

ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Embrace IR Anxieties (or, Morgenthau’s Approach to Power, and the Challenge of Combining the Three Domains of IR Theorizing)

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This article addresses the call made by the ISA Sapphire panel to focus on “the opportunities and the challenges of theory-building in interdisciplinary scholarship.” The article focuses on the multiple anxieties that exist in the discipline of IR, its departmental subalternity, its fragmentation of content, its methodological diversity, and its hybrid constitution of practical and observational knowledge. However, rather than arguing for any restriction, the article pleads for these anxieties to be embraced and for IR to be treated as a privileged space in which to integrate that knowledge. It invites scholars to link three distinct yet important domains of IR theorizing: the philosophical, the explanatory, and the practical. It invites the discipline to see the three domains as equally fundamental for its identity. Using Morgenthau’s theory of power as a foil, the article shows the need to think about these three domains of theorizing concomitantly, despite the difficulties involved in providing a coherent link between them, something Morgenthau did not achieve.

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The discipline and field of international relations (IR) have experienced a series of anxieties that relate to their status. None of our ex-post rationalizations for disciplinary identity really worked. There are no specific methods to IR. Some disciplines may claim to have generated some methods, even if they are then used also elsewhere, such as the specific legal reasoning in law, the analysis of primary sources for history, or field research of different types for ethnography. IR, however, shares all its methods with other social sciences, making it no better, but also no worse, than sociology, political science, or even economics, comprehensively understood.

Hence, for quite some time, IR has tried to define itself in terms of its specific subject matter. This has come in mainly two guises. In its origin myth, created by its first chair in 1919 in Aberystwyth, the subject matter was declared to be the study of war and peace. This implied a focus on both the “diplomatic-strategic chessboard”

(Aron 1962) and its main players, diplomats and the military, and the origins and practical mitigation of interstate violence. The other aspect was a focus on the “international,” as opposed to the “domestic.” Here, realism and idealism played very important roles, since their common assumption of anarchy—that is, the lack of a world government—implied that the rules of analysis and the practice of world affairs were different from those in the other social sciences, in particular, political science. “Domestic analogies” (Bull 1966; Suganami 1989) were not impossible, but nor were they automatic, leaving them in constant need of justification. Anarchy became the demarcation criterion—all the more so for those who insisted in the practical improbability of this ever changing, as realism does. As Raymond Aron (1962, 19) put it, if international relations were ever to overcome the state of nature, there would be no way to demarcate a theory of international relations.

With the increasing significance of a new set of international actors, such as firms and their CEOs, (central) banks, and financial funds—and given the understanding of conflict and peace as not being limited to intrastate relations, the latter often depending on other forms and theatres of violence—this definition by subject matter did not prove very viable. Kenneth Waltz’s (1979) *Theory of International Politics* can be understood as a last-ditch attempt to save a clearly identifiable and distinct version of a theory of international relations, even at the cost of defining many issues out of the theory’s reach. Given the overlap between realist assumptions and the boundaries of the discipline, a redefinition of realism was to preserve IR’s unique and privileged terrain. When critics admonished the narrowness of the theory while happily adding extra factors, they missed, and indeed undermined, one of Waltz’s main aims: to maintain a tight and distinctive boundary around IR. In the end, Waltz’s attempt did not work when realists made revisions and the discipline revolted (for a more thorough analysis, see Guzzini 1998).

Ever since, IR has gone through waves of soul-searching. Membership of the discipline was in fact increasingly attached to one’s knowledge of the different “debates.” The internal communication of the discipline came to constitute its defining feature (Wæver 1996), pitching the core of the discipline at a theoretical level. Yet when the paradigms no longer informed the debates, the discipline returned to its underlying default position of self-reflection, as seen in the anniversary issue of the *European Journal of International Relations* that asked: “the end of theory?”

This soul-searching is arguably more pronounced in IR than in its sister disciplines in the social sciences (except perhaps in geography). Looking at them from the outside, these other fields have just as much trouble defining and distinguishing themselves, and this for the same reason as IR. But fields like sociology and political science have a longer pedigree, earlier “debates” and founding “fathers,” and a far more established *departmental* presence. IR is always more in need of justifying itself, its space easily occupied by the greater departmental power of other disciplines. It is as if these other disciplines exist as givens, while IR needs to prove itself, time and time again. In only a few places did IR manage to establish itself as an independent department, although multidisciplinary centers of international studies or public policy can at times loosen the grip of other departments.

An important reason for IR being a departmental late-comer is, oddly enough, the fact that as a field it existed before. When the Western social sciences started to develop in the nineteenth century, international relations followed a different trajectory from political science (or “the science of the state,” as it is still called in some countries), economics, and sociology. In the increasing functional differentiation of Western societies, sciences developed to observe the newly autonomous fields that separated them from the state: the government, the market economy, civil society. International relations did not need this: it was already a separate sphere of knowledge, indeed of practical knowledge, mainly in strategy and diplomacy. Its distinctiveness predates the differentiation within the state because it is based on the one between states. It already had its specialized experts. Yet, when its practical knowledge came under scrutiny in the early twentieth century, scientific

justification was needed for it to retain its credibility and influence. IR, too, now needed a discipline. In contrast to the other social sciences, therefore, the late-comer IR worked the other way around: “The discipline was not there to produce knowledge; already-existing (practical) knowledge produced its discipline” (Guzzini 2013, 524), thereby replicating the masculine language and hierarchy, world-view and habitus of its practice (Sjoberg 2012, 16; for early analyses, see Cohn 1987; Tickner 1988, 430). Ever since, IR has navigated between the knowledge of actors and of observers, which again prompted some anxiety over “lost relevance” when not speaking to practice, or over the “pitfalls of common sense” when practical knowledge does not chime with controlled knowledge.

The call for the Sapphire panels invites reflection on the present state of these continuous anxieties. In this call, there is still a sense that IR theory is the basis for providing identity to the discipline and giving coherence to it. The call is also informed by an understanding that the paradigmatic packaging is wrong not in endeavoring to think about metatheoretical and normative assumptions together but is in the way that this has been done so far. It comes at a time when theorizing has tried to address this issue, often in the form of “turns,” which constitute different attempts to provide some overarching direction to our theoretical rethinking. Turns are nothing new in IR, given the earlier behaviorist turn, followed by the metatheoretical/methodological (Little 1991) and constructivist turn (Checkel 1998) of the late 1980s and early 1990s. But the recent acceleration of the linguistic, practice, narrative, and reflexive (Hamati-Ataya 2013) turns are indications of this ongoing quest, while the sheer number of “turns” and their methodological and theoretical diversity will do nothing to put historical IR anxieties to rest.

The present article engages with that part of the Sapphire panel’s call that focuses on “the opportunities and the challenges of theory-building in interdisciplinary scholarship, . . . (on) how to increase the diversity in theoretical approaches to international studies and the challenges of communication across various theoretical approaches and how to overcome these challenges.” It does so by reflecting on the present role of IR theorizing with these different anxieties in mind: the departmental subalternity, the fragmentation in content, the methodological diversity, and the hybrid constitution of practical and observational knowledge that characterizes the discipline of IR.

