

Status Liberalism:

A Synthesis of Status Psychology, Liberalism, and Morgenthau

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Introduction

Morgenthau's foundational *Politics Among Nations* was written in reaction to the spread of idealism that in part caused WWII and remained after. He started his work laying out what he saw as the problems with international relations theory of time and, without trying to build upon the past, goes straight into the foundation of a new paradigm. He is so confident with his paradigm, as it does successfully mitigate the major problems of the idealist paradigm, that he calls it realism—his predecessors called idealists. His work is a rejection of most of the liberal precedent and thus lacking in all of liberal theory's strengths.

Instead of being as brash as to reject realism as Morgenthau rejected liberalism, it is possible to amend realist theory to maintain its advantages and to mitigate its flaws. This will be done by establishing a liberal philosophic basis and adding in those positive elements of realism by complementing liberalism with status psychology.

This paper lays the groundwork for the Status Liberal Theory of international relations. It first will address realism, its positive and the negative elements. It will then lay out status liberalism and compare the two, using case studies to show the greater utility of status liberalism.

Section 1: Realist Theory: Advantages and Flaws

Realist Philosophy

Realist philosophy is the prominent theory of international relations. It is largely credited to Morgenthau, so it will be his main text, *Politics Among Nations*, that is dealt with. To quote the opening lines of his work:

International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim. Statesmen and peoples may ultimately seek freedom, security, prosperity, or power itself. They may define their goals in terms of a religious, philosophic, economic, or social ideal. They may hope that this ideal will materialize through its own inner force, through divine intervention, or through the natural development of human affairs. But whenever they strive to realize their own goal by means of international politics, they do so by striving for power.

Politics Among Nations, Page 13

To Morgenthau, power is, “man’s control over the minds and actions of other men”. He states, “the desire to attain a maximum of power is universal” and comes from “those elemental bio-psychological drives by which in turn society is created.” He warns us to not be fooled by the various “religious, philosophic, economic, or social” ways in which leaders may define their goals. In reality, “to pacify the resentment and opposition that arise when the drive for power is recognized for what it is, those who seek power employ... ideologies for the concealment of their aims”¹.

From this philosophic axiom, he paints his picture of international relations: The international arena is a collection of states pursuing power to use on one another—power being the main motivator for action. The book downplays the possibility of enduring cooperation, arguing that any apparent collaboration is circumstantial and driven by the balance of power. There is nothing capable of creating long term cooperation besides a union of states; however, Morgenthau says, “The community of the American people antedated the American state, as a world community must antedate a world state”. He moves on to conclude his book by saying, “If the world state is unattainable in our world, yet indispensable for the survival of that world, it is necessary to create the conditions under which it will not be impossible from the outset to establish a world state... This method of establishing the preconditions for permanent peace we call peace through accommodation”. It is called that because “nations must be willing to compromise on all issues that are not vital to them”. To do this, “diplomacy must be divested of the crusading spirit”².

Advantages of Realist Theory

Europe was largely stable under the steady hand of Bismark from the 1870s to his dismissal in 1890 by Kaiser Wilhem II who dismissed him to pursue an imperial policy inspired by romantic nationalism backed by incompetence. This nationalism never left Germany until their unconditional surrender and occupation in WWII. The British, for their part, near the end of the 19th century and especially after WWI fell into the idealist paradigm. The idealists believed, like many of those before and after them, that, due to modern advances in institutional structure, deepening economic ties and dependence, cultural interaction, a further entrenchment of the idealist’s ideology (i.e. socialism or liberalism), and a general feeling of modernity accompanied by belief in war being an antiquated means of solving disputes, war can be avoided through proper diplomacy. This line of thought led Chamberlain to force the French into allowing Germany to

¹ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 1948, pg. 13, 17, 155, 169.

² Morgenthau pg. 406, 419, 439, 441.

uncontestedly have the Rhineland and Sudetenland and ensured WWII when the allies could have stopped both militarily.

This is not to exclude the US of fault who backed British idealism and led to WWII. Wilson, in particular, attempted to create a League of Nations among nations that lacked the proper “world community” or the desire to have peace³.

Realism, in reaction to idealist theories, focused on the fundamental reality of power and the ensured existence of imperial actors. The current normative systems are in place because those with power have deemed it so. Even with these norms, if a state cannot militarily defend itself and another state wanted to invade it, it will get invaded. Had Western Europe followed realist doctrine, they could have deterred the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, they, like the interwar British, forgot power is needed to enforce norms. Imperialist powers emerge when they 1) think they can use power to change the status quo to favor them and 2) want war. The status quo of the Liberal International Order (LIO) cannot be taken for granted, otherwise we get results like WWII or Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Further Analysis of Morgenthau

Morgenthau claims states pursue power to fulfill their desire. He also claims that whatever the stated desire of a state happens to be is in reality a manifestation of the drive to obtain power.

States are led by leaders. He condemns a few in the book for poorly leading a state. Thus, he admits that the behavior of the state is controlled by agents of the state. If the state is controlled by agents of the state, that means the desires of the state are actually the desires of the leaders. Thus, when he says, “the desire to attain a maximum of power is universal”, he is making the psychological and philosophic claim that we each ultimately are driven by power. He has a low opinion of humanity, saying, “The drives to live, to propagate, and to dominate are common to all men”⁴.

He admits “philosophies and political systems which have made the lust and struggle for power their mainstay has proved impotent and self-destructive” (170). From this perspective, “The main function of [the Bible and ethics] has been to keep aspirations for power within socially tolerable bounds.” Based off his definition of power, this is all to say

³ Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, 1995, <https://archive.org/details/onoriginsofwaran00kaga/page/n15/mode/2up?view=theater>. A reading of Kagan’s chapters on the lead up to WWI and WWII wonderfully explains the dynamics and beliefs leading up to WWI and WWII that I draw on here.

