

Political Realism and Moral Corruption

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Abstract

The realist tradition is often regarded as taking conflict and power to be constitutive of politics, rejecting as “utopian” those approaches which seem to deny this fact, and prioritizing the requirements of political order and stability over the demands of justice. To the extent that self-styled realists affirm these commitments, as they often do, their doing so has left them open to the charge that their theoretical approach amounts to little more than a series of status quo-justifying rationalizations that cast doubt on the validity and strictness of our moral duties. The paper begins by using some philosophical insights from Immanuel Kant and current psychological findings on motivated reasoning to unpack this charge, accepting the moral seriousness of the concerns raised but arguing that these problems are not particular to realists. The remainder of the paper analyzes examples from the works of Thucydides, E.H. Carr, and Hans Morgenthau, attempting to show that political realists have a profound awareness of the corrupting effects of rationalization that echoes and extends Kant’s worries and anticipates contemporary psychological findings. Not only do political realists unmask and diagnose these rationalizing tendencies in the seemingly uncompromising arguments of their “idealist” targets; they also identify realist pathologies of moral corruption that help us to recognize the particular ways in which *realist* arguments may rationalize existing power relations and affirm the status quo by default rather than by design.

1 Introduction

The charge that realism is little more than “an apologia for power and a rationalization for the status quo” may be “a tired old cliché,”¹ but it is a persistent one. The realist tradition is often regarded as taking conflict and power to be constitutive of politics, rejecting as “utopian” those approaches which seem to deny this fact, and prioritizing the requirements of political order and stability over the demands of justice. To the extent that self-styled realists affirm these commitments, as they often do, their doing so has left them open to the charge that their theoretical approach amounts to little more than a series of self-serving and system-justifying rationalizations that cast doubt on the validity and strictness of our moral duties. These criticisms have come from a variety of theoretical perspectives. From an external and critical orientation, R.B.J Walker contends that the realist tradition in International Relations (IR) “has often degenerated into little more than an antipolitical apology for cynicism and physical force” (1987, 70). More sympathetic to the realist tradition, at least in its classical incarnation, Richard Ned Lebow charges that contemporary realism “offers an intellectual justification for a range of policies at odds with core democratic and humanitarian commitments” and has provided a rhetoric of private and public rationalization for American presidents, secretaries of state, and national security advisors since the beginning of the Cold War (2003, 16-18). Similar criticisms have been waged against contemporary realists in political theory. Questioning whether realism can be made compatible with forms of radical critique, Patchen Markell notes that one of the roles that the language of realism played in postwar American politics was that of “collapsing...the space for serious challenges to major social and political institutions” (2010, 176). Mark Philp (2012) worries along somewhat different lines that the closeness of realists to the world of political practice means that, like politicians, they risk becoming victims of the seductive and judgment-eroding effects of power.

However, the most stinging indictment comes from the heart of the realist tradition itself. In a 1948 review of *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, Hans Morgenthau accuses E.H. Carr of lacking a “transcendent point of view from which to survey the political scene and to appraise the phenomenon of power.” In spite of himself, Carr had become a “utopian of power” whose theory provides an apparently reasonable justification for the view that “whoever holds seeming superiority of power becomes of necessity the repository of superior morality as well.” Carr had been corrupted by power because he was “philosophically so ill-equipped” and lacked the transcendent evaluative standard that a moral education would have provided. Dealing his final blow, Morgenthau concludes that Carr might have avoided this corruption if he had learned “from the fate of the political romantics of whom the outstanding representatives are Adam Müller and Carl Schmitt” (1948a, 134). What Morgenthau’s critique shares with the others is the worry that the apparently reasoned arguments of realists may in fact be nothing more than rationalizations for the status quo and apologies for the inclinations and interests of the powerful.

This paper argues that Morgenthau is not alone among realists attentive to these con-

¹See Michael Cox’s endorsement of Scheuerman (2009).

cerns. Other political realists like Thucydides and even Carr are more attuned to the dangers of rationalization and apology than is often supposed. The paper proceeds in four parts. Section 2 uses Immanuel Kant's account of moral corruption to unpack the normative worries about rationalization and apology that seem to inform familiar critiques of realism. It then reviews the psychological literature on motivated reasoning and concludes that Kant and realism's critics have identified a genuine problem, though hardly one particular to realists. Sections 3 through 5 analyze examples from the works of Thucydides, Carr, and Morgenthau, attempting to show that political realists have a profound awareness of the corrupting effects of rationalization that echoes and extends Kant's worries and anticipates some of the findings in contemporary social, moral, and cognitive psychology. Not only do political realists unmask and diagnose these rationalizing tendencies in the seemingly uncompromising arguments of their "idealist" subjects and targets; they also identify *realist* pathologies of moral corruption that help us to recognize the particular ways in which realist arguments may rationalize existing power relations and affirm the status quo by default rather than by design.

2 The Charge of Moral Corruption

In order to understand what is at stake in this persistent critique of realism, we first need to grasp what rationalization looks like and why it might be cause for moral concern. Immanuel Kant offers powerful answers to these questions in his account of moral corruption in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). He first acknowledges that our everyday intuitions about moral problems are generally right. When wrestling with questions of conscience and duty, those who rely on their "common reason, or everyday judgment, "may even have as good a hope of hitting the mark as any philosopher whatever can promise himself." In fact, because the philosopher does not have access to any principles not available to common reason and because he is liable to become distracted by irrelevant considerations, everyday judgment may in fact be the more reliable guide. "Would it therefore not be more advisable in moral matters," asks Kant, "to leave the judgment of common reason as it is?" If common reason is so reliable, why embark on the project of moral philosophical deliberation? Kant's answer is worth quoting at length:

There is something splendid about innocence; but what is bad about it, in turn, is that it cannot protect itself very well and is easily seduced. Because of this, even wisdom—which otherwise consists in conduct than in knowledge—still needs science, not in order to learn from it but in order to provide access and durability for its precepts. The human being feels within himself a powerful counterweight to all the commands of duty, which reason represents to him as so deserving of the highest respect—the counterweight of his needs and inclinations, the entire satisfaction of which he sums up under the name happiness. Now reason issues its precepts unremittingly, without thereby promising anything to the inclinations, and so, as it were, with disregard and contempt for those claims, which are

so impetuous and besides so apparently equitable (and refuse to be neutralized by any command). But from this there arises a *natural dialectic*, that is, a propensity to rationalize against those strict laws of duty and to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness, and, where possible, to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations, that is, to corrupt them at their basis and to destroy all their dignity—something that even common practical reason cannot, in the end, call good (1996, 59-60).

