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Embracing Ontological Doubt: The Role of ‘Reality’ in Political Realism

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Abstract

While a number of scholars argue that classical realism is conspicuously similar to critical international relations, this article takes an issue with such an interpretation. It does not challenge the observation that both approaches are comparable when it comes to ethical concerns and a related critique of modernity, but it puts forth an argument that they differ fundamentally when it comes to their basic intellectual motivation and purpose. This also makes classical realism more ready to formulate normative judgment. To articulate what provides for the ethical impetus in classical realism, the study turns to the work of Stephen Turner and his collaborators who illuminate Weberian sources of classical realist social science. Adopting the category of analyticism from Patrick Jackson, it further puts forth that normative judgment is linked to classical realism’s inherent ontological doubt, a feature it compensates for by focusing on epistemology necessitating constant engagement with empirical reality as a source of its (weak) ontological orientation. As a result, classical realism is reinforced here as an approach to international relations worth reviving and further developing.

Keywords

Classical Realism, Hans J Morgenthau, Critical IR, Max Weber, social science, normative judgment

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The social scientist is a part of history from which his knowledge is constructed;
every tomorrow, that knowledge may have to be revised or abandoned altogether.
WG Runciman (1963: 174)

Introduction¹

The number of works revisiting IR’s classical realism which have appeared in the last dozen or so years is large enough to divulge that the once deprecated approach resonates with intellectual needs and quests of current IR scholarship. What exactly are the gaps that classical realism helps to fill in has so far not been systematically examined, although there is a number of partial accounts along these lines. Classical realism lends new energy and a particular direction to the theorising of the ethics of responsibility (Williams, 2005; Lebow,

¹ The article was produced as part of the Leverhulme Trust funded project ‘Classical Realism Meets Critical Theory’ and its earlier versions were presented at the project’s workshops in Newcastle (2013) and Ottawa (2014). I am grateful for the generous input of the project’s members into the making of this article and for additional editorial comments from Hartmut Behr and Michael Williams.

2003), the virtue of reflexivity (Lebow, 2003), ethical leadership (Tjalve, 2008) or the need of a fundamental transformation of the state (Craig, 2003; Scheuerman, 2011). As can be seen already from this brief outline of its key themes, in its sensibilities, the revival of classical realism is conspicuously close to critical IR. It is, therefore, crucial to ask whether the classical realist revival is a part or a new stage of the critical turn in IR, which is both older and more robust than is the present turn to classical realism.

Two issues may prevent us from reaching such a conclusion. First, it is the question of normative judgment. The promise of normative judgment seems to be stronger in classical realism than it is in critical IR, which is suspicious of normativity's universalism. If classical realism is a version of critical IR, it must come to terms with the latter's unease about normativity. Second, the renewed interest in the works of classical realists has not yet produced new research into contemporary international politics which would utilise classical realist theory.² Unless such research is produced, one may ask whether the revival of classical realism is anything more than an antiquarian quest to engage past, oft-forgotten works of one-time giants of our field, which – as is usually the case – lends a new perspective on what we are already set to do, strengthening our vision but without fundamentally challenging the way we do research. This article argues that the two points are crucially intertwined. By asking about the reluctance to produce new classical realist research in international relations, we may be able to answer the question how, if at all, classical realism is distinct from critical IR and where it grounds its commitment to normative judgment.

Several commentators on the current revival of classical realism point out a striking similarity between the critical sensibilities of the key protagonists of this revival and the critical tradition in IR (Steele, 2007; Cozette, 2008a, 2008b; Hom and Steele, 2010).³ Some argue that it is the engagement with the work of classical realists as nurtured by contemporary critical sensibilities that produces what they call reflexive realism (Steele, 2007); others locate the very critical sensibilities in classical realism itself (Scheuerman, 2008). At the same time, there is also a growing unease with the idea that Morgenthau et al. should be seen as precursors of the critical turn in IR or even as critical IR theorists themselves. Daniel Levine (2013) makes a compelling argument why Morgenthau should not be deemed a critical theorist. Compared to Frankfurt School's anti-foundationalism, Morgenthau comes across as 'profoundly epistemologically and ontologically conservative' (Levine, 2013: 96). Yet, we must ask whether admirers and critics alike assess classical realism on its own terms. After all, classical realism fell out of fashion and ceased shaping our scholarly receptiveness. It might well be that IR's current critical sensibilities as well as expectations on what is good scholarship are preventing us from recognising classical realism's unique character and, concomitantly, from making full use of its own scholarly potential.

Starting with the established premise that mid-century (now 'classical') realism lost to its competitors on the grounds of its alleged scientific inadequacies (Waltz, 1959; Gilpin, 1984; Vasquez, 1998: 41), the article's first section examines the role of social science in both critical IR and classical realism. Within the context of this study, science is understood in Patrick Jackson's (2011) pluralist sense, as a systematic inquiry to produce factual knowledge about the empirical world of international relations. The opening section emphasises the tendency in critical IR to neglect scientific inquiry, arguing that classical realism does not

² Rathbun (2008) illustrates why neoclassical realism cannot be seen as fulfilling this role.

³ For the purpose of this article, I understand the critical IR tradition broadly, including scholarship inspired by Frankfurt School Critical Theory, approaches developed out of the Coxian reading of Horkheimer as well as post-structuralist scholarship.

have a comparable option of resorting to philosophy. While present scholarship has appreciated the specificity of classical realist take on social science, this has not been a key research area. This relative neglect is understandable. In the 1950s and 60s classical realism bitterly lost to the onslaught of behaviouralism, which triumphed as the more rigorous approach. It thus comes as no surprise that scholars working on the rehabilitation of classical realism have avoided repeating the mid-century battling. As a result, classical realism tends to be understood – and praised – as a kind of international political theory, which is exactly what its mid-century critics claimed it to be. To reverse this, the article turns its attention to classical realist social sciences, exploring in its second section the thesis that it is a version or precursor of IR constructivism before supporting the argument that it is best viewed as a Weberian social science relying on ideal-types. The third section reinforces this interpretation by exploring how Weberian social science necessitates cultivation of inner criticism as well as the faculty of judgment which indicates when the inner critic is (temporarily) satisfied. It is this faculty that informs the normative element of classical realism, one which looks conspicuously close to critical IR's cultivation of ethics, but is in fact nurtured from different intellectual sources and practices of knowledge formation.