⁴ Morgenthau, pg. 17.

that, fundamentally, humans strive every day for our entire lives to compete in the bounds of what we deem appropriate for the ability to control one another with the goal of “maximum” control. This is a postmodern assumption with the façade of Darwinism with references to “elemental bio-psychological drives” but no real science or philosophy he provides to back his claims. He, however, gives himself an out. He says, in his opening lines, that, even if humans pursue desires instead of power, they still need power to pursue desires—thus humans are ultimately pursuing power.

Morgenthau discriminates between different kinds of power. Military power is the most straightforward. It is the ability to coerce action through threat or use of force and pain.

Political power, however, is the kind Morgenthau focuses. The way he describes what political power is on pages 13-14 is that it the use authority to get others to believe or do something. The largest problem we the reader have in understanding political power is that Morgenthau never explicitly explains how it is gotten. Does one first get authority and then have political power because of it? Does demonstrating political power give authority? How does a state weigh different states’ political power? By not answering these questions, he makes it difficult to philosophically attack his theory by allowing any defender of his theory to choose an ad hoc alternative understanding of political power. So, we will be as general as possible in our understanding of political power to encompass all possible definitions. The fairest and strongest definition, in my opinion, is that a demonstration of political power is any time someone causes someone else to believe or do something that they wanted them to believe or do *that they would not otherwise believe or do*.

Critique of Morgenthau

There are three general power relations people can adopt: Tyranny, slavery, or negotiation.

Tyranny

If one is trying to be a tyrant, then one’s goal is to maximize power—we will stay to confines of political power for this discussion—and not be affected by anyone else’s power. This is the realist prescription and description of human relations. If actually enacted, however, the results are often catastrophic. A person who seeks to obtain power for oneself at the expense of others will enable oneself to use power in the way one sees fit. Thus, that person assumes they alone already know what is best for them, even if they do not go to the logical conclusion and realize, based off their logic, what is best in general is what is best for them. They thus declare themselves de facto the proper arbiter of good and evil by pursuing a maximum of power. Any false beliefs the individual holds can only be rectified through the causative consequences of their failures, rather than Socratic thought. The act of taking on knowledge and beliefs from others from, say, reading books is the individual

allowing others to have power over them by our definition. Thus, the tyrant will do no such thing—as tyrants have so often done. Going further, the tyrant can serve no higher cause as serving it is an admission of that cause having power over them or that what is good is detached from their individual. Thus, true cooperation between tyrants, as the realists posit for between states, is not possible.

Going into the realm of the psychological and social, the tyrant stratagem is not viable. As Franz de Waal famously observed, chimpanzees are not hierarchically arranged by power. If the highest status chimp is ruling by power, the hierarchy is unstable, and the tyrant is prone to be murdered by other chimps. Rather, stable hierarchies are those with the most socially adept and reciprocal chimp as the highest status chimp⁵. Who would want to be friends with a tyrant? Who would want to be married by a tyrant? Who would want to be led by a tyrant?

Slavery

To be a slave is to have one have total power over you. If there are tyrants, then there must also be slaves. Being a slave is not a viable social relation just as tyrannies are not stable.

Negotiation

Negotiation can be thought of as the mutual use of political power between individuals to come to an agreement both parties are satisfied with. One must be open and receptive towards the influence of others in order to have influence themselves in this framework. It is the negotiative framework that the Western philosophic culture advanced and that which Western society is premised on. The tyrant and slave paths do not work out well in reality. Rather, negotiation is the optimal choice.

What is called negotiation here is somewhat what Morgenthau refers to as diplomacy. However, he is contradictive of his own prior axioms. He views diplomacy as “nothing but a symptom of the struggle for power among sovereign nations which try to maintain orderly and peaceful relations among themselves”. However, if we were to follow what was laid out before, diplomacy should be another arena in which to gain power over nations. He later explains himself: “When war was the normal activity of kings, the task of diplomacy was not to prevent it, but to bring it about at the most propitious moment. On the other hand, when nations have used diplomacy for the purpose of preventing war, they have often succeeded”. Thus, we can only conclude that diplomacy is merely an extension of domestic policy. It failed in the lead up to WWI and WWII because Germany was only using it to “bring it about at the most propitious moment”. To him, however, diplomacy is about

⁵ Frans de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex among Apes*, 1982.

“[creating] the conditions under which it will not be impossible from the outset to establish a world state”. There is clearly some cognitive dissonance. Diplomacy only works when domestic goals are aligned, but diplomacy allegedly can change domestic goals for the world state to be viable⁶.

This makes it rather hard to critique Morgenthau because one can take away from him whatever one wants to read into him.

Going further with the critique, Morgenthau is also unclear on war and peace. It is implied that the proper way to handle an imperial power is through war. It is also implied that peace is the best scenario, but he does not state under what conditions and what counts as “not vital” objectives. His theory is fundamentally amoral, so one must assume it rejects the Right to Protect idea of starting war to protect people in other states among other liberal ideas as a “not vital” objective. But then he also quotes Edmund Burke saying, “It is not what a lawyer tells me I *may* do, but what humanity, reason and justice tell me I ought to do” when discussing “[giving] up the shadow of worthless [legal] rights for the substance of real advantage” when compromising, adding in more cognitive dissonance⁷.

He goes further by saying, “The methods of foreign policy are relative and conditional: not to advance by destroying the obstacles in one’s way, but to retreat before them... and dissolve them slowly by means of persuasion, negotiation, and pressure”. This fully contradicts the universality of “the desire to attain a maximum of power”⁸. Victoria Tin-bor Hui strongly argues that ruthless tactics, like those employed by the Qin and half-heartedly by Napoleon, are the best way to create a world state⁹. Is the world state not what Morgenthau says is the best way towards peace^{10 11}—peace being the best thing possible? Why not destroy obstacles if one has the power to?

