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Practice, Prudence and International Relations Theory: Bourdieu, Aristotle and the Classical Realists[1]

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ABSTRACT

The "practice turn" in International Relations is a promising development which can be linked both to the Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom and the classical realist virtue of "prudence". There are family resemblances here, here but also differences; for Aristotle and the realists, practical wisdom is associated more with the intellect, while the practice turn places great emphasis on the role of habitual behaviour. The practice turn offers an alternative to neo-positivist conceptions of the conduct of social enquiry – but the classical realists could argue that they have already trodden this route in the past. Still, the implications of Aristotle's comment that "prudent young people do not seem to be found" need to be confronted. Is "competent practice" something that can be achieved by study, or is it only achievable in the context of the kind of lived experience that some of the classical realists could claim, but which few modern students of International Relations can aspire to.

Keywords: *Practice, Prudence, Realism, Bourdieu, Morgenthau*

Introduction

One of the most interesting recent developments in the academic literature of International Relations (IR) has been the emergence of a "Practice Turn", associated in particular with the work of Vincent Pouliot and Emmanuel Adler.[2] In their hands, this turn involves a re-orientation of the study of IR towards international practices understood as "competent

[1] I am grateful to Toni Erskine, Andrew Jillions, George Lawson, Pietro Maffettone and to participants in the 10th METU Conference on International Relations in Ankara in June 2011 for comments on an earlier version of this article; I am, of course, responsible for any errors that remain.

[2] Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, "International Practices", *International Theory* (Vol. 3, No.1, 2011), pp. 1–36; in Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (eds.), *International Practices* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Vincent Pouliot, "'Sobjectivism': Toward a Constructivist Methodology", *International Studies Quarterly* (Vol. 51, No.2, 2007), pp. 359-384; Vincent Pouliot, "The Logic of Practicality: A Theory of Practice of Security Communities", *International Organization* (Vol. 62, No.2, 2008), pp. 257-288 and *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 93-231.

performances"; the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu is a major (but not the only) source for this change of emphasis.[3] This Bourdieu-influenced practice turn has some affinities with other movements in the social sciences, and social theory more generally, in particular a renewed interest in the Aristotelian notion of "practical reason" (*phronesis*), on which see, for example, the (very different) work of Bent Flyvjberg, Alasdair MacIntyre, Stephen Toulmin and Bernard Williams.[4] The Aristotelian moment is slowly arriving in International Relations Theory and in International Political Theory, although, perhaps counter-intuitively, a little more slowly in the latter case although the present author has attempted to challenge the Kantian dominance of that field by drawing in particular on Toulmin and on Martha Nussbaum.[5] A clear link between Aristotle and modern IR can be found in the work of the classical realists, in particular that of Hans J. Morgenthau, who was the author of a little-known commentary on Aristotle's *Politics* and whose thoughts on the nature of social theory were heavily tinged by Aristotelian notions.[6] The classical realists placed a great deal of emphasis on the notion of practical reason, sometimes in the guise of "prudence" and their work has clear affinities to Aristotelian notions of practical judgment, and, equally, to the idea of competent performance, central to the practice turn.

To cut a long story short, there are family resemblances between the "practice turn", the Aristotelian notion of "practical reason" and classical realist IR theory. Partly this is because adherents to these three "schools" (perhaps too aggregating a word, but let that stand for the moment) are in general agreement that what was the dominant approach to social science theorising in the 20th century is, in certain important respects, defective.

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3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Francois Mérand and Vincent Pouliot, "Le monde de Pierre Bourdieu: Éléments pour une théorie sociale des relations internationales", *Canadian Journal of Political Science* (Vol. 41, No.3, 2008), pp. 603-625.

4 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999); Bent Flyvjberg, *Making Social Science Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Revised ed.) (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd, 2007); Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) & *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

5 Chris Brown, *Practical Judgment in International Political Theory: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 2010); Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian approach", in Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.) *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) and *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Revised ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Nussbaum's more recent work has been less obviously Aristotelian.

6 Anthony Lang, *Political Theory and International Affairs: Hans J. Morgenthau on Aristotle's the Politics* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2004); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947).

This approach, sometimes termed "positivist" or "neo-positivist", looks to the production of social theory along lines akin to the theories that characterise the natural sciences (albeit with many adaptations to take into account the differences of subject matter), and all three schools agree that the attempt to create theories of this kind is misconceived. There is a category error at work here they believe; the differences between knowledge of the natural world and knowledge of the social world are fundamental, and not such that the methodological presuppositions that underlie scientific theorising can be adapted to social science theory, however much effort is put into doing so. On this Aristotle, Bourdieu, and Morgenthau could agree, if a roundtable composed of these presiding deities could be organised.

At the same time, there are substantial differences between the three schools. For Bourdieu, competent performance is largely based on habit in one form or an other, and the importance of the reasoning power of the agent, although not excluded from consideration, should not be overemphasised. For Aristotle, reason is central; the virtuous individual may seem to be acting on the basis of habit, but this habitual knowledge is developed consciously through processes of reasoning. For the classical realists, it is less easy to pin down their stance on this issue, but it seems plausible to suggest that prudence involves both a deep knowledge of statecraft (how things are done) as well as the possession of the intellectual ability to think through how things might be different and to weigh the consequences of action. As such, the role of realism in this discussion is to provide a useful counter-point to the other schools, and a way of highlighting the similarities and differences to be found within this family of approaches, as well as cashing out those similarities and differences in real-world situations.