1. Classical realism and critical IR: Morgenthau is not Adorno

IR's critical turn in the 1980s and especially 90s was instigated from two directions: scientific dissatisfaction with positivist IR that came to dominate the discipline and a longing for an ethical dimension in scholarship. IR was to be made ethical in the sense that analysis, its outcomes and the impact it is making on the social world was to be put under ethical scrutiny. This was married with a re-kindled belief that, in one way or another, ideas can produce a world better than the inherited one. Ensuing developments seem to have fulfilled both needs. Critical IR responds to scientific critique of un-reflexive, rationalist positivism and validates the ethical need by accounting for the power that knowledge brings about. However, as already some of the earliest critics point out, critical IR is rarely capable of satisfying its two intellectual roots – the scientific and the ethical – at the same time. Critical IR's resignation on furthering its scientific dimension cannot be replicated in classical realism. Morgenthau, whom this study uses as an epitome of classical realism, was a social scientist and an IR scholar, unlike the seminal figures of critical IR who were all philosophers and often not particularly interested in international relations.

While directly focusing on only one segment of the wider category referred to here as critical IR, Beate Jahn maintains that the Anglo-American strand of critical theory in IR sees 'the epistemological critique of the fact-value relationship not as a basis for a more rigorous methodological approach than positivism, but rather as a licence of not observing any kind of rigour' (1998: 614). According to Jahn, critical IR is complacent about honing its own scientific credentials. Instead, it seeks to build bridges between various theories and incorporates 'valuable parts' of realism, rationalism and idealism in areas it cannot provide for with its own theoretical means (1998: 626). Jahn worries that methodological laxity cannot be counterbalanced by a noble ethical goal, joining here another critic, Josef Lapid (1989).

Critical IR has not displayed any systematic engagement with challenges of this kind. Mark Neufeld puts forth an argument why this is next to impossible (1995: 125). Critical IR seems to have acted upon Neufeld's point. Instead of investing energy into theorising critical social science of international relations, it has placed extra effort into theorising its ethical commitments and philosophical significance. For many critical IR scholars this translates into non-normative cultivation of ethics, such as the ethics of scholarship as political action or the

ethics of responsibility, which do not make claims of normative universalism (Jabri, 1998; Edkins, 1999, 2000; Dauphinée, 2007). Others embrace commitments to political norms and related research interests (Linklater, 1998) but progressively do so in a rather abstract, though no less vehement, manner which stops short of formulating a specific normative position on current international affairs, focusing instead on long-term ethical orientation (Linklater, 2011). It should be added that this dual shift away from social science and towards ethics might not have been propelled by only autochthonous forces. Most likely, it also happened as a response to the hyper-scientism that came to dominate global IR, which did not leave much space for alternatives as scientifically acceptable options. Toni Erskine is right to liken the status quo of current IR to ‘trench warfare’ or, at best, see it as profound ‘indifference’ towards other approaches (2012: 449). Jackson’s quest (2011) to re-configure the parameters of what is ‘good’ scientific IR demolishes the trenches but, as will be shown later, inadvertently reinforces critical IR’s reasons for turning away from its science.

Another strategy, present in critical IR from its very beginning, is to postulate that scientific explanation is inherent to only some approaches – those which critical IR rejects as insufficient. Interestingly, Richard Ashley (1981) turns to John Herz and Hans Morgenthau to introduce this point, a move that might also make him into a forerunner for the more recent recovering of classical realism. Inspired by hermeneutics, Ashley distinguishes knowledge as understanding and knowledge as explanation and postulates that not all IR must be concerned with scientific explanation (1981: 212). In a sense, he celebrates the trenches Erskine criticizes. The book *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Hollis and Smith, 1991) sealed Ashley’s thesis and in the eyes of many theorists brought the discussion about the alleged scientific inadequacy of critical IR to a closure. As a result, critical IR’s ‘emancipatory interest’ (Ashley, 1981) and dedication to the politically excluded (George and Campbell, 1990) has most forcefully shaped our present expectations on and our very idea of what critical IR stands for.

In many ways, the revival of classical realism replicates the trajectory of critical IR. Emphasis is placed on classical realism’s ethical commitments while scientific aspects are mostly neglected; preference is given to in-depth interpretations of past thinkers over engagement with contemporary theory and practice of international relations. The close attention paid to Hans Morgenthau over the last dozen years (Lebow, 2003; Williams, 2005, 2007; Tjalve, 2008; Neacsu, 2009; Jütersonke, 2010; Scheuerman, 2013; Rösch, 2015) is not dissimilar to the attention seminal philosophers have received within critical IR. Like critical IR, the revival of classical realism highlights the problems of late modernity, especially ethical and political consequences of global value neutrality in the face of differentiated histories, of technological progress and environmental degradation. However, one factor in classical realism prevents its revival from mimicking the route of critical IR. From its very beginning, critical IR has been crucially nurtured by the philosophical works of Marx, Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas, Foucault, etc. That none of these primarily sought to explain international relations has presented critical IR with a challenge which has been turned into an opportunity. It allows critical IR to avoid confrontation with the wider discipline on the issue of its science by constantly renewing its ethical orientation and critical diagnostics of the maladies of the modern world in the robust philosophies which underpin it. This avenue is not present for the revival of classical realism.

Jackson identifies ‘reflexivity’ as the chief characteristic of critical IR, meaning by it ‘reflexivity of knowledge, by which the tools of knowledge-production are turned back on the

situation of the scientist herself or himself' (2011: 157).⁴ He argues that better understanding of reflexivity should make critical IR acceptable as a form of social science, if we define science broadly, as 'systematic inquiry designed to produce factual knowledge' (24), one with 'internal validity' (22) and a 'goal' to pursue science (18). His aim is to show that critical IR is an approach scientifically on par with neopositivism, critical realism and what he calls 'analyticism', each representing a scientific possibility in Jackson's two by two analytical framework. Yet, Jackson's analysis could lead to a different conclusion. Accentuating 'reflexivity' as the key feature in critical IR can also illuminate how this approach is constantly pulled away from the goals of social science (systematic factual knowledge), towards the humanities, especially philosophy. If one's central intellectual concern is about the relationship of the self to knowledge, philosophy is the most rewarding intellectual home. It is illustrative that the focal point of Jackson's chapter on 'reflexivity' is a discussion of Kant, Hegel, Horkheimer and Adorno rather than of various critical IR theorists grappling with the attraction of philosophy but primarily engaging in empirical research.

