CHAPTER 2

What is Idealism?

Those postwar writers who have taken a closer look at Woolf have been reluctant to employ the term idealist to characterize his international political thought. Yet it is nonetheless true that such characterization is pervasive in IR. Indeed, virtually everyone who wrote about the international scene during the interwar period, who supported the League, and who held progressivist social and political beliefs, has been labeled in this pejorative way.

But it is not only a pejorative label. It is also an ambiguous one. Indeed, as a realist rhetorical device, which is how some see it, its pejorativeness and its ambiguity go hand in hand. It has enabled swathes of thought and the thinkers who thought it to be dismissed on the most general grounds.

In order to assess the degree to which Woolf can be characterized as an idealist we first need to establish its meaning. We need, that is, to establish its central tenets, its core assumptions or beliefs, those attributes in the absence of which it could not be regarded as a distinct school of thought. We need, in other words, to identify the properties that make “idealism” idealistic.

This is not as simple as it may appear. The first hurdle to overcome is that while some writers have identified idealism almost exclusively with the interwar period, others see it as something much broader. According to the latter view, idealism is an approach to international relations that may ebb and flow in influence, but it is one that can always be found where independent political communities exist in a condition of anarchy. Idealism is a doctrine that advocates various means of controlling or transcending the international anarchy. It may have been strongly manifest in the interwar period but it is not exclusive to it.
Another hurdle to overcome is that while some authors use the term idealist interchangeably with terms such as utopian, liberal, liberal internationalist, or rationalist, others imply that there are subtle and perhaps important differences between them. One frequently encounters statements such as “X was an idealist but not of the utopian kind” or “Y was criticized for holding liberal and even idealist beliefs.” But those who imply that these terms signify different things rarely attempt to lay bare the basis of any such distinction.

**Idealism in IR Historiography**

In order to make progress on the question it may be helpful to have a brief look at some of the standard accounts of the growth of the discipline and idealism’s place within it.

In one of the most widely cited short accounts of the growth of IR theory, Hedley Bull states that the “distinctive characteristic” of idealism is belief in progress. Indeed, his preferred term for idealism, which he consistently puts in inverted commas, is “the progressivist doctrines of the 1920s and 1930s.” Idealists held that the system that gave rise to the First World War was “capable of being transformed into a fundamentally more peaceful and just world order.” Such an order was, indeed, already in the making as a result of “the awakening of democracy,” the growth of the “international mind,” the creation of the League of Nations, the strengthening of international law, and the good works and teachings of “men of peace [and] enlightenment.” The responsibility of IR students was to “assist this march of progress to overcome the ignorance, the prejudices, the ill-will, and the sinister interests that stood in its way.” The War and the creation of the League represented a sharp break with the past. The “pre-war system,” idealists felt, did not provide a source of guidance but “a series of object lessons” about anarchy and disorder. Present and future possibilities were not limited by the “test of previous experience” but were “deducible from the needs of progress.”

In his trenchant analysis of the predictive power of realism, John Vasquez does not so much emphasize progress as its close ally reason. One of the distinctive qualities of the idealist paradigm, he says, is the ability of reason to overcome the problem of war. This is accompanied, indeed fortified, by a belief in a basic harmony of interests between nations and the existence of a nascent world community. However, in contrast to Bull, Vasquez upholds that the “Wilsonian contention” that democracy leads to peace whereas dictatorship leads to war constitutes the “heart of the paradigm.”

In one of the more detailed accounts of the “utopian school” to be published in the last few decades, Trevor Taylor emphasizes, like Vasquez, the role