



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

## ARCHIVIO ISTITUZIONALE DELLA RICERCA

### Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna Archivio istituzionale della ricerca

The Limits of Power: Knowledge, ethics, and foreign policy in Hans J. Morgenthau's international theory

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

Zambenardi, L. (2022). The Limits of Power: Knowledge, ethics, and foreign policy in Hans J. Morgenthau's international theory. *INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS*, 36(1), 3-22 [10.1177/0047117820935621].

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/763503> since: 2022-11-04

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820935621>

*Terms of use:*

Some rights reserved. The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (<https://cris.unibo.it/>).  
When citing, please refer to the published version.

(Article begins on next page)

# The limits of power: Knowledge, ethics, and foreign policy in Hans J. Morgenthau's international theory

**Lorenzo Zambarnardi**

University of Bologna

## **Abstract**

Hans J. Morgenthau's contribution to international relations and political theory appears to have been fully recognized to date. However, his ideas have undergone surprisingly little comprehensive investigation: an attitude that made it possible to grasp only a few aspects of his reflections. The main argument of this article is that the main area of inquiry in Morgenthau's scholarship - international politics and foreign policy - is based on general considerations regarding the role of reason in politics and the limits of knowledge of the social universe. Not only does the question of the possibility of such knowledge lie at the root of his considerations on political action, but it also forms the mainspring of his reflection on ethics. Through an inquiry into the red thread that tightly links his diverse body of thought on social sciences, ethics, and foreign policy, the article aims to show that Morgenthau was a systematic political thinker who set out from theoretical observations on the limits of knowledge to develop particular insights into ethics and, from there, a particular notion of how foreign policy should be conducted. In other words, Morgenthau established links of essential continuity between knowledge, ethics, and action.

## **Keywords**

epistemology, ethics, foreign policy, Morgenthau, power

Hans J. Morgenthau's contribution to international relations and political theory is described by distinguishing two different research streams: the first one leading to the analysis of international politics and the second one – of a more philosophical character

---

## **Corresponding author:**

Lorenzo Zambarnardi, University of Bologna, 40125 Bologna, Italy.

Email: [lorenzo.zambarnardi3@unibo.it](mailto:lorenzo.zambarnardi3@unibo.it)

---

– to the study of the nature and limits of social science. This view appears to betray a weak point underlying many of the polarized interpretations of Morgenthau’s work, namely, the failure to recognize the unity of his thought and to lay due emphasis on the fact that Morgenthau’s studies on social philosophy are essential for an appropriate understanding of his view of political ethics and foreign policy.

The main argument of this article is that the main area of inquiry in Morgenthau’s scholarship – international politics and foreign policy – is based on general considerations regarding the role of reason in politics and the limits of knowledge of the social universe. Not only does the question of the possibility of such knowledge lie at the root of his considerations on political action, but it also forms the mainspring of his reflection on ethics. In this perspective, the present research aims to show that Morgenthau was a political thinker who set out from theoretical observations on the limits of knowledge and went on to develop particular insights into political ethics and, from there, a particular notion of how foreign policy should be conducted. With this I do not mean to suggest that Morgenthau’s analysis of international politics stems merely from his epistemological ideas on the social sciences. There is no doubt that he was an intensely political writer, whose thought was greatly influenced by his direct, personal experience of the crisis of the Weimer regime. However, in reflecting on the great political questions of his time Morgenthau was significantly shaped by his view on the limits of political and social knowledge. In actual fact, he established links of essential continuity between knowledge, ethics, and action, all of which are at the center of his intellectual work, from *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics (Scientific Man)* to his critique of US military rationalism in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

Before describing how the article is organized, one point is worth mentioning. Although the attempt to provide a unified interpretation of Morgenthau’s work may result in what Quentin Skinner labeled ‘the mythology of coherence’,<sup>2</sup> I hope to show that if we take Morgenthau’s whole corpus, some apparent incompatibilities in his arguments actually exhibit more consistency and coherence than is usually thought. Of course, I am not claiming that Morgenthau was altogether systematic in his writings. As other scholars have shown, he changed his mind on a variety of themes and political issues and also contradicted himself in the course of his long intellectual journey.<sup>3</sup> However, the goal of the article is to highlight the red thread that tightly links Morgenthau’s diverse body of thought on social sciences, ethics, and international politics.

The article is organized as follows. Section ‘Political knowledge’ focuses on Morgenthau’s critical evaluation of scientism and rationalism expounded in *Scientific Man*. By distinguishing his two different critiques on the possibility of developing a scientific understanding of politics (i.e. the complexity of the social universe and his attack on the mechanistic worldview), this part is meant to show that some of Morgenthau’s arguments point to an insurmountable limit of scientism and rationalism in politics. Section ‘From epistemology to ethics’ will attempt to shed light on Morgenthau’s ethical position by tracing it back to his epistemological considerations. His perspective will not only be shown to be greatly at variance with the classical separation of ethics and politics – generally ascribed to political realism – which reduces morality to a sheer appendage of power, but more importantly, in this part of the article I try to show that for Morgenthau what really matters is not the content of morality, but the political context in which

---

ethical values are determined. Section ‘Foreign policy’ is concerned with Morgenthau’s most central and controversial concept in his analysis of foreign policy: the notion of ‘interest defined in terms of power’. Here it will be shown not just that his peculiar, ambiguous concept originates in his epistemological and axiological views, but also that his notion of ‘interest’ is designed to foster prudence in the conduct of foreign policy. For it is the aim of this article to portray Morgenthau as a thinker who dealt mainly with the boundaries within which individuals are able to grasp the social world and act morally, though also, and in particular, with the limits of power.<sup>4</sup>

## Political knowledge

*Scientific Man* is a radical critique on the political, social, and moral philosophy underlying the scientific study of politics and the rationalist conduct of foreign affairs. In this book, Morgenthau speculates upon the limits of knowledge of the social universe and upon the appropriate means to achieve this kind of knowledge. In particular, he is interested in whether and to what extent social and political reality can be known and controlled. The main target Morgenthau aims at is the philosophy which gave birth to scientism, namely, the confidence that social problems must be similar to natural problems and that the modes by which natural laws are discovered should apply to society as well.<sup>5</sup>

*Scientific Man* is rooted in the culture shock its author suffered during the first years of his stay in the United States. As the intellectual environment in which he had grown up was strongly affected by Nietzsche’s and Weber’s writings, Morgenthau was totally unprepared for the optimism and pragmatism which are typical of American culture.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the distinction between human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] and natural sciences [*Naturwissenschaften*] was largely recognized and shared within the German intellectual and academic contexts in which Morgenthau was educated.<sup>7</sup> The likening of social sciences to natural sciences appeared to Morgenthau as a scientific vagary, to such an extent that he was prompted to write what is still one of the most impressive indictments of the ‘scientific’ study of politics.

