



IDEALISM AND REALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: AN ONTOLOGICAL DEBATE

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Abstract

The debate between realism and idealism continues to mark the discipline of International Relations. On the one hand, realism argues that international politics is a struggle for power and a quest for survival, which results in a condition of permanent conflict between States without any possibility of evolution or progress. On the other hand, idealism considers it possible to build a world of peaceful coexistence, prosperity and well-being, achieved through cooperation and based on values and aspirations shared by humans. The object of this article is to analyse the debate between idealism and realism, considering it as an ontological debate and taking into account the controversy it has generated. The argument presented here is that both realism and idealism are two responses to the creation and maintenance of international order, that is, how States relate in international society; however these responses are not mutually exclusive and can coexist in constant tension with one another. An analysis of internationalist thought of two authors, Hans Morgenthau and Raymond Aron, is also presented, which relates to how they are positioned in this debate as well as International Relations as a whole.

Keywords

Idealism; Realism; Ontology; Power; Ethics.

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IDEALISM AND REALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: AN ONTOLOGICAL DEBATE¹

Vitor Ramon Fernandes

International Relations has been somewhat dominated by questions of an ideological nature associated with different currents of thought that gave rise to the so-called "great debates". These debates are part of the history of International Relations. Thus, with reference to Brian Schmidt (2005: 4) in his contribution to the well-known *Handbook of International Relations*, the history and evolution of International Relations have been counted as "starting with the 'great debate' between idealists and realists, defining the discipline", a debate that began between the two world wars, specifically in the 1920s and 1930s. Although there are numerous documents related to the study of international relations, among which is the more-cited *History of the Peloponnesian War*, written by historian and Athenian general Thucydides, the purpose of this analysis is to match the chronological framework of analysis with the university institutionalisation of the discipline, which occurred with the autonomous creation of International Relations at the University of Aberystwyth, UK, in 1919.

The argument presented here considers the debate between idealists and realists as opposing ontologies, that is, two different perspectives of the human being and human existence, the deepest two conceptions of the world, with different philosophical implications in relation to human activity and the elements that constitute the field of international relations. Idealists, whose thinking is linked to the ideas of liberal internationalist, consider that despite the international system being anarchic there is a communitarian consciousness, the possibility of progress in the international system, achieved through cooperation and progress towards a lasting peace, prosperity and social well-being, based on values and aspirations shared by humans. In contrast, realists have a negative opinion of human nature and consider international anarchy as being characterised by a struggle for State survival and vying national interests, where the conquest of power is of vital importance given the ever-present possibility of conflict. These ontological visions are not reconcilable, and can coexist in constant tension with each other.

The beginning of the debate

In Hedley Bull's article entitled *The Theory of International Politics 1919-1969*, the author recorded the existence of a group of authors that he defines as "idealists". They are generally characterised as a set of theorists who believed in the idea of progress and the

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possibility of an evolution in international relations that would give rise to a more peaceful world (Bull 1972: 185). These predominantly European authors considered the creation of international organisations as a way to promote the ideal of peace and security among states, of which the League of Nations is highlighted – created following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on 28th June 1919 at the end of the First World War – as well as the creation of international regimes with norms and rules accepted by States. The issue of moral nature also assumed considerable importance in the context of his thought, although the writings are somewhat scattered, and it is not evident that they were organised into a homogeneous theoretical body.

From the late 1930s of the twentieth century, a number of other theorists who became known as “realists” reacted against this view that the world could be governed based on idealist principles. According to realists, we live in a historical context that is characterised by conflict – which is completely contrary to the idea of harmony conveyed by idealists – and relations between States are governed by power. In the European context, the 1930s corresponds to the period when Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany, in which Hannah Arendt's is in exile, specifically in August 1933 after leaving prison and crossing the Czech border, and in which a process begins that culminates in the start of the Second World War in 1939.

It is precisely on the eve of the Second World War that the first attempt to systematise the ideas then in circulating came in, which came about with the work of Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (1995). It was this author who summed up the opposition between realism and what he called a “utopia”; what differentiates the two perspectives are two contrasting views regarding the field of international relations. The perspective of utopianism features a proactive vision that believes in progress and evolution, while realists accept reality without the possibility of change or evolution, characterised by recurrent determinism (Carr, 1995: 12). In his words, his intention in writing the work resulted from a “passionate desire to avoid war”, a teleological aspect of the science of international politics from its conspicuous start that had arisen following a terrible war between 1914 and 1918. This international environment that lived very particularly in Europe is important because it allows us to contextualise the work in time and space, as these are the dimensions that allow the systematic characterisation of the utopian and idealist thought – as Carr called them – and realist thinking.

