do not seem to make them any more flawed than idealists and utopians, often enough even less so.

Realism is a way of thinking about politics, particularly its international dimensions. Traditionally realists share three assumptions: 1) human affairs are essentially conflictual; 2) the group, not the individual or the class, is the basic social unit; and 3) power and security are the primary human motivations.¹ By placing power at the center of analysis, realism has never produced a comprehensive ethics of its own, and the approach, as Carr has claimed, lacks imagination.² Carr notes that utopianism can provide a source of vision for practitioners just as realists are able to offer a corrective to the complacency and hypocrisy that often settle into idealist/liberal views when they take concrete form. Just as they might look to utopianism for vision, realists look for moral foundations in traditional sources of moral thinking, religion and other systems of universalist thinking such as Kant’s categorical imperative. For example, Reinhold Niebuhr drew on his foundational beliefs that were rooted in neoconservative Protestantism in grappling as a realist thinker about the problems of choice in international political affairs during the cold war, and Hans J. Morgenthau’s profoundly insightful thinking about morality that suffused his writings emerged from his Jewish roots.

In addition to drawing on different traditions to inform their ethical judgments realists also place
high value on such conditions as stability, order, and peace which provide a context in which all those secured by these conditions are provided the space to contemplate questions of morality and principles of ethical action. The opposed conditions of turmoil, anarchy, disorder, and war do not afford circumstances for reflection and deep thinking that are required for careful thought about moral philosophy, religion, and other ways of finding ethical principles. Conditions of acute conflict in action nevertheless provide the spark for thinking about morals, for here is where effective ethical principles are actually implemented and violated. Realists recognize the tension between guiding principles of universal applicability and the arrangements of power. Thus realists point to the commonplace that the most powerful frequently assert claims to universality for their own interests while the less powerful assert aspirations for justice in putting forth their own claims. And realists contribute to such dialogues by deflating the complacency of the rich and powerful who defend the status quo as right and just. And they advance the debate further by noting that in the face of such complacency and resistance to change the claim that peace is morally superior to the force of arms is a sham when those seeking change are provided no other means of recourse.

Furthermore, the “supreme virtue in politics” of realism is prudence, “the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions.” Realists combine this precept of prudence with the requirement for success that together imply that action should be rational and moderate, never crusading or driven by any intensity that might be fostered by a moralistic or self-righteous impulse. This principle of prudence, applied in practice, leads to the consideration by any realist statesman of all of the interests in play in any given political situation. By taking others’ interests into account, the realist acts with moderation. Moderation may be a virtue, but it is not a moral imperative; at the same time, more often than not it is likely to produce a moral result.

Realists tend to adopt a point of view close to that of statesmen or political practitioners so that they perceive moral issues in the context of action. And action takes place within a reality that itself is
produced, not from preconceptions or principles, but from a clash of competing, antagonistic perspectives. Thus ethical action takes place within specific circumstances and is, therefore, imperfect. In an insightful essay Arnold Wolfers made the point that “nonperfectionist morality” is not confined to international politics but rather suffuses all of public and private life when one considers circumstances.

An ordinary man might be expected to defend his home from invaders, using violence to the extent necessary, as much as a political leader might be expected to employ a country’s army to defend his country. And Wolfers offers the continuum of amity and enmity between actors as a circumstantial measure of the difficulties of moral choice in the context of effective action. In circumstances of enmity it may prove impossible to make one’s actions conform to such universal imperatives as “thou shalt not kill” and “always treat other human beings as ends, not as means.” On the other hand, such imperatives gain traction within a situation of amity. In considering ethics always within the context of necessity of action, the realist loses the advantage of that moral clarity that characterizes abstract thinking about principles. But a realist’s awareness of moral dilemmas and difficult choices, while making him vulnerable to criticism, allows him to avoid claims of innocence that, if valid, would not allow one to act effectively in a contentious world and prevents him from advocating radical schemes.

