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## Morgenthau as a Weberian Methodologist

### Abstract

*Hans Morgenthau was a founder of the modern discipline of international relations, and his Politics Among Nations was for a decade the dominant textbook in the field. The character of his Realism has frequently been discussed in debates on methodology and the nature of theory in international relations. Almost all of this discussion has mischaracterized his views. The clues given in his writings, as well as his biography, point directly to Max Weber's methodological writings. Morgenthau, it is argued, was a sophisticated user of Weber's views who self-consciously applied them in the sphere of international relations in such a way that Realism provided an ideal-typical model of the rational and responsible statesman. This interpretation both explains Morgenthau's views and shows them to be a serious, complex, and compelling response to the issues which have animated the controversies over international relations theory after Waltz's presentation of the methodological basis for his neo-Realism.*

Keywords: Morgenthau, Weber, ideal-type, spheres, Realism

The sprawling discussion of the underlying methodological presuppositions of international relations theory over the last few decades<sup>1</sup> has often mentioned Hans J.

Morgenthau<sup>2</sup>, but Morgenthau's own methodological thinking has rarely been discussed.

Although there are a number of texts in which he discusses the idea of international relations 'theory' (especially 1962, 1970: 67-71, 1978a, 2004: 15-31) and comments on opposed positions (Morgenthau, 1970, 1978a), these texts are curiously unrevealing, and often puzzling, especially if they are read in the light of the later controversy, especially the controversy over the strongly expressed methodological views of Kenneth Waltz<sup>3</sup>.

The puzzles have often been noted. But there has been no attempt to resolve these puzzles, nor to identify a distinctive 'Morgenthau approach' to methodological questions. The fact that Morgenthau says little about his methodological commitments would make this difficult, in any case. But what he does say is distinctive, and calls for amplification and explication.

Since the 1980s, it has become clear that Max Weber is a major historical source of Morgenthau's Realism, and, entirely independent of the methodological literature, a large literature on the relations between the two has emerged.<sup>4</sup> Morgenthau's own autobiographical statement (1978b) makes the influence of Weber clear, but the relationship was evident earlier, for example in Morgenthau's use of a quotation from Weber to explain the central concept of 'interests' (Weber [1968]1978: 9). In the autobiographical text Morgenthau, and accordingly most of the secondary literature (Schmidt, 2005), refers to the inspiration of Weber's *political* writings, which in a well-known passage, Morgenthau tells us appeared to him as a revelation in the seminar that launched his career in the direction of international relations.

Weber's political thought possessed all the intellectual and moral qualities I had looked for in vain in the contemporary literature inside and outside the universities. . . . While as a citizen he was a passionate observer of the political scene and a frustrated participant in it, as a scholar he looked at politics without passion and pursued no political purpose beyond the intellectual one of understanding. (1978b: 64)

The political writings, were, however, a collection of occasional pieces that were specifically distinguished from Weber's 'scholarship'. To comprehend Weber 'as a scholar' concerned with 'understanding'—the terms of the biographical statement—required Morgenthau to take account of Weber's other writings, including his methodological writings, collected in his *Wissenschaftslehre* ([1922]1988), as well as his sociological writings, which are the source of the 'interests' quotation, and indeed, as we will see, Morgenthau did take them into account.<sup>5</sup> Thus it would seem that a separate inquiry into the relation between Morgenthau's and Weber's methodological writings is warranted.

The intersection between the methodological literature, the methodological presuppositions of Realism, and the literature on Weber and Morgenthau is, however, surprisingly empty. Just as there is no account of Morgenthau's methodology, there is no account the relationship of Weber to that methodology. That is the lacuna that this paper seeks to repair by reconsidering the relationship between the two thinkers in a way that sheds light on both literatures. In this article we will argue that an adequate interpretation

and amplification requires attention to Weber's methodological writings ([1907]1977, [1922]1988, 1946, 1949, [1903-1906]1975). We will identify the decisive textual grounds for treating Morgenthau as, methodologically, a Weberian, and reconstruct Morgenthau's original argument in light of Weber's methodological writings. The core of this argument is the demonstration that Morgenthau's crucial self-characterizations in these texts employ and directly reproduce the key elements of Weber's methodological writings, virtually unchanged and in fine detail, and creatively applied to the novel task of defining the character of international relations theory. Moreover, we will claim, this represents not only a credible position, but one that avoids many of the problematic claims made by later neorealists, such as Kenneth Waltz. The credibility of Morgenthau's alternative depends on the vexed issue of 'ideal-types'. A review of the history of the critique of the concept of 'ideal-types' reveals that the original arguments against the concept framed by Carl Hempel ([1952]1963), which de-legitimated it as a 'scientific' strategy, no longer make sense, and subsequent developments, including the new role of rational choice and the problem of its status, point to a different conclusion about the ideal-type.

Getting Morgenthau Wrong: Why?

Simply as an historical matter, addressing the problem of correctly characterizing Morgenthau is important. Two examples of otherwise highly competent scholars who have been misled are Roger Spegele (1987) and Martin Hollis (1987). Hollis was among

the most distinguished philosophers of social science as science of his generation, and his co-authored work with Steve Smith on international relations theory (Hollis and Smith, 1990) is the most complete and sophisticated intervention in the literature from the point of view of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. Moreover, Hollis himself defends an ‘interpretive’ approach to the methodology of international relations theory which he explicitly associates with Weber, and which Hollis explicates in terms of his own approach to rational choice theory (cf. Hollis, 1977, 1987) against a more ‘positivistic’ causal or structural approach (Cerny, 1993). This valuable study treats Morgenthau as ‘essentially positivistic’ (1990: 23; cf. Hollis, 1987: 148). It is revealing that Hollis and Smith are puzzled by what appears to them to be the halfheartedness of his ‘positivism’, and the fact that he ‘seems to doubt the realism of his own Realism’ (1990: 95),<sup>6</sup> but they do not go on to ask whether they have misunderstood Morgenthau.