In the opinion of E. H. Carr, the evolution of international relations had been up until the utopian era, a fact that attributed a still poorly structured character to this new science. However, this did not mean that a complete departure from the utopianism of International Relations was defended, as he believed that utopia and realism were constant and necessary elements that should coexist in an essential and permanent tension. On the one hand, a utopian is seen as proactive, someone who believes in free will and the ability to reject the reality of their own volition, while the realist tends to be deterministic, accepting reality as it is presented without ever trying to change it. Citing Carr (1995: 10): “Utopia and reality are the two facets of political science. A solid political thought and sound political life can only be observed where both are present”.

Between distinct views and attempts to legitimate positions

But the truth is that this work has been the subject of several controversies, related both to the general reading that is made of it as well as to its bias of utopian thought. In the



opinion of Peter Wilson (1998), a debate that had opposing idealist and realist views never came into being, and is even misleading as historical fact. The idealistic thinking of the period between the two world wars, featured in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, was no more than a rhetorical invention by E. H. Carr to discredit a number of issues that were at odds (Wilson 1998: 13). Ashworth (2002: 34-35) has a similar opinion, believing that a proper debate between idealism and realism never existed, at least not in the way that it usually does in International Relations, and its construction was essentially intended to discredit normative thought in the discipline as well as international liberalism through the idea of a victory of realism over idealism.

Fundamentally for Wilson (1998: 14), what existed was a wide range of opinions and theories associated with various authors, where most were linked to liberal internationalist thought, namely authors such as Alfred Zimmern, Arnold Toynbee and Norman Angell. This is not forgetting the very US President Woodrow Wilson, whose writings are dispensed and whose thinking had few things in common.

The notion of legitimising some ideas over others is shared by several authors. As highlighted by Brian Schmidt (2005: 8), there is often a tendency to write history with the view of legitimising contemporary research programmes, which allows references to the field of study in a way that reveals authority. The problem is not only that historical analysis be used to enforce or corroborate an argument relating to this, but the fact that history itself is altered and distorted in order to legitimise a position *a priori* or to criticise another person's position.

This is also the opinion of C.G. Thies (2002), who argues that the most common way to assess progress in international relations theory has been through the construction of the history of the discipline by certain communities of researchers. When this exercise is fruitful, it serves to legitimise the position of this community of researchers against the positions of their opponents, creating an idea of progress in the discipline. In his view, the so-called "great debates" have marked progress in the discipline of International Relations, and have served to keep the identity of certain communities of researchers (Thies, 2002: 148). Underlying this argument is also, as stated by Peter Wilson (1998: 1), the fact that there is no unified body of texts and authors who call themselves "idealists", or one or more authors respected by the research community, which means that "realists" refer to them in a generic way, and only on occasions refer concretely to articles or authors connoted with idealism.

Other authors give greater relevance to the implications of the interpretation of E. H. Carr's work, and to the foundations of idealist and realist thought in international relations theory. According to the opinion of Ken Booth (1991), which can be characterised as deconstructivist, the work of Edward Carr suffers from some confusion regarding the way it is positioned relative to utopianism and realism. This relatively ambiguous position makes it especially remembered as he criticises the impossibility of reconciliation between utopia and reality. For Ken Booth, and as mentioned above, Edward Carr also identified the need to accept both utopia and reality as necessary, where power and morality coexist.

The ambiguity of Carr's language also led to a certain use by realists, in an attempt to hold the author to his thesis, when in fact Carr – at various points of his work – also criticised realism, considering that international order could not only be founded on power. In the opinion of some authors such as Molloy (2014: 460),



"Carr's criticism of utopianism and realism are similar in tone and content".

For Ken Booth (1996: 329), there is a simplification and tampering of the positions of key authors, in particular regarding the interpretation commonly made of the supposed idealist position of Davis and the mythologised realist position of Carr. What this also shows, from my point of view, is the existence of a quasi-Manichaeism in the field of International Relations since the institutionalisation of the discipline, which is characterised by confrontation between realist and idealist thinking.

