Realist Ethics and the ‘War on Terror’

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‘The realist parts company with other schools of thought before the all important question of how the contemporary world is to be transformed. The realist is persuaded that this transformation can be achieved only through the workmanlike manipulation of the perennial forces that have shaped the past as they will the future. The realist cannot be persuaded that we can bring about the transformation by confronting a political reality that has its own laws with an abstract ideal that refuses to take those laws into account’.

Hans Morgenthau (1993: 12)

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 that sparked the global ‘war on terror’ were unambiguous in their ethical and moral iniquity. Al Qaeda’s murder of over three thousand innocent civilians in the Twin Towers, its attack on the Pentagon and its unsuccessful attempt at a third mass suicide attack were terrorist acts of chilling barbarity which were roundly condemned by the international community – including virtually all of the Muslim and Arab world, and most Muslim religious leaders. The response by the United States and its allies to these terrorist atrocities, however, has raised some troubling moral and ethical dilemmas. From renditions, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo to the invasion of Iraq, the response of the US-led coalition to the terrorist campaign of Al Qaeda and its radical Jihadist allies has caused considerable moral and political uneasy, and generated debate on the ethics of what has become known as the ‘global war on terror’.

This article explores some of the ethical dilemmas that confound the contemporary struggle against international terrorism. It does so by drawing on the
Realist tradition of international political theory – a much maligned and widely misunderstood approach to the study of international politics. Realist international theory is frequently dismissed as amoral at best, if not thoroughly immoral. Although there are few Realists in the British or European International Relations community, a ‘straw-man’ version of Realism is widely used as the ‘Other’ against which liberal-idealistic theories are constructed. As Sartre once said of Marxism in French universities in his time, Realism is taught in order to be dismissed. This is particularly the case with structural or ‘neo-realism’, which its critics accuse of a one-dimensional, hawkish and ‘muscle-bound’ approach glorifying power and military force. Because Realists are seen as hard-hearted advocates of a dangerous and ultimately self-defeating Realpolitik devoid of sentiment or compassion, few would dispute Andrew Linklater’s assertion that to ‘a far greater extent than any other perspective, neo-realism has highlighted the moral impoverishment of the study of international relations’ (Linklater 1998: 15).

Criticism of realist approaches to foreign policy and international politics is not confined to the liberal-idealistic mainstream in academia, but is also found in the official statements of government ministers in many Western liberal-democracies – which is not surprising, given the hegemonic dominance of liberal discourse in Europe and North America. The British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, for example, in a speech on ‘The Democratic Imperative’ given on 12 February 2008 in Oxford, defended the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq as being both in the national interest and a ‘moral impulse’. He went on to criticise realists for advocating what he termed a ‘narrowly interest-based approach’ to international politics, arguing that ‘we must resist the argument of the left and right to retreat into a world of realpolitik’ (Miliband 2008).

This article does not advocate a ‘retreat into a world of realpolitik’, but it does advocate a Realist approach to the ‘war on terror’ that focuses more on a hard-headed calculation of interests rather than the quixotic pursuit of second-order normative agendas. Its central argument is that Realist international theory provides firm theoretical and philosophical foundations for an ethical approach to the problem of contemporary international terrorism. It draws on the rich tradition of Realist international theory, which includes not only classical Realists like Reinhold Niebuhr, E.H.Carr and Hans Morgenthau, but also the work of structural or neorealists like Kenneth Waltz and John
Mearsheimer. Clearly, there are important differences between classical (or ‘human nature’) and structural realism. Whereas classical Realists devoted considerable energy to exploring the relationship between politics and morality (largely by attacking ‘moralism’ in foreign policy), neorealists have concentrated their attention on developing a theory of international politics not tied to any particular normative or political agenda. Whilst this means that neorealist theory is not associated with an explicit normative programme, it does not mean that neorealism is incompatible with ethical thinking about foreign policy and international politics. On the contrary, as the argument developed below demonstrates, classical and structural realism are complementary approaches to international politics, which together provide much sounder foundations for an ethical foreign policy than liberal-idealism – in either its mainstream liberal form or its more radical ‘critical theory’ guise.

Realism and Normative Political Theory

‘Political realism’, Hans Morgenthau noted, ‘does not require, nor does it condone, indifference to political ideals and moral principles, but it requires indeed a sharp distinction between the desirable and the possible – between what is desirable everywhere and at all times and what is possible under the concrete circumstances of time and place (Morgenthau 1993: 7). This emphasis on the importance of distinguishing between the ‘desirable’ and the ‘possible’ underlines realism’s distinctive approach to the ethical dimension of statecraft and international politics, which is rooted in a particular idiom of normative theorising. Before outlining the ethical dimension of a realist approach to the ‘war on terror’, it is helpful to clarify the different purposes served by normative political theory and situate realism within this domain of intellectual inquiry. Andrew Hurrell has proposed a threefold categorisation of normative theory, based on three distinct types of questions: first, what impact do norms have on international politics?; second, what ought we to do?; and third, given the realities of political life, what can be done? (Hurrell 2002: 137).

The first of these is primarily an empirical question, although one difficult to effectively operationalise. Realists would certainly not dispute that norms have an impact on international life, and most realists would recognise that norms can and do shape state
behaviour, particularly when vital issues of security and economic prosperity are not at stake. However, realists tend to argue (a) that apparently normative approaches to foreign policy often serve more venal national interests, and (b) that when push comes to shove, most ‘rational’ states discard their normative principles when faced with serious threats to their security, prosperity or other vital interests. Just War theory provides a perfect example of the limited traction of liberal norms and ideals in a self-help system. Realists would argue that the normative concerns embodied in Just War theory are less likely to shape the conduct of military operations in total wars of survival than they are in limited wars of choice or conscience.

