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Structural Realism, Classical Realism and Human Nature

Chris Brown

Reading Waltz in Context

It is, I think, generally acknowledged that Waltz's major books are 'modern classics' – there are those who claim to see no merit in *Theory of International Politics* and to regard its success and influence as incomprehensible, but, for the most part, this is simply a way of expressing dislike of the ideas it contains rather than a genuine judgement as to its standing in the field.¹ On the other hand, there are a great many writers who argue with greater sincerity that, while classic in its own terms, Waltzian realism has parted company with classical realism; indeed the name 'neorealism' implies discontinuity, and was coined (by Richard Ashley in 'The Poverty of Neorealism') precisely to make exactly this point – possibly why Waltz himself prefers the term structural realism.² What I will argue in this chapter is that this judgement, though in good faith, is misconceived, and that Waltz's theory has clear roots in the pasts of realism. In order to make this argument, I will first backtrack somewhat; if, as I suggest is the case, nearly everyone agrees that *Man, The State and War*³ and *Theory of International Politics*³ are classic texts in so far as they demand that anyone involved in the field must engage with them – and most also consider that they are classics in so far as they set a standard of excellence in the field – then it is not unreasonable to treat them in the way that we might treat works of 'classical' political theory, and to pose the question 'how are classic texts to be read'?

Some post-structuralists/deconstructionists answer this question by offering what is sometimes called a 'symptomatic reading' – the locution is that of Louis Althusser,

though the postmodern critic Frederic Jameson is a more accessible source. In *The Political Unconscious* Jameson argues that interpretation “always presupposes, if not a conception of the unconscious itself, then at least some mechanism of mystification or repression in terms of which it would make sense to seek a latent meaning behind a manifest one, or to rewrite the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code”.⁴ A symptomatic reading, in other words, pays attention to exclusions as opposed to surface content, and invites us to reconstruct the text to fill the gaps and silences that have been identified – an example is Ashley’s ‘Living on Borderlines: Man, Post-structuralism and War’ which offers a symptomatic reading of *Man, The State and War*, bringing out the ways in which the text escapes the control of the author, at some points privileging ‘man’ at others ‘the state’.⁵ There is something to be said for this approach; exclusions and omissions clearly are important and the author cannot be allowed to exercise authority over the interpretation of a text – but, still, such a reading is always open to the charge that one can make of any text whatever one wishes to. Rather than a symptomatic reading, but not wholly divorced from the idea, I would prefer to approach texts along contextualist lines – that is, we must read texts in contexts; more specifically, we must treat texts as speech-acts, and ask not just what the author is *saying*, but also what the author is *doing*.⁶ Symptoms are important here, but what this centrally involves is an attempt to recreate as far as possible the context within which the author wrote; most of all, we must not assume that an author is addressing a timeless set of problems, much less a set of problems that we happen to be concerned with. This is a very difficult task, for two reasons. To illustrate the first, consider Quentin Skinner’s work on Hobbes; a prodigious scholar with a command of the relevant classical and early-modern languages which has rarely been equalled, Skinner is

probably familiar with everything that might have influenced Hobbes's work. Skinner's scholarship explicitly reflects this reading and so can claim to place Hobbes in his contemporary context – by following Skinner we can, in principle, see what worried Hobbes and what he wanted to do with his texts. It is impossible to imagine this kind of depth of context being available to even the most learned and industrious commentators on modern writers – we can do our best, but our best is bound to fall short of the ideal.

But there is a second, more intractable problem, which is perhaps best illustrated by a musical analogy. Consider the post 1945 movement towards 'authenticity' in classical music, the attempt to recreate the conditions under which works by e.g. Bach and Beethoven were first performed – the use of original or replica instruments, time signatures and notation of the period, smaller orchestras and choirs, different layouts, and, in general, original performance practice based on contemporary accounts. The result of this movement has been to change quite radically what we understand by the performance of, say, a Beethoven symphony or concerto – there is a great deal more lightness and speed than in the rather ponderous versions that used to be common, period pianofortes create a much crisper sound-world, and so on; even modern symphony orchestras usually pick up some of these changes. But what cannot be said is that we are hearing Beethoven's symphonies the way Beethoven's audiences would have heard them. The reason for this is quite simple – we cannot wipe out the auditory experiences of two hundred years by an act of will. Musically literate modern audiences will have heard Brahms, Wagner, Bruckner, Mahler *et al*, and even those who do not frequent the concert hall will have picked up much of the musical language of these composers via popular music (for example, the many film scores

written by Mahler's pupils) and this will colour the way they hear Beethoven; there is no way this influence can be eliminated.