According to Morgenthau, scientism is the most dangerous product of one of the dominant doctrines in the nineteenth century – that is, rationalism, a system of thought according to which the social world is governed by mechanical laws which the scientist is potentially able to understand and control. Reliance on science and confidence in the progress of civilization can hence become one and the same if knowledge of the former is applied to the evils and faults of politics. Thus, knowledge and education are alleged to lie at the basis of progress, while ignorance is assumed to be the original root of the ills afflicting the political body.

Rationalism is grounded on two basic principles. It believes in the possibility of understanding society by the same standards applied to the study of nature and claims that this kind of knowledge can ensure rational control of the social world:

the unity under reason of the social and the physical world and the ability of the human mind to mold both worlds through the application of the same rational principles . . . In this view, the problems of society and nature are essentially identical and the solution of social problems

---

depends upon the quantitative extension of the method of the natural sciences to the social sphere.<sup>8</sup>

Morgenthau claims that the false analogy between social and hard sciences turned the new political scientist into a sorcerer's apprentice searching for a magic formula to solve the problems of society. He also argues that political questions cannot be dealt with for good and all like technical matters. Issues concerning political authority, the relationship between the individual and the state and between law and power can be addressed only provisionally,<sup>9</sup> as they always manifest themselves in different forms and never in the same way, unlike what happens with natural phenomena. What statesmen can do is try to make the most of the strength and energy of the political body, with the tragic awareness of being unable to heal its disorders forever. In his own words, 'social problems are never solved definitely. They must be solved every day anew. An eternal vigilance is the price of freedom, so is the provisional solution of all social problems paid with never ending effort'.<sup>10</sup>

Morgenthau's struggle against rationalism stems from the political consequences of the latter. In particular, rationalism represents the most patent example of the decline of Western political thought, which manifests itself in the belief that the healing power of science can solve the problems afflicting society and politics. According to him, contempt of power and power politics, encouraged by rationalism, has done away with their theoretical relevance without removing the roles they actually play in politics. Morgenthau's view entails restoring a political science merging with action in such a way as to allow policymakers to re-appropriate the actual, concrete reality of the social world they belong to.

According to Morgenthau, there are two main reasons why the study of politics cannot be equated with science and, hence, why the social scientists who drew inspiration from the model of hard sciences could not help failing. The first one has to do with the *complexity* of the social universe. Yet, if Morgenthau's argument were confined to this contention, his critique of the scientific study of politics would be essentially mistaken: as will be shown in the next paragraph, *complexity* is an argument *for* the use of natural science approaches in political research. The second reason is concerned with the scientific model which traditionally provided a frame of reference for social scientists. In particular, Morgenthau contends that the latter adopted an 'obsolete' paradigm – the Newtonian mechanistic model – which cannot conform to the nature of human beings and society.

### *On the complexity of the social universe*

The first reason for the failure of scientism, as outlined above, is the great amount of variables that are to be taken into account by an observer. An understanding of the social world could only be achieved if scholars and statesmen were able to grasp all the variables and their related mechanisms significantly affecting the political events they are interested in: if their picture of social reality is partial, then their predictive and controlling abilities will be as imperfect. As Morgenthau himself points out:

---

the social sciences deal with interminable chains of causes and effects, each of which, by being a reacting effect, is the cause of another reacting effect, and so forth ad infinitum. Furthermore, the links of such a chain are the junctions and crossing-points of many other chains, supporting or counteracting each other. The scene of this intricate spectacle is what we call the 'social world'.<sup>11</sup>

One of the main limits of internationalist thought between the two wars, in Morgenthau's view, was its providing single-cause accounts of the roots of war and the remedies to be adopted, what he termed as the 'method of the single cause':<sup>12</sup> if a war is motivated by faulty borders, then it will be up to the 'scientific frontier' to settle international conflicts; if a war is caused by high tariffs, then free trade will be entrusted with the task of establishing peace among nations; if national antagonisms stem from isolation, then the unifying power of modern means of communication will rush to the aid of international diplomacy. However, Morgenthau notes that all these 'single cause' explanations have been disproved by the historical evidence. Politics is so complex as to make this 'one-track mode of thought' not only mistaken from a scientific viewpoint but also, more importantly, when it is embraced as a guideline for the conduct of foreign policy.<sup>13</sup>

Undoubtedly, Morgenthau shared the notion of 'the abuse of reason' – which Friedrich von Hayek had been developing almost at the same time<sup>14</sup> – whereby the number of variables involved in a social phenomenon is generally too large for the human mind to control.

Although the complexity of the social world is often employed as an argument against scientism, the *complexity* argument amounts to a thesis arguing for a naturalistic approach to political research. *Complexity*, in effect, ascribes the failure in understanding and predicting social phenomena to the lack of information on all those factors which play a part in causing a certain phenomenon. If at a given time, though, all the significant variables involved in a given (closed) system were known with knowledge also of the mechanisms linking the variables, it would actually be possible, through a series of complex mathematical calculations, to explain and predict the evolution of a phenomenon, be it natural or social. That is why social complexity theorists are highly refined positivists using the approaches of hard sciences to forecast the course of political events.

Morgenthau's argument, however, does not solely associate the fallacy of scientism with society being more complex than the natural world. The pages of *Scientific Man* present a second thesis – even more relevant than the complexity argument – which is generally neglected in current debates on the specific nature of social sciences and on the insurmountable barriers they have to overcome in the study of human and social systems.<sup>15</sup>

### *Beyond the mechanistic paradigm*

Morgenthau does not question the application of natural science methods to social studies tout court, but rather the notion of science as a static, inflexible paradigm with rigid methods and set purposes instead of a variety of perspectives and procedures. According to him, just as liberalism tends to represent itself as a universal philosophy, rationalism

---

is apt to present Newtonian science as a universal frame of reference for social sciences, while it is only one (though certainly the most successful in terms of accumulation of knowledge and capacity to predict and control natural phenomena) of several models generated by natural scientists.

