
Hans J. Morgenthau: The Quest for Justice

Hans J. Morgenthau, Chairman of the Worldview Editorial Board and a long-time Trustee of the Council on Religion and International Affairs, died in New York on Saturday, July 19, at the age of seventy-six. The following eulogy was delivered at the funeral by Robert J. Myers, President of CRIA, who in earlier years served as research assistant to Professor Morgenthau at the University of Chicago.

I would like to say a few words about the enduring significance of Dr. Morgenthau's intellectual legacy.

Hans Morgenthau's study of politics can be interpreted as his quest for justice. It was his belief that proper power relations, on the international and domestic scene, offered the best possibility toward that end. From this proposition arose the question of the relationship between justice and power. Citing Pascal, Morgenthau held that ideally both justice and power must be obeyed, and therefore whatever is strong should be made just, despite the difficulty. "The real problem arises," said Morgenthau, "when we try to find out what is just." To do so "we must know the purpose and nature of the universe before we can apply these general principles to individual cases."

One obstacle to this application is selfishness, another is ignorance, and even more limiting is the quantity of justice available at any one time. "We are too poor to pay the price required by all the groups demanding justice. We are forced to assign priorities to the demands. How then can the goal of justice be achieved?"

Morgenthau rejected simplistic approaches, such as equal shares of justice without regard to the legitimacy of claims, or a mechanical process equating justice with power, like a robot police force. Yet another means was love, "a spontaneous giving of all that is to be given." This solution, however, really evades the issue of justice by transcending it.

For Morgenthau the most practical way to approximate justice is in the social mechanism of power. He argued that justice is more likely to be found in limited power—in societies that possess semi-autonomous centers of power, one checking the other and preventing a monopoly of power by any one group "by using the self-limiting dimension inherent in power itself."

This is the root of Professor Morgenthau's classic textbook, *Politics Among Nations*. Yet some considered this work a later-day Machiavellian handbook. In the preface to its third edition (it may not be inappropriate to mention that over 250,000 copies are in print), Morgenthau laments that "I am still being accused of indifference to the moral problem in spite of abundant evidence, in this book and elsewhere, to the contrary." He blamed that misunderstanding on "the superficiality of our civilization which, blind to the tragic complexities of human existence, contents itself with an unreal and hypocritical solution of the problems of political ethics....Avoiding a political action because it is unjust, the perfectionist does nothing but shrink from the lesser evil because he does not want to do evil at all. Yet his personal abstention from evil does not at all affect the existence of evil in the world but only destroys the faculty of discriminating between different evils."

Justice remained relative and elusive. Might alone

was perceived as just. But not for Hans Morgenthau in the case of the Vietnam war. His opposition to the war was based on his moral conception, his concern for justice, and his principles of interstate relations. This position silenced his earlier critics, though dialectically it created a new set. He soon learned the danger of Speaking Truth to Power but was not deterred. In May, 1966, Morgenthau said this of President Johnson's Vietnam policy: "The melancholy conclusion is inescapable that governments, like men in general, if they are capable of learning at all, learn from experience rather than from rational arguments. Perhaps we have not suffered enough for the lessons of Vietnam to sink in. Thus men must die, women must weep, what nature has provided and man has wrought must be destroyed, because governments, blinded by prejudice and paralyzed by pride, learn too slowly for the good of the governed."

And after President Nixon's invasion of Cambodia in April, 1970, Morgenthau wrote: "What will it avail us to save our face in a war without end if we cannot save our souls, if we cannot save ourselves as a nation worthy to be saved? And what kind of face would we be saving at the price of our souls and our purpose as a nation? I can see that face: ignorant, violent, brutal, lying, and mean—the face of some American Hitler." The Indochina war, in his view, allowed the ruling élite to debase and monopolize justice. But Morgenthau's analysis and faith prevailed and sustained him. Our democratic society did find a different definition of justice through the semi-autonomous centers of power, demonstrating a key factor in Hans Morgenthau's view of a truly democratic society: the prospect that today's minority may become tomorrow's majority, that today's justice may be something else tomorrow.

Justice follows a tortuous path. "In the eyes of man, the accounts of justice are never square. Yet we must try to square them though, like Sisyphus, we cannot succeed." There are many disappointments. (One small but nagging disappointment for Morgenthau was not having visited China. His attempt a year ago was thwarted by a plane crash; a second attempt this past May was put off by illness. However, just prior to that scheduled trip the China Mission here gave a dinner in his honor. When the hosts inquired into his view of current American politics, he answered spontaneously: "America under President Carter is like China under the Empress Dowager. We deserve better leaders.")

In his intellectual autobiography Morgenthau wrote: "Our aspirations, molding our expectations, take account of what we would like the empirical world to look like rather than what it actually is. Thus empirical reality endlessly denies the validity of our aspirations and expectations. I aspired to understand the riddle of human existence, and I expected academic philosophy to show me the way; but academic philosophy did not do what I expected it to do. We expect the oracle to give us a clear-cut answer. What we get is an enigma compounding the riddle. What remains is a searching mind, conscious of itself and of the world, seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking, and speaking—seeking ultimate reality beyond illusion." This is the essence of his towering contribution to our civilization.

— R.J.M.