We cannot rely on our everyday moral judgments, then, because they are easily manipulated.² These manipulations should hardly surprise us because the demands of morality admit no compromises. They oppose our needs and inclinations—whose satisfaction is what we understand as happiness—and promise them nothing in return. As a result, we have a tendency to develop rationalizations that chip away at the strictness and validity of our moral duties in order to reconcile them with our needs and inclinations. This kind of corruption strikes at the very foundation of the moral laws, perverting their status and content, destroying “all their dignity” and durability, and leaving us with little reason to respect them. Kant’s further suggestion is that moral corruption is the result of innocence, or uneducated moral judgments. Philosophical education protects us against moral corruption by helping us to distinguish between rationalizations and rational moral arguments, both in our own deliberations and in those we have with others.

Kant’s argument about moral corruption confronts us with a serious normative worry. Yet perhaps his argument seems too extreme, especially to those who do not share his rigorist commitments. Why, then, should the rest of us be concerned about the corrupting effects of rationalization? The primary reason is that their subtlety systematically obscures abuse. “If one can twist or pervert otherwise plausible moral claims to a corrupt end,” argues Stephen Gardiner, “then one can both hoodwink some into thinking they do right when they do wrong, and also provide moral cover for the more discerning.” There are two serious worries that follow from this. First, the rhetoric of morality is a powerful motivational force and can propel many people to what they see as righteous action, sometimes with disastrous consequences. Second, and arguably worse, “in a situation in which the moral requirements are otherwise clear, the discerning will be reluctant to go against them without some (at least vaguely) plausible rationale for doing so” (Gardiner, 2011, KL 4773). Effective and compelling rationalizations allow the discerning to avoid moral duties while still appearing righteous. Even more disturbingly, such rationalizations can provide plausible ways to denounce these moral duties as actually immoral. At their worst, then, rationalizations spur some to ill-conceived and potentially dangerous actions and provide others with powerful justifications or apologies for immoral behavior.

I take these to be the worries that are at the root of persistent criticisms of realism as a rationalization of the status quo and an apology for power. Because realist arguments about the inescapability of conflict or the necessity of prioritizing order over justice often

²I have found Gardiner’s (2011) exegesis of this passage, which is done with an eye to its practical political significance, especially helpful and I draw on it here and in the discussion of the normative significance of moral corruption below.

appear reasonable, they may induce well-intentioned people to defend unjust distributions of power. Worse still, such arguments may provide the more discerning with both moral cover for nakedly self-interested policies and rhetorical tools for denouncing idealist alternatives as immoral. We might have cause to worry not only that realists themselves are caught in a moral delusion, but also that their apparently reasonable arguments might infect and corrupt their sympathetic readers.

Beyond presenting us with a normative worry, Kant's argument also contains two descriptive claims: (1) we have a tendency to rationalize in order to make the conclusions of our moral deliberations more consistent with our needs and inclinations; and (2) moral philosophical education will remedy this tendency. There is robust psychological evidence for the first claim. A growing number of studies of everyday judgment suggest that motivational factors like hopes and fears exert a powerful influence on the reasoning process. We are motivated, for example, to reach conclusions that confirm our pre-existing opinions, affirm our self-characterizations, and point to positive outcomes for ourselves. These kinds of motivations may bias reasoning steps such as the memory search for relevant knowledge, the choice of statistical heuristics, and the evaluation of scientific or other expert research (Kunda, 1990). For instance, we tend to subject preference-inconsistent evidence—such as an undesirable medical diagnosis—to much more scrutiny than preference-consistent evidence (Ditto and Lopez, 1992; more generally, see Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch and Lockhart, 1998; Kunda, 1987; Tabor and Lodge, 2006). While these findings seem to confirm Francis Bacon's dictum that "man always believes more readily that which he prefers" (1902, 26), we cannot simply reach any conclusion we happen to like. Rather, when people engage in motivated reasoning, they "attempt to be rational and to construct a justification of their desired conclusion that would persuade a dispassionate observer" (Kunda, 1990, 483). We rely on our rational capacities to discriminate among more or less persuasive conclusions and to frame our arguments in ways that make them acceptable to others. This process may appear objective, even to the individual deliberator, but this can be an illusion. Given different preferences, the deliberator might access other information, rely on alternate principles, devote more scrutiny to particular kinds of evidence, and perhaps even reach contrary conclusions (Kunda, 1990).

Findings in social, moral, and cognitive psychology suggest that motivation does not only influence positive and descriptive beliefs but also normative ones, and much along the lines Kant suggests. Because subjective preferences are not persuasive grounds for moral judgments, we have to appeal to reasons if we want to convince others that our conclusions are correct. Emotions and automatic intuitions may generate moral judgments for which reasons provide only a post hoc justification. Instead of deliberating as judges attempting to reach the truth, we deliberate as lawyers trying to find the best reasons to justify an intuition (Haidt, 2001). For instance, when confronted with a story about an isolated instance of sibling incest in which both parties are of age, are not coerced, take measures to prevent pregnancy, and are happy with their decision afterward, most subjects will immediately conclude that the siblings did something wrong and will then attempt to justify this conclusion by appealing to the standard moral objections to incest. However, as the scenario rules out objections like

the absence of meaningful consent, the dangers of inbreeding, and the possibility of emotional harm, many subjects quickly exhaust available reasons and are left “morally dumbfounded.” They are unable to account for their moral judgments (Haidt, 2001; Haidt and Hersh, 2001). At least in cases of strong taboos, instinctual disgust, or pronounced emotional investment, what looks like moral deliberation may simply be post hoc rationalization of our intuitions. Yet it is difficult to conceive of realist commitments as being motivated or self-serving in this way. Without elaborate and contorted psychoanalytic maneuvering, one would be hard-pressed to uncover the strong taboos or automatic intuitions that might motivate typically realist commitments.

However, realists may be motivated by a cognitive and affective need not anticipated by Kant. Some social and political psychologists have suggested that we have a Panglossian need to defend and justify the political, economic, and social status quo. There is evidence that people will rationalize the status quo even when it violates their individual or group self-interest. System justification is a form of motivated moral reasoning consciously or unconsciously aimed at defending, justifying, and bolstering “aspects of the status quo, including existing social, economic, and political institutions and arrangements” (Jost and van der Toorn, 2012; see also Jost, Banaji and Nosek, 2004). Evidence of this kind of motivated moral reasoning can be found both among high- and low-status groups. Indeed, the presence of a system-justifying motive may help to explain patterns of depressed entitlement, internalized inferiority, and out-group favoritism among those who are disadvantaged by the status quo (Rudman, Feinberg and Fairchild, 2002; Pelham and Hetts, 2001; Jost, 1997; Jost and Banaji, 1994). There is also evidence that individuals will rationalize a current or imminent status quo that violates their antecedent preferences. For instance, in a study conducted during the 2000 Bush-Gore presidential campaign, Aaron Kay et al. found that both Republicans and Democrats engaged in “sweet lemon” rationalizations, increasing their normative judgment about the desirability of *either* election outcome as its (experimentally-manipulated) likelihood increased (Kay, Jimenez and Jost, 2002; see also Elster, 1983).³ Proponents of system-justification theory argue that such rationalizations have a palliative effect, reducing “feelings of uncertainty, distress, guilt, frustration, helplessness, cognitive dissonance, and moral outrage brought on by social inequality and other potential system deficiencies” (Jost and van der Toorn, 2012, 337; see also Jost, Wakslak and Tyler, 2008; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan and Laurin, 2008; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler and Chen, 2007). These findings suggest that Kant’s worries about moral corruption might not be misplaced. In some circumstances, our moral reasons merely serve as cover for our needs and inclinations. Furthermore, given that we may have an inclination to justify the status quo, we have cause to worry not only about weakening the moral law and corrupting the well-intentioned, but