Rationalism assumes the similarity of nature and society and infers from it the possibility of controlling the latter by borrowing adequate methods from the former, but fails to notice that the analogy between nature and society is 'invalidated by modern scientific thought itself; and it is only in rationalistic philosophy and science that it still leads a ghostlike existence'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Morgenthau is far from entirely refuting naturalism – employing natural science approaches in social studies – but he feels there is no single scientific model within natural sciences either. Morgenthau felt that the mechanistic worldview had had its day and there were no more good reasons to regard it as *the* model to be followed. Accordingly, the problem lay not only in the fallibility of social sciences and in the complexity of human interaction. The trouble is that no universal scientific paradigm is available: there exist several ones, and Morgenthau maintains that the model provided by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural science and adopted by social scientists as a prototype is not suitable for the study of politics:

Matter has been dissolved into electronic atoms; the traditional concepts of time, space, and the law of gravitation have succumbed to the theory of relativity; the quantum theory has transformed causation into statistical probability and replaced determinism by the principle of indeterminacy. What scientist philosophy and, under its influence, nineteenth-century political thought and the social sciences refer to as their object of emulation is a ghost from which life has long since departed.<sup>17</sup>

The view of society put forward by rationalists can therefore be equated with the traditional understanding of nature, a conception which undoubtedly played a major role in the progress of modern science. Yet historical analyses of scientific thinking seem to confirm that science conveys no single image of the world, and scientists – in order to overcome barriers that appeared insurmountable for the knowledge available to them – had to adjust the methods they had embraced. The predicament facing the social sciences lies in imitating a scientific model which is no longer accepted by contemporary natural scientists as the sole pattern of scientific knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

In this sense, *scientific man* is utopian in at least two ways. First, he believes in the utopia of a monolithic science and in the resulting endorsement of a scientific method which is valid for all spheres. Second, he is utopian because he trusts that such an approach can be employed to reform society and cure it of the ills of politics. According to Morgenthau, the failures of social scientists result from the 'raw material' of politics, which is not permeable to the methods of mechanistic science.<sup>19</sup>

Although quantum theory was probably not one of the crucial factors in the development of Morgenthau's thought,<sup>20</sup> he deemed that the radical changes physics had witnessed in the first half of the twentieth century challenged political science to arrange a renewal process. Morgenthau points out that contemporary social scientists rely much more on those natural sciences which claim to pursue certainty than on current natural sciences which, by contrast, have recognized that outcomes are always indeterminate,

---

uncertain, at best likely; those sciences, in conclusion, which regard truth – if the word makes sense here – as a sheer statistical datum.

This argument is not meant to suggest that Morgenthau was envisaging the prospect of a probabilistic theory of international politics. From his viewpoint, such an endeavor would appear to be problematic for two main reasons. First, as is the case with the environment of subatomic particles in quantum physics, it is the very study of social and political phenomena that affects the nature of the phenomena themselves. According to Morgenthau, social research modifies the world not through achieved knowledge turning into action – as provided for by the positivist paradigm – but through the very act of cognition, since subject and object form a single system and not two separate entities:

The social scientist as such stands in the streams of social causation as an acting and reacting agent. What he sees and what he does not see are determined by his position in the those streams; and by revealing what he sees in terms of his science he directly intervenes in the social process.<sup>21</sup>

Observation itself can conjure a certain potential state into actual existence and that is how cognition itself can affect the social phenomenon. With that in mind, Morgenthau concludes that ‘Nature as the object of human knowledge is, therefore, somehow the product of human action’.<sup>22</sup>

The second reason has to do with what is important to predict in international politics. While natural scientists are correctly interested in the behavior of ‘averages of large numbers of similar objects . . . the social sciences . . . are to a much greater extent than the natural sciences interested in individual behavior’. And the ‘inevitable emphasis upon individuality as such . . . extends the domain of uncertainty immeasurably’.<sup>23</sup> This is why, for Morgenthau, probability distributions are largely insignificant to policymakers because what really matters for them is the unique conditions in which statesmen must act on the political scene. Thus, every situation must be understood in its own distinctiveness and no statistical inference can tell statesmen what to do.

At this point what is left to discuss is whether Morgenthau’s assumptions on the unviability of an accomplished political science, as expounded in *Scientific Man*, are consistent with the realist theory of international politics he put forward in his later writings, especially in *Politics among Nations*. In particular, is the radical critique of scientism and rationalism consistent with Morgenthau’s first principle of realism (i.e. ‘Political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by *objective laws* that have their roots in human nature’)?<sup>24</sup>

Apart from the soundness of his contentions on the limits of social sciences, there appears to be an evident inconsistency (to be found in the pages of *Scientific Man* as well) between his forceful critique of rationalism and his concurrent appeal to certain ‘objective laws’ to be recognized in the first place and then abided by. In particular, reason must recognize the existence of certain laws in order to attempt, albeit precariously, to minimize the destructive potential of politics. In other words, not only does reason play a key role in Morgenthau’s theoretical speculation, but there also exist objective laws acting, if not as a map, at least as a compass to sail over the uncharted waters of politics.

---

Admittedly, if only the ‘first principle of realism’ were taken into account, the resulting picture would portray Morgenthau as a positivist thinker. Although speaking of ‘objective laws’ is anything but a clear example for a critique of scientism,<sup>25</sup> Morgenthau construed them on the basis of *principles* discovered by ‘classical Indian, Chinese and Greek philosophies’ and not as mechanical laws. In fact, the ‘six principles of realism’ are not meant to identify any laws of politics, since it would not make sense to take as a principle what reality is and must be (i.e. a scientific law). As Richard Ned Lebow has clarified, the application of these principles is ‘always context-dependent in a double sense: context determines if they will be applied and, if so, how they will be applied’.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, the attack on rationalism and scientism was to keep recurring in his next writings, especially in his commentary on American foreign policy.<sup>27</sup> During the debate over Vietnam, for example, Morgenthau criticized both the rationalism underlying American military strategy and the universal application of the containment policy, which brought the United States into Indochina.<sup>28</sup> In these writings, his epistemological criticism of the scientific approach is closely linked to his foreign policy analysis and reveals its prominence. This is why the author respectfully disagrees with those interpreters that see a ‘paradoxical transition’ from the critique of scientism in *Scientific Man* to the attempt to develop a rational theory of international politics in *Politics among Nations*.<sup>29</sup>