Spegele was among the most acute critics of Waltz’s methodological presuppositions, and pointed out the many ways in which Waltz’s appeal to the philosophy of science actually undermines the scientific pretensions of his theory by immunizing it from falsification (1987: 196). This was to become a standard criticism in the subsequent literature (Vasquez, 1997; Vasquez and Elman, 2003, and many others). But when Spegele turned to Morgenthau, he quoted Morgenthau’s comments about his reluctance to engage in polemics concerning methodological presuppositions (1987: 192). Spegele takes this as evidence that he had no methodological conception at all, lamenting ‘the absence of philosophical efforts to ground the commonsense view of international realism’ (Spegele, 1987: 191). Morgenthau himself justified his reluctance to engage in

methodological discussion on the grounds of the fruitlessness of these discussions (1978a: xi-xii), a judgment which the record of the debates of the 1950s and 60s amply supports (Jervis, 2003). But Spegele ignores this interpretive warning sign, and does not go on to ask whether Morgenthau might have had a methodological conception that he intentionally did not fully articulate.

There are some exceptions to this view of Morgenthau as a methodological naif or primitive positivist, but they illustrate the failure to come to terms with the Weberian elements of Morgenthau's methodological thought. Richard Little correctly observes that Morgenthau saw 'hermeneutic methods' as essential in social science (1991: 467), but does not connect this with Weber. Jim George makes the connection between Morgenthau, hermeneutics, and Weber, but not to Weber's ideal-types (1994: 91), and considers Morgenthau's appeal to laws (which we will take up at length below) to be an 'anomaly' of a large 'magnitude' (1994: 93). As we will show, this anomaly is an important clue to his underlying conception. Stacie Goddard and Daniel Nexon suggest that a structuralist-constructivist synthesis might be developed which treats systems as Weberian ideal-types, but make no reference to Morgenthau in this connection (2005: 48-49). Stefano Guzzini notes that Weber's 'understanding of social action . . . underlies Morgenthau's theory', but comments that Morgenthau did not understand the metatheoretical implications of this for deriving a deductive form of balance of power theory, indicating that he reads Morgenthau as a proponent of such a deductive theory (2004: 538). Again, the conflict is real. But only a naif would have failed to notice it. Tarak Barkawi correctly says that Morgenthau 'makes use of Weber's ideal-typical

method'. But Barkawi develops the thought only in passing, in a discussion primarily concerned with Morgenthau's value commitments and conception of policy science, which he contrasts to Weber's own (Barkawi, 1998: 173-4).

The question of Morgenthau's methodological views is thus an open one on which there is little agreement even within the modest discussion of the subject that has occurred. The core of the discussion that follows is thus primarily historical and interpretive: an attempt to give an answer to the question of what Morgenthau's methodological views were and how they relate to Weber's. It will be argued here that Morgenthau unambiguously understood his own efforts as the construction of a Weberian ideal-type designed for purposes of understanding. The larger relevance of this claim is a product of the fact that issues about the status of ideal-types underlie disputes over the nature of theoretical social science generally, about the role of models in social science, and about the problem of their relation to social science policy. Morgenthau, we will show, understood these issues in a sophisticated way. His approach to these issues deserves to be made explicit. The issues are central to Realism as an intellectual tradition, as well, for it is only in the light of an adequate understanding of his views that a meaningful comparison can be made between Morgenthau's 'modern' realism and its neo-Realist successors.

### Morgenthau's Reliance on Weber's Methodology

Morgenthau makes a number of methodological comments that are specifically and



unequivocally 'Weberian'. Some of them appear in *Politics Among Nations* (from the second edition (1954) to the fifth edition– the last one Morgenthau did). Others appear in his rare discussions of the nature of international relations 'theory', for example in 'The Commitments of a Theory of International Politics' ([1959]1962). Another set appears in his New York lectures on Aristotle (2004: 15-31). There are three major clues, places where his mode of expression is distinctly Weberian and unintelligible apart from the Weberian background. There are also many cases where his form of expression is more generic, but takes on a specific sense if they are interpreted in terms of Weber.<sup>7</sup> The major clues include (1) the notion of the standpoint relative (perspectival) character of social science conceptualization, (2) the use of a Weberian ideal-type notion of rationality in a relation of 'reflection' with underlying realities, together with the idea of the one-sided character of such ideal-types, and (3) the notion of 'spheres'.

The point of contact that sets Morgenthau apart and places him unambiguously in the Weberian tradition is his embrace of the interest-relative character of international relations theory. Weber argued that our interests in social explanation differ from the interests that govern our conceptualizations in natural science. In natural science we are free to alter our concepts to fit the demands of prediction. In social science our options are much more limited. In social science a predictive theory in a conceptual language that did not map onto our ordinary language would substantially fail to meaningfully explain what we are interested in understanding. War, for example, is a concept that is part of our culture. A theory that redefined 'war' in order to make a predictive theory possible would no longer answer our questions about war, but merely change the subject, and this is a

generic feature of what Weber called the historical sciences ([1904]1949: 74-76).

The world of interest to the historical sciences is the world preconstituted for us by our cultural interests or values and embodied in our language. ‘Culture’ is a finite segment of the otherwise meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which *human beings* confer meaning and significance ([1904]1949: 81, emphasis in the original). We have access to the sub-segment of ‘culture’ which is our own culture. It is this culture which is directly intelligible to us. In this sense, social science is always tied to a particular social or cultural situation. Weber explained both the notion of interest and the notion that our concepts could not be replaced in terms of value. Our everyday worldview, he argued, was itself valuative. Consequently the ‘language of life’, in terms of which the historical sciences necessarily express themselves ([1904]1949: 107), is valuative. This was a claim that derived from neo-Kantian philosophy, which was contemporary to Weber and central to the philosophy of both Rickert and Lask, philosophers who had close relations to Weber. But Weber diverged from neo-Kantianism with respect to the idea that disciplines have and should be organized around a fixed set of final categories ([1904]1949: 84).

The first relativization, so to speak, is thus to the social and cultural situation to which we are tied, which is also a valuative starting point. The second relativization is to our disciplinary purposes. For Weber, each of the social sciences has distinctive cognitive interests, which were in each case originally associated with valuative standpoints. Economics, for example, ‘viewed reality from an at least ostensibly unambiguous and stable practical evaluative standpoint, namely, the increase of the “wealth” of the

population' ([1904]1949: 85). The same holds for 'the empirical social sciences'

generally, Weber states:

. . . the possibility of meaningful knowledge of what is essential for us in the infinite richness of events is bound up with the unremitting application of viewpoints of a specifically particularized character, which, in the last analysis, are oriented on the basis of valuative ideas ([1904]1949: 111).