The first half of what follows will be devoted to providing a brief, and necessarily rather crude, guide to the "practice turn" and the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*. The second half will focus on the classical realists, and in particular on Hans J Morgenthau, and, to a lesser extent, George Kennan, as a way of teasing out how the concepts described in the first half could be seen actually in action in the work of these thinkers. The similarities and differences between "practice" and *phronesis* will be explored and, I hope, clarified, but no attempt at reconciliation will be made – any such attempt could only succeed by introducing unproductive distortions. In so far as this presentation has a message, it is that both the Bourdieuian and the Aristotelian approaches constitute an important advance on dominant modes of thinking about international relations, and it would be good if they both flourish. To advance this flourishing is my purpose, but there is one caveat that must be entered. These are approaches that place a great deal of emphasis on experience – knowing how to get along in the world takes time, whether this is a matter of becoming familiar with the "habitus" or accumulating the kind of wisdom

that Aristotle believed young people were incapable of.[7] One of the most attractive features of the scientific method is that, in principle at least, experience is of little importance; the newly minted graduate student can (again in principle) undermine the work of the Nobel Laureate. On the other hand, becoming a competent performer and/or exercising practical reason is not something that will simply happen, or can be conjured up without a great deal of effort. As we will see, the reception of the work of the classical realists in the post-war era illustrates the problem in a number of interesting ways.

The "Practice Turn" In International Relations

To focus on "practices" is, at its most basic, to study what people do and why they do it. At this point, a diplomatic historian might interject that this is what practitioners of the historian's craft do, and have always done This is, however, to miss the point; whereas the historian is at root attempting to describe and explain a specific sequence of events, the "practice turn" in the social and cultural sciences is based on the proposition that although empirical detail is important, indeed crucial, for the study of what people do, still there are features of practices which are not specific to the single case and thus can be theorised.[8] But – an important point – "theory" in this case is not to be understood in neo-positivist terms as a set of causal laws or "if-then" propositions linking independent, intervening and dependent variables. Such an approach to theorising opens up a series of standard problems in the social sciences, such as those connected to the relationship between agency and structure, which an emphasis on practices is intended to by-pass.

Predictably, given this anti- or post-positivist position, many post-modernist and post-structuralist writers could, and do, plausibly claim to focus on practices, but the self-identified "practice turn" in IR is more closely associated with constructivism and recently, in particular, with the version of constructivism associated with the writings of Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot. As has often been remarked, the term constructivism in International Relations covers a number of very diverse approaches; what is distinctive in the work of Adler and, especially, Pouliot, is the influence on their work of the theoretical tools developed by the French sociologist and cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1930 – 2002), and before we can approach the study of "international practices" a short digression on these tools is required.

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7 David Bostock, *Aristotle's ethics* (Book VI, 8, §5. 1142a).

8 Theodore Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina and Eike Von Savigny (eds.), *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Alone or with collaborators Bourdieu wrote or edited over thirty books on subjects as diverse as the political ontology of Martin Heidegger, the Kabyle people of Algeria and the effects of neo-liberalism on television, which means that any attempt to summarise his approach in a paragraph or two is doomed to fail.[9] However, some such summary is necessary, and a good starting point is Bourdieu's dissatisfaction with the terms of the time-honoured debate about agency and structure in the social sciences, or, to put it slightly differently, between subjective and objective knowledge. Individuals are agents; they act and make choices based on their subjective understandings of their position in the world or the particular situations in which they find themselves – but at the same time, individuals exist within structures that present themselves as objective and limit the choices that they can make. The most powerful research programmes in the social sciences – social choice theory and structuralism – are based on these two perspectives, but Bourdieu wants to claim that these programmes are defective precisely because each denies, ignores or misrepresents the reality the other defends and promotes. The theoretical tools Bourdieu develops to investigate practices (what people do and why they do it) are designed to help us to overcome the opposition between these two programmes. Pouliot makes Bourdieu's point here in his *International Studies Quarterly* article of 2007 where he introduces the term "sobjectivism" – a rather ugly word which for aesthetic reasons one hopes won't catch on, but it does summarise quite nicely the idea of an attempt to combine objective and subjective approaches.[10]

Bourdieu employs three key, inter-related, tools to study practices – the concepts of "field", "capital" and "*habitus*". The first two notions are not too difficult to grasp. "Field" is a relatively autonomous, hierarchically organised social space within which transactions, interactions, events etc in a particular sphere of social life takes place (think "battlefield" or "sports field"); "capital" refers to the resources (material, symbolic, cultural etc.) which agents expend in order to occupy the dominant positions within the hierarchy that characterises each field. "*Habitus*" is a trickier notion to come to terms with, because it is here that Bourdieu wishes to overcome the opposition between our experience of ourselves as agents making choices, and our simultaneous understanding that these choices are made in, and to a great extent determined by, structures over which we have no control. *Habitus* is a property of agents (individuals or collectives) which both structures and is structured; it consists of dispositions which generate

[9] Good introductions to Bourdieu include Jen Webb, Tony Schirato and Geoff Danaher, *Understanding Bourdieu* (London: Sage Publications, 2002) and Michael Grenfell (ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts* (Durham: Acumen, 2008).

[10] Pouliot, op.cit. in note 2.

perceptions, appreciations and practices – "dispositions are both close in meaning to structures, but also designate "a *way of being*, a *habitual state* [or especially] a *predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination*".[11] These dispositions are formed by the objective conditions the agent encounters, becoming embodied and affecting action at a level that is pre-reflexive.