What Morgenthau is stumbling over about here is the biological basis for morality that Piaget and the primatologist wrote extensively about. Here it is arising in the contrast between a stratagem of negotiation (short-term oriented negotiation) and a strategy of negotiation (long-term oriented negotiation).

Stratagem of Negotiation

⁶ Morgenthau, pg. 431, 444.

⁷ Morgenthau pg. 441-42.

⁸ Morgenthau pg. 443.

⁹ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*, 2005.

¹⁰ Fei-Ling Wang, *China Order*, 2017.

¹¹ Fei-Ling Wang, *The China Race: Global Competition for Alternative World Orders*, 2024.

A reading of China’s experience under the China Order that tries to establish a world order and their current push to do so (and the potential catastrophic consequences of success) also makes for a great critique of Morgenthau.

There is a classic rational choice theory economics game. One person is given one hundred dollars on the condition that they can negotiate an amount to give to another a player and keep for themselves. Their answer is to offer one dollar and keep ninety-nine as the other player is still better off taking that deal than refusing it. Clearly, the person who gains ninety-nine dollars earns more in this situation.

If one truly cares about power, one would force this deal at “the most propitious moment” to create a new status quo. This is not what Morgenthau, in contradiction with his own theory, prescribes.

Strategy of Negotiation

Say we play the same game, but, not only do we play it multiple times, you also get to choose who you play it with. Long-term, iterative games that you pick who you play with are much more common and important in the real world and on the international stage than one-off games with no consequences. The proper solution to this game is to be a player that would make other players happy to play with you and recommend you to others to be able to play the game more, perhaps by always giving them more than you take.

Wanting to be a successful player in this strategy rather than trying to dominate the world through a stratagem would be a strong argument for “not to [advancing] by destroying the obstacles in one’s way” as others would be disinclined to play with you.

Mutual Interaction

But what a magnificent revelation this is. The proper way of managing power in interaction is to transcend it. We allowed for the definition that a demonstration of political power is any time someone causes someone else to believe or do something that they wanted them to believe or do *that they would not otherwise believe or do*. However, if you are playing a strategy of negotiation properly, you are causing someone else to believe or do something that you want them to believe or do that they would willingly want to do. This is the ontological opposite of power, and it forms much of our relations. When forming a contract, power can play into for how little the other side is willing to accept the terms, but both sides still see accepting the negotiated terms as better than the alternative. In negotiation, the contract is not compelled, even if it does not live up to some fantastical, utopian ideal. This branch of human relations is ‘mutual interaction’.

One does not get better at mutual interaction by having more political power. Rather, one gets better at it by fulfilling the desires of others, gaining more utility, and having status—making oneself a more appealing player to play with. This is an entire dynamic of human

and state relation that Morgenthau could not reconcile with his theory, leading to the large amount of cognitive dissonance in his concluding section on diplomacy ¹².

Part 2: Status Liberalism

Liberal Philosophy

There are many liberal philosophies. Siedentop traced the birth of liberalism from Paul and then to Ockham and the Papal Revolution¹³. Mises claimed liberalism has nothing to do with metaphysics or spirituality¹⁴. In its essence, however, liberalism revolves around allowing each individual to pursue their desires in accordance with ‘the state of nature’ or ‘natural law’ or ‘what is within their rights’. Either by grace of God or as a derivative from the equality that stems from the mutual arbitrariness of our desires, no one can claim one’s desires has authority over another’s. Liberal philosophy, also being based in the unique empirical epistemology that developed alongside it—stemming from Ockham’s nominalism and leading to Locke—and that appeared in no other philosophic tradition, is not dogmatic and adopts what is pragmatic. It is pragmatic and as well as philosophically sound to not play games of dominance and power over each other when pursuing desire but rather play games that lead to more flourishing, safety, and opportunities. It is not coincidence that all the great free market thinkers were also liberals just as all the empiricists were liberals. The free market is one of the liberal answers as to how to distribute resources in a fair way to allow all a chance at pursuing desires. Liberalism is empiricism and free market capitalism.

Status Psychology

The following section will briefly go over the relevant ideas in status psychology to the IR practitioner.

What is Status

Status is perhaps the most important thing to humans whether or not we are aware of it. Our very perception of the world, our health, what we consider moral and immoral, and the way we govern are all fundamentally tied to status and the status games we and those around us are playing. Status cannot be described apart from its associated game. It is merely our perceived relative ranking in the games we play in. It cannot be empirically measured in the scientific sense but rather is sensed by the other players of the game.

¹² I owe much of the inspiration to the conception of this framework of critique to Jordan Peterson and his many lectures.

¹³ Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, 2014.

¹⁴ Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism: In the Classical Tradition*, trans. Louis Spadaro, 1985.

However, to deny the existence of status is akin to denying the existence of fame, social rolls and their associated ranking, and possibly the idea of hierarchy itself ¹⁵.

Status Games

Humans naturally organize themselves in hierarchies. Different hierarchies have different rules for climbing up and down. One's relative ranking in a hierarchy is dependent on one's status within that hierarchy. Because these hierarchies are fundamentally organized by status and have rules, they are known as status games. Players can choose what status games they want to compete in but are also forced by others to play in their status game. There are said to be dominance games and prestige games, with prestige games either being a virtue game or a success game ¹⁶.

Dominance games are those premised on use of force and coercion—power. When states go to war, they play a dominance game to establish dominance. But, as noted earlier, dominance games are not stable ¹⁷.

Virtue games are fascinating. One earns status through moral acts, acts of duty, acts of obedience. Religion, ideologies, and different forms of elitism are all virtue games. Humans first used virtue games to transition away from dominance games. Virtue games are notable for being that which can restrain dominance games and that which a prosperous success game is dependent on.