This is in sharp contrast to the natural and physical sciences. They also begin in practical concerns, but do not continue to be defined by evaluative standpoints. The subject matter of chemistry may well be partially preconstituted for us by our culture, for example by our interest in the precious metals. But as chemists we are always prepared to discard and replace such a folk classification as 'gold' for one which predicts better or fits better into a predictive general theory, such as the element 'Au' with a fixed atomic weight and place in the periodic table. In the social sciences, in contrast, the tie to values is never broken, neither with respect to the original 'folk' terms of description that are part of the worldview of ordinary experience, nor the valuative standpoint rooted in practical aims, which gives rise to the construction of the conceptual schemes in the historical sciences. As Weber explains the idea, 'the guiding "point of view" is of great importance for the *construction* of the conceptual scheme which will be used in the investigation' ([1904]1949: 84), emphasis in the original). This is *because* our cognitive interest in the subject would not be satisfied by a conceptual scheme that did not map onto our original

questions.

Morgenthau not only subscribed fully to this general view, he adhered to it until the end of his career. A comment in his late New York lectures mentions both the role of values in providing us with a limited window on an infinite variety of empirical reality and the purpose-relative character of empirical inquiry:

We approach reality with an implicit and inchoate set of values that we want to discover. Empirical reality is infinitely varied and quantitatively not subject to assimilation. So whatever empirical study we make by way of selection from an enormous number of empirical data, the principle of selection is a value. For instance, I could make it my purpose of empirical investigation to count the number of hairs on your head which, in terms of value, is not a particularly revealing or interesting activity. So by studying one thing and leaving aside a hundred others, you already apply a value. We are philosophers without knowing it. (2004: 23-4)

This reasoning applies directly to the special situation which Morgenthau says guides the process of selection relevant to the study of international relations. Morgenthau argued that while the

theoretical function of a theory of international relations is no different from the function any social theory performs, its practical function is peculiar to itself. The

practical function of a theory of international relations has this in common with all political theory that it depends very much on the political environment in which it operates. In other words, political thinking is, as German sociology puts it, '*standortgebunden*', that is to say, it is tied to a particular social situation. ([1961]1962: 72-73)

The first sentence is a direct application of Weber's account of the interest-dependent character of social science conceptualization, applied to the study of international politics. Morgenthau locates international relations theory in the category of social theory, whose 'theoretical functions' it shares<sup>8</sup>, and then places it in a specific sublocation which is not shared: political thinking which has a practical function which is tied to a particular social situation.

The particular social situation, as he describes it in *Politics Among Nations*, is 'the position of a statesman who must meet a certain problem of foreign policy under certain circumstances'. We analyze by putting ourselves in this position 'and we ask ourselves what the rational alternatives are from which a statesman may choose' (1978a: 5). This is a starting point for social theory oriented to understanding, in this case to the understanding of a particular group of agents operating in a specific role in a specific historical situation. But the theory happens also to have practical significance, or to function also as 'political' theory because in our particular political environment, it serves as a basis for expert evaluations useful to the conduct of foreign policy. This practical function is something it does not share with social theory in general.

This relativization of the science of international relations, first to the culture in which its terms are meaningful, then to the specific cognitive purposes of persons engaged in the practical tasks of diplomacy, separates Morgenthau significantly from the standard scientized conception of social science theory. Morgenthau's specific reference to the notion of *standortgebunden* shows that he *intended* what he is often accused of (Guzzini, 2000: 153), namely of conceptualizing international politics in the historically localized terms of its participants. Morgenthau's use of the term *standortgebunden* shows that he was also quite conscious of the philosophical grounds, derived from Weber, for doing so.

The next central point of commonality in methodological views between Morgenthau and Weber involves the concept of rationality. This is an area in which a large number of puzzling claims can be given significance by reference to a distinctive clue. In this case the clue involves the term 'reflection' in the context of the claim that a theory 'reflects' underlying realities. As is well known, Morgenthau said that realism believes in the objectivity of the laws of politics, and that these laws are rooted in human nature (1978a: 4).<sup>9</sup> This is the kind of passage that led many interpreters, such as Guzzini, to argue that Morgenthau did not grasp the implications of Weber's theory of action, which precludes such laws, and interpreters, such as George, to see an anomaly of a large magnitude. But the text itself provides a clue to the explanation of this apparent conflict. Morgenthau immediately qualifies the reference to laws by saying that realism is concerned to establish a 'rational theory' that 'reflects' these objective laws, however 'imperfectly and one-sidedly' (1978a: 4). The usage 'reflects' appears merely to be

slipshod language for 'is true of'. But as we will see, the meaning is quite different, precise, distinctly Weberian, and points directly to the correct interpretation of Morgenthau's methodology. However, to see its significance it is important to deal with a series of equally puzzling claims that turn out to be closely related.

Morgenthau, in an oft-quoted passage that 'theory [for realism] consists in ascertaining facts and giving them meaning through reason' (1978a: 4). This passage and those on laws of human nature and 'reflection', taken together, from the point of view of a 'positivist' account of theory, require careful interpretation. If there are laws, for the positivist they should be the subject of the science and the source of its explanatory power. The term 'reflect' simply does not belong. There is no point to having a theory that merely reflects these laws. The term 'rational' makes no sense here either: the laws should be empirical, not rational, and true, in the sense of predictive. 'Meaning' is also a term that does not belong. The 'meaning' of a sentence for a positivist is to be found in its method of verification. Theories in the positivist sense, however, do not bestow meaning on anything.

'One-sidedness' is also a problem. Science, seeking explanation through law-like generalizations, might employ idealizations, such as the ideal gas law, or models that are simplifications. But, the purpose of these idealizations is to enable the law to be combined with other empirical laws to enable predictions that become less 'one-sided' and imperfect or simple. A one-sided theory as such is only a partial one, and hence false. So to say that a theory is one-sided is to say that the theory is false. But Morgenthau presents his theory not as a partial and imperfect theory to be corrected in the future, but

as a theory which is intrinsically different: something designed to be one-sided.

