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Citation for published version:

Molloy, S 2009, 'Aristotle, Epicurus, Morgenthau and the Political Ethics of the Lesser Evil', *Journal of International Political Theory*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 94-112. <https://doi.org/10.3366/E1755088209000342>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.3366/E1755088209000342](https://doi.org/10.3366/E1755088209000342)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Journal of International Political Theory

Publisher Rights Statement:

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ARISTOTLE, EPICURUS, MORGENTHAU AND THE POLITICAL ETHICS OF THE LESSER EVIL

SEÁN MOLLOY

Abstract: This article explores one of the key themes of Hans J. Morgenthau's moral theory, the concept of the lesser evil. Morgenthau developed this concept by reference to classical political theory, especially the articulation of the lesser evil found in Aristotle and Epicurus. The article begins by differentiating Morgenthau's work from that of E. H. Carr, whom he regards as engaged in a Quixotic quest to provide Machiavellism with greater ethical purpose. The article also contrasts the ethics of the lesser evil with Kantian ethics. Morgenthau places the lesser evil in the context of a modernity that has lost the capacity to think about the relationship between politics and morality and stresses the importance of coming to grips with the existential demands of love and power. Finally, the article argues that despite the ubiquity of evil, the existence of the lesser evil gives rise to the development of specifically political virtues such as prudence and moderation which raise the possibility of moral politics beyond mere expedience.

Keywords: Aristotle, Epicurus, ethics, evil, Morgenthau, political theory

The Aristotelian truth that man is a political animal is true forever; the truths of the natural sciences are true only until other truths have supplanted them. (Morgenthau 1946: 220)

In an era characterised by large-scale terrorist attacks and military conflict, war and the use of force have once again become the central questions of global politics. In such challenging times questions about the relationship between power and morality inevitably rise once more to the fore. What is the nature of this relationship and how can one even begin to make moral claims in

Journal of International Political Theory, 5(1) 2009, 94–112
DOI: 10.3366/E1755088209000342
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relation to political life? For Hans J. Morgenthau one of the great flaws of modern politicians is their inability to see past the ideological postures which provide them with moral certainty, in effect placing their aims above politics. The ancient political virtues, prudence and moderation, have been lost and replaced by unworkable concepts that are at best irrelevant to the demands of politics. Statesmen operate therefore in a moral void wherein they equate their ideals with universal ideals and lack the very ability to make decisions that effectively factor in both the political and the moral dimensions of international life. The relationship between ends, means and circumstances has become skewed and the ends themselves posited in an unrealistic manner, divorced from the demands of prudence. Arguably, what is needed is a greater appreciation of the relationship between politics and morality that accepts that there will be evil, that evil must be recognised and even accommodated in order to preserve self-interest and the wider interests of international society, where prudence, not some formulation of an incorruptible principle of rational or divine origin, is the ultimate virtue. The purpose of this article is to argue that in his works on the relationship between politics and morality, Morgenthau went some way to elaborating such an approach and that this subtle integration of politics and morality can serve as the means to navigate the demanding and dangerous territory between what ought to be and what is the case in international politics.

The acceptance that Morgenthau is in fact an important ethical thinker and not simply an apologist for a species of amoral *Machtpolitik*, is growing apace in International Relations (IR) theory (see Bain 2000: 445–64; Gismondi 2004: 435–64; Williams 2004: 633–65; Lang 2004, 2007: 18–41; Molloy 1997, 2002; Molloy 2004, 2006; Russell 2007: 212–33; Wong 2000: 389–409; Pin-Fat 2005). This paper is different in that it seeks to examine why and how Morgenthau developed his ethical theory by reference to certain key concepts derived from classical Greek thought and argues in effect that it is his dissatisfaction with modernity, and in particular with modern, liberal ethics that provoked him to reject the dominant ethical categories of his age to create a synthesis of both modern pessimism (Gismondi 2004; Williams 2004) and ancient modes of thought about ethics. The aim of the paper is not to claim that Morgenthau is merely updating Aristotle or Epicurus, but rather to investigate the extent to which Morgenthau's ethics are rooted in what he terms the 'eternal verities' of Greek thought and to examine the extent to which he uses these principles to construct a determinedly political ethics.¹

The paper commences with a consideration of Morgenthau's attitude towards modern ethics typified by two opposing traditions, the Machiavellism of E. H. Carr and the deontological ethics of Immanuel Kant. Having staked out his opposition to these modes of thought, Morgenthau creates his ethical theory by reference to what he considers to be their shortcomings in that he seeks to provide realism with a measure of morality and to reunite the political and the ethical by the utilisation of Aristotelian and Epicurean concepts contra Kant.

The article proceeds from the identification of the existential context of ethics in Morgenthau, what he terms ‘the ubiquity of evil’, through to his promotion of an ethic of the lesser evil, the virtue of prudence, the moral dignity of the national interest and finally of civilisation as the expression of the community of interests and obligations.

