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Author(s): Robert G. Gilpin

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The richness of the tradition of political realism

Robert G. Gilpin

What do the following scholars have in common: Kenneth Waltz, Robert Keohane, Stephen Krasner, Robert W. Tucker, George Modelski, Charles Kindleberger, and the present writer? Very little, you might say, except perhaps that they have all written on international relations from a rather disparate set of professional and political perspectives. How wrong you are, according to Richard Ashley. They are all card-carrying members of an insidious and rather dangerous conspiracy that, like Socrates, is indoctrinating the youth (read graduate students) in false and dangerous ways of thinking. And Ashley, like Karl Popper, E. P. Thompson, and other crusaders against nefarious doctrines before him, seeks to expose their intellectual treachery for the evil that it is.

The heinous and common crime of these perverters of the next generation of graduate students in international relations is “neorealism.” This felony may go under other names as well: modern realism, new realism, and structural realism. And, although the purveyors of this false doctrine may clothe themselves in the name and language of the *classical* realism of Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger, and others, they have in fact, according to Ashley, betrayed even the teachings of the venerable realist tradition.

One does not know whether to be bemused or downright scandalized by Ashley’s own orrery of confused, misleading, and perplexing propositions. On the one hand, I am flattered to be placed in such distinguished company and to be jointly credited with having had any influence whatsoever on the anarchy of international relations (I mean here the discipline, not the object of study itself). On the other, I feel helpless before my accuser because I am not sure precisely what crime it is that I and my fellow defendants have actually committed. Although Ashley tells us in section 1a that “neorealism . . . is a progressive scientific redemption of classical realist scholarship,” he never once informs us of the precise nature of our crime: there is nowhere in the whole indictment a definition of “neorealism.” It is, therefore, im-

possible to know why such a seemingly motley crew as the one he has assembled should be labeled—libeled?—as neorealist. It might have helped if, when describing our alleged lapses from the classical heritage of realism, Ashley had defined realism itself. But although we are all charged with having betrayed the realist heritage, at no time does he tell us what that heritage actually is. As a result, I do not even know why we are all called “realists,” much less “neo.”

This absence of definition and the density of Ashley’s prose present serious problems in coming to terms with his argument. Furthermore, Ashley’s method of argumentation makes it exceptionally difficult to respond to his specific points. For example, because we are all alleged to have committed the same crime, quotations from different authors are thrown together to support various specific charges in the overall indictment. Thus, Waltz may be quoted to support one specific charge, Krasner another, and Gilpin yet a third. That Waltz and Krasner should be held accountable for the foibles of Gilpin does not seem to concern the self-appointed Kafkaesque prosecutor. Although I would be the last to deny that schools of thought exist, it is incumbent upon the categorizer and critic to define rather carefully what constitutes the common ground. In the case in point, it is true that the named individuals do hold certain ideas in common, but they also differ importantly on many of the very points Ashley treats. Ashley fails to consider whether the points of agreement or those of disagreement are the more fundamental.

This problem may be illustrated by a brief consideration of Waltz’s and my own last books. In his *Theory of International Relations*, Waltz employs a theoretical framework that is, to use Brian Barry’s useful formulation, essentially “sociological”: Waltz starts with the international system and its structural features in order to explain certain aspects of the behavior of individual states.¹ My *War and Change in World Politics* emphasizes the opposite approach, namely, that of economic or rational choice theory: I start with individual state actors and seek to explain the emergence and change of international systems.² In my judgment, neither approach is intrinsically superior to the other, given our present state of knowledge; the utility of one method or the other depends upon what the scholar is attempting to explain. I find it inexplicable, however, that Ashley argues that these two contrasting methods are both structuralist and somehow identical. But, then, in Ashley’s orrery, things are seldom what they seem.

A far more fundamental problem is the basic strategy of Ashley’s polemic (the term “polemic” is his, and richly deserved). The strategy works as follows. First, he equates neorealism with a series of particular philosophical positions. Next, he analyzes in turn each position as a surrogate for neorealism.

1. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Relations* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

2. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

And, finally, employing a ready-made set of standard philosophical criticisms, he dispatches each surrogate and with it its alleged neorealist adherents. Thus, all neorealists are at once structuralists, physicalists, statisticians, utilitarians, positivists, determinists, and, by virtue of being all these other things, totalitarians and imperialists as well. If Ashley finds a statement by a neorealist that happens not to mesh with one of these philosophical positions, rather than assuming that perhaps the "neorealist" writer does not in fact ascribe to the position in question, Ashley proceeds to accuse the individual of apostasy. One is enmeshed in a Catch-22.

