

Justice, Realism, and the Global State: A Review of John Mearsheimer's *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*

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John Mearsheimer is the preeminent realist scholar of international relations (IR) at the present time. For the last few decades he has been the leading voice in championing a fairly straightforward model of “offensive neorealism,” which posits that states want to survive, therefore they want security, therefore they want power, and since it's unclear exactly how much power is required to survive, states will tend to acquire as much power as they can get. That power-aggregative behavior can then ultimately result, as per the title of Mearsheimer's seminal book, in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Recently, however, Mearsheimer has produced a new book, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, in which he seeks to stretch his analytical lens a bit wider, by including references to “the good life.” In the process, he acknowledges to some degree the significance of that philosophical concept for understanding the unfolding of international political events.

Mearsheimer's treatment of this topic is important both for what he says and what he does not. On the one hand, many students of IR will feel the tectonic shift which accompanies any expansion of Mearsheimer's model, given the steadfast advocacy with which Mearsheimer has promoted that model's core – and seemingly concrete – tenets over the years. The fact that *this* scholar is adding *this* concept to his analytical framework almost feels like the start of a new era in IR studies. On the other hand, the incomplete and – I would argue – inaccurate conclusions which he draws regarding the operationalization of “the good life” – and of its corollary concept, justice – in determining political outcomes highlight the essential limits of offensive neorealist theory.

Those limits derive most directly from the fact that Mearsheimer's theory is, like its predecessor – Kenneth Waltz's “defensive neorealism,” which Mearsheimer amends – a “systemic” theory, with a system comprising a structure and units. The structure of international relations is understood to be anarchic, and the units – which are individual states, all with varying levels of

material capability – are presumed to want to survive. In this neorealist framework, states’ survivalist desire is not predicated upon a specific reading of human nature. Rather, neorealism is, at a core level, humanity-free. Instead, it is assumed that, because states exist, they must exist for a purpose, and whatever that purpose happens to be, states need to exist in order to achieve it. Thus they – the states *qua* states, not necessarily the people running them – must want to exist.ⁱ The appeal of this approach, of course, is that it dispenses with all the messiness of human nuance and unpredictability. The problem is that it takes the people and hence the *polis* out of politics. This sort of intellectual amputation is, ultimately, untenable; the patient will not survive the operation.

Mearsheimer appears to give a nod in the direction of this recognition with his new book, in which he examines how an ideology – namely, liberalism – and hence ideas relevant to that ideology, and hence human attachment to ideas, and hence humanity, can play a role in IR. He therefore devotes the second chapter of his book to the topic of human nature and to liberal ideology’s assumptions about that nature. Building upon this assessment, he then examines how various liberal notions are influencing the foreign policies of some important states in ways which are – according to Mearsheimer – ultimately self-destructive. Mearsheimer’s goal is to elucidate that futility, even while acknowledging his sympathies for liberal ideology so long as that ideology is confined to the realm of domestic politics.ⁱⁱ

There is much to discuss about the many points which Mearsheimer raises in his book, but what is key for this book review, submitted as it is to the World Government Research Network, is what occurs when Mearsheimer winds up considering the idea of the good life, particularly insofar as that idea pertains to what Mearsheimer views as the ultimate liberal fantasy; namely, the potential for establishing a global state. In this regard, Mearsheimer makes the following contradictory claims. On the one hand, he asserts that it’s impossible to persuade large numbers of people to agree on core political principles, since different peoples hold such discordant conceptions of what the good life entails. As a result, he claims that a global state is simply impossible.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet at the same time, he acknowledges that modern liberalism, as an ideology, is an outgrowth of the recognition that it’s difficult to get people to agree on political principles, and that it’s possible to create a state based upon that very recognition, by enshrining certain rights and by promoting tolerance for difference as a core political value, then protecting all of that via the coercive power of the state.^{iv} Which therefore begs the question: if modern liberal states are formed on an “agree to disagree” basis, could a global state not theoretically be formed by populations from around the world agreeing to disagree with each other, within the context of a single political structure? Mearsheimer does not indicate his awareness of this contradiction.