Similarly, concerns about human rights and democracy promotion are more likely to influence foreign policy-makers when national security or vital economic interests are not at stake. Thus for example the Bush Administration advocates democracy and human rights in Belarus, Cuba, Iran and Syria (states critical of American foreign policy), but is muted in its criticism of authoritarian oppression in Azerbaijan, Chad, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia (states that are geostrategically or economically important, and/or which are regarded as allies in the ‘war on terror’).

The second question - what ought we to do – takes us deep into the murky waters of abstract and utopian normative theorising, where few realists choose to go. Hurrell quotes Mervyn Frost to the effect that there has been too little normative theory concerned with the second question, namely ‘in what would a just world order consist?’ (Hurrell 2002: 137). From a realist perspective, however, it is hard to see much value in such abstract normative musing on the good life. Frost’s preferred approach to normative theory corresponds with what E.H.Carr termed the ‘moral code of the philosopher, which is the kind of morality most rarely practised but most frequently discussed’. This utopian approach concentrates on ‘discussions of the question what international morality ought ideally to be’, and reflects a preference for ‘the role of the missionary to that of the scientist’ (E.H.Carr 2000: 135-36). Reflecting on ‘what ought to be done’ without taking into account international political structures risks succumbing to utopian dreaming and idealist illusions. ‘What Morgenthau and many other realists have in common’, Robert Gilpin notes, ‘is a belief that ethical and political behaviour will fail unless it takes into account the actual practice of states and teachings of sound theory. It is this dual commitment, to practice and theory, that sets realism apart from both idealism and the
abstract theorizing that characterizes so much of the contemporary study of international relations’ (Gilpin 1986: 320). Frost’s call for normative musings on the nature of a just world order risks degenerating into an empty moralising that assumes that changing social and political circumstances requires only sufficient political will and a determined effort to change ‘hearts and minds’. It is difficult not to conclude that speculating on the constitutive features of a ‘just world order’ is not only a fairly pointless activity, it is also – potentially at least – politically dangerous and ethically flawed. To propose a course of action on the basis of idealist notions of what ‘ought to be’ is both dangerous and immoral if it leads to policies that leave political communities and their citizens vulnerable to aggression, coercion and exploitation from others (Mearsheimer 2000: 437-38).

Realist ethics are therefore grounded in the third of Hurrell’s normative perspectives, which examines ‘the extent to which moral behaviour is heavily constrained by the dynamics of political life’ (Hurrell 2002: 137). ‘Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation, but that they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place’ (Hans Morgenthau 1993: 12). Realists assume that to act effectively requires knowledge of existing circumstances together with the power to act. Causal knowledge about the way in which international politics works is a necessary precondition for making informed moral choices between alternative courses of action. Realism is concerned ‘to detect and understand the forces that determine political relations among nations, and to comprehend the ways in which those forces act upon each other and upon international political relations and institutions’ (Morgenthau 1993: 17). Realist theory is thus above all an attempt to identify the parameters within which action to change international politics will be effective – a focus on the structural and material constraints on political action which Realism shares with Marxism (Evans 1975: 105; Nardin 1992: 17). Only by identifying the parameters of the possible is it feasible to attempt to reconcile what is just with what is practical. As Henry Kissinger noted,

Every statesman must attempt to reconcile what is considered just with what is considered possible. What is considered just depends on the domestic structure of
the state; what is possible depends on its resources, geographic position and
determination, and on the resources, determination and domestic structure of other
states (Kissinger 1957: 5).

**Structural Constraints and Ethical Statecraft**

Morality involves choice. Where there is no choice, where behaviour is pre-determined,
there can be no morality. To make moral decisions, one must have choices between
alternative courses of action. The moral life, Oakeshott argues, ‘appears only when
human behaviour is free from natural necessity; that is, when there are alternatives in
human conduct’ (Oakeshott 1991: 295). In international politics, the range of alternatives
is constrained by the structure of the international system. ‘Men make their own history’,
Marx famously argued in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, ‘but they do not
make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by
themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the
past’ (Marx and Engels 1973: 96). Much the same can be said for the states and other
international actors, which makes their own history under circumstances directly
encountered, given and transmitted from the past. In this sense, international actors are
‘situated actors’ located within distinct structural contexts that define the range of
potential strategies and opportunities available to them (Hay 2002: 116-17, 122-26;

All too often, it is assumed – and sometimes insinuated – that structural realists
are favourably disposed towards the international status quo and care little or nothing
about manifestations of injustice, conflict and aggression, however shocking or egregious
(Booth 1995). This is most certainly not the case. Politically and normatively, neorealists
come in all shapes and sizes, and many would admit to being ‘closet liberals’ (Gilpin
1986: 321). Structural realists are not coldly indifferent to conflict and injustice. They do,
however, recognise that there are limits to political agency imposed by the ‘strategic
selectivity of structure’. Realists seek to identify the extent to which systemic factors
either enable or constrain political choices in international politics, thereby ‘shaping and
Anarchy and the Tragedy of International Politics

Within the realist traditional, it is structural or neorealism that offers the most sophisticated analytical tools for identifying the ‘parameters of the possible’, and thus the scope for ethical action. Designed as a form of explanatory theory, structural realism provides a means of identifying the structural constraints of the international system, and the extent to which systemic forces ‘shape and shove’ state behaviour. Structural realism, Mearsheimer notes, assumes that state behaviour ‘is largely shaped by the material structure of the international system. The distribution of material capabilities among states is the key factor for understanding world politics. For realists, some level of security competition among great powers is inevitable because of the material structure of the international system’ (Mearsheimer 2000: 436).

