

each others' survival and 'friends' who have renounced force in their relations. Realism in effect becomes a special case; what Wendt calls the 'Hobbesian' anarchy of enemies. Sovereignty, understood as rights to territorial integrity and political independence, transforms relations into those among 'Lockean' rivals, with the rivalry having been substantially moderated by the abolition of aggressive war.

Most realists, however, downplay the significance of institutions, as suggested in titles such as 'The False Promise of International Institutions' (Mearsheimer 1994/5) and *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Krasner 1999). Institutions and norms are treated as largely reducible to the material interests of the powerful. They are at best 'intervening variables' that can be expected to have independent effects only in minor issue areas far removed from the struggle for power. (An interesting, and little explored, alternative is represented by the effort of Schweller and Priess 1997 to theorize institutions from within a realist framework.)

Realists are a bit less reluctant to talk about identities – although usually this seems to be done unwittingly. This is most evident in the classical realist distinction between status quo and revisionist powers or the parallel split between offensive and defensive structural realists. But there are many other examples. 'Great power' signifies not merely unparalleled material capabilities but also a managerial role in international society (Bull 1977: Chapter 9; Simpson 2004) and an identity type. Balance of power is also a complex set of institutions (Gulick 1967; Bull 1977: Chapter 4; Cronin 1999: Chapter 1). The sovereign territorial state is a particular system-wide construction of 'unit' identity (Compare Cronin 1999; Reus-Smit 1999). To take a simple example, the attitude towards territory is very different among early modern dynastic sovereigns and late nineteenth- and twentieth-century national/territorial sovereigns. (On the general importance of identity in international political thought see Keene (2005).)

Structural realists, however, have no theoretical basis for incorporating identity. Like Waltz on state motivation, identity conceptions are implicitly, and illicitly, incorporated into an analysis that presents itself in different terms. (Neo-)classical realists do have theoretical space for identity and institutional roles, but few have pursued the issue systematically. One notable exception is Schweller's work on revisionist powers (1994, 1999: 18–23), which aims to meld structural, motivational, and identity elements into a coherent and rigorous realist account.

Constancy and change

Identities, institutions and norms are important for our purposes here not so much because they are central concerns of most realists but because

they represent the principal points of substantive divergence between realist and other approaches in contemporary international theory. They also indirectly raise the issue of change. A standard complaint about realism is its inability to comprehend fundamental change in international relations. The implications of this charge, however, are less damning than critics often imagine.

Realism is a theory 'tuned' to explaining constancy. Realists are more impressed by the repeated occurrence of certain patterns across time than by the undeniable historical and cultural diversity of actors and interactions in international relations. They emphasize constancy not accidentally but by self-conscious theoretical choice. Although others may not share this judgement, it is one about which reasonable people may reasonably disagree.

The failure of realism to account for the end of the Cold War is a large part of the explanation of its declining popularity over the past fifteen years. Ironically, though, realists can fairly claim that they never attempted to explain change. They can even note, with a certain smugness, that no other theory of international relations did a better job. Everyone was caught by surprise.

It is understandable that dramatic change is held up against a theory that emphasizes constancy. But whatever kind of failure it represents is shared by all other prominent theories of international relations. It is a failing of the discipline as a whole rather than realism in particular.

Morality and foreign policy

In popular and foreign policy discussions, 'realist' most frequently refers to arguments against pursuing moral objectives in international relations. Although in principle simply a special case of the broader issue of norms and institutions, the place of morality in foreign policy has been a central concern of the classical realist tradition, not only in canonical texts such as Thucydides' Melian Dialogue and Machiavelli's *The Prince* but also in the work of major twentieth-century realists such as Carr, Morgenthau and Niebuhr. It is also an issue of vital substantive importance. Therefore, it is well worth discussion here, even though it has been a peripheral concern of academic realists since the 1970s, whose concerns have been more scientific and scholarly than directly policy oriented.