The analogy here is, I hope, clear. *Theory of International Politics* was published in 1979. This was before: the rapid expansion of rational-choice analysis and formal theory characteristic of much (US) IR of the last three decades; the framing of such work in terms of 'neorealism' and 'liberal-institutionalism' in the 1980s and more recent debates over relative versus absolute gains, offensive versus defensive realism, balancing strategies, soft-balancing and bandwagoning; the arrival also in the 1980s of the so-called Third Debate, with post-structuralist theory, Frankfurt-style Critical Theory, Feminism and Gender Studies making an entrance; the addition of Lacanian psychoanalysis to the list, and the rise of multiple varieties of constructivism in the 1990s and 2000s; the recent revival of interest in classical and Augustinian realism, and the Just War tradition; the attempt to establish Carl Schmitt as a canonical figure in IR; the emergence of debates on global distributive justice and more widely the emergence of international political theory as a recognisable sub-field; and, more parochially, the establishment of the 'English School' as a putatively distinctive approach to IR. And all this has been in the realm of theory – the end of the Cold War is also worthy of note. Of course, many of these developments were stimulated by readings of Waltz's work, or developed in opposition to such readings, but the musical analogy holds – post-Beethovenian musical language was, one way or another, heavily influenced by Beethoven's work but it still makes it impossible to listen to Beethoven with early nineteenth century ears. Similarly, how are we, in 2008, to read Waltz's work without everything that has happened since then in the field influencing our judgements?

The question seems to answer itself; it simply is not possible to achieve the kind of distance that this approach to reading a text requires – but we can at least make the effort, and, as it happens, I am well placed to make a shot at this task, because in 1980 I wrote a review essay on John Burton's *Deviance Terrorism and War* and Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, which means I can at least see how I thought about things then, before all the developments listed in the previous paragraph.⁷ Moreover, although about half of this essay is dedicated to Waltz, the main focus of the piece was on Burton, and my reading of Waltz was written *sine ira et studio* which makes it, I think, a more useful document. I may have been grinding axes, but not with a view to cutting down the author of *Theory of International Politics*.

Re-reading my own text for the first time in a quarter of a century has been an interesting experience. The first thing it brings to light is not strictly relevant to my topic here, but of interest nonetheless, and that is the focus on the nature of structure in the first response to Waltz's text. As is now almost entirely forgotten, the most immediate response to Waltz's argument (which was first presented in *The Handbook of Political Science* in 1975) was a philippic from Morton Kaplan, who took serious exception to Waltz's critique of his conception of a 'system'; Waltz distinguishes between the systems level properly conceptualised, and the level of interacting units, and accused Kaplan of failing to grasp this distinction in his famous text *System and Process in International Politics*.⁸ To my mind, and, given my interest at the time in structuralist and neo-Marxist theories of international relations, this was an important issue to me, Waltz had much the better of this debate, but was vulnerable to the charge that his version of structure was no more capable of showing how structure

was transmuted into process than Kaplan's. To make this point I refer in the review to the Marxist literature on the subject, and E.P. Thompson's recent critique of Louis Althusser, *The Poverty of Theory*;⁹ Thompson suggests the need for 'junction concepts' and lays great stress on the notion of 'experience' – all this has quite a bit of resonance in terms of later constructivist thought, the agent-structure debate and, more recently, of critical realist theory; interestingly, Ashley would also use Thompson's work in his critique of 'the poverty of neorealism' in his 1984 *International Organization* article.

More to the point of this essay is the way in which in 1980 I understood Waltz's relationship with past realist writers. The simple answer is that I identified no great discontinuity here. Due attention is paid, of course, to the fact that Waltz presents his argument via a Popperian account of scientific method that certainly was not to be found in the classic texts of realism, and that he draws a distinction between reductionist and systemic theories that is somewhat different from that employed by those texts, insofar as they employ such a distinction at all, but these points of difference are outweighed by the substantial similarities between his overall conception of the world and that of the classics. He presents a strong and sophisticated account of the working assumption that states are unitary actors, a 'masterly' critique of theories of interdependence (and it is indeed masterly I should add, still very much worth reading – especially if you substitute 'globalisation' for 'interdependence' when the term appears in the text), and a subtle discussion of the balance of power – all key issues for the classical realists. Hence my judgement then that Waltz remains firmly in the 'conventional mainstream' of realist thought.