One could also consider the contradiction from another angle: namely, could it not be claimed that the ability of people to “agree to disagree” is itself a reflection of a shared notion of the good life? In other words, the shared ideals of freedom and equality could be considered essential to the good life, and thus, so long as one accepts those core concepts, one can believe anything else one wants. Which is to say, we may not all be able to agree about a variety of important topics, but we can agree on a few essential points, and that agreement is sufficient to establish a state – with a liberal, democratic regime – which then allows everyone to individually pursue other aspects of the good life on their own.

As such, if a liberal, democratic state does represent an authentic, collective vision – however limited/abstracted – of the good life, *and* if there are lots of such states on the planet, then could not those democratic populations theoretically agree to form larger political entities which reflect that same notion of the good life? Again, Mearsheimer offers no answer.

The explanation for this incomplete development of the concepts which he himself raises seems fairly obvious. If Mearsheimer were to follow the logic of his own statements to their natural conclusions, he would be obliged to admit that the thesis of his book regarding the self-defeating nature of liberal ideology is itself self-defeating. Furthermore, he would need to recognize that the fundamental nature of neorealist theory is problematic, insofar as it disregards the role of certain essential ideas in global politics. In particular, by starting from the premise that *the* central political issue – i.e., justice, understood as essential to the good life – can be dispensed with in order to understand the most important aspects of global politics, structuralist scholars like Mearsheimer have fundamentally limited IR theory’s ability to explain its chosen subject matter. Nor are attempts to amend such a theory by retroactively accommodating “big ideas” likely to prove effective, since these centrally important concepts cannot simply be grafted onto extant theory models as an add-on; at least, not without fundamentally altering the core premises of those models in the process.

That being said, neither Mearsheimer nor neorealism as a “school” are solely to blame for this state of affairs. The same critique leveled against them could, with varying calibers of ammunition, be directed at other prominent IR theory models. In order to understand this problem fully, therefore, it would be necessary to look at the issue writ large by considering IR theory’s general disposition as a discipline. Such a study is beyond the scope of a book review, but a few key points can be noted here.

The first fact to highlight is that Mearsheimer is operating within the highly circumscribed IR realist tradition which was set in place in the immediate post-WWII era by Hans Morgenthau’s *Politics among Nations*. Concerned that a violence-prone world was now dominated by ideologically adamant superpowers wielding nuclear weapons, Morgenthau crafts a theory intended to de-ideologize IR and thus engender reasoned, careful, accommodating statesmanship which will be able to prevent nuclear Armageddon. To accomplish this, he starts with a basic claim: humans want power, therefore states want power. And since states all want power, they’re all after the same thing regardless of their ideological claims. That being the case, states ought to treat each other carefully and not get carried away with their own agendas or overreact to the agendas of others.

Morgenthau was hardly the first person to base a political theory on the human power drive, but the simplicity of his theory, combined with the timeliness of his message, as well as the colorful character of his examples – mothers-in-law, for instance, loom large in his assessment of power-seeking behavior – established him as the founding father of modern IR.^v Yet the very simplicity of Morgenthau’s approach, and his rather shallow analysis of the power drive itself, left something to be desired, as did his lack of scientific rigor. Thus entered Kenneth Waltz, arguing in *Man, the State and War* that predictions of political behavior cannot be based upon an assessment of human nature since humans are capable of anything. Humans can help or harm each other, perpetuate the most debased crimes or perform the most beautiful acts of creative

genius. Since human nature can be used to explain and predict any sort of behavior, it cannot – so the argument goes – be used to explain much at all.^{vi} Thus Waltz sets out in his era-establishing *Theory of International Relations* to craft a theory unburdened by human beings. It's here that the foundational tenets of neorealism are set in place. As noted, his theory focuses on “the system,” which is comprised of an anarchic structure populated by states seeking to survive. Waltz defines survival in terms of sovereignty; for a state to survive is for it to maintain its sovereign authority.^{vii} Therefore states will ultimately maintain enough power to ensure their sovereignty, which, according to Waltz, requires that states balance each other's power.^{viii}