This account of *habitus* is over-compressed, necessarily so given the scope of this account. In fact, the notion is, in most respects, similar to that which the Wittgensteinian John Searle's terms the "Background" – "the set of nonintentional or preintentional capacities that enable intentional states to function".[12] The basic idea in both cases – and Bourdieu counts Wittgenstein as one of his influences, so this is not a coincidence – is that we necessarily bring to action certain unspoken, unarticulated assumption without which we could not make sense of the world. To pick up one of Searle's simple examples, we understand without it being spelled out for us that if we are asked to cut the grass this is to be interpreted differently from a request to cut the cake – we don't need to be told to use a lawn-mower or scythe in one case and a knife in the other. To an extent we are talking here about habitual behaviour, although the Latin term *habitus* acts to distance us from a simple understanding of the Background as a collection of habits – there is more to the notion than that would suggest. What is missing in an account which overstates the importance of habit is the idea of a continual interaction between *habitus*, field and capital; in Bourdieu's thought these are not to be understood as separate concepts but as working together.

They are also not to be understood as abstract notions – Bourdieu stresses the importance of using these tools to investigate actual practices, and, returning to International Relations, this is where Vincent Pouliot's work is very strong. *International Security in Practice*, his 2010 monograph, sets out a stall for a Bourdieuean reading of IR, but does so in the context of a study of *The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* to quote his sub-title. This is very much a hands-on analysis of the detail of the *habitus* of the diplomats and state-actors involved, the ways in which they expend symbolic capital in their interactions in the field of diplomacy, what constitutes competent practice in this field. One of the things that is most interesting about this study is the way in which it reveals a culture of diplomacy which, although expressed in very different terms, would be readily recognisable to resolutely non-Bourdieuean writers such as Geoff Berridge, Keith Hamilton and Richard Langhorne, and even, from and earlier generation, Harold Nicolson.[13] What Pouliot does with this quite conventional

[11] Bourdieu, op.cit. in note 3, p. 214; Grenfell, op.cit. in note 9, p. 51.

[12] John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 129.

[13] Geoff Berridge, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice* (4th ed.), (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Keith Hamilton and Richard Langhorne, *The Practice of Diplomacy* (2nd ed.),

notion is to refine it by the use of the methodological tools discussed and outlined above, and thereby relate it to other areas of social life, other fields, rather than treating diplomatic culture as sui generis. This is something that will be taken up later, but next the idea of practice will be examined through a different lens, with a shift from Bourdieu (and Wittgenstein) to Aristotle.

Practical Wisdom

One clear, but perhaps misleading, connection between Bourdieu and Aristotle can be found in terminology. The term *habitus* was used by the Scholastics to translate Aristotle's term *hexis*, which nowadays is translated into English by terms such as "state" (as in "state of mind") or "condition" or "disposition"; in the words of the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Aristotle "describes ethical virtue as a "*hexis*", a tendency or disposition, induced by our habits, to have appropriate feelings".[14] This is misleading vis-à-vis Bourdieu because *habitus* is obviously not meant to be descriptive of ethical virtue, but it is suggestive nonetheless: Derek Robbins tells us that "all his life [Bourdieu] was fluent in Latin" and he could hardly have been unaware of the implications of his choice of the term".[15] Aristotle and Bourdieu also share certain understandings of the nature of the "social sciences". In the case of Aristotle this term is, of course, anachronistic and misleading since the relevant sections of the *Nicomachean Ethics* concerns "virtues of thought" – but then it is also a little misleading to describe Bourdieu as a social scientist. The central point though is highly relevant to both authors; Aristotle distinguishes three "virtues of thought", *episteme* (scientific knowledge), *techne* (craft knowledge) and *phronesis* (prudence, or practical wisdom) (Book VI 1138b ff.).[16] The first of these, *episteme*, concerns "knowledge about things that cannot be otherwise" (Book VI, 1140) – or in more modern terminology, knowledge where non-reflexivity is the rule; the objects of this kind of knowledge are not self-aware and cannot react to what is known of them. Aristotle does not see this as a virtue of thought that is relevant to human action – again translating this into modern terms, he would reject the positivist/neo-positivist approach to the social sciences, and in much the same way, and for much the same reasons, as does Bourdieu. *Techne*, on the other hand, is essentially about manipulating material things, the work of an artisan, a technician, or a craftsman; Aristotle as an aristocrat who does not work with his hands has relatively little of interest to say about *techne*. Rather, *phronesis* is the virtue of

(London: Routledge, 2010); Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (Washington DC: University of Georgetown Press, 1998).

14 Richard Kraut "Aristotle's Ethics", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2010 Edition)*, citing Aristotle, 1999: 1105b25-6 http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/aristotle-ethics/

15 Robbins, op.cit. in note 9, p. 29.

16 References in the text are to Aristotle.

thought that is most important in considering human action and on which Aristotle focuses. *Phronesis* is about deliberation on "the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being" (Book VI, 5, § 3, 1140); it is about "knowledge of particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars" (Book VI, 7, §7, 1141b). Unlike *episteme*, this is about matters that "could be otherwise", i.e. where reflexivity is unavoidable. We could translate *phronesis* as practical wisdom, or prudence – but neither term exactly captures this virtue. This is interesting and revealing, since both "scientist" and "technician" or "artisan" capture pretty well the other two virtues of thought; it is, perhaps, a feature of modernity that we have more difficulty finding an easy modern substitute for *phronesis*.