The subordination of morality to power often is presented as a descriptive statement of the facts of international political life. 'The actions of states are determined not by moral principles and legal commitments but by considerations of interest and power' (Morgenthau 1970: 382).

‘States in anarchy cannot afford to be moral. The possibility of moral behavior rests upon the existence of an effective government that can deter and punish illegal actions’ (Art and Waltz 1983: 6).

Such claims, however, are obviously false. Just as individuals may behave morally in the absence of government enforcement of moral rules, states often can and do act out of moral concerns. Consider, for example, the outpouring of international aid in the wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami and other natural and political disasters.

It simply is not true, of either men or states, that they ‘never do good unless necessity drives them to it’, that ‘all do wrong to the same extent when there is nothing to prevent them doing wrong’ (Machiavelli 1970: Book I, Chapter 2, 58). States sometimes – I would suggest frequently – value compliance with ethical and humanitarian norms for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the threat of coercive enforcement. And even when states do violate norms because of the absence of enforcement, the independent ethical force of an infringed norm frequently is a significant part of the normative calculus of both the state acting and those who judge it.

We should also remember that even in anarchy coercive enforcement is sometimes possible, most obviously through self-help. Furthermore, various mechanisms exist to induce, even when they cannot compel, compliance. Public opinion, both national and international, can be a powerful force. In some cases, the power and authority of intergovernmental institutions may be significant. More generally, international law, which includes some obligations that are also moral obligations, is no more frequently violated than domestic law. In any case, violations typically do have costs for states (although not always sufficiently high costs to compel compliance).

Realists, with good cause, emphasize that a state, especially a powerful state, bent on violating a moral norm usually can get away with it – and that when it can’t, it usually is because the power of others states has been mobilized on behalf of the moral norm. Nonetheless, states do sometimes comply with moral norms both for their own sake and out of consideration of the costs of non-compliance. As a matter of fact, states regularly conclude that in some instances they *can* afford to be moral, despite international anarchy.

For example, humanitarian interventions in Kosovo, East Timor and Darfur, however tardy and limited, simply cannot be understood without the independent normative force of the anti-genocide norm and humanitarian principles. Such normative concerns rarely are the sole motive behind foreign policy action. But they often are an important element of the calculus. And few significant foreign policy actions reflect just a single self-interested motive either. Foreign policy is driven by the

intersection of multiple motives, some of which are ethical in a large number of countries.

Pursuing moral objectives such as spreading democracy or combating preventable childhood diseases certainly may be costly. But no political goals can be achieved without cost. Just as the cost of pursuing economic objectives is no basis for excluding economic interests from foreign policy, the costs of pursuing moral objectives do not justify categorically excluding them from foreign policy agendas. The proper course is to weigh the costs and benefits of pursuing all relevant interests, moral and non-moral interests alike. Moral values are indeed values and therefore must be taken into account in any truly reasonable and realistic political calculus. Thus even Mearsheimer allows that 'there are good reasons to applaud the 1978 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, since it drove the murderous Pol Pot from power' (1994/5: 31).

Realists often suggest that ordinary citizens and even politicians, especially in democracies, tend to underestimate the costs of – and thus overestimate the space available for – the pursuit of moral interests. But to the extent this is true, most non-realists would offer the same criticisms. There is nothing distinctively realist about insisting that foreign policy should be based on a rational calculation of costs and benefits.

Notice that as this discussion has progressed, we have moved towards more prescriptive arguments against the wisdom of pursuing moral objectives. Along similar lines, realists often stress the constraints on foreign policy imposed by the special office of the statesman. For example, Kennan argues that the 'primary obligation' of any government 'is to the *interests* of the national society it represents' and that therefore 'the same moral concepts are no longer relevant to it' (1954: 48; 1985/6: 206). Morgenthau talks about the special demands of statesmanship in terms of 'the autonomy of politics.' (1948/1954/1973: 12; 1962: 3)

Kennan claims that an overriding concern for the national interest is a matter of 'unavoidable necessit[y]' and therefore 'subject to classification neither as "good" or "bad" ' (1985/6: 206). But if the national interest is not merely good but a very high good, there is no reason to accept it as a standard for judging international political behaviour. The 'necessity' here is ethical, not a matter of physical or logical compulsion.

