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Evil Human Nature as a Necessary Assumption of the Neorealist View on International Politics

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MICHAL PARIZEK, MAR 3 2008

If men were angels, no government would be necessary. (Madison, 1970: 264)

[E]conomism is machiavellianism come of age (Strauss, 1975: 51)

In 1948, a new bible was published. *Politics Among Nations* by Hans Joachim Morgenthau, the bible of realism as it is sometimes referred to (Drulak, 2003: 57), was supposed to bring reality and empiricism into international relations, both to theory and to practice. This bible was revised by Kenneth Neil Waltz in his *Theory of International Politics* (1979), the constituting book of structural realism or neorealism (this term is used in the essay). In the book Waltz adopts a new approach to international politics, which enables him to explain the origins of wars in a more rigorous way. Furthermore, this approach allows him to relax the pre-scientific assumption about human nature, which was essential for Morgenthau and other realists. For Waltz, the structure of system, that means the fact that anarchy reigns the international politics, can itself account for wars. As Donnelly puts it, “[a]narchy can defeat even our best intentions” (Burchill et al., 2005: 37). No evil desire for power inherent to human nature is necessary any more.

This essay attempts to show that such a step, that means abandoning the assumption of wicked human nature, would in the end lead to collapse of the whole theory. In order to reveal this, a new concept of considerate/inconsiderate struggle for power is developed which enables us to understand the nature of power and relations of power in the theories of both Morgenthau and Waltz. As a matter of fact, in the world of scarce resources one cannot think of Waltz’s interest-accomplishment maximizing units (individuals or states) without assuming at the same time the desire for power in human nature. Necessary to say, in both cases of Morgenthau and Waltz, the behaviour of units is explained either with reference to individuals or to states interchangeably. This is a deliberate simplification adopted in this essay and it is based on the fact that both authors use this simplification as well. Morgenthau switches his attention between individuals and states, Waltz between firms and states. Even though this simplification does not make any difference for their arguments it is useful to be aware of it.

The restricted length of the essay determines its structure to a large extent. In order to allow enough space for the main argument, the depiction of both Morgenthau’s and Waltz’s theories is kept as concise as possible. This consequently leads to omitting those features of both approaches which are neither essential for this argument, nor for the theories themselves. Such approach is justifiable with regard to the fact that the core concepts of both approaches are well known and easily accessible in textbooks (Burchill et al., 2005: Ch. 2; Jackson and Sorensen, 2003: Ch. 3) and in works by other theorists of realism in international relations (Guzzini, 1998; Keohane, 1986). The essay consists of three chapters: the first introduces the concepts and the theory of Hans Morgenthau, the second brings the innovations suggested by Waltz. The last chapter comprises the main argument of the essay based on a new understanding of the problem of human nature and on the ideas of German philosopher Leo Strauss.

1. Morgenthau: Defining Realism

Morgenthau’s realism is concerned with many complex issues which it would be worth discussing in length, but, given the limited scope of this essay, only the method, the core concepts and the main ideas that he suggested in the

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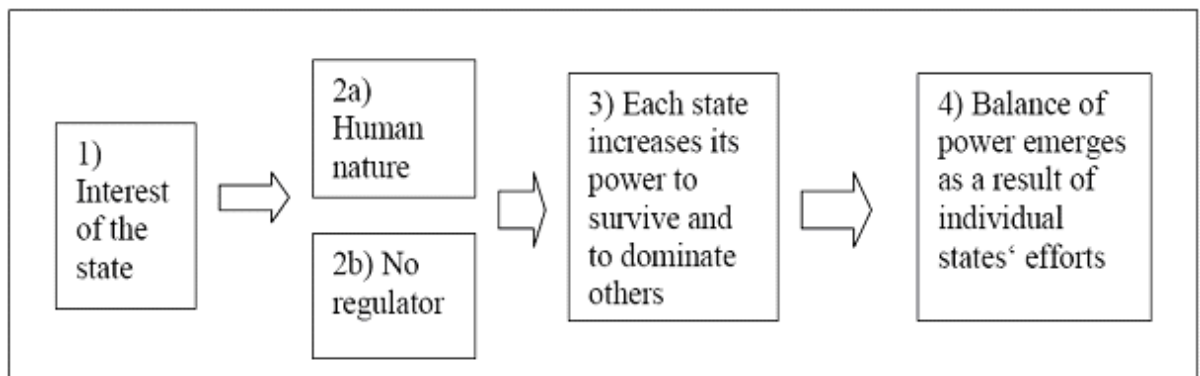
Politics Among Nations are presented here. The realist position of Morgenthau is taken here only as a point of reference for a more detailed analysis of structural realism. This does not mean that it is not necessary. On the contrary, to build a solid launch pad is a precondition for any successful jump. To do so, the essence of the realist theory is introduced at first. The explanation of war (its causes) and of the balance of power (how it emerges) is given thereafter.