Such conservatism leads the realist to a concern with the balance of power, a concept that is devoted to preventing any power from assuming a position of dominance in the international system, in short allowing the continued existence of independent states. Implicitly the realist accepts the right of people to work out their own destinies and recognizes that different nations might choose systems of government and social arrangements that do not conform to one’s own. Although realism does not promote cooperative international institutions as ends in themselves, as does liberalism, alliances and international organizations such as the United Nations do provide, in the realist’s view, useful mechanisms for coordinating policies and achieving cooperative institutional arrangements. Concern with balance of power stems from a variety of views about the need to oppose ambitions to dominate.
Traditional realists find the drive for power in human nature, while others such as Waltz find it in the positional relations of states, while others like Mearsheimer perceive fear and other incentives that drive states to seek unlimited power. Some regard the operation of the balance of power as being a nearly automatic function whereas others believe that it is the subject of policy. None think that checking power should ever be ignored as it was by American policy makers in the 2003 invasion of Iraq that had the effect of eliminating that country’s ability to check Iran.

All realists agree that the foremost consideration for analysis is power, and all recognize that a distribution of power in the international system constrains and shapes choices of individual states. The recent and current advocacy of spreading democracy by all means including the use of force thrives in a period when a liberal coalition provides hegemonic leadership across the world. At the same time, even democracy and human rights advocates pay some obeisance to realism by endorsing military intervention only in less powerful countries, never in major powers such as Russia and China. And neither did such advocacy even raise its voice in the era when millions of people were tortured, incarcerated, and put to death in the Soviet Union or when forty-five million Chinese people died in the famine produced by the policies associated with the Great Leap Forward. Even in the contemporary era, there was silence while some four million people died in the largest war in the post cold war period in DR Congo, for to have intervened in that gigantic country would have merely spread the war, not brought the suffering to an end.

Currently in the so-called Arab spring, intervention by the leading powers remains very selective according to power arrangements and strategic interests. The presence of an important American naval base in Bahrain is but a whisper in the discourse about popular dissent and spread of democracy, and the entrenched power of Bashar al-Assad in Syria forms but a muted tone in the background as peaceful demonstrators are shot and jailed by the state’s security forces. Western silence greeted the intervention of Saudi Arabia in Bahrain to help suppress popular democracy demonstrations. Meanwhile a coalition of countries mounted a serious though limited military intervention in Libya. What realists bring to
discussions about such affairs is clarity of analytic perspective and emphasis on interests defined in terms of power. In such situations realists remain acutely aware of the moral choices involved, but they never conflate that morality with the actuality of power and existent constraints on realizable political choice.

What realists lack is any permanent vision about what states of affairs they prefer. On the one side, a lack of vision and an absence of passion—important driving forces of politics—may be considered as flaws in the realist perspective. On the other, those characteristics offer a dampening to the impulses of zealots. In place of fixed aims, realists choose contextual ends and the means to achieve them; instead of passion, realists bring will to carry out the means to achieve contextual ends. By calculating forces at play in any actual situation and giving consideration to everyone’s interests, without unduly passionate attachment to fixed, universal principles, the realist statesman more often than not can achieve his ends through diplomacy. At the same time, when a conflict is insoluble through such accommodating means, he remains willing to use force if that is the rational means to achieve the ends that he has willed.

When one considers the sources of vision and zealotry in politics, it seems that they may often, though not exclusively, be found in the very foundational structures that produce systems of ethics, particularly religion and ideology. Even though Christianity has produced one of the foundational systems of ethics, it also produced such murderous and torturous phenomena as the Crusades and the Inquisition. In the contemporary world some of the most zealous terrorists who conduct war against their enemies’ civilian populations as well as military targets derive their mission from the religious roots of Salafist Islam. On the secular side, dedicants of human rights and democracy base their views on a fundamentally ethical respect for the individual, but simultaneously they advocate military action, with its attendant killing and maiming, without knowledge of opponents and with minimal concern for success. Such drivers often result in extraordinary suffering, for example, the killing of tens of thousands of Iraqis and the creation of some three million Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons in the foreign intervention of 2003 to date. Thus in comparing the relative ethical weight attributed to the effects of
action by zealots and by realists, the latter’s actions do not deserve any greater moral opprobrium than those of the former.

