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Classical Realism and Human Nature: An Alternative Reading

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An oft-cited collection of writings on international relations (IR) opens its chapter on realism with an apt, if somewhat tongue-in-cheek, description:

“It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the academic study of international relations is a debate about realism.” (Wohlforth 2008, 131)

Realism, in the widest understanding of the term, has been, historically, one of the defining schools of thought in political theory for centuries. Seen mainly through the works of various classical authors, the intellectual tradition, in fact, is claimed to extend far beyond the institutional establishment of IR at the start of the 20th century (Wohlforth 2008, 132). According to Wohlforth (133), four common fundamental presumptions underpin the “spectrum of ideas” that realism comprises: (1) groupism, or the idea that human existence is tied to groups of various size and quality; (2) egoism of individuals and groups, grounded in the so-called *human nature*, as the primary motivation of all actors; (3) anarchy, or the absence of government on the international (and traditionally also domestic) level; and (4) power politics as the dominant ordering principle, arising from inequalities of social influence and material resources.

Due to the ubiquity and significance of realism, all of its assumptions have been subjected to thorough criticism. Yet, the concept which has, arguably, attracted the most controversy is that of human nature. For what are called classical realists, human nature holds a central function as an explanatory black-box which guides the behaviour of individuals and states; even if its precise properties and operation may be difficult to explain, realists scholars would argue, human nature is pessimistic and its negative consequences, principally, unavoidable (Schuett 2010; Brown 2009). However, it would be wrong to assume that the concept of human nature is only important for classical realists. Among the numerous IR theories, human nature features at least implicitly in their discussions, albeit with varying degrees of significance: an obvious example is classical liberalism which opposes the negative view of human nature, but others, such as neorealism (Brown 2009) or even some constructivists (Wendt 1992), are more inclined to accept the tragic predicament of human beings.

While the realist perception of human nature has been contested from different standpoints (Freyberg-Inan 2004), many of them have in common the implicit acceptance that there is a distinctive, *essential* characteristic of humans which is worth finding about (Epstein 2013). This paper offers an alternative – and contextualized, similarly to Brown’s (2009) study – reading of the concept of human nature and the manner in which it has been presented in classical realist literature. It builds on Michel Foucault’s rejection of essentialism in connection with human nature by applying the critique to the particular circumstances of classical realism and by comparing two prominent figures of classical realist thought. Therefore, the first section of the paper discusses Foucault’s account of human nature, highlighting the main points of his anti-essentialist critique, and the second section reanalyses the views of human nature of Hans Morgenthau and Thomas Hobbes.

What Is Human Nature?

Michel Foucault, in a well-known debate with Noam Chomsky, responds to the issue of human nature as following:

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“If you say that a certain human nature exists, that this human nature has not been given the rights and possibilities that allow it to realize itself in our contemporary society (...) if one admits this, does not one risk defining this human nature – which is at the same time ideal and real, and has been hidden and repressed until now – in terms borrowed from our society, from our civilization, from our culture?” (Davidson 1997, 131)

Foucault, therefore, questions the essentialist understanding of the idea of human nature defended in this case by Chomsky. His attack on essentialism should be understood against the background in which he operates, a loose tradition sometimes referred to, not without dissenting voices, as “post-structuralism”. Within this tradition, Foucault’s particular contribution to the disruption of structuralism’s entrenched meanings rested primarily in his innovative study of discourses, knowledge, and power.

Below the surface, the anti-essentialist critique of Foucault encompasses a number of exacting reproaches which underlie a more fundamental concern about the possibility and mode of understanding human nature. The first criticism relates to the notion of reductionism which condenses complex phenomena into one or few vital constituents. Apart from being generally rejected by numerous prominent thinkers in various fields (Brown 2013, 439), with regards to human nature it specifically faces condemnation for collapsing political and social complexity to unchanging, universal, and ahistorical truths. Similarly to the attack on reductionism, the second strand of Foucault’s critique questions the ‘biologism’ of the human nature concept, or the idea that by understanding the biological properties of human beings, we will ‘uncover’ the (reductionist) essence of what is inherent to human behaviour (Wilkin 1999, 180). Thirdly, the idea of human nature has a homogenizing function, as it attempts to locate a common ground for all humans (Wilkin 1999, 181); discursively, this homogenization can be employed to dismiss differences between people. Finally, references to human nature also carry a deterministic element – should there be anything essential that causes humans to behave in a certain way then the causality and regularity of the actions of people denies, or at least constrains, the possibility of free will (Wilkin 1999, 182).