So many people have subsequently disagreed with this assessment that an element of auto-critique may be called for here. In my review I picked up Waltz's use of the terminology of a self-help system and his use of economic models, and I critiqued his assumption that he was producing explanatory (as opposed to 'metaphysical') theory – but I did not anticipate that these positions would transmute into the rational-choice versions of neorealism subsequently popular, that the behaviour of egoistic actors under anarchy (the 'anarchy problematic') would be studied by the use of increasingly complex econometric models. In my defence, I suspect Waltz himself did not anticipate this denouement – later statements and interviews suggests as much.¹⁰

Still, even accepting that there are elements of the argument I didn't pick up then, it still seems there is a big gap between my take on Waltz's position in 1980, and its later reception. How is this gap to be explained? In two ways, I think, one a matter of rhetoric, the other a matter of substance. The rhetorical points concern, first, the way in which authors present themselves, and, second, the way in which they critique others. As to the first point, there is a basic divide to be seen in academic argumentation between those who in their own work stress continuity and those who stress rupture. In practice, we all stand on the shoulders of giants, as did the giants themselves and there is always a degree of continuity between even the most innovative work and past efforts in the field – the difference is whether, and to what degree, any particular writer is moved to acknowledge that link. Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* is closer to the latter camp than the former; he does not make positive claims for great originality, but neither does he emphasise the links between his work and that of earlier realists (as we will see below, *Man, the State and War* is a different kind of book, and there the problem is rather of discerning when Waltz is

speaking in his own voice, and when he is reporting the work of others). There is an interesting contrast here with, say Robert Gilpin, whose response to being identified as a neorealist by Richard Ashley was to deny vigorously the charge, stressing the way in which he represents the rich tradition of political realism.¹¹ In the same collection Robert Keohane suggests that Waltz ‘[reformulates] and systematizes Realism, and thus develops what I have called Structural Realism, consistently with the fundamental assumptions of his classical predecessors’,¹² but, in his own response, Waltz simply does not address the issue of continuity with the past; he notes Richard Ashley’s charge that ‘[older] realists, despite some limitations, set a high standard of political reasoning from which I and other neorealists have regressed’, and he notes Keohane’s position cited above, but responds directly to neither charge.¹³ Instead he simply sets out in detail and defends his original arguments.

This insouciance is, in many ways, admirable, but it does help critics to make the point that his work represents a clear break with the past, if they wish to do so – and they often will, because this leads into the second rhetorical point about the way in which academics criticise each other. A very familiar ploy here is the one Waltz notes in his comment on Ashley. In order to undermine the position of an author with whom one disagrees quite profoundly, it is helpful to be able to make the case that their position does not simply contradict one’s own but also that of some acknowledged past masters within the author’s own discourse. In effect, the ploy is to try to use people who would have been your enemies in the past to combat someone who is your enemy in the present. These figures from the past are praised for their sagacity in order to belittle the present foe.

In fact, of course, this is usually little more than a rhetorical trick. For example, Ashley refers favourably to E.H. Carr in the aforementioned essay as an example of someone who was steeped in the diplomatic culture of the past and who exhibited superior wisdom and judgement to Waltz, who has remained pretty firmly ensconced in the world of the academy. Actually, one cannot help feeling that Carr would have had very little time for the kind of post-structuralist work favoured by his admirer, and as to Carr's allegedly superior judgement, I suppose support for the appeasement of Hitler before 1939, and of Stalin after 1945, could be described in those terms, but not by me – but this is beside the point, because Ashley's invocation of Carr has very little to do with Carr's work and everything to do with using him as a stick to beat Waltz with. Waltz spoils the game slightly by not responding, but the very lack of a response does feed the predispositions of those who want to see him as instituting a rupture with the past.

But, although this is part of the story, it is only part of the story – there is another reason why Waltz's work is seen as instituting a serious break with the past and that concerns the much wider issue of how that past is understood. What actually are the roots of realism, and is Waltz's structuralist account actually out of line with those roots? The rest of this chapter is devoted to this question, and, as will become apparent, the matter hinges on an examination of the role of human nature in classical realist thought. The argument for a rupture between Waltzian neorealism and classical realism rests partly on the proposition that human nature plays less of a role for Waltz than it does for the classics – I want to suggest that while this is indeed the case, the way in which Waltz handles the issue of human nature can be related to both

the major strands of realist thought, although, at the same time, it is distanced from them.

Waltz, Human Nature and the Roots of Realism

The central problem for those who wish to argue against the discontinuity thesis is simply stated. Waltz is absolutely clear that what he is presenting is a theory of the international system, and that theories based on other levels, the individual or the state, that is, 'reductionist' theories, are profoundly unsatisfactory – but, on the face of it, most of the authors who are usually seen as the key figures in a genealogy of realism offer precisely such theories. The Machiavellian tradition of *raison d'état* is essentially based on a theory about the conduct of foreign policy and rests on a particular conception of what human beings are like; the Hobbesian account of an international 'state of nature' again rests explicitly on an anthropology, as the structure of *Leviathan* makes very clear; the Augustinian roots of Niebuhr's (and perhaps Morgenthau's) realism are firmly embedded in the notion of original sin and fallen man.¹⁴