Critical IR's escape to philosophy can be illustrated with recent attempts to reinvigorate this approach through closer engagement of Adorno's work. Levine (2012: 226) rebuts the rather well-known arguments by theorists like Habermas, Seyla Benhabib or Ira Katznelson that 'Adorno's work led to a scholarly-theoretical impasse'. But his, admittedly philosophically attractive, defence of Adorno bypasses these critical arguments by vacating the realm of social science and concentrating exclusively on the realm of philosophy; that is on gaining intellectual satisfaction solely from the organization of one's own thought rather than, as the social sciences would do, from (also) making sense of the minds/actions of others. Adorno criticized conceptual theories for reifying the ideas, practices or values they describe and replaced concepts with constellations. Levine characterizes constellations as having the ability to 'continuously reveal the concepts and theories they bring together as nodes embedded within dense, interactive nets of social meanings' (103). Their advantage over conceptual theories is that they 'would surround events and problematics with voices that represent as many different parties to it as possible' (104). But a constellation never seeks to privilege any of these parties or assign truth to some but not all of these voices. In this sense, constellations come across as means of saving a self-reflective mind from the guilt of assigning meaning, order or preference, each of which could be later proven wrong or unjust. But this happens at the cost of abandoning the possibility of making any intervention/change beyond the realm of one's own mind. It is then not surprising that those attracted to the rewards of philosophy find those critical IR scholars who still want to contribute to the social sciences as insufficiently 'critical' (see Levine, 2012: Chapter 2). From an exclusive perspective of philosophy, they are right.

No such recourse to philosophy is available to classical realism. Admittedly, political realism has long intellectual roots (Dyson, 2007), some of which are philosophical, but there are no specifically 'realist' philosophers to draw on. This should not come as a surprise. Classical realism or – in the words of its mid-century adherents – political realism was first and foremost a means to theorising international relations. Engaging with the political reality of international affairs was always superior to philosophical questions about the nature of knowledge or the relationship between the self and the world, even if such questions had to be engaged while pursuing one's endeavour. Morgenthau sees the purpose of his *Politics among Nations* (1st ed. 1948) – and by extension of IR (or 'international politics' as he calls it) – as

⁴ Like this article, Jackson has a broad conception of critical IR and subsumes in IR rooted in feminism, Critical Theory, post-colonialism and post-structuralism.

‘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’ ([1948]1959: 14). ‘[T]his purpose is not misplaced’, he adds, because ‘the natural aim of all scientific undertakings is to discover the forces underlying social phenomena and how they operate’.

Interestingly, Jackson’s robust plea for scientific pluralism omits classical realism – most probably because he seeks to address the diversity of present-day IR and does not consider the revival of an old approach significant enough to warrant inclusion. Morgenthau et al. serve Jackson as a foil to illustrate how throughout the history of IR ‘the term “science” has been flung around in extremely cavalier ways’ (2011: 3), citing the above quoted segment from *Politics among Nations* ([1948]1959: 14) as a prime example. Despite his lacking interest in classical realism, Jackson astutely observes that Morgenthau (and Carr) pursued a ‘double intellectual operation: on one hand criticizing the over-reliance on science ... on the other hand, claiming some of its cultural prestige for his own project of knowledge-production’ (2011: 4). I will argue that this was not a calculation but an expression of a very particular understanding of social science which both reinforces its role and seeks to come to terms with its limits. As I will later demonstrate, classical realism is, in fact, an excellent example of Jackson’s category of analytics and, if understood as such, Jackson’s typology can help us to make better sense of its present utility.

The mid-century realists’ conception of social science was challenged in what disciplinary history calls the Second IR Debate. Some present scholars question the very notion of a debate, arguing that there was little actual debating (Schmidt, 2013: 18). As Nicolas Guilhot (2008) demonstrates, the mid-century realists – together with other ‘traditionalists’, most notably the English School – fought hard to guard the study of international relations from the pressures of behaviouralism and concomitant modelling of the social sciences on natural sciences. The ‘methodological plea for science’ (Farr 1995, 202) was a chief trait of behaviouralism, an approach that entered the study of politics from other social sciences. But the realists did not seek to be anti-scientific, neither did they see themselves as enemies of science. What they maintained was that in order to understand (international) politics we must avoid reducing all behaviour to political agents’ rational choices and come to terms with the fact that actors, especially those in power positions, respond to a host of impulses, including moral and emotional ones. While rejecting a particular version of social science, the classical realists nevertheless insisted on reinforcing IR as science. In Guilhot’s formulation, the issues the realists disagreed about with their behaviourist colleagues were ‘the role of values and the problem of the rationality of politics’ (2008: 285). Importantly, the realists produced book-length treatises as well as shorter pieces attacking scientific (and moral) rationalism in general well before the latter permeated the study of politics. Morgenthau’s *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (1946) and Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) are best examples here.

Their critics rarely challenged classical realists’ science directly or systematically. In fact, neither side in the Second Debate formulated what exactly is wrong with the alternate position. The two oft-cited articles (Bull, 1966; Kaplan, 1966) are exceptions. Texts from the time when the traditionalist-behaviouralist dispute was alive disclose that those on the behaviouralist side did not consider themselves as competing with the traditionalists. As is nowadays rarely stressed, the early anti-traditionalists did share the normative (essentially liberal) commitments of their traditionalist counterparts (Farr, 1995: 202); however, they did

not consider it scientifically sound to link explanation with normative evaluation.⁵ They claimed to be interested in the same social phenomena as the traditionalists but be using ‘different’ – in the sense of being more sophisticated – ‘tools’ for their analysis. In fact, they sought to ‘destroy the traditional-behavioral dichotomy’ (Zinnes, 1968: 259, 266; see also Easton, 1957: 111-2) and strengthen thus IR’s scientific credentials. Destroy they did, though not in the manner that many of them seemed to have intended. Political realism was pushed out of the realm of social science.

Karl Deutsch, a key figure in IR in the 1950s and 60s, usually labelled as an opponent of traditionalism while professing his own, cybernetic version of scientism not easily equated with behaviouralism, referred to classical realists sparingly. But when he did, rather than criticizing them, he associated them with political theory and the history of ideas, not with IR. To Deutsch (Deutsch and Rieselbach, 1965: 144), the works of Morgenthau and Kenneth Thompson are of value, but belong to the same category as the political philosophies of Leo Strauss and Sheldon Wolin – two giants of political theory of their time. In another place (Deutsch, 1967: 98), Morgenthau, Niebuhr, George Kennan and Thompson are placed within a wider, Augustinian and Thomist, intellectual tradition set apart from the ‘scientific’ spirit informing contemporary IR.