Morgenthau and Modern Ethics: Between Machiavellism and Kantianism

Despite their membership of a supposed realist school, Carr and Morgenthau have very different ideas about the nature of morality in international relations. The extent of this difference is manifest in Morgenthau’s rebuke of Carr, published in *World Politics* in 1948. Carr’s diagnosis of the ‘decline’ of political thought, described in terms of ‘blindness’, ‘barrenness’, and ‘disease’, according to Morgenthau, is surpassed only by Reinhold Niebuhr. The problem with Carr was that he did not confine himself to being a critic, but rather tried to offer an alternative to liberal utopianism. In this context, Morgenthau concludes that ‘the over-all impression of Mr. Carr’s work is one of failure’ (Morgenthau 1948: 133). This failure is rooted firmly in the ‘relativistic, instrumentalist conception of morality’ proposed by Carr. Morgenthau detects in Carr a desire to transcend the reality of power and maintains that ‘all his subsequent thinking [post *Twenty Years’ Crisis*] becomes the Odyssey of a mind which has discovered the phenomena of power and longs to transcend it’. The fundamental problem is that Carr, as a relativist (in Morgenthau’s understanding of the term), has no transcendent ethical stance from which to examine the political. The importance of a transcendent standard of ethical behaviour is implied in his epithet on Carr (and Schmitt and Müller): ‘it is a dangerous thing to be a Machiavelli, it is a disastrous thing to be a Machiavelli without *virtù*’. Finally, without a transcendent point of view one is philosophically ill-equipped to ‘appraise the phenomenon of power’ (Morgenthau 1948: 129, 134). Morgenthau’s subsequent work in political ethics can be seen in part as an attempt to promote a transcendent basis for appraising political life.²

The importance of Kant is twofold: firstly, he is a leading figure in the development of contemporary ethics. Secondly, it is probably through Kant’s criticisms of Epicurus and Aristotle that Morgenthau was provided with the foundations from which to build an alternative to Kant’s moral theory by utilising two of the most important philosophical traditions which Kant criticises in his ethical writing. The problem with Kant is the reverse of that of Carr in that Kant, in erecting a moral system based on the separation of politics and ethics, in effect created a form of ethics incapable of dealing effectively with the political. Kant and the liberal tradition which followed his teachings had effectively instituted a fatal breach between politics and ethics, insisting on the separation of politics and ethics and the superiority of the ethical over the political as expressed in the formula: ‘I can indeed think of a *moral politician* . . . but not of a political

moralist' (1996: 340). The Kantians and other liberals did not understand that morality cannot be understood in a power-political vacuum, that there is more to Man than simply the observance of laws derived in accordance with reason. As Morgenthau writes:

A civilization which has made this worldview its own has deprived itself of the intellectual facility to master the radical evil of the lust for power. Where the essence of this evil can no longer be denied, it can at least be belittled and its necessary and intimate connection with human life in society can be denied. Thus, the spokesmen of our civilization do not recognize the ubiquity of the lust for power and of its evilness but assume that the power element and its evilness are particularly attached to certain actions, situations, and institutions and that, by reforming or abolishing them, the lust for power itself could be abolished and the moral problem of power would be solved. They fight a sham battle which they can never win, and it would not matter if they could. (1946: 199–200)

The genuine focus of moral inquiry for Morgenthau could be found more purposefully in the pre-rationalist traditions of ethics, especially in those authors derided by Kant. From Epicurus and Aristotle, Morgenthau takes the idea of necessity, prudence and the lesser evil. The Greek element of his thought provides the basis of his critique of modern ethics and the foundation for his alternative formulation of the relationship between politics and ethics.

Love and Power

What Morgenthau proposes is a reconsideration of morality in terms different from the dominant liberal and rationalist understandings of ethical behaviour. Part of this project is the rediscovery of good and evil in contrast to the utilitarian ethics of 'how certain effects are co-ordinated with certain actions', i.e., an existential, transcendent ethic as opposed to the empirical, utilitarian ethics typical of various strands of liberalism or the instrumental relativism of which he selected Carr as an exemplar. Whereas there is no fixed standard of morality from which to survey political life in Carr's analysis (and arguably Carr's is a variation on utilitarian ethics), only shifting, intimations of an absolute good, for Morgenthau there is a way in which moral life is possible according to a fixed principle, the lesser evil, which can form the foundation for moral judgement. This method, the selection of the lesser evil, is not, however, a transcendent point outside politics, but is a part of politics itself, in keeping with the Aristotelian notion of politics as the 'master art' and the means by which the good of Man can be determined in relation to the other sciences, including the ethical (Aristotle 1984a: 1729).