Mearsheimer's point of entry into this formula – and his most valuable contribution to IR theory in general – is to note Waltz's error in assuming that states will or ought to rest content with such a balance. As Mearsheimer argues, states rarely assume that they have all the power they'll ever need to maintain sovereignty.^{ix} And indeed, five thousand years of inter-state history do appear to bear this out. Nonetheless, one of the multiple drawbacks of Mearsheimer's theory, and of neorealism in general, is that it's depressing. As noted, Mearsheimer's prediction is of a likely clash amongst great powers, while Waltz suggests that the best anyone can hope for is a world in which states are pointing nuclear weapons at each other but are too terrified to pull the trigger.^x

It's therefore not surprising that alternative theories have been offered which have sought to paint a rosier picture. Yet like the neorealists, other IR theorists have often avoided the essential justice question, choosing instead to operationalize rather rudimentary notions of basic human need. In the process they've made few real dents in the neorealist framework. For instance, neoliberal institutionalists – who've played the role of neorealism's most concerted contenders – tend to focus primarily on basic economic incentives, while social constructivists – who constitute IR's third “school” – typically consider how ideas interact with each other rather than engaging in philosophical explorations of the depth and validity of fundamental ideas such as justice, the good life, etc.^{xi}

The obvious question to ask, therefore, is how did we – the community of IR theorists – get here? Why is it that a discipline whose task is to intellectually assess global politics appears so poorly equipped to inject more meaningful ideas into the discussion of its chosen subject matter? The answer to that question is located amidst the founding texts of early modern political philosophy, insofar as the modern “project” intentionally truncates the role of justice in the context of political analysis, then passes that theoretical disposition along to contemporary IR theorizing.

Without getting bogged down in details, we can simply note that this all begins with Niccolò Machiavelli, who establishes the “modern” framework for thinking about politics by specifically dispensing with a concern for justice, the good life, and other intellectual items which had been held dear by the ancient theorists. As Machiavelli argues in *The Prince*, it's a waste of time thinking about ideal republics, such as Plato does in *The Republic*, when truly just regimes can so rarely if ever be achieved.^{xii} Machiavelli therefore suggests that, rather than spending our time considering the ultimate ends of political life, we should consider the starting points, the most basic things, such as forging a strong state, focusing on military power and hence on military virtue.

From there it's a slippery slope. Thomas Hobbes, following Machiavelli's lead, focuses on the most basic, most material of impulses – the fear of death – and then sketches an entire societal model based upon that premise, in the course of which he develops his social contract theory. According to Hobbes, since life in the state of nature is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” it makes sense for individuals – who are afraid to die – to agree to surrender their pure freedom to a sovereign authority in order to receive the protection that a state can provide. This constitutes the key theory-constructing move: replacing a focus on “justice” with a focus on “sovereignty.” Via this philosophical swap, Hobbes not only sets in stone the analytical lowering-of-the-bar which Machiavelli initiated, but he also makes it impossible for his own theory – and thus for modern political theory, and hence contemporary IR theory – to be completely consistent.

The inconsistency derives from the fact that the logical extension of social contract theorizing is its application to the behavior of states, since states presumably should want to contract their way out of the horrors of international anarchy just like individuals seek to contract their way out of individual-level anarchy. Yet states cannot do this, based upon Hobbes' principles, because sovereignty is the central fact of a state's existence. Near the end of the second part of *Leviathan*, for instance, Hobbes suggests that the ideas which he's described relating to relations between individual persons can now be applied to relations between individual states.^{xiii} But does he apply them? No. Does he suggest how a state, enjoying the social-contract-provided sovereignty which he himself suggests is central to its legitimacy, might surrender its sovereignty and yet not cease to exist? He does not. John Locke takes a similar approach in his *Second Treatise of Government*, in which he only vaguely suggests that his social contract concepts might be applied to IR.^{xiv} Jean-Jacques Rousseau, meanwhile, concludes *On The Social Contract* by admitting that, while he originally intended to apply his theory to the global context, the challenge of doing so proved too much for him, so he gave up.^{xv}