Moreover, he claims that it has normative implications, something that Weber was careful to avoid saying, but which is consistent with Morgenthau's suggestion that under special circumstances social theory may have the additional function of serving as political theory.<sup>10</sup>

These claims take some disentangling, and this requires attention to the texts themselves. The following passage contains and connects both thoughts:

Political realism contains not only a theoretical but also a normative element. It knows that political reality is replete with contingencies and systematic irrationalities and points to the typical influences they exert upon foreign policy. Yet it shares with all social theory the need, for the sake of theoretical understanding, to stress the rational elements of political reality; for it is these rational elements that make reality intelligible for theory. Political realism presents the theoretical construct of a rational foreign policy which experience can never completely achieve. (1978a: 8)

This is to say that 'the theoretical construct of a rational foreign policy' does not completely correspond to reality, but that it is nevertheless rational and supplies meaning and intelligibility to the actions of statesmen, as well as a standard for judging them. The deviations from rationality are the result of contingencies and systematic irrationalities, which can in turn be made intelligible. The imperfect and one-sided character of the



theoretical construct is a result of its rationality: the construct is more rational, that is more fully intelligible, than the reality itself.

The constructs that are imperfect and one-sided are none other than Weberian ideal-types. Morgenthau does not use the term 'ideal-type'. But 'one-sided' used in this way is a direct clue to the Weberian provenance of this conception. The term is used repeatedly in Weber's major methodological work, 'Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy', usually with reference to the example of economics ([1904]1949: 67, 71, 73, 90, 105). Ideal-types are conceptual forms, idealizations, which selectively present some aspects of social life, particularly social action, for the purpose of making them more fully intelligible by redescribing them in terms of clarified concepts. Weber gives the following example of this kind of reasoning in relation to rationality:

. . . in attempting to explain the campaign of 1866, it is indispensable both in the case of Moltke and of Benedek to construct imaginatively how each, given fully adequate knowledge both of his own situation and that of his opponent, would have acted. Then it is possible to compare this with the actual course of action and to arrive at a causal explanation of the observed deviations, which will be attributed to such factors as misinformation, strategical errors, logical fallacies, or considerations outside the realm of strategy. Here . . . an ideal-typical construction of rational action is actually employed even though it is not explicit ([1968]1978: 21).

The rational ideal-type employed here is one-sided in the sense that, out of the mass of relevant explanatory considerations, it selects only those that relate to rational military strategy.

This use of an ideal-type that is both a means of understanding and evaluating is directly paralleled in Morgenthau, who comments that:

It is no argument against the theory here presented that actual foreign policy does not or cannot live up to it. That argument misunderstands the intention of this book, which is to present not an indiscriminate description of political reality, but a rational theory of international politics. Far from being invalidated by the fact that, for instance, a perfect balance of power policy will scarcely be found in reality, it assumes that reality, being deficient in this respect, must be *understood and evaluated* as an approximation to an ideal system of a balance of power.

(1978a: 8, emphasis added)

Rational ideal-types are, for Weber, the acme of intelligibility ([1968]1978: 20). A ‘rational theory of international politics’ for Morgenthau, similarly, is one which represents the actions of a statesman by describing them not indiscriminately, but in terms of the rational pursuit of the national interest, including the ways in which the statesman fails to live up to rationality, errs, misperceives, and the like. It is in this sense, as Morgenthau puts it, ‘political realism contains not only a theoretical but also a normative element’ (Morgenthau, 1978a: 8). Being ‘unrealistic’ but conceptually clear,

is, for Weber and Morgenthau, a means to the end of intelligibility. First one makes actions intelligible, then one makes them additionally intelligible by accounting for the systematic deviation from the clear forms of rationality.<sup>11</sup>

So what is the factual content of the theory? And how does it relate to the underlying laws of power? With this question we come to the core oddity of Morgenthau's approach, which turns out to be shared with Weber. Begin with a recollection of Waltz, who notes that 'Morgenthau once compared a statesman not believing in the balance of power to a scientist not believing in the law of gravity' (2003b: 53). This might lead one to believe that our interest in international politics is in uncovering these laws of gravity, and this indeed is how Waltz understood his own project. But Morgenthau does not say this. His focus is on understanding action, and especially rational action. When he designates international relations theory as a subcategory of social theory with all its characteristic properties, he is most readily understood as claiming that it is a special branch of what Weber called *Verstehende Soziologie*, whose topic is meaningful action, which is made intelligible— not (*nota bene*, merely casually explained) primarily by showing it to be rational, meaning by 'assimilating' it to an ideal-typical form of rational action.<sup>12</sup> How does this work, and how does this 'rational' and 'meaning' oriented approach relate to the realities of international politics? Morgenthau's claim is this:

We assume that statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power, and the evidence of history bears that assumption out. That assumption allows us to

retrace and anticipate, as it were, the steps a statesman— past, present or future— has taken or will take on the political scene. (1978a: 5)

The ‘we assume’ refers to the rational ideal-type of action. The rest refers to the factual basis for thinking that people will behave in accordance with it, at least most of the time. These considerations are the explanation of Morgenthau’s answer to the question of why power and interest are the core concepts of international relations. The answer is not the ‘postivistic’ one that this centrality is derived *directly* by the facts of international politics, or that it is part of the untestable assumptions of the theory, but rather that they are made central by the standpoint around which we have chosen to organize our inquiries, the standpoint of the statesman, whom we assume (correctly, according to the evidence of history) thinks and acts in terms of interest defined as power.