It must be noted, however, that in his commentary on political affairs Morgenthau does not deny the feasibility of rationally investigating social reality. His goal, as in *Scientific Man*, was to restore an appropriate role to reason, avoiding the mistake of endowing it with a degree of understanding and control which is and will be alien to it. The form of reasoning he appeals to is one which recognizes the scourge of the age (i.e. scientific dogmatism) and unmasks false excitements (i.e. the science of peace), one that accepts the role of power as an inescapable fact and attempts to control its destructive effects without trying to root it out for good and all (i.e. Morgenthau’s political realism). Thus, Morgenthau fought a battle on two fronts: against rationalism claiming that reality could be understood and controlled, and against radical skepticism, which would doom to failure any attempt to grasp and regulate the social world. By placing himself beyond dogmatism and skepticism, he took a stand against choosing between a purely contingent view of reality and one in which, conversely, everything can be understood and controlled. As he claimed that it was impossible to develop a peaceful international order founded in law but realized, at the same time, that the reality of international politics should not be accepted as it appears to be (for relationships between nations are a product of the human will and can therefore be manipulated and reformed), it was only to be expected that he should be regarded as a realist cynic<sup>30</sup> by some and as a ‘romantic’ political thinker by others.<sup>31</sup>

## From epistemology to ethics

Morgenthau was often described as being totally uninterested in moral questions reaching beyond the national interest. Still more often his theory was assumed to consider interstate relations from a completely amoral standpoint: security imperatives resulting from ‘the lust for power’ appear to be so compelling as to make any ethical limitations

---

utterly impossible. Various passages in Morgenthau's works seem to confirm such an interpretation. On one page of *Politics Among Nations*, he argues that 'Ethics in the abstract judges action by its conformity with the moral law; political ethics judges action by its political consequences'.<sup>32</sup> This extract appears to validate the old image of a cynical Morgenthau who is indifferent to ethical issues. Thus, it was easy to reach the hasty conclusion that Morgenthau's reflection on morality solely aimed at showing its purely illusory and 'ineffectual' nature, to borrow a term Machiavelli used at the beginning of chapter XV of the *Prince*.<sup>33</sup>

Recent contributions have shown, however, that Morgenthau's realism should be equated neither with a cynical disregard for ethical principles nor with a ruthless statecraft in the conduct of foreign affairs.<sup>34</sup> Morgenthau preserved moral values as standards for assessing the art of government although, by his own admission, morality is too important to be left to moralists. Just as he had got rid of rationalism without rejecting reason, he would free himself from moralism, not from morality. In particular, Morgenthau never felt it was either viable or desirable to have a clear-cut separation between politics and morality – Machiavelli's supposed great contribution to modern political thought. In this respect, the 'fourth principle of realism' reads as follows:

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. And it is unwilling to gloss over and obliterate that tension and thus to obfuscate both the moral and the political issue by making it appear as though the stark facts of politics were morally more satisfying than they actually are, and the moral law less exacting than it actually is.<sup>35</sup>

To Morgenthau, the ethical evaluation of political action is rooted in the moral and social nature of human beings: political success is therefore far from being the sole criterion for assessing politics. Political action is not devoid of moral significance and is inevitably subject to the moral judgment of the actor who puts it into effect, the judgment of those suffering its consequences and, finally, even the judgment of those acting as simple bystanders.<sup>36</sup> The individual is not only a rational and political being guided by mere considerations of convenience, but is also endowed with an ethical dimension requiring him to justify his own actions in moral terms. In Morgenthau's own words, 'To say that a political action has no moral purpose is absurd; for political action can be defined as an attempt to realize moral values through the medium of politics, that is, power'.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, there exists a dialectical relationship between ethics and politics which prevents the latter from escaping the judgment of the former.

Morgenthau's own notion of power too is characterized by an unquestionably moral dimension. State security and national survival are not ends in themselves and power is not a centuries-old dogmatic goal whose achievement can be justified by anything. In a passage from *The Purpose of American Politics*, he writes:

In order to be worthy of our lasting sympathy, a nation must pursue its interests for the sake of a transcendent purpose that gives meaning to the day-by-day operations of its foreign policy. The empires of the Huns and the Mongols, eminently successful in political and military terms,

---

mean nothing to us; but ancient Greece, Rome, and Israel do. We remember ancient Greece, Rome, and Israel with a sense of personal involvement . . . because they were not just political organizations whose purpose was limited to their survival and physical growth but civilizations, unique realizations of human potentialities that we have in common with them. And their achievements appear to us in retrospect . . . not just as isolated contributions of some great men, but as the collective work of generations in which a collective purpose was revealed.<sup>38</sup>

Accordingly, politics cannot simply be measured in terms of accumulation, preservation, and display of power: political success per se appears to be meaningless when it is totally unrelated to collective ends of a different nature. Although ultimate ends such as liberty, justice, and equality cannot always act as concrete political objectives, they must orientate political action by giving it a meaning that goes beyond sheer power and security.

While the analysis has so far aimed to show that morality and politics are not two separate spheres in Morgenthau's eyes, from now on particular emphasis will be laid on the role of ethical considerations in politics, with a view to understanding the objectives and contents of his political morality. Most scholars examining Morgenthau's treatment of morality have focused on his idea of the ethics of the lesser evil,<sup>39</sup> which is a sort of consequentialist Weberian ethics of responsibility that is meant to guide policymakers in their foreign policy choices. However, his moral framework and normative claims are larger than that.

In his writings, Morgenthau often referred to the existence of transcendent moral values,<sup>40</sup> but without providing any accurate, detailed definition of their nature, so much so that radically adverse criticism of his work might possibly be justified: he appears to be irremediably ambiguous and inconsistent in his contentions. In particular, he claims that the content of morality belongs to another world and that nobody is able to know with absolute certainty what is just or unjust: ethics is a set of transcendent imperatives which cannot be fully recognized by women and men. In other words, Morgenthau believed in the existence of objective moral values, which provide the supreme goals to be pursued but can be neither completely known nor fulfilled. It is thus no surprise to read, in his most famous work, first an affirmation of the existence of absolute moral principles and then the following warning:

To know that nations are subject to the moral law is one thing, while to pretend to know with certainty what is good and evil in the relations among nations is quite another. There is a world of difference between the belief that all nations stand under the judgment of God, inscrutable to the human mind, and the blasphemous conviction that God is always on one's side and that what one wills oneself cannot fail to be willed by God also.<sup>41</sup>

No individual or political leader, no nation, not even the holiest one, should therefore pose as a master of morality, which cannot be an object of knowledge for human beings, but only for God. In moral issues as well, according to Morgenthau, it is crucial to defend the autonomy of ethics against interference by an authority enjoining individuals what to do – be it a state, a religion, or scientific rationalism. In other words, he suggests the existence of transcendent values which are ontologically superior but epistemologically

---

inaccessible to human beings, so that nobody can be a bearer of these values. That is how he breaks away from the classical transcendent concept of moral truth, which seems only natural for a scholar influenced by the philosopher whose work *The Gay Science* had announced 'the death of God',<sup>42</sup> meaning not solely the death of the Christian God, but rather the removal of any external guide and support for human action. Still, Morgenthau does not deny the existence of such values but, more modestly, only the possibility of knowing them.