Speaking of philosophy and the clarity that its ancient Greek inventors hoped it would bring to our thinking, what is an accused to make of the following: "For eschatological discourse (evident in phenomenology, ethno-methodology, and some hermeneutical sciences) the objective truth of the discourse lies within and is produced by the discourse itself" (section 2c). Unfortunately, *International Organization* failed to send an English translation with the original text. Therefore, although I am sure that this statement and many like it throughout the article are meaningful to Ashley, I have no idea what it means. It is this needless jargon, this assault on the language, that gives us social scientists a bad name. More seriously, because of the opacity of much of Ashley's prose, I frequently could not follow his argument. (For this reason, if I fail to respond to some of Ashley's more telling points, it is not that I am deliberately avoiding them but rather that I failed to understand them.)

I have been asked to respond to Ashley's criticisms of neorealism because my own name has been attached to his bill of particulars. I do so reluctantly for several reasons. In the first place, I certainly cannot presume to speak for the other defendants. Second, I cannot recall that I have ever described myself as a realist, although I readily admit that I have been profoundly influenced by such realist thinkers as Thucydides, Hans Morgenthau, and E. H. Carr, and have no particular objection to the appellation. But I have also been strongly influenced by Marxist and liberal writers as well. If pressed I would describe myself as a liberal in a realist world and frequently even in a world of Marxist class struggle.

With these caveats in mind I would like to address several issues raised by Ashley's attack. Prior to doing so, however, I shall discuss what I consider to be the essence of realism. Let me state at the outset that, whatever other crimes neorealists may have committed as a group, they have not, as Ashley avers, abandoned the fundamental premises of realist thought.

The nature of political realism

I believe that political realism must be seen as a philosophical disposition and set of assumptions about the world rather than as in any strict sense a

“scientific” theory. Although a realist perspective may give rise to testable hypotheses and more systematic theories, political realism itself, as Richard Rosecrance once aptly put it, is best viewed as an attitude regarding the human condition. Unlike its polar opposite, idealism, realism is founded on a pessimism regarding moral progress and human possibilities.

From this perspective, all realist writers—neoclassical, structural, or what have you—may be said to share three assumptions regarding political life. The first is the essentially conflictual nature of international affairs. As Thomas Hobbes told his patron, the 2nd earl of Devonshire, and realist writers have always attempted to tell those who would listen, “it’s a jungle out there.” Anarchy is the rule; order, justice, and morality are the exceptions. The realist need not believe that one must always forego the pursuit of these higher virtues, but realists do stress that in the world as it is, the final arbiter of things political is power. All moral schemes will come to naught if this basic reality is forgotten.

The second assumption of realism is that the essence of social reality is the group. The building blocks and ultimate units of social and political life are not the individuals of liberal thought nor the classes of Marxism (although in certain circumstances “class” may in fact be the basis of group solidarity). Realism, as I interpret it, holds that the foundation of political life is what Ralf Dahrendorf has called “conflict groups.”³ This is another way of saying that in a world of scarce resources and conflict over the distribution of those resources, human beings confront one another ultimately as members of groups, and not as isolated individuals. *Homo sapiens* is a tribal species, and loyalty to the tribe for most of us ranks above all loyalties other than that of the family. In the modern world, we have given the name “nation-state” to these competing tribes and the name “nationalism” to this form of loyalty. True, the name, size, and organization of the competing groups into which our species subdivides itself do alter over time—tribes, city-states, kingdoms, empires, and nation-states—due to changes in economic, demographic, and technological factors. Regrettably, however, the essential nature of intergroup conflict does not.

The third assumption that I believe characterizes realist thinking is the primacy in all political life of power and security in human motivation. As Thucydides put it, men are motivated by honor, greed, and, above all, fear.⁴ This is not to say that power and security are the sole or even the most important objectives of mankind; as a species we prize beauty, truth, and goodness. Realism does not deny the importance of these other values, although particular realists may. (Nonrealists may as well—realists, after all, do not have a monopoly on vice.) What the realist seeks to stress is that all

3. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).

4. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Modern Library, 1951), p. 44.

these more noble goals will be lost unless one makes provision for one's security in the power struggle among social groups.

Given a realism so defined, are the neorealists as ignoble a band of apostates as Ashley would have us believe? In answering this question, I shall discuss only those criticisms that I think lie at the heart of Ashley's case. First, I consider the criticism that the scientific concerns of the neorealists somehow violate the more practical spirit of the classical realists. What I propose to show in this connection, and throughout this essay, is that Ashley has a very narrow and constricted comprehension of the variety and richness of realist thought.

The issue of methodological differences

According to Ashley, a major difference between classical and new realists is methodological. The former, we are told, are intuitive in their approach; they remain close to the actual practice of statecraft. In contrast, the neorealists are said to objectify political life and improperly seek to make international relations into a social science. In doing so, however, the new realists, Ashley charges, have abandoned and lost what was most important in the older realism, namely, a respect for diplomatic practice.