Many realists thus explicitly present pursuit of the national interest, and realist power politics, as a matter of ethical obligation. Joel Rosenthal's social history of post-war American realists is nicely titled *Righteous Realists* (1991). Morgenthau goes so far as to speak of 'the moral dignity of the national interest' (1951: 33–9).

A few realists adopt a radically nationalist ethic that holds that 'the State is not to be judged by the standards which apply to individuals, but by those which are set for it by its own nature and ultimate aims'

(Treitschke 1916: 99). Most, however, show varying degrees of discomfort with the fact that 'the great majority persists in drawing a sharp distinction between the welfare of those who share their particular collective and the welfare of humanity' (Tucker 1977: 139–40). Many use the language of tragedy, for example, in titles such as *Truth and Tragedy* (Thompson and Meyers 1977) and *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Mearsheimer 2001). Niebuhr (1932) bemoans the severe attenuation of our moral sentiments and resources in social life in general and in international politics in particular. Carr goes so far as to claim that 'the impossibility of being a consistent and thorough-going realist is one of the most certain and most curious lessons of political science' (1939/1945/1946: 89).

The special ethical demands of statesmanship certainly deserve emphasis. The statesman has an ethical obligation to protect and further the national interest, much as lawyers, especially in adversarial legal systems, have an ethical obligation to pursue the interests of their clients, often even when they conflict with justice or truth. We rightly expect national leaders to give special weight to national interests. It would be not only politically irresponsible but ethically derelict to consult only religious precepts, universal moral principles, international law, or a broader human interest in formulating and implementing foreign policy.

Survival in particular is such an overriding priority that even most moralists would agree with Machiavelli that 'when the safety of one's country wholly depends on the decision to be taken, no attention should be paid either to justice or injustice' (1970: Book 1, Chapter 41). But such an argument applies no less against non-moral objectives, such as pursuing economic interests and supporting an ally. And survival rarely is at stake in international relations.

It simply is not true that 'the struggle for power is identical with the struggle for survival' (Spykman 1942: 18). Neither is it true that 'the system forces states to behave according to the dictates of realism, or risk destruction' (Mearsheimer 1995: 91). Many moral foreign policy objectives pose no risk to national survival. And other national interests simply do not have the ethical priority of survival. Much as a lawyer who learns that her client is planning to commit a murder ordinarily is required to breach client confidentiality, the ethical obligations of the statesman to the national interest must sometimes be balanced against other norms and values.

Realists certainly are correct to criticize 'moralism', the belief that international relations can appropriately be judged *solely* by conventional moral norms. But few if any serious theorists or activists have actually held such a view. Even the inter-war peace activists that realists pejoratively dismiss as idealists in fact usually held far more sophisticated views (Lynch 1999).

To the extent that there is a tendency toward moralism in foreign policy, especially in the United States, realists may offer a healthy corrective. Five hundred years ago, it might have been scandalous for Machiavelli to argue that a good statesman must ‘learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity’ (1985: Chapter 15). Today, however, almost all students of international relations agree that sometimes the good statesman ought to act in ways inconsistent with the principles of private morality – for example, to give greater consideration to preserving the lives of her own soldiers than the soldiers of her adversary.

Controversy arises over when, where and how frequently violating moral norms is truly necessary. Realists suggest that anarchy and egoism so severely constrain the space for the pursuit of moral concerns that it is only a small exaggeration to say that states in anarchy cannot afford to be moral. This, however, is a contingent empirical claim about which reasonable people may reasonably disagree. And even if we accept it, it provides no grounds for categorically excluding morality from foreign policy. Even if the primary obligation of the statesman is to the national interest, that is not her exclusive obligation. States not only are free to, but in fact often do, include certain moral objectives in their definition of the national interest.