Stephen Toulmin elaborates this point in his compelling account of the way in which, in the seventeenth century, the moral insights of renaissance humanism and the classical world were put aside.[17] Under the influence of Descartes and Hobbes, along with many lesser talents, formal logic came to displace rhetoric, general principles and abstract axioms were privileged over particular cases and concrete diversity, and the establishment of rules (or "laws") that were deemed of permanent as opposed to transitory applicability came to be seen as the task of the theorist – in other words, although Toulmin does not put it this way, matters properly within the purview of *phronesis* came to be seen, wrongly, as matters of *episteme*. Toulmin suggests that at this time moral reasoning became "theory-centered" rather than "practically-minded", that is, a matter of following a theoretically-validated rule, rather than of making a practical judgment, and was impoverished thereby.

Bent Flyvbjerg brings this story up to date in an important but somewhat neglected text (neglected at least by scholars of International Relations), *Making Social Science Matter*.[18] His goal is to persuade social scientists to abandon the attempt to model their research on the work of the natural sciences. Drawing heavily on the Aristotelian distinctions outlined above (but also on the work of Bourdieu), Flyvbjerg contrasts general, theoretical, context-independent, knowledge (i.e. *episteme*) with concrete, practical, context-dependent knowledge which he terms *phronetic*. His thesis is that the modern social sciences wrongly privilege the former over the latter, and that the goal should be to produce a *phronetic* social science. Such a social science would be genuinely action-guiding in a way that context-independent knowledge – the goal of the natural scientists – never

[17] Toulmin, op.cit. in note 5.
[18] Flyvjberg, op.cit. in note 4.

can be in the social sciences; context is all important when it comes to action, as is knowledge of particulars.

As this discussion has shown, the points of contact between the "practice turn" and a putative "*phronetic* turn" are obvious, but this family resemblance, although real, should not be overstated. As noted above, Aristotle is not a social scientist in any modern sense of the term, even in a sense of the term that could incorporate Bourdieu; his concern in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is with the living of a good life rather than with a desire to understand social practices. An understanding of "practices" in the Bourdieu/Pouliot sense of the term involves both more and less than does a focus on the good life. On the one hand, "what people do and why they do it" involves much more than ethical behaviour, even defining "ethics" as widely as Aristotle's thought requires us to – for Aristotle, ethics involves much more than the sort of considerations summarised nowadays by "morality".[19] On the other hand, a good life is not simply about doing things – certainly not for Aristotle, for whom *contemplation* of the good was perhaps the most important of all "activities".

This difference also manifests itself in other ways in particular with respect to the consciousness with which practices are approached. It would be an oversimplification to suggest that the "practice turn" is simply about the importance of habitual behaviour – as noted above *habitus* is not another way of referring to "habit" – but it remains the case that the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* is always about the exercise of the faculty of reason, which is not the case with Bourdieu's formulation. The Aristotelian virtues, whether as described by Aristotle himself, or by a modern neo-Aristotelian such as Martha Nussbaum, certainly involve dispositions to act in certain ways, but these dispositions are consciously learned through the exercise of the human capacity to reason.[20] In a given situation, it might seem that the virtuous man or woman will know instinctively what is the right thing to do, but this "instinct" is not produced by immersion in the *habitus* or Searle's Background. Rather, it is the product of an education in the virtues, something that only the trained mind can achieve. This, incidentally, is one of the big differences between Christian/Kantian and Greek ethical thought; in the former, simplicity is at the root of virtue, for the latter virtue must be self-aware. To illustrate the point from the modern cinema, the good-natured simpleton *Forrest Gump* always does the right thing and is a good person in the Christian sense of the term even though unable to articulate why he does what he does; for the Aristotelian, on the other hand, this inability would disqualify Forrest from being able to claim to

[19] Bernard Williams is a standard modern reference for the distinction being made here. See Williams, op.cit. in note 4.

[20] See note 4.

be a virtuous person. Instead, an excellent paradigm of a good person might be the capable police chief Marge Gunderson in the Coen Brother's *Fargo*, who is "Minnesota nice" but highly intelligent and with a good understanding of human motives, including those she does not share. She does the right thing because of her training, intelligence, common-sense and personal rectitude.

Getting back to the point, practical wisdom is based on a reason which in turn is shaped by experience, and therein lies a possible problem. Not everyone will have the relevant experience; in particular young people will not. As Aristotle puts it in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, "prudence is concerned with particulars as well as universals, and particulars become known from experience, but a young person lacks experience, since some length of time is need to produce it" (Book VI, Ch 9, 1142a). Since Aristotle was actually a practicing educator, and presumably believed that he was developing the faculties of his students, it isn't clear how young his "young person" lacking experience might be but the general point holds – a *phronetic* social science requires an experienced social scientist, and experienced in the relevant practice. When it comes to international politics or diplomacy this presents obvious problems, since most people in the academy who write about these subjects have not had direct experience thereof. This point will be returned to in the next section.

For the time being, it suffices to point out that there is actually a growing body of explicitly Aristotelian work on international relations; much of this work relates to realism – see Anthony Lang and Sean Molloy in this context – but other notions such as war (Grady Scott Davis) and friendship (P.E. Digeser) also feature.[21] In each case, one can understand this work as representing an attempt to produce *phronetic* social science, and to get away from the dominant way of conceptualising the problems under consideration, whether this is a matter of escaping from the neo-positivist assumptions of mainstream International Relations, or the Kantian assumptions of most International Political Theory. My own recent work comes in the same category; in "Selective Humanitarianism: In Defence of Inconsistency", "Practical Judgement and the Ethics of Pre-emption" and "Just War and Political Judgement". I challenge the assumption that ethical action in international relations requires the identification of a set of binding

[21] Anthony Lang, "Morgenthau, agency, and Aristotle", in Michael Williams (ed.), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sean Molloy, "Aristotle, Epicurus, Morgenthau and the Political Ethics of the Lesser Evil", *Journal of International Political Theory* (Vol. 5, No.1, 2009), pp. 94-112; Grady Scott Davis, *Warcraft and the Fragility of Virtue: An Essay in Aristotelian Ethics* (Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1992) and P.E. Digeser, "Friendship Between States", *British Journal of Political Science* (Vol. 39, No.2, 2009), pp. 323-344.

rules.[22] Drawing on Aristotle and later Aristotelians such as Thomas Aquinas, I argue that while there are general principles that can be identified through which issues such as the justice of war or the ethics of pre-emption can be examined, their application always requires a detailed examination of the circumstances of particular cases rather that the applying of a rule.