Success games are premised on earning merit or having utility in domains ranging from science to business to sports. The more a society is premised on success games, the less tyrannical it is. A tyrant wants nothing more than there to be only one status game, namely their virtue game. The history of the West is the history of how it, largely through the early activities of the Church, enshrined success games—dominion over nature instead of a virtue game of belonging with it. It was the virtue game of the West that allowed the promotion and nourishing of success games that defined the West ¹⁸.

The Dream

It is becoming increasingly undeniable and the consensus that we fundamentally view our lives as a story—the hero's journey as it has been coined. The Enlightenment paradigm of the world being apparent facts and rationality has been overturned, after some delay caused by the postmodernists dominating academia, by the phenomenological viewpoint

¹⁵ Will Storr, *The Status Game* (William Collins, 2021), Prologue - Chapter 2.

¹⁶ Storr, Chapter 5.

¹⁷ Storr, Chapter 7.

¹⁸ Storr, Chapter 6.

by the likes of Jung or Rogers backed further by recent discoveries. What we think to be our journey, and the associated goals, determines how we perceive reality.

A true discovery, if objective, should be able to be found from different starting points. The idea above can be shown from both the perspective of status psychology and on the international stage:

One's virtue game inherently not only shapes what one sees as good and evil but also what one devotes their attention to. If one's virtue game prompts one to notice small hand movements as signals or the certain way of wearing one's hat, then one will be primed to notice these things. To an outsider of the game, all of these virtue signals will be missed¹⁹.

On the international stage, we observe the fallacy of détente. Both the US and the USSR interpreted détente differently. The US thought of it as the beginning of a peaceful accord between the two powers—this being what Kissinger wanted. The Soviets thought détente was the US allowing them to deal with those in their zone of influence as they pleased as long as they stopped their Comintern activities in places like Latin America. Thus, the US was surprised when détente ended when the USSR invaded Afghanistan.

The Player

The player is immensely caught up in their dream. Being social animals, all of our dreams are tied up to some status game that we associate ourselves with. This status game, for all intents and purposes, is a group. It has been demonstrated that our beliefs largely come from our group and that our beliefs change as those of the group change. Breaking with the group, for changes in belief or any matter, is rare. One is far more likely to be Nazi in 1930's Germany than a hero like Schindler. Ordinary men choose to adopt the winning virtue game—the Nazi's having successfully destroyed any other path to status—or change their beliefs with their current game than face the consequences of having principles²⁰.

Browning concludes in his study on Police Battalion 101, "The shame culture, making conformity a prime virtue, impelled ordinary Germans in uniform to commit terrible crimes rather than suffer the stigma of cowardice and weakness and the "social death" of isolation and alienation vis-à-vis their comrades" with members of the Battalion who could not bring themselves to massacre brushing off their comrades actions by saying, "... It was not particularly important to me to be promoted or otherwise to advance, because I had my prosperous business back home. The company chiefs ... on the other hand were young men and career policemen who wanted to become something." This goes to merely highlight that the Nazi's created a singular path to status that players could easily find all

¹⁹ Storr, Chapter 3, 13, 16, 21, 26.

²⁰ Storr, Chapter 15, 22.

sorts of justifications for pursuing, as the book lays out with other examples²¹. The game makes the player.

Tightening

Tightening is a phenomenon where members of various games collectively strengthen their identification with or against a group and radicalize their beliefs—a race to the fringes to show who is most virtuous—in response to collective stressors. For example, if one is attacked for having a certain identity, even if one rarely considers the association, one will be forced to defend that identity—raising it to the realm of consciousness and contemplation, making one primed to think of their association with it. This can happen at a national level towards the national identity in response to provocations by a hostile nation.

Tightening occurs against a game when one feels the game is unfair. This is seen in the laying flat movement that evolved into the let it rot movement in China among the youth who feel like they can never succeed in such a corrupt system. A similar thing occurred during the 2008 recession (around the world but also) in the US where college students' opinions towards capitalism negatively spiked²².

Changing the Game

Changes in the game are some of the most dramatic scenes in history. It is the Rome adopting Christianity. It is the industrial revolution. It is the Archipelago. It is the International Liberal Order.

Change—revolution—is generally, if not always elite driven, or at least the middle class driven, who are not far off from being elites with their own game. It is very hard to organize a revolution and properly implement a new regime and game as seen by the failure of the June 6th (Tiananmen Square 1989) Movements and the Arab Spring. The elites feel the need to change the game when they feel the current game is not rewarding status correctly (e.g. a young, educated middle class that feel as if they are more qualified than previous generations but are in a worse social and economic position) or when there are too many elites (e.g. too many PhDs, not enough faculty positions)—that is to say, when the elites tighten against the current game. In both cases, the disgruntled elites are inclined to create their own rival game to earn status in and then compete with the current game²³.

²¹ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 3rd ed., 2017, pg. 75, 240 .

²² Storr, *Chapters 19-21*, 27.

²³ Storr, Chapter 14.

Competing Games

Individuals are ultimately after status. However, one's status does not transfer games easily, and one gains status for being a part of a game that has more status than a different game. Thus, games compete. However, unfortunately, one gains increased status for virtue signaling when one is in a tightened game. One can easily create a tightened game by causing it to compete openly against a different game. Uncynically, players compete because they are deep in the dream of their game whose conclusion is that they ought to compete for the sake of what is good. We all believe that some things ought to be done and others not and fight for and against those respectively²⁴.

Humans developed non-dominance (prestige) games in part to limit intra-group violence, but we are incredibly aggressive and violent towards those playing other games. We are naturally adept at seeing, based on subtle signals, what games people are playing. We think of those playing other games as unintelligent and immoral, while those playing our games as more intelligent and moral. Those 'tall poppies' playing other games deserve to be cut down—and we get immense pleasure in doing so, while those high in status playing our game are our noble leaders²⁵.