Realists believe that it is difficult, if not nigh on impossible, to transcend the structural limits of anarchy. The only conceivable means of achieving this is through one state emerging as a global hegemon – a development highly improbable because of what Mearsheimer terms the ‘stopping power of water’. Most contemporary neorealists would argue that whatever the ‘logic’ of the case for a new Leviathan, a world state is highly unlikely to emerge. Moreover, if such a world government were to arise, Waltz has argued, it ‘would be an invitation to prepare for world civil war’ (Waltz 1979: 112).

Realist theory thus assumes that states will remain the primary actors in the international system for the foreseeable future, and that consequently, anarchy not hierarchy will remain the dominant ordering principle of the international system (Lynn-Jones 1999: 71). Anarchy and the unequal distribution of power in the international system place constraints on projects to achieve perpetual peace, international harmony and institutionalised cooperation – and provide the structural context within which counter-terrorist strategies are formulated and implemented. ‘To achieve their objectives and maintain their security, units in a condition of anarchy – be they people, corporations, states or whatever – must rely on the means they can generate and the arrangements they can make for themselves’ (Waltz 1979: 111).

Because international politics is a self-help realm, Realists remain sceptical about liberal-idealist claims that international organisations, international law or democratic governments can provide the foundations for addressing the contemporary terrorist threat.
– a fallacy that George Kennan once termed the ‘legal-moralistic approach to solving international problems’. Nonetheless, realist scepticism about the prospects for transcending the structural constraints of a self-help system is not incompatible with a political and ethical commitment to conducting counter-terrorist operations justly, discriminatively and proportionately.

Realists are painfully aware of the often tragic nature of international politics, and of the danger that noble intentions can generate unintended outcomes – as the Iraq War demonstrates. ‘How often’, Morgenthau notes, ‘have statesmen been motivated by the desire to improve the world, and ended up by making it worse? And how often have they sought one goal, and ended by achieving something they neither expected nor desired?’ (Morgenthau 1993: 6). Realists thus tend not to be favourably disposed towards radical political programmes based on abstract ideals such as ‘emancipation’, cosmopolitan order or perfect justice. As Reinhold Niebuhr observed, the concern of ‘collective man’ cannot be ‘the creation of an ideal society in which there will be uncoerced and perfect peace and justice, but a society in which there will be enough justice, and in which coercion will be sufficiently non-violent to prevent his common enterprise from issuing into complete disaster’ (Niebuhr : 16). ‘Policy’, in Michael Oakeshott’s words, ‘will not the imagination of some new sort of society, or the transformation of an existing society so as to make it correspond with an abstract ideal; it will be the perception of what needs doing now in order to realize more fully the intimations of our existing society’ (Oakeshott 1991: 397).

**Indeterminacy and Second Order Normative Concerns**

Neorealism is an avowedly parsimonious theory that seeks to explain only a few aspects of reality – albeit important ones. It certainly does not claim to provide a comprehensive explanation of all aspects of international life. This leaves considerable scope for normative debates on a wide range of secondary issues where the imperatives of security and survival in a self-help system are less intense. As we have seen, realists do not deny or bemoan the fact that liberal ideas (such as Just War, human rights and democracy promotion) can and do shape policy; what Realists question is the claim that such ideas
continue to determine policy when they conflict with vital national interests – especially when national security or core economic interests are at stake.

Considerable scope for ethical and moral approaches to international politics is also opened up by the sometimes indeterminate nature of systemic pressures. Systemic theory is concerned with the structural pressures on states, yet these pressures can be – indeed, frequently are – indeterminate in terms of state behaviour or international outcomes. In contexts where structure is indeterminate and vital national interests are not at stake, foreign policy decisions are more likely to be shaped by domestic political interests and moral considerations. ‘If the preservation of the state is not in question, national goals easily fluctuate between the grandiose and the frivolous’ (Waltz 1967: 15-16).

Although ethical principles are less likely to shape foreign and security interests when vital national interests are at stake than they are in contexts where structure is indeterminate, this does not absolve statesmen and women from weighing ethical issues in the balance when they consider alternative counter-terrorist options, however constrained. Realists recognise the enduring constraints of structure on the behaviour of states. But structures ‘shape and shove’, they do not determine behaviour and outcomes – not only, Waltz argues, because ‘unit-level and structural causes interact, but also because the shaping and shoving of structures may be successfully resisted’. ‘With skill and determination’, he continues, ‘structural constraints can sometimes be countered’ (Waltz 1986: 322-46; see also Gilpin 1986: 312). As ‘situated actors’, states are constrained by structural pressures, but their behaviour is not determined mechanically by systemic forces. Because they can chose between alternative courses of action, states can still make moral choices. In this light, Niebuhr’s admonitions concerning the implications of political realism for individual moral behaviour have resonance for states’ ethical choices: ‘No political realism which emphasises the inevitability and necessity of a social struggle, can absolve individuals of the obligation to check their own egoism, to comprehend the interests of others and thus to enlarge the areas of cooperation’ (Niebuhr 2005: 180).

This sensitivity to ethical considerations does not mean that peaceful and non-military approaches to counter-terrorism are always the most ‘ethical’ choices. Pacifism
and appeasement are rarely ethically defensible stances in a self-help system. Policy-makers must consider the security of their own citizens, and the health of the wider international system when they are faced with decisions about how best to prevent terrorist attacks. At times, the discriminate use of force and military intervention against terrorist ‘safe havens’ might be the morally right choice. As Churchill noted,

The Sermon on the Mount is the last word in Christian ethics. Everyone respects the Quakers. Still, it is not on these terms that Ministers assume their responsibilities of guiding states. Their duty is first so to deal with other nations as to avoid strife and war and to eschew aggression in all its forms, whether for nationalistic or ideological objects. But the safety of the State, the lives and freedom of their own fellow countrymen, to whom they owe their position, make it right and imperative in the last resort, or when a final and definite conviction has been reached, that the use of force should not be excluded. If the circumstances are such to warrant it, force may be used. And if this is so, it should be used under the conditions which are most favourable. There is no merit in putting off a war for a year if, when it comes, it is a far worse war or one much harder to win. These are the tormenting dilemmas upon which mankind has throughout its history been so frequently impaled (Churchill 1948: 320).