This interpretation of Morgenthau, however, points to the puzzle posed by George about the Weberian theory of action. What is the status of the ‘laws of gravity’ of politics? Are there laws of this kind? And isn’t any reference to ‘laws’ in this domain deeply anti-Weberian? The answer to this question is an odd one, and it ties Morgenthau even more closely to Weber. Weber himself, in his political writings, also spoke of laws, as when he said that ‘for everything that shares in the goods of the *Machtstaat* is inextricably enmeshed in the law of the “power pragma” that governs all political history’ [1916]1994: 78). This remarkable formulation, in the *Politische Schriften*, the text which Morgenthau describes as having transformed his thought, opens the door to precisely the kind of interpretation Morgenthau later developed. Nor is this a slip of the pen on

Weber's part. Another example of this indirect use of 'laws' in Weber is in the *Zwischenbetrachtung*: 'as economic and rational political actions follow laws of their own, so every other worldly action remains inescapably bound to worldly conditions' ([1915]1946: 339). These passages point directly to the solution to the puzzle of the relation between 'one-sided' ideal-types and empirical reality. The first part of this solution is contained in the phrase 'inescapably bound'. The second part, which we will take up shortly, involves the notion of spheres.

'Inescapably bound' is a phrase similar to 'reflect'. It points to a relationship in which there are profoundly determinative facts, but facts whose determinative power in some sense indirect, muted, or mediated. Morgenthau has explained this indirectness by the phrase quoted earlier: 'political reality is replete with contingencies and systematic irrationalities' (1978a: 8). Weber has a specific term for the relation corresponding to 'true' from the point of view of rationality: objectively correct rationality (*Richtigkeitsrationalität*) (1913]1981: 154-55; cf. Swedberg 2005: 179). This concept supplies the link of 'reflection' between the rational and the empirical which is fundamental for Morgenthau. Human conduct is intelligible and thus can be ideal-typically constructed in the context of international politics *because* it is ordered, in this case by the laws of power, which mean that actions have more or less predictable consequences. For Morgenthau as for Weber, there are objective laws, but our goal in relation to them is not, as one might 'positivistically' think, to discover these laws, but rather to make sense of the behavior of statesmen who must conduct themselves in the face of them. But to fully understand this notion, we must add to it.

### The Third Clue

The third clue is the use of the term ‘spheres’. Morgenthau appealed to the notion of ‘politics as an autonomous sphere of action and understanding apart from other spheres . . . without which a theory of politics, international or domestic, would be altogether impossible’ (1978a: 5). The language of spheres and the distinction between the sphere of politics and other spheres is taken directly from Weber, who divides the essay ‘*Zwischenbetrachtung*’, (from which Morgenthau took the ‘interests’ quotation in *Politics Among Nations*), into separate discussions of the spheres of ‘economic’, intellectual, political, esthetic, and erotic. The aim of the essay is to analyze the ‘tensions’ between these spheres and the religious. Foreign policy plays a special role in this discussion. It is the part of the sphere of the political which, Weber says, is the most ‘meaningless to any universal religion of salvation’, because ‘the state’s absolute end is to safeguard (or to change) the external and internal distribution of power’ (Weber, [1915]1946: 334).

What is a ‘sphere’ for Weber and Morgenthau? In the first place, it is a domain or action which is intelligible in terms of the consequences of actions and of value-choices. The legal sphere, according to Weber’s friend and protégé Gustav Radbruch, was organized around the antinomies of the legal values of certainty, justice, and expedience, which every legal system was compelled to find a balance between (Radbruch, 1950: 111). In the case of foreign policy, matters were simpler: the state had an absolute end. The consequences of action were intelligible, because they were more or less organized

around the balance of power— a principle Weber recognized and commended as the basis of the freedom of small states, and believed imposed responsibility on Germany as a great power (Weber, 1958: 172; Weber, 1971: 176-77; quoted in Beetham, 1985: 142).

Language like this is somewhat shocking to discover in Weber, in that it is ‘valuative’, and by his own premises value-choices were not rationally justifiable. But there is an explanation for this, which illuminates Morgenthau’s claim that the realist model of rational foreign policy is normative as well as intelligibility-producing and explanatory. The point may be seen in terms of law. Weber and Radbruch were interested in cases of Tolstoyan Christians who rejected the state and the law as evil (Radbruch, 1950: 127-28). Consistent with their conception of value-choice, they did not regard this rejection as ‘irrational’. This was an instance of the kind of ‘religious rejection of the world’ that Weber discussed in the *Zwischenbetrachtung*. But Weber and Radbruch were eager to make the point that it was inconsistent to accept the state and then reject the ends of the state, such as the preservation of the state’s power. This was the error of Christian pacifists who sought to influence politics. Weber’s point was that politics forced an all or nothing choice: reject it and accept the consequences, namely the loss of the protection of the state, or accept it and give up attempting to apply the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount to it. To put this in a somewhat different way, the significance of these spheres is that once one enters into them one is compelled to make decisions according to their logic.<sup>13</sup> Yet, for Weber, the values of the spheres were not necessarily ‘ultimate’ values. Though some of us we may choose ‘the nation’ as an ultimate value, for most of us our ultimate values are of the sort that require the kind of order and legal structure that the

state provides. Political order is thus a condition or intermediate end which is among the means we require for the pursuit of our ultimate values.<sup>14</sup> This is what puts the Christian pacifists in politics in a bind: unless he chooses to forego the benefits of the state, as the Tolstoyan does, he cannot avoid the moral consequences of the fact that violence is the distinctive means of the state (Weber, ([1919]1946): 122).

The language of 'spheres' is puzzling: it is not clear what status Weber wishes to grant these 'spheres'. They are naturally or historically occurring domains rather than the domains familiar to neo-Kantianism, which are constituted by the assumption of certain categories or structuring concepts. They are nevertheless also value-spheres or spheres of meaningful validity, as he also puts it (1949: 18). The spheres are constituted by the historical reality of human choice and decision, but represent the historically or naturally given structure within which value-choices are possible and intelligible.

When Morgenthau says that assuming the spheres is a condition of the rational comprehension of international politics (1978a: 5), he has in mind that they represent domains of rational orderliness of a particular kind, but not that they represent intellectually closed universes (such as for example, in the legal theory of his teacher Hans Kelsen, the legal order that would be associated with the *Grundnorm* and made into the subject of a corresponding legal science). Weber's view of spheres was that they could not be understood as closed. Speaking of ethical choice, he observes, 'in almost every important attitude of real human beings, value-spheres cross and interpenetrate' (1949: 18). This means that human actions, which are directed to valuative ends, are themselves subject to the interpenetration of spheres, to value conflicts between the



values of different spheres, and thus to the contingencies (from the point of view of a given sphere) that necessarily arise when, in the face of these conflicts, agents make choices. And this means that there can be no predictive theory of the goings-on in a 'sphere' in any strict sense, because people will act 'in' the sphere for reasons that arise from other spheres.