The gist of the realist theory can be summarized in several points. Firstly, to avoid repetition of tragic world wars a new theory must be developed. This theory should recognize that there are no “universally valid principles” according to which people could align their interests. The world is imperfect and it “is the result of forces inherent in human nature” (Morgenthau, 2005: 3). One should seek attainable lesser evil rather than the absolute good.

Secondly, to build such a theory several principles deriving from the above statement should be adopted: these are the famous six principles of political realism. What is essential for our further discussion is that “politics ... is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature” and that states (the only political actors relevant for international politics) act to fulfil the “interest defined as power” (ibid: 4 – 5).

This means, at third, that “[i]nternational politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim.” (ibid: 29). Power is a means necessary for reaching any other objectives and, in the first place, survival. Increasing its power is therefore the ultimate goal of any state. Since power is a relation, a gain of one state is a loss for another. Within the state, conflict can be avoided because the government is able to suppress the violence. Among states, however, this is not the case. Such a situation means that for any state to avoid destruction is to balance any gain of other state by an increase of its own power. Thus, a universal balance of power emerges. The logic of main argument is summarized in the following diagram.

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The human nature and the fact that there is no regulator in the international politics (the second step of the diagram) can be identified as the causes of wars. Thus, for Morgenthau there are two reasons why wars emerge again and again. Firstly, human beings yearn for power. Only power enables them to “to live, to propagate and to dominate” (ibid: 36 – 37). These are the basic needs common to all men and also the reason why people strive for power. Pichler (1998: 192 – 194) interestingly reveals that entire concept of struggle for power is based on political philosophy of Carl Schmitt and his notion of ‘the Political’ and that without the reference to it the concept loses a lot of its alleged objectivity. The transmission mechanism from the unit-level to the state-level is based on nationalism

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which “serves as a conceptual bridge between the individual and unitary state actor.” (Guzzini, 1998: 26). Secondly, since there is no government (or other authority) in the international politics which would act as a regulator, the states tend to use violence to enforce their interests.

The third and the fourth steps in the diagram help explain the emergence of the balance of power. States seek power and this forces other states to balance this increase in order to guard their safety. According to Morgenthau “[t]he aspiration for power on the part of several nations ... leads of necessity to a configuration that is called the balance of power and to policies that aim at preserving it.” (2005: 179). Nevertheless, this does not say that conflict cannot emerge. The power is hardly to be measured and this leads politicians and even experts to miscalculations. Furthermore, the balance of power as a mechanism must be recognized as a principle at first. If it is not, as in case of Napoleonic Wars, the balance as an instrument fails (Guzzini, 1998: 28).

These are, in short, the core principles of Morgenthau’s theory presented in the Politics Among Nations. The theory has been widely criticized, both from the positions of liberalism and other streams of thought and by the ‘fellow-realists’. The most prominent of realists to revise the theory have been Kenneth Waltz who the rest of the essay concentrates on.

2. Waltz: Introducing Structure

To start with a quotation is sometimes useful:

If any book can be compared to Morgenthau’s Politics Among Nations for its paradigmatic function in the discipline of International Relation ... then it is Kenneth Waltz’s Theory of International Politics (Guzzini, 1998: 125).