**Three Idioms of Moral Conduct**

Liberal-idealists assume that moral behaviour is associated with ‘rationalist’ politics and teleological political action designed to bring about a cosmopolitan world order (Frost 2003: 494; Mayall 2003). Realists, by contrast, have a non-teleological conception of international politics that accepts the diversity and plurality of the international system. Consequently, as we have seen, realists seek to examine ‘the extent to which moral behaviour is heavily constrained by the dynamics of political life’, rather than musing on abstract schemes for a ‘just world order’.

Given the assumption that anarchy will remain the dominant ordering principle of international politics, and that tragedy is inherent in the structure of the international
system, a realist ethics cannot be based on a conception of moral behaviour that consists in working to achieve a particular telos (a ‘single substantive purpose’) (Oakeshott 1991: 358) – whether rationally determined or revealed by religious prophecy. Realists follow Michael Oakshott in rejecting ‘the illusion that in politics there is anywhere a safe harbour, a destination to be reached or even a detectable strand of progress’ (Oakeshott 1991: 66). This non-teleological ethics implies a distinctive approach to statecraft: one that seeks to navigate the shifting tides of international politics, conscious of the ebb and flow of systemic forces;

In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion’ (Oakeshott 1991: 60).

What is the basis of morality in this non-eschatological and non-teleological understanding of international politics? Here Michael Oakeshott’s reading of Hobbes is apposite. Oakeshott argues that there are three ‘idioms of moral conduct’: a morality of communal ties; the morality of the common good; and the morality of individuality. In the first, ‘good conduct is understood as appropriate participation in the unvarying activities of a community’. Such a ‘morality of communal ties’ implies the existence of deeply-rooted social conventions of various kinds defining a complex pattern of mutual obligations – a Gemeinschaft, to use the language of Max Weber and classical German sociology. Clearly, this idiom of morality is inappropriate for international politics because the international system is composed of sovereign political communities with competing national interests and rival conceptions of the summum bonum (the ‘good life’); even the most starry-eyed proponent of ‘international community’ or ‘international society’ would be hard pushed to convincingly argue there is a ‘moral community of humankind’ based on a shared identity and shared values (Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaez 2005: 35; Nardin 1983: 19).
The second idiom of morality envisages the existence of a socially constituted ‘common good’. It envisages the existence of a ‘society’ (Gesellschaft) composed of independent actors, but believes that all are ‘engaged in a single, common enterprise’ and consequently share a common understanding of ‘the good of all’, or the ‘social good’. It assumes that there are shared normative values such as democracy and ‘human rights’ which should be available to all. This ‘morality of the common good’ corresponds to Max Weber’s ‘ethic of ultimate ends’, which decrees absolute and unconditional fidelity to principle. This understanding of morality has become highly influential in Western liberal-democracies (Tuck 1999: 14-15, 234). The problem with it is that it can lead to a crusading, messianic and imperialist mentality, whereby one’s own understanding of the ‘good life’ – with its associated, and culturally rooted conceptions of ‘liberty’, ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ – is seen as justifying intervention in states and societies with different conceptions of the ‘good’. As Oakeshott notes, every moral ideal is potentially an obsession; the pursuit of moral ideals is an idolatry in which particular objects are recognised as “gods”. … Too often the excessive pursuit of one ideal leads to the exclusion of others, perhaps all others; in our eagerness to realize justice we come to forget charity, and a passion for righteousness has made many a man hard and merciless. There is, indeed, no ideal the pursuit of which will not lead to disillusion; chagrin waits at the end for all who take this path (Oakeshott 1991: 476).

The third idiom of moral conduct is the one most appropriate to a Realist ethics – a ‘morality of individuality’. This involves give and take, mutual accommodation and a pursuit of ‘enlightened’ self-interest. ‘In general’, Oakeshott argues, ‘moral activity may be said to be the observation of a balance of accommodation between the demands of desiring selves each recognized by the others to be an end and not a mere slave of somebody else’s desires’ (Oakeshott 1991: 502). It corresponds to an ‘ethic of responsibility’, which specifies that one should consider the consequences of one’s actions for others and behave accordingly. In Oakeshott’s ‘morality of individuality’, the agents are individual human beings, but the moral sentiments expressed apply equally
well to international politics where the primary actors are states; in the morality of individuality, he argues,

human beings are recognized … as separate and sovereign individuals, associated with one another, not in the pursuit of a single common enterprise, but in an enterprise of give and take, and accommodating themselves to one another as best they can: it is the morality of self and other selves. Here individual choice is pre-eminent and a great part of happiness is connected with its exercise. Moral conduct is recognised as consisting in determinate relationships between these individuals, and the conduct understood to be characteristic of human beings. Morality is the art of mutual accommodation (Oakeshott 1991: 297)

**Realism’s Non-Teleological Ethics**

A ‘morality of individuality’, applied to the realm of international politics, thus provides the basis for a non-teleological ethics characterised by three principles: prudence, scepticism and reciprocity. Realist ethics are *prudent* in that they are circumspect and modest; they seek not perfection but the lesser evil, the familiar to the unknown, the tried to the untried, ‘present laughter to utopian bliss’ (Oakeshott 1991: 408). Prudence entails not only restraining those of evil intent, but also those who intend only good, yet whose pursuit of justice and the *summum bonum* threats to destroy what order, security and justice does exist in the international system. Realist prudence thus seeks to guard against the zealous pursuit of utopian visions at the expense of order and security. As Morgenthau notes,

> There can be no political morality without prudence; that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action. Realism, then, considers prudence – the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions – to be the supreme virtue in politics. Ethics in the abstract judges action by its conformity with the moral law; political ethics judges action by its political consequences’ (Morgenthau 1993: 12).
This prudence gives rise to scepticism about the human capacity to achieve perfect justice through political action. Realists are sceptical about the possibilities of, and potential for, political action to produce the ‘good life’, and sceptical about the prospects for progress in the human condition, either through scientific and technological innovation, economic interdependence or ‘rational’ political action. For Realists, politics more often than not involves choosing between the lesser of two evils. As Niebuhr argued, ‘We are men, not God; we are responsible for making choices between greater and lesser evils, even when our Christian faith, illuminating the human scene, makes it quite apparent that there is no pure good in history; and probably no pure evil either. The fate of civilisations may depend on these choices’ (Lovin 1995: 73).