Realism and *Prudentia*

The first half of this discussion has been devoted to an examination of writers who are not normally seen as central to the canon of International Relations, assuming such a canon actually exists. All scholars in the field will, of course, have some sense of the work of Aristotle and many will be conversant at some level with Bourdieu's work, but neither the "practice turn" nor Aristotelian *phronesis* are yet firmly established in the repertoire of the discourse of IR. Realism, on the other hand, has been central to that discourse since the Second World War – its advocates would say since the Peloponnesian War. The contention here is that realism, at its best, is based precisely on the classical Greek virtue of *phronesis* or, when drawing on the republican tradition of Machiavelli, its Latin equivalent, *prudentia*. It is precisely its claim to be able to provide the kind of guidance that practical wisdom offers that is distinctive about realism – and its similar claim to be rooted in the realities of statecraft links it to the practice turn; realism is pre-eminently an approach to International Relations that bases its legitimacy on the study of what people actually do and why they do it.

Before exploring realism's relationship to practice and *phronesis*, it is first necessary to clarify that the realism to which reference is made is what is sometimes called "classical" realism rather than the "structural" realism identified with Kenneth Waltz and his successors.[23] The key point here is that although Waltz, and other structural realists such as John Mearsheimer, frequently demonstrate their possession of the virtue of *phronesis* in their public pronouncements, their methodological commitments are to precisely the model of social scientific theorising rejected by both Bourdieu and modern Aristotelians.[24] The archetypal classical realist Hans J Morgenthau in his text *Politics Among Nations* was wont to write freely – rather too freely – about the "laws" of international politics, but it is clear from the context of these statements, and from less popular writings such as *Scientific Man vs.*

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[22] The first two of these papers are collected in Brown, "Just War and Political Judgment" (2010) is forthcoming in Anthony Lang, Cian O'Driscoll and John Williams (eds.), *Just War*.

[23] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1979); for critical discussions of neo or structural realism, see Robert Keohane, *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) and Ken Booth (ed.), *Realism and World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[24] Waltz, Ibid., Chapter 1.; John Mearsheimier, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

Power Politics, that he did not subscribe to the kind of logico-deductive model of theory espoused by Waltz.[25]

Morgenthau's actual theoretical and methodological roots have been much studied of late, but, impressive though much of this scholarship is, of more interest in the context of this paper is the less philosophically charged parts of Morgenthau's oeuvre, his policy advice to the American people and leadership.[26] The early Cold War really is history nowadays, hence the understandable focus on Morgenthau's philosophy, but in the 1940s and 50s he had other priorities, as did other classical realists such as the diplomat George Kennan (who, in any event is not generally considered to have the kind of philosophical background and sophistication that has been attributed to Morgenthau). Important texts here include Morgenthau's *In Defence of the National Interest* and the essays collected in his *Truth and Power* as well as *Politics Among Nations* (which is a work of advocacy before it is a textbook), Kennan's *American Diplomacy* and the first volume of his *Memoirs*.[27]

Focusing for the moment on Morgenthau and Kennan in the immediate post-war years, it is clear that both the scholar and the diplomat are deeply concerned at the inadequate response of the American political system to the foreign-policy challenges it faced in the 1940s. The US had become the predominant power in the world in terms of industrial, financial, naval and air power, but faced a political challenge from the second world power, the USSR. America's fellow capitalist countries and potential allies were in dire straits, and some at least had good reason to think they could not survive without the assistance of the US, but the American political class seemed uncertain as to how to use its power to support its friends, or even whether to use its power at all, as opposed to withdrawing to Fortress

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25 Morgenthau, op.cit. in note 6, and Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (1st/4th editions.) (New York: Knopf, 1948/67).

26 Lang and Molloy, op.cit. in note 21, discuss his Aristotelian roots, while Christoph Frei discusses his debt to Weber and Nietzsche in *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge, LA: University of Louisiana Press, 2001). I have examined his relationship with "Carl Schmitt in 'The Twilight of International Morality' Hans J. Morgenthau and Carl Schmitt on the end of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum"* in Williams, (ed.) *Reconsidering Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,2007) as does William Scheuerman in the same collection. In *Morgenthau* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009) Scheuerman discusses his relationship with progressively-minded German labour lawyers in the 1920s.

27 Hans Morgenthau, *Truth and Power: Essays of a Decade 1960–70* (New York: Praeger, 1970) and *In Defence of the National Interest: Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (New York: University Press of America, 1951/1982); George Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-50* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967), are a fascinating document, more revealing than *American Diplomacy: 1900 – 1950* (Revised Ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951 – 85).

America. Both Morgenthau and Kennan, coming at the matter from different angles, are clear that the problem is not simply that the leaders of the US do not know *what* to do in this difficult situation – more fundamental is the fact that they don't know *how* to do whatever they decide they ought to do. It is "competent practice" that is missing as much as actual knowledge.