The most important problem with the traditional explanation of human nature for Foucault concerns, however, the empiricist or rationalist epistemology it relies upon. Foucault, on the other contrary, is a constructivist, and, consequently, he cannot ignore that all understanding, including that of human nature, is embedded in a complex web of social and power relations:

“(...) these notions of human nature, of justice, of the realization of the essence of human beings, are all notions and concepts which have been formed within our civilization, within our type of knowledge and our form of philosophy, and that as a result form part of our class system; and that one cannot, however regrettable it may be, put forward these notions to describe or justify a fight which should overthrow the very fundamentals of our society.” (Davidson 1997, 140)

As a result, the only correct answer to the question “what is human nature?” is that human nature is whatever the dominant discourse determines it is; it is nothing more than an effect, or product, of power, which is present everywhere (Foucault 1990, 93), at any given point in time, and a simple inquiry into the history of the idea can demonstrate its malleability across different eras. Since each era is characterized by an episteme, which defines the possibility of all knowledge (Foucault 1970, 161), any prevailing conception of human nature will necessarily reflect a certain ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault 1980, 133), and for it to be accepted it will need to be *dans le vrai* (Foucault 1971, 16). In the end, therefore, any attempt, contemporary or past, at understanding what constitutes the human nature should be treated – instead of as a statement of some objective truth – as a probe into the dominant mode of understanding and the underlying power relations of that time.

Human Nature of Morgenthau and Hobbes

In order to exemplify the type of analytical ethos outlined in the previous chapter, it is worth scrutinizing the standpoint of one of realists’ most revered. In a universally popular passage from *Politics Among Nations*, Hans Morgenthau (1985, 4) writes that:

“Human nature, in which the [objective] laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since the classical

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philosophies of China, India, and Greece endeavoured to discover these laws.”

Morgenthau's view of human nature is, thus, exemplarily essentialist. In his attempt to invoke historical authority, Morgenthau is entirely unacknowledging of the 'bias' produced by the dominant discourses of his time, or of the times of the predecessors – Thucydides, St Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes – to whose tradition he subscribes. Instead, human nature, as understood by him, is completely ahistorical and unchanging, and it gives rise to objective laws of politics that can subsequently be discovered. Furthermore, Morgenthau (1985, 38) elaborates on the content of human nature by contrasting institutions created by man, which can change, to those originating from:

“(…) elemental bio-psychological drives by which in turn a society is created. The drives to live, to propagate, and to dominate are common to all men.”

This part of Morgenthau's vision is culpable of the aforementioned 'biologism' – explanation through the reference to a biological essence. Yet what is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Morgenthau's approach to human nature is, despite this reference to 'bio-psychological drives', the lack of scientism in his but also other modern classical realist's accounts. A more scientific conceptualization of human nature has been proposed only relatively recently (Crawford 2009; Brown 2013), while the realist discourse has for the better part of its modern existence simply recognized the pseudo-scientific axioms of Morgenthau, Carr, Niebuhr and others. This is peculiar, as Morgenthau is willing to accept, on the one hand, and in line with the prevailing discourses of his time, the possibility of a historically independent – yet based on age-old 'truths' – and fixed human nature, and on the other hand, he stands in opposition to the 'scientification' of all knowledge, a powerful Enlightenment discourse (Morgenthau 1965). Thus, Morgenthau embodies both a conformist position – in his trusting adoption of the essentialist pessimism of human nature – and at the same time a critical, anti-rationalist approach to politics.

The dichotomy in Morgenthau's thought can be better understood by situating his ideas in historical context. Morgenthau has spent his formative years in Germany, where he was born in a Jewish family, during the inter-war period, which has seen him witness also the rise of National Socialism. His doctoral dissertation had been reviewed by Carl Schmitt, a jurist whose ideas supplied the forthcoming ruling regime with intellectual rationalizations, who has left a negative impression on Morgenthau (Morgenthau 1984). Before leaving Europe, Morgenthau became friends with one of the most influential modern legal theorists, Hans Kelsen; unsurprisingly, Kelsen was himself a strong opponent of National Socialism and was at the time developing his 'pure' theory of law that attempted to exclude moral content (meaning also the immoral content) from legal systems. Of course, many others were cited as influences on Morgenthau's thought, and his realism bears marks of at least a number of them. Aristotle, a foremost post-Socratic essentialist, was identified as Morgenthau's 'hero' (Mollov 2000, 3), while the connections to Nietzsche (scepticism) and Weber (objectivism) are discussed in depth in the academic literature (Petersen 1999; Turner 2009). However, the mention of Nietzsche, in particular, also points to another inconsistency – like Foucault, Nietzsche emphasized the relativity of knowledge (Frei 2001, 166), which shows the selectivity of Morgenthau's arguments in conveniently avoiding Nietzsche's scepticism regarding objective truth, while accepting the scepticism of the human predicament.