Certainly one can find 'structuralist' positions in classical authors. Thucydides is an interesting case here. At the beginning of his history he states that the truest cause of the war whose story he is about to tell is 'the one least openly expressed, that increasing Athenian greatness and the resulting fear among the Lacedaemonians made going to war inevitable' which sounds like a clear structuralist argument (indeed an embryonic statement of the security dilemma).¹⁵ He makes the structuralist case more explicitly later in the text when he puts into the mouths of the Athenian representative

the proposition that they were compelled to expand their empire by necessity, and that the Spartans would have done the same had they been in a similar situation – the Athenian speech here is a nice early statement of the tenets of ‘offensive realism’.¹⁶

Waltz understandably cites these and similar passages in Thucydides – the problem is one can find with equal ease statements in the same source which put the real driving force behind the war elsewhere. In the same speech cited above, the Athenians state,

[we] have done nothing remarkable, nor contrary to ordinary human behaviour, if we not only accepted an empire when it was offered but also did not let it go, submitting to the great forces of prestige, fear and self-interest – not as the originators of such conduct, moreover, since the rule has always existed that the weaker is held down by the stronger...¹⁷

Later, the Athenians make the same point in the ‘Melian Dialogue’.

According to our understanding, divinity, it would seem, and mankind, as has always been obvious, are under an innate compulsion to rule whenever empowered.¹⁸

Human nature is the driving force, to which individuals and peoples must submit, are under an innate compulsion.

The other classical writer favoured by structural realists is Rousseau, whose parable of the stag hunt is a staple for students of rational choice and the logic (and dilemmas) of collective action. Thus..

If it was a matter of hunting a deer, everyone well realized that he must remain faithfully at his post; but if a hare happened to pass within the reach of one of them, we cannot doubt that he would have gone off in pursuit of it without

scruple and, having caught his own prey, he would have cared very little about having caused his companions to lose theirs.¹⁹

This is frequently used to illustrate the imperatives of a self-help system; ‘everyone’ would behave in this way because everyone would behave in this way – in other words we have to assume that if we don’t chase the hare someone else will, or if we are the only person who has seen the hare and so this does not apply, we have to assume that there may be another hare which someone else will see and chase and so on. Either way the stag will be lost and we will go hungry, so we had better act now. But, again, it is the assumptions that Rousseau makes about human nature that do the work in this case; it is because human beings are unscrupulous in the pursuit of their own interests, and have little concern for the interests of others that they act in this way.²⁰

In short, both Thucydides and Rousseau are ultimately offering first-image accounts of the motor of realism – and they are the best friends Waltz can find within the classical literature on the subject. For Augustine and the Augustinians, ancient and modern, political leaders are obliged to operate in a fallen world – the city of man as opposed to the city of God – and therefore must be wise and prudential (also, it is to be hoped, just) wielders of power, and this has nothing to do with structural features of the international politics of late antiquity (or the early 21st century); for Augustine, the hierarchical polity that was collapsing around his ears was as much a context as the incipient anarchical system being created by the barbarian tribes who were overrunning the Empire.²¹ Again, Machiavelli simply takes it for granted that politics is about the pursuit of interests; thus, the unstated assumption is that the Duke Valentino seeks to extend his power simply because he can – no further explanation is

required – and if you want to preserve your power, or that of the city, (*The Prince*) or to preserve republican forms of government (*The Discourses*) you had better be aware that this is the way of the world.

Without labouring the point further, I suggest a key feature of Waltz's thought and one that genuinely distinguishes it from classical realism, is that his theory of international politics is *not* derived from a theory of human nature, or even explicitly in reaction to a theory of human nature – indeed 'human nature' does not even appear in the index of *Theory of International Politics*. In *Man, the State and War*, of course, it does appear but of the three images set out therein, the first two ('man' and 'the state') are collapsed into one category in *Theory of International Politics*, 'reductionism'. Interestingly, when he wants to illustrate the follies of this way of thinking, it is to a theory of foreign policy (Lenin's theory of imperialism) that he turns, and not to a theory of human nature. Why so?