The essay 'Love and Power' is perhaps the most revealing of Morgenthau's texts regarding the basis for a transcendent ethics in that it makes clear the existential context in which Man as a political animal operates, for although

it is in the earlier *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics* that Morgenthau first expounds an ethical system for realism, it is in 'Love and Power' that he most revealingly describes why such a system is necessary as a consequence of the emergence of the *animus dominandi* (a persistent theme throughout Morgenthau's works and the central concept of *Politics Among Nations*). Morgenthau's treatment of love is complex: love and power play opposite roles as responses to the fundamental existential experience of isolation. Man is restricted in his choices in that he either embraces love or power. Love is, according to Morgenthau, 'in its purest form the rarest of experiences. It is given to few men to experience it at all, and those who experience it do so only in fleeting moments of exaltation'. The rarity of this pure form, and the corruption of most love by power, entails the 'inevitable frustration of love' (1962: 248). *Philia* and *Agape* are insufficient and ephemeral, and cannot serve as the basis for life in that they are inevitably frustrated. The potential of *eros* to degenerate into a power-sex relationship is perhaps the most depressing perversion of the intentions of love in that the lovers become degraded by the politicisation of the erotic impulse. The intimate relation of love and power is expressed in fraternal terms: 'the lust for power is, as it were, the twin of despairing love' (249).

With love frustrated and corrupted, power and the lust for power enter as substitutes to fill the existential void: 'What man cannot achieve for any length of time through love he tries to achieve through power: to fulfil himself, to make himself whole by overcoming his loneliness, his isolation'. Morgenthau's pessimistic inversion of Rousseau, that everywhere man is born a slave but longs to be master, has its root in the perversion of love:

It is in the very nature of the power relationship that the position of the two actors within it is ambivalent. *A* seeks to exert power over *B*; *B* tries to resist that power and seeks to exert power over *A*, which *A* resists. Thus the actor in the political stage is always at the same time a prospective master over others and a prospective object of the power of others. While he seeks power over others, others seek power over him. (1962: 249)

The lust for power, the elevation of power over love, is nonetheless insufficient to fill the gap of loneliness as 'the acquisition of power only begets the desire for more' (250). The desire for more power, or the desire to discharge power, in addition to the inherent selfishness of Man, leads to the 'ubiquity of evil' in life and politics which is described as 'the paradigm and prototype of all possible corruption' (Morgenthau 1945: 14; Lebow 2003: 237; Murray 1997: 126). Universal love is an impossibility, the quest for universal power doomed, isolation an existential inevitability and all political life compromised by the corruption of selfishness and lust for power, while every political act is at least in part an injustice as the statesman is inevitably forced to do some party an injustice by his choices. This unpromising wasteland is the foundation for the

transcendent point of view that Morgenthau considers essential for the ethical appraisal of political life.

The Lesser Evil

In answer to the question ‘how must moral man act in the political sphere?’ Morgenthau expresses the core of his approach: ‘[T]he best he can do is to minimize the intrinsic immorality of the political act. He must choose from among the political actions at his disposal the one which is likely to do the least violence to the commands of Christian ethics. The moral strategy of politics is, then, to try to choose the lesser evil’ (1962b: 16; see also Wong 2000: 391, 402 ff.; Mollov 1997: 561–75; Frei 2001). The achievement of the lesser evil is an element of Christian thought that is in fact influenced by classical authors, in particular the treatment of this theme in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (Lang 2007: 18–41).

The first task for Morgenthau is to reassert the unity of moral evaluation and to jettison the dual morality perspective as employed by Carr. This is in keeping with Morgenthau’s Aristotelianism: ‘the courage, justice and wisdom of a state have the same form and nature as the qualities which give the individual who possesses them the name of just, wise and temperate’ (Aristotle 1984b: 2100). Distinguishing between the acts of states and individuals is, according to Morgenthau, ‘a formidable perversion of the moral sense itself, an acquiescence in evil’. The liberals can only offer a ‘narrow and distorted formulation’ of the problem of dealing with the ethics of politics, while their answer to the problem is ‘sentimental and irrelevant’. The irrelevance of liberal thought to the ethics of politics is, for Morgenthau, largely due to the epistemological shortcomings of rationalism, which had become increasingly anachronistic in the face of the problems of the mid-twentieth century (1945: 16–17). Not all political philosophy shares this fate, however, with Plato and Aristotle being singled out as ‘at least partly’ capable of representing ‘eternal verities . . . able to guide the thought and action of our time as well as of any other’. Morgenthau’s perennial endeavour was to seek the ‘eternal verities’ in order to rescue politics and ethics from the perceived dead ends of rationalism and relativism (1946: 4, 9).

Morgenthau’s concept of Man is akin to that of Aristotle, in that they both stress the dual nature of man’s psychology inasmuch as Man has elements of both rationality and irrationality inherent in his being, albeit that Morgenthau is much more pessimistic about the capability of the rational to contain the impulses of the irrational in Man.³ Finding the moral ‘truth’ of politics is related to Morgenthau’s development of a particular philosophy of history, one in which ‘autonomous forces’ have the effect of engendering ‘historic necessity in their own right and not as mere deviation from reason’. Morgenthau presents a universe where ethics is predicated on necessity, and also in which a

permanent ethics of necessity is possible and practicable, deliberately contrasted against Thrasymachus' outright moral scepticism and Machiavelli's belief in the impermanent convergence of politics and morality (1946: 38–39; see also Plato 1997; Machiavelli 1984). The recognition of necessity also places Morgenthau in opposition to Kant (who was loath to introduce empirical necessity into moral calculation) and firmly in the Epicurean camp, where necessity is an important element in the calculation of moral behaviour, where necessity is an evil, 'but there is no necessity to live under control of necessity' (Epicurus 1926: 107). Aristotle argues beyond the Epicurean perspective by arguing that what is necessary and useful in politics is the foundation for that which is honourable, that necessity is the foundation for the 'better' (Aristotle 1984b: 2115).