Kennan is compelling on this in his *Memoirs*. In the 1930s he served in Moscow and despaired at the inability of the political-appointee Ambassador, Joseph E. Davies to grasp the nature of the Soviet Regime – Davies took as gospel the testimony presented at the show trials during the Great Purge in 1936/38, and later published an embarrassingly pro-Stalin memoir *Mission to Moscow*.[28] Kennan returned as Deputy Head of Mission at the US Moscow Embassy from 1944 and 1946 and again was horrified at the sometimes hair-raising antics of visiting delegations of US Congressmen, one of whom, when drunk threatened to punch Stalin on the nose, fortunately out of earshot of the dictator.[29] The American political class seemed to oscillate between unreasoned trust in the Soviet system and unrelenting hostility. Kennan's famous "Long Telegram" of February 1946, and his later article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1947 (published anonymously and known as the "X" article) attempted to address this problem; the latter argued for a "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies" explicitly combating the desire for over-simplified solutions and quick fixes.[30] But in the "Truman Doctrine", laid before Congress in March 1947, President Harry S. Truman turned the idea of containment into an open-ended commitment to support "free peoples" everywhere; much to the disgust of Kennan, Truman judged, probably correctly, that the necessary support from Congress and the American people could only be achieved if the task of containing Soviet power was cast in terms of a crusade. Still, in the end, the right course of action – more or less – was chosen.

Kennan approached these events from the perspective of a professional diplomat who, after a prep-school education and Princeton University, spent most of his life abroad in the American Foreign Service. He was more conversant with, and at home in, the practices of international diplomacy as they had developed over the centuries, than he was with the vagaries of American politics. While at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton from 1950 – 1952 he produced a short book on *American*

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[28] Kennan, op.cit. in note 26; in the context of its time, the fawning nature of Joseph Davies, *Mission to Moscow* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1941) is perhaps understandable, but it is clear that Davies really did believe the story he told.

[29] Ibid., p. 277; Kennan's patrician disdain for American democracy can be wearing, but on this occasion had some justification.

[30] George Kennan (writing as 'X'), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct", *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 25, No. 4, 1947).

Diplomacy which became one of the core texts of classical realism. In it he castigated what he saw as the failings of American moralism, encapsulated in "Wilsonianism", the diplomacy of President Woodrow Wilson in the immediate aftermath of World War I, and contrasted this with the realism of traditional diplomatic practice. The balance of power is given great emphasis in the text, but – central to the argument of this paper – as a *practice* rather than as a *theory*. American failures are not the result of an inability to grasp the theory of international politics, but stem from a more basic lack of understanding of how the game is played.

Kennan was a critic rather than an educator, and, in the 1940s, it was Hans J. Morgenthau more than any other figure who actually tried to show how the game should be played; in the, patronising but astute, words of Hedley Bull, he provided the American leadership and people with "a convenient crib of European diplomatic wisdom".[31] Morgenthau's reputation is as a leading figure in the development of the theory of international relations, and, as noted above, his *Politics Among Nations* is littered with references to the laws of international politics, which gives the impression he is developing theory in the neo-positivist sense of the term – but on closer inspection it is clear that this is not the case. To give just one example, in his discussion of the balance of power he describes balances emerging "of necessity", and yet the main thrust of the discussion, here as elsewhere in the text, is prescriptive; he is concerned to show how states ought to behave in order to create balances of power, a concern that would be meaningless if balances of power actually created themselves through some "necessary" process. By way of contrast, Kenneth Waltz, who sees the balance of power as the theory of international politics, simply tells the story in terms of systemic imperatives towards balancing which will punish those who ignore them and, in the text if not in his other contributions, resolutely refuses to yield to the prescriptive impulse which is at the heart of Morgenthau's work. Morgenthau is centrally engaged in advocacy; interestingly, one of the features of *Politics Among Nations* that helped to establish it as the core text for the teaching of the theory of realism is the enumeration of the "Six Principles of Political Realism" in the introductory chapter – and yet these theoretical propositions were only added to the second edition of the book, at the insistence of Morgenthau's publishers, whose interests lay in the direction of having the book adopted as a teaching text.

In *Politics Among Nations* and in *In Defence of the National Interest*, Morgenthau is engaged in describing the practice of international relations

[31] Hedley Bull, "The Theory of International Politics, 1919-1969", in Bernard Porter (ed.), *The Aberystwyth Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 39.

for an audience which is unfamiliar with what it means to be a competent performer in the game of nations. On his reading, because of their history, the American people are prone to understanding international politics in terms of "good" and "evil", and his goal is to get them to think instead of "interest" and "power". He presents them with a selective history of the practice of international politics, with a number of edifying stories and exemplary figures (Bismarck is a particular hero), designed to show that peace can only emerge from an understanding of the architecture of power and not from an act of will on the part of well-intentioned idealists. There are elements of both a Searle/Bourdieuian concern to convey the "Background" of international politics, and an Aristotelian concern to apply practical reason to the conduct of international politics. Morgenthau's books describe in detail the diplomatic culture of the European states-system, the kind of unspoken understandings that professional diplomats such as George Kennan take for granted but which mean nothing to ordinary Americans, but these books are also trying to tell those same Americans how they should act in accordance with reason in this world.