Morgenthau's reflection appears to suggest that any discussion of morality implies the question of the uncertainty surrounding the knowledge of political affairs, which was dealt with in the previous section: both issues can neither be reduced to scientific propositions nor be objects of absolute knowledge. But that is not tantamount to saying that Morgenthau's ethics is totally empty, devoid of content. Morgenthau's political reflection does not fall prey to skepticism and relativism. Bernard Johnson's interview can be useful to clarify his position. The following passage is part of an account of political events in the last days of the Weimar Republic starting from a meeting in 1935 at Professor Karl Neumeier's:

He had invited a number of people – clergymen, Protestants, scholars, and so forth. They were all anti-Nazi. They all argued against the Nazis from their own personal point of view. The churchmen said the Nazis had violated the autonomy of the church. The scholars said they had infringed on the autonomy of the universities. But nobody faced the issue head on. Nobody faced the basic problem.<sup>43</sup>

This paragraph shows Morgenthau's total divergence from the opponents of the Nazi government because they failed to understand that the new regime would obliterate the fundamental rights safeguarding the autonomy of all spheres of human and social life. The clergy and academics were interested in the autonomy of their own provinces, but without realizing that such autonomy stemmed from the existence of an independent political sphere, which was soon to be abolished by the Nazi state. Thus, what really matters is not the content of morality, which nobody can possibly know with absolute certainty, but the *political context* in which moral values are determined and compete with one another. Apparently, Morgenthau is not concerned with ethical evaluations ranging beyond moral pluralism, since they are still individual judgments. Like any other human being, he is not interested in them because he is not able to distinguish with a high degree of certainty between what is just and unjust.

If ethics cannot be known with certainty, moral pluralism and the political institutions which are intended to preserve it become the content of political ethics, namely, values to be protected and safeguarded per se.<sup>44</sup> A plural society, within a state and among states as well, is therefore regarded by Morgenthau as the utmost value to be protected and fought for even by resorting to force. What really matters is the structure allowing a political system to remain a plural environment which, in turn, makes it possible not to mistake what is held to be moral in one particular society for what is ethical in an absolute sense. In a passage of *Human Rights & Foreign Policy*, later included in *Politics among Nations*, Morgenthau maintains:

---

So there exists of necessity a certain relativism in the relation between moral principles and foreign policy; one cannot overlook this if one wants to do justice to the principles of morality in international politics. The relativism is twofold. It is a relativism in time; certain principles are applicable in one period of history and not applicable in another. It is also a relativism in terms of culture – of contemporaneous culture – in that certain principles are obeyed by some nations, some political civilizations, but are not obeyed by others.<sup>45</sup>

That is the reason why the political system, at both domestic and international levels, is to be founded on a certain degree of moral skepticism, implemented *in* and protected *by* political institutions allowing morality to continuously evolve. And hence it is essential to create and maintain a political system in which moral principles are allowed to grow and change, in such a way as to prevent them from being at the mercy of an individual, a group, a state, or a historical epoch.

## Foreign policy

Morgenthau's reflection on foreign affairs proceeds from a particular epistemological and axiological standpoint, posing the question of how a long-lasting political order can be built within the framework of international and moral anarchy. *Scientific Man* was intended to show that the course of action suggested by liberal social engineers was ineffective, since policies such as free trade, collective security, disarmament, and international organizations are not in a position to solve the problem of war. In fact, Morgenthau could not but be extremely critical of a foreign policy founded on the principles of rationalism. Equally important in his eyes, the technocratic notion that the social scientist can provide the political leader with a body of knowledge to be turned into action should be rejected altogether. Actually, in his view faith in the salvific powers of science jeopardized the quality of statecraft: 'The scientific era of international relations produced as its inevitable result the substitution of scientific standards for political evaluations and, ultimately, the destruction of the ability to make intelligent political decisions at all'.<sup>46</sup> Thus, policymakers should not be guided by the expertise of the scientist, but rather by principles which are to be adjusted to different circumstances on a case-by-case basis: for the knowledge of universals typical of scientific knowledge can reveal nothing about the particular situations where the policymaker is called upon to act.

The arguments developed in volumes such as *Politics among Nations*, *In Defense of the National Interest*, and later writings appear to revolve around one main problem: in the presence of a multiplicity of sovereignties (political anarchy) and in the absence of shared moral values and political practices (moral anarchy), the limitation of conflict can only be achieved by reviving traditional political instruments, such as the balance of power and diplomacy. The former is not meant primarily to prevent war or preserve the stability of the international system, but rather to maintain liberty and plurality:

If the goal were stability alone, it could be achieved by allowing one element to destroy or overwhelm the other and take their place. Since the goal is stability plus the preservation of all elements of the system, the equilibrium must aim at preventing any element from gaining ascendancy over the others.<sup>47</sup>

---

Only societies based on weights and counterweights are in a position to avoid concentration of power and to minimize the risk of a single notion of morality being established permanently. Ergo, the balance of power is an essential requirement for all societies aiming to preserve their plurality.<sup>48</sup>

While the balance of power is the main foreign policy tool, in order to restrain conflict in a situation of political and moral anarchy, according to Morgenthau, states should, quite paradoxically, pursue their interest ‘defined in terms of power’. As I show below, this concept not only originates in his epistemological and ethical considerations, but pursues the goal of shaping a foreign policy of limited objectives based on the political virtue par excellence, prudence.<sup>49</sup>

### *The concept of interest defined in terms of power*

‘The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics’, Morgenthau claims in the second edition of *Politics among Nations*, ‘is the concept of interest defined in terms of power’. Over 60 years after its initial articulation, this assertion is still a matter of debate. While no particular objections have been raised concerning the minimum content of the national interest – the ‘integrity of the national territory and of its institutions’<sup>50</sup> – various scholars have questioned the analytical usefulness of such a concept beyond mere survival, since objectively defining the interests of a complex political entity such as a nation appears to be an impracticable task.<sup>51</sup>