It is important to recognise therefore, that the ubiquity of evil (i.e., the necessity of evil) does not necessitate the abandonment of ethics, but that it produces the conditions for a universal ethic of its own, the ethics of the lesser evil. This concept is present in both Epicurus and Aristotle's work. For Epicurus, the issue is rather simple: 'No one when he sees evil deliberately chooses it, but is enticed by it as being good in comparison with a greater evil and so pursues it' (1926: 109). For Aristotle, the issue is more complicated with the lesser evil being in effect the second best option in the absence of the Golden Mean between moral categories of excess and defect.⁴ Aristotle also puts forward an idea of a difference between a conditional and absolute good:

I use the term 'conditional' to express that which is indispensable, and 'absolute' to express that which is good in itself... just punishments and chastisements do indeed spring from a good principle, but they are good only because we cannot do without them. – it would be better that neither individuals nor states should need anything of the sort – but actions which aim at honour and advantage are absolutely the best. The conditional action is only the choice of a lesser evil: whereas these are the foundation and creation of good. A good man may make the best even of poverty and disease, and the other ills of life; but he can only attain happiness under the opposite conditions. (1984b: 2113)

In the case of evil, however, Aristotle confers on the lesser evil the status of a 'good', 'since the lesser evil is rather to be chosen than the greater, and what is worthy of choice is good, and what is worthier of choice a greater good' (1984a: 1786). Morgenthau does not mention the attainment of moral excellence, or absolute good, and instead concentrates on the lesser evil – as such his theory of evil is more Epicurean than Aristotelian, although it should be remembered that for Aristotle, ethics is not an exact science: 'We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better' (1730). It is possible that Morgenthau read Aristotle in this light and as a

consequence eschewed the extreme difficulty of calculating moral excellence in favour of a more pragmatic and achievable ethics of the lesser evil – a form of political ethics.

Political ethics is the ‘ethics of doing evil’ yet, as the doctrine of the lesser evil contends, the quantity and quality of the evil involved in the decision to act (or not to act), are unequal. The individual or the state has the capacity to choose that action which causes the least harm and moral behaviour stems from the ‘endeavor to choose, since evil there must be, among several possible actions the one that is least evil’. This is the political ethics of despair, but also of moral courage: ‘To choose among several expedient actions the least evil one is moral judgment. In the combination of political wisdom, moral courage, and moral judgment man reconciles his political nature with his moral destiny’ (Morgenthau 1945: 17–18). This reconciliation of political life and moral life is best achieved through what may be termed a tragic sensibility and the ‘knowing insecurity of the wisdom of man’ (1946: 204–23). The later Morgenthau embraced this ‘knowing insecurity’ to the extent that he was willing to recognise two species of relativism, historical and cultural, while still insisting on an objective moral law – an element of his ethical thought derived from his commitment to Judaeo-Christian ideals and perhaps a partial acceptance of the need for some kind of deontological ethics with which to anchor the lesser evil.

All different moral codes, argues Morgenthau, filter an objective moral code (‘something objective that is there to be discovered. It is not a product of history’). When questioned about the lack of applicability of this universal code, he replied: ‘I think the normative function of the moral code remains intact. Only it is put in a situation in which the compulsive force, the normative force of the code, is qualified by potential considerations. I mean what we call circumstantial ethics’. The nature of this code is minimal, being simply, ‘certain basic moral principles applicable to all human beings’. When pressed on the non-observance of the moral code Morgenthau conceded: ‘this is correct in the pragmatic situation, but it does not necessarily affect general principles’. As he later clarifies, in almost Kantian terms, ‘[i]n other words, there exists a moral order in the universe which God directs, the content of which we can guess. We are never sure that we guess correctly; or that in the end it will come out as God wants it to come out.’ (1979: 17, 25, 36). The difference between Morgenthau and Kant is that he limits his claims to moral certainty to guesses and intimations, not expressions of the categorical imperative.

Virtue in the Ethics of Evil: Prudence

The existence and value of political virtues in Morgenthau’s work is demonstrated by contrast with secular or Christian values of universal love, best exemplified in his opinion by Kant’s concept of universal justice. Morgenthau’s

basic position is that 'even assuming the reality of justice, man is incapable of realizing it'. Morgenthau argues that

our knowledge of what justice demands is predicated upon our knowledge of what the world is like and what it is for, of a hierarchy of values reflecting the objective order of the world. Of such knowledge, only theology can be certain, and secular philosophies can but pretend to have it. (1963: 421–2)

The problem is that justice is, in essence, a relative virtue: 'Empirically we find then as many conceptions of justice as there are vantage points, and the absolute majesty of justice dissolves into the relativity of so many interests and points of view' (422). Yet as we saw in his criticisms of Carr, Morgenthau does not allow for the possibility of a relativist ethics.