³Evidence of anticipatory adjustment to a new status quo goes some way to eliminating an alternative explanation for status quo justification—learning and experience. There is always the possibility that even if ex ante preferences do not favor a status quo (especially a new or imminent one), living with it for a while causes agents to update their preferences. Status quo justifications would then be the result of learning and experience (updating), rather than “habituation and resignation (adaptive preferences)” (Elster, 1983, 113). Evidence of *anticipatory* adjustments to the status quo is therefore powerful, as it rules out the possibility of preference updating as a result of learning and experience.

also about the persistence of systemic injustice unchecked by moral outrage.

There would seem to be less definitive support for Kant's second descriptive claim that a philosophical education will remedy the tendency toward moral corruption. Kant's claim seems intuitively plausible. Surely rigorous training in the techniques of moral reasoning protects philosophers, and particularly ethicists, from the kinds of unwanted biases that require post hoc rationalizations. Yet could it not just as easily be the case that years of moral philosophical education simply make one a more adept rationalizer? Friedrich Nietzsche quipped that while philosophers claim to reach the truth through "a cold, pure, divine unconcerned dialectic," they really rely on assumptions and hunches, "most often a desire of the heart that has been filtered and made abstract...that they defend with reasons they have sought after the fact. They are all advocates who resent that name, and for the most part even wily spokesmen for their prejudices which they baptize 'truths'" (2000, 202-3). Nietzsche's suggestion is not only that philosophers are not immune from motivational bias, but also that they are expert rationalizers who are well-versed in the "subtle tricks of old moralists and preachers of morals" (2000, 203). New research in moral psychology suggests that at least some of this cynicism might be justified. Schwitzgebel and Cushman (2012) find evidence that philosophers are as susceptible as non-philosophers to order effects, a form of cognitive bias in which normative evaluations of hypothetical scenarios are influenced by the order in which those scenarios are presented. They also find some tentative evidence that philosophers may be more skilled than non-philosophers at post-hoc rationalization. In a related project, Schwitzgebel and Rust (2013) present evidence that the moral behavior of ethicists is no better than that of non-ethicists but find uneven evidence of an enhanced capacity for rationalization among those with moral philosophical training. We might tentatively conclude, then, that Kant's optimism about the transformative capacities of a moral philosophical education is unwarranted, but Nietzsche's picture of philosophers as highly skilled and cunning rationalizers may well be overdrawn.

In sum, Kant's worry about moral corruption is well-grounded. There is robust evidence that individuals have a tendency to engage in motivated moral reasoning to defend and justify their needs and inclinations. Among these is an inclination to justify and rationalize the status quo. However, there is nothing to suggest that realists are especially vulnerable to motivated moral reasoning. Rather, the evidence from social, moral, and cognitive psychology suggests that this is a general tendency whose expression depends on various contextual and dispositional factors that cut across political theoretical commitments (Jost and van der Toorn, 2012; Kay, Jimenez and Jost, 2002). Finally, even if realists were especially vulnerable to moral corruption, there is little evidence that this tendency could be remedied through increased exposure to the arguments and deliberative techniques of moral philosophy. Tempting as this solution might be to their critics, the problem of moral corruption will not be remedied by enrolling realists in a remedial ethics class.

This section has suggested that motivated moral reasoning is a general tendency, rather than one particular to realists. In the next three sections, I aim to defend the stronger claim that political realists like Thucydides, Carr, and Morgenthau are particularly attuned to the dangers of rationalization. Not only do they diagnose forms of motivated moral reasoning

in the seemingly uncompromising positions of their “idealist” subjects and targets, but they also demonstrate a reflexive awareness of the ways in which realist arguments are themselves vulnerable to moral corruption, often in more subtle ways than those identified by Kant and by many of their critics.

3 Thucydides: The Mytilenean Debate

Thucydides has long been read by International Relations scholars as an early structuralist who attributes the behavior of states entirely to the ordering principle of anarchy and the distribution of capabilities within in the international system (Waltz, 1959, 1979). While there is textual support for this structuralist appropriation⁴, it obscures the role of human nature, motivation, and irrationality in the *History* (Bagby, 1994; Ober, 2010). Thucydides identifies general tendencies in human nature that assert themselves most clearly in situations of profound desperation and high-stakes crises.⁵ These are also the occasions in which he suggests that we should expect to see the familiar pathologies of motivated reasoning. The case of the Melians offers a famous example. Faced with the desperate choice of incorporation into the Athenian empire or destruction at the hands of the Athenians, the Melians alleviate their psychological distress by engaging in a dangerous form of wishful thinking, entertaining the possibility that they may benefit from a last-minute Spartan rescue (5.84-115, 400-8; see also Ober, 2013; Jenkins, 2011; Orwin, 1994). The Melians refuse to surrender and are eventually destroyed. But they are hardly unique, and exhibit instead what Thucydides takes to be a more general tendency for men to unreflectively hope for what they want while using “the full force of reason in rejecting what they find unpalatable” (4.108, 303).

Such motivations do not only effect factual descriptions but also normative assessments. Consider Thucydides’ description of the civil war in Corcyra. In more peaceful and prosperous circumstances, when passions are calm and individuals are not “deprived of the power of satisfying their daily wants,” most will be able to exercise good judgment. However, the breakdown of laws and social conventions during the civil war in Corcyra brought “most people’s minds down to the level of their actual circumstances,” unleashing violent passions and eroding the capacity for sound judgment (3.82, 242). This erosion of judgment is accompanied by frightening ethical inversions. For example, the word “courage” came to denote “a thoughtless act of aggression” (3.82, 242). Contrary to what is suggested in most translations, the problem is not that words “had to change their usual meanings,” but that the words that had designated virtues were now applied to vices. When human judgment is corrupted by violent passions, Thucydides suggests, so too is “the very language of appraisal

⁴The textual support for structural explanations tends to rest heavily on the iconic passage in which Thucydides (1972, bk. I, ch. 23, p. 49) reveals “the real reason” for the Peloponnesian War: “What made the war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear that this caused in Sparta.” Subsequent references to this text will be given parenthetically in the following form: I.23, 49.

