Morgenthau’s Twofold Concept of Power

The final aspect of Morgenthau’s thought, which we want to discuss in this introduction, is his concept of power. Power has always been of major cognitive interest in the pursuit of analyzing Morgenthau’s contribution to International Relations (e.g., Wasserman, 1959; Nobel, 1995; Williams, 2004; Molloy, 2004; Hacke, 2005; Neacsu, 2010). Given the vastness of interpretations, we might rightfully ask what can a translation of *La notion du politique* significantly contribute to the understanding of Morgenthau’s concept of power. To give a bold answer: it is essential because a close study of this important concept of Morgenthau’s thought and its genealogical development demonstrates that he meticulously distinguished between two concepts of power – an empirical and a normative concept – in his European works while ignoring this most important distinction in his English writings.

Morgenthau understood power (and it is of no relevance here if we speak of empirical or normative power) not in simplistic terms of material capabilities as we often find it in “neo-realism”, but as a concept of “durchgehende[r] Geistigkeit” (constant intellectuality) (1930c, p. 43). Power was, for Morgenthau, a psychogenic condition which rested on inter-subjective relations. It could not be acquired through an endogenous accumulation of financial means and/or weaponry; rather power was for Morgenthau generally created through the interaction of people: as a result and quality of human action. The distinction he made in his European writings – as in *La notion du politique* – between Macht and Kraft (1930c, p. 9; 1934b, p. 33) and pouvoir and puissance (i.e., between “power” and “puissance”, the later being understood as...
the faculty and capability to act, to express oneself, and to be creative) rested, therefore, not on power being the means to some kind of end, but on power being the end in itself. As we will see below in greater detail, Morgenthau understood empirical power as the ability to dominate others, whereas normative power implied the intention to willfully act together to contribute to the creation of a life-world. In *Scientific Man vs Power Politics*, Morgenthau put the distinction between power more figuratively: “[m]an is the victim of political power by necessity; he is a political master by aspiration” (1946, p. 153).

That Morgenthau’s concept of power is still much contested in International Relations – him being very often misread as a *machtpolitische* power politician and his twofold conceptualization being not yet fully realized, acknowledged, or appreciated in the disciplinary debates – is partly his own responsibility, as he did not clearly distinguish between his empirical and normative concept of power in his English writings (thus from 1937 on). We have no concrete evidence as to why Morgenthau did not define his concept of power in his English writings as sharply as he did in his German and French ones. One reason might be related to the unfavorable climate towards Germany during and shortly after the Second World War, which is certainly why Morgenthau attempted to separate himself from his past, including from his intellectual legacies. As we know from his former student, Richard Ned Lebow, “questions about his German past were taboo” (2003, p. 219). A second reason was presumably the shift of interest from purely theoretical studies towards works with a higher focus on contemporary policy issues (Guzzini, 1998, p. 24), such as “The Problem of German Reunification” (1960b) or *Vietnam and the United States* (1965). Still, this does not settle the question why Morgenthau did not attempt to improve the clarity of his concepts after his emigration to the United States, especially since he seemed to have realized this problem very clearly. To Michael Oakeshott, Morgenthau wrote in 1948 that

I can now see clearly that my attempts to make clear the distinctions between rationalism and rational inquiry, scientism and science, were in vain. I think I was fully aware of the importance and difficulty of these distinctions ... and it is now obvious to me that I have failed in the task to make my meaning clear. (HJM-Archive Box 44)