

Phronesis, Morgenthau and Diplomacy

Written by Anthony F. Lang Jr.

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/11/07/phronesis-morgenthau-and-diplomacy/>

ANTHONY F. LANG JR., NOV 7 2013

In 2000, I began working at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs. Soon after starting there, the president of the Council, Joel Rosenthal, handed me 500 pages of typescript consisting of transcribed notes from lectures and seminars given by Hans J. Morgenthau on Aristotle's *The Politics*. Like other students of IR, I was surprised that Morgenthau would have been influenced by Aristotle's thought, as the caricature of realism that is so often presented in the literature suggested that a realist would have no business thinking about normative issues or engaging with any classical thinker other than Thucydides.

Once I had read through the lectures, done some more research on Morgenthau and consulted others more versed in his thought than me, I realized how influential Aristotle was in shaping Morgenthau's ideas. Kenneth Thompson, a collaborator with Morgenthau, told me that he lectured on or taught seminars on Aristotle for much of his career. I discovered among his papers at the Library of Congress an outline of the lecture notes on Aristotle from 1948 (the same year he published *Politics Among Nations*). After editing the transcribed notes, I brought them to publication and wrote a chapter in an edited volume on Morgenthau that explored the link between the two thinkers.[1]

The Concept of 'Phronesis' in the Realist Tradition

One of the results of this research was a better appreciation of the idea of *phronesis* in the thought of not only Morgenthau but the realist tradition more widely. Prudence, the Latinized translation of the Greek term, had long been a concept invoked by realist thinkers to describe their understanding of foreign policy making.[2] As evidenced by the recent contributions to this journal, *phronesis* continues to provide important insights into international affairs, both in terms of principles for diplomatic life and normative assessments thereof.[3] Some of this material arises from concerns that IR as a discipline fails to take into account the nexus of normative and empirical research, while some arises from concerns that real world foreign policy has not adequately responded to the demands of the modern world.

Aristotle's understanding of *phronesis* has been adequately described in the articles previously published in this journal.[4] One element of *phronesis* that has not received as much attention is the way in which it allows us to overcome the Kantian heritage of disconnecting our morality from our interests. That is, Aristotle argued, along with others in the Ancient world, that to be a morally good person meant orienting one's desires in such a way that it would benefit both one's self and a wider political community. What this required, however, was that the individual know himself (the famous adage on the Oracle of Delphi). Self-knowledge is an essential part of the ability to make judgments in political life; one must not, in other words, know only the history and context of the issues at stake, but also be able to represent oneself and one's own interests in reacting to that context.

What relevance does this have for IR? In my reading of Morgenthau, his idea of diplomacy points us to the complexity of understanding the self and acting in a world with others. Additionally, Morgenthau's idea of diplomacy opens up important theoretical debates, ones that speak to the agent structure debate. And, even more importantly, combining Morgenthau's idea of diplomacy with Aristotle's idea of *phronesis* can give us a greater appreciation of the task of diplomacy and its ability to bring about peace.

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Morgenthau's understanding of diplomacy is complex.[5] In his lament about the failure of nationalistic ethics to constrain the pursuit of power in the international system, we find nostalgia for a different, aristocratic morality. This moral framework arose from the diplomatic traditions of 19th century Europe, in which individual leaders knew the "rules of the game" and were hesitant to violate them. In briefly explaining this ideal, Morgenthau describes the moral ideal of the 19th century diplomat in Aristotelian terms:

The moral standards of conduct with which the international aristocracy complied were of necessity of a supranational character. They applied not to all Prussians, Austrians, or Frenchman, but to all men who by virtue of their birth and education were able to comprehend them and to act in accordance with them. It was in the concept and the rules of natural law that this cosmopolitan society found the source of its precepts of morality. The individual members of this society, therefore, felt themselves to be personally responsible for compliance with these moral rules of conduct; for it was to them as rational human beings, as individuals, that this moral code was addressed.[6]

Certainly an atavistic conception of international affairs – one premised upon the idea of enlightened diplomats adhering to moral standards that the *demos* could not comprehend much less act upon – this idea of morality and the practice of politics suggests that Morgenthau conceptualised ethics in terms of what is today sometimes called virtue ethics, a tradition that draws upon Aristotle as one of its originators.