⁵There is a fierce debate in the secondary literature about whether or not Thucydides offers us a static account of human nature. I do not propose to adjudicate it here. For arguments that Thucydides’ conception of human nature is relatively static, see: Reinhold (1985); Pouncey (1980). For an argument that traits of human nature express themselves differently in different contexts, see: Reeve (1999).

on which judgment relies” (Reeve, 1999, 441). Situations of crisis are ripe, then, for the kind of rationalizations that Kant and critics of realism are worried about.

The Mytilenean debate offers an extended case study of motivated moral reasoning and the dangers of moral corruption. The debate is occasioned by the city of Mytilene’s unsuccessful revolt against the Athenian empire. The revolt had been carried out by the city’s ruling oligarchs on the promise of imminent aid from Sparta that never came. Besieged by the Athenians, abandoned by the Spartans, and with food reserves running low, the aristocratic few armed the many and prepared for combat. However, once armed, the lower classes refused to obey their oligarchic leaders and demanded the distribution of the remaining food reserves on the threat of surrender to Athens. Believing that they were unable to prevent this capitulation and worried about the outcome of an agreement reached without them, the oligarchs surrendered on the understanding that the people of Athens would decide their fate. Overwhelmed with anger, the Athenians “decided to put to death not only those now in their hands but also the entire adult male population of Mytilene, and to make slaves of the women and children” (3.36, 212). A ship was then hastily dispatched to deliver orders for the complete destruction of the Mytileneans. The next day, however, the Athenians were gnawed upon by feelings of remorse and a second debate was called so that they might reconsider their decision.

Thucydides reports that several speeches were delivered on both sides of the question, but he only presents two. The first is given by Cleon, who had championed the earlier decision at the last meeting and was known to have a reputation “for the violence of his character” (3.36, 212). The second is delivered by Diodotus, who had “vigorously opposed” the earlier motion (3.40, 217). Despite finding themselves on opposite sides of the issue, both Cleon and Diodotus begin their speeches by flagging the corrosive effects of motivation on political deliberation. Cleon begins his speech by claiming that decisions motivated by compassion are both morally blameworthy and politically dangerous. Athenians need to acknowledge that their “empire is a tyranny” exercised over unwilling subjects inclined to interpret any show of compassion as a failure of credible resolve (3.37, 213). The institution of democratic debate simply allows such dangerous motivations free reign and delays decisive action. Diodotus, for his part, affirms the value of democratic deliberation. However, he goes on to argue that the climate of debate in Athens, which rewards oratorical skill and persistently suspects politicians of being bribe-takers, demands that even well-intentioned speakers make deceptive arguments. Successful orators will be motivated to choose the most persuasive reasons, rather than the right ones, in making their case to the demos. The entire debate, then, is framed in a way that primes the reader to diagnose instances of motivated moral reasoning.

Cleon’s argument is virtually a textbook example. The heart of his case is that justice and interest happen to coincide in this instance. Both demand that the original decision be upheld: “Punish them as they deserve, and make an example of them to your other allies, plainly showing that revolt will be punished by death” (3.40, 217). The crime of the Mytileneans was a serious one. They enjoyed a privileged place within the Athenian empire and were comparatively well treated, but nonetheless opted to revolt. This action is best seen

as a serious act of aggression and justice demands the most severe punishment. A failure of resolve would set a dangerous precedent that would encourage future revolts (3.39-40, 215-7). To persuade the Athenians, Cleon makes two moves that seem aimed at eliciting a process of motivated moral reasoning. First, he urges his audience “not to be traitors to your own selves” and to imaginatively return to the emotional state first elicited by the revolt (3.40, 217). The right decision will only be reached “from the perspective of maximum anger” (Orwin, 1994, 144). Second, he casts any revision to the original decision as a deviation from the status quo. It is “the very worst thing,” he explains, “to pass measures and then not abide by them. We should realize that a city is better off with bad laws that remain fixed, than with good laws that are constantly being altered” (3.37, 213). Both the appeal to an instinctual and automatic emotional response and to the status quo seem ideally chosen to motivate the moral and political deliberation of the audience.

However, if Cleon’s arguments for vengeance under the cover of justice alert the reader to fairly overt pathologies of rationalization, Diodotus’ argument for leniency points to the more subtle dangers of moral corruption in a typically “realist” argument. These dangers are harder to identify because most readers, and certainly his Athenian audience, are inclined to agree with his conclusion that the initial decision was disproportionately harsh. Yet, as W. Robert Connor notes, “there is something very disquieting...underneath the surface of Diodotus’ speech” (1984, 87). Diodotus’ case rests on the claim that a harsh punishment for the Mytileneans is not in the interest of Athens. Such punishments do not deter crime, but will deter future surrenders. Many interpreters have been at pains to argue that there is a concern for justice lurking beneath this argument from interest (Kagan, 1975; Orwin, 1994).

Yet even if justice is Diodotus’ end, the terms of his argument effectively foreclose the possibility that political reasons could be anything more than rationalizations of collective self-interest. He begins his speech, as we have already noted, by claiming that the circumstances of public deliberation in Athens require that even well-intentioned speakers employ deception. And indeed Diodotus himself misrepresents the circumstances of the revolt when he inaccurately claims that, once armed, the Mytilenean masses surrendered to the Athenians (3.47, 222). He then goes on to argue, contrary to the established conventions of classical rhetoric, that questions of right are matters for the law and have no place in the political assembly, which must only be concerned with questions of interest and advantage (Connor, 1984). Finally, his argument for the ineffectiveness of deterrent punishment rests on an especially dark vision of human nature characterized by a drive for self-aggrandizement and an inescapable tendency toward over-reaching, neither of which can be reliably constrained by law or punishment (3.45, 220-1; see also Connor, 1984). This claim logically entails not only a policy of leniency toward the Mytileneans, who could not have behaved otherwise and whose harsh punishment would fail to deter others. It also amounts to an apology for the behavior of Athens, which can hardly be blamed for treating the pursuit of its imperial interests as an ultimate end (Orwin, 1984; Forde, 1986). If individuals and collectives are indeed so motivated, one has no choice but to appeal to their interests. In making his case for leniency, then, Diodotus adopts and cultivates motivations that may well not be his own, alienating his arguments from the ends of justice and right and planting them instead in

the ground of interest and expediency. In so doing, he commits himself to the position that political arguments, if they are to be effective, should be nothing more than rationalizations of self-interest and apologies for power.

The speech reveals the danger of political actors who seek to persuade others to peace in ways that undermine its long-term prospects, along with those of justice. Diodotus' arguments justify the larger status quo of the Athenian empire, even as they seek to reverse one of its most morally troubling decisions. While Thucydides shows himself to be fully aware of the rationalization involved in Cleon's argument, his position on Diodotus is less clear. Realists have often been accused of falling into precisely the form of rationalization enacted by Diodotus—advancing claims about human nature and collective self-interest that push them that concede too much to the status quo. Yet his attention to Diodotus' deception gives us reason to think that Thucydides understands and wants the reader to understand not only Cleon's failing but Diodotus' as well.