Finally, realist ethics are based on reciprocity in that they call for compromise, restraint, mutual accommodation and ‘give and take’ between sovereign political communities, each with their own vision of the summum bonum. Hans Morgenthau noted that,

… if we look at all nations, our own included, as political entities pursuing their respective interests defined as power, we are able to do justice to all of them. And we are able to do justice to all of them in a dual sense: We are able to judge other nations as we judge our own and, having judged them in this fashion, we are then capable of pursuing policies that respect the interests of other nations, while protecting and promoting those of our own. Moderation in policy cannot fail to reflect the moderation of moral judgement’ (1993: 13).

This conception of international politics as an arena for competitive interest-based politics accords with Weber’s ‘ethic of responsibility’ (see Kissinger 1957: 144-45). By emphasising the importance of reciprocity, statesmen and women ‘may save themselves from the temptation to believe that they have a special commission for the reform or punishment of a recalcitrant world’ (Clinton 1994: 258).

To summarise the argument thus far: Realism does indeed provide firm foundations for ethical thinking about the ‘war on terror’. It is not, as its critics allege, amoral or immoral. Liberals imply that an ethical approach to terrorism must involve a
commitment to strengthening international society, the rule of law and multilateral institutions; critical theorists maintain that an ethical approach involves seeking to transcend international anarchy and achieve security through ‘emancipation’, thereby eradicating the underlying causes of terrorism. Both variants of liberal-idealism associate ethical behaviour with teleological and ‘rationalist’ politics, and hold to a ‘morality of the common good’ and an ‘ethic of ultimate ends’.

Realist ethics, on the other hand, are based on a ‘morality of individuality’, not a morality of communal ties or of the common good. They incorporate an ‘ethics of responsibility’, and are characterised by prudence, scepticism and reciprocity. Realists recognise that ethical behaviour will always be constrained by the ‘strategic selectivity of structure’, and that there is no easy escape from Churchill’s ‘tormenting dilemmas upon which mankind has throughout its history been so frequently impaled’.

**Realist Ethics and the ‘War on Terror’**

Of course, the ethical principles underlying any theoretical approach to international politics do not translate directly into a concise set of policy prescriptions; at best, they indicate the broad parameters within which policy options are framed and selected. In the case of realism, the ethical and theoretical assumptions underpinning it suggest a number of broad approaches to waging a just ‘war’ on terrorism.

The first task in devising any security strategy is assessing the nature and significance of the threat. Henry Kissinger once wrote that the key to success for any statesman as understanding the nature of the epoch (Kissinger 1957: 325). What is the nature of the age in which we live? The threat of international terrorism certainly ranks high in any analysis of the contemporary international security agenda, but are we living in an ‘age of terror’? Since 9/11, the dominant Western liberal discourse has revolved around the notion of a Manichean struggle between ‘freedom-loving countries’ and ‘terrorism’: Bush has spoken of a ‘war on terror’ against an ‘axis of evil’; Tony Blair of an ‘arc of extremism’; Joschka Fischer of ‘totalitarian Jihadism’. Western leaders have argued that terrorism is a major strategic threat, and have accorded it centrepiece in their foreign and security policies – trumping other second-order normative concerns like democracy promotion, human rights or poverty reduction. This liberal discourse tends to
homogenise different forms of ‘terrorist’ activity into a single essence that is then counter-posed to Western liberal democracy and the global capitalist markets that sustain them. ‘Terrorism’ has thus been elevated to the central strategic threat of the early twenty-first century, defining the age in which we live in terms of the ‘war on terror’.

Realists, however, tend to be sceptical about such claims on two grounds. First, because whilst the current generation of religiously inspired Jihadists seek to inflict mass casualties, they do not constitute a threat comparable to that posed by the Soviet Union and its communist allies which threatened international peace and security in the Cold War. Terrorism is certainly a very real threat, but it is only one of many security risks and challenges facing states in the early twenty-first century – and compared to the challenges posed by nuclear and WMD proliferation, or state failure and regional conflicts, not necessarily the most serious. Terrorists remain more of an irritant than a major challenge to the existing international order, and are also diverse and fragmented in terms of their motives, capabilities and strategies. Consequently, security policy should not be reduced to a one-dimensional and Manichean ‘global war on terror’ against ‘Jihadist fundamentalist terrorism’. As the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Jonas Gahr Store, has argued, the Bush Administration’s tendency to conflate all forms of terrorist and insurgent activity together – regardless of their political objectives or geographical focus – in a Manichean struggle of ‘with us or against us’ apotheosis is misleading and counterproductive: ‘This paradigm of the war on terror, connecting all kinds of armed resistance around the globe in one huge ideological framework, as a new ideology at a stage in history when most of the major ideologies are gone, does not reflect the facts on the ground’ (Cohen 2008).