For the answer to this question we have to examine the complex picture of human nature actually presented in *Man, the State and War*. This is not as easy as it might be thought to be, because – unlike *Theory of International Politics* – this is a book that is built round a series of interlocking debates between different authors, classical and modern, and it is not always as clear as it might be what Waltz himself thinks on the subject. So, for example, at the outset of *Man, the State and War* we have the bald statement '[our] miseries are ineluctably the product of our natures. The root of all evil is man, and thus he himself is the root of the specific evil, war' (p.3) which Freyberg-Inan in her generally excellent book on realism and human nature takes to be an expression of Waltz's own view; she comments, correctly, that in this he sounds

like St Augustine.²² The problem is that while Waltz may indeed endorse this position, it actually occurs in the course of a discussion of precisely the Augustinian perspective that it is supposed to resemble, and it could well be (probably is) simply a summary of that position. If it is Waltz's view then the use of the term evil is interesting here, adding an unexpected theological dimension to what is otherwise, as noted above, a frequently expressed realist position, but, in any event, what is more significant is that it is clear from the rest of the book that Waltz believes that this sort of generalisation about human nature actually gets us nowhere, and a different kind of explanation for war is needed. Why? Given the general thrust of his argument elsewhere, one might have expected him to argue that because human nature is a constant it cannot explain war; war is the product of a particular set of social arrangements and must be understood in that context, reductionist theories will not do, and so we must move to the third image. Had he taken such a route he would have aligned himself with those realist writers who emphasise an unchanging human nature (Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes) even if, unlike those predecessors, he doesn't think that ultimately this nature matters very much.

But, it seems, that this is actually *not* why he moves away from human nature. Rather, it is first, because, in any scientific sense, the content of human nature is unknowable, but second, and more important, it is because, *contra* the position outlined above, human nature is actually a variable, not a constant. Thus, '[Because] of the difficulty of knowing such a thing as a pure human nature, because the human nature we do know reflects both man's nature and the influence of his environment, definitions of human nature such as those of Spinoza and Hobbes are arbitrary and can lead to no valid social or political conclusions.' (p.166)²³ Here Waltz is

discussing the critique of these accounts of human nature allegedly put forward by Montesquieu and Rousseau, but it is, I think, clear from the context that he is endorsing this position.²⁴ Reconstructing and rearranging his argument, it seems to be that while we humans do indeed have a nature, and, perhaps, judging from the existence of evil in the world, that nature is such that sometimes evil consequences flow from it, we can't actually specify this nature much beyond that, at least not in any scientific way, and, in any event, in practice, nature and nurture cannot be treated separately; therefore an emphasis on human nature gets us nowhere if we want to understand social phenomena.

This is quite a complex position, which touches base with the major strands of classical realist thought, but at a tangent. The initial emphasis on evil, if it were to be the case that this is indeed his emphasis, would link Waltz to the 'righteous realists', the Augustinian strand of thought identified by Joel Rosenthal, Alastair Murray and others.²⁵ But the Augustinians actually draw political conclusions from this position; their realism is a realism of prudence, where we are enjoined to question our own presuppositions and values (because we are fallen beings every bit as much as are our enemies), and to turn away from ambitious projects of social reform, which are doomed to failure because of the imperfect human material from which societies are constructed – human beings may strive to be moral (although, for Augustine, they can only achieve this status by God's grace, not by their own efforts), but collectivities will always be egoistic.²⁶ There is, I suspect, little here with which in practice Waltz would disagree (which is one of the reasons why Freyberg-Inan might be right in assigning the 'evil' statement to him) but he does not get to this position by the Augustinian route, even if he has the same starting point. From his perspective, and

given his commitment to social science, and to a particular version of what social science involves, the Augustinian route leads into a dead end. In the terminology of *Theory of International Politics* this is metaphysics and he, Waltz, is engaged in science. One cannot build a model on this kind of foundation, even if the foundation is, in some sense, sound; Augustinian realism does not generate testable hypotheses and ultimately it remains a branch of *belles-lettres*. From a Waltzian perspective this is also, I think, the problem with Morgenthau's theory – Morgenthau wants to be objective and present scientific laws of politics, but his metaphysical commitments get in the way, although, for many, of course, it is Morgenthau's so-called 'metaphysics', his critique of positivism, as set out in e.g. *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* that is his most attractive feature.²⁷ In short, Waltz is not an Augustinian realist, even if he shares some of the pessimism characteristic of that genre.

Neither does he follow Hobbes, Spinoza, Machiavelli *et al* by rooting his theory in the drives produced by an unchanging human nature. But, again, there are points of contact with this strand of realism; he may not see human nature as constant, but he does, I think, share with these authors the view that the *interests* of states, which are ultimately generated by human nature, are, more or less, constant – the difference being that from his perspective these interests have to be seen as exogenous to a theory of the international system. States desire to survive and it is this desire which leads them to arms-race, or form balances or whatever; we don't need to ask why states desire to survive, they just do. From his perspective, to push the question further takes us into areas which it is not reasonable to expect a theory of the international system to be concerned with. It is this approach to interests – as constant but exogenous – which has dominated the thought of the 'rational choice realists' who

have built on Waltz's work to construct modern neorealism by redefining the field as the study of how egoists pursue their exogenously given interests under conditions of anarchy— and indeed of their cousins, the liberal institutionalists who have offered a different reading of the possibilities of the anarchy problematic, but take the same view of interests, (or 'preferences' as Andrew Moravcsik would have it).²⁸ And, of course, it is this position that has been so effectively criticised by constructivist writers such as Friedrich Kratochwil and Harald Müller;²⁹ values and interests should not be taken as given but must be understood as produced in discourse, that is, produced in a relationship – as Kratochwil puts it, one root of the word 'interest' is 'inter-esse', 'the in-between of the me and the you'.³⁰ On this account, it simply isn't possible to produce a theory of international politics that is isolated from other levels of social and inter-personal interaction.