4 E.H. Carr: The Harmony of Interests

Like Thucydides, E.H. Carr offers an account of human nature and moral psychology that emphasizes the persistent possibility of irrationality. This conception is largely implicit in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (1939), Carr's contribution to the realist canon, but is explicitly laid out in his other works (Schuett, 2009). The best way to characterize this conception is as a rough and ready combination of a Freudian vision of the unconscious, a Nietzschean moral psychology, and a Marxist diagnosis of ideological illusion. From Freud, Carr borrows the argument that our own motivations are not always transparent to us. Freud, Carr argues, “has driven the last nail into the coffin of the ancient illusion that the motives from which men allege or believe themselves to have acted are in fact adequate to explain their action” (1986, 134). Our individual deliberations on both positive and normative questions may be motivated in ways that we neither acknowledge nor fully understand. From Nietzsche, Carr borrows the intuition that reason will not “always be the decisive force that determines political and social action. We have learned to penetrate deeply enough into the springs of human action to recognize that what appear on its surface as rational motives are often only rationalizations for our irrational impulses” (Carr, 1951). Once again, the conclusion that Carr is forced to draw is that what appear to others and even to ourselves as reasons may be nothing more than post-hoc rationalizations for shadowy motives. Yet while Carr acknowledges that “to unmask the irrational by stripping from it its hypocritical fig-leaf of false reason is a salutary and necessary task,” he refuses to join Nietzsche in his “panic flight from reason.” We will do ourselves nothing but harm “if we dethrone reason because reason has turned out to be less powerful or less self-sufficient than we thought” (Carr, 1951, 106). Carr's own commitments to democratic progress require that our faith in reason, though weakened, is nonetheless still justified. From the Marxist tradition, and particularly from its selective deployment in Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1936), Carr draws a rudimentary conception of ideological illusion. Reflecting back in the last years of his life, he explained that what had interested him in Marxism was not primarily the account of

the decline of capitalism but instead the Marxist “method of revealing the hidden springs of thought and action, and debunking the logical and moralistic façade generally erected around them” (as quoted in Haslam, 2000, 54; see also Jones, 1998). On this account, political reasons are always motivated by material interests. While these Freudian, Nietzschean, and Marxian lines of influence are neither neat nor entirely consistent, they all point to an acute awareness of the ways in which reasoning might be motivated by unconscious drives, irrational impulses, and material interests.

When we move from the behavior of individuals to that of states, Carr explains that we can only expect these drives, impulses, and interests to become more pronounced. Man compensates for his individual powerlessness by projecting his desire for self-assertion upward, identifying his ends with those of the state (Carr, 1964, 159).⁶ He will indulge behavior and emotions on the part of the state that he would condemn in the individual. Nevertheless, violations still require justification and human beings ultimately reject, at least consciously, “the doctrine that might makes right” (Carr, 1964, 145). One of the ways in which leaders, citizens, and political scientists overcome the dissonance between the moral commitments that they consciously affirm as individuals and the troubling self-assertion of their state is to discern in its actions the instantiation of “supposedly absolute and universal principles” (Carr, 1964, 87). Herein lie, for Carr, the psychological roots of utopianism. Leaders like the paradigmatically utopian Woodrow Wilson will rationalize the drives and material goals of their state by appealing to apparently absolute principles such as “national self-determination,” “free trade,” or “collective security,” whilst remaining genuinely blind to the ways in which these principles are merely “concrete expressions of particular conditions and interests” (Carr, 1964, 14). These utopian tendencies are especially pronounced among status quo states which benefit from the current distribution of power. The task of the realist is to unmask these apparently absolute principles as moralizing rationalizations for the drives and interests of states. Importing into political realism a strong dose of Karl Mannheim’s “sociology of knowledge,” Carr tasks the realist with demonstrating “that the intellectual theories and ethical standards of utopianism, far from being the expression of absolute and a priori principles, are historically conditioned, being both products of circumstances and interests and weapons framed for the furtherance of interests” (1964, 64). The realist must unmask the drives and interests lurking behind the utopian ideological smokescreen. Far from being an apology for power and a rationalization of the status quo, then, Carr’s realism is itself a dialectical check on these tendencies.

This becomes especially clear in his example of the doctrine of the harmony of interests. This doctrine was the ideological organizing principle of nineteenth-century liberalism. Carr explains that the doctrine emerged from the twin foundations of Jeremy Bentham’s ethical formula of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” and Adam Smith’s *laissez-faire* faith that the pursuit of self-interest felicitously produces a common good (1964, 23). For the most part, Carr contends, these ideas were largely discarded in their purest form by the

⁶Carr rightly acknowledges a debt to Reinhold Niebuhr here. Niebuhr: “The frustrations of the average man, who can never realise the power and the glory which his imagination sets as the ideal, makes him the more willing tool and victim of the imperial ambitions of his group. His frustrated individual ambitions gain a measure of satisfaction in the power and the aggrandisement of his nation” (Niebuhr, 2001, 18).

beginning of the twentieth century. Yet, he posits, “by one of the ironies of history, these half-discarded nineteenth-century assumptions reappeared, in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, in the special field of international politics, and there became the foundation stones of the new utopian edifice” (Carr, 1964, 26). Thus resurrected, the doctrine of the harmony of interests contended: (1) in serving themselves, states serve the shared interests of all humanity, (2) every state has an identical interest in peace; (3) rational discussion can bring states and their leaders to a consciousness of this shared interest, thereby avoiding conflict and war; and (4) war must therefore arise from miscalculation, or a “failure of understanding” (Carr, 1964, 25). For Carr, these assertions of an international harmony of interests are “an ingenious moral device invoked, *in perfect sincerity*, by privileged groups in order to justify and maintain their dominant position” (1964, 80). The Covenant of the League of Nations, for instance, though couched in progressive and universalist moral language, reflected the interests of the large powers. Liberal trade regimes, argued to be especially beneficial to poorer countries, primarily serve the interests of rich states. “Internationalism” is simply the latest disguise of the imperialism of the *Pax Britannica* (Carr, 1964; Smith, 1999). In short, the assertion of a harmony of interests between states is a vehicle for powerful states to justify the international status quo by couching the policies that support it in the language of a moralistic universalism.