Although such a critique should be given credit for revealing the ambiguities involved in the notion of national interest as an objective category with a specific and permanent content, it appears to be marred by one major shortcoming concerning the polemical rather than analytical function Morgenthau ascribes to this concept. While Morgenthau does claim that ‘realism assumes that its key concept of interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid’, what he further states is noteworthy since he points out that realism ‘does not endow its key concept of interest defined as power with a meaning that is fixed once and for all’. For the content of the interest is neither stable nor permanent but, rather, has a changing and even contingent nature: the kind of interest determining political action in a particular period of history depends upon the political and cultural contexts within which foreign policy is formulated. The goals that might be pursued by nations in their foreign policy can run the whole gamut of objectives any nation has ever pursued or might possibly pursue.<sup>52</sup> In this respect, Morgenthau himself notes that the strength of his concept paradoxically lies in its ability to embody different contents in different historical epochs and cultural contexts. Actually, for Morgenthau even the content of power is conceptually indeterminate. As he clearly argues:

The same observations apply to the concept of power. Its content and the manner of its use are determined by the political and cultural environment. Power may comprise anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man. Thus power covers all social relationships which serve that end, from physical violence to the most subtle psychological ties by which one mind controls another.<sup>53</sup>

---

Yet, one may legitimately ask what kind of analytical value and role can be attached to an indeterminate notion that may incorporate numerous contents and meanings and which is clearly empirically unfalsifiable? What, then, is the point and utility of this doctrine?

The analytical interpretation appears to have underestimated the polemical function Morgenthau ascribes to his controversial concept, namely, challenging the notion that morality, truth, and justice can be thought to belong to a single nation, one political group or a single policymaker. One of the main purposes Morgenthau associates with the notion of 'interest defined in terms of power' lies in criticizing the universal aspirations of American foreign policy in the early years of the Cold War.

Like other classics of political theory, *Politics among Nations* was shaped by the great political problems of the epoch. Morgenthau developed his reflections in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when the spheres of influence, which would last for over 40 years without interruption, had already been created. At the dawn of the Cold War one of the most dangerous threats lay, he felt, in what he termed 'nationalistic universalism', a doctrine shared by both American democratic and Soviet communist internationalisms. As a keen observer, Morgenthau noticed that the Soviet Union and the United States had implanted their own political and economic models in their respective spheres of influence. In such a situation, both superpowers would attempt to 'impose upon the other contestants a new universal political and moral system recreated in the image of the victorious nation's political and moral convictions'.<sup>54</sup>

Not coincidentally, in the pages of *In Defense of the National Interest* Morgenthau attacks any form of universalism by arguing that the United States should abandon all doctrines of a universal nature which posit American *exceptionalism* and embrace policies that aim to achieve limited goals. On the subject of the Truman doctrine, which envisioned the defense of democracy on a global scale, our author remarks:

Thus the Truman Doctrine transformed a concrete interest of the United States in a geographically defined part of the world into a moral principle of worldwide validity, to be applied regardless of the limits of American interests and of American power.<sup>55</sup>

In Morgenthau's eyes, it was the national interest to counteract the anti-communist crusade, which would lead the United States to support movements and regimes which were not only deeply reactionary, but totally unable to build a stable, long-lasting political order. Thus, what was seen by many as an ideological or even immoral concept<sup>56</sup> is regarded by Morgenthau as an essential moderating factor, in terms of both the goals pursued and the means employed by states in the international arena:

it is exactly the concept of interest defined in terms of power that saves us from both that moral excess and that political folly. For 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 . . . in a dual sense: We are able to judge our nations as we judge our own and, having judged them in this fashion, we are then capable of pursuing policies that respect the interests of other nations, while protecting and promoting those of our own. Moderation in policy cannot fail to reflect the moderation of moral judgment.<sup>57</sup>

---

Only rejecting the notion that all good, all morality, and justice are on one side alone will ensure that compromise and reconciliation can be fostered among nations. Hence, states should be guided by a principle of moral symmetry tending to prevent faith in one's own virtue from becoming – in the words of the English historian Herbert Butterfield – ‘one of the profoundest seats of evil’.<sup>58</sup> Pursuing values which claim to be universal moral ends is especially hazardous because it may lead to forms of fanaticism typical of the ‘crusading spirit’ which ‘destroys nations and civilizations in the name of moral principle, ideal, or God himself’.<sup>59</sup> Elsewhere in *Politics among Nations*, in the chapter dealing with ‘international morality’, Morgenthau remarks that:

The morality of the particular group, far from limiting the struggle for power on the international scene, gives that struggle a ferociousness and intensity not known to other ages. For the claim to universality which inspires the moral code of one particular group is incompatible with the identical claim of another group; the world has room for only one, and the other must yield or be destroyed. Thus, carrying their idols before them, the nationalistic masses of our time meet in the international arena, each group convinced that it executes the mandate of history, that it does for humanity what it seems to do for itself, and that it fulfills a sacred mission ordained by providence, however defined. Little do they know that they meet under an empty sky from which the gods have departed.<sup>60</sup>

Morgenthau feels that the ‘crusading spirit’ characterizing these conflicts is generally coupled with a demonological view of politics which conjures up monsters to destroy and turns the world into a battlefield for the clash between the forces of good and evil. From this perspective, the Soviet Union was an imperialist power which needed to be *contained*, but its foreign policy did not make it the most immoral country in the world. Morgenthau believed that the Vietnam War itself was the result of a demonological perspective which had mistakenly replaced a concrete threat to the United States – power distribution in Southeast Asia – with the abstract one of the communist ideology.<sup>61</sup>

By contrast, thinking in terms of interest can allow nations to recognize the legitimacy of other countries’ claims, which is essential to achieving the ethical goal of moderation in the conduct of foreign affairs. This is why diplomacy ‘must be divested of the crusading spirit’ and ‘must look at the political scene from the point of view of other nations’.<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, Morgenthau stressed the need for coexistence among states embodying different interests in a world that, instead, was shifting toward the crusading spirit. In Morgenthau’s view, the awareness that one’s own national interest is not universally shared and absolutely rightful makes it possible to tolerate and accept other countries’ legitimate interests: therefore, the practice of the national interest is potentially able to exert a moderating influence on national aspirations.