This feature of spheres, 'interpenetration', explains why a rational theory, even an objectively correct rational theory, can at best 'reflect', to use Morgenthau's term, a domain of this sort. Where an empirical theory would strive to reduce and eliminate contingencies in favor of predictive adequacy and closure, a rational theory that provided meaning and understanding would have a different aim: intelligibility. The intelligibility of spheres which are subject to interpenetration requires a 'rational' theory that abstracts out the sphere-relevant intelligible core. For Morgenthau, as for Weber, the point is not merely or primarily to predict, but to understand, and to understand agents who act in the face of contingency and systematic irrationality (including that resulting from the interpenetration of spheres). The agents are inseparably bound to the world of consequences, and thus know the balance of power as we know gravity. To understand them is our access to this order. Our rational understanding of them predicts, but only if they act rationally— and in terms of the sphere— and they do not always do so.

### Public and Private Faces of Realism

These three clues, interest-relativity, one-sidedness, and spheres, properly interpreted,

reveal that Morgenthau relied heavily on Weber's methodological conception in constructing his own. They point to the fact that Morgenthau understood what he was doing in a highly specific way. But at the same time, this interpretation produces some new puzzles. Why did Morgenthau fail to explain his use of Weber? Why did he use the term 'theory' rather than ideal-type? And, if he had the backing of a highly developed methodological conception, why did he give the appearance of having no methodological views at all— and give it so effectively that commentators considered him either a positivist or a methodological naif? Morgenthau's own answer to this question comes in a comment in the fourth edition (1967). After acknowledging that his theoretical approach differed from 'behaviorism, systems analysis, game theory, simulation, methodology in general', he notes that 'I have learned both from historic and personal experience that academic polemics generally do not advance the cause of truth but leave things very much as they found them' (1978a: xi). Read carefully and literally, it is not the statement of either a positivist or a naif. It is, rather, the statement of the author of a polemic, *Scientific Man and Power Politics*, which he thinks did not succeed, and who has consciously chosen to abstain from methodological discussion despite his full consciousness that his theoretical approach was distinctive. Morgenthau seems to have been satisfied with being understood by those who shared his knowledge of Weber. Such thinkers as Raymond Aron certainly did share it: Aron had written a major work on the subject in the thirties (cf. 1938, 1990: 79-90). So Morgenthau had the most sophisticated of intellectual allies. But this remained the private face of realism, rarely commented on in public forums, by design.

The public face of realism deflected methodological controversy by substituting the wisdom of the six points. And as a strategy it was outstandingly successful. The audience for international relations was among the least interested in methodological questions at the time, and did not demand more. What he gave them, reluctantly, in the six points, proved to be enough. His views dominated international relations theory; they outlasted the enthusiasm for ‘behavioral science’ and later ‘behavioralism’. The field of international relations avoided the methodological disputes over positivism that consumed sociology and political science in the 1960s and 70s. But this strategy opened the door to misunderstanding when the moment of methodological controversy arrived, in the form of Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* (1979).

### The Critique of the Ideal-Type

These contextual and strategic reasons explain something. But there is another important reason that might have motivated Morgenthau to keep his public silence on the sources of his methodological thinking, a reason closely connected to his decision to use the term ‘theory’. The concept of ideal-type was extensively discussed in the period in question. Almost all of this discussion was brutally critical. This raises a more serious issue: why did Morgenthau not abandon the ideal-type model and reconstruct his thought in correct, or at least more fashionable, terms? If he groundlessly adhered to a defunct conception, this would be grave and an act not merely of intellectual insouciance. The case against the ideal-type conception was strongly stated long before Waltz’s influential critique of

Morgenthau's 'confusions' (Waltz, 1979: 118-122). Morgenthau ignored it. Was Morgenthau justified in ignoring it? This question might be treated historically, by asking whether the case against the ideal-type in Morgenthau's own time was so overwhelming that he should have addressed it. The argument against the ideal-type available in his time has not been refuted. So in answering this question we arrive at the question of the validity or adequacy of the concept of ideal-type itself. What has changed since the critique of the ideal-type in recent philosophy of science is a shift from a focus on theory to a focus on models. This shift is highly congenial to Morgenthau's use of the ideal-type (cf. Morrison and Morgan, 1999, especially Reuten, 1999, and Gibbard and Varian, 1978). This raises another possibility: that the ideal-type is a better fit with the methodological *Zeitgeist* now than it was then.

Examining the case against the ideal-type in Morgenthau's time provides an answer to these questions, and a further validation of Morgenthau's refusal to be drawn into these discussions.<sup>15</sup> The critique of the ideal-type was given its classical formulation by Carl Hempel in 1952 ([1952]1963). Hempel denounced the concept as irretrievably confused, and provided his own account of what would make it relevant to scientific concept formation. He calls ideal-types 'intuitive idealizations' to distinguish them from idealizations in physics (which he suggests, using the ideal gas laws as a model, are 'ideal' only in the sense that they involve extreme values not to be found in real cases), and asks about the circumstances that would have to obtain for these idealizations to become explanatory. This amounts to treating them as sources of hypotheses which might be made into empirical theories, or, as he puts it, 'their function is to aid in the discovery

of regular connections between various constituents of some social structure or process' which can, once discovered, be used to replace the intuitive elements. Treating ideal-types as true subject to *ceteris paribus* clauses, he notes, will not suffice, because these qualifications make the formulation irrefutable and empirically irrelevant. Consider the claim 'Q will be realized whenever P is realized' all other things being equal: 'since the protective clause does not specify *what* factors other than P have to be equal, (i.e. constant) or irrelevant if the prediction is q is to be warranted, the hypothesis is not capable of predictive application to concrete phenomena. Similarly the idea of testing the given hypothesis becomes pointless' ([1952]1963: 225). The only thing that would make them explanatory would be for them to function as theories, i.e. for them to be claimed to be true.