Nearly twenty years after the storms of the 1940s, Morgenthau explicitly addressed the role of theory in an essay that could be seen as a less philosophically-charged follow-up to his 1947 book, *Scientific Man and Power Politics* – "The intellectual and political functions of theory", which first appeared in an edited collection on the role of theory put together by Horace Harrison, but is now most easily accessed in Morgenthau's own collection *Truth and Power*.[32] The essay is essentially an attack on the kind of neo-positivist theory that developed, especially in the US, in the 1950s and 1960s, which, on Morgenthau's account, fails to grasp the centrality of political power on the one hand, and the sheer contingencies involved in all accounts of politics on the other. More interesting perhaps, is the account he gives of the proper role of theory, to which, perhaps unsurprisingly, he argues his own oeuvre can be related. He sees this proper role as linked to the circumstances of the time, and offers four different ways in which his own experiences as a theoretician illuminate the point. First, in the 1940s he observes that the US leadership developed the theory of containment; this was the correct policy – more or less, Kennan might have added – but there was no theory to support it; he and others tried to fill that gap. Under John Foster Dulles in the 1950s, on the other hand, the actual conduct of foreign policy did not correspond to the national interest, and it was the role of the theorist to say so, providing "a rational framework for a non-orthodox, critical political position, either within the government or outside it".[33] Things changed again in the 1960 with the arrival of theorists of international

[32] Horace Harrison, *The Role of Theory in International Relations* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1964) and Morgenthau, op.cit. in note 6.

[33] Morgenthau, Ibid., p. 259.

relations actually in the government in the Kennedy Administration; and at that point, the role of the theoretician outside of government came to be to act as an intellectual conscience to keep the insiders on the straight and narrow and to counteract any tendency the latter might have to shape their advice to the political needs of the administration as opposed to the national interest.

For the purpose of this discussion, however, it is the fourth role of theory that is particularly interesting. An extended quotation is needed here:

> There is a final task – and perhaps it is the most noble of all – that a theory of international relations can and must perform, particularly in an age in which the very structure of international relations has radically changed. It is to prepare the ground for a new international order radically different from that which preceded it. Theoretical analysis can show that the principle of political organisation that has dominated the modern world from the French Revolution to the present day is no longer valid. The sovereign nation-state is in the process of becoming obsolete. That is to say the fact of nuclear power…[requires] a principle of political organisation transcending the nation-state and commensurate with the potentialities for good or evil of nuclear power itself. Theoretical analysis can show that the availability of nuclear power as an instrument of foreign policy is the only real revolution that has occurred in the structure of international relations since the beginning of history…..[34]

This is a breathtaking claim, but Campbell Craig and William Scheuerman amongst others have demonstrated in detail that Morgenthau meant every word of these sentences.[35] In fact, nearly fifty years on, there is little sign of the emergence of the new principle of political organisation that he describes as a necessary consequence of the development of nuclear power, but what is important to the argument of this paper is that Morgenthau is able to think these revolutionary thoughts and make these claims because of the way in which he goes about theorising international relations, namely as an exercise in practical reason. He is not locked into a neo-positivist theoretical framework which prevents him from recognising change (a charge that could be levelled against Kenneth Waltz's structural realism), but also, although he is well aware of the importance of the diplomatic culture that constitutes the Background, in Searle's sense of the term, or, if you will, the *habitus*, of international diplomacy, he is both willing and able to think thoughts that are alien to that culture and to

[34] Ibid., p. 260.

[35] Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); William Scheuerman, *The Realist Case for Global Reform* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

challenge the most basic of background assumptions held by almost all diplomats.

In his willingness to think outside the box, Morgenthau displayed the virtue of *phronesis*, but here the common translation of the latter as "prudence" is a little misleading; in modern English prudence has connotations of circumspection, cautiousness and a degree of passivity – indeed some contemporary realists seem to think of prudence exclusively in these terms, as providing reasons why one should not act. Actually, practical reasoning is better understood as the ability to weigh the consequences of one's actions rather than as providing reasons for inaction. As Morgenthau himself put it in the fourth of his Principles of Political Realism, "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".[36] This weighing is, above all else, a rational process, and sometimes reason can take you to unexpectedly radical places, can take you outside of existing political arrangements, and, in the case under consideration, can lead you to believe that the political order that you have spent half a lifetime explicating is no longer valid.

Experience, Practical Reason and Competent Performance

For Morgenthau and the classical realists, political judgement was not something that came from reading textbooks. His essays in *Truth and Power* are bitterly critical of those academic theorists of international relations who allegedly treat the subject as an esoteric intellectual exercise rather than engage in "the great controversies over truth and superstition and different national ends and means".[37] A certain scepticism over Morgenthau's belief in his capacity to discern "truth" might well be in order, but the general sentiment seems right, and the problems generated by regarding his thought in textbook terms are illustrated by the fate of his ideas in the 1960s. Jennifer See has described how when Morgenthau became involved in active opposition to the Vietnam War, taking part in the first National Teach-In in Washington DC in May 1965, and debating National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy on national television, the US Administration activated "Project Morgenthau" which sent NSC staffers culling through the scholar's writings in search of errors".[38] Unsurprisingly, some inaccurate predictions were indeed found in his journalism, and phrases or sentences

[36] Morgenthau, op.cit. in note 25.
[37] Morgenthau, op.cit. in note 6., p. 247.
[38] Jennifer See, "A Prophet without Honor: Hans Morgenthau and the War in Vietnam: 1955–1965", *Pacific Historical Review* (Vol. 70, No.3, 2001), p. 440.

were discovered in his academic writings supporting resistance to communism in the 1940s that could be construed as contradicting his opposition to American support for South Vietnam in the 1960s. But this was, of course, to miss the point of Morgenthau's theorising, which relied precisely on the ability to exercise judgment and to recognise when apparently similar circumstances actually called for quite different responses. Polycentrism in the communist world, Vietnamese nationalism and the inability of the South Vietnamese to produce a legitimate government meant that the appropriate response to the situation in that country was very different to the appropriate response to crises in Greece and Turkey in 1947, or Korea in 1950. The inability of the Bundy's National Security Council to grasp these differences were central to the point that Morgenthau was making, and quotations drawn from his earlier writings which ignored these differences were worse than irrelevant.