For Carr, the normative worry about such rationalizations is that they legitimize potentially unlimited violence. The crucial step is a slippage from an *assumption* of a harmony of interests to an attempt to coercively *impose* such a harmony. The assumption becomes untenable when faced with “the unpalatable fact of a fundamental divergence of interest between nations desirous of maintaining the status quo and nations desirous of changing it” (Carr, 1964, 53). The inevitable conflicts of interest between status quo and revisionist states mean that a harmony of interests can no longer be assumed, but must instead be coercively created. This is done, Carr explains, by branding any state that seems to diverge from the established harmony as a pariah, “both irrational and immoral” (Carr, 1964, 53). The difficulty then becomes how to deal with those states whose behavior is a blatant challenge to any assertion of a harmony of interests. In the nineteenth century, the necessity of eliminating “unfit nations” formed the implicit core of European imperialism. “The harmony of interests was established through the sacrifice of ‘unfit’ Africans and Asiatics” (Carr, 1964, 49). Carr is openly concerned, therefore, with the potential for violence in system justifications “built on the sacrifice of the weaker brother” (Carr, 1964, 49). An international system in which revisionists are labeled as “unfit,” “pariahs,” or (in a familiar contemporary designation) “rogue states” is one in which almost unlimited violence can be waged to create a harmony of interests. Yet for Carr, the interwar utopians lack the “toughness” of their nineteenth-century counterparts. The solution of the former is to export democracy on the assumption that this is the only regime type in which public opinion can be prevailed upon to generate a genuine harmony of interests. The danger that Carr sees here is not violence and war, but rather the “sterility and disillusionment” that result from the transplantation of liberal democracy “to countries whose stage of development and whose practical needs [are] utterly different from those of Western Europe in the nineteenth century” (1964, 5). The

task of political realists is not only to expose the system-justifying ideology of the harmony of interests as an apology for power and rationalization of the status quo, but also to draw attention to its normative and practical dangers.

Yet like Thucydides, Carr is unwilling to protect realist arguments from normative scrutiny. Carr acknowledges the force of the familiar criticism that in her reaction against utopianism, her commitment to studying facts and events as they are, and her emphasis on the “irresistible strength of existing forces,” the political realist is always susceptible to “the inclination to deduce what should be from what is” (1964, 10-11). Realist arguments thus risk legitimizing a dangerous complacency. But for Carr, there is also a more subtle danger of moral corruption posed by the realist’s method of critique. As we have seen, Kant’s worry is that flexible and motivated uses of moral principles chip away at the dignity of the moral law and leave us with no reason to respect it. Carr identifies a different worry—that the project of perpetually unmasking the rationalizations of others prevents the political realist from identifying and defending genuine moral principles at all. The realist, he explains, “in denying any *a priori* quality to political theories, and in proving them to be rooted in practice, falls easily into a determinism which argues that theory, being nothing more than a rationalisation of conditioned and predetermined purpose, is a pure excrescence and impotent to alter the course of events” (Carr, 1964, 13).⁷ At its extreme, political realism leaves us with no “right of moral judgment” or grounds for principled and purposive political action (Carr, 1964, 89). The very way in which the political realist unmasks the system-justifying motivations and interests lurking behind state action makes it impossible for her to defend principled revisions to the status quo. Carr himself famously attempts to negotiate this danger by positing a precarious dialectical relationship between realism and utopianism, with each serving as a necessary and timely corrective to the other.

In attempting to avoid the dangers of status quo justification, then, Carr embraces a form of unmasking criticism that, as he acknowledges, threatens to reproduce the problem by another means. If all normative political arguments are seen as corrupted by interest, then no particular argument can easily be defended. In these circumstances, the realist is left without obvious grounds for pursuing political action of any sort. All proposals are suspect, and therefore the status quo is likely to continue by default, as no more obviously unjustified than any alternative. This is clearly not Carr’s intention, and his ambiguous statements about the need for utopianism show uncomfortable longings for the kind of certainty his practice of unmasking cannot easily ground or allow.

⁷Karl Mannheim, from whom Carr borrowed and adapted much of the conceptual apparatus of *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, had diagnosed a similar danger among early Marxists and perhaps never effectively escaped it himself: “in the measure that the various groups sought to destroy their adversaries’ confidence in their thinking by this most modern intellectual weapon of radical unmasking, they also destroyed, as all positions gradually come to be subjected to analysis, mans confidence in human thought in general” (1936, 41).

5 Hans Morgenthau: Nationalistic Universalism

While Hans Morgenthau ultimately attempts to resist these paralyzing conclusions, he offers a vision of human nature and moral psychology that resonates with the more Nietzschean strains in Carr's account. Morgenthau is explicit in his commitment that any plausible political theory must be grounded in an understanding of human psychology (1954). The psychological foundations of his political realism are uncomplicated. There are two immutable human drives: self-preservation and self-assertion. Self-preservation motivates man to secure the requirements of survival. Its goals include food, shelter, and security and it manifests itself most clearly in the instinct of self-defense (Morgenthau, 1946). Self-preservation, on Morgenthau's account, is rational and has natural limits. Once the requirements of survival have been met, the drive is satisfied. This is not true of self-assertion. While Morgenthau thinks that this drive may be directed toward any number of objects, it makes its political appearance as a "lust for power [that] manifests itself as the desire to maintain the range of one's own person with regard to others, to increase it, or to demonstrate it" (Morgenthau, 1946, 182; see also Frei, 2001; Petersen, 1999). This drive "would be satisfied only if the last man became an object of domination, there being nobody above or beside him, that is, if he became like God" (Morgenthau, 1946, 193). Together, self-preservation and self-assertion produce the intense conflicts and agonism that define the political condition. The fact that these drives are, for the most part, hidden from us means that we will often fail to recognize the ways in which they motivate our reasoning. Morgenthau explains:

[Our] interests and emotions are already determined when we start using our reasoning powers in the social sphere...Even when we seem to have an inner experience of reason deciding a conflict between interests and emotions which struggle for dominance within ourselves, we experience in truth the victory of the stronger interests and emotions, which at once lay hold of our reasoning faculties in order to justify themselves before the tribunal of reason. For even though man is dominated by interests and driven by emotional impulses, as well as motivated by reason, he likes to see himself primarily in the light of this latter, eminently human quality. Hence he gives his irrational qualities the earmarks of reason. What we call 'ideology' is the result of this process of rationalization (1946, 155).

Anticipating contemporary findings in social, moral, and cognitive psychology, Morgenthau thus hypothesizes that what we *experience* as reasoned deliberation may sometimes be motivated by drives, emotions, and interests that are not fully transparent to us.