Hempel's account puts economic theory, which he concedes to be the conception in the social sciences that is closest to the natural sciences, into the category of irrefutable and thus empirically irrelevant ([1952]1963: 224). Deducing results from 'postulates' which represent ideal forms of behavior precludes a 'theoretical basis for an appraisal of the idealization involved' ([1952]1963: 228). But he thinks that economic theory can be saved if economic theory could be deduced as a special case ([1952]1963: 226) from a more general theory of social action, of the kind which, he optimistically notes, were being proposed at the time ([1952]1963: 229).<sup>16</sup> The effect of this argument, as Hempel notes, is to collapse ideal-types into the category of theory: "'Ideal" constructs have the character not of concepts in the narrower sense, but of theoretical systems' ([1952]1963: 227). The theoretical systems are then understood in accordance with the standard

conception of empirical theory, and are thus testable on the basis of predictions about observable phenomena, because, as special cases, their 'area of application' is defined ([1952]1963: 228-9).

This provides a context for the answer to the question of whether Morgenthau failed to respond to the objections to the ideal-type and muddled the matter by calling realism a theory. Hempel's crucial point in this critique of the ideal-type was that an intuitive idealization is explanatory and empirically relevant only once it becomes fully empirical, i.e. testable. The most influential later attempt to improve on Morgenthau on the basis of the philosophy of science, by Waltz, violated Hempel's strictures in two major ways, first by arguing that postulates or 'assumptions' were necessary to theory but could not be tested, even indirectly, and second by his account of the domain of application of the theory. Waltz argued that he had a theory of international politics as distinct from a theory of foreign policy, but also claimed that this was a domain that had to be defined in such a way that excluded counter-examples that were the result of facts outside the domain of international politics. The theory was thus true *ceteris paribus*. This claim led (predictably, in view of Hempel's explicit discussion of these points) to a lengthy controversy over whether Waltz's theory was an empirical theory at all. Hempel would have denied that it was— for precisely the same reasons that he denied that ideal-types understood as intuitive idealizations were: a theory is empirical if and only if it can be converted into testable statements about the world. Open *ceteris paribus* clauses mean that any predictive failure can be claimed to be the result of 'external' conditions.

Waltz, however, had a point. This is the same point that has perplexed

philosophers of economics and rational choice ever since. There seems to be no alternative to treating the postulates of decision-theory or economics as ‘assumptions’ rather than empirical claims. There is nothing in the way of broader theories to derive them from as special cases, as Hempel had hoped. Yet there are no alternatives to these ‘assumptions’. They are indispensable: even to explain and theorize about the biases of actual minds and actual decision-making psychology requires us to take normative decision theory as a starting point. The philosopher Donald Davidson was later to make this point against Hempel’s own attempt to assimilate rational action to the covering-law model by treating statements involving rationality into as empirical tendency statements (Davidson, [1976]1980).

Morgenthau’s formulations of this position during the 1950s responded to these issues. We can only conjecture about what he knew about the ideal-type debate, or what he thought about the logical status of economics, or how much of the behavioralism literature he attended to.<sup>17</sup> But whatever he knew it was enough to motivate him to formulate his own views, which dealt with the issues raised by Hempel and others, in a direct, if coded, manner. The result is a distinctive, coherent, complex, and sophisticated position: appreciatively the complexity of this position is, in the end, the key to understanding why Morgenthau formulated it in this peculiarly indirect way.

The position Morgenthau developed can be summarized as follows: that realism understood as a theory of the conduct of statesmen was an ideal-typification which made sense of the reasons that statesmen acted in the international arena as they do; that the sphere of politics interpenetrates with others so that its autonomy is only partial, and thus

a predictive theory *stricto sensu* would be impossible; that the empirical validity of this ideal-type could be established by ‘reflection’, i.e., that it was largely consistent with the actual conduct of statesmen as recorded in the historical record, and that only an account based on the rationality of balance of power thinking about national interest would be consistent with this record; that the ideal-type was linked to a specific historical situation and role, that of the politician and diplomat concerned with national interest; that it was ‘normative’ because it reflected the logic of rational action in the sphere of international politics, in which there were more or less predictable consequences of action, and because the role which provided the audience for the ideal-type (and for whom it made this sphere rational and meaningful) was a role in which a particular value, national interest, was already implicitly given.

This position solved the problem of empirical validity by the device of ‘reflection’: the ideal-type was an interpretative, meaning-providing, rational model of action in a sphere, whose actual historical content validated by validating that the consequences of action in the ideal-type were largely consistent with the actual consequences of action in the real world. The problem of domain, which so vexed Hempel and Waltz, was solved by the spheres device: spheres are the sorts of things that interpenetrate, or are only partly autonomous, and thus there will be cases in which a statesman acts in the sphere of politics for reasons from the sphere of religion rather than from the sphere of politics. The theory is frankly directed at an audience in a specific historical situation and role, that of the statesmen acting in international politics, for which it attempts to provide reason and meaning in this special sphere. But it is like all



social theory in other respects, a claim we can read as affirming that international relations theory is a branch of what Weber called *Verstehende Soziologie*. The ideal-type is appropriately called a theory because it is not intended merely as one ideal-type among others. But in the language of more recent philosophy of science it is a model, because it is not intended as an empirical theory in the sense of Hempel, derivable from a wider theory or free from exceptions resulting from causes arising from other domains.