Again we run into the critical problem that Ashley does not define his terms, and his argument takes on that closed-loop quality that defies understanding or refutation. If "classical" realists are the members of the realist breed who are intuitive, and "neorealists" are the ones who are scientific, Ashley wins by a tautology. Yet I find realists on *both* sides of this traditionalist/scientific fence, and indeed some versatile ones jump back and forth. In fact, Ashley's quintessence of a classical realist, Hans Morgenthau, can be found at various times on both sides of this methodological issue. The same can be said of most new realists as well. But for the sake of argument, let us consider the several individuals whom Ashley would surely have to call classical realists.

In my judgment, there have been three great realist writers; it is difficult for me to conceive that anyone would deny them inclusion in the tradition. They are Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Carr. (Parenthetically, for such a learned scholar, Ashley holds an amazingly narrow and time-bound conception of the realist tradition.) One finds in each of these writers both intuitive and scientific elements. For example, Thucydides' intuitive insights into state behavior were indeed profound. In Ashley's terms, one could say that he was a classical realist interested in state practice. Yet, as classicists point out, Thucydides was greatly influenced by Greek science and in fact took his method of analysis from it; one should not forget that he is heralded as the first *scientific* historian (and, I would add, the first scientific student of international relations as well). Or take Machiavelli who was, if anything,

an observer of state practice but is by most accounts credited as being the first true political *scientist*. As for Carr, the opening chapter of *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939*, cries out for a *science* of international relations in order to overcome the problem of war and to institute a mechanism of peaceful change.⁵ If these three writers, spanning the millennia and combining both intuitive and scientific elements in their thinking, are not “classical” realists by anyone’s definition, then I do not know who is. And if they are, then Ashley gives too much credit, or discredit, to the new realists as the first realists wanting to put realism on a more scientific footing. In fact, contrary to Ashley, realism in all historical epochs is characterized by its effort to ground the “science” of international relations on the realities of diplomatic “practice.”

In this connection, the case of Hans Morgenthau is especially interesting, particularly because he is Ashley’s prime example of a classical realist. In his superb *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, Morgenthau clearly does fit Ashley’s very narrow conception of the realist tradition.⁶ The book is brilliant in its exposition of the realist’s pessimistic view of the human condition, a judgment that Morgenthau saw confirmed as he observed the failure of the liberal democracies to understand the role of power in the world and to stand together against Hitler before it was too late. But how is one to characterize the Morgenthau who wrote in *Politics among Nations*, first published two years later in 1948, the following: “Political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by *objective* laws that have their roots in human nature”?⁷ Surely, this Morgenthau would have to be cast into that outer circle of Ashley’s *Inferno* reserved for the likes of neorealist objectifiers. (I suspect that the more intuitive Morgenthau was led astray by his Chicago brethren who, beginning with that remarkably creative idealist Quincy Wright and others in the 1920s and 1930s, had been seeking to fashion a science of international relations. Like Ashley, I too prefer the earlier and intuitive Morgenthau.)

It is no doubt true that the new realists are more self-consciously scientific than their classical realist mentors. They do seek to apply social theory to an understanding of international affairs. But, then, so do almost all contemporary schools of international relations. At the same time, however, most, if not all, so-called neorealists also have a healthy respect for practice and intuition. Thus Ashley’s notion of a fundamental disjuncture between classical and new realism simply does not hold up under close examination. The realist tradition, for whatever it is worth, is an old one. As distinguished as they are, Morgenthau, Herz, and their contemporaries did not, as Ashley

5. Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1951).

6. Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

7. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 4, emphasis added.

appears to assume, begin it. Within that venerable tradition is far greater room for methodological diversity than is dreamt of in Ashley's philosophy.

The role of economic factors

I must confess that Ashley's second alleged difference between what he calls classical realism and the new realism astounds me. It is that the former were uninterested in economic matters whereas the latter are enamored of them. The reason for this contrast, he further argues, is the dual crisis of realism and the world capitalist economy. In my judgment, Ashley's comprehension of these matters is greatly flawed and reveals a superficial understanding of realist thought.

If by "classical" realists one means Morgenthau, John Herz, or Henry Kissinger, then Ashley is most certainly correct. There is an absence of economic concerns in the work of all three scholars. Writing largely during the height of the Cold War, they primarily focused their concerns on national security. The new realists, on the other hand, have been motivated in part by a desire to counter this limitation of postwar realism and to apply the fundamental insights of the realist tradition to the issues that burst on the world scene as the Cold War seemingly abated in the 1970s, and when issues of trade, money, and foreign investment moved to the fore. But Ashley's characterization of this shift in the focus of realism and the reasons for it once again displays his historical myopia.

The new realists may best be seen, I believe, as returning to the roots of the realist tradition. In all historical epochs, realist thinkers have focused on the economic dimensions of statecraft. Thus, Thucydides' *History* can be read as an examination of the impact of a profound commercial revolution on a relatively static international system. The expansion of trade, the monetization of traditional agrarian economies, and the rise of new commercial powers (especially Athens and Corinth), as he tells us, transformed 5th-century Greek international politics and laid the basis for the great war that eviscerated Greek civilization. Everything—well, almost everything—that the new realists find intriguing in the interaction of international economics and politics can be found in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*: an expanding, interdependent "world" economy; the political use of economic leverage, i.e., the Megara Decree; and even conflict over energy resources, in this case the wheat to fuel men's bodies. These and other economic factors enter into all aspects of Thucydides' analysis of the war and its causes. In spirit and substance he may be said to have been a political economist—perhaps the first—and almost all realists have followed him in this appreciation of the intimate connection between international politics and international economics.