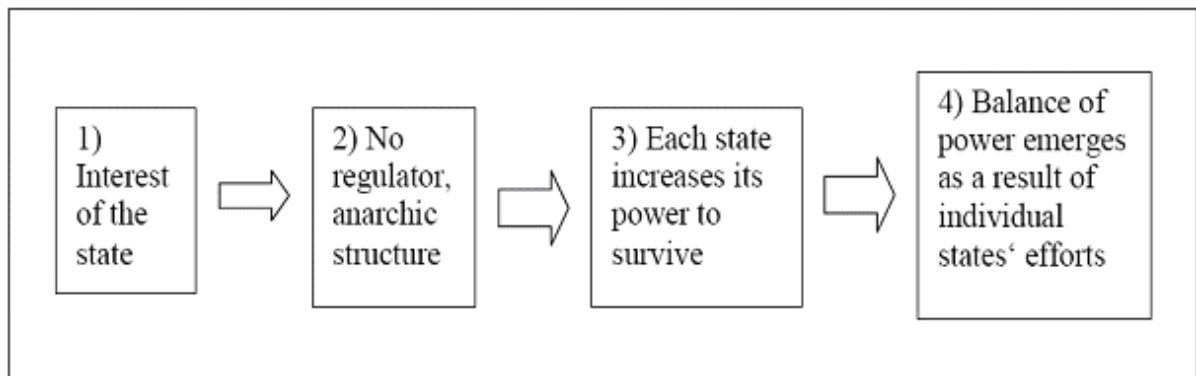
This chapter, which engages in a depiction of a neorealist position, is therefore based on the theory of Kenneth Waltz only, not on any other neorealist author. As in the case of realism, it is hardly possible to describe and explain such a complex theory in short. To achieve this aim, only the very gist of the approach is given at first. Afterwards, two concepts essential for my argument (the notion of structure and the role of human nature) are presented more comprehensively.

At the beginning, an emphasis should be put on the fact that Waltz accepts most concepts and models of behaviour suggested by Morgenthau. Nevertheless, his position differs substantially in the approach to the international politics in terms of method of investigation. Whilst the analysts of the international politics are concerned mostly with the individual and national level when seeking explanations for reality, Waltz adopts what he calls ‘systemic approach’ (Waltz, 1979: ch. 3 – 4). Why? Because one cannot explain the permanent character of international politics in the world where the units (states) change profoundly over time. Units change but the outcomes of their interactions do not. As Morgenthau puts it, the continuous struggle for power is the main feature of the system. But why do the outcomes persist if the states change so much in terms of their internal qualities? There must be another factor intervening: “[i]t is not possible to understand world politics simply by looking inside of states” (ibid: 65). In Waltz’s view, this intervening factor is the anarchic structure of international politics which, in the end, can itself account for wars. The only way to protect the world from system-wars is to maintain the balance of power. Again, the mechanism is outlined in the graph.

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The structure of the international system – in the diagram the second step – is the crucial concept of Waltz's theory. Firstly, structure is defined neither by units, nor by their behaviour. It is that aspect of international system which is obtained when one abstracts from all features peculiar to individual units and interactions among them. Secondly, in international politics, the structure is anarchic; it means that there is no authority able to regulate the struggle for power as it does happen within individual states. "Nationally, relations of authority are established. Internationally, only relations of strength result." (ibid: 112) This is, in Waltz's view, similar to how economic markets operate and how firms have to behave in order to survive. Therefore, at third, the analogy with market and profit-maximizing firm shows that the anarchic structure leads states to accumulate power, since none would guarantee their security if a more powerful states attacked them. Waltz can say that the persistent anarchy in international politics is the cause of wars emerging ever again (ibid: 66). Changes in various units' specifics do no matter since their behaviour is to a high extent determined by the structure.

For Morgenthau there are two reasons for struggle for power and consequently for wars to emerge: evil human nature and lack of authority in the international politics. However, as it is apparent from the diagram above, for Waltz the latter alone is enough. How to explain it? The answer lies in the previous paragraph. The unit's behaviour is largely determined by scarcity of resources. Under such conditions, for people who want to survive this constitutes a sufficient reason to strive for power. They enforce their interests against the will of others. In anarchy, that interest is fulfilled which is being enforced with higher power. Put together, the struggle for power emerges as a natural consequence of scarcity of resources and lack of authority able to distribute these resources in such a way as to prevent violence. No desire to dominate in human nature is necessary any more. In that sense, Waltz can say that

[n]eorealist theory ... shows that it is not necessary to assume an innate lust for power in order to account for the sometimes fierce competition that marks the international arena. (Waltz, 1988: 619 – 620)

Having discussed both the notion of structure and the role of human nature in Waltz's theory, it appears that he not only explains the origins of war but is also able to relax some pre-scientific assumptions about humane nature. However, his argument does not hold if one focuses on what the 'evilness' of human nature in his theory stands for. In the last chapter, therefore, the argument is presented that Waltz is not able to relax the assumptions unless losing the theory as a whole.