Dominance games are often employed games are often employed between competing virtue games. Thomas Schelling described it, war, as bargaining. What is being bargained over in a civil war or revolution is the orientation of the institutions governing relations between individuals and the state and individuals amongst each other. In the case of war, the institution governing relations (and status) between states is being bargained over. Once one realizes that institutions, beings with rules that give out rewards and punishments, are games, then one can reach the critical conclusion: The state itself is a game.

Status Liberalism

It is relatively straightforward to incorporate liberal philosophy and status psychology. According to liberalism, we all have desires. One of those desires is status. For some, this desire is stronger than others. However, status is powerful to have. It increases the resources and opportunities one has available, reproductive success, and health. This is to say, status overall helps the pursuit of all other desires. Thus, the liberal enterprise, or the liberal virtue game, is one that designs appropriate status games for people to compete in. However, there is no particular philosophic reason to continue to play by liberal rules if other agents are playing an opposing status game.

²⁴ Storr, Chapter 27.

²⁵ Storr, Chapter 5, 12, 16.

To understand the utility of the synthesis of the two bodies of thought, the following framework for international relations is provided:

The State as a Status Game

There are a wide variety of regime types that states come in ranging from democratic to totalitarian. It is unlikely that someone like President Harry Truman would make for a strong dictator, nor would a dictator like Mao Zedong make for an effective candidate on the Democratic or Republican party ticket. Both are products of their respective systems.

The state, simply put, is the governing institution of a nation. There are many internal components of it that affect its decisions and behavior that can vary drastically by the state being discussed. For the players of the state status game—the *State Game*, like any game, the goal is to become the highest status player. The State Game is a varying mixture of dominance, virtue, and success games. The degree of prevalence of different kinds of games is dependent on the regime. For example, monarchies emphasize virtue games heavily, democracies emphasize a mix of virtue and success games, and authoritarian regimes emphasize dominance games that back a crafted virtue game.

The National Game

There is a myriad of other games the players in the State Game are playing and must successfully do so to win the State Game. For the simplicity of this grand view of things, we can call this grouping of necessary games the *National Game*, essentially the pervasive cultural dream of the time.

The National Game generally takes the form of a virtue game but also a success game in Western cultures in particular. An example of a virtue game would be any popular political movement where one needs to stick closely to the particulars of the ideology to become a successful candidate, whereas breakaway candidates must endure the punishments of losing status in the virtue game—failure. An example of the success game would be the culture of entrepreneurship that gives some politicians status in the eyes of voters.

Playing the State and National Games

The state game is a relatively fixed and slow changing game, at least from the perspective of a player. Generally speaking, they need to rise to the top before they can attempt to change it. The National Game, however, changes quite quickly if not at least every decade. Thus, to the player, there are generally three things they can do:

First, if there exists a National Game that they are partial to, they can naturally play it. There has been a plethora of elected leaders that rode the wave of the times, only to be washed out when the times changed.

Second, the players can create an amiable National Game to themselves. A quite famous and powerful example of this is the imperial elite in Germany near the end of the war plotting to create the ‘stab-in-the-back’ theory that kept Germany on the imperial path.

Third, after winning the State Game with a National Game one does not support, by whatever means that was done, one can use one’s newfound power to create a new National Game, like the Nazis did after their electoral victory²⁶. This allows one to play by the rules they prefer but still stay high status.

The National Game and Tightening

Tightening can occur towards the National game when one 1) buys into the game and 2) perceives threats to it. Leaders—dictators—naturally understand this. Tightening leads to radicalization and other phenomena like guerrilla warfare. Not giving one’s enemies’ leaders material to use to tighten their society is always a sound policy.

Tightening against the National Game, in turn, occurs when one 1) does not buy into the game and 2) perceives status as being unfairly distributed or threatened. For example, many elites in the Allies in the lead up to WWII, as Morgenthau notes, began identifying themselves with the Axis, creating a Fifth Column, because they did not believe their society could ensure their status (see below). As another example, it is often the poor areas of democratic countries (e.g. former East Germany) or those systematically oppressed that are prone to radical beliefs like Fascism or Communism.

Humiliation

Those that are humiliated are prone to terrible violence. The Germans got themselves to believe, after WWI, that their entire society had been humiliated. They took this out on people like the Jews. They did their best to humiliate the Jews while killing them to make them feel better about themselves. There is a large body of literature on humiliation (or having low status) within the field of status psychology that one could draw many insights from²⁷.

Leaders as Status Chasers

We need not be cynical about chasing status. It is a deep part of our nature and allows society to function. That said, our leaders did not innocently and naively walk into power. They wanted to promote their status game and get status. Thus, inherently, our leaders care about status, making the body of status psychology applicable to them.

²⁶ Storr, Chapter 22.

²⁷ Storr, Chapters 7-8, 22-23.

Power and Status

It is often assumed that states pursue power. If this is the case, then it can more properly be said that the State Game rewards status to those that increase the power of the state. One does not receive status for potential but rather for action. The predecessor who developed the capabilities for the successor rarely gets much status. Thus, a leader needs to do something to earn status. Thus, it is even better to say the leader who displays power earns status through the State Game.

However, this is not quite the case. If the US were to conquer Canada, it would be quite a display of power. But, due to the National Game, the leader would actually lose status. Instead, the leader, if in the US, would likely gain more status by developing the capabilities for power but instead using them to maintain peace and stability. Further, they would also gain status through mutual cooperation and negotiation with our allies, not by coercing them with power.

Thus, the desire to pursue the status quo or imperialism comes solely from domestic games. Rationalistic strategies, like those described by theorists like Waltz, will be employed as far as they help the leaders earn status in their games. The international stage may be a grand arena for leaders to earn status, but they still must earn status on the international stage in ways that align with their domestic games.