When we attempt to deliberate about questions of justice, we can only expect these difficulties to become more pronounced. Morgenthau explains that even as man is governed by drives, emotions, and interests, he is nonetheless "a moral being" with reasons to pursue justice (1946, 168). While he seeks to dominate others, he often finds himself dominated by them. This "discord between man's desire and his actual condition" produces a demand that power be justified and limited (Morgenthau, 1946, 168-9). Morgenthau later makes a

philosophical move that proves immensely consequential for this account of moral psychology, even as it poses problems for his commitment to the existence of transcendental moral standards subject to rational apprehension and leaves him open to the charges of moral unmooring that he leveled at Carr. Even if there is a reality to justice, Morgenthau asserts, we are incapable of apprehending it and therefore of determining which of the plurality of available conceptions of justice are true. What is more, any particular conception of justice is so abstract that there is an inevitable gap between its general requirements and the demands of a particular case (Morgenthau, 1970; see also Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, 1999). We bridge this gap by appealing, often without fully realizing it, to the demands of our own interest and mistaking these for the requirements of justice: “Turning Kant’s categorical imperative upside down, we take it for granted that the standards of judgment and action produced by the peculiarities of our perspective can serve as universal laws for all mankind” (Morgenthau, 1970, 64). Without objective knowledge of what justice requires, but with certain knowledge of what he wants, man “equates with a vengeance his vantage point and justice” (Morgenthau, 1970, 65). Rather than constraining man’s self-assertion, his aspiration for justice fuels it: “it eggs on the lust that seeks power for power’s sake. And in that dialectic between justice and power, power gets the better of justice” (Morgenthau, 1970, 67). For Morgenthau, then, deliberations about justice are especially vulnerable to moral corruption.

Like Carr, Morgenthau argues along broadly Freudian lines that the drive to self-assertion and the tendency toward motivated moral reasoning will become even more pronounced as we move from the level of the individual to that of the state. Domestically, the individual’s drives of self-assertion are diverted, weakened, or suppressed by rules and institutions (Morgenthau, 1954). His drives thwarted and unsatisfied domestically, the individual projects them into the international arena and satisfies them vicariously through his “identification with the power drives of the nation” (Morgenthau, 1954, 95; see also Morgenthau, 1946). While domestic society restrains and condemns the drive of self-assertion, “power disguised by ideologies and pursued in the name and for the sake of the nation becomes the good for which all citizens strive” (Morgenthau, 1954). With a nod to Mannheim, Morgenthau argues that it is a fact of the political condition that this pursuit of power will often be concealed “behind the mask of political ideology” (1954, 81). The tendency to seek moral cover for power interests is not “the accidental outgrowth of the hypocrisy of certain individuals who need only to be replaced by other, more honest, individuals in order to make the conduct of foreign affairs more decent” (Morgenthau, 1954). Rather, it is a perpetual feature of the political condition.

For Morgenthau, this is a cause of deep moral concern because clothing foreign policies in the language of justice obscures the moral corruption involved in this projection of individual self-assertion onto the state. Not only do political ideologies and moral rationalizations “blunt the individual conscience” (Morgenthau, 1946, 198) and prevent it from condemning the power impulses of the nation, but they also make possible a more radical form of moral corruption. The state that clothes its own policies in the garb of justice and condemns those of others as narrowly self-interested power politics sets “the scene of the ultimate moral corruption through power.” In this case, “it is not action that is corrupted or moral judgment which regards as good what it ought to consider as evil. What here takes place is

a formidable perversion of the moral sense itself, an acquiescence in evil in the name of the very standards which ought to condemn it” (Morgenthau, 1946, 201).

Morgenthau sees these tendencies dangerously at work in the phenomenon of nationalistic universalism. His state’s actions leave the individual’s conscience “ill at ease” and “he pours, as it were, the contents of his national ethics into the...almost empty bottle of universal ethics” (Morgenthau, 1948b, 96). In a process similar to the inversion of the categorical imperative that Morgenthau had diagnosed in a private individual seeking to rationalize his own drives and interests, the political actor will soothe his troubled conscience by universalizing the particular perspective of his nation and equating its ends with those of justice. Once clothed in the garb of justice, however, these ends take on a totalizing and quasi-religious character. For Morgenthau, the twentieth-century “nationalistic universalisms” of German Nazism, Soviet Communism, and American liberal internationalism see the nation as “but the starting-point of a universal mission whose ultimate goal reaches to the confines of the political world” (Morgenthau, 1948c, 156). States confront each other not as self-interested collectivities pursuing specific ends but as “the standard-bearers of ethical systems, each of them national in origin and each of them claiming and aspiring to provide a supranational framework of moral standards which all other nations ought to accept...The moral code of one nation flings its challenge of its universal claim in the face of another which reciprocates in kind” (Morgenthau, 1948b, 96-97). In the postwar world, American liberal internationalism had met its crusading foe in Soviet Communism and both had found in nuclear weapons the means to match their totalizing ends. The danger is thus a peculiar combination of a normative status quo bias and moral zealotry: political actors take their nation and its existing values and practices as the standard for all of humanity, and act to universalize them with a deadly moral seriousness. Power interests, thus refracted through distorted moral principles, give to acts of international politics a crusading zeal from which leaders and individual citizens might otherwise shy away.

The task for the political realist is to relativize these claims. In a 1928 diary entry shot through with youthful Nietzschean skepticism, Morgenthau tasked the scholar with a duty “to relativize what might appear to be absolute, to show how things come to be what they are” (as quoted in Frei, 2001, 147). While much of his Nietzschean moral skepticism gave way with the rise of Nazism and the crusading ideologies of the Cold War, Morgenthau never abandoned relativism as a rhetorical and therapeutic tool. This, I would suggest, is the way in which we can make sense of his insistence on the value of a conception of the national interest defined in terms of power. There are methodological advantages, he claims, to the assumption that “statesmen tend to think and act in terms of interest defined as power” (Morgenthau, 1954, 5). Analytically the assumption helps the political realist to penetrate the fog of ideology, rationalizations, and delusions that prevent a systematic analysis of foreign policy. For state leaders, it allows for a clear-eyed analysis of their opponents’ positions and protects them from the seductions of crusading rationalizations. This narrow conception of the national interest has been rightly criticized as profoundly undertheorized and systematically blind to the ways in which cultural norms and identities shape and constitute the national interest (Scheurman, 2009). Yet, even if its analytical

value is questionable, its rhetorical and therapeutic value remains central to the normative project of Morgenthau's political realism. In an international arena in which crusading nationalisms claim universal validity, "it is exactly the concept of interest defined in terms of power that saves us from both that moral excess and that political folly" (Morgenthau, 1954, 10). As a rhetorical tool, the national interest defined in terms of power works to deflate and expose crusading and totalizing ideologies. As a therapeutic tool, it serves a purpose similar to Freudian analysis. Just as the successful therapist alerts "the patient to the illusions under which they had been laboring, enlightening them about the irrational forces to which they had been unduly subjected in order to ensure heightened autonomy," the national interest defined in terms of power frees the political actor from the moralistic delusions that undermine rational and moral state action (Scheuerman, 2009, 86).