Kenneth Waltz, credited with sealing classical realism’s defeat by directing IR toward approaches that fulfil the scientific aspiration of the early behaviouralists without succumbing to their mechanistic generalisations about human behaviour, also began with a normative aim (Craig, 2003: 118). Nevertheless, like some of his behaviouralist predecessors, he soon inserted a wedge between his normative commitments and his social science. The young Waltz also stands out by directly challenging classical realists, addressing them as the quintessential ‘first image’ theorists, reducing Morgenthau, Niebuhr and Herz to pessimistic theorists based on ‘basic assumptions’ about evil human nature and the impossibility of international peace (1954: 31). Like other proponents of scientific IR, he argues that classical realists are producing ‘a philosophy of politics’ (37), but not a science of IR. Elsewhere he suggests that without being ‘more concern[ed] with the structure’ the classical realists cannot achieve their scholarly aims (1960: 259).

If the present revival of classical realism neglects the scientific dimension and presents this approach as chiefly a contribution to the ethics and philosophy of international relations, it can – inadvertently – replicate Deutsch’s, Waltz’s and other early opponents’ position. But, as this section demonstrated, unlike critical IR, classical realism cannot find external, philosophical sources that would bestow it with internal certainty and external legitimacy. What nurtures it is the production of systematic factual knowledge of international politics and not philosophical reflexivity. If the present revival of classical realism is to ever be more than an antiquarian pursuit or an exercise in selective inspiration, classical realism’s specific understanding of social science needs to be articulated. If nothing else, classical realism’s promise of producing normative knowledge, a pursuit that is otherwise scarce in contemporary IR and which is found problematic in critical IR, makes this effort imminent.

2. The science of classical realism

Political realism at one point dominated IR because of its scientific advancement. Morgenthau distinguishes realist IR from its idealist alternatives by criticising idealism’s ‘vagueness and

⁵ Among the earlier anti-traditionalists the normative commitment is spectacularly apparent, as for instance recent works on Karl Deutsch amply emphasize (Ruzicka, 2014a, 2014b; Stullerova, 2014a).

eclecticism of the theoretical conception' ([1959]1962: 115). He does not challenge idealist ethical commitments and appreciates the virtues of idealist ethics. The alternative to idealism needs a specific intellectual 'function', one that Morgenthau defines in significant part in scientific terms. IR needs to 'bring order and meaning into the mass of unconnected material and to increase knowledge through the logical development of certain propositions empirically established' ([1961]1962: 72). Revealingly, while the scientific function has been largely absent in the classical realist revival, every comprehensive work revisiting the classical era of realism in IR devotes considerable space to at least some scientific elements. To the degree that the revival of classical realism has directly addressed questions of scientific theorizing, it has most often been in connection to social constructivism. However, as this section seeks to demonstrate, it is more productive to turn to the works that emphasise Max Weber's legacy in realist social science and classify classical realism as an example of what Jackson calls analyticism.

One of the earliest contemporary interpreters of classical realism, Richard Ned Lebow, primarily seeks to show that 'ethical behavior is more conducive ... to national security' (2003: 16). He does so by exploring the works of realist thinkers through the prism of what he calls 'the tragic vision', which should 'widen [the] intellectual and emotional horizons in a manner conducive to political tolerance and reconciliation' (24). At the same time, he repeatedly points out that the tragic vision urges the classical realists under his scrutiny, Thucydides, Clausewitz and Morgenthau, to prefer a certain kind of social science over others. This social science is according to Lebow closest to what we call thick constructivism (370) and resonates more closely with some anthropologic and sociological traditions than with much of present-day IR (311). It gives explanatory role to the realm of the arts and humanities, maintaining that the wealth of stories, parables, norms or emotionally testing genres such as Greek tragedy amass socially relevant knowledge about actors being 'neither egoistic nor autonomous' but cooperative because responding to 'internal imperatives' (311).

Drawing on the political theorist Richard Flathman's idea of wilful liberalism (1992), Michael Williams, another key protagonist of the classical realism's revival, reads realism as crucially characterised by 'wilfulness'. Flathman introduces the term to emphasise a specific, publicly-orientated voluntarism as essential for sustaining freedom and free-spiritedness, that is, values and practices crucial to liberalism (1992: 123). Williams mobilises this term for similar reasons and maintains that realism is not opposed to liberalism, it 'is a form of liberalism' (2005: 130). He especially addresses Morgenthau's critique of what could be called rationalist or schematic liberalism rather than the liberal order as such (83). Williams, too, links this point to a discussion of IR as a social science and, like Lebow, he brings in constructivism to argue the point. While scientifically acceptable, the constructivist critique of rationalism as empiricist epistemology and materialist ontology is mistaken in ascribing the reasons for these shortcomings. They are not a result of 'somewhat naïve and anachronistic understanding of science and knowledge' but must also be understood as 'a set of practical commitments and as the outcome of practical judgments' (149). A rationalistic actor can be seen as a particular 'identity' (147).

Samuel Barkin most directly addresses the idea that classical realism and IR constructivism are fundamentally linked and that constructivism viewed through the prism of classical realism is a valuable addition to IR theorising. This thesis not only allows Barkin to reorient constructivism but also to illuminate some scientific aspects of classical realism, although his interest is too instrumental and his insights into classical realism too conventional to consider him a party to the revival of classical realism. Barkin is right to emphasise that classical

realists were interested in power by ‘definitional fiat’, not because they wanted to reduce all international relations to power struggle (2003: 327). Equally useful is his reminder that for classical realism ‘power is at least partially endogenous’ and not exclusively materialist (329) and that ‘nonmaterial factors are central to a complete understanding of power in international relations’ (330). These and similar proto-constructivist points about classical realist ideas on the role of states and rationalism allow Barkin to claim that realist constructivism is a conceivable theory, sanctioning his reorienting of constructivism from its usual liberalist and idealist underpinnings.

Lebow, too, is sceptical that Barkin’s thesis helps to illuminate the scientific merits of classical realism and its potential applicability for studying international relations here and now (Jackson *et al.*, 2004). While agreeing that (some of) classical realists were ‘interested in questions that are often considered the preserve of constructivists’, he maintains that there are separate realist and constructivist paradigms which sometimes ‘fit together to help solve a large puzzle’ and sometimes do not (Jackson *et al.*, 2004: 346). Others, most notably Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon, are less conciliatory and accuse Barkin of losing the grasp of what is commonly understood as constructivist IR (Jackson *et al.*, 2004: 337-41). Whether Barkin is right on constructivism or not is unimportant here. What matters is that his thesis only works if classical realism is understood as an old-fashioned, unsophisticated, more intuitive than thought-through approach which got some things right and can now crucially reorient IR constructivism away from idealism. It is constructivism which possesses the advanced methodological tools of intersubjectivity and co-constitution; classical realism is crucially silent on the questions of subjectivity and objectivity or the agent-structure problem.