Still, without remotely wishing to suggest that Waltz is a proto-constructivist, it seems to me that there are elements of his thinking that would be rather more compatible with this critique than one might expect; the aspects of the work of the neorealists and liberal institutionalists criticised by Kratochwil actually owe more to the Hobbesian account of human nature than they do to the more nuanced story that Waltz has to tell. Indeed, when Waltz writes of man's nature interacting with his environment, one could almost imagine this thought being developed in the direction of Alexander Wendt's account of the different kinds of anarchy that might emerge in different kinds of environments³¹ – but, of course, Waltz does not wish to go anywhere near that position, rejecting altogether any this line of thought that relies on human nature. The point is that he excludes human nature because we can't (or at least don't) understand it, whereas the rational choice realists treat it as an exogenous variable because they

believe that they do understand it, and that it generates interests the nature of which can simply be taken for granted. But, on the other hand, for Waltz although we can't (or at least don't) understand human nature, we do at least know that it is quite likely that 'our miseries are the product of our natures', which takes us back to Augustinian pessimism and away from both the rational choice realists and the constructivists. Waltz's thought seems to oscillate between the Hobbesian and Augustinian poles, touching both while refusing to be identified with either.

Here, I suggest, is perhaps the most important, and certainly the most paradoxical, reason why Waltz is so difficult to relate to the roots of realism; it is not because he is totally separated from those roots, but because he is actually implicated in too many of them. Whereas we can settle for a Weberian (modified Nietzschean) reading of Morgenthau and, I would argue, perhaps controversially, a Hobbesian (out of Marx and Mannheim) reading of Carr, no such shorthand is available to us to summarise Waltz's position. Easiest simply to say that there is a rupture here, that Waltz really is the inventor of something called 'neorealism', a doctrine which has lost touch with past realist thought. Easiest perhaps, but inaccurate I think – better would be to say that finding a shorthand reading of Waltz that relates to the realist past is difficult because there is too much to say rather than too little.

Returning to the issue of human nature, so far I have tried to describe Waltz's position – but some degree of assessment of that position is also called for. Was he right to see human nature as essentially unknowable, and variable in its impact? When Waltz was developing his thoughts on structural realism in the 1970s, human socio-biology was in its infancy, and the first serious attempt by a scholar to talk about human

nature in a scientifically defensible way – Edward O. Wilson’s *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* – was as unpopular with biologists as it was with sociologists and anthropologists, and gave no reason for Waltz to change his judgement that there was nothing useful that a social scientist could say about the subject.³² Indeed, the most trenchant critique of the scientific pretensions of socio-biology, by Marshall Sahlins, rejected the discourse on roughly the same, Durkheimian, grounds offered by Waltz for rejecting other kinds of ‘reductionist theories.’³³ Since the 1970s, however, socio-biology, rebranded as ‘evolutionary psychology’, has developed in ways that are far removed from the simplicities of Wilson’s work, and now, I believe, demands to be taken seriously.³⁴ Moreover, neuroscientists such as V. S. Ramachandran and Antonio Damasio are revealing ways in which human perceptions and behaviours are crucially shaped and determined by physical processes within the brain.³⁵ And, to complete the picture, many cultural anthropologists are now rejecting the politically-correct relativism of their disciplinary forebears – perhaps rather disappointingly, it turns out that the ‘coming of age on Samoa’ was more or less like the coming of age everywhere else, and Donald Brown has proved that one can write a very substantial book full of ‘human universals’.³⁶ Add all this material together and although we may not know of such a thing as a ‘pure human nature’, we (that is, the scientific community, broadly drawn) do know a lot more about the subject than we did thirty years ago. Does this have any implications for Waltz’s position?