Is this interpretation of Morgenthau merely of historical interest? Or is this a plausible understanding of the methodological situation of international relations theory today as well? This is a large question that we can only briefly discuss here. Morgenthau's approach, and the 'Weberian' approach generally, have some important virtues. The problem of relativism is frankly addressed: international relations theory is interest-relative, audience specific, and relativized to a specific historical situation. It is open to, and indeed invites, the question of whether the historical conditions for its applicability have passed, for example as a result of the implications of nuclear weapons for the notion of national interest— a question that Morgenthau himself felt compelled to ask. It avoids the endless problems of testability that undermine 'positivistic' interpretations of international relations theory, and gives a plausible account of the sense in which an empirical theory can be true (namely by reflection) and also normative. It does not depend on questionable 'assumptions' about human nature or rationality, or on circular definitions of the domain of application: it is about real events, not an abstracted category of international politics distinct from 'policy'. It provides an explanation and a plausible account of the relation of international relations theory to the rest of social

science knowledge. And it reconciles the interpretive with the prediction-oriented tradition in social science, as well as with the rational-choice tradition. This is certainly enough to commend it as a serious alternative and a response to the decades of debate over methodological issues in this field. The criticisms of Morgenthau which formed the starting point of this debate also need to be reconsidered. They were made on the basis of a misunderstanding of his argument so profound and profoundly trivializing that it would not be inaccurate to say that the critics, rather than Morgenthau, were the naifs, and that Morgenthau declined to be drawn into debate with them because he recognized this.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Richard K. Ashley (1986), Ken Booth (1991), Robert Cox (1986), William Coplin (1966), Robert Crawford (2000), James Der Derian (1995), Colin Elman and Mirium F. Elman (2003), Stefano Guzzini (2004), Jeremy Larkins (1994), Richard Little (1991), Edward Mansfield (1994), Justin Rosenberg (1994), Ole Waever (1998), and Kenneth Waltz (1998).

<sup>2</sup> William Bain (2000), Peter Feaver et al (2000; 176-7, 179-80), Peter Gellman (1988), Stefano Guzzini (1998: 23-31, 45-6, 125, 182, 186-7, 213; 2000: 153; 2004: 538, 543, 547-8, 554), Martin Hollis and Steve Smith (1990: 22-30, 32, 37, 42-3, 46, 76, 97), Martin Hollis (1987: 148), Robert Jervis (1994), Robert J. Myers (1992), Jaap Nobel (1989), Greg Russell (1990, 1994), Brian Schmidt (1998: 28, 31, 153, 209, 214, 218, 222-24; 2005: 527, 531-6, 539-40, 546), Roger Spegele (1987: 190-4), Kenneth Thompson (1985), Robert W. Tucker (1952), R. B. J. Walker (1987: 71-2), and Michael C. Williams (2004).

<sup>3</sup> John Barkdull (1995), Colin Elman and Mirium F. Elman (1997), Stacie Goddard and Daniel Nexon (2005), Robert Jervis (2003:: 281-2), John Ruggie (1986), Randall Schweller (1997), John Vasquez and Colin Elman (2003), John Vasquez (1995: 217-40; 1997; 1998: 240-86, 287-368; 2003b), and Kenneth Waltz (1959, 1979, 1986, 1997, 2000, 2003a, 2003b).

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<sup>4</sup> Among the many discussions of the Morgenthau-Weber relation are William Bain (2000), Tarak Barkawi (1998), Christoph Frei (2001), Peter Gellman (1988), Jim George (1994: 20-21, 35n22, 37n56, 86-7, 91-100, 107n1, 147), Gerard Holden (2002), Robert Jervis (1994), Joseph Kruzel and James N. Rosenau (1989), M. Benjamin Mollov (2002, chap. 3), A. J. H. Murray (1996: 99-100), Robert J. Myers (1992), Jaap Nobel (1989), Hans-Karl Pichler (1998), Greg Russell (1990, 1994), Michael Smith (1986), Alfons Soellner (1987), Kenneth Thompson (1985), Robert W. Tucker (1952), Stephen Turner and Regis Factor (1984: 168-79), R. B. J. Walker (1993: 155-6), and Michael Williams (2004: 644-46).

<sup>5</sup> These writings were extensively discussed in the Weimar period and in Morgenthau's own legal intellectual milieu, for example, by his dissertation advisor Hans Kelsen whose *Allgemeine Staatslehre* discusses Weber's 'sociological' approach to the law ([1925]2006: 169-78, 188-91). A treatment of the Weimar methodological discussion, primarily as it relates to the problem of values, is in Turner and Factor (1984: 90-120).

<sup>6</sup> There are many critics of the 'positivist' interpretation of Morgenthau (cf. Murray, 1996: 94-96).

<sup>7</sup> Among these are many occasions in which he uses distinctively Weberian language without attribution, for example when he paraphrases Weber's methodological individualist account of the logical status of collective concepts ([1952]1962: 107; cf. Weber, [1968]1978: 13), and when he distinguishes legal and scientific questions

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(Weber, [1904]1949): 94, 82-3).

<sup>8</sup> If the account of Morgenthau developed here is correct, this would mean that it shares the functions of Weber's *Verstehende Soziologie*.

<sup>9</sup> The ambiguous role of this claim, which is central to the Hobbesian interpretation of Morgenthau, and which apparently differentiates Morgenthau from Weber, is discussed in Turner (2004).

<sup>10</sup> We thank Ido Oren for calling this issue to our attention.

<sup>11</sup> This is the method discussed by Karl Popper as the Zero'th method: 'I refer to the possibility of adopting, in the social sciences, what may be called the method of logical or rational construction, or perhaps the **'zero method'**. By this I mean the method of constructing a model on the assumption of complete rationality . . .' ([1945]1964: 141). Popper was also a reader of Weber (cf. Turner 2007: 596).

<sup>12</sup> The complex question of Weber's views of the relation between 'meaning' descriptions and causality is beyond this discussion. It will suffice to say that Weber thought action explanations needed both to be adequate with respect to intelligibility and with respect to cause ([1968]1978: 11; cf. Turner and Factor, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, in a recent paper there is an intriguing comparison between Weber on spheres and Bourdieu on 'fields', which have an intrinsic logic (Bruun, forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> This way of thinking of Weber is elaborated in Turner and Factor (1987). This text also



deals with Weber's account of *raison d'état*.

<sup>15</sup> These issues are reviewed in Fritz Machlup, 'The Ideal-type: Bad Name for a Good Concept,' (1978: 236-51). In light of what has been said about Morgenthau's Chicago milieu, it is revealing that Machlup is often grouped with the Chicago School of economists.

<sup>16</sup> The reference is almost certainly to Parsons and Shils, *Toward A General Theory of Action* (1951).

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it was a great deal, for this debate reenacted a debate of his student years, involving intimates of his teacher Hans Kelsen, Alfred Schutz, and Ludwig von Mises (cf. Turner 2007: 41-47)