If relativism is an inadequate basis for ethics, then the Golden Rule and other attempts to create an ethical framework based on absolute and universal values for political action are, according to Morgenthau, 'appropriate only in an already perfect moral world where nobody wants what could infringe upon anybody else's wants' (1974: 168).⁵ In an imperfect world, characterised by the ubiquity of evil, what is necessary is the discovery and application of imperfect values rooted in political existence and the ethics of the lesser evil, the appropriate normative context for the ethical conduct of politics in so far as this is possible. This judgment of political morality is, however, characterised by 'essential ambivalence' (Lang 2004: 100). In effect, Morgenthau rejects the Kantian metaphysics of the Golden Rule and embraces instead an Aristotelian mean between the excessive expedience of Thrasymachus and the excessive idealism of the Utopians.⁶ Morgenthau stresses that this mean is also dependent on the 'determination . . . upon the pre-existence of a moral order which assigns a specific place to a particular action in the total spectrum of human actions' (1974: 168). This approach, however, does not proceed from a universal determination of what is ethical applied to the political, but rather that the demands of political practice determine what is ethical. While the greater evil of Man's lust for power cannot be avoided or remedied, 'specific evils' are susceptible to amelioration through the operation of 'historical forces' supported by conscious human effort (1949/50: 516). This conscious human effort is informed by the existence of certain explicitly political virtues, namely 'prudence' and 'moderation' – both rooted in an *über*-virtue of self-interest, or perhaps more accurately a pursuit of happiness based in satisfaction of the needs of the self, an Epicurean notion updated by Morgenthau to the age of the nation-state and beyond. Where claims based in justice obscure the element of self-interest in the appeal to universalism, the political virtues embrace it as the foundation of their appeals to universality. For Morgenthau, the self-interest of the state is a positive value and an admirable aim, if not the very basis for moral statecraft, in that the statesman has a duty to preserve the well-being of those he represents. Defining that self-interest in the

context of an existing international society, and determining the content of a theory of moral behaviour, is consequent upon recognising the priority of the interest of the state, while always acknowledging the necessity of the lesser evil as opposed to the technical standard of Thrasymachus or the shifting morality of Machiavelli (or Carr).

Moral behaviour for Morgenthau in international relations proceeds from a sense of proportion. Thus it is hubris that Morgenthau, agreeing with the 'Greek tragedians and biblical prophets', identifies as a primary example of a political vice and moral danger against which leaders should be warned (1962c: 326). Without the correct perspective, or at least an informed opinion, the pathology of power leads to this identification of ruthless power with virtue – the Thrasymachian perspective – (Jackson 2005) and to 'moral delusions' and 'intellectual errors' that direct nations to disaster. Prudence and moderation are the political virtues of perspective and proportion respectively and represent the best means to avoid disasters related to hubris and moral delusion.

As Morgenthau wrote, '[n]o one can be certain before the event which choice is morally right and politically sound', and the only, and admittedly imperfect means by which to even approximate the correct moral action is to follow the dictates of prudence, which he defines as the ability to make morally responsible decisions in international politics (1962b: 16; see also Murray 1997: 11; Frei 2001). Prudence was also a key virtue for both Epicurus and Aristotle, with Epicurus identifying it as a quality virtue more important than philosophy itself: 'the beginning and the greatest good is prudence... for from prudence are sprung all the other virtues' (1926: 91). Aristotle's take on prudence (*phronesis*) as practical wisdom is a much more developed and satisfactory concept in terms of understanding how the political actor can act in an ethical manner. Practical wisdom is an imprecise quality, the importance of which lies in its capacity to inform choice in an undetermined situation (1984a: 1801). That choice should be informed by a desire to achieve the good: 'we think Pericles and men like him have practical wisdom, viz. because they can see what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general' (1800).

For both Morgenthau and Aristotle the importance of practical wisdom lies in its ability therefore to allow moral judgment. In an ideal situation this would result for Aristotle in the achievement of the Golden Mean, whereas in the pragmatic sense (informed by the tragedy of Man being unable to reconcile his wish for transcendence with his all too human being) for Morgenthau, it is better to conceive of prudence as a species of reasoning designed to effect the lesser evil. Prudence is in effect the means by which moral aspirations can be filtered through the particular circumstances of political life. The example Morgenthau uses is that of liberty: the individual may choose to sacrifice himself to such a notion, but a state may not, due to the competing and superior moral principle of national survival. Thus although liberty is a universal moral value, the prudent moral choice in this instance is to choose survival over a commitment to an

abstraction (albeit an important one) like the imperative to protect or spread liberty in other nations. The centrality of prudence, to the existence and operation of a distinct political morality is vital:

There can be no political morality without prudence; that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action. Realism, then, considers prudence – the weighing of the consequences of alternative political associations – to be the supreme virtue in politics. Ethics in the abstract judges action by its conformity with the moral law; political ethics judges action by its political consequences. (Morgenthau 1978: 10–11)

This centrality of prudence is also found in Aristotle, who argues that the very possibility of being good, ethically or politically, is rooted in practical wisdom. Prudence in itself, however, is insufficient to ground ethics in politics, what is also necessary is a moral purpose, of necessity a minimal moral purpose given the nature of the international society, which Morgenthau finds in the concept of the ‘national interest’. If prudence is the cardinal political-ethical virtue, the national interest is its imperative.