In order to answer the question whether classical realism has specific answers to the questions that constructivism addresses with help of inter-subjectivity and co-constitution – or whether, as Barkin suggests, it is in need of imports from constructivism’s own answers to fill in the gaps – we are well served by looking at how classical realists sought to articulate their social science in response to the critique by their own contemporary, Raymond Aron. Aron was an idiosyncratic scholar, who according to Stanley Hoffmann single-handedly established French IR (1985). Hoffmann was a relentless commentator on the works of mid-century realists, especially Morgenthau, and recognised closed affinities between the American realisms and Aron (2002: 107), which were later reasserted (Cozette, 2004; Hassner, 2007). More than anything else, the similarities and differences between Aron’s and Morgenthau’s realism puzzle Hoffmann (1985). Like his American counterparts, Aron aspired to produce a complex, general theory of international relations. But his IR also encompasses a typology of international systems and a theoretical account of systems’ interactions, which brings him closer to systems theorists like Deutsch or Morton Kaplan. Deutsch and Kaplan approved of Aron’s work, Deutsch doing so in the very piece in which he classifies the American realists as nothing but political philosophers. He recognises Aron for ‘combin[ing] the insights of the great traditions – including both a concern for ethics and a continuing interest in such concepts as the balance of power – with sociological considerations’ (Deutsch and Rieselbach, 1965: 144). For Kaplan, Aron is a ‘honorable exception’ among the traditionalists, as his ‘remarkable writings are surely useful to political scientists and [his] methodology may not be quite so far removed from the newer scientific approaches’ (1966: 16). However, Aron’s persistent emphasis on the distinctiveness of international relations, on the importance of historical analysis and on the relevance of power politics disclose fundamental affinity with the American realists.

Morgenthau recognises that Aron produces what we might call a pragmatic position on truth, yet he argues that such a position inevitably loses ‘precision, certainty, and predictability’ (1967: 1110). This leaves Aron with a fissure between his theoretical framework and what Morgenthau considers to be exceptionally insightful substantive propositions resulting from ‘the author’s practical judgment’ (1111). Morgenthau maintains that Aron stops short of answering some of his own, well-formulated questions about international politics because he would have to acknowledge that his own theory is ‘standortgebunden’, that is ‘aris[ing] out of a concrete political situation with which it tries to come intellectually to terms in a new and meaningful fashion’ (1111). ‘Standortgebundenheit’, sometimes translated as social determination or context-dependency of knowledge, is a concept Morgenthau appropriates from Karl Mannheim (Behr, 2013: 763; Rösch, 2013: 822). Yet, Aron is hostile to the idea of theory’s ‘Standortgebundenheit’, as he is critical of Mannheim in general, maintaining that the sociologist pushed German historicism ‘to its extreme conclusion’ and thus fell into ‘thorough-going historical relativism’ (1957: 56, 55). Aron, too, knows that a ruling on Mannheim’s contribution is what differentiates him from his American counterparts. When criticizing them he mobilizes another of Mannheim’s key terms, ideology. He berates the American realists for producing an ideology rather than a theory, with Niebuhr being their chief ‘ideologist’ (Aron, 1966: 592).

Aron’s point has deeper roots, stretching to his long-standing grappling with German sociological tradition, especially with its quest to make sense of historical character of knowledge, in response to Hegel’s and Marx’s philosophical insights. His chief target is not Mannheim but Max Weber. Like Morgenthau, Aron seems to be temperamentally at ease with ‘ambiguities, uncertainties, and risks’ (Morgenthau, 1967: 1110) which characterise sociological historicism, but he worries that the German tradition of historical sociology, which seeks to operate in ‘a historical situation in which man has lost the certitudes which he believed unassailable and must create his own individual life within a collectivity whose destiny opens upon the unknown’ (Aron, 1957: 135), eventually cannot live up to its commitments to openness and ends up in either relativism or ideology.

If Aron grapples with Weber, Morgenthau embraces the German social theorist, a point that in response to Morgenthau’s admission of early Weberian influence on his intellectual development (Morgenthau, 1978) has been repeatedly highlighted (Pichler, 1998; Barkawi, 1998; Turner, 2009; Lebow and Lebow, 2016). The chief obstacle in this effort is the fact that Morgenthau rarely referred to Weber and his declaration of Weber’s influence in his intellectual autobiography came as a surprise. The explanation is historical and sociological. Like most emigres from Germany, Morgenthau had a hard time establishing himself in the US. It was a strategic decision not to disclose the German origins of his ideas (Rösch, 2015: 148). Instead, Morgenthau ‘adopted a procedure that permitted him to present his Weberian views with their full polemical force, without the disability of their origins’ (Turner and Factor, 1984: 169). While some analysts find clear Weberian influence already in *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Turner and Factor, 1984: 169–70); it is Morgenthau’s late works that most closely correspond to his autobiographic admission. The book *Science: Servant or Master?* (1972)⁶ can (and should) be read as a sequel to Weber’s ‘Science as a Vocation’ and, more generally, as an engagement with the same questions about the value and meaning of science as have traditionally been explored in German sociology.

⁶ See Rösch 2016 on the German origins of this book.

Not only does Morgenthau borrow from Weber some of his central concepts, he also replicates Weber's methodology. As the Weberian specialist, sociologist and philosopher, Stephen Turner and his co-authors demonstrate (Turner, 2009; Turner and Factor, [1984]2014; Turner and Mazur, 2009), Morgenthau's methodology can be made intelligible when interpreted as fundamentally Weberian. Because of the aforementioned emphases on classical realism's ethical dimensions, current IR scholarship typically glides over the precise mechanism of Morgenthau's methodology or illuminates only some of its parts. Turner and George Mazur distinguish Weberian 'clues' that are central to Morgenthau's IR as a theory of social science. The first clue relates to Weber's argument that the social sciences are 'value-relative in at least two ways' (Turner and Mazur, 2009: 487). One is similar to Mannheimian 'Standortgebundenheit' (the importance of which for Morgenthau is analysed in Behr, 2013 and Rösch, 2013), another relates to our 'disciplinary purposes' and guides 'the process of selection relevant to the study of international politics' (Turner and Mazur, 2009: 487). In brief, what we study cannot be separated from the value this study has for us.