Yet, instead of trying to restrict IR in focus, methodology, and type of knowledge (practice or science), so as to discriminate a specific field of IR, the article argues for an opposite strategy in answering these anxieties. Rather than reducing the choice of topics, methods, and observational languages in its quest for distinctiveness, it argues in favor of establishing IR’s specificity in the particular ways in which our field has managed to embrace this diversity. In other words, rather than seeing in the many recent “turns” simply an indicator of a lost core or desperate mimicry, it is also an expression of the sheer curiosity of our field to learn from elsewhere and *to use IR as a privileged space in which to integrate that knowledge*. There is no reason a priori why IR would be confined to political science alone, since many relevant international issues are problematized elsewhere. There is also no reason a priori to exclude some methodologies only because they were not typical of IR earlier. Nor is there any necessity to choose between practical and observational knowledge. Indeed, good observation cannot be done without a hermeneutic bridge to international actors, as provided by their practical knowledge, while practice is increasingly characterized by the actors’ capacity to step aside and have the tools to observe their actions or understand the observers providing these views. Rather than wishing us to return to the language of practice (cf. Wallace 1996) or imposing a unique vantage point of observational language, present-day IR needs to be bilingual (Guzzini 2001).

This article will therefore spell out the implications involved in embracing this diverse vision of IR for theoretical research. Its main point is that we need to

reconnect the three domains of theorizing that have become untied over the scientification of IR in recent decades, namely the philosophical, explanatory, and practical domains. This not only answers the anxieties—indeed, it turns them into a positive stimulus—but it also responds to a theoretical necessity. By not reflecting on the ways in which these three domains are connected, we have been running the risk of introducing internal contradictions, which, moreover, we no longer have the tools to become aware of. Of course, individual scholars will not easily straddle all of these divides, but a discipline is a collective enterprise where we do it together yet need to be prepared for it.

The article illustrates the three domains and problematizes their links by analyzing Morgenthau's conceptualization of power. Certainly, this is not the only way of proceeding, but there are three main reasons for doing so. First, the claim that there are three domains and that their links are crucial is best illustrated by an example: the proof is in the pudding. Second, the choice of Morgenthau's theorizing derives from his historical (and also personal) context, in which the three domains are still present and not yet compartmentalized or their links neglected, as they would be after the later behaviorist turn in IR theorizing. Finally, his conceptualization of power provides his crucial link between the domains and is therefore the privileged place to inquire into the nature of these links.

The main point or end of this exercise is not an invitation to return to good old realism or produce yet another exegesis of the richness and self-contradictions of Morgenthau's theory, although it does that, too. Rather, it uses this detour as a means that invites us to think of IR as this specific field where the three domains meet, and to treat our theorizing as providing the multifaceted connections between them. Morgenthau's links are problematic, some of them not even justified. Exposing a past and finished project may nonetheless help to show how present attempts, often under the guise of grand theory (Kratochwil 2011, 2018; Albert 2016; Weber 2016; Katzenstein and Seybert 2018; Qin 2018; Adler 2019), deal with and fare in imposing coherence across the three domains (for a discussion of Kratochwil's theory in this context, see Guzzini 2010).

The following discussion will show the relevance of Morgenthau's philosophical theorizing for his explanatory theory and practical strategy. It will show how power links the three domains but also how their respective logic imposes certain strictures that lead to contradictions in Morgenthau's theorizing. Trying to translate his ontology into an explanatory theory, the latter's criteria (as seen by Morgenthau) end up narrowing the approach to a version of utilitarianism that his philosophy denies. Applying his political theory to political practice ends up undermining a large number of theoretical openings that the field of practice could have inspired, stripping off his insights into the conventional and social nature of world politics. Yet, whatever his errors, it was clear to Morgenthau that these three domains needed to be connected and that attempts to reduce IR theorizing to any one of them were mistaken. The specific task of IR theorizing is to find new ways to reconnect them that reflect the advances in all three domains, also including, most crucially, in the practice of world politics.

Morgenthau's Philosophical Domain: Power and the Nature of Politics—Politics and the Nature of Power

Morgenthau's earlier writings aim to carve out a specific logic of politics. In his view, neglecting the specifically "political" in the social world was responsible for the dire understanding of world affairs that led to catastrophe in the first half of the twentieth century. A lawyer by education, he opposed the attempts of positivist law to keep both morals and politics out of its self-understanding, as if legal validity could be achieved without them. Becoming a scholar of politics by vocation, he saw the

pernicious role played by (a certain take on) liberalism that reduces ethics and politics to rational teleology and scientism, eventually subsuming the study of politics under economics. Finally, with an eye on philosophy, he qualifies the autonomous logic of politics as never divorced from morality. A pure Machiavellianism is just as much a utopia as the harmony of interests. In short, law and economics cannot be thought without the political and cannot subsume it; but neither can the logic of politics be divorced from morality.

For Morgenthau, such attempts to evade or reduce politics were not just hopelessly misguided; they were positively dangerous. Not seeing the way democracies, markets, and the international legal order are all ultimately dependent on the distribution of power and the potential conflict of actors' interests could only produce hapless politics. Its policies would simply clash with the reality of the world as he saw it. Understanding the specificity of the political is hence fundamental to making ends realistic and means appropriate. For Morgenthau, power is the essential element for understanding the specifically political that has eluded practitioners and observers alike.

Yet, as the following discussion will show, he relied on a series of assumptions and world views of politics that are not untypical for a disappointed international legal theorist, world views that will later inform his attempt to turn his philosophy into the backbone of an explanatory theory.

Politics as a Critique of Legal Self-Sufficiency

In its opposition to natural law, legal positivism is in principle related to political realism in IR (Bobbio 1981). It recognizes as legal rules only those that have been established (posited) by subjects of international law, in particular states. This positive law contrasts with natural law based on the existence of rights and norms that reason can derive from human nature. Natural law is universal and determines the legal validity of norms, whether or not governments recognize them. Despite legal positivism's insistence on what is, rather than what should be—a focus akin to realists and shared by Morgenthau—the latter put forward two main criticisms that made him endorse a more sociological approach (for a discussion, see Meiertöns 2015) and explicitly reserve a place for universal ethics. For him, law was fundamentally dependent on both politics and the underlying social forces.

He also argued that legal positivism conceives of the legal realm, sources, and effect of law in a manner that is too autonomous and “self-sufficient” (Morgenthau 1940, 263). Legal problems would be all resolvable through the mere interpretation of positive law. In this view, positivistic legal theory can only conceive of politics as a residual category to what is legal because it is conducive to a solution by positive law (Morgenthau 1933, 38). For Morgenthau, this errs in many ways that are relevant to the analysis of law, politics, and power.

First, this position sees all legal conflicts in international affairs as fundamentally similar. Yet, Morgenthau made a distinction between legal conflicts that are within the normative system and those that challenge the very underlying logic of the normative order, which he calls “tensions” (Morgenthau 1933, 78; see also 1948a, 343–6). For the latter, the reference back to the established legal order is not part of the solution but part of the problem: law cannot substitute itself for politics where fundamental visions and interests clash (for a more detailed discussion, see Jütersonke 2010, 51–7).