3. Evil Human Nature as a Necessary Assumption of Realist View on International Politics

At the beginning of the essay, James Madison is quoted: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." (Madison, 1970: 264). This is the essence of realist notion of human nature and Morgenthau himself refers to *The Federalist* (Morgenthau, 2005: 181) as well. In my view, however, Waltz would not agree fully. For him, the statement might be paraphrased as Even if men were angels, and at the same time had interest to pursue, a government would be absolutely necessary. In other words, anarchic structure is enough to cause wars in the world where sources for

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the fulfilment of interests are scarce. The target of this chapter, and also the main argument of the entire essay, is to show that Waltz's effort to distance his theory from the pre-scientific statement about evil human nature was not successful and that, in the end, without the assumption his theory would collapse. In order to show this, a new concept is developed at first. Then, it is applied to Waltz's theory showing the essential contradiction in it. At last, the reasons for this misunderstanding are given with reference to philosopher Leo Strauss.

In order to clarify the core of the argument, it is absolutely necessary to explain in detail what the 'evil' human nature means. For Morgenthau, there are three motives for the individual's struggle for power: "to live, to propagate and to dominate" (Morgenthau, 2005: 36 – 37). For Waltz, the third is not necessary. If the men only want to survive (meaning to live and to give birth to descendants) in the world of scarce resources, the anarchic structure will force them to fight each other. No lust for power is necessary. The difference is therefore in what Waltz calls 'animus dominandi', the desire for power (1988: 616 – 619). In my view, and this is the essence of the argument, the substance of animus dominandi is such that without it an individual, or a state, would in the world of scarce resources necessarily perish. Animus dominandi is, by definition, the relation; in particular, it is the relation of power and its distribution. In principle, power is an ability to procure an interest even against the will of others. The power, therefore, is defined as an ability to give precedence to one's own interest before the other's. The relation between power and interest is a crucial one: without interest, there, by definition, is no power. Animus dominandi, the desire for power, can be translated as a will to give precedence to one's own interest without taking any circumstances into consideration, because power is an end in itself. A concept of inconsiderate struggle for power can be developed here to account for an individual which seeks power as an end in itself. Because power as such is a cause for struggle, there is no reason for taking anything into consideration. This corresponds to Morgenthau's notion of evilness in human nature.

As the opposite, it is possible to build a concept of a considerate struggle for power that means such a struggle where power is seen only as a means for other ends. This struggle is considerate in two meanings. Firstly, one takes into consideration the fact that when his survival and his interests are secure the major motive for struggle for power is accomplished. Secondly, if one does not see power as an end in itself, he is in fact giving to the interests of others the same relevance as to his. Of course, he keeps fulfilling his own but he acknowledges theirs interests as equally justified. This corresponds to Waltz's notion of human nature without the 'lust for power'. To resume, Waltz's individual seeks power to survive and to fulfil its other interests, it's struggle for it is considerate. To the contrary, Morgenthau's individual seeks power to survive, to fulfil its interests, but also to dominate. It's struggle for it is inconsiderate.

According to Waltz's theory, an individual (and consequently a state) is led to struggle for power because it wants to accomplish its interests and because the resources for the accomplishment are scarce. However, because of the scarcity only some interests can be fulfilled, those which are enforced with highest power. Therefore, in effect, taking others' interests (even such as their survival) into consideration means foregoing some resources that were at least potentially disposable for one's own interest procurement. Being considerate ultimately means abandoning one's own interest for the sake of somebody else's interest. This means that, at least at the margin, one prefers other's interest to his own. One cannot seek power considerately without giving preference to others.

