CHAPTER 2

Power: Hans Morgenthau and Ontology

Introduction

This part discusses fundamental concepts that guided Morgenthau’s ontological outlook on the world. Identifying power and the political as these concepts does not come as a surprise, as they have attracted extensive academic interest before (e.g., Tsou 1984; Mollov 2002; Hacke 2005; Scheuerman 2007a; Solomon 2012; Paipais 2014), and Morgenthau (1955: 434; 1962a: 19) repeatedly characterized them to be one of the “perennial problems” of politics. In this context, scholars like Williams (2005a), Hans-Karl Pichler (1998), as well as Stephen Turner and George Mazur (2009) argued that Morgenthau developed his concept of power in close congruence with Weber. Indeed, empirically, Morgenthau agreed with Weber’s tripartite division of power. However, Frei (2001), Ulrik Enemark Petersen (1999), or Neacsu (2010) demonstrated that Morgenthau did not simply rephrase Weber, but his thought was also strongly influenced by Nietzsche. Finally, Schuett (2007, 2010) asserted that the influence of psychoanalysis on Morgenthau should not be underrated, as his concept of power draws on Sigmund Freud too.

This part discusses a lacuna in these recent debates on Morgenthau’s conceptualizations of power and the political, as it stresses the normative profoundness both concepts had for Morgenthau. Just like Mannheim’s (1952: 185) notion of worldview anticipated, it also contains a specific world postulate, that is, an intention of how the world should be. It is argued that this is also the case with Morgenthau. Power and politics are normative concepts for Morgenthau (HJM Archive 79; 1947a: 178; 1959b: 19; 1971b: 77; 1972: 42), containing elements of how the interactions among people ought to be. Although the complexity of Morgenthau’s notion of the political had received a first appropriate...
elaboration in Frei’s (2001) monograph, it sank back into oblivion and was primarily related to Schmitt (cf. Koskenniemi 2000, 2004; Brown 2007; Scheuerman 2007b; critical Brown 2004). Only recently was this complexity reevaluated (Neacsu 2010). Likewise, the distinctive normative orientation of Morgenthau’s notion of power is commonly understood in a limited manner, as Weber’s definition of power is imposed on Morgenthau’s notion, reducing it to a fraction of its meaning (cf. Coser 1984; Pichler 1998; Shilliam 2007, 2009; Turner 2009). This limitation even caused interpretational inconsistencies by establishing erroneous connections, as happened to Turner and Mazur.¹

The elaboration of Morgenthau’s (1949a: 2) ontology begins with what he took as his analytical starting point: the individual. This anthropological focus allowed Morgenthau to recognize the tragic choices humans are facing in their attempts to create lifeworlds together (Lebow 2003: 308). Two conflicting drives, one existential and the other one assertive—to which any person has to succumb—require people to socially interact, although these drives have the ability to destroy these interactions. For this reason, these drives need to be constrained. Next, this leads to Morgenthau’s concept of power, his central ontological concept. Its elaboration reveals that he distinguished between two types of power. First, the animus dominandi served as Morgenthau’s characterization of the prevalent empirical concept. Second, however, Morgenthau promoted a different, normative concept of power with the intention to replace the former in order to reestablish societies based on humanistic values. Finally, this part deals with the collective level, societies, and the role of the political for them. This includes Morgenthau’s thoughts on the development and composition of societies. Furthermore, Morgenthau considered the political realm as central since this realm with power as its ultimate component allows reestablishing values in order to prevent the extinction of social beings and eventually human beings.

Hunger and Love: Morgenthau’s Search for the Origins of Power and Politics in Human Nature

To demonstrate that Morgenthau pursued a psychological definition of power and to reveal its relevance to his concept of the political, his earliest European writings have to be consulted. In an early unpublished manuscript, Über die Bestimmung des Politischen aus dem Wesen des Menschen,² Morgenthau (1930c: 5) noted that human action is determined by “the impulse of life striving to keep alive, to prove oneself, and