Morgenthau’s political thinking seems to suggest that true wisdom in the fields of social science, ethics, and political action lies in a *prudent* style of thought and action which seeks to reconcile political discernment, moral judgment, and the need to make political decisions. ‘That this conciliation’, as he argued in *Scientific Man*, ‘is nothing more than a *modus vivendi*, uneasy, precarious, and even paradoxical, can disappoint only those who prefer to gloss over and distort the tragic contradictions of human existence with the soothing logic of a specious concord’.<sup>63</sup>

---

## Conclusion

Morgenthau's line of thought, including his central concept of 'interest defined in terms power', was rooted in epistemological considerations which are mainly propounded in *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* but were repeatedly confirmed in his writings thereafter. Morgenthau applied his reflection on the limits of social sciences and reason in political affairs both to understanding the social universe and to the ethical sphere: consequently, there is not a mere metaphorical relationship between the two areas but, rather, a substantial and profound philosophical connection. Within the framework of political science, he reaches the conclusion that it is impossible to achieve an understanding of social reality based on the mechanistic model offered by natural science. Likewise, he claims that the contents of morality cannot be known with absolute certainty. While he asserts the existence of objective moral values which provide the ultimate purposes to be pursued, Morgenthau contends, no less categorically, that they can be neither fully understood, nor totally fulfilled in historical reality. What truly matters is not moral content, but the political conditions under which ethical values are established. Morgenthau is not interested in moral judgments reaching beyond the ethical scope of any political system aiming to preserve its plurality, since they are bound to remain subjective wisdom. As long as ethics cannot be known with certainty, moral pluralism and the political institutions which are intended to preserve it will have to be regarded as core values to be protected. For this reason, domestic and international political systems should be founded on a certain degree of moral skepticism, practiced and protected by political institutions, which can allow morality to evolve incessantly and be the object of continuous variation.

Morgenthau's line of reasoning is not intended as an attempt to establish a genuine theory of foreign policy but rather a philosophical frame of reference for a political system in which ethics, unknowable to humans, is to stay in a constant state of evolution. The political scheme Morgenthau refers to – the liberal one of equilibrium of powers within a state and balance of power among nations – is what can prevent man's ethical ignorance from crystallizing into immutable, narrow-minded dogmas. The option suggested by Morgenthau envisages *prudence* as a basis for political science and action. Indeed, limited knowledge recommends moderation both in moral reasoning and in the conduct of foreign policy. Given the factual reality of the choices that are necessarily required by politics, Morgenthau scales down the value of what is claimed – and occasionally simply posited – as 'scientific' knowledge: political leaders should not give up political creativity in exchange for mechanical rules of behavior. His work is intended for policymakers, not for those who sit comfortably in the ivory towers of academies and research institutions. For these men and women, a prudent style of thought and action is the sole answer to the complexity and contingency of politics.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Micòl Beseghi, Lelio Pallini, and Mario Tesini for their several helpful suggestions.

---

## ORCID iD

Lorenzo Zambarnardi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3232-5320>

## Notes

1. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965). On Morgenthau's critique of American military rationalism during the Vietnam War see Lorenzo Zambarnardi, 'The Impotence of Power: Morgenthau's Critique of American Intervention in Vietnam', *Review of International Studies*, 37, 2011, pp. 1347–9.
2. Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, 8(1), 1969, p. 16.
3. For example, he radically changed his view on the possibility of a limited nuclear war from accepting this option (see Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Has Atomic War Really Become Impossible?', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 12, 1956, pp. 7-9) to rejecting it (see Hans J. Morgenthau, 'The Four Paradoxes of Nuclear Strategy', *American Political Science Review*, 58(1), 1964, pp. 23–35).
4. From this viewpoint, my argument is consistent with Christoph Frei's interpretation of Morgenthau's work as a 'strategy of limitation'. See Christoph Frei, 'Politics among Nations: Revisiting a Classic', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 30(1), 2016, p. 43. I would merely add that it is a strategy based on human beings' epistemological and axiological limits.
5. Hans J. Morgenthau, 'The Escape from Power', in Hans J. Morgenthau (ed.) *The Decline of Democratic Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 312.
6. Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Bernard Johnson's Interview with Hans J. Morgenthau', in Kenneth W. Thompson (ed.) *Truth and Tragedy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984) pp. 365–9. On the European origins of Morgenthau's thought see Christoph Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), Oliver Jütersonke, *Morgenthau, Law and Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
7. On this topic see Felix Rösch, *Power, Knowledge, and Dissent in Morgenthau's Worldview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), especially chapters 1 and 3.
8. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, pp. 3–4.
9. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Political Theory and International Affairs: Hans J. Morgenthau on Aristotle's The Politics*, ed. Anthony F. Lang (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), p. 15.
10. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, pp. 215–6.
11. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, pp. 129–30.
12. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. 95.
13. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. 96.
14. Friedrich A. von Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1952).
15. For an exception see Alexander Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
16. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. 126.
17. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. 132.
18. For a historical review of the (negative) influence of the Newtonian model on social sciences, see Bernard Cohen, 'Newton and the Social Sciences, with Special Reference to Economics, or, the Case of the Missing Paradigm', in Philip Mirowski (ed.) *Natural Images in Economic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 55–90.
19. See also Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Common Sense and Theories', in Hans J. Morgenthau (ed.) *Truth and Power: Essays of a Decade, 1960-70* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1970), pp. 245–6.

- 
20. As Christoph Frei has shown, many arguments of Morgenthau's critique of scientism are a by-product of his critical view of legal positivism, the dominant approach in German universities in the 1920s, Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau*, pp. 115–20. On the roots of Morgenthau's epistemology see also Rösch, *Power, Knowledge, and Dissent in Morgenthau's Worldview*, pp. 75–106.
  21. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, pp. 142–3.
  22. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. 141. It must be noted that Morgenthau was aware that macroscopic objects do not display quantum properties. See Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. 133.
  23. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, pp. 135, 138–9. For a thorough examination of uncertainty in Morgenthau and, more generally, on classical realism see Patrick Porter, 'Taking Uncertainty Seriously: Classical Realism and National Security', *European Journal of International Security*, 1(2), 2016, pp. 239–60.
  24. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 4. Emphasis added.
  25. Hartmut Behr, "'Common Sense,'" Thomas Reid, and Realist Epistemology in Hans J. Morgenthau', *International Politics*, 50(6), 2013, p. 762. Not coincidentally, Ole Wæver referred to the 'twelve misleading pages on "six principles of political realism"', see Ole Wæver, 'Figures of International Thought: Introducing Persons Instead of Paradigms', in Iver B. Neumann and Ole Wæver (eds) *The Future of International Relations: Masters in the Making?* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 11.
  26. Richard Ned Lebow, 'Hans Morgenthau and *The Purpose of American Politics*', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 30(1), 2016, p. 58.
  27. As noted, Morgenthau's theory is 'scientific' in the sense of *Geisteswissenschaften* of the German academy. On this point see Seán Molloy, *The Hidden History of Realism* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), p. 148; Felix Rösch, 'Crisis, Values, and the Purpose of Science', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 30, 2016, pp. 29–30.
  28. See, for example, Hans Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy for the US* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1969), pp. 140–4, where he refers to *Scientific Man* for criticizing US military policy, especially concepts such as 'diplomatic bargaining', the 'strategy of conflict', and, more generally, 'quantification'.
  29. See, for example, Mark Chou, 'Morgenthau, the Tragic: On Tragedy and the Transition from Scientific Man to Politics among Nations', *Telos*, 157, 2011, pp. 109–28.
  30. Jan Willem Honig, 'Totalitarianism and Realism: Hans Morgenthau's German Years', in Benjamin Frankel (ed.) *Roots of Realism* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), pp. 283–313.
  31. James P. Speer II, 'Hans Morgenthau and the World State', in *World Politics*, 20(2), 1968, p. 213.
  32. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1967), p. 10.
  33. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 14.
  34. See, for example, William Bain, 'Deconfusing Morgenthau: Moral Inquiry and Classical Realism Reconsidered', *Review of International Studies*, 26(3), 2000, pp. 445–64; Richard N. Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests, and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 236–42; William E. Scheuerman, *Hans Morgenthau* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 59–65, 179–92.
  35. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1967), pp. 9–10.
  36. See, for example, Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, pp. 175–8.
  37. Hans J. Morgenthau, 'The Problem of the National Interest', in Hans J. Morgenthau (ed.) *Dilemmas of Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 85.