International Status Games

When a player is highly invested in a game, their identity is synonymous with that game, so they become greatly tightened. Players in the State or National Game can find their own sense of status tied to that of the state or nation. States exist in the international system and have their own respective status compared to other states. We will call this game the International Game. The status symbols and rules change depending on the time. Some states do not feel the need to always engage in every part of the International Game—the International Game in actuality being a hierarchy of games. Bismark opted to not engage in the colonial game or have a navy, while his successor Wilhelm II found it greatly damaging to the Germany's (his) status not to have colonies or a navy.

Some IR theorists argue there are intrinsic games to the international stage, primarily different dominance games. However, others do argue that virtue and success games are also intrinsic to the international stage due to the inherent social nature of man. In the present day, we, the West, have created our own status games revolving around economics, culture, and politics where players lose status if they also play dominance games, allowing Western Europe to finally find peace with itself.

However, at the end of the day, while a state may not be able to earn status in a domestic game but only in an international game, the state does not determine its own behavior. Rather, the leaders do, and the leaders engage in the domestic games and have their own game they support. Bismark's domestic games did not support engagement in some international games. Wilhelm's domestic games greatly supported participation in international dominance games.

An imperial state may view a peaceful state as weak and low status, but the peaceful state does not care as it is not participating in that status game. However, an imperial state does not view a peaceful state as being engaged in a different game and does not see it through the other state's perspective. The imperial state simply sees the peaceful state as weak. Likewise, interwar Britain did not see Germany as an imperial state. It saw it through its game. It thought Germany ultimately wanted peace and simply had its own unique way of pursuing the maintenance status quo and fixing valid grievances preventing peace. Hitler, on the other hand, was aware of Britain's game and played the part of a player when he needed to²⁸.

Part 3: Comparison

Morgenthau and Status Psychology

There are many notable similarities of thought between Morgenthau and the literature on status psychology that indicate the transition from power to status is more natural than one might otherwise suspect. I found countless examples demonstrating this; the following are just a few:

Substituting Status for Power

Morgenthau says "...most people are unable to satisfy their desire for power within the national community... the people project those unsatisfied aspirations onto the international scene"²⁹. Here, he shows that there is a domain for pursuing power domestically and a separate one internationally that is an extension of the domestic drive. This is a reformulation of saying there are domestic and international status games.

"The lower strata of the middle classes especially had always derived at least a limited satisfaction from their superiority to the proletariat... National socialism offered them lower races to look down upon and foreign enemies to feel superior to and conquer"³⁰. The

²⁸ Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, Chapter 4.

²⁹ Morgenthau, pg. 74.

³⁰ Morgenthau, pg. 78.

language of “superiority” and “[looking] down upon” indicates he has conflated status and power.

Descriptions of Status Games

“Thus it is not by accident that certain groups of the populations are either the most militant supporters of the national aspirations for power in the international field, or else refuse to have anything to do with them at all”³¹. The phenomenon being described here is competing status games in a time of tightening. He, in this section of the book, paints a picture of the history of nationalism at a time when people were deprived of status, for various reasons, so they tightened their identity towards the state. The opposing view was a ‘gold mine’ for potential status to be harvested³².

He continues, “On the one hand, relatively small, yet powerful, groups of intellectual, political, and military leaders in Great Britain and France either refused to identify themselves with their countries or even preferred to identify themselves with the national enemy. The leaders who felt this way were insecure in their power positions, especially in view of the initial political and military weakness of their countries, and the enemy alone seemed to be able to assure them their positions on the top of the social pyramid”³³. When status games fail to have all the aristocracy feel content by the divvying up of status, the aristocrats create a competing status game. They think their status is threatened by the weakness of their status game, so they join a different state’s status game.

Tightening

“The increasing insecurity of the individual in Western societies, especially in the lower strata, has magnified enormously the frustration of the individual power drives. This, in turn, has given rise to an increased desire for compensatory identification with the collective national aspirations for power”³⁴. This is the precise phenomenon of tightening if one merely replaces the word power for status.

Points of Agreement

1. Nations Compete

There are many neoliberals, idealists, and the like that either downplay or demonize the competition on the world stage. According to liberalism, competition is a great good that drives innovation, forces states to invest in its people and give them liberty, and allows for

³¹ Morgenthau, pg. 75.

³² Storr, Chapter 17.

³³ Morgenthau, pg. 76.

³⁴ Morgenthau, pg. 75.

experimentation in different polities. According to status psychology, competing in status games is natural and allows those most worthy of having status to earn it. A well-structured game is sure to bring benefits to all of its players as we want the most competent among us to manage our resources and encourage the cultivation of the desired traits of the game. The alternative to competition is nepotism.

Morgenthau, interestingly, wants a world state. It is unclear what the structure of this polity would be. One could assume that he imagines something similar based on the states within the US based on some of his comments. In such a case, these states do indeed lean into friendly competition with one another and experimentation that status liberalism prescribes. Further, when discussing the world stage, he says, “If the desire for power cannot be abolished everywhere in the world, those who might be cured would simply fall victims to the power of others”³⁵. This functions as an endorsement of competition.

2. There are bad actors with imperialists ambitions that need to be checked

In status psychology, there explicitly exist games that others play that you will find to be opposite in value that naturally cause conflict. Following liberal philosophy, when the situation permits, one should diminish those opposing games that harm those that rather have liberalism. For the foreseeable future, it is conservative to act as if there will always exist illiberal states playing imperialistic games that oppress those that would want freedom. Competition is the answer.

Realism greatly emphasizes, “A nation which mistakes a policy of imperialism for a policy of the status quo will be unprepared to meet the threat to its own existence which the other nation’s policy constitutes. Its weakness will invite attack and may make war inevitable”³⁶. Thus, one must always be vigilant.