Different philosophies of history

Andreas Osiander (1998: 409) agrees with the idea that the debate between idealists and realists presented by E. H. Carr in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* reveals a distorted view of idealist thought. However, Osiander has a different view, in his revisionist opinion, on the thinking of idealist authors – which are fundamentally the same as those cited by Hedley Bull (1972) in *The Theory of International Politics, 1919-1969*. His view was interpreted from the work of E. H. Carr by realist authors in a way that supported their arguments in defence of realist thought.

These idealist authors were familiar with realist theses, but what distinguished them above all was a different way of looking at the history of philosophy. For idealists, we have a philosophy of directional history, while in the case of realists it is cyclical. Osiander (1998: 418-419) argues that much literature of idealists is based on false premises, and that while idealists adopted a directional interpretation of history, realists adopted a cyclical interpretation, combined with a vision of recurrence and repetition, as mentioned also by Martin Wight (1966: 25): "Why is there no international theory?". However, according to Osiander (1998), although the idea that realists and idealists are separate in their views of history, which was in circulation in the early twentieth century, many authors of International Relations argue that what actually occurred was a construction by realists to sustain their own position.

The opinion of Osiander resembles the idea defended by Robert Crawford (2000) about the existence of a dichotomy and a tension between idealist and realist thought, reflecting opposing views of reality. In the opinion of the latter author, the discipline of International Relations has been increasingly subjected to scientific methods, where realist thinking appears as a reference – a current standard against which all others are compared, leading to a monistic conception of discipline.

In reality International Relations as a disciplinary area is crossed by multiple and varied intellectual traditions, and it is not possible to choose any one as preferential. At the same time, it is also true that there has been a tendency to consider the debate between idealism and realism as a serious confrontation of ideas, but easily reconcilable in a unitary conception, through which a unified and consistent discipline can be built, based on a scientific methodology (Crawford, 2000: 4-5). However, for Robert Crawford, the idealism-realism debate is a debate of ideas that are in open opposition and cannot be reconciled, as they are based on different ontologies.



The English School as an attempt to reconcile extreme positions

The English School is worth mentioning in this ontological debate between realism and idealism, which is commonly denominated as the *via media* in International Relations in the context of the Grotian tradition between realist and revolutionist traditions. The English School has undergone a major evolution over time, but in the version given by Hedley Bull and Martin Wight, essential discussion is centred on the existence of an international society and its nature in a Grotian sense, and more particularly the institutions that build this society, such as war, diplomacy and the balance of power.

The main argument of the English School is that sovereign states are part of a society. This society is anarchic in the sense that there is no authority above those states that can coerce or punish for the breach of established laws, but that does not mean it is a chaotic society. However, this also does not mean that violence is not recognised and taken into account, although the English school assign great importance to normative issues, in particular rules, laws, institutions, and moral, as important elements in the organisation of this international society.

In the opinion of Dunne (1998: 1), the English School has points of convergence with realism, though it should not be confused with it. For Dunne (1995: 128-129) English realism between the late 1930s and early 1950s is the starting point for understanding the evolution of the English School. Since the publication in 1939 of the book *The Twenty Years' Crisis* by E. H. Carr, several other authors have focused on realist thinking and idealist ideas in order to better understand the international context and the interaction among States.

According to this author, the positioning of Carr as a realist is, at the very least, controversial, but Dunne believes that in Carr's analysis of the antinomy between realism and idealism, there are commonalities with the English School. With regard to Booth (1991: 530-531), Carr did not consider realism a winning current over idealism, because that view does not take into account the antinomian view of the author. As stated by Dunne (1995: 129), Carr's relationship with the English School is ambiguous. It is from here that Hedley Bull criticises the lack of recognition of Carr in relation to the international society, and Martin Wight (2004) elaborates on international politics, referring to power politics as inevitable. The evolution seen from the early 1950s in the thought of authors like Martin Wight goes towards a concern for international norms and institutions, and the development of theory led to the creation of the British Committee, which meets for the first time 1959. The committee ended up not involving Carr, but the reasons for his non-inclusion seem to have had more to do with personal issues than anything scientific.