- 
38. Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Purpose of American Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), pp. 8–9.
  39. See, for example, Hartmut Behr and Felix Rösch, ‘The Ethics of Anti-hubris in the Political Philosophy of International Relations: Hans J. Morgenthau’, in Jodok Troy (ed.) *Religion and the Realist Tradition. From Political Theology to International Relations Theory and Back* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 111–28; Seán Molloy, ‘Aristotle, Epicurus, Morgenthau and the Political Ethics of the Lesser Evil’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 5(1), 2009, pp. 94–112; Douglas Klusmeyer, ‘Beyond Tragedy: Hannah Arendt and Hans Morgenthau on Responsibility, Evil and Political Ethics’, *International Studies Review*, 11(2), 2009, pp. 332–51; Scheuerman, *Hans Morgenthau*, pp. 40–69; Nicholas Rengger, ‘Realism, Tragedy, and the Anti-Pelagian Imagination in International Political Thought’, in Michael C. Williams (ed.) *Realism Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 118–36.
  40. Robert Good spoke of ‘Morgenthau’s transcendentalism’, see Robert C. Good, ‘National Interest and Political Realism: Niebuhr’s Debate, with Morgenthau and Kennan’, *Journal of Politics*, 22(4), 1960, pp. 611–6.
  41. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1967), p. 10.
  42. On the influence of Nietzsche on Morgenthau see Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau*, pp. 99–113.
  43. Morgenthau, ‘Bernard Johnson’s Interview’, p. 363.
  44. That is not meant to suggest that Morgenthau was a pluralist theorist. He is a pluralist from a normative – but not sociological – viewpoint.
  45. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Human Rights & Foreign Policy* (New York: Council on Religion and International Affairs, 1979), p. 4 and Hans J. Morgenthau [revised by Kenneth W. Thompson and W. David Clinton], *Politics among Nations* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2006), p. 265.
  46. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. 101.
  47. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1948), pp. 126–7.
  48. On Morgenthau’s idea of the balance of power at the international level see Seán Molloy, ‘“Cautious Politics”: Morgenthau and Hume’s Critiques of the Balance of Power’, *International Politics*, 50(6), 2013, pp. 775–80.
  49. For a general interpretation of realism as a polemical concept see Nicolas Guilhot, ‘Portrait of the Realist as a Historian: On Anti-whiggism in the History of International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 21(1), 2015, pp. 3–26. This thesis is supported in the case of Morgenthau by his decision to publish a collected paper edition of his works in German under the title of ‘Realism as revolt against historical optimism’. See Hartmut Behr and Felix Rösch, ‘Contextualization of “The Concept of the Political”’, in Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Concept of the Political* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 23.
  50. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1948), p. 440. The concept of ‘interest defined in terms of power’ is the second of the six principles of realism, which Morgenthau added in the second edition of *Politics among Nations* on Alfred Knopf’s suggestion. Morgenthau’s previous discussion of states’ interests was framed around the more general concept of the national interest. See Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘The Primacy of the National Interest’, *American Scholar*, 18(2), 1949, pp. 207–12; Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘The Mainsprings of American Foreign Policy: The National Interest vs. Moral Abstractions’, *American Political Science Review*, 44(4), 1950, pp. 833–54. For a review of the criticisms raised by Morgenthau’s formulation of the national interest see Cornelia Navari, ‘Hans Morgenthau and the National Interest’, *Ethics & International Affairs*, 30(1), 2016, pp. 47–54.
  51. Robert W. Tucker, ‘Prof. Morgenthau’s Theory of Political “Realism”’, *American Political Science Review*, 46(1), 1952, pp. 214–24; Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), p. 147; Stanley Hoffmann, *Primacy or World Order: American Foreign Policy since the Cold War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), p. 133.

- 
52. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1967), pp. 8–9.
  53. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1967), p. 9.
  54. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1948), p. 193. See also Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘The Military Displacement of Politics’, in *The Decline of Democratic Politics*, pp. 335–6.
  55. Hans J. Morgenthau, *American Foreign Policy: A Critical Examination* (London: Methuen & Co, 1952), published in the United States in 1951 under the title *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), p. 116.
  56. Véronique Pin-Fat remarked that the ‘metaphysics of the national interest’ allegedly turned the nation-state into a mystical entity ushering in even greater dangers than utopianism. See Veronique Pin-Fat, ‘The Metaphysics of the National Interest and the “Mysticism” of the Nation-state: Reading Hans J. Morgenthau’, *Review of International Studies*, 31, 2005, pp. 217–36.
  57. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1967), p. 10.
  58. Herbert Butterfield, ‘Global Good and Evil: The Moderate Cupidity of Everyman’, in *Truth and Tragedy*, p. 202.
  59. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1967), p. 10.
  60. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1948), pp. 195–6.
  61. Bain, ‘Deconfusing Morgenthau’, p. 460.
  62. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1948), pp. 439–40.
  63. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, p. 203.

## Author biography

Lorenzo Zambarnardi is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Bologna. He is the author of the monograph *I limiti della potenza. Etica e politica nella teoria internazionale di Hans J. Morgenthau* (2010). His work has been published in the *European Journal of International Relations*, *History of European Ideas*, *International Political Sociology*, *Political Studies Review*, *Review of International Studies*, and *The Washington Quarterly*.