Secondly, Weber's concept of the rational ideal-type allows Turner and Mazur to explain Morgenthau's alleged conflict between his claim that there are laws governing international politics and his interpretive social theory focusing on individual acts of especially statesmen (488–90). Morgenthau does not directly mention ideal types but his references to 'rational' properties of e.g. foreign policy and to the quality of 'one-sidedness' provide conclusive evidence of the use of Weberian ideal-typification. Morgenthau's notion of rationality, Turner and Mazur argue, makes sense only if understood in the Weberian sense and not in the positivist sense of predictivity. The rational ideal-type is one-sided because it selectively presents only some – idealized – aspects of the studied phenomenon 'for the purpose of making them fully intelligible by redescribing them in terms of clarified concepts' (490). As a result, IR theory cannot produce the laws of politics; theory can only 'reflect' – imperfectly – these laws, which are intrinsic to the ideal type (492). The rationality of the ideal-type is tied to valuative nature of social knowledge, a point which Turner and Mazur illustrate, but do not sufficiently comment on, when they cite Morgenthau's claim that '[w]e assume that statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power, and the evidence of history bears that assumption out' (Morgenthau, 1978: 5, cited in Turner and Mazur, 2009: 491). The 'we' in 'we assume' gives expression to the social character of knowledge, to 'rational idea-type of action' (Turner and Mazur, 2009: 491). The collective assumption embodies what the social group values as the rational purpose of their action in that particular sphere of activity.

Turner and Mazur's third Weberian clue is the idea of separate spheres of human activity, the distinctiveness of the political sphere and its link to a normative element. This clue is the most challenging to demonstrate as the relationship between the idea that politics is a distinct sphere of social action and the normative element is at best tenuous in Weber. Turner is not keen to turn Weber into a normative sociologist and he cannot be accused of not knowing where Morgenthau departs from Weber. Together with Regis Factor (1984) he outlines a number of points of departure, but when it comes to Morgenthau's departure from Weber on the desirability of normative judgment, Turner and Factor diminish the difference between Weber and Morgenthau and present this a 'practice-informing theory' that is 'possible without departing from the Weberian strictures against normative theory' (1984: 174). As will be shown in the next section, the 'practice-informing theory' is better referred to as normative judgment. When it comes to the concept of separate social spheres and the idea that separatedness of politics is related to normativity, Turner and Mazur (2009) suggest that Morgenthau succeeds in better conceptualising what Weber outlines but does not fully elaborate. If it 'is not clear what status Weber wishes to grant these "spheres"', for

Morgenthau they clearly represent ‘a condition of rational orderliness of a particular kind, but not that they represent intellectually closed universes’ (Turner and Mazur, 2009: 494). Turner and Mazur conclude that this methodology allows Morgenthau to both make human behaviour intelligible by being able ‘to understand agents who act in the face of contingency and systematic irrationality’ and – ‘if they act rationally ... and they not always do’ – to predict actors’ behaviour (495).

Turner and his collaborators present a more sophisticated interpretation of classical realism as a social science than can be done by likening it to IR constructivism. They not only manage to show that classical realist social science is fundamentally Weberian, but also that this approach is legitimate and fruitful. Weber is not nowadays ordinarily understood as a key figure in IR, although some early IR constructivists refer to him as a ‘precursor’ to constructivism’s position on power (Hopf, 1998: 177). It is Jackson who puts forth an argument that Weber is a ‘theorist *par excellence*’ (2011: 114) for one of the four modes of inquiry he distinguishes as making up the plurality of scientific approaches in contemporary IR. He calls this approach ‘analyticism’, to emphasise that it is ‘analytically general claims’ and not ‘empirical generalizations’ that constitute the key form of knowledge for this type of inquiry (Jackson, 2010: 4). Like constructivism, analyticism stresses intersubjectivity of knowledge. Unlike constructivism, however, analyticism does not work with the idea of co-variation, as it does not make sense once empirical generalizations are not possible.⁷

Interestingly, the only IR theorist whom Jackson identifies as an analyticist is Waltz. It may now be argued that Morgenthau is as good, if not better, an example. In the Weberian fashion, Morgenthau is not interested in empirical generalizations and IR theory that compares to reality, but in producing a ‘set of more or less helpful idealizations or oversimplifications that can be used to order the complex chaos of empirical reality into more comprehensible and manageable forms’ (Jackson, 2011: 113). What then distinguishes classical realism (analyticism) from critical IR (reflexivity) is a different take on the relationship between knowledge and observation. Critical IR operates with the idea of ‘unobservables’ (37), which is based on a meta-theoretical claim that ‘because these unobservable objects cannot be perceived ... [they] are “concept-dependent”’ (89). That is, there has to be a theory informing the researches about the basic ontology of the world, what is studied is provided by theory prior to the act of studying. Analyticism, in turn, is phenomenalist. This means that for classical realism it is ‘neither necessary nor possible’ to ‘transcend experience’; knowledge ‘is a matter of organizing past experiences as to forge useful tools for the investigation of future, as-yet-unknown situations’ (37). As I will argue in the next section, analyticism thus has ontological doubt inscribed into its very scientific DNA. This doubt does not push it away from social science, into philosophy, but, just on the contrary, closer to it, to incessant analysis of the empirical world. And its forward looking purpose compels it to normative judgment.

3. Embracing ontological doubt

Classical realist Weberian IR enables understanding of singular phenomena. It allows for partial (and rather infrequent) prediction of action to the extent it is rational according to ideal rationality of the social sphere in which it takes place. It also seeks normative judgment of what would be the best (rational) action in a given situation and which values would be best to activate. One dimension which Turner et al. do not explore is the fact that this kind of

⁷ Constructivism does not figure as an example of any of the four ideal-typical modes of inquiry Jackson recognises.

theory requires *constant* engagement with empirical reality. They helpfully point out that the ideal-type upon which Morgenthau developed his theory ‘was linked to a specific historical situation and role, that of the politician and diplomat concerned with national interest’ (495). But what happens to the value of knowledge this approach produces when, after over sixty years since its inception, we may well doubt the empirical relevance of ‘the politician and diplomat concerned with national interest’? Moreover, the historicity of Morgenthau’s ur-ideal-type makes us ask a crucial epistemological question: What exactly made Morgenthau identify this type as an ideal in the first place? Why did not he choose war, the phenomenon of international anarchy or that of international cooperation, as competing theories do, or the phenomenon of continuous quest for power and dominance, which too is close to Morgenthau’s heart, and which other alternatives favour? In brief, we must question the assumption that Morgenthau starts with a robust ontology, while understanding the specificity of his – quite robust – epistemology.