The crucial social circumstances forming the ideas of the celebrated scholar are perhaps best summarized by himself in an essay from when he was 18 years old:

“My relationship to the social environment is determined by three facts: I am a German, I am a Jew, and I have matured in the period following the war.” (Morgenthau 1984, 1)

Therefore, major strands of inspiration, conscious or not, which are reflected in his work are also reactions to powerful discourses of his formative years and beyond: devastating effects of military power, the failure of idealism to maintain peace, anti-Semitism, scientism of racial theories, the Holocaust, and others. In other words, Morgenthau captured the negativity of this era in the negativity of his view of human nature.

The traditional understanding of classical realism considers Morgenthau to be a modern successor of the famous phrase by Thomas Hobbes regarding the so-called state of nature:

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"In such a condition (...) the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." (Hobbes 2008, 94)

This is no place to extend the discussion also to the term 'state of nature', but it is notable that Hobbes believes that the outlook of life without the necessary social institutions is deeply pessimistic. This is probably the most widespread notion associated with Hobbes, and it is also where the similarities with Morgenthau mostly end, for Hobbes' ideas are fundamentally different from Morgenthau's – the fact that they are both seemingly part of the same tradition uncovers the unsettling actuality beneath disregarding the social reality of constituting power relations and discourses.

First of all, Hobbes, an outspoken critic of Aristotle, is an anti-essentialist. He advocated what is termed 'nominalism', a view rejecting that there is anything universal except for names (Trigg 1988, 55). According to this view, there would be no such thing as 'human nature'. Therefore, Hobbes' discussion of the selfishness of human beings is based around the individual. If numerous individuals display similar properties it is not because they share a certain essence; they merely resemble each other. Secondly, Hobbes is a hard-line empiricist/materialist and an early champion of modern science; as such, he had no time for metaphysical musings, especially those of Aristotle (Trigg 1988, 56). In contrast, besides the aforementioned rejection of scientism by Morgenthau, the German was also fond of metaphysics: "bad metaphysics leads of necessity to bad political philosophy" (Morgenthau 1950, 515).

If the differences appear to be very obvious, taking into account the dissimilar epochs of the two authors, then these differences are not quite as obvious when one adopts the perspective of the realist discourse of human nature, which is at times so disregarding of difference in its pursuit of an all-explaining, unchanging variable in the form of the pessimistic human nature. The preceding short excursion into the historical and intellectual context of human nature in the writings of two major personae – putatively believed to be ideationally connected – is a very modest preview of the complexity and uniqueness of the epistemes and principal discourses governing each era. Far from being exhaustive, the critical attitude explored in this article merely purported to raise awareness of a taken-for-granted standpoint that continues to exert considerable influence to this day.

Conclusion

The argument presented in this work attempted to question, through the lens of Michel Foucault, the essentialist understanding of human nature in classical realism, as represented in the writings of Hans Morgenthau. The central explanation comes from the inescapability of the workings of dominant discourses which highlight the deficiencies of the essentialist viewpoint; a repeated observation of some sort of negativity can, thus, only be attributed to recurrent power relations and their productions, not any kind of *essence*. Furthermore, by juxtaposing Morgenthau with Hobbes, the aim was to point to the neglect in the realist discourse of historical contextualization that carries the defining features in the form of differing epistemes and discourses. In fact, however, it would be just as well possible to contrast other influential scholars who are categorized according to the *prima facie* criterion of pessimism/scepticism of the human condition. A historically more complete genealogy of human nature would help elucidate the intellectual diversity behind the realist trivialization of differences between the various conceptions. There is still much to be gained from post-structuralist and anti-essentialist lines of thought (Epstein 2013), but it will require IR scholars to query many of the fundamental beliefs underlying the discipline.

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