Other examples of the realist concern with economic matters are readily

available. Take, for example, the mercantilists of the early modern period. As Jacob Viner tells us, for these realists the pursuit of power and the pursuit of wealth were indistinguishable.⁸ Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries national interest was identified with and depended upon the achievement of a trade and balance-of-payments surplus. If one wanted to play the game of nations one needed gold and silver to pay for the newly created professional armies of the emergent nation-states and to finance an increasingly expensive foreign policy. Or what about those other realist thinkers, Alexander Hamilton and his disciples in the German Historical School, who identified national power with industrialization and economic self-sufficiency? Perhaps a rather unsavory lot, but realists nonetheless. And then there is my second-favorite realist after Thucydides, E. H. Carr, who lays great stress on economic power and economic variables in his classic work in the realist tradition.

To be autobiographical for a moment, this alleged neorealist found in Carr's work one of the greatest inspirations for his own scribblings in the field. He incorporated Carr's analysis of the relationship of international economics and politics into his own work on the subject. In short, contrary to Ashley's allegations, economic aspects of international relations have always been a major concern of realist writers.

From the perspective of this long tradition of realist writings on the intimate connection between international politics and economics, the absence of a similar interest on the part of Ashley's "classical" realists is what is noteworthy and requires explanation. For it was they who abandoned an important component of the mainstream realist tradition. One finds, for example, a scant few pages in Morgenthau on economic imperialism and the economic base of national power. Although he does draw a comparison between realist and economic modes of analysis, as Ashley points out, this is rather misleading; whereas Morgenthau's realism focuses on the state as actor, economic analysis is based on the individual actor or coalition of actors. (The quotation from Morgenthau is curious in this regard because it is contrary to Ashley's point that classical realists were uninterested in economics.) As for Kissinger, it can truly be said that as scholar and statesman he was almost completely innocent of economic interests or understanding. Indeed, the early postwar generation of American realists, despite their other virtues, had their eyes fixed so firmly on the power struggle between the superpowers that they overlooked the economic relations beneath the flux of political relations.

The "rediscovery," if that is the right term, by the new realists of the economic component of international affairs was a response to the surfacing of these economic factors in the 1970s. It was not, as Ashley suggests, due to a crisis in realist thought itself, a crisis somehow intrinsically related to the crisis of world capitalism. On the contrary, realist writers tend to believe

8. Jacob Viner, "Power versus Plenty as Objectives of Foreign Policy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *World Politics* 1 (October 1948), pp. 1-29.

that their general perspective on the relationship of economics and politics provides a much better explanation of what has transpired over the past decade or so, and of the reasons for the crisis of the world economy, than do those of their liberal and Marxist ideological rivals.

The essential argument of most realists with respect to the nature and functioning of the international economy, I would venture to say, is that the international political system provides the necessary framework for economic activities. The international economy is not regarded as an autonomous sphere, as liberals argue, nor is it in itself the driving force behind politics, as the Marxists would have us believe. Although economic forces are real and have a profound effect on the distribution of wealth and power in the world, they always work in the context of the political struggle among groups and nations. When the distribution of power and international political relations change, corresponding changes may be expected to take place in global economic relations. Thus, for Carr, the open and expanding world economy of the 19th century rested on British power and interest, and when the *Pax Britannica* was undermined in the latter part of the century by the redistribution of power toward nonliberal states, corresponding economic changes were set in motion that eventually led to the collapse of the liberal world economy.

Ashley's neorealists, including the present writer, have made a similar analysis of the contemporary world economic crisis, in terms of the rise and decline of so-called hegemonic powers. Unfortunately the use of this concept of hegemony and its economic implications have spread as much confusion as light. In particular, the concept has inspired rather oversimplified analyses of the relationship between political hegemony and a liberal international economy. As others have associated me with views to which I do not subscribe, I would like to make clear my own position on this relationship.

As I argue in *War and Change in World Politics*, there is no *necessary* connection between political hegemony and economic liberalism. Historically, in fact, hegemony, or political domination, has been associated with the command economies of empires: why create an imperial system in the first place, if it is not to take control of other economies and exploit them to one's own advantage? The close association between political hegemony and economic liberalism in the modern world began with the political and economic rise of Great Britain. Britain was the most efficient producer of tradeable goods for world markets; its leaders, a liberal, middle class elite, judged the promotion of an open world economy to be in their national interest. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that both political hegemony and economic efficiency are necessary ingredients for a nation to promote a liberal world economy. For the first time in the history of the world these two crucial elements came together in the guise of the *Pax Britannica* and Britain's global industrial supremacy.