Second, legal self-sufficiency cannot understand the very nature of norms. Although legal positivism claims to be empirical, not metaphysical, it makes two mistaken moves, becoming too narrow and too broad at the same time. It is too narrow when it includes in the list of valid norms only those that are derived from legal state acts. This neglects norms generated elsewhere. Such norms are not derived from states positing law: sometimes they constitute in themselves what makes such

positive law possible in the first place, such as the norm of sovereignty (Morgenthau 1936, 3; 1940, 269, 272). Without fundamental norms such as sovereignty, we would not be able even to delimit the subjects of international law in the positivist tradition.

Inversely, a self-centered focus of positivist law ends up including norms as valid that *de facto* are not and that a (scientific) positivist mind, looking only at what there actually is, should exclude. To make this argument, Morgenthau focuses on the role of sanctions. According to him, negative sanctions (punishments) are constitutive of legal validity and hence of the very existence of a norm. If a norm is not backed by the expectation of a negative sanction, it cannot be said to have legal validity, for it is this threat of reprisal that, for Morgenthau, is the mechanism that makes individual behavior converge toward the normative system. This does not necessarily mean that such sanctions will actually be effective in imposing a certain behavior, but without sanctions there is no cost, let alone a change in behavior; there is, literally, no valid norm. For Morgenthau, the decline of the toothless Versailles order was proof of his approach (for the argument in this paragraph, see Morgenthau 1935, 479–90; 1936, 16–7; 1940, 265f., 276).

Both limitations point to a fundamental error in legal positivism: it does not see that all legal rules are ultimately dependent on a substratum of social forces, or what Morgenthau also calls the “political,” which “determines the content of norms, which influences their validity, and on which depend the very fact and manner of its realization” (Morgenthau 1936, 19; all translations are mine). Indeed, it is part and parcel of international law itself, when, for instance, it intervenes in the assessment of international disputes. “The precepts of international law need not only to [*sic*] be interpreted in the light of the ideals and ethico-legal principles which are at their basis. They need also to be seen within the sociological context of economic interests, social tensions, and aspirations for power, which are the motivating forces in the international field, and which give rise to the factual situations forming the raw material for regulation by international law” (Morgenthau 1940, 269).

Politics as a Critique of Scientism and Economics

In a somewhat parallel manner to his critique of legal self-sufficiency, Morgenthau criticized the academic study of politics in the United States for being both too detached from its philosophical underpinnings and yet not empirical enough, mistaking its hopes for reality. While legal positivism had defined ethics and politics out of its realm, he felt the United States academy to be defined by a liberal scientism that had reduced ethics and politics to utilitarianism and economics.¹ The faith in the effectiveness of law had been replaced by a faith in the effectiveness of reason, which was still unable, as he saw it, to capture the logic and evil of politics. No good policy advice could come out of this. For the “international scientist” the “supreme value is not power,” as it is for international politics, “but truth.” “There is essentially nothing to fight for; there is always something to analyze, to understand, and to reform” (Morgenthau 1946, 101).

The notion that even the academic study of politics may have misunderstood the role of power may have come as a surprise to his peers. Yet Morgenthau would insist that, while the discipline acknowledged an important role for power, it was reduced to being a residual rather than a fundamental feature of the human condition. This

¹ The following presentation will not always stick to Morgenthau’s idiosyncratic terminology in *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*. The book endorses science already in the preface, defending the purpose of looking for general causes of events, while then apparently repudiating it (“scientism”). Morgenthau criticizes conservatism and liberalism, while being arguably both conservative—in his vision of human nature and the role of violence, in his cyclical vision of history, and in his form of elitism—yet liberal, in his defence of pluralism and individual rights. Finally, he endorses a rationalist theory of action (158), rational social planning (152), and an ethics of practical reason, while lambasting rationalism. I will often avoid his catch-all conceptualizations and replace them with more precise terms.

neglect of the “stark facts of politics” (Morgenthau 1946, 97) informs a view where rationality is all that is needed for conflict resolution and where science can provide the blueprints with which to reform the world and relegate power politics to the dustbin of history. “The very field of politics thus becomes a kind of atavistic residue from a prerational period” (Morgenthau 1946, 28). His critique of this rationalist zeitgeist comes in two steps: he opposed the way politics is merged into science, as well as how science is reduced to a certain approach to economics.

In his reading, the reduction of politics to science became possible with the advent of rationalism. Morgenthau constructs rationalism as a philosophical teleology in whose future all conflicts can be resolved without violence. Rationalism’s main assumption is that man, through reason, is perfectionable. Seen in this way, all violent conflicts are simply a temporary expression of a reason that has not yet come to its fruition. To change this, science should replace politics altogether, since the knowledge of the laws of the social world is accessible through reason and realizable in practice through science.

Although Morgenthau would be the last to deny improvements in human civilizations, human perfectionism will find its limits in the essence of politics, which is “the aspiration for power over men,” the *animus dominandi* (Morgenthau 1946, 45). The irrational lust for power is pursued in a necessarily violent game: “Even where legal relations hide relations of power, power is to be understood in terms of violence, actual and potential; and potential violence tends here [in world politics] always to turn into actual warfare” (Morgenthau 1946, 50).² For Morgenthau, politics is not just an atavism, a “disease” or “evil finally overcome,” but one of the “autonomous forces which engender historic necessity in their own right and not as a mere deviation from reason” (Morgenthau 1946, 32, 71, and 38–39, respectively). (Political) science in the name of rationalism can pretend to replace politics, but only at our own peril.

This belief in the force of reason has the effect of importing the use of a scientific approach and standards of economics into the study of politics. International politics becomes akin to business competition in which “business enterprise becomes the standard for the evaluation of governmental activities, the ‘business administration’ the ideal of governmental perfection” (Morgenthau 1946, 29). Yet, Morgenthau believes that the “conditions which make the application of the scientific methods to domestic politics at least a temporary and partial success are entirely and permanently absent in the international sphere” (Morgenthau 1946, 85, 103 [quote]). Economics cannot be the model for a science of international politics, being a science misapplied to different conditions and having a mere residual conception of politics to start with.

Politics as Ethical and as Necessarily Evil

To define the specific logic of politics, Morgenthau conceptualizes the will to power as a psychological constant. Seeking, maintaining, and demonstrating power are the three basic forms of political behavior. This political will to power has a marked tendency to trespass on all rational limitations.³ Therefore, the sphere of politics is intrinsically connected to conflict and violence, and history becomes an ongoing struggle with no redemption. From here, one could have easily expected a more or less clean line toward a Machiavellian vision of ethics in which the ends of power justify any means. Yet, however often Morgenthau used his harsh language to ridicule what he saw as the blind ideology of others, he reserved an important place for ethics in his understanding of man, politics, and world affairs. As he did, in general,

²This statement contradicts an earlier distinction between the means of politics proper and collective violence or war, where the two domains, following Clausewitz, are set apart. See Morgenthau (1933, 62).

³This is from an early formulation in Morgenthau (1933, 42–43, 69), but it remains constant over time.

he would infer from the existence of normative order and moral behavior back to the psychology of men, to human nature. Power is constitutive of the sphere of politics, but it is not its exclusive component.