The Observance of the National Interest as a form of Moral Dignity

The national interest is a special case of the second of Morgenthau’s six principles of political realism. The second principle revolves around the concept of interest in general, i.e., that the ‘main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power’. Morgenthau’s assumption is that ‘statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power, and history bears that assumption out’ (1978: 5). This idea of the national interest is the fundamental basis for an international community. It is a role that Morgenthau invests with particular significance describing it in terms of its ‘moral dignity’. It also provides the basis for a genuine understanding of the nature of moral choices at the level of the international:

The equation of political moralising with morality and of political realism with immorality is itself untenable. The choice is not between moral principles and the national interest, devoid of moral dignity, but between one set of moral principles divorced from political reality, and another set of moral principles derived from political reality. (1951: 33)

The ‘moralistic detractors’ who refuse to see the ethical necessity of the national interest are guilty of ‘both intellectual error and moral perversion’ due to their insistence on ‘a standard of action alien to the nature of the action itself’. The perversion is threefold: (1) the inappropriate nature of the ethical evaluation,

(2) the costs of realising an 'idealist' foreign policy would destroy the very values that prompt intervention, (3) idealism denies any validity to any moral framework other than itself, 'placing the stigma of immorality upon the theory and practice of power politics' (33). A commitment to the lesser evil in the service of the national interest has the advantage of being realisable and of being consistent with the norms of existing international society. The national interest can, in short, serve as the basis for the universal recognition of particular interests, and therefore, of their accommodation. Morgenthau is here endorsing a type of 'situational ethics' in which the strict application of Christian ethics (a saintly ethic) is replaced by an alternative ethic in which the question is not 'how do I act to achieve salvation'? In situational ethics, according to Morgenthau, 'you have to ask yourself, "What is possible for the average man who is not a saint, who doesn't aspire to sainthood, under the concrete conditions under which he lives?"' (Lang 2004: 95). Morgenthau's adaptation of Aristotle's and Epicurus' concepts allows a reconceptualisation not only of the nature and possibility of international ethics, but also allows for the accommodation of politics and ethics in the concept of international society.

Civilisation as the Locus of Political Ethics

International community can be seen as predicated on the concrete plurality of conflicting and complementary interests. Civilisations are the community of interests. The lust for power is an ever present reality in this community of interests, as various (though not necessarily all) parties clash in their attempts to secure or retain power. This we may term, following the first part of Morgenthau's subtitle to *Politics Among Nations*, 'the struggle for power'. It is clear how the 'struggle for power' fits into the realist political theory of international relations; what has been forgotten or elided is the second part of the subtitle, 'the struggle for peace'. Peace also has a major role to play in realist theory as it is through peace that the 'rational' community of interests can best be served. This preference is a result of the convergence of the demands of morality and politics in the 'Nuclear Age' when, given the risks of escalation, war is no longer usable as an instrument of policy (1957: 502; see also Campbell 2003).

The social expression of the ethics of the lesser evil is the fragile concept of civilisation, itself a product of the revolt against power. Civilisation may be understood as the product of the community of interests. Alliances, trading blocs, even international law and the norms of statecraft and diplomacy are rooted in a desire to control the effects of the lust for power and the preservation of communal order in the face of various attempts to replace the society of states by hegemony, or the effects of war on the state system. The initial impetus of this society of interests is, of course, self-interest, but norms and laws increase in power over time with moral rules becoming embedded not only in the formal

structures of international relations, but in the activities of international relations (Lebow 2003: 239). Again, this is compatible with an Epicurean sense of the advantage of arranging relations according to interest, to the extent that the accommodation of 'advantage' has 'the guarantee of justice', so long as it 'accords with the general principle' (Epicurus 1926: 105). There is a disparity between the discourse of international morality and the reality of international morality, but there is without doubt an important moral component to the practice of statecraft:

They [statesmen] refuse to consider certain ends and to use certain means, either altogether or under certain conditions, not because in the light of expediency they appear impractical or unwise but because certain moral rules interpose an absolute barrier. Moral rules do not permit certain policies to be considered at all from the point of view of expediency. Certain things are not being done on moral grounds, even though it would be expedient to do them. Such ethical inhibitions operate in our time on different levels with different effectiveness. (Morgenthau 1978: 237)

One might refer to Morgenthau's ethics as a theory of the limits of power politics as opposed to a theory of pure power politics. On the one hand there is the idea of expedience, in which the practice of power is determined solely according to a technical rationale that permits no moral or ethical input – the realm of Rome's total destruction of Carthage or the Nazis use of 'firing squads and extermination camps'. On the other hand there is an ethical rationale for the use of power in international politics in which power is conceived not in terms of expediency, but rather in terms of limitation, which 'derives from an absolute moral principle, which must be obeyed regardless of considerations of national advantage' (240). Even the national interest must recognise higher moral obligations once the purely technical standard is abandoned, leading to the sacrifice of the national interest when 'its consistent pursuit would necessitate the violation of an ethical principle, such as the prohibition of mass killing in times of peace' (Morgenthau 1948b: 82). Morgenthau therefore goes beyond simple advantage, and allows for a moral evolution, that in itself is in accordance with the Epicurean notion of moral evolution from some distant point in the past, i.e., 'we must suppose that human nature too was taught and constrained to do many things of every kind merely by circumstances; and that later on reasoning elaborated what had been suggested by nature and made further inventions' (Epicurus 1926: 47).