Nor does it follow that the decline of hegemony will lead inevitably to the

collapse of a liberal world economy, although the dominant liberal power's decline does, in my judgment, greatly weaken the prospects for the survival of a liberal trading system. This was most certainly the case for the British-centered world economy and may very well be the fate of our own. But what eventually happens depends also, I believe, on factors both economic and political. I shall only discuss the latter, as the more relevant, in the present context. It should be obvious, however, that certain economic aspects of the situation, such as the rate of economic growth or the complementarity of trading interests, are also of great importance in the preservation of economic liberalism.

As I have argued, a liberal international economy rests on three political foundations.⁹ The first is a dominant *liberal* hegemonic power or, I would also stress, liberal powers able and willing to manage and enforce the rules of a liberal commercial order. The second is a set of common economic, political, and security interests that help bind liberal states together. And the third is a shared ideological commitment to liberal values. These three elements constitute what I called above the political framework for the economic system. Thus, since the end of the Second World War, American global hegemony, the anti-Soviet alliance, and a Keynesian, welfare-state ideology have cemented together economic relations among the three principal centers of industrial power outside the Soviet bloc—the United States, Japan, and Western Europe.

It was on the basis of this conceptualization of the relationship between international economics and politics that I and a number of other “neorealists” were highly skeptical of the argument of the more extreme exponents of interdependence theory. Their projections into the indefinite future of an increasingly interdependent world, in which nation-states and tribal loyalties (read nationalism) would cease to exist, seemed to us to be a misreading of history and social evolution. Such theorizing assumed the preeminence and autonomy of economic and technological forces over all others in effecting political and social change. Thus, it neglected the political base on which this interdependent world economy rested and, more importantly, the political forces that were eroding these political foundations.

For many realists, therefore, the crisis of the world economy of which Ashley writes was at least in part a consequence of the erosion of these political foundations: the relative decline of American hegemony, the increasing strains within the anti-Soviet alliance, and the waning of the commitment to liberal ideology. Contrary to Ashley's view that the crisis of the world economy somehow represents a challenge to realism, it is precisely the traditional insights of realism that help us to explain the crisis and the ongoing retreat from an interdependent world economy. The political cement of the economic system is dissolving with the eclipse of American hegemony

9. Gilpin, *War and Change*, esp. p. 129.

and related political changes. However, and this is a point that I wish to emphasize, whether or not this deterioration of the world economy continues does not depend solely on structural factors. Market forces and skillful diplomacy do matter in the eventual outcome. Realists have sought to add the missing political dimensions to other analyses of the interdependent world economy.

Other crimes and serious misdemeanors

Scattered throughout Ashley's article are assorted other indictments of the new realists, especially their alleged departures from the views of classical realists. Among these apostasies are those of statism, structural determinism, objectivism, ethical neutrality, reification of the state, and youthful over-exuberance. (As one who has entered his second half-century, I especially liked this last charge.) Under Ashley's close scrutiny no one turns out to be what they seem or thought themselves to be—including, I suspect, the classical realists for whom Ashley claims to speak and whose besmirched honor he seeks to uphold. They would no doubt be as perplexed as I am regarding Ashley's characterization of their views (and everyone else's for that matter).

It may very well be that particular new realists, including me, have committed one or more of the stated crimes. I cannot answer for all of us, and I readily confess that over a span of nearly three decades of professional life my own ideas on many subjects have changed. I shall continue to try, however, as best as I can, to deal with Ashley's criticisms of new realists as a collectivity.

According to Ashley, the new realists, in contrast to his classical variety, are "statist." What does this mean? At times he seems to suggest that new realists worship the state and, therefore, are closet totalitarians. At other times he appears to mean that neorealists, unlike classical realists, believe in an unending state-centric world. I shall assume he means the latter, because it is at least a significant intellectual point whereas the former is polemical innuendo designed to scare easily corruptible graduate students away from the likes of such alleged profascists as Bob Keohane and George Modelski.

As I pointed out above, I believe that realists of all stripes accept the primacy of the group as the basic unit of political life. In international relations the group-organization of political affairs has most frequently taken the form of the state; in the modern world a particular subspecies of state, the nation-state, has predominated in political life. This does not mean, however, as Ashley alleges, that new realists necessarily believe that the state is here forever. Speaking for myself, I have argued that the modern state and the nation-state system arose due to a peculiar set of economic, technological, and other circumstances. I have argued, further, that just as the modern nation-state is a product of particular historical forces, changes in those forces could bring about the demise of the nation-state. In a changed economic

and technological environment, groups, and I emphasize the word, *groups*, might cease to believe that the nation-state continues to serve their security and other interests.

The difference between Ashley and me on this issue of the state and its future can best be understood, I believe, by quoting from an earlier article of his, also attacking the new realists. The quotation from Ashley contains two paragraphs from Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*.