Already in his early legal writings, he insisted that denying the existence of a universal morality, or even of natural law, flew in the face of reality. Again, legal positivism did not live up to its empiricist credentials. In its opposition to natural law, legal positivism simply excluded it from the normative sphere: if “it shall not” be valid, “it cannot” be present. Yet, Morgenthau saw this as an exclusion done a priori with no empirical justification, a kind of “negative meta-physics,” as he called it—that is, the ultimately metaphysical position of excluding any *empirically existing* metaphysics (Morgenthau 1936, 2–3; 1940, 268–69).

For not only are morals empirically present; they are indeed the necessary condition for a functioning legal and political order that assures compliance by the citizens, on the one hand, and limitation on the holders of power, on the other (for this paragraph, see Morgenthau 1945b, 147). Morals guarantee social order. Since any order is more effective the fewer sanctions need to be applied to achieve compliance, it is left to the morals of its citizens to restrain their potential to violate the law. Moreover, precisely for the political aspect of any order, it is not the legal order that ultimately limits ruling power but the balance of social forces and the underlying morals to which power-holders keep allegiance. When such a moral anchor breaks down, power becomes unchecked.

Although Morgenthau saw a difference in the very set-up of the domestic and international order, for him it did not follow that states pursued power politics unfettered by moral concerns. There has always been a difference between what states could have done in terms of their national interest and what they actually did. States do recognize moral obligations despite being able to justify their violation by referring to the national interest (see the identical passages in (Morgenthau 1948a, 177; 1948b, 82). Put differently, even though states always follow their national interest, some things simply do not enter their calculus (see the identical passages in Morgenthau 1938–39, 125–26; 1939, 483; 1948a, 174–75; and 1948b, 79–80).⁴ It is not that interests come first and are then checked by morals; morals are already part of the interests and their calculation. However, the scope and content of such moral restraint is no constant. Indeed, Morgenthau was so concerned about the twentieth century because it had shown how states could end up abolishing all moral limits in formulating their national interests.

In other words, Morgenthau’s picture of the sphere of politics is two-sided. On the one hand, as seen above, “[t]o the degree in which the essence and aim of politics is power over man, politics is evil; for it is to this degree that it degrades man to a means for other men.” The aspiration to hold power over others, the *animus dominandi*, being “the constitutive principle of politics as a distinct sphere of human activity” implies that whatever final aim an actor may have, power is always the immediate aim (see the verbatim passages in Morgenthau 1945a, 14; 1946, 195). Trying to hold power over others therefore means using them as a means to an end. Here, Morgenthau follows Kant’s second moral imperative, according to which one should never use humans as a means but always as an end. Given, however, the nature of the sphere of politics, this cannot be avoided, according to Morgenthau. In politics, we cannot escape evil.

On the other hand, politics is nonetheless not devoid of morality. Power constitutes the sphere of politics, but it is not alone within it. Morgenthau linked this intrinsic presence of morals back to the “nature of man as both a political and a moral animal” (see the identical passages in Morgenthau 1945a, 5; 1946, 177–78). “The lust for power as ubiquitous empirical fact and its denial as universal ethical

⁴ There are, however, passages where it sounds more like the classical realist sequence of interest and ethical restraint, like, for instance, in Morgenthau (1945a, 5) and verbatim in Morgenthau (1946, 176).

norm are the two poles between which, as between the poles of an electric field, this antinomy is suspended. The antinomy is insoluble because the poles creating it are perennial. There can be no renunciation of the ethical denial without renouncing the human nature of man” (see the identical passages in [Morgenthau 1945a](#), 17; [1946](#), 201).

Morgenthau’s Explanatory Domain: Power and a Theory of International Relations

With hindsight, it is curious that Morgenthau became such a reference theorist for the discipline of international relations in the postwar United States.⁵ His type of theorizing, although not marginal, clearly did not fit the evolution of political science to which IR belongs in the United States, not the least in his own department in Chicago. In a scathing critique of *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry* by the leading Chicago professors [Harald Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan \(1950\)](#), he took these eminent authors to task for trying to build a political theory from a “straightforward empirical standpoint.” For Morgenthau, that made no sense. Empirical inquiry is dependent on the underlying philosophical framework that provides the meaning to the analysis, which otherwise would stay “blind,” just as much as political philosophy needs empirical verification so as not to become speculative. By not explicitly providing and defending the philosophical framework that necessarily underlies all empirical inquiry, let alone making philosophy and empirical analysis consistent (in an “organic relationship”), he viewed their book as an indicator of the “tragedy of political science and of philosophy in America.” By falling for some easy empiricism that makes their analysis “without direction and barren of meaning,” two “superbly endowed minds” end up being no more than dilettantes ([Morgenthau 1952](#), 233, 234).⁶

Still, if his theorizing was to command authority in the explanatory domain, it required the philosophical underpinnings to be brought into an “organic relationship” with empirical inquiry. Morgenthau needed to translate his philosophical tenets into theoretical propositions. Human psychology, or human nature, was the foundation on which he built his theory of action. And here, paradoxically, despite all the criticisms of rationalism and utilitarianism as philosophies, his theory ends up being a version of a rational theory of action, once human drives are taken into account and are translated into universal motives. Here the aspiration to hold power over others became the “general causes of which particular events are but the outward manifestation” ([Morgenthau 1946](#), v).

Power thus moves from being the ontological anchor of Morgenthau’s philosophy to the core factor of his explanatory theory. It provides the central link between the two domains. In his political theory, he went beyond a legal understanding of political order, because it mistook its formality for reality, and also beyond a purely Machiavellian understanding, since it denied moral “man.” When devising his explanatory theory, this left him with some latitude. Yet, the central role of human drives and inalienable violence when embedded in the context of a scientific field ended up priming the analysis, to which there are many openings, many shades. However, despite his critique of rationalism and scientism, despite the openings to a theory of action based on recognition, and despite the gesture to a more relational ontology in his concept of power, in the end, when he tried to frame his particular conceptualization of human nature and the role of negative sanctions in the provision of political order into a theory, he fell back on a basically utilitarian theory of action that he himself so much decried in other places. Power, as a drive in his

⁵ For an empirical assessment of Morgenthau’s role as an exemplar of the realist school and his leading status in the discipline, see [Vasquez \(1999\)](#).

⁶ Morgenthau did see sciences as empirical, but as [Jütersonke \(2010, 143\)](#) argues, he had a different understanding of an empirical science, informed by the German *Staatslehre*, than his Chicago colleagues. He never succeeded in bridging the two.

ontology and motive/interest in his explanatory theory, provided a reductionist and contradictory link between the two domains.

Power as a Psychological Relation

When defining the specificity of the political, or the logic of politics, Morgenthau always referred back to human nature. He did not derive this from science but treated it as a universal ontological tenet verified as an “undeniable fact of experience” (Morgenthau 1948a, 18). Fundamental to the understanding of politics is the aspiration for power over others, the *animus dominandi*. It is one of the three drives common to all of humankind: to live, to propagate, and to dominate, which are the basis of any society (Morgenthau 1948a, 17). Elsewhere, he listed as universally common psychological traits and elemental aspirations “the desire to live, to be free, and to have power” (Morgenthau 1948a, 199).