It's therefore left to Immanuel Kant to complete the task of applying material-needs-driven social contract theorizing to the IR realm, which he does, famously and problematically, in his essay “On Perpetual Peace.” Like the others, Kant recognizes that life in a state of nature can be very dangerous, and like some of his predecessors he appreciates that there is a logical corollary to be found in the international state of nature. Yet, because he takes the precepts of social contract theory seriously, he assumes that a state has a legitimate right to enjoy its sovereignty, insofar as that sovereignty can be presumed to rest upon an original – or theoretically original – expression of consent by the governed, who, fearing death, endowed the state with its core characteristic of sovereign power. According to Kant therefore, it is illogical to expect a sovereign state to voluntarily surrender its sovereignty. Rather, states must forever inhabit a situation of global anarchy and manage their relations in that environment as best they can.^{xvi}

The ideas outlined by Kant have echoed through IR theory ever since, and it's at his feet, fundamentally, where we should lay the blame for the intellectual impasse at which IR theory has arrived. The emphasis on anarchy, basic needs, state sovereignty, and social contract-conferring legitimacy, has shaped the scope of the contemporary IR discussion. Which is ironic, in a way, since certain aspects of Kant's argument are so patently flawed that even someone without an IR background ought to question Kant's analysis. For instance, Kant suggests that, in lieu of forming a global state, “republics” ought to band together to form a “peaceful league,”

since the core characteristic of a republic – according to Kant – is that in such a state the populace is empowered to express a determinative view on whether or not the state ought to engage in war, *and* according to Kant, since the general populace will not want to engage in war, wars within the peaceful league will be quite rare.^{xvii} Notwithstanding the manifest inaccuracy of Kant’s argumentation, the Kantian construct has been widely adopted by the modern IR theorist community.

So we arrive back at Mearsheimer’s neorealism, which is, fundamentally, Kantianism on steroids.^{xviii} Heir as it is to Kant’s concepts – most notably, having tacitly accepted “sovereignty” as the alternative to “justice” as its touchstone concept – this neorealism is incapable of explaining fundamental aspects of contemporary IR. Most conspicuous in this regard is its incapacity to account for the pooling of sovereignty which is currently underway amidst the states of the European Union (EU), and which in turn might presage the sort of global integration process that Mearsheimer summarily dismisses. To truly understand European integration, it is necessary to recognize how and why the EU states’ shared justice notions provide the environment for integration to occur, ultimately trumping the significance of sovereignty. Such an analysis, however, does not find room in the neorealist model. Instead, offensive neorealists continue to suggest that the states of the EU are not in fact combining; a claim which appears to be belied by the fact of how difficult Britain is currently finding it to extricate itself from the EU’s strictures.

So then: if Mearsheimer’s neorealism is unable to incorporate much-needed concepts into its framework, *and* if that difficulty reflects a larger issue with IR theory in general, *and* if that issue, in turn, is inherited from modern political philosophy, then the obvious intellectual recourse is to turn to the very tradition which Machiavelli rejects – classical political philosophy – in order to develop a more adequate IR theory; one which places the consideration of justice front-and-center. That classical tradition, however, is not without problems of its own, insofar as its major figures – Plato and Aristotle – give little serious consideration to IR topics. In Plato’s *Republic*, for instance, only a few pages out of three hundred are devoted to IR issues, while Plato’s largest work, *The Laws*, functions to explicitly reduce the importance of IR in political analysis.^{xix} Aristotle, for his part, simply ignores the topic in his *Politics*, focusing instead on how a city-state comes into being and how it is then internally constituted.^{xx} A partial antidote to the ancient disinterest in IR is offered by the Roman statesman Cicero, who, as a good Roman, doesn’t fall prey to the assumption that the city-state is the ultimate goal but instead stretches his view across the Mediterranean, and ultimately across the planet at large, to consider how a world-encompassing community of man, grounded in a universal sense of justice, might be envisioned.^{xxi} Still, Cicero’s method and insights in this regard are somewhat vague and underspecified, and as such he doesn’t provide the sturdiest of foundations for re-imagining how a justice-focused IR theory might be devised.^{xxii}

We thus find ourselves left relatively bereft of justice by the moderns and denied a serious treatment of IR by most of the ancients. There is, nonetheless, someone we can turn to in this situation: Thucydides, who was an Athenian during Athens’ golden age and who, via his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, offers the single best starting place for crafting a realist theory which is grounded in the recognition of how both security-seeking *and* justice-seeking manifest themselves in the interactions of states. By extension, Thucydides provides the most useful

starting point for understanding how realist rationales are capable of driving global integration.