There is a fundamental difference between terrorist organisations like Hamas, Hezbollah and the Taliban that are rooted in specific political communities and which have clearly delineated political and territorially defined goals, and Al Qaeda, which has a maximalist political agenda and global aspirations. With the former, political dialogue – under specific political conditions – is possible, whilst it is much more problematic with the latter (Halevy 2006: 276). In the context of the Cold War, Morgenthau criticised the U.S. government for defining communism as ‘evil’ and failing to recognise the polycentric nature of the international communist movement, which led to indiscriminate
support for governments and movements professing anti-communism (1993: 9). Western leaders are in danger of making the same error in the struggle against terrorism and radical Islam, by failing to take cognisance of its polycentric and fragmented character, and giving unconditional support to governments and movements that offer support for the US-led ‘war on terror’.

Second, Realists are sceptical about the ‘securitization’ of terror for other purposes and concerns, seeing it as form of ‘moralism’ in foreign policy that impedes effective and judicious decision-making. ‘Securitization’ is a concept developed by the Copenhagen School and refers to ‘the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitization can thus be seen as a more extreme form of politization’ (Waever, Buzan, Kelstrup and Lemaitre 1993). The terrorist attacks of 9/11 generated a discourse centred on the notion of a global ‘war on terror’ that required exceptional and extreme measures. This was justified by framing the debate in terms of a stark divide between ‘good’ and ‘evil’: between the peace-loving democracies and an ‘axis of evil’. Posing the issue in terms of moral absolutes was used to justify the invasion of Iraq, which most realists opposed on the grounds that the Saddam regime was being successfully contained and consequently did not offer a ‘clear and present danger’ to the security of the region or to Western interests (Mearsheimer 2005). The Bush Administration’s attempt to restructure the Middle East in its interests and its image was presented as a ‘crusade’ against terrorism and an ‘axis of evil’.

For Realists, this attempt to securitize terrorism for ulterior motives provides a prime example of the dangers of ‘moralism’ in foreign policy which, Hans Morgenthau argued, leads to ‘demonological interpretations of reality which substitute a fictitious reality – peopled by evil persons rather than seemingly intractable issues – of the actual one’ (Morgenthau 1993: 7). For Realists, therefore, foreign and security policy, including counter-terrorist strategy, should be based on a hard-headed calculation of interests, not on ideologically or normatively driven agendas. In David Clinton’s words, states should be ‘calculators not crusaders’ (Clinton 1994: 259).

**Cosmopolitanism and ‘Moralism’ in Foreign Policy**
Realism’s emphasis on the importance of avoiding moralism in foreign policy and of being calculators rather than crusaders reflects a key tenet of realist theory – the recognition of a diverse and pluralist international system, comprising a plethora of discrete political communities, each with their own understanding of the *summum bonum*. This central tenet of realist thinking generates some fundamental political and ethical principles. For realists, the fundamental political and ethical issue in international relations is learning to live in a plural world; this involves accepting difference, and reaching accommodation and mutual understanding with different political communities. This is reflected in the third idiom of moral conduct outlined above: a ‘morality of individuality’ involving give and take, mutual accommodation and a pursuit of ‘enlightened’ self-interest.

Realism’s acceptance of the plural and diverse nature of international politics tends adherents of this approach to a communitarian rather than a cosmopolitan political philosophy. The cosmopolitan tradition of normative political theory (of which Kant was a seminal figure) argues that there are universal moral and ethical principles that apply to all of humanity – and which therefore privilege individuals over particularist political communities. Cosmopolitanism is associated with a teleological view of international politics, in which history and politics are leading to the transcendence of discrete polities in a cosmopolitan – or ‘cosmopolitical’ – order based on universal values and a shared conception of the *summum bonum*. These cosmopolitan assumptions underpin much of the Western liberal discourse on human rights, democracy promotion and the ‘war on terror’, and are manifest in two distinct forms: a weak version, which advocates a gradualist and passive approach to international politics, assuming that the ‘logic’ of cosmopolitanism will result in a evolutionary transition to a cosmopolitan world order, and a strong version, which is more interventionist and activist. The communitarian approach, on the other hand, stresses the appeal of nationalism and particularist political communities over cosmopolitan claims to universal solidarity, and (drawing on Hegel) make a positive case for particularist political communities as the moral repository of distinctive conceptions of the ‘good life’. They also stress the political value of sovereignty as the foundation of a pluralist and diverse ‘society of states’ (Brown 1992; Caney 2005).
For Realists, the irredeemably pluralist character of international politics reflects the way the world *is*, not necessarily a moral judgement about how it *should* be. Nonetheless, whilst this does not lead to a positive endorsement of the moral claims made by communitarians on behalf of national political communities as a source of identity and values, it does imply a certain empathy with communitarian arguments, and a deeply sceptical view of cosmopolitan claims. Most Realists recognise that – whatever its shortcomings and failings – nationalism has been, and remains, one of the most potent political ideologies of the modern world, reflecting the political dynamics of an anarchic international system. The problem with cosmopolitanism is that it reflects wishful thinking rather than empirical analysis, substituting a desire to transform the world in a particular direction for a cool-headed analysis of the realities of the contemporary international system.