Yet Morgenthau is unwilling to allow this realist project of unmasking to bottom out in the kind of moral and political paralysis to which Carr's approach seems inevitably to lead. Morgenthau is at pains to argue that political realism does not require an acceptance of the status quo, either intentionally or by default. Nor does it demand an abandonment of the transformational project of international justice. Nonetheless, "the realist is persuaded that this transformation can be achieved only through the workmanlike manipulation of the perennial forces that have shaped the past as they will the future" (Morgenthau, 1954, 9). This slow and difficult work begins with a tragic acknowledgement of "the ineluctable tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action." The political realist must affirm and accept this tension, resisting the temptation to rationalize it away or to resolve it in power's favor. He must remain "unwilling to gloss over and obliterate that tension and thus to obfuscate both the moral and the political issue by making it appear as though the stark facts of politics were morally more satisfying than they actually are, and the moral law less exacting than it actually is" (Morgenthau, 1954, 9). Morgenthau celebrates the tragic figure of a statesman who is able to acknowledge the irrational forces that corrupt political decisions, as well as the inescapable tensions between the uncompromising demands of the moral law and the requirements of effective political action. The best statesmen acknowledge these tensions and still manage to act:

To know with despair that the political act is inevitably evil, and to act nevertheless, is 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. That this conciliation is nothing more than a *modus vivendi*, uneasy, precarious, and even paradoxical, can disappoint only those who prefer to gloss over and to distort the tragic contradictions of human existence with the soothing logic of specious concord (Morgenthau, 1946, 203).

These precarious and temporary conciliations are the best that we can hope for in a tragic world. Honesty requires that we face them directly and go forward as best we can. While our desire for moral certainty often leads us to imagine more definitive solutions, we must continually resist this illusory promise and return again and again to the difficult work of uncertain politics.

6 Conclusions

Critics of realism often charge that it is a mere rationalization of the status quo and an apology for power. The first part of the paper sought to unpack the elements of this charge, accepting the moral seriousness of the concerns raised but arguing that the charges made do not apply specifically to realists. Problems of rationalization and system justification are much more profound and recurrent problems in moral thinking wherever it is found. The remainder of the paper offered three case studies of canonical political realists who have attempted to wrestle seriously with the problems of motivated reasoning and moral corruption. Each of the three thinkers diagnoses this corruption in the seemingly uncompromising positions of their “idealist” targets or opponents. Thucydides exposes the ways in which Cleon’s argument for the harsh punishment of the Mytileneans actively works to elicit the emotional and system-justifying motivations that allow vengeance to be perpetrated under the name of justice. Carr unmasks the system-justifying motives behind the idealist doctrine of an international harmony of interests, devoting particular attention to the ways in which the assumption of such a harmony can easily slip into a violent or dangerously disillusioning attempt to coercively impose one. Morgenthau reveals the emotional and self-assertive motivations behind the crusading ideologies of the Cold War which begin as rationalizations for power but quickly emerge as totalizing ends in themselves. All three realists are deeply and centrally concerned with forms of moral corruption that speak in the confident name of justice. Often, they argue, the purported unwillingness to accept unjust features of the world as it is serves as precisely the kind of moral cover for acts of power politics that realists are accused of condoning.

Moreover, all three thinkers are also attuned to the particular forms of moral corruption to which political realism is vulnerable. Thucydides, Carr, and Morgenthau are neither psychologists nor philosophers and their attempts to pursue these issues will inevitably leave specialists frustrated and unsatisfied. Nevertheless, each thinker expresses concerns about the ways in which realism’s continual project of unmasking can produce dangerous or paralyzing results. In Diodotus, Thucydides presents us with an ambiguous figure who offers seemingly strategic arguments that ultimately make any form of argument for justice more difficult to secure, even as they seek to lay bare the dangers of Cleon’s motivated moral reasons. For Carr, the radical project of perpetual unmasking always risks ending in moral and political paralysis. The only option that would seem to remain for a thoroughgoing realist, he worries, is the “passive contemplation” of political reality (Carr, 1964, 92). Morgenthau’s turn to a tragic worldview that acknowledges but never attempts to dissolve the tensions between an uncompromising moral law and the demands of politics is one potential response to these dangers. Yet his invocation of the quasi-mythic figure of the tragic statesman able to negotiate these tensions without succumbing to the temptation to dissolve them provides little in the way of firm guidance for more ordinary political actors, not to mention scholars, trying to avoid falling victim to the pathologies of moral corruption. Each thinker recognizes the degree to which careful attention to motivated reasoning can call into question all moral judgments, even those of which we ourselves feel most certain. If there is a danger to be found in realism, it is that in seeing all arguments for justice as the likely expression

of motivated reasoning, they may leave the status quo in place by default rather than by design. Their failing, if it is a failing, comes from doubting too much the power of human judgment rather than from accepting existing relations of power as legitimate whatever they might be.

Beyond its contribution to a richer understanding of three canonical political realists, this analysis has implications for our understanding of the place of political realism in International Relations theory. The complex awareness of the pathologies of moral and political deliberation outlined here highlights the challenges and possibilities of first-image theorizing. The challenges are well-rehearsed in Kenneth Waltz's structuralist critique of political realism. At least part of this critique is a normative and idealist one, motivated by a desire to solve once and for all the problems of international violence. "If human nature is the cause of war," Waltz worries, "then we can never hope for peace" (1959, 29-30). The central thrust of the structuralist challenge—its source of hope—is ultimately analytical. It promises to help us gain reliable and objective knowledge about the operations of international politics. If, as the caricature of political realism suggests, human nature is bad and fixed, it cannot explain variation in the presence of interstate conflict. Yet if human nature is instead complex and admits variety, as more nuanced political realist accounts suggest, first-image explanations have the potential to justify an almost infinite range of outcomes (Waltz, 1959).

The structuralist solution is to posit a world of rational, security-seeking states and to explain patterns of war and peace by appealing to the relative distribution of capabilities and the structural condition of anarchy. On the structuralist account, political leaders should judge how to act politically based on an interpretation of these systemic factors, viewed in the most objective light. As a means of setting aside presumptions about justice and other political sources of motivated moral reasoning, structural realism offers political actors the hope of circumventing the limits noted by political realists. Yet there are reasons to wonder if these limitations are so easily overcome. In the end actors must act, and when they do so their choices will be subject to the variety of epistemic pathologies that concerned political realists. Political actors must always choose in the first image, whatever we might wish, and structural realism gives them relatively sparse resources for evaluating their own likely patterns of failure.

The explanatory and predictive gains of structural realism's flight to parsimony have been the subject of enduring debate in International Relations. The analysis in this paper suggests that this flight has had critical and self-reflective costs. Thucydides, Carr, and Morgenthau offer accounts of human nature that, while admittedly overdrawn, are nonetheless sophisticated enough to have anticipated findings in contemporary social, moral, and cognitive psychology. The willingness of these thinkers to linger on the uncertain ground of first-image theorizing gives them access not only to the critical tools required to diagnose motivated and system-justifying reasoning in the arguments of their idealist targets, but also the self-reflective stance needed to recognize the particular ways in which realist arguments might succumb to these tendencies. It is these critical and self-reflective resources that structural realists demand their political counterparts sacrifice on the altar of parsimony and objectivity. Since it is precisely these resources which allow realists to recognize, if not

always resist, the dangers of moral corruption, there are reasons to wonder if the sacrifice has been on balance well made.

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