For classical realists, by contrast, such a metaphysical commitment to the state and the states system is, to borrow one of Kenneth Waltz's favorite epithets, a mistaken *reification* of a principle. As discussed earlier, classical realists have their own metaphysical commitment: a commitment to a dialectical and generative balance of power scheme. In the classical realist understanding, this scheme finds expression throughout all levels and in all things of the political universe, among them the modern states system. It is constitutive of the system. The system's tensions—the ever present and contrary movement toward unity and fragmentation, for example—are read by classical realists as a particular historical manifestation of the scheme's own antinomies. But the scheme, as classical realists understand, is not to be reduced to any of the relations it generates, the modern states system included.

Indeed, if one truly grasps the scheme, as classical realists do, then one understands that history cannot be expected to come to an end in some state systemic cul-de-sac whose only exit is by the means endorsed by the system itself. If one truly grasps the scheme, then one can understand how Morgenthau can conclude his discussion of his third 'principle of political realism' by saying:

'What is true of the general character of international relations is also true of the nation state as the ultimate point of reference of contemporary foreign policy. While the realist indeed believes that interest is the perennial standard by which political action must be judged and directed, *the contemporary connection between interest and the nation state is a product of history, and is therefore bound to disappear in the course of history. Nothing in the realist position militates against the assumption that the present division of the world into nation states will be replaced by larger units of a quite different character, more in keeping with the technical potentialities and the moral requirements of the contemporary world.*

'The realist parts company with other schools of thought before the all-important question of how the contemporary world is to be transformed. The realist is persuaded that this transformation can be achieved only through the workmanlike manipulation of the perennial forces that have shaped the past and will shape the future. The realist cannot be persuaded that we can bring about the transformation by confronting a political reality that has its own laws with an abstract ideal that refuses to take those laws into account.'

Lest the point be missed: If by statism we mean a metaphysical com-

mitment to the state and the states system suspended beyond the critical force of historically grounded scholarship, then *new realism is a form of statism. Classical realism most emphatically is not.* For classical realism, the state and the states system are themselves 'abstract ideals,' and their realization in concrete form is always problematic, always contingent on the poising and counterpoising of opposing 'perennial forces' generated by an underlying balance of power scheme under the concrete circumstances of time and place. States, in other words, are 'unitary actors' only as an ideal that statesmen would strive to realize but at best only approximate when they succeed in solving the problem of balancing contesting forces which can never be assumed to cease. To say otherwise, to treat states as unitary actors pure and simple, is to engage in a *reductio ad absurdum*, a lie that the leader might tell to the people but never, if he is wise, tell to himself. As Morgenthau was fond of pointing out, to forget this is to take the politics out of the state—something that tyrants would want to do but political scientists should not.¹⁰

Ashley's interpretation of Morgenthau's interpretation of classical realism on the nature and future of the state seems to me wrong and unnecessarily complex. I read Morgenthau as simply saying the following: if the nation-state is to disappear, as in the case of earlier forms of the state (empires, city-states, and absolute monarchies), it will do so through age-old political processes and not as idealists would wish through a transcendence of politics itself. The key to his position is contained in the statement that "this transformation can only be achieved through the workmanlike manipulation of the *perennial forces* that have shaped the past and will shape the future. The realist cannot be persuaded that we can bring about the transformation by confronting a political reality that has its own *laws* with an abstract ideal that refuses to take those laws into account." (With respect to Ashley's charge that neorealists "objectify" where classical realists intuit, what could be more objectified than to talk about politics having its own laws and to allude to perennial forces?) I doubt that many new realists would use such language except perhaps in some metaphorical sense; certainly they would not use it in the highly determinist manner of Morgenthau himself.

What the latter passage from Morgenthau says, at least to me, is that if the state or the nation-state system is to be replaced by a larger political unit, it will happen through the same type of political process that has historically brought about political change. I accept that. In fact, I wrote a book whose central thesis was that despite contemporary economic and technological developments, the essential nature of the political process has not changed over the millennia. In this sense, though I do have some reservations

10. Richard K. Ashley, "Realist Dialectics: Toward a Critical Theory of World Politics" (Paper prepared for the American Political Science Association meeting, Denver, Colo., September 1982), pp. 26–28.

regarding “objective laws and perennial forces,” I consider myself a disciple of Hans Morgenthau.

With respect to Ashley’s charges that we new realists are state-centric, deny the existence of politics, and enshrine the contemporary state as here forever, perhaps three quotations from my own writing will suffice to show—putting the point in rather blunt terms—that Ashley has not done his homework and does not really know what he is talking about.