As it happens, Morgenthau had actually anticipated "Project Morgenthau" more than a decade before, although, of course, without recognising the form it would take. In the Preface to the second edition of *Politics Among Nations*, stung by criticisms of the first edition, he quotes Montesquieu from the Preface to *The Spirit of the Laws* "I beg one favour of my readers, which I fear will not be granted me; this is, that they will not judge by a few hours" reading of the labour of twenty years; that they will approve or condemn the book entire, and not a few particular phrases". Drawing out a few particular phrases was exactly what was done to try to discredit him in 1965; still, while any author can sympathise with the sentiment behind the first half of the favour requested – "not judging by a few hours reading of the labour of twenty years" – the wider implications of this proposition need to be considered. When Morgenthau wrote these words in 1950, he could look back on first hand experience of the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism in Germany, of great power politics in the 1930s as seen through the eyes of a refugee, and of the emergent Cold War as seen by an émigré scholar in the US, and, even if he could offer little by the way of hands-on experience of government he could certainly claim to have paid his dues. A decade or more later, Bundy's staffers on the National Security Council, young men (mostly men) coming to government directly from elite educational backgrounds with little experience of the world, could certainly not compete with their antagonist on this dimension. Still, it might legitimately be doubted whether comparing autobiographies is actually a good way to settle arguments. Most people in the world of the academy will have had some experience of distinguished professors who expect to have their views treated seriously precisely because they are distinguished professors, and usually such experiences are not happy or conducive to genuine intellectual progress.

The point here goes much wider than the vanity of particular individuals, and takes us back to Aristotle's strictures as to the lack of *phronesis* on the part of young people. Aristotle's "young people" lacked experience of life in general, but the truth is that most of us, young and old, lack experience of the big issues of international political life – and this applies as well to most practitioners who live too close to the trees to see the forest, the occasional exception, such as George Kennan, proving the general rule here. This is a problem for proponents of the practice turn as much as for those who rely on practical wisdom; it would be too much to assert that "competent performance" can only be assessed by "competent performers" but certainly there is an issue here. Both the practice turn and the idea of practical reason rest on notions of knowing how to go on in the world, and whether this ability is seen as resting on acquired dispositions or the ability to reason from experience, it cannot only be learnt from books. Practice theorists are well aware of this point, as are the great exemplars of Aristotelian practical wisdom, such as Niccolo Machiavelli and Michel De Montaigne, both of whom communed with their beloved libraries only after building up a reserve of experience of the (rather different) worlds they inhabited.[39]

Conclusion

Where does this leave the "practice turn" and the Aristotelian moment in IR Theory? An extreme reaction to the obvious importance of experience would be to endorse the perspective of the diplomatic historian, referred to briefly above, in other words to deny the relevance of practice *theory* altogether, and to relegate the role of practical reason to the realm of ethical speculation. But this would be too extreme; even acknowledging that experience in the field of the international may be hard to come by, and that there are limits to the value of book learning, there is no reason to be quite so defeatist. Instead, perhaps the key point to be drawn from this discussion is the importance of acknowledging the limits of our knowledge of international practices, of avoiding the making of hubristic claims. Neo-positivist social science is rightly to be criticised for precisely such hubris, for making claims for the status of its findings that cannot be defended, but its adherents can at least point to the inherently democratic nature of the scientific ethos, the commitment to openness and transparency of scientific reasoning. Such a defence is less readily available to those who reject the

[39] Peter Bondenella and Mark Musa (eds.), *The Portable Machiavelli* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979) gives a broader view of Machiavelli's work than the usual focus on *The Prince* (which is in any event included therein); Donald Frame's American-English translation of the Montaigne, *The Complete Works* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2003) is as good as Michael Screech's English-English version for Penguin and the Everyman includes Montaigne's travel journal.

model of the natural sciences – and as a result they should be more careful than the would-be scientist about claiming authority for their work.

To bring the matter back home, Morgenthau's citation of Montesquieu was ill-advised. Authors are not entitled to tell readers how their work should be read, however irritated they may be by what they see as misinterpretations. There is a kind of paradox at work here – experience of the world is central to the exercise of practical reason, but attempts to "pull rank" on the basis of such experience are self-defeating. Wisdom is not something that can be claimed for oneself – it has to be recognized by others. Shifting back to practice theory, the claim to be a competent performer relies upon the judgment of others for its validity.

The purpose of this essay has been to draw out some of the similarities and differences between the modern "practice turn" and a putative Aristotelian moment in IR theory, and to show that some of the classical realists, although they did not use contemporary terminology, nonetheless were conscious of diplomacy as a practice, and the importance of practical reasoning. The conclusion is that all three of the bodies of work under consideration have much to offer, and that an orientation towards practice has much value for the study of International Relations. But, unlike work conducted under the rubric of neo-positivism, such an orientation does not have a built-in mechanism for self-critique; the old charge of the scientists that classical realism was "wisdom literature", reliant on authority rather than argument, has some substance, and those whose approach stresses competent performance and practical judgment need to be aware of the danger here, and take steps to avoid the ever-present danger of hubris.

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