Although the expression “to have power” usually refers to a concept of power that is a property of a holder, Morgenthau uses it in terms of a relation. In general, power refers to “man’s control over the minds and actions of other men” (Morgenthau 1948a, 13). Political power is the particular subcategory that does not involve actual violence in the asymmetrical relation (that would be military power). The threat of violence, however, is part and parcel of a psychological relation, as he calls it. In this way, Morgenthau makes a distinction between actual violence and political power, but he includes both within his general approach to power, for both have an effect on B’s actions. His definition, reminiscent of Weber’s definition of *Macht*, then runs as follows: “Thus the statement that A has or wants political power over B signifies always that A is able, or wants to be able, to control certain actions of B through influencing B’s mind” (1948a, 14). This definition has many significant and problematic facets.

First, the definition moves from the description or definition of power as a particular type of relation to the use of power as an explanatory factor. Although the slide seems innocent, it may not be. As we have seen, initially Morgenthau defined power as an asymmetrical psychological relation. Put this way, power does not explain; it is simply the descriptive term to characterize a significant form of asymmetrical relation. In the definition, however, he slides from power as a relation to the statement that A “has power” in a relationship that *explains* behavior. A’s power is the ability to control certain actions of B. A has the ability to influence B’s behavior, or, put differently, A can cause B’s behavior. B’s behavior can be explained by A’s power. A definition becomes a causal claim.

Second, the definition insists on the psychological moment at which political power takes a passage through the mind of B. This is the strong relational component in the definition. Power is not a property of A but needs to pass via B; it is derived from this relation. This stance is in the Weberian tradition, where *Herrschaft* is defined by the chance to have one’s order obeyed. The person obeying is a crucial component in such a power relation. Weber famously saw the source for this acceptance in different types of legitimacy: tradition, habit, and reason. Yet, when it comes to his discussion and examples, Morgenthau seems to reduce these three to just one: the cost-benefit analysis of gains or losses. In other words, A affects B’s mind mainly by making it more or less costly to engage in a certain behavior, by deterring, compelling, and (later) also bribing B (for the role of bribing and positive sanctions in foreign policy, see Morgenthau 1962b). Morgenthau saw power whenever B’s behavior has come to conform to A’s preferences. This is consistent with his earlier legal analysis in which legal validity was related to the cost-benefit calculus of citizens who have to face certain sanctions when violating norms (Morgenthau 1948a, 333). In both cases, Morgenthau starts from a utilitarian calculating actor. Power is relational in the sense that it lies in the way A and B relate to each other; but the actual analysis relies on a utilitarian theory of strategic interaction in which

behavior is determined by the calculus of the benefits of satisfied innate drives and the cost of external sanctions.

The National Interest Defined in Terms of Power

Morgenthau has become (in)famous for the idea that international politics is based on the national interest, which, in turn, is defined in terms of power (Morgenthau 1960, 5). In Morgenthau's explanatory theory, the national interest plays a crucial role, since it is the junction between the ontologically posited drives that constitute the logic of politics and the utilitarian theory of action that explains political behavior. It is that which makes power move from an ontological anchor to the prime explanatory factor. Put differently, the two roles of power so far encountered meet in the national interest: power as an innate drive for behavior (of A), and A's power causing B's behavior in a social relation.

Although the drive to dominate others is just one among many, it acquires a dominating position as compared to the others. Morgenthau provides no theoretical deduction; he simply posits their joint prominence as an ontological fact verified by historical experience.⁷ Hence, "the desire to live, to be free, and to have power" ends up reducing the first two to the last.⁸ Indeed, Morgenthau starts his section on power by stating that "International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim" (Morgenthau 1948a, 13). Without power, there is no ability to pursue life or achieve freedom. At one stroke, power becomes the indispensable means and the inescapable aim—that is, it is what defines the preferences of an actor. From here, the will to power becomes the general term that can subsume all actors' interests (see also the critique in Barkawi 1998, 173ff.). As we have seen, therefore, according to Morgenthau political action falls into three categories only—namely, to maintain a position of power, expand it, or demonstrate it. It is the politics of the status quo, of imperialism, and of prestige. Given the utilitarian calculus, the policies correspond to strategies that allow the maximization of the national interest expressed in terms of power.⁹

The inclusion of prestige may be curious in this regard. Indeed, Morgenthau at some point included "a desire for social recognition" as a "potent dynamic force determining social relations and social institutions" (Morgenthau 1948a, 50). This would quite upset the general set-up, since it would anchor the theory of action in social recognition. But when he discussed the main reason for including the politics of prestige, he sees it mainly as a means for achieving the two other types of policies and hence folded it into the overall utilitarianism. If sanctions are the main ordering principle, and if an order is more stable the less one actually needs to use sanctions to achieve conformity to the rule (law) or behavior that reflects the power-holder's preferences, then imprinting a sufficient "reputation for power" is a crucial means of domination. The reputation for power may make the use of sanctions unnecessary and reduce the costs of imposing an order or prevailing in a relation. A politics of prestige corresponds to this reputation for power and fits his idea of power as the inevitable immediate aim.¹⁰

⁷This opens a circle of how we can establish a theory from historical experience when, at the same time, we are told we need a theory to understand that historical experience. I will return to this later.

⁸Ty Solomon (2012) is right in insisting that, in his later writings, in particular in Morgenthau (1962a), his vision of drives and human nature is more qualified than many of his detractors lead us to believe. But if one focuses on the way he translated this into his explanatory theory, the narrowing is his, not that of his critics (see e.g., Freyberg-Inan 2004).

⁹The attempt to reduce all aims to power in a utilitarian theory has been shown impossible already by Aron 1962, 98–102 for the missing power-money analogy, a theoretical critique Morgenthau (1967) decided not to engage with. For a longer discussion, see Guzzini 1993, 453; 1998, 46–48; 2004, 538–41.

¹⁰For an example of its use, see his critique of the politics of the United States in Vietnam, which got the understanding of the politics of prestige completely wrong (Morgenthau 1965, 9–20, "shadow and substance of power").

Besides reducing interests to power, Morgenthau saw the drive for power as insatiable; it is persistent. Morgenthau was explicit that the purpose of behavior, the interest of an actor, is not just survival but something that can never really be secured. In a crucial passage, he wrote:

The selfishness of men has limits; his will to power has none. For while man's vital needs are capable of satisfaction, his lust for power would be satisfied only if the last man became an object of his domination, there being nobody above or beside him, that is, if he became like God. (Morgenthau 1945a, 13; 1946, 193)¹¹

Power in Morgenthau's explanatory theory is hence derived from an "ever unstilled desire," which, in turn, is relative in that it aims to maximize rank as compared with others. The national interest defined in terms of power thus becomes the causal constant, the explanatory dynamic in the theory.¹²

By reducing the theory to one in which all interests can be expressed in terms of power and where rational actors weigh the costs and benefits of their move for the fulfilment of power—that is, for the improvement or stabilization of rank—Morgenthau proposes a fundamentally utilitarian theory of action in which power is the value to be maximized. In addition, the explanatory theory is not just utilitarian, in its insistence on interest maximization, but is also basically behaviorist. A behaviorist theory of action "black-boxes" motives or the actual calculus of individual agents. All we need is externally given rationality and behavior from which we can infer such calculus. Morgenthau's use of the national interest explicitly abstracts from motives and ideologies (Morgenthau 1960, 5ff.). According to him, we cannot know what motives really are and should not see ideological preferences as anything more than means in the politics of power.¹³ Hence all the analysis has to do is to establish the most rational course in terms of the national interest defined as power. Assuming preferences are externally given (the national interest) and then comparing them to actual behavior makes this a specifically behaviorist approach to rational action. All these other items are not needed, as they can all be subsumed within an interest in power. As he says, this is an assumption borne out by history.