On state-centrism and the state as political actor:

The argument that the state (as herein conceived) is the principal actor in international relations does not deny the existence of other individual and collective actors. As Ernst Haas cogently put it, the actors in international relations are those entities capable of putting forth demands effectively; who or what these entities may be cannot be answered a priori (Haas, 1964, p. 84). However, the state is the principal actor in that the nature of the state and the pattern of relations among states are the most important determinants of the character of international relations at any given moment. This argument does not presume that states need always be the principal actors, nor does it presume that the nature of the state need always be the same and that the contemporary nation-state is the ultimate form of political organization. Throughout history, in fact, states and political organizations have varied greatly: tribes, empires, fiefdoms, city-states, etc. The nation-state in historical terms is a rather recent arrival; its success has been due to a peculiar set of historical circumstances, and there is no guarantee that these conditions will continue into the future. Yet it would be premature to suggest (much less declare, as many contemporary writers do) that the nation-state is dead or dying.¹¹

On politics and the political determination of state policy:

Strictly speaking, states, as such, have no interests, or what economists call “utility functions,” nor do bureaucracies, interest groups, or so-called transnational actors, for that matter. Only individuals and individuals joined together into various types of coalitions can be said to have interests. From this perspective the state may be conceived as a coalition of coalitions whose objectives and interests result from the powers and bargaining among the several coalitions composing the larger society and political elite. In the language of Brian Barry (1976, p. 159), collective choice and determination of political objectives are coalition processes (Cyert and March, 1963, p. 28).¹²

On the future of the nation-state and the possibilities of larger forms of political organization:

It is not clear, however, what the ultimate effect of contemporary mili-

11. Gilpin, *War and Change*, p. 18.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

tary and economic developments will be on the scale of political organization. The scope of nuclear warfare and the immense cost of a retaliatory force would appear to favor an enlargement of political entities. At the same time, however, an attempt to conquer a small state possessing even a very modest nuclear capability may be prohibitively expensive. Increasing economic interdependence certainly has decreased national economic autonomy. However, it has also meant that states can have access to large markets without the necessity of integrating politically and that states have increased their intervention in the economy in order to protect national values against potentially harmful external economic forces. Although the emergence of global ecological and related problems necessitates a comparable organization of human affairs, the hold of the nation-state concept on the minds of men grows ever more tenacious. The ambiguous effects of these contemporary developments may be noted in three seemingly contradictory aspects of present-day international politics: (1) the emergence of the superpower; (2) the movement toward regional integration; (3) the proliferation of new nation-states and secession movements in older nation-states. These contradictory developments suggest that the sizes and distributions of political entities in our era have yet to be determined.¹³

Of course, we "realists" know that the state does not really exist; in fact, we knew that before Graham Allison told us so. But, then, as I have written elsewhere, neither do Allison's bureaucracies, interest groups, nor even transnational actors exist for that matter.¹⁴ Only individuals really exist, although I understand that certain schools of psychology challenge even this. Only individuals *act*, even though they may act on behalf of one of these collective social entities, the most important one being the group. But Ashley is certainly correct that we (all of us, including critics of "neorealists") do write as if some particular social or political entity really does exist and acts. It is a matter of convenience and economy to do so. Thus, we speak of the *Soviets* doing such-and-such rather than listing the individual members of the Central Committee who in reality did the acting. There is certainly the danger in this practice of coming to think of the state as an actor in its own right, which has interests separate from those of its constituent members. If I have committed this fallacy of reification, I shall attempt to be more careful in the future. By the same token, however, Ashley should be more circumspect in attributing various beliefs to the very diverse collection of *individual* scholars that he labels "neorealists."

Two other issues where the new realists are said to depart from classical realism are those of "free will versus determinism" and "objectivism versus subjectivism." Classical realists, according to Ashley, were committed to the view that statesmen could change the international environment; the sub-

13. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

jective views of statesmen were, therefore, important. New realists, on the other hand, are accused of believing that objective structures, such as the number and size of states in the international system or the position of a state in the international hierarchy of states, determine the behavior of statesmen.

This contrast is absurd. No new realist that I have read argues that political structure determines all behavior. Nor does any classical realist argue that indeterminism and subjectivism rule the world. Most new realists, however, do argue, I believe it safe to say, that structure constrains and in fact powerfully influences behavior—but so do classical realists, as Ashley himself well illustrates in his long discussion of the role of the “balance of power” in classical realist thought. As the passage quoted above from Morgenthau attests, Ashley’s prime model of a classical realist believes that *perennial forces* and the *laws* of political reality always confront the statesman. No new realist has been more objectivist and determinist than this in setting forth the limits on the freedom of the statesman.

In his earlier article cited above, Ashley made his most vehement attack on the new realists in the following words: “*new realists assume the trans-historical truth, objectivity, and value neutrality of technical reason as an action orienting frame.*”¹⁵ What he appears to be saying is a criticism frequently made about all political realists, old and new, which accounts in large measure for the strong emotional attacks on realists by Ashley and many others. Many, especially among the younger generation of international scholars, abhor realism because it is believed to be an immoral doctrine at best and a license to kill, make war, and commit wanton acts of rapine at worst. Only the existence of such a belief on the part of its most vocal critics can possibly explain why realism has so frequently been subjected to highly emotional and, I personally believe, irresponsible attacks. Although Ashley, I should quickly add, has not himself been guilty of such behavior, his criticisms do give aid and comfort to those who see realists as immoral monsters.