3. Skepticism Towards International Bodies and Law

Historically speaking, liberalism was tied to consular movements and not absolutism. When the Consular Reforms failed against papal absolutism and continental Europe turned to secular absolutism, it was only in Britain that liberalism, empiricism, and consularism in the form of Parliament, a decentralized government with separated powers, survived³⁷. When Napoleon tried making Europe a united, centralized empire—and when Germany tried twice later—it was Britain that fought against it. Liberalism finds no need for

³⁵ Morgenthau, pg. 17.

³⁶ Morgenthau, pg. 420.

³⁷ Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, Chapter 24.

a centralized authority that suppresses competition and experimentation and is prone to corruption.

Morgenthau agrees that international bodies and law are dependent on the sovereignty of states. Because of this, he agrees that they alone cannot stop an imperial state without strong punishing mechanisms that would essentially be war. Thus, the League of Nations failed. However, he does believe the world state, if backed by a world community that would allow all states to be turned into one, would be a great thing. For the time being, however, we lack a world community. Thus, we should remain skeptical of international bodies and law.

Three Main Problems of Realism Addressed

1. Domestic and International Influence
 - Realist Approach

To the realist, all states are pursuing power as their ultimate goal. States differ in the means of pursuing power because they wear different 'ideological [veils]'. The manifestation of this veil is the extent that domestic policy affects foreign policy largely dictated by the international stage.

However, this assumes that a state's preferences are naturally conflictual with other states as all states are only pursuing power. This forces the conceptualization of domestic policy to be a black box whose conclusion will be to pursue power.

- Status Liberalism Approach

Status liberalism sees no justification in making the state a black box. Rather, domestic policy is critical to understanding the state and national game that help determine foreign policy. To quote Moravcsik, "For liberals, state behavior reflects varying patterns of state preferences. States require a 'purpose,' a perceived underlying stake in the matter at hand, in order to provoke conflict, propose cooperation, or take any other significant foreign policy action. The precise nature of these stakes drives policy... Liberal theory rejects... the realist assumption that state preferences must be treated as if naturally conflictual"³⁸.

Case Study: Britain 1918-1939: Arms Reduction, Pacifism, and Isolation

Between 1918 and 1939, Britain pursued a policy of intentionally weakening its overall power after WWI until the White Paper of 1935. Even after the White Paper, Britain pursued a policy of accommodation until 1939.

³⁸ Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997), pg. 520.

Further, Britain chose to stop acting as a 'balancer' and largely withdrew from European affairs. In doing so, they denied themselves the chance to use power on European countries or pursue power.

Lastly, Britain, and the US, refused to enforce the Treaty of Versailles repeatedly. Proper enforcement would have without a doubt prevented WWII. Instead, the British, to the horror of the French, repeatedly stopped the French from preventing the resurgence of their war-bound neighbor. Enforcement of the treaty would only serve to increase British power over Germany, and the threat of not enforcing it could be using against the declining French state.

- Realist Approach

This series of choices fundamentally goes against what realism would expect to happen. Realism could simply say that Britain made poor choices or was not acting rationally, but, as a largely rationalistic philosophy, such a statement would undermine realism.

- Status Liberalism Approach

One of the first things a status liberal would notice is that there were firmly entrenched pacifistic beliefs within the elites at the time caused by the trauma of WWI and possibly their more competent and brave elites all being killed by the war. Even Churchill supported reduction in power at the time. The elites thought that war was outdated and that various forces like economics or the idea of modernity would prevent future wars. Britain also has always had the idea that it was separate from Europe. This elite national game—even though polling showed that the British people would have supported military invention when Germany began acting imperially³⁹—led to their foreign policy of isolation and power reduction.

Further, it was also popular at the time, in large part because of Keynes, to see WWI as a war without any particular cause—certainly not an imperial Germany as the French are much more dangerous. Because of this, it was included in the national game to think that the Treaty of Versailles was unfair. Thus, by giving Hitler, who assuredly wants to maintain the status quo as war is outdated, what he wants and what the German state ought to have, the British were, in their minds, rationally preventing war. Those Premiers that helped reduce arms control, make various treaties with the Germans, give various concessions to the Germans, and the like were all given status in their national game. They were not participating in the French's game of suppressing the Germans. In fact, because the French

³⁹ Kagan, pg. 342.

were making all the wrong moves according to the British national game, the British saw the French as the main threat to peace.

Some within Britain were wise enough not to play the national game or to stop playing it. It took the traumatic event of the German takeover of Czechoslovakia for the general public and statesmen to tighten around the opposing national game. Even then, it then took the German invasion of Poland for Chamberlain lose enough status for his national game to beaten fully.

2. Cooperation on the International Stage

▪ Realist Approach

Realism holds that all cooperation is contingent as all states ultimately seek power over one another. No preferences can ever be aligned fundamentally.

▪ Status Liberalism Approach

Status liberalism certainly believes in the possibility of cooperation. If two states both support similar or the same games, then both can cooperate to maintain and strengthen that game. In games like liberalism, states and statesmen are rewarded status for cooperating and are punished for betrayals and unclean competition.

Case Study: The EU: Liberalism, Cooperation, and Sacrifice

Instead of attempting another Carthaginian peace after WWII, France and German thinkers pushed forward to create institutions that would eventually become the EU. The EU, like the US that previously united many sovereign states, is premised on the ideas of liberalism and has created fabulous results.

Notably, the French and German states are historic rivals. France, after being a part of the winning coalition a second time, did not institute a systemic power imbalance as realist theory would predict. Instead, it integrated its own power capabilities, like coal and steel, with that of Germany's. Instead of crippling Germany, France helped rebuild it.

Going further, France and Germany could dominate the continent of Europe if they chose to. Instead, they given up much political power and wealth to the weaker Eastern European states and are allowing the, admittedly slow, rise of Poland.