Jackson questions contemporary IR’s preoccupation with ontological clarity, which is typically expected to come before epistemological and methodological work (2011, 26–32). This, too, might be a consequence of the behaviouralist victory six decades ago. In Morgenthau this order of preference does not apply. He is concerned with methodology and epistemology, leaving ontology rather unattended and underdeveloped. In Weberian social science, theorising from an ideal-type, ontology does not have a primary role. Jackson, too, leaves the question of the selection and construction of an ideal-type unaddressed. Yet, when asking about present applicability of past theorising, as this article does, criteria for choosing an ideal-type in a particular historical constellation must also be articulated. Of help are here two theorists from outside of IR: the political theorist Judith Shklar, who asked questions of this kind, perhaps because she was primarily focusing on normativity of knowledge and grappled with the ossifying tendencies of ontology more directly than the IR scholars, and the historical sociologist WG Runciman.

A political theorist sceptical about philosophical foundationalism, Shklar turns to socially produced knowledge to provide crucial orientation for her normatively oriented political theory. Believing that in the first place political theory must focus on the plight of those who suffer from domination (which she conceptualises as a wider category of cruelty), Shklar proceeds in a Weberian fashion, getting inspiration from Weber’s interpreter Runciman. What differentiates Runciman from his life-long object of study is a quest to primarily account for social change without escaping Weberian historicist framework. In his monumental three-volume work, *Treatise on Social Theory*, Runciman seeks to develop a general theory of social change through the course of world history, akin in ambition to Michael Mann’s, in IR better known, project *Sources of Social Power*. In the first, methodological volume, which interests us here, Runciman outlines a tripartite methodology of knowledge-production: reportage, explanation and description. Runciman’s method prompts Shklar to call the study in which she praises it vis-à-vis its interpretivist alternatives ‘Squaring of the Hermeneutic Circle’ ([1986]1998).

Shklar recognises that crucial to ‘full understanding’ is Runciman’s element of reportage. Among others, reportage faces the challenge of psychology, that is of answering the question ‘what motivates social agents’; yet, does not have access to any such psychology – or even an idea of it (89). The rationality of a social sphere can serve as a proxy here. People want to succeed when acting in individual social spheres, thus co-constituting their rationalities. Runciman reiterates Weber’s claim that the reported event must be narrow enough to be confined to a social sphere with intrinsic rationality, so that rationalities of different spheres

do not contaminate knowledge production. An event must be 'typical enough' in Weberian sense (Runciman, 1983: 77); revolution, for instance, is too broad. Unlike Weber, Runciman devises a complex theory of selecting events for 'ideal-types'. Reportage is not a one-off exercise. It 'must be admitted to cover at least some cases of multiple occurrence' and thus produce what he calls a generalization (106). Generalizations might be possible without pre-empting other stages of knowledge formation – explanation and description/evaluation – and, crucially, they can be 'allowed to stand or fall ... by the criteria of reportage alone' (107). Runciman continuously invites the figure of a hypothetical 'rival observer' to question whether a report is not 'inaccurate' or does not 'involve a misunderstanding'. He thus implants historical particularism, the possibility to generalize and transfer reports of events, as well as scepticism about the validity of such transfers into the very act of reportage. Since reportage supplies for the primary ontological orientation of Runciman's epistemologically and methodologically sophisticated theory, we may conclude that this theory embraces a certain degree of ontological doubt, as no reportage is permanently valid.

Shklar, whose interest as a political theorist is to theorize normative orientation without preventing further revision of its underlying knowledge, advances Runciman's emphasis on ontological doubt. Her political theory is grounded on the idea that people's suffering from cruelty 'here and now' (Shklar, 1984: 249) is to produce relevant knowledge of what suffering ought to be publicly outlawed and not a philosophy of suffering which would produce a taxonomy or classification of suffering. Reporting acts of cruelty – understood as ordinary acts, not just extraordinary cruelties – leads to the knowledge of cruelty which aspires to provide full understanding of an event, within the limits of certainty outlined by Runciman. Because she seeks to formulate normative knowledge, Shklar needs a closure on the epistemic knowledge of suffering. Her political theory thus exemplifies what Stephen White calls 'weak ontology', which is an ontological position that continuously nurtures scepticism about the validity of its ontology. It 'possesses resources for deflecting [the] propensity ... to naturalization, reification, and unity' (White, 2000: 8) while accepting that for the sake of action (or life), we also need to affirm certain meanings and act upon them.

It is uncertain to what extent Shklar knew of her close affinity to the mid-century realists. A generation younger, she entered the profession at the time when bifurcation between political theory and social scientific study of politics was becoming firmly entrenched – Deutsch's references to Morgenthau as a political theorist being a case in the point. Thus, we should not expect her to be commenting at length on the works of IR theorists. Yet, she was a close friend and colleague of Stanley Hoffmann and it is reasonable to surmise that it was Hoffmann who introduced Shklar to IR. For someone outside IR, she followed the IR realists redolently closely. As her papers disclose, she read all key books by Niebuhr and Morgenthau and assigned them to her students (Harvard University Archives, HUGFP 118). But whenever directly commenting on the realists' ideas, she seeks to differentiate herself from them. Few books are closer to Shklar's seminal critique of moralism and legalism (1964) than Morgenthau's *Scientific Man and Power Politics*. Yet, she accuses him and other IR realists of imputing objectivist, ideological thinking in the name of national interest into their otherwise skeptical and anti-moralist theoretical framework. As a result, they keep national interest closed to moral scrutiny (Shklar, 1964: 125).

Shklar worries that realists fail to write doubt into their ontology. Yet, Morgenthau and Niebuhr seem to be doing precisely this when producing moral analyses of their own time and ideal-types of international political practice. Like Shklar isolates suffering as an immediately negatively recognisable, ordinary experience among 'us', so does Morgenthau distinguish

national interest as an ordinarily recognised property of international relations. Like the cosmopolitan Shklar does not seek to reify the idea of us-versus-them, yet starts with the immediate ‘us’, so does Morgenthau use the ‘nation state’ as a heuristic device (Behr and Rösch, 2012: 39). In the absence of a robust ontology, Morgenthau necessitates that the world he wants to understand reveals itself to him – albeit in an imperfect manner. Morgenthau is more than aware of this imperfection. Hartmut Behr and Felix Rösch illuminate this issue when they argue that Morgenthau’s concepts of power or interest should not be understood as ‘ontological statements’ but as ‘epistemological concepts’. They helpfully quote from a letter Morgenthau wrote in 1961 to resist his likening to Heinrich Treitschke, whom he calls ‘an ideologue of the nation state ... and of power’ (2012: 39, 40).

I am an analyst of the nation state and of power and have emphasized time and again their negative moral connotations. More particularly, I have emphasized the obsolescence of the nation state as a principle of political order.