Scholars of international relations have been slow in coming to terms with this material, and probably the best-known work, by Bradley Thayer, is broadly supportive of rational-choice, game theoretic approaches.³⁷ More recent work, however, focuses on the ways in which choices are made that are not utility

maximising.³⁸ The results here are rather sobering; for example, there is good evidence that mentally healthy people tend to exhibit psychological biases that encourage optimism; such biases, known to evolutionary psychologists as ‘positive illusions’, may well have been adaptive in helping our ancestors to cope with hard times, but nowadays may serve instead to get us into trouble.³⁹

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of this work for international political theory, and I hope to write more extensively on this topic in the future, but obviously, any serious assessment would take us far beyond the scope of this particular article – still, it is interesting to ask whether, if it is indeed the case that we can now say rather more about human nature than we could in the 1970s, as I think it is, does what we can now say actually support the position Waltz’s took in *Theory of International Politics*? Was Waltz right to resist basing his theory on human nature? The answer, I think, is a tentative yes. Scientific work in this field has indeed identified biases in judgement some of which are relevant to any theory of foreign policy behaviour – but, of course, Waltz had no intention of producing such a theory. At the macro level where he was working, the most relevant finding of the new learning is rather different. It is precisely that while there may be identifiable human behavioural biases and mechanisms that are the product of evolution and are constant across cultures and over time, the idea that human nature *as such* is a constant is not defensible. In the study quoted above, ‘positive illusions’ were present generally in all populations, but they varied in intensity as between individuals; mental states are important and, unsurprisingly, depressed people were less likely to have positive illusions than mentally healthy people; context is central – positive illusions are greater, for example, ‘in situations of ambiguity, low feedback, and where events are

difficult to verify’; culture matters, ‘positive illusions are greater among Western (especially American) populations than Eastern populations’ (we might have guessed that one as well) and, finally, they vary according to regime type and decision making process.⁴⁰ The point is that it is precisely *because* of these variations that it is possible to put together a theory which is intended to predict when positive illusions will be important – this is the goal of Dominic Johnson’s recent book.⁴¹ If there were to be such a thing as a constant ‘human nature’ it could not be the basis for theory, which is precisely why Waltz was right not to construct his theory on such foundations, even if this meant that, in this respect, he had to part company with his illustrious forebears.

So, to return to the starting point of this chapter, how then should we read Waltz – as one in a line of realist theorists whose work is consistent with the ‘fundamental assumptions of his classical predecessors’ or as a figure who has broken with the past? The answer is ‘both and’ rather than ‘either or’. It is impossible to find any figure amongst the classics who puts things together in the same way that Waltz does, but most of the things that are put together by Waltz would be familiar to most classical writers. And this ability to take familiar material and to combine and recombine it is precisely why Waltz is an undisputed modern classic.

¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979). I am grateful to Kirsten Ainley, Kim Hutchings, George Lawson and especially Ken Booth for comments on earlier versions of this chapter; as always, I alone am responsible for errors that remain.

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- ² Richard K. Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', *International Organisation*, (38) 225-86. 1984.
- ³ Kenneth Waltz *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).
- ⁴ Frederic Jameson *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990) p.60
- ⁵ Richard K. Ashley. 'Living on Borderlines: Man, Poststructuralism and War', in James Der Derian and Michael Shapiro, eds. *International/Intertextual*. (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1989).
- ⁶ On this approach see the discussion in James Tully. *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1992).
- ⁷ J.W. Burton *Deviance, Terrorism and War* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1979).
Chris Brown 'International Theory: New Directions' *Review of International Studies* (7) 173-185, 1981.
- ⁸ Morton A Kaplan *Towards Professionalism in International Theory* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1979), written largely in response to Waltz's chapter in Fred Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby eds. *The Handbook of Political Science: Vol. 3 Macropolitical Theory* (Reading MA: Addison Wesley, 1975).
- ⁹ E. P. Thompson *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* London: Merlin Press, 1978).
- ¹⁰ See Kenneth Waltz 'Evaluating Theories' *American Political Science Review* (91) 913-918, 1997 and 'Realism revisited: An Interview with Kenneth Waltz' (conducted by Fred Halliday and Justin Rosenberg) *Review of International Studies* (24) 371 – 386, 1998.
- ¹¹ See Robert Gilpin 'The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism' in Robert O. Keohane ed. *Neorealism and its Critics* (NY: Columbia UP, 1986).

¹² Keohane ‘Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond’ in *ibid* p. 175.

¹³ Waltz ‘Reflections on *Theory of International Politics: A Response to my Critics*’ in *ibid*, p. 322.

¹⁴ Morgenthau believed that the objective laws of political realism are based in human nature (*Politics Among Nations* 5th edition. (New York: Knopf, 1978), p. 4.) and Ulrich Petersen makes a strong case for saying that he had a Nietzschean belief in the centrality of a human lust for power that seeks to dominate (Ulrik Petersen, “Breathing Nietzsche’s Air: New Reflections on Morgenthau’s Concepts of Power and Human Nature” *Alternatives* 24.1 (1999), p. 83). Certainly Michael Smith is persuasive in identifying the Weberian roots of modern realism, and Weber was deeply influenced by Nietzsche; see Michael J. Smith *The Realist Tradition from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge, LA: University of Louisiana Press, 1986). It is a moot point whether this is in any way compatible with Niebuhr’s Christian (Augustinian) pessimism, although it produced similar results.