International relations then skirts between two standards, an ethical standard informed by prudence, which aims at the lesser evil, and an unethical, merely technical standard. The emergence of the two standards is related to the *animus dominandi* that undergirds much of Morgenthau's realism. Hobbes' war of all against all does not characterise the international system because, 'the very threat of a world where power reigns not only supreme, but without rival, engenders that revolt against power which is as universal as the aspiration for power

itself'. Over time, argues Morgenthau, the ethical standard, informed by a 'moral conscience' has come to the fore, best exemplified by 'the attempts to bring the practice of states into harmony with moral principles through international agreements' (1978: 231, 243). This moral quality of international politics may be ignored or violated, but it is there nonetheless as a permanent and vital aspect of international life. As such, Morgenthau recognises that humanity has moved beyond the condition of injustice that Epicurus paints of rival tribes of men 'which have been unable or unwilling to make compacts not to harm or be harmed' (Epicurus 1926: 103).

The greatest threat to the moral quality of international politics comes not from the practice of power, but rather the development of modernity itself, and in particular modern warfare which in its commitment to and capability for destruction and ideological fanaticism 'has been too strong for the moral convictions of the modern world to resist' (Morgenthau 1978: 245). The conduct of war is symptomatic of a wider moral malaise in the international system for Morgenthau, who posits a crucial difference between the 'ethical system' of early modernity, informed by agreement about aristocratic mores and norms, and the deterioration that results from a substitution of democratic for aristocratic ideals, resulting in the replacement of a universal, aristocratic perspective by particular, conflicting, nationalistic perspectives on the conduct of international politics (1948: 96). The prospect of nuclear holocaust was such that it provokes a refiguring of the very existence of Man, 'throwing life back upon itself' (1961: 233). All that is left in the shadow of the Bomb is a relentless self-indulgence and narcissism (Rosenthal 1991: 162). The crisis of modernity in moral terms can only be understood in the context of a declining moral framework – if anything in his works Morgenthau laments the deterioration of a moral standard in international politics rather than advocating an immoral or amoral approach.

Conclusion

Morgenthau's dissatisfaction with the liberal 'moralistic detractors' of his age proved to be the spur to his development of an alternative to modern ethics rooted in the ethics of Ancient Greece. The most significant aspects of this is that in contrast to Kantian and utilitarian ethics, Morgenthau's ethics reintroduce to ethical debate the primacy of the political, and as a consequence of this the political nature of the choices actors have to make in politics and international relations. For both Aristotle and Morgenthau, ethics is to be found not in the observance of universal laws derived either from abstract principle or expedience, but rather in the application of intellect to, as Aristotle puts it, 'that which may be otherwise'. Whereas Kant and the Machiavellian, *Machtpolitik* traditions insist in effect on freedom from choice (follow the law of reason or of expedience) Aristotle and Morgenthau insist on the centrality of making choices according to context and capability.

Politics restricts voluntary action in that the international society provides its actors with a limited array of options, this is in keeping with Aristotle's belief that choice or its absence must be borne in mind as a part of ethical reasoning: 'For the involuntary if base or bad is not blamable, if good is not praiseworthy, but only the voluntary . . . men may do bad acts under compulsion but no one chooses them under compulsion,' no one that is except the wicked (1984c:1945). At moments of crisis, as Morgenthau and his Greek predecessors point out, the choice is restricted to greater and lesser evil. Moral praise or blame can only be attached in such an instance if the actor has power to do something better. If an actor is compelled to do something, he cannot be held morally at fault, as his action is a consequence of being forced to do it. Moral culpability only applies if the actor chooses a greater evil over a lesser evil. For Aristotle this is what it actually meant to be considered good or bad. It is in this moment of having to choose that the true nature of ethics is revealed not to be the end, as in Machiavellism, nor is it the nature of the act in terms of the importance of means or accordance with a moral law as in Kantianism. Rather, it is from what a person chooses to do from the range of options available to him or her that allows us to judge the person and his or her actions: '[I]t is from a man's choice that we judge his character – that is from the object for the sake of which he acts, not from the act itself. Similarly, badness brings it about that we choose the opposite object', following this logic he must choose the lesser evil (Aristotle 1984c:1945).