Intentions versus effects form a significant consideration in ethical thinking. For example, in a great debate about one of the most serious ethical issues of our time, the threat to use nuclear weapons, opponents took positions identified by the distinction. With the publication in 1982 of Jonathan Schell’s arousing book about nuclear weapons,7 public fears were provoked, while the author called for a utopian solution. In 1983 the Catholic Bishops of the United States issued a position paper condemning as immoral the very idea of nuclear deterrence, their logic resting upon the view that to threaten retaliation represented an evil intention to kill millions.8 Countering both the fears and the ethical argument based on intentions, a group from Harvard University published a study, which I characterize as realist, arguing that broader public understanding of the technical and political issues was warranted and that an ethics based upon effects rather than intentions formed a more proper basis with which to guide policy.9 All sides in this debate contributed seriously and brought profound ethical considerations to bear, but it is impossible to read the presentations and then reach the conclusion that the realists were less sensitive and less firmly attached to moral foundations than were the utopians.

Similarly in viewing the debates about the wars fought by the United States for non-vital interests, specifically those in Vietnam from 1965 to 1973 and in Iraq from 2003 to 2011 both of which caused extensive death, destruction, and suffering to the societies against which they were waged, one can see a pattern of advocacy and promotion by ideologically driven constituencies and opposition by realists. In the debate about the Vietnam war, Hans J. Morgenthau, the leading realist of the time, vigorously opposed the war. In the debate about waging war against Iraq in 2003, the overwhelming majority of American academic realists opposed the war.10 While these positions were founded on realist principles of power and interest their effects, had the positions been followed, they very likely would have produced fewer evil consequences than the policies actually put into effect and need to be judged perhaps more
ethical, certainly not less so than the positions of the ideological supporters of the wars.

Realists, though, are fully cognizant of the role of violence in politics, especially international politics, and war and other forms of violence raise the most profound questions of circumstantial ethics. Unsurprisingly realists contemplate the uses of force, and their efforts carry ethical overtones even though this analytical approach does not systematically devote itself to such overtones in the way that philosophers of just war, for example, do. At the same time, such guidelines of realism as having clarity of purpose, full knowledge of one’s own interests and of opponents’ interests, prudence and a standard of success lead a realist to a careful examination of specific conflicts and ways of achieving desired outcomes with a minimum of violence. As advocated by thinkers like Machiavelli\textsuperscript{11} and soldiers like Colin Powell,\textsuperscript{12} sometimes the concentration of overwhelming force avoids prolongation of a conflict with its waste of lives and property and ensures quicker success with less effort. On the surface, such a calculation seems antithetical to just war theory’s criterion of proportionality, but the effect of using overwhelming force may prove ethically beneficial by minimizing losses and ending the brutality and suffering of war sooner rather than later. But realist thinking about such matters also includes a clear idea of what is to come when a war is over, the establishment of a situation of domination in which order, law, and justice may be effected by the victor.

The current conditions in which we live are often chaotic and frequently challenging, filled with unfamiliar pressures and emerging forces as the world changes. In this uncertainty advocates claiming moral principles and ethical guidelines promote intervention using such guidelines. More cautiously, realists tend to seek knowledge, to calculate carefully using interests as their measure, and to promote security above all. In doing so they bring imperfect moral calculations to bear and recognize that passion and dogma offer poor guidance for action. That position does not diminish their essential human entanglement in ethical questions, though they are caught in the position of being unable to champion universal moral principles, knowing full well that fallible human beings in an uncertain and dangerous
world are mostly incapable of moral certainty.

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Notes


11. See, e.g., Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapter VIII.