Cosmopolitanism is also dangerous as a guide to foreign and security policy because it generates a discursive logic that slips all-too-easily into a crusading approach to the outside world. The argument that the values of Western liberal-democracy are also cosmopolitan values that all peoples and political communities should enjoy provides a dangerous rationale and justification for policies that seek to transform international politics in one’s own image. Cosmopolitanism rests on the doctrine of the harmony of interests, whereas Realists argue that in a diverse international system of discrete political communities, conflicts over power, resources and influence are inevitable and pervasive. The danger with cosmopolitanism is that the universalist claims it makes often serve to disguise particularist interests. As E.H. Carr notes, clothing one’s ‘own interest in the guise of a universal interest for the purpose of imposing it on the rest of the world’ is nothing new; he quotes Dicey to the effect that ‘Men come easily to believe that arrangements agreeable to themselves are beneficial to others’ (2001: 71). Carr goes on to argue that ‘Theories of social morality are always the product of a dominant group which identifies itself with the community as a whole, and which possesses facilities denied to subordinate groups or individuals for imposing its view of life on the community’. The doctrine of the harmony of interests thus serves as an ingenious moral device invoked, in perfect sincerity, by privileged groups in order to justify and maintain their dominant position’ (Carr 2001: 74-75). The ‘concept of internationalism [or ‘cosmopolitanism’]’,
Carr argues, ‘is a special form of the doctrine of the harmony of interests. It yields to the same analysis; and there are the same difficulties about regarding it as an absolute standard independent of the interests and policies of those who promulgate it’. ‘Just as pleas for “national solidarity” in domestic politics always come from a dominant group which can use this solidarity to strengthen its own control over the nation as a whole, so pleas for international solidarity and world union come from those dominant nations which may hope to exercise control over a unified world’. ‘The exposure of the real basis of the professedly abstract principles commonly invoked in international politics is the most damning and most convincing part of the realist indictment of utopianism’ (Carr 2001: 78, 79, 80).

A similar point was made by Hans Morgenthau, who strongly criticised the universalist claims underpinning the cosmopolitan approach to international politics. ‘Political realism’, he argued, ‘refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe’;

All nations are tempted – and few have been able to resist the temptation for long – to clothe their own particular aspirations and actions in the moral purposes of the universe. To know that nations are subject to the moral law is one thing, while to pretend to know with certainty what is good and what is evil in the relations among nations is quite another. There is a world of difference between the belief that all nations stand under the judgement of God, inscrutable to the human mind, and the blasphemous conviction that God is always on one’s side and that what one wills oneself cannot fail to be willed by God also (Morgenthau 1993: 13).

The Realist approach to the ‘war on terror’ thus mirrors its broader approach to international politics – which is fundamentally a recognition and acceptance of the diversity and pluralism of the international system, and willingness to strive to address foreign policy challenges on the basis of national interests rather than universalist moral claims and idealist visions of a ‘new world order’. As Roger Spegele notes, this approach rejects the cosmopolitan ‘ideal of a universal humanity’ because of its essentially ‘assimilationist’ implications. ‘Ignoring difference’, he argues, ‘may encourage cultural imperialism by permitting norms which express only the point of view of certain
privileged groups in their effort to appear neutral, impersonal and universal’ (Spegele 1996: 79-80):

What we are left with, tragically perhaps, is a pluralist world of evolutionary change involving political dilemmas, moral conflicts, disruptions, instability, hard compromises – all constrained and restricted by the thought that ‘the state is externally sovereign’ is a necessary truth (Spegele 1996: 120).

**Politics and Diplomacy**

Recognising and accepting the inherently pluralist and diverse nature of a ‘pluralist world of evolutionary change’, with all the attendant dilemmas, conflicts and frustrations that this involves, implies a willingness to engage in political and diplomatic intercourse with political actors with rival understandings of the *summum bonum*. Terrorism is, by definition, a political act. Terrorist methods – the murder of innocent civilians and non-combatants – are morally repugnant, but they must be understood in the context of a political strategy. This means that rather than treating terrorism as an evil that must be defeated by a moral crusade, an effective counter-terrorist strategy must be attuned to the distinctive political, strategic and socio-economic context within which terrorists organise and operate. It also implies that – under certain conditions – terrorist groups and their international sponsors and supporters must be engaged politically and diplomatically.

‘At some point these past few years’, the journalist Roger Cohen has argued, ‘diplomacy went out of fashion’. He quotes Richard Haas’s response to criticism of his invitation to Iranian President Ahmadinejad to speak at the Council on Foreign Relations in September 2006: ‘I don’t see diplomacy or talking as a favour or an endorsement or a gift. To me, it’s a tool, and I’m confident that if used right, it can advance our interests’. ‘The United States’, Haas continued, ‘gets itself in trouble when it limits its options and approaches diplomacy as a value judgement. It’s not obvious to me, looking at the last 50 or 60 years, that we paid a price for talking to the Soviets. At the end of all the talking, we won the Cold War’ (Cohen 2006). Iran is a sponsor of terrorist groups in Lebanon and Israel (Hezbollah and Hamas) and of Shiite insurgency in Iraq; President Ahmadinejad has also made repugnant statements denying the Holocaust and calling for Israel’s destruction; more importantly, Iran’s power maximisation strategy in the Gulf – most
notably, its opaque uranium enrichment programme – threatens the stability and security of its regional neighbours. Nonetheless, this does not mean that diplomatic engagement with Iran is unthinkable and inevitably defeatist.

At the height of the Bush Administration’s hubristic folly, Vice-President Dick Cheney declared that ‘You do not negotiate with evil – you defeat it’. This is to misunderstand the nature of diplomacy, and the dynamics of international politics. As Graham Allison has argued, diplomacy and military coercion are not alternatives, but are complementary. In response to Cheney’s crusading braggadocio he quotes President Kennedy, who said ‘Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate’. And referring specifically to Iran, he quotes Robert Gates in 2004 before becoming Secretary of Defence: ‘Iran is not on the verge of another revolution … The durability of the Islamic Republic and the urgency of the concerns surrounding its policies mandate that the United States deal with the current regime rather than wait for it to fall’ (Allison 2007). Lord Salisbury spoke of diplomacy as ‘wise concession one moment, far-sighted persistence another, sleepless tact, immovable calmness and patience that no folly, no provocation, no blunders can shake’ (Jenkins 2007). More recently, Madeleine Albright has argued that:

The purpose of foreign policy is to influence the policies and actions of other nations in a way that serves your interests and values. The tools available include everything from kind words to cruise missiles. Mixing them properly and with sufficient patience is the art of diplomacy (Albright 2003: 407).