Conveniently, Thucydides has recently come into vogue via the publication of Graham Allison's *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*. In that book, Allison seeks to draw upon Thucydides in order to argue that a dramatic increase in power by one state often makes other states very nervous, and that that tension-generating dynamic frequently leads to war. According to Allison, Thucydides demonstrates this point by describing the rise of ancient Athens and the manner in which Athenian power aggregation unnerved Sparta, thus triggering the multi-year Peloponnesian War amongst the Greek city-states in the 400s BCE.

It's to his credit that Allison takes Thucydides seriously; nonetheless, he doesn't appear to see the larger picture of Thucydides' presentation, approaching Thucydides as he does from a decidedly modern perspective. Specifically, Allison focuses on one element – the concept of power competition – while largely disregarding the manner in which Thucydides pairs that element with an operationalization of the role of justice in the unfolding of international events. More specifically, Thucydides repeatedly demonstrates that shared notions of democratic legitimacy directly impact how states interact in the context of their security-driven, power-aggregating agendas.^{xxiii} In particular, these shared justice notions serve as a key intervening variable when Athens pursues its imperial enterprise, determining which states Athens will ally with and how Athens treats states which come under its aegis. The fact of shared democratic regime type also plays a direct role in determining how badly Athens will suffer after it attacks other democracies like itself.^{xxiv}

All of which is to say, therefore, that Mearsheimer's exploration of the good life ought to prompt us to consider how best to formulate a realist theory which accounts for the most important aspects of political life at the global level, and that consideration, in turn, ought to lead us back to the original realist source. Thucydides shows how claims to justice and calculations of power both inform the formulation of foreign policy. In so doing, he provides a pairing of dreams and realities which, far from leading us into the delusions that Mearsheimer predicts, is in fact the true route to clarity.

ⁱ Waltz (1979) pp. 91-92.

ⁱⁱ Mearsheimer (2018) p. 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mearsheimer (2018) p. 150.

^{iv} Mearsheimer (2018) pp. 48-49.

^v Morgenthau (1985) p. 39.

^{vi} Waltz (1959) p. 27.

^{vii} Waltz (1979) p. 96, 102.

^{viii} Waltz (1979) p. 121.

^{ix} Mearsheimer (2001) pp. 34-35.

^x Sagan and Waltz (2012).

^{xi} To the degree that ideas-driven IR scholarship has, in fact, sought to evaluate the validity of certain ideas versus others, it has – in prominent instances – drawn upon Georg Hegel’s concept of the historical dialectic, which suggests that ideas relating to universal human freedom will ultimately achieve dominance. See, for example, most notably, Fukuyama (1989) and Wendt (2003). Yet this turn to Hegel carries its own pitfalls. Not only is Hegel’s writing rather – and in certain cases, extraordinarily – dense, and thus not easily appropriated or comprehended, but the concept of inevitable historical progress tends to be a hard sell in our largely post-Marxist world. For instance, the most notable IR reaction which it has generated is Samuel Huntington’s counterargument regarding an inevitable and endless “clash of civilizations.”

^{xii} Machiavelli (1995) p. 48.

^{xiii} Hobbes (1962) p. 260.

^{xiv} Locke (1965) pp. 317-318.

^{xv} Rousseau (1978) p. 132.

^{xvi} Kant (2000) p. 94, 102.

^{xvii} Kant (2000) p. 100, 104.

^{xviii} It’s both ironic and entirely appropriate that Mearsheimer’s neorealism and “democratic peace theory” – which are typically understood to occupy opposite ends of the IR spectrum – should share the same Kantian source material; a fact which indicates both the influence of Kant and the narrowness of the general IR enterprise.

^{xix} Plato (1991) pp. 99-100, and (1988) p. 4.

^{xx} Aristotle (1981) p. 59.

^{xxi} Cicero (1994) pp. 261-283.

^{xxii} Which isn’t to say that some scholars haven’t tried. See, for instance, Pangle and Ahrens Dorf (1999).

^{xxiii} Thucydides (1998) p. 182, 199, 316-328.

^{xxiv} Thucydides (1998) p. 459.

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