# A Cynical Theory and Wicked Men: The Origins of Classical Realism's Pessimism and Cynicism

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**Abstract.** Classical realism is renowned for the nuanced understanding of international relations without reducing it to a realm of intense power-political competitions for security. It bridges the gap between individuals and international politics by attributing state behaviors to human nature, an unchanging concept transcending time and space. This paper focuses on Thucydides and Machiavelli's assumptions about human nature and their respective views of morality. Through close interpretations of *the History of the Peloponnesian War* and *the Prince* of Thucydides and Machiavelli, the two originators of realist international relations traditions, this paper explores from where classical realism's pessimism and cynicism derive? Why classical realism possesses a tragic view of world politics? The conflict between morality and the practical necessity of state survival in international politics constitutes another enduring theme in the two books. Thucydides laments the irresolvable tensions between morality and compulsions resulting from "fear, glory and profits," the three paramount human drives. Likewise, *the Prince* embodies the most cynical assumptions about the universal wickedness of human nature and the resulting tragic divergence between international politics and morality. Therefore, this paper argues that classical realism's cynicism and pessimism should not be taken for granted. Instead, they have historical roots in Thucydides' moral skepticism and Machiavelli's assumption about the prince's "wicked subjects." The cynical theory is an outgrowth and embodiment of the wicked men.

**Keywords:** Thucydides · Machiavelli · Classical Realism · Human Nature · Morality

## 1   Introduction

Despite the recent theoretical explosion of post-positivist approaches to international relations, such as poststructuralism, feminism, and critical theory, the realist paradigm remains a prominent member of IR theories due to its exceptional predictive power. Realism as an international relations paradigm assumes war, peace, security, and power as the essential issues of world politics. Therefore, the domination of the field of international relations by the realist paradigm, namely the structural realist tradition, for the second half of the 20th century is attributable to this predictive power