This rap of moral neutrality bordering on immorality is obviously a difficult one to beat. Do we have a morals test for theories of international relations? I hope not. Fortunately, given the Anglo-Saxon legal tradition in which *International Organization* is published, it should not be necessary to prove one’s innocence. Still, if a charge is made and one fails to respond to it, others may tend to presume one’s guilt. For this reason, a brief defense of realism as a politically moral doctrine seems called for. In fact, I would argue that a moral commitment lies at the heart of realism, at least as I interpret it. This is not to say, however, that particular individual realists have on all occasions behaved in ways that the reader would regard as morally justified.

Since Machiavelli, if not before, two perspectives on international morality

15. Ashley, “Realist Dialectics,” p. 32, his emphases.

have attached themselves to the realist position. Machiavelli himself has variously been interpreted as sharing one perspective or the other. He has been held to be immoral, amoral, and a moralist.

The first moral perspective associated with realism is what Gordon Craig and Alexander George characterize as *vulgar* realism.¹⁶ It is the amorality, or if you prefer, the immorality, of Thucydides' "Melian Dialogue": in order to discourage further rebellions against their empire, the Athenians put the men of Melos to the sword and enslaved the women and children. It was this type of *raison d'état* behavior that the great German historian, Friedrich Meinecke, condemned in his important book, *Machiavellism*.¹⁷ This amoral version of realism, which holds that the state is supreme and unbound by any ethical principles, is not my own view of realism. Nor, I would venture to say, is it a position to which any of the new realists that Ashley so sweepingly condemns would subscribe.

There is, however, another moral position associated with political realism. As Craig and George remind us, in the early modern period realist writers sought to impose some constraints on the excesses of absolute monarchs.¹⁸ According to this interpretation of realism, states should pursue their *national interests*, not those of a particular dynasty or political party. Statesmen are admonished to carry out a foreign policy in the interest of the whole nation and not just in the selfish interests of the ruling elite. Further, it was believed that there were certain rules of prudent behavior that enabled a state both to protect its interests and at the same time to minimize international violence. Certainly Morgenthau is situated in this tradition when he concludes *Politics among Nations* with a set of "do's and don't's" for contemporary statesmen; furthermore, basing his position on these principles, Morgenthau was among the first to condemn the Vietnam War. What Morgenthau and many other realists have in common is a belief that ethical and political behavior will fail unless it takes into account the actual practice of states and the teachings of sound theory. It is this dual commitment, to practice and to theory, that sets realism apart from both idealism and the abstract theorizing that characterizes so much of the contemporary study of international relations.

I like to think, and Ashley has yet to convince me to the contrary, that the new realists, like their classical forebears, study international practice and theorize about it in part to add to the list of "do's and don't's" formulated by Thucydides, Morgenthau, and others. The new realists thus continue a tradition that political theorists call "advice to princes." For example, some have studied and advocated improvements in international regimes. Others have written on the problem of peaceful change. Still others have dealt with

16. Gordon A. Craig and Alexander L. George, *Force and Statecraft—Diplomatic Problems of Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

17. Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism; the Doctrine of *raison d'état* and Its Place in Modern History*, trans. by Douglas Scott (London: Routledge, 1957).

18. Craig and George, *Force and Statecraft*, p. 5.

the dangers of nuclear war. This advice may not be very useful and, being realists, we know that it is seldom if ever given serious attention. But to say, as Ashley does, that the new realists as a group are guilty of “moral neutrality” is as baseless as it is unfair.

This last point leads me to make a confession. Ashley is correct. I am “a closet liberal.” I do believe in the liberal values of individualism, liberty, and human rights, and I do want my country to stand for and to stand up for these things. I do believe, further, that we social scientists should study war, injustice, and, yes, even imperialism, in order to help eliminate these evils. I do have faith that knowledge as a general rule is to be preferred to ignorance. But I most certainly do not believe, as Ashley alleges, in automatic progress. On the contrary, I am not even sure that progress exists in the moral and international spheres. Indeed, there have been transient international orders that have been more benign and humane than others. I count the British and American eras of world dominance among them, despite the Opium and Vietnam wars and other abuses of power. It is, in fact, precisely this issue of automatic and evolutionary progress that divides most realists from most idealists. Whereas the latter tend to believe that technological advance, increasing economic interdependence, and the alleged emergence of a global community are transforming the nature of international relations, I for one lean toward a belief in Morgenthau’s *perennial forces* of political struggle and the limits that they place on human perfection. To me at least, this moral skepticism joined to a hope that reason may one day gain greater control over passions constitutes the essence of realism and unites realists of every generation.