For the situations that occurred in an international context and that underlay different ontological perspectives, the analysis of Wight (1994) on international politics deserves recognition, which distinguishes three traditions: the realist, the rationalist and the revolutionary. In the same vein, although more attentive to notions of solidarity and community than Martin Wight, there is Hedley Bull's (2002) *The Anarchical Society*, where the author defines and elaborates on realist, Grotian and Kantian (or universalist) traditions. Hedley Bull's argument (2002: 39) is that the international community reflects the three traditions – but at certain times or geographies – and takes into account different policies adopted by States, with one of these elements being able to prevail



over the others. The fundamental idea behind this rationalist (or Grotian) perspective of Hedley Bull is that relations between States are conditioned by prudence, as well as moral imperatives and cooperation. Both Martin Wight and Hedley Bull consider that this perspective is between realist and Kantian perspectives, hence the designation *via media* between realist and idealist currents.

Hedley Bull (2002: 13) also distinguishes between the international system and international society, in that an international society implies the existence of an international system but not vice versa, since the existence of an international society requires that certain features are present in the international system. More specifically, international society exists through States' awareness of the existence of common interests and values that bind and unite them in some way, making them share their efforts in work developed through various international institutions. At heart, the thought of these authors includes the three concepts mentioned above.

Members of the English School seem always to oscillate between realism and idealism, a permanent tension between different ontologies, tending to one of these notions, or, as stated by Tim Dunne (1995: 126), combining the three traditions of Martin Wight, where the notion of international society derives from the rationalism of Vattel.

Morgenthau, power and ethics of responsibility

For Hans Morgenthau (1985: 37), the struggle for power is always present in all politics, saying that

"the desire for power is the distinctive element of international politics, like all politics, international politics is by necessity power politics".

This author emphasises the power struggle but also the tragic nature of politics, which is attached to human nature, and that is defined by an unlimited desire to rule over other men (Morgenthau 1946: 193). He also believes that

"it is this ubiquity of the desire for power that apart and beyond any selfishness or evil purpose, constitutes the ubiquity of evil in human action" (Morgenthau, 1946: 194).

And that's what politics is, in essence, a struggle for power without limits or end (1946: 201).

The Morgenthau position denotes a certain tragic sense in the relationship that man has with power, from the tension within itself, as pointed out by Rengger (2007: 124), also reflecting his ontological position. But while the demand for power is the main ambition of man in politics, this does not mean that it is the only ambition (Cozette, 2008: 668). Moral concerns exist in Morgenthau's work, as he also states that



"man is a political animal by nature, he is a political scientist by chance or choice, he is a moralist because he is a man"
(Morgenthau, 1946: 7).

That is, moral judgments are considered characteristics of the human being and that's what makes us truly human.

Contrary to what is usually considered, and despite his pessimistic view on international politics, the author has ethical and moral concerns beyond the question of the struggle for power. In the opinion of Molloy (2003: 82), although for Morgenthau all political decisions are due to abstract moral principles, the author considers a moral approach to politics possible if it is based on a morality of the lesser evil.

However, for Morgenthau, in essence international politics is not consistent with good intentions, which require an ethical responsibility, as what is at stake is the security of a State. Contrary to idealistic arguments, international politics involves difficult choices that are possibly painful. Morgenthau recognises the ethical need to justify actions and does so through a choice between the two antinomies of Max Weber (1963: 206), the ethics of responsibility and the ethics of conviction, with his preference clearly being the first. This concern with the state's survival, above all, and the choice of an ethic of responsibility are aspects that are close to Max Weber.

What is to be considered is that although there are ethical and moral values, political man has abstracted them onto his political decisions, which is a result of his ontological position. And for this reason, his position is not amoral or devoid of ethics, he just has abstracted morals in his actions and decisions, despite having to justify them in ethical terms, thereby justifying his realist position and rejection of idealism.

Aron: the tension between realism and idealism

By analysing idealism and realism, Aron (2004: 567-596) puts us in a position of some tension between these two ontological positions.

For this author, it is an illusion to think that one can avoid conflicts, particularly war, and that lasting peace can be achieved through only a diplomacy based on normative considerations of good conduct and principled morals. Idealism is seen by some authors as a deep conviction in total compliance with the rules and legal norms set in conduct among states in order to avoid war. Moreover, this belief assumes that all states are interested in maintaining the law and that in the case of aggression against one of them, the others would volunteer to assist the attacked.