¹⁵ Thucydides *The Peloponnesian War* trans. Steven Lattimore (Indiana, Hackett Publishing Company, 1998) p. 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid* p. 37.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* different translations of the ‘great forces’ offer ‘ambition’ (Woodruff) or ‘honour’ (Crawley) instead of ‘prestige’; these notions are so closely interwoven for the Greeks that distinguishing between them is genuinely difficult, although for us they point in somewhat different directions. R. N. Lebow lays stress on the importance of honour to the classical Greeks, but perhaps understates the importance of its synonyms, in his *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 298. Crawley is crisper and more poetic ‘Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can.’

¹⁹ J-J Rousseau *A Discourse on Inequality* Part 2. trans. Maurice Cranston.

²⁰ In fact, Rousseau distinguishes between pre-social human beings who exhibit *amour de soi* and socialised humans who are driven by *amour propre*; both are the forms of egoism, but the latter involves emulation, whereas the former is simply self-centred. Rousseauian realists would like states to be driven by *amour de soi* rather than *amour propre*.

²¹ James O’Donnell *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005) is a fascinating new study which places Augustine’s thought firmly in its historical context.

²² Annette Freyberg-Inan *What Moves Man: The Realist Theory of Human Nature and its Judgement on Human Nature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003) p.73

²³ Interesting that Spinoza is mentioned in this context; too little attention is paid by modern IR theorists to the work of Spinoza, who is coming to be seen as a much more central figure to the Enlightenment than was previously thought to be the case. See Jonathan Israel *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650 – 1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁴ In fact, I think that to Rousseau human nature was a little more important and a little less variable than this quotation would imply, but that’s not the issue here.

²⁵ See Joel Rosenthal *Righteous Realists* (Baton Rouge LA; University of Louisiana Press, 1991), Alastair Murray ‘The Moral Politics of Hans Morgenthau’, *The Review of Politics* (58) 1996, 81-107 and *Reconstructing Realism* (Edinburgh: University of Keele Press, 1996).

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- ²⁶ Niebuhr *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932).
- ²⁷ London: Latimer Press, 1947.
- ²⁸ Andrew Moravcsik, 'Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics' *International Organisation* 51 (4) 1997, 513-553.
- ²⁹ Harald Müller 'Arguing, Bargaining and All that' *European Journal of International Relations* (10), 2004, 395 – 435; Friedrich Kratochwil 'Rethinking the "inter" in International Politics' *Millennium* (35) 2007, 495 – 511.
- ³⁰ Ibid. p. 502, fn 13
- ³¹ Alexander Wendt 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization* (46) 1992, 391-426 and *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- ³² Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- ³³ Marshall Sahlins *The Use and Abuse of Biology: An Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology* (London: Tavistock Press, 1977).
- ³⁴ The literature here is vast; for a recent, large-scale, authoritative and wide-ranging survey see R.I.M. Dunbar & Louise Barrett, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ³⁵ Good popular introductions are V. S. Ramachandran *The Emerging Mind: The BBC Reith Lectures, 2003* (London: Profile Books, 2003) and Antonio Damasio *The Feeling of What Happens* New Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).
- Interestingly, one of the few political philosophers to investigate this work is William Connolly, normally seen as a Foucauldian; see his *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

³⁶ On Samoa, see Dennis Freeman *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999); Donald Brown, *Human Universals* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1991).

³⁷ Bradley Thayer *Darwin and International Relations; On the Evolutionary Origins of War and Ethnic Conflict* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).

³⁸ See, e.g. Stephen Peter Rosen *War and Human Nature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) and Raphael D. Sagarin & Terence Taylor, eds. *Natural Security: A Darwinian Approach to a Dangerous World* (University of California Press, 2008).

³⁹ See Dominic D. P. Johnson *Overconfidence in War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman comments ‘the bottom line is that all the biases in judgment that have been identified [by evolutionary psychologists] in the last 15 years tend to bias decision-making toward the hawkish side’. Cited from Dominic D.P. Johnson et al ‘Overconfidence in wargames: experimental evidence on expectations, aggression, gender and testosterone’ *Proceeding of the Royal Society B*. 273 (2006) 2513–2520.

⁴⁰ Johnson *et al* p.2518.

⁴¹ Johnson (2004). Interestingly, at an ISA Roundtable in San Francisco in 2008, Johnson presented this argument as a refutation of Waltz, whom he understood, wrongly I believe, to base his theory on the constancy of human nature.