At the same time, Europe has neglected its military and allowed Russia to become a threat, making them dependent on the US.

▪ Realist Approach

The EU is a complex puzzle for a realist to work out. States within it are mostly resistant to the idea of a United States of Europe. By the realist understanding of a world community, this should mean there is no European community. This is far from reality. There is a strong sense of European identity coupled by a national identity that still wants sovereignty. However, to the realist, because the states are sovereign, one should still fear them. Instead, France helped build up Germany, and then Western Europe helped build up Eastern Europe. Instead of pursuing power, Europe let their military readiness slacken. This genuine cooperation and sense of safety is not what realism would expect.

- Status Liberalism Approach

In the time after WWII, Germany had just been freed from Nazi institutions and France recently freed from Vichy institutions. Ordinary people are extraordinarily quick to adopt a new virtue game once they see their old one is irrelevant. Liberal thinkers after WWII designed a series of institutions imbedded with liberal philosophy to change the prominent game in Europe, a dominance game, with a virtue game based on liberal values where different nations could compete economically, politically, and culturally but also cooperate.

The actions of France and Germany are merely the actions of liberal states that do not have power as their main motive. Just as the US helped build up Germany and Japan after WWII because of its national game, Western Europe helped and is helping Eastern Europe build itself after freedom from the Soviets.

Because the states in the EU all play by the same virtue game of liberalism, they are all willingly cooperating amongst each other without a power dynamic being the major feature of their interactions. Rather, mutual interaction is the dominating feature.

It was a flawed policy of the EU to buckpass military affairs and global competition to the US. It originated from the same line of thinking that has been around in Europe for centuries that “modernity has come, and economic ties will stop future war”.

3. Competition on the International Stage

- Realist Approach

The realist sees interstate competition on the international stage as natural as states are pursuing to maximize their power. Competition is either through alliances of convenience or between individual states.

- Status Liberalism Approach

It is true that individual states compete for power against each other. However, realist philosophy, as addressed earlier, stops its adherents from conceptualizing any uniting

narrative for multiple nations to cooperate with each other to obtain. As the EU shows, however, there do exist higher order things nations can collectively pursue. States can compete for institutions they ideologically align with.

Status liberalism in particular focuses on competing institutions and competition over institutions and can more readily explain phenomena such as grey-zone tactics and China's institution building & push to establish an alternative world order.

Case Study: Competition in the 21st Century: The West, China, and the Competition for the International Order

China has increased in its relative power substantially over the past few decades via foreign investment and participation in Western institutions like the WTO that it has systematically taken advantage of.

The US for some time has been thought of as a hegemon. If states wanted to balance against it, they could side with China. However, those middle powers that could best do this all decided to side with the US and are actually now decoupling from China to make it weaker, leaving China to invest large sums of money into the Global South to earn lipservice.

- Realist Approach

The hegemonic understanding of the West goes hand in hand with realism. Because realism cannot conceive of any fundamental uniting narrative, there must be a coercive or circumstantial reason states would group together. A realist's understanding of the West then, naturally, is that the US is a hegemon—a behemoth of power—that declared the rules for the Liberal International Order that all other countries must play by.

China, by investing in the South, is trying to become a hegemon in its own right by courting countries to join it in balancing against the US.

Realism, however, cannot explain why the West would let China into its vulnerable liberal institutions, why the West is just starting to oppose it at a time it is beginning to decline, and why Europe and other countries in the West are not balancing against US 'hegemony'.

- Status Liberalism Approach

The West largely came into being after WWII. It consists of those countries that developed the Anglo-American liberal tradition, Continental Europe was made liberal as a result of the EU, and those Asian nations that were made liberal done so through US-backed institutions. These countries not only have overcome the security dilemma wholly, but their main problem is actually getting their members to militarize. All the nations are connected

through various liberal institutions of trade, culture, and collective security. Although the US arguably has the most political power, no one member dominates the West due to its decentralized nature, and it is largely premised around mutual interaction—not use of power.

China has developed an ideology coined the ‘China Order’ over the past two millennia. Currently, China is attempting to make a world safe for dictators by making loose ties that are slowly forming a bloc with countries like Russia, Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, and the like. However, as there is no uniting narrative between these countries other than striving for power, they cannot properly function as or form a bloc.

China and others are trying to ideologically shift the global institutions towards one that favors their views that oppose the liberal order the West is trying to maintain⁴⁰. This form of competition is transnational and goes beyond, at least in the West, the individual nation’s striving for power. The realist, state-focused paradigm misses the larger dynamics at play.

The West is superior because of its liberal philosophy. It is far superior in terms of mutual interaction, prosperity, safety, and innovation—and thus military power—than any opposing philosophy. It allows states to cooperate harmoniously and compete within the liberal framework. This competition only serves to enhance the prosperity and innovation of the liberal states. Liberal states are not power hungry. They seek status and desire fulfillment through mutual cooperation.

Part 4: Conclusion

The realist theory that proceeded the idealist theory in the Anglo-American tradition was certainly a safer theory. However, the dogma around realist theory and their strawmanning of liberal theory as only idealist theory is not justifiable. Realism is opposed to liberal philosophy. If we want to preserve our freedoms and values in the West, we cannot follow realism to the book. We must take the good parts of it—its emphasis on competition, the existence of bad actors, and skepticism—and leave behind the flawed parts—the focus on power, denial of cooperation, and undervaluing of domestic influence. Status liberalism starts from the belief in liberal philosophy and tries to make a framework for the international stage by combining it with modern status psychology. It acknowledges the reality that states are run by individuals in various institutions and organizations. Thus, liberalism places an emphasis on understanding these individuals that largely control the behavior of the larger bodies. Therefore, attempting to create a framework by merging liberalism with psychology is a sound pursuit.

⁴⁰ Wang, *The China Race: Global Competition for Alternative World Orders*.