How to think about realism (and its critics)

Time after time we have identified an unfortunate tendency among realists to push an important insight well beyond the breaking point. Not only are they prone to rhetorical exaggerations, such as Nicholas Spykman’s claim that ‘the search for power is not made for the achievement of moral values; moral values are used to facilitate the attainment of power’ (1942: 18). Even more moderate statements regularly lack the necessary qualifications. Note the absence of an adverb like ‘often’, ‘frequently’, or even ‘usually’ in Kennan’s claim, quoted above, that non-moral considerations ‘must be allowed to prevail’. Likewise, Mearsheimer, on the same page that he argues that institutions ‘matter only on the margins’ – a controversial but plausible empirical claim rooted in a standard realist analysis of the impact of anarchy – also asserts the obviously false claim that institutions that ‘have no independent effect on state behavior’ (1994/5: 7).

Strong adherents of a theory often unthinkingly slide from (justifiable) theoretical simplifications to (unjustifiable) descriptive claims. As I have noted repeatedly, theories must abstract, simplify and thus exaggerate. The danger arises when these simplified theoretical ideal-types

are presented as categorical empirical claims. That realists are no less prone to this confusion than adherents of other theories is ironic but not particularly surprising.

Waltz nicely captures the contribution of realism: it tells us ‘a small number of big and important things’ (1986: 329). Were realists, and Waltz himself, always this modest, the discipline, especially in the United States, would be much better off – particularly if realists took to heart the negative implication that there are a large number of big and important things about which realism is necessarily silent. Realism simply fails to explain most of international relations. Anarchy, egoism and the distribution of capabilities cannot explain the vast majority of what happens in such relations.

The realist response that they explain ‘the most important things’ is a contentious normative judgement. Furthermore, given the ‘indeterminacy’ of most realist predictions, it is by no means clear that realism offers deep or satisfying explanations of even the things to which it applies (compare Wendt 1999: 18, 251–9). But even if realism does adequately explain the few most important things, there is no reason to restrict the discipline to those. The resulting impoverishment would be equivalent to restricting medicine to studying and treating only the leading causes of death.

That realism cannot account for substantial swathes of international relations is no reason to denigrate or marginalize it. Realists, though, must allow the same for other theories. Realism must be an important, even essential, part of a pluralistic discipline of international studies. No less. But no more.

The familiar question ‘Are you a realist?’ may be appropriate if we understand realism as a moral theory or world-view. A few realists, particularly Augustinian Christians such as Niebuhr (1941, 1943) and Butterfield (1953) have treated realism in such terms. Among contemporary academic realists, Robert Gilpin (1986, 1996) perhaps borders on holding such a view. But world-views – natural law, Islam, Kantianism, Christianity, Aristoteleanism, humanism – are not usually what we have in mind by ‘theories of international relations’. If we are talking about analytical or explanatory theory, ‘being’ (or ‘not being’) a realist makes little sense.

Unless realist predictions or explanations are almost always correct across something like the full range of international relations – and neither realism nor any other theory of international relations even approximates this – no serious student or practitioner would want to ‘be’ a realist in the sense of always applying or acting upon realist theory. But unless realism never provided valuable insights or explanations – and even its strongest critics do not suggest this – no reasonable person

would want to 'be' an anti-realist in the sense of never using realist theories.

The proper questions are how regularly, in what domains and for what purposes does realism help us to understand or act in the world. My general answer is 'a lot less often than most realists claim, but a lot more frequently than most anti-realists would like to allow'. But more important than this general answer is the fact that, depending on one's political interests and substantive concerns, one might appropriately use realism regularly, occasionally, or almost never in one's analyses or actions.

Realism *must* be a part of the analytical toolkit of every serious student of international relations. But if it is our only tool – or even our primary tool – we will be woefully underequipped for our analytical tasks, our vision of international relations will be sadly impoverished, and, to the extent that theory has an impact on practice, the projects we undertake in the world are liable to be mangled and misshapen.