This interpretation of Morgenthau is reinforced in his lectures on Aristotle. In examining Book II of *The Politics*, Morgenthau uses Aristotle's writing on slavery to explore the issue of equality. He understands Aristotle to be arguing that equality among a group of people does not always apply, for equality should be judged on the basis of whatever task has brought those persons together. This leads Aristotle, and Morgenthau, to ask if everyone is equal in their ability to rule. The answer, for both, is no. As Morgenthau states:

Another way to think about this same issue of equality is to think about political judgment. Most of the people I know who deal with foreign policy are devoid of political judgment. It is a very rare quality. So, I would not exclude *a priori* the proposition that people are different by nature in different respects, and that they are also different with regard to politics. . . . I'm convinced that only a small minority is capable of governing. Most of the people who govern are unqualified to govern.[7]

Along these same lines, in *The Purpose of American Politics*, Morgenthau lamented the decline of "objective standards of excellence" in the American public, linking this to the collapse of a public realm.[8] The use of that phrase, "standards of excellence" is sometimes used a translation of Aristotle's concept of *arête*, the Greek word for virtue, one of which, of course, is *phronesis*.

This virtue ethic can be found, perhaps, in Morgenthau's understanding of diplomacy, which one can use to develop a theory of state agency in his work.[9] While *Politics Among Nations* is remembered for many things, few recall that it concludes on the importance of diplomacy as the only way to moderate power and pursue peace. After stipulating that power is what states pursue and that nationalism has prevented ethics from moderating that power, few options are left to create a peaceful world order. Dismissive of liberal and idealist schemes for world order – in part because of their failure to articulate a global ethic – Morgenthau concludes that patient and prudent practice of diplomacy is humanity's only hope. His review of what diplomacy requires has, again, an Aristotelian echo; it must combine knowledge (intellectual virtue) with the ability to act in moments of crisis (moral virtue). Indeed, the first "rule" of successful diplomacy is the elimination of the "crusading spirit," a rule that conforms well to the Aristotelian idea of virtue as being about moderation between extremes.[10]

Morgenthau's focus on the prudent individual as the representative of the political community is an important part of how he conceptualises the power of the state. Diplomacy does not appear merely at the end of *Politics Among Nations* as the only possible means to constrain the excesses of nationalism. It is the final, and most important, element of national power:

Of all the factors which make for the power of a nation, the most important, and of the more unstable, is the quality of diplomacy. All the other factors which determine national power are, as it were, the raw material out of which the

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power of a nation is fashioned. The quality of a nation's diplomacy combines those different factors into an integrated whole, gives them direction and weight, and awakens their slumbering potentialities by giving them the breath of actual power. The conduct of a nation's foreign affairs by its diplomats is for national power in peace what military strategy and tactics by its military leaders are for national power in war. It is the art of bringing these different elements of national power to bear with maximum effect upon those points in the international situation which concern the national interest most directly.[11]

The state cannot act, even with the material elements of power, without the ability of the diplomat to bring those factors to bear in interactions with other leaders. The state, in other words, is embodied by the diplomat/leader who must turn potential into actual power and influence. Its very agency requires diplomacy, for without such skill in bringing together a wide range of traditions, material power, and ideas, the state cannot be said to "act" in any way. The diplomat is the one who makes real state agency.

Diplomacy and Power in the International Order

Morgenthau's point about power can provide us with an additional insight into diplomacy and power in the international order. Morgenthau is arguing that a diplomat must be able to combine the elements of the community she represents into an agent that can interact with others. In order to do so, the diplomat must understand the state she represents. Morgenthau's privileging of the 19th century diplomatic ethos in which an aristocratic class could ignore the messy politics of their communities runs counter to this point, though Morgenthau is not alone here; George Kennan, another realist and an actual diplomat, argued in his later writings that American foreign policy would benefit from being less democratic and more aristocratic.[12] Yet, Morgenthau also explored the nature of American political life in *The Purpose of American Politics*, a book that argued for an understanding of the moral foundations of American diplomacy as based on equality and freedom, yet also demonstrated how those norms were undermined by the historical experience of the American polity especially because of slavery and the continued heritage of this institution in modern day racism. There is, in other words, two strands in Morgenthau's idea of diplomacy: one that privileges the aristocrat who need not know his community and relies on the norms of his fellow diplomats; or two the diplomat who, while aware of the diplomatic norms, brings forth the knowledge of her own community and draws on its history, power, and ideals to construct her state's agency. Indeed, the combination of these two strands of diplomatic life in Morgenthau's writing presents the ideal diplomatic persona.