Even if Morgenthau judges the nation state as obsolete, he nevertheless works with the concept to account for the behaviour that is done in the name of the nation state, which he recognises as weighty in his studied social sphere of action.

There are multiple occasions at which a Weberian scholar like Morgenthau must correct and possibly also abandon his once-developed ideal-types. As Runciman emphasizes, ideal-typical generalizations do not pre-empt explanation and evaluation of scientific knowledge claims (Runciman, 1983: 107). Neither do they disqualify Runciman’s hypothetical ‘rival observer’ who must ask over and over again about the accuracy of the very act of reportage about the world. Is national interest still a concept practitioners use when trying to report about their own action? Classical realism depends on constant ‘reality checks’. Contemporary heirs of classical realism cannot fortuitously apply Morgenthau’s ideal-types without also examining the validity of these ideal-types for their own spatio-temporal situation. While realists cannot account for empirical reality being separated from the idea of this reality, their ontological uncertainty compels them to constantly revisit this idea of reality. The central notion of the ideal-type allows them to produce knowledge of the empirical world which has greater scientific validity than a simple aggregate of practitioners’ self-reporting utterances. In this sense, realism aspires to objectivity, which is objectivity of a kind. Behr and Rösch characterise it as ‘an analysis based upon explicitly formulated conceptual distinctions in order to perceive/find out/identify/recognize/analyze features and qualities of an object in question’ and not as ‘never-changing characteristics which would be knowable and describable on the basis of ever-valid, truthful sentences’ (2012: 43). This is the reason why Shklar calls Runciman’s social science the squaring of the hermeneutic circle.

Normative judgment, which Turner and Mazur locate as intrinsically linked to the Weberian idea of separate social spheres, follows the very same principle of ontological doubt. Because she is more attentive to normative knowledge than factual, Shklar locates ontological doubt as only a property of the realm of values (and fails to recognise its role also in the realm of facts). At the same time, Shklar is instructive on how knowledge rooted in ontological doubt can have normative validity, as this is precisely what she examines. While postulating that criteria of moral behaviour must be developed locally, she nevertheless supports an idea of weak cosmopolitan ethics and burdens those who have the capacity to act ethically to do so. This is because we do not have complete understanding of the facts of life as lived by others, especially when it comes to the perceptions and causes of their suffering. Instead of letting people suffer until such knowledge is established, Shklar proposes to act on what I call ‘borrowed knowledge’ (Stullerova, 2013: 693). For instance, she champions human rights, the purpose of which is to judge and act in situations where there are signs of human suffering,

without instantly necessitating a reliable reportage, description and evaluation of the situation. All those will follow, as will better understanding of the norm of human rights, which, for Shklar has to be open to – infrequent – change in response to the knowledge of their use.

Shklar's, and Aron's, censure of classical realist social science comes from their worries that it is not sufficiently sceptical about the validity of its ideal-types. Levine quotes Deutsch as making a similar point. Deutsch cautions that Morgenthau is saved from a 'hangman' walking behind him, saying 'I am the action of your theories', because 'he knows far too much history' (Levine, 2013: 102–3). This is a justified worry that anyone working in the classical realist tradition must be prepared to face. Like a circle cannot really be squared, so will there always be a tension between the scientific relevance of realist knowledge of the world and ontological uncertainty about the very basis of this science. Only continuous scholarship can guard from this critique, which will always have reason to exist. Analyticist social science must cultivate its inner critic. Judgment is both an activity of critique and an activity of positive knowledge production. It becomes normative when the inner critic is temporarily silenced as all explanatory alternatives look inferior in the light of presently available knowledge of the world. Then a situation can be judged as normatively welcome or problematic, or such judgment can be projected onto the future. This is precisely where judgment informs policy recommendation – and classical realism lends itself well to both. Those who consider as normative only the type of knowledge that transcends all spatio-temporal situatedness might be wary of using this term (and resort to 'practice-informing theory', as Turner and Mazur do, instead). For others, most notably Shklar and Morgenthau, this is the only normative knowledge to be had. The validity of this knowledge is affected by the same doubt as is scientific ontology of the empirical inquiry that accompanies it, but this is not a reason to despair. Rather, it is a reason for investing in its continuous cultivation, correction and critique.

Conclusion

Applying Jackson's characteristics to critical IR (reflexivity) and classical realism (analyticism), we may conclude that what differentiates the two is disagreement about the possibility to 'transcend experience', a belief that there is a 'possibility of going beyond the facts to grasp the deeper processes and factors that generate those facts' (Jackson, 2011: 36–7). Critical IR is affirmative on this, while classical realism does not find this position possible. As a result, classical realists do not worry about potential reification of meaning by the virtue of their inescapably limited, reductionist and what might be termed 'populist' ideal-types. While never fully objective, the faculty of judgment employed at all stages of scientific inquiry is the best tool to be had. In turn, realists are sceptical about any classification of the empirical world that does not stem from reporting on that world and imposes categories developed out of one's political persuasion. Critical IR's focus on the 'margin' is a good example. Can we be sure of the margin, if the very act of speaking about it makes the marginal enter the mainstream? For realists, this ontological move is too 'thick'. While sharing a great deal, classical realism differs from critical IR precisely on the issue of ontological doubt and the role scientific engagement with empirical reality has in addressing this doubt.

Levine (2013) is right; Morgenthau was not a critical theorist. But this does not mean he miscarried his own scientific and ethical aspirations, as Levine suggests. 'A constant grappling against theory *by the means of theory*', which Levine (101, emphasis mine) demands from Morgenthau, is not to be had. The self-correcting mechanism, which critical IR calls 'doublethink', finds its parallel in classical realism's ontological doubt and concomitant

epistemological work. It is represented in the never-ending quest to make sense of empirical reality, which constantly escapes it, while also slowly appropriating the corrective meanings and normative interventions produced by realist scholarship in its intertwined but also separable scientific and normative modes. We may say that classical realism engages in constant grappling against theory *by the means of social science*. Due to its purposeful ontological weakness, classical realism is not as easily translatable to present context as are some ontologically robust theories. Indeed, current careful engagement with classical realist texts discloses that any such translation must be rooted in contextual interpretation. What also needs to be examined, this article has sought to argue, are the knowledge claims on the basis of which the mid-century realists made their scientific and normative statements. Due to their inherently limited spatio-temporal validity, they must be deemed ‘borrowed knowledge’ until we develop knowledge for our own context, also via understanding of its own history, or establish that knowledge produced in different contexts is valid and is the best knowledge to be had.

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