As regards Iran, diplomatic engagement is not an alternative to coercive pressure, nor an acceptance of its assertive foreign policy agenda. ‘What you mustn’t do’, Henry Kissinger has argued, ‘is to identify diplomacy with escalating concessions’. Writing in November 2007, he noted that the Bush Administration was ‘sliding into a position that we neither negotiate enough nor put out enough red lines’ (Kissinger 2007). The opening of a US-interests section in Tehran in July 2008 demonstrates the apparent victory of the more ‘realist’ approach of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice over the crusading hubris of Vice-President Cheney, but must also be seen in the context of growing coercive
pressure on Iran from the USA and Israel, and greater diplomatic backbone on the part of the Europeans. Diplomatic engagement with Iran is not an alternative to coercive strategies, nor should it preclude the ultimate use of military force if Iran continues with its aggressive and intransigent policies. Diplomacy can, however, be used to explore the possibilities of compromise and concessions based on mutual interests.

Diplomatic engagement with Syria is another crucial element in diffusing the political tensions that feed terrorism in the Middle East – which remains the geographical focus on the ‘war on terror’. Again, diplomacy is not an alternative to military action when necessary, but can complement it – as Israel’s strike on the alleged nuclear facility in Syria in September 2007 demonstrates. The essential point here is that political and diplomatic engagement is an indispensable element of an effective counter-terrorist strategy – and not just with the states that sponsor terrorism. The need for political and diplomatic contact with terrorist organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah is also widely accepted – in private, if not in public, even within the Israeli political and security elite. Both organisations have explicit political strategies, focused on winning political power in their national political communities, which provides opportunities for working towards some form of compromise and mutual accommodation.

The case for engaging politically with Al Qaeda is less clear, given its maximalist political agenda that seeks to overthrow existing Arab and Muslim regimes and establish a new Caliphate. There is a broad-ranging debate on the nature and structure of Al Qaeda, but even with this brutal and extremist organisation, it is clear that there are internal fissures and divisions which could be exploited to weaken its capability to conduct mass-casualty terrorist attacks. More generally, the struggle against terrorism must acknowledge the differences between and within various terrorist organisations, and avoid lumping all terrorist groups together in a Manichean ‘with-us-or-against-us’ strategy. Waging a successful war on terror involves a cool-headed calculation of competing interests, a long-term strategy and an approach that carefully calibrates military coercion and political engagement. To be effective, Morgenthau wrote, ‘diplomacy must be divested of the Crusading Spirit’ (Morgenthau 1993: 381), and grounded on a hard-nosed calculation of core interests. More generally, the ‘war on terror’ should avoid the implicit assimilationist and crusading tendencies of
cosmopolitanism, and be rooted in a non-teleological Realist characterised by the Realist principles of prudence, scepticism and reciprocity.

CONCLUSION
This article has argued that Realism provides firm moral and political foundations for addressing the threat of international terrorism in the early twenty-first century. Rather than offering a series of detailed policy prescriptions, it has focused on the implications for counter-terrorist strategies of the underlining assumptions shaping approaches to international politics, conflict and security.

At the heart of the Realist approach to the international system is an acceptance of the inherent diversity and pluralism of international politics, with its plethora of discrete political communities, each with its own conception of the *summum bonum*. In contrast to the assimilationist and homogenising implications of cosmopolitanism, which underpins much of the Manichean discourse of contemporary Western liberalism, Realism focuses on the constraints placed on moral action by the dynamics of a pluralist international system. Realists thus advocate a non-teleological approach to international politics grounded in what Michael Oakshott called a ‘morality of individuality’, characterised by three principles: prudence, scepticism and reciprocity.

Central to the Realist critique of the Bush Administration’s ‘war on terror’ is a rejection of crusading mentality that pervades it. Since Morgenthau, Realists have warned against the dangers of ‘moralism in foreign policy’, and advocated an approach to policy formulation grounded in a calculation of national interests and the balance of relative power capabilities – in short, that states should be ‘calculators not crusaders’. This in turn gives rise to an emphasis on the importance of politics and diplomacy, and a willingness to negotiate on the basis of national interests rather than perceived moral imperatives. At the same time, Realists have traditionally been sceptical of what George Kennan termed the ‘legal-moralistic approach to international problems’, and advocated the use of coercive instruments as an adjunct to diplomacy. As Reinhold Niebuhr observed,
‘Politics will, to the end of history, be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises’ (Niebuhr 2005: 180).

Endnotes:

1. Jack Donnelly notes that neo-realism demonstrates a ‘striking lack of attention to moral issues’, given its focus on ‘the development of positive explanatory theory’. However, he muses that, ‘in the light of the relatively limited scope and aspirations of most neo-realist theorists’, and if structural realism is conceived as ‘a very rough first approximation rather than a comprehensive theory of international relations’, space might be opened up ‘within the field for the discussion of moral issues’. He also suggests that there ‘may even be a new opening for at least a constructive interchange between realists and those more actively concerned with moral issues in international relations’ (Donnelly 1992: 107-08).

2. A prime example of this is the Anglo-American strategic bombing campaign against Germany in the Second World War (See Walzer 1977: 255-63; Walzer 2004: 33-34).

3. In his lecture on ‘Politics as a Vocation’, Max Weber distinguished between an ‘ethic of ultimate ends’ and an ‘ethic of responsibility’. The former linked ethical behaviour to a distinctive teleos, and believed that if ‘an action of good intent leads to bad results, then, in the actor’s eyes, not he but the world, or the stupidity of other men, or God’s will who made them thus, is responsible for the evil’. An ethic of responsibility involved the consideration ‘of precisely the average deficiencies of people’ and an unwillingness to burden others with the results of their actions as far as they could be foreseen (Freedman: 2005-06: 22; see also Harries 2005: 28).

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