In real terms and at the international level, for example the European Union would lower its import tariffs for agricultural products and thus enable the African countries to increase their exports. This would be a case of considerable pursuit of power, because the EU, having recognized that it is enough well-off, gives at least at the margin preference to the profit of African countries before its own. For Waltz, however, this would (*ceteris paribus*) be irrational and, according to his theory, states do not do it. For him, an individual (or state) which gives preference to other's interests before its own perishes, equally as a firm which does not maximize profit perishes. Surely, Waltz does not speak about such an individual or about such states. But the concept of considerate and inconsiderate struggle for power reveals that in essence this is exactly how an individual without animus dominandi would behave. In the world of scarce resources, being considerate means being irrational. Because for Waltz irrational behaviour leads to extinction, his individuals must be inconsiderate; in other words, they must be led by the animus dominandi.

The key to the argument is that interest without power is meaningless. Possessing power means disposing tools to

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enforce interests. Without interest, there is no power. Without power, no interest can be pursued. Thus, enforcing interests equals struggling for power. Engaged words such as 'lust' cover the fact that pursuing power is absolutely neutral, neither evil nor virtuous. Power is neutral and so is struggle for it.

It has been shown that there is a major contradiction in Waltz's detachment of his theory from the assumption of evil human nature. However, there is still one task left: How to explain this confusion? German philosopher Leo Strauss could help. In his essay called *What is Political philosophy?* (Strauss, 1975), he describes the modern line of political thought – as opposed to the classical one – as the tradition starting with Machiavelli and continuing to Hobbes, Locke and others. Since Machiavelli, human nature had been evil and men's strongest motive for action has been a desire for glory and esteem. Hobbes reviews his position and states that the motivation lies in desire for power, which is morally more neutral. However, the essence is the same: men are naturally evil. This seems to be opposed by Locke according to whom people do not seek power, they only want to live peacefully and to fulfil their material interests. This appears as a major turn in the perception of human nature: from power-seeking beast to peaceful citizen seeking comfortable life. In analogy, from Morgenthau's animus dominandi-driven individual lusting for power to Waltz's rationally calculating individual seeking survival and accomplishment of its interests.

Nevertheless, Strauss explains that the substance of the nature of human beings remains the same. Only the words have changed. People still prefer their own interests to the morality and to interests of others; immorality became victorious through invention that we can substitute morality with acquisitiveness. In his words, "economism is Machiavellianism come of age" (Strauss, 1975: 51). Men are naturally evil equally in the thought of Locke as of Machiavelli. And the same applies to Morgenthau and Waltz. An interest-maximizing individual behaves in the world of scarce resources in equally evil manner as the one lusting for power.

Resuming the argument, the concept of considerate and inconsiderate struggle for power shows that an individual without animus dominandi has no place in Waltz's theory of interest-accomplishing units. Power cannot be detached from the interest for which it is used and therefore any interest fulfilment is naturally connected to lust for power. The evil human nature is in Waltz's theory replaced with emphasis on scarcity of resources, which, in his view, allows him to claim a substantial switch in the perception of human nature. Nevertheless, this argument does not hold.

Conclusion

The argument has shown that if one adopts Waltz's notion of rationally calculating states, an assumption inherent to entire realist tradition (Keohane, 1986: 7), then it is not possible to reject the classical realists' assumption of evilness in human nature if one wants to explain why wars occur. Kenneth Waltz, as opposed to Morgenthau and other scholars, adopts a more rigorous approach to the study of international politics based on the examination of structural aspect of the system. This, in his view, allows him to relax the pre-scientific assumption about evilness of human nature. The essay argues, however, that the more detailed analysis of what the nature of this evilness really means, reveals that in the world of scarce resources this step cannot be made without breaking another assumption of interest-fulfilment maximizing actors. In this point Waltz's theory is contradictory. To realize this contradiction a new concept of considerate/inconsiderate struggle for power is created which enables us to tackle the confusion and ambiguity of terms used in both realist and neorealist thought. The inconsiderate struggle for power is the only possibility for a state in the world of scarce resources.

Even though Waltz fails to recognize an essential contradiction in his approach towards the study of international politics, this does not mean that his theory is invalid. His claim that we can avoid the pre-scientific notion of human nature is one of the results of his theory, not its assumption. The fact that it is recognized as wrong leads us to a revision of this particular point but affects neither other statements based on the theory, nor the theory as such. The structural approach seems to be a major contribution to the study of international politics providing us with very innovative insights. In this sense, Waltz's groundbreaking work is as much powerful after this critique as it was before.

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