Hence, Morgenthau scholars have been correct in pointing to the richness of his theory, ethics, and intellectual courage (see e.g., Lebow 2003; Molloy 2004; Williams 2004; Molloy 2006; Williams 2007; Tjalve 2008, and the different contributions collected in Navari 2018), although his critical potential is surely contestable (Levine 2013). Yet this richness often comes at the price of neglecting to probe the links between the domains and their coherence. Consequently, many of the positive reconstructions aim primarily at the philosophical and/or practical domain, neglecting the crucial passage in his explanatory theory (Steele 2007, 273). When applying consistency to his explanatory theory in this overall approach, however, Morgenthau is himself to be blamed for the critique of circularity and narrowness with which it was received (starting, e.g., with Tucker 1952, Aron 1953).

¹¹ However, this produces a tension in his theory. If the drive for power is the Promethean ambition to become like God, then any domination of nature, including social nature, too, is an "ever unstilled and limitless" desire for humans. The drive for the control of nature, physical or social, is just as irrationally unstoppable as the drive for power of which it is part, since it is instrumental in maximizing rank. The scientist teleology whereby humankind aspires for a divine place by eventually controlling nature is hence part of a limitless desire and cannot be stopped by whatever reasonable definition of the national interest. If a really rational national interest is possible, the drive for power can be limited; if it can be limited, Morgenthau's anthropological foundation and antirationalist critique does not hold. In the end, he would provide a solution to a problem of his own making.

¹² For a similar point on how this universal allows him to paper over the contradiction between his skepticism toward objectivity and more general laws, see Pichler (1998, 192).

¹³ In fact, despite being used in an explanatory domain, the target here was political practice and the advice to allow more flexibility in Cold War competition. For more on the link between the two domains, see below.

The Balance of Power and the Nature of a Theory of International Politics

Morgenthau's theory of international relations is based on the national interest defined in terms of power, which, in turn, represents a limitless drive for rank maximization. Simply aggregating such individual behavior is enough to see the collective outcome as a balance of power, defined as "an actual state of affairs in which power is distributed among several nations with approximate equality" (Morgenthau 1948a, 125, fn. 1). It should therefore come as no surprise to find Morgenthau saying that a balance of power is "of necessity" (1948a, 125); it is simply a logical implication of the strategic interaction of states that seek to maximize their rank. If everyone wants to get higher, the effect will equal out. Since the balance is in constant flux (Morgenthau 1948a, 131), this is to be seen as a general tendency rather than as a specific state (despite his own definition). Yet Morgenthau would not be himself if he did not complicate this straightforward analysis.

He introduced a first complication unwittingly. When presenting the balance of power as an equilibrium, he suddenly introduced a theoretical logic that is not an aggregation of individual behavior, but the functional necessity of a "social homeostasis." This produces a profound theoretical tension. On the one hand, we have a utilitarian theory of rank maximization; on the other hand, the balance of power is not an aggregate of individual actions but an autonomous system, and "it is the purpose of all such equilibriums to maintain the stability of the system without destroying the multiplicity of the elements composing it." Indeed, "[s]ince the goal is stability plus the preservation of all elements of the system, the equilibrium must aim at preventing any element from gaining ascendancy over the other" (Morgenthau 1948a, 126, 127). Without apparently being aware of it, Morgenthau combined a utilitarian theory of action with a functionalist theory of equilibrium. Yet, the explanatory logic is very different and cannot be combined. The first is individualist, where the parts explain the logic of the whole, whereas the second is holistic, where the whole is more than the sum of its parts and acquires a dynamic of its own ("the equilibrium" has a "purpose"). Whereas power is obviously crucial for the first derivation of the balance of power, it is less central for the second, since here the purpose of the system takes over. It is reasonable to assume that Morgenthau did not really intend a functionalist approach but added an argument that looked useful in the defense of his approach to power.¹⁴

A second complication is the relationship between the balance of power and the normative context in which it is embedded. In both the utilitarian and functionalist accounts, the balance of power is an inevitable mechanism, "of necessity," as Morgenthau wrote. But then, this contradicts his view of politics as never being divorced from morality. If all legal norms derive from their political substrata, as he wrote, the political substrata, in turn, cannot be thought independently of the normative context. Hence, any political mechanism, such as the balance of power, is dependent on an underlying shared normative commitment. In particular, if the balance of power is to provide stability to the international system and hence limit the frequency and scope of conflict, national policies need to share a common understanding of its role. In his words: "Before the balance of power could impose its restraints upon the power aspirations of nations through the mechanical interplay of opposing forces, the competing nations had first to restrain themselves by accepting the system of the balance of power as the common framework of their endeavors" (Morgenthau 1948a, 164). Deprived of such "common moral standards, and a common civilization, as well as of common interests, which kept in check the limitless desire for

¹⁴ His comparison with the equilibria in our human body is indicative (1948a, 126). Taken seriously, it would imply our organs would fight to gain domination over each other; "liver now beats heart." That the equilibrium in a body is based on functional differentiation is not noticed here. Hence, it makes sense to assume that Morgenthau is simply not aware of the implications and is using a utilitarian model instead.

power . . . the balance of power is incapable of fulfilling its functions for international stability and national independence” (Morgenthau 1948a, 164–65).

This produces a marked tension between a balance of power that is once treated as logically necessary and once as historically and normatively contingent. The balance of power here is not a logical consequence of the *animus dominandi*, the necessary result of individual power aspirations, as he wrote elsewhere, but an institution of international society that derives from a normative consensus to work in the first place. For it to function, states have to factor its role into their national interest. The balance of power is a self-fulfilling prophecy that functions if actors behave on the basis of a common understanding of its functioning. Given his own theory of rank maximization, it is not evident how this can be derived from the theory. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, the centerpiece of Morgenthau’s international theory is either misleading or itself in need of explanation. It is misleading when it simply refers to the results of strategic interaction driven by rank maximization, since limitless power maximization cannot guarantee a distribution of power “with approximate equality.” Yet, when adding factors that fix such an equilibrium, the balance of power has to rely on a shared consensus of actors, which provides the primary explanatory gist but whose origins cannot be derived from rank maximization. In the end, Morgenthau provides a historical explanation, which he simply posits and does not theoretically generate.