But these principles of collective security are difficult to implement, because they imply too, from the start, an agreement by States on the definition of who is the aggressor and a shared sentiment about the acts committed. Even if the aggressor State is easily identified, the formation of alliances or coalitions for defence of the attacked State is required, which presupposes that other states are indeed interested and engaged in the maintenance of international order and agree to act in order to punish the offender. In this type of process a whole range of situations can be seen, and depending on the relative strengths of the aggressor State and coalition several outcomes are possible, from capitulation to total war – results that turn out to be contrary to the objectives



intended. Idealist doctrine therefore becomes dangerous with respect to the conduct of foreign policy, to the extent that it closes in on itself through the adoption of normative principles. In this regard, Raymond Aron (2004: 572) states that:

The critique of the "idealist illusion" is not only pragmatic, but also moral. Idealist diplomacy often becomes fanatical, it divides States into good and bad, into peace loving and belligerent, and imagines a definitive peace through the punishment of the first and the triumph of second.

However, it is interesting that, when it comes to this issue of the "idealist illusion", Aron (2004: 578) compares the position of H. Von Treitschke and G. F. Kennan. Treitschke was a German nationalist historian who fully accepted power politics, including war, considering it as necessary and an exalting prudence from power politics and nationalism; and Kennan, who resignedly accepted power politics as a way to avoid other greater evils. Both Treitschke and Kennan make an apology for prudence and consider power important. But curiously – and Raymond Aron stresses this fact – Treitschke considered himself an idealist while G. F. Kennan was not opposed to being classified as a realist. What seems to be at stake is that the idealist, as well as the realist, must understand their era, not ignore the possibility of violence and accept that the resolution of conflict requires taking into account the balance of power among states, and that action should include prudence and diplomatic and strategic conduct. An incompatibility does not necessarily exist between being an idealist and recognising violence and war. What Raymond Aron truly opposes – referring to the "idealist illusion" – is the disregarding of war and violence to act in international relations, which most idealists of the time seemed to reveal. It is not, therefore, condemning idealism completely, but points out some weaknesses.

Beside this, Aron (2004: 581) considers that realism best takes into account and recognises what the selfishness of States and their interests are compared to idealism. However, when considering power as the ultimate objective of States, realists – particularly from North American – do not take into account the idea that although the States coexist without the existence of an arbitrator or a supranational politic, they limit their freedom of action through the obligations they incur, namely the signing of agreements and treaties, although they may also resort to armed force to resolve conflicts (Aron, 2004: 582). Thus, the absence of a sovereign power is not incompatible with the notion that international life cannot be contractually ruled (in the sense of political philosophy), with the existence of rules and norms of conduct, which, however, does not exclude or prevent the use of violence. And it stresses that the realist school is a little set back from traditional European thought, because the obsession of realists with power make them always see an alternative to law or morality, and ultimately define international politics by power and not by the absence of a arbiter or a politic above States. In reality, in the face of national egoism that prevails in between states in the "state of nature", the diplomatic and strategic conduct of States – to use the terminology of Raymond Aron, and that includes the exercise of diplomatic functions of diplomats themselves as well as strategy and war, which are duties of the soldier, taking one another as symbolic characters of the two types of conduct – should seek to conform to



normative principles and ideas, and not to what happens to animals in the jungle (Aron, 2004: 568-569)

This position is in line with the fact that, through their leaders, States need and have the obligation to safeguard their vital interests, acting in accordance with norms and customs that may be more or less respected, but with the risk – always latent – that war is decreed by the leaders.

However, both idealist and realist thinking are considered extreme positions. The idealists, for reasons related to the occurrence of the atrocities of the First World War and its rejection of the importance of power in international relations; and realists, precisely because of their emphasis on power in opposition and reaction to this other school of thought. It is this need of reaction that explains, according to Aron (2004: 16), the extreme positioning of realism in relation to idealism, in his inadequate opinion.

The internationalist thought of Aron reflects numerous tensions and antinomies, among which it is worth pointing out idealism versus realism. For Aron, idealism and realism are not contradictory concepts, but complementary; this antagonism, at its core, is no more than a part of the "eternal debate" between Machiavellianism and moralism.

The debate between realism and idealism can be characterised by two extreme and opposite ontological views on international relations, which results from different considerations and actions in relation to how States relate in international society. Still, they are not mutually exclusive. In the context of the international politics of States, the question that arises is whether they, in their capacity as sovereigns, have the obligation to obey moral criteria or other interests, in particular legal or rules, or on the contrary, act in a way that best serves their purposes and interests, governed solely by the objective of maximising power. It is, of course, two different responses to the problem of order, which fall into a certain tradition of thought in the field of International Relations; they can, however, overlap.

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