Morgenthau, in other words, can be read as using *phronesis* to develop an understanding of diplomacy that combines the importance of judgment, the need to act on the basis of those judgments, and a self-knowledge that can allow for morality and self-interest to sit side by side. In order for diplomatic practice to work, to bring out some level of peace in international society, a diplomat must be able to combine these elements in her actions.

Phronesis and International Relations Today

Does this give us any insight into international relations today? There are no perfect diplomats who can combine the requisite dimensions of *phronesis* into a single effective whole. Yet some come closer than others, especially in their ability to understand their own communities and make that understanding relevant for the conduct of their state's foreign policy. For instance, former US Ambassador to Egypt Anne Peterson gave a speech in April 2013 to the Egyptian Rotary Club that embodies the kind of ethos suggested by Morgenthau. The speech, in the days before the Morsi government was toppled, sought to find a space between support for democracy and concerns over rights violations. Ambassador Peterson used the history of the United States to point out that it is not an easy matter to find this balance. Rather than platitudes about the benefits of democracy, she notes that as someone from the US South, she saw and understood the racial problems that prevented the US from being a truly democratic system. She also alludes to the political conflicts facing the US in a brief reference to freedom of press and the role of religion in public life.[13]

At the same time, Peterson has also been the subject of some controversy. As an article in the *New York Times* pointed out, she was subject to criticism by the forces that overthrew Morsi for being too close to his regime. And yet, she was seen by others as being too close to the protesters. The article also describes her extensive career in the US

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Foreign Service, which includes a wide range of postings, and a stint as the Acting US Representative to the UN. Moreover, she has a personal interest as well in US policies in the region, for her son served in the US military in Afghanistan.[14]

None of this necessarily demonstrates that Peterson is the ideal diplomat. But it does hint at the ways in which diplomats can integrate their conception of their own community with their role as representatives. It also highlights their difficult role in formulating a peaceful position in a world where force, intervention, and disagreement is the norm. One would hope that Morgenthau's insights into diplomatic practice and his invocation of the Aristotelian idea of phronesis might help us to see the difficulties of diplomatic life today – and also why we need to embrace their role and cultivate diplomats who can use the complexities of their own histories to advance new visions of peace and justice in the world.

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[1] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Political Theory and International Relations: Hans J. Morgenthau on Aristotle's The Politics*, edited by Anthony F Lang, Jr (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004); Anthony F Lang, Jr. "Morgenthau, Agency and Aristotle" in Michael Williams, ed., *Reconsidering Realism: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 18-41.

[2] See Alberto Coll, "Normative Prudence as a Tradition of Statecraft" *Ethics & International Relations* 9 (March 1995): 193-213.

[3] See David McCourt, "Phronesis and Foreign Policy in Theory and Practice" *e-International Relations*, November 23, 2012 at: <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/11/23/phronesis-and-foreign-policy-in-theory-and-practice/>; Francis Beer and Robert Harriman, "Maximizing Prudence in International Relations" *e-International Relations*, February 12, 2013 at: <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/12/maximizing-prudence-in-international-relations/>; and Richard Shapcott, "Phronesis, Ethics, and Realism" *e-International Relations* February 7, 2013 at: <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/07/phronesis-ethics-and-realism/>.

[4] See, in addition, Richard Shapcott, "IR as Practical Philosophy: Defining a Classical approach" *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6 (2004): 271-291.

[5] Some of this material is drawn from Lang, "Morgenthau, Agency and Aristotle".

[6] Hans J. Morgenthau with Kenneth Thompson, *Politics Among Nations: The Pursuit of Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986): 186.

[7] *Political Theory and International Affairs: Hans J. Morgenthau on Aristotle's The Politics*: 59.

[8] Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Purpose of American Politics* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1960): 222-231.

[9] Something I tried to do in *Agency and Ethics: The Politics of Military Intervention* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002)

[10] *Politics Among Nations: The Pursuit of Power and Peace*: 419-445.

[11] *Politics Among Nations: The Pursuit of Power and Peace*: 105.

[12] See George Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy* (New York: W W Norton,

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[13] Anne W. Peterson, Speech at the Rotary Club, 28 April 2013, Cairo Egypt. Available at: <http://egypt.usembassy.gov/pr043013.html>.

[14] Mark Landler, "Ambassador Becomes Focus of Egyptians' Mistrust of the US" New York Times 3 July 2013, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/04/world/middleeast/ambassador-becomes-focus-of-egyptians-mistrust-of-us.html?_r=0.