An academic theory based on the reformulation of the ethics of political life according to the lesser evil is not going to stop Hamas launching rockets into Israel, or Israel launching a massive retaliation in response to these attacks. What it does provide is a powerful alternative means for theorists of IR to understand the nature of politics and morality. It also provides us with the ability to identify which actors have been prudent and guided by the lesser evil and which actors have not, which actors have chosen not to be prudent and moderate but have instead chosen to abuse their power. A positive consequence of restoring politics to our understanding of moral possibility while not disavowing ethics completely, is that the ethics of the lesser evil provides us with the ability to recognise the existence of others not solely in terms of abstract rights, but also in terms of practical realities. In the ethics of the lesser evil, political and moral actions obey a more pragmatic code rooted in prudence, not in understandings rooted in moral, legal or political perfectibility. The lesser evil is a robust and realistic ethic, which even a politician operating in that paradigmatically corrupt profession can achieve, when an ethic of sainthood, or its secular equivalent, the categorical imperative, is impossible, and hence largely irrelevant to those outside the academy. It also offers an alternative means of understanding the ethics of politics than the 'end justifies the means' expedience based *realpolitik* or the hybrid Machiavellian utilitarianism Morgenthau detected at the heart of E. H. Carr's attempt to create a political ethics.⁷ Morgenthau therefore seeks to reaffirm the ethical dimension of politics, and the political dimension of ethics

and in doing so provides the foundation for an alternative understanding of the moral-political universe.

Acknowledgments

This article is based in part on an earlier work published in 2008: Seán Molloy, 'Hans J. Morgenthau versus E. H. Carr: Conflicting Conceptions of Ethics in Realism,' in D. Bell (ed.), *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). An earlier version of the paper was presented at the workshop, 'Rethinking the Realist Tradition', organised by Lucian M. Ashworth and Columba Peoples in Limerick, 2007. The paper has benefited from the advice and comments of Duncan Bell, the Limerick workshop participants and the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal*.

Notes

- ¹ The obvious place to start in order to understand Morgenthau's relationship to Aristotle and the extent to which Morgenthau agrees with and often parts company with Aristotle are his lectures on Aristotle which have been edited and contextualised by Tony Lang (2004).
- ² Murray identifies both Morgenthau and Niebuhr as transcendent realists and Kennan as a religious realist (Murray 1997: 31). Murray's article (1996) is a very good exposition of the Judaeo-Christian, specifically the Augustinian, element of Morgenthau's ethics. The most impressive and sustained account of the desire for transcendence in Morgenthau's work is that of Benjamin Molloy (2002). Molloy roots this desire for a transcendent category in Morgenthau's religiosity, specifically his Jewish faith, which provides the pre-political and meta-political standpoint from which to appraise politics morally, in both the *ought* and *is* dimensions (58). According to Haslam (2002: 192) the early Morgenthau was more willing to accept a relativist basis for shifting norms. The presence of a transcendent perspective also qualifies the claims of Michael Williams (2005) that Morgenthau is engaged in the development of a Weberian 'ethics of responsibility'. Morgenthau's consistent anti-Machiavellianism also calls into question Beitz's identification of a moral scepticism in realist thought from Machiavelli via Hobbes to Morgenthau (Beitz 1999).
- ³ This is one of the central themes of *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*. For Aristotle's interpretation of the relationship between rational and irrational parts of Man see *Nicomachean Ethics* (1984a: 1741 ff.; 1984b: 2115). It is important to note that Aristotle considers the rational part to be the superior and as such the irrational part should obey it. Morgenthau, influenced perhaps by Freud, sees human reason as an island in a dark and stormy sea (Molloy 2006: 87, 167; Schuett 2007). The relationship between the rational and irrational in Morgenthau's work is therefore very different, culminating in his call in the fifth edition of *Politics Among Nations* for a 'counter-theory' of politics stressing the role of irrationality in human affairs. See also Christoph Frei's (2001) interesting take on the influence of Nietzsche on Morgenthau's intellectual development, especially with regard to the relationship between politics, rationality and morality.
- ⁴ Although the ideal in Aristotle's conception of the lesser evil is to avoid both vices of excess and deficit, he recognises that 'of the extremes one is more erroneous, one less so; therefore, since to hit the mean is hard in the extreme, we must as a second best, as people say, take the least of the evils' (1984a: 1751). Only those adept in the art of finding the perfect mean can achieve this feat: 'to find the middle of a circle is not for everyone but for him who knows; so, too, any one can get angry – that is easy – or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way, that is not

for every one, nor is it easy; that is why goodness is both rare and laudable and noble'. Only practical wisdom (*phronesis* or prudence) can provide a man with the means to be good in a political-ethical sense, in the same manner as geometric wisdom can provide him with the means to find the centre of a circle (1751).

⁵ This attitude towards deontological prescription, whether Christian or liberal, leads me to question the attribution of a dominant Judaeo-Christian ethic in Morgenthau's work beyond an identification of the power of Augustine's political thought and the existence of God. See on this point Murray (1997: 133) and Roger Epp (1991).

⁶ Roger Spegele (1996: 195) has noted the potential of attenuating what he calls neo-Kantian non-cognitivism with the Aristotelian tradition of ethics, culminating in what he terms Evaluative Political Realism.

⁷ I deal with Carr's interesting attempts to create an accommodation between politics and morality in Molloy (2008).

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