This tension translates into Morgenthau’s general theory. On the one hand, his approach is surely driven by the concern for the historical preconditions that have brought the state system where it is now and whose historically developed logic needs to be understood so as to allow a policy that can avoid the dual threat of total war and totalitarian politics. On the other hand, he looks for general causes and laws (Morgenthau 1946, v). As he wrote, “the social sciences cannot hope to master the social forces unless they know the laws which govern the social relations of men,” in which immediate causes “have their roots in the innermost aspirations of the human soul” (Morgenthau 1940, 284; 1946, 95). That makes him waver, at times conveniently for his chosen target of the day, between a more historicist and a more scientist outlook. He does argue that human relations do not fit strict causal models because the same cause can have multiple effects (multifinality) and the same effect can have several independently working causes (equifinality). But then, although he uses this argument against scientism in the social world, his own vision is close to what those social scientists have been doing. “The best the so-called ‘social laws’ can do is exactly the best the so-called ‘natural laws’ can do, namely, to indicate certain trends and to state the possible conditions under which one of these trends is most likely to materialize in the future,” a science, as it were, based on “statistical averages and probability.” “The social sciences do not need to be brought to the level of the natural sciences; they are already there as far as the logical structure of their laws is concerned” (Morgenthau 1944, 178, 179; 1946, 136, 138).¹⁵

That leaves his position and the role of power in the explanatory theory in a limbo. Regularity, for Morgenthau, is not just in human nature, but in history, if repetitive, process (Morgenthau 1946, 149–52).¹⁶ The only part of his theory that can support this regularity is the “universal laws based on human nature,” in other words, the will to power. Yet, as he argued himself, its effects are contingent. This produces a circle: the desire for domination is central to human behavior, an assumption borne out of history; but then power maximization should be used independently to explain that very history from which it is derived. Of course, one can

¹⁵ For a critique showing how Morgenthau wavers between a view of theory as a framework of analysis that is not empirically testable and justifying his theory for being empirical, see Griffiths (1992, 60–70).

¹⁶ See also his reply to Martin Wight’s (1960) charge that there is no progress in world politics and hence no theory, turning Wight’s criticism around such that it is precisely this repetitive feature of world affairs that makes a theory of IR possible, in Morgenthau (1970 [1964]). For a discussion of this oddly positivist move and the circularity of his foundations, see Guzzini (2013, 528–30).

always read power into any behavior *ex post* and declare that this explains regularity. Power becomes the master concept of the explanatory theory but one which seems oddly unfalsifiable, just as metaphysical as he criticized positivist law to be. Power did not succeed in coherently linking his philosophical and explanatory domains of theorizing.

Morgenthau's Practical Domain: Gauging Power and the Art of Diplomacy

Power responds to a third purpose in Morgenthau's theorizing. Besides being the central phenomenon that constitutes the sphere of politics by providing its distinct logic, the *animus dominandi*, and besides being the central concept for explaining political action as rank maximization, power also serves a purpose in political practice. Morgenthau is fundamentally interested in how all this knowledge about the nature of politics and the general causes of state behavior translates into a strategy of foreign policy. In the historical circumstances where the shared norms of the "Aristocracy International" are no longer binding and informing the national interest, moderation and the limitation of conflict is at constant risk. The rise of a new form of nationalism threatens total war and totalized societies. How can such limitless power politics be avoided? What is the best *use of power*?

With the change in purpose, expectations about the concept of power also shift. While using power in an explanatory theory, Morgenthau pointed to the inevitability of power politics, to the *animus dominandi* that determines behavior, and to the formation of a balance of power by necessity. A quite determinist and clean causal reading such as this in his explanatory theory is necessary to establish the scientific credentials for the superiority of realist theory, the necessity for the primacy of power in theorizing. This is a disciplinary power move, providing the background authority for policy advice. Handily, this theory is articulated in terms of a practice already given in earlier European statesmanship, which thus becomes justified. To have such authority, the more determinate the concept, the better. Power "maximization" and the "balance" of power require power to be an empirically identifiable and measurable phenomenon.

When interested in the possibilities of statesmanship, however, Morgenthau saw power, the national interest, and the balance of power through the eyes of practitioners; and power suddenly appears all uncertain and immeasurable. Diplomacy may be based on Morgenthau's type of science, but for all the contingencies of the real world, it must be practiced as art. It is quite remarkable how the determinate language of Morgenthau in the early pages of his *Politics among Nations* gives way to a series of chapters whose main function is to show the elusiveness of power. "Evaluating" power and the balance of power are the major concerns of entire chapters. Although they seem to be connected to his explanatory theory, they are in fact informed by the point of view of the practitioners. Morgenthau provides a checklist of mistakes and reductions that need to be avoided if statesmen are to follow an effective but also morally justifiable foreign policy. Just as the neglect of power was the culprit in his ontological and explanatory theory, so is the obsession with power the target of his practical politics. That may sound contradictory but is less so when keeping the different purposes of power and the domains of their analysis apart: establishing a general strategy for action has other demands than establishing a causal theory or a political ontology. Still, by using power as the master concept to link his three purposes and domains, it produces a muddle that is of his own making.

Correctly evaluating and "showing" power is crucial, according to Morgenthau, in putting limits on power politics: showing too much provokes fear and violent reaction, but showing too little invites opportunist aggression. For Morgenthau, this adds up to two basic aims of any good and morally justifiable foreign policy: seek power to defend rank, and seek a balance of power to provide a political order. To achieve these aims, gauging power is important in two ways. If rank maximization

is the aim for state policies, it is important to understand what makes up national power; and if the balance is to work in a smooth manner that manages power shifts, then diplomats must devise means to calculate equilibria. The evaluation of power becomes the crucial element of foreign policy not only for political decisions on where to invest what resources but also for the multilateral conventions needed to assess an ever-fluctuating balance.

Morgenthau lists eight elements of national power: geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, national character, national morale, and the quality of diplomacy. A list such as this makes it impossible to see an aggregate of “national power.” Yet, Morgenthau’s theory is driven by the limitless drive for power and hence the unavoidable possibility that collective violence be used to achieve it. Thus, most of the elements are treated in combination so as to determine whether they improve “military effectiveness” (Morgenthau 1948a, 110). Hence, the national interest consists in combining policies such as maximizing the national combination of these different elements for purposes of military effectiveness.

Such power maximization cannot really be assessed, however. First, “effectiveness” does not refer to the elements of power but to their actual influence: national power is understood as influence—namely, that which effectively causes B’s behavior. Morgenthau’s phrasing points to the problem that power is influence but that for any analysis before the event, we only have elements of power (or resources, or capabilities) from which no secure influence can be directly derived. Therefore, Morgenthau is quite explicit that military effectiveness is much more than the military factor alone.

Having indices of power but no objective measure of influence obviously produces a problem for a balance of power to work. Where does the equilibrium lie? Is this state policy only balancing the power increase elsewhere, or is it tipping the balance? Given that national power cannot be really assessed, the only way for this to work is for diplomats to come up with a conventional measure:

The balance of power mechanically conceived is in need of an easily recognizable, quantitative criterion by which the relative power of a number of nations can be measured and compared. For it is only by means of such a criterion, comparable to the pounds and ounces of a real pair of scales, that one can say with any degree of assurance that a certain nation tends to become more powerful than another or that they tend to maintain a balance of power between them. Furthermore, it is only by means of such a criterion that variations in power can be converted into quantitative units to be transferred from one scale into the other in order to restore the balance. (Morgenthau 1948a, 151)

Whereas, in the past, “the theory and practice of the balance of power” used territory, population, and armaments for such a measure, we are in dire need of a reliable replacement, lest “the balance of power becomes a series of guesses the correctness of which can be ascertained only in retrospect” (Morgenthau 1948a, 152)—that is, after a conflict, including war.

It should be clear that when Morgenthau speaks here of the theory and practice of the balance of power, he is no longer referring to an explanatory theory, at least as he conceived it. He uses a theory of power politics in the sense of “strategy” or foreign policy “doctrine” (Aron 1964, 27, 45–46), as is characteristic of the practical domain. Therefore, the balance of power, defined earlier as a roughly equal distribution of capabilities in the system, is not in any theoretical or logical sense “of necessity,” as he wrote. It overshoots. It needs conventional measures to function in the first place, conventions that may no longer be in place. It is “of necessity” in a policy/strategy sense, in that, if states wish to avoid humiliation or worse, they need to balance the power of others. It is also “of necessity” in a normative sense, in that, if humanity wishes to limit the totalizing tendencies of twentieth-century politics, it

requires a functioning balance of power, itself underpinned by a commonly shared diplomatic culture. For this reason, Morgenthau does reserve a significant place for other ordering mechanisms, like international morality, law, and world public opinion.

In this practical domain, theorizing is connected to establishing the maxims that feed into practical judgment. If the art of diplomacy consists in gauging power, if those measures cannot simply be read off the elements of power but need to be agreed on beforehand, then the gauging of power assumes a measure, and that measure assumes a shared understanding. If the latter is missing, diplomacy is surely a very special craft. To square the circle and gauge power correctly, diplomacy must pretend to have a conventional agreement already while concomitantly applying itself to forging one (Sárváry 2008). The statesman (*sic*) becomes here the (very romantic and) heroic figure of Morgenthau's (and other realists') texts (for a more detailed discussion of Morgenthau's conception of leadership, see Neascu 2010, 134–46). As Pin-Fat (2005, 231) has shown, for Morgenthau, this wise judgment, inspired by Weber's ethics of responsibility, cannot be deduced from theory but "is founded upon the 'gift of intuition' which cannot be taught but only refined through experience, study and example."

Hence, when discussing practice, Morgenthau himself keeps the two meanings of theory apart, explanation versus strategy, the level of the distant observer making sense of behavior and the level of the actor who is planning behavior. However, when trying to legitimate the superiority of the realist position through its explanatory theory, he sees a direct link between the two where his rationalist theory inspires political action. Yet, power works very differently in these respective domains, in a manner which Morgenthau's repeated conceptual slide obfuscates. This is to some extent "good" news for Morgenthau since it makes it possible for him to have his cake and eat it too—that is, to have contradictory expectations about the concept of power, determinate for an explanatory theory but elusive and conventional for foreign policy strategy. Yet it is also bad news in that the underlying assumptions actually do not match. In fact, his vision of a convention of power measures should have prompted links back from the practical to the explanatory domain, with a far more socially embedded theory of international behavior than mere power maximization. When criticizing law for not relating to social forces, he made an important move that would affect his ontology and explanatory theory. But when faced with important issues about recognition (given his focus on rank) and convention (given the nonexistent objective measure of power), realist practice should have affected his explanatory theory, even if he just followed Max Weber's social and not only his political theory. It did not. Here as before, his specific conceptualization of power cannot provide a walkable bridge between the domains.

Conclusion

The field of IR is characterized by the parallel presence of three domains and languages. Although the existence of these domains is generally acknowledged, research often proceeds in one domain, as if theoretical progress could infinitely bracket knowledge about the other domains. Without making the links, knowledge may pretend complementarity across the domains while producing contradictions. Instead, our theorizing needs to build bridges in a coherent manner. This is no easy task and one that could keep more than a single discipline busy. Morgenthau's attempt to use a theory of power for this purpose may not have succeeded, yet it demonstrates the variety and necessity of the links. It also indicates some of potential pitfalls of linking them, where the claims across the domains do not meet or where, in order to establish consistency, findings are neglected. Morgenthau's explanatory theory suffers from the strictures his ontology of power imposes on it. It

also runs into blatant contradictions when the explanatory theory aims at an empirical and causal analysis for which it needs to assume a measure of power that his analysis of practice denies.¹⁷

Using Morgenthau's theory as a foil, however, may be seen as playing a bad trick on the whole endeavor. As Bleiker (1997, 85) warned quite some time ago, "by articulating critique in relation to arguments advanced by orthodox IR theory, the impact of critical voices remains confined within the larger discursive boundaries that were established through the initial framing of debates." I do not think we can entirely avoid this risk. If the discipline has some sense of itself, it will refer to the established languages. Yet these languages are changing, and it is the core of IR theorizing to apprehend those changes. As the recent development of new sections in the North American International Studies Association has shown, there is a huge need to integrate the (often more critical) knowledge that, for example, the Historical International Relations (HIST), the International Political Sociology (IPS), the Science, Technology, and Arts in International Relations (STAIR), and the (surprisingly late constituted) Theory sections have produced. The world of practice does not only speak the language of diplomacy or strategy, and the "common lessons" of history that provide much of the stock of the collective memory have been rewritten; normative positions are much more varied than they used to be, and, on the explanatory level, we have advanced a lot in terms of metatheoretical sophistication, as well as historical and intersectional reflexivity. As the critique of Morgenthau's solution should have shown, the present piece is not an invitation to return to a realist package for dealing with the three domains but to think them both together and anew.

Hence, when the Sapphire panel was asked to reflect on the role of theory in the present-day fragmentation of debates and research agendas, as well its role in the pluralism and diversity of methodologies (i.e., metatheories, not just methods), this call reacted to a felt need in the field where research communities drift apart and the sheer variety of the necessary knowledge exceeds anyone's capacity. The temptation is great to resort to yet another round of narrowing the field, its research, and its methodologies, to define a core and a core practice that defines the legitimate IR scholar. Recruitment and academic hierarchies often do still reflect this move, mainly for practical reasons. As mentioned earlier, although all social sciences have arbitrary disciplinary boundaries, IR's weak institutional weight in departmental struggles make such defensive and narrowing definitions often necessary in order to establish some disciplinary space.

But it would be advisable not to forget the contingent reasons for such narrowing. For the general understanding of the discipline, it would make much more sense to make the discipline truly plural, allowing for the different fields of expertise and a sense of complementarity to inform it. For this, scholars need not "know it all," but they do need to accept that the coherence of their knowledge depends on knowledge in those other domains. Therefore, this is not just a plea for some disciplinary pluralism in theory and method, stretching from philosophy via explanatory theory to practice. It is a plea for considering all three domains as equally fundamental for the specific discipline of IR. Moreover, one needs to be ready and able to bridge—not for some *via media* but for consistency across philosophical, explanatory, and practical claims. Besides the role within the domains, it is for these bridges, that our different ways of theorizing have an indispensable place. And IR may be the privileged place in which to make it happen.

¹⁷ Some constructivists have, therefore, tried to base the practice of realist prudence (Barkin 2010) or self-restraint (Wendt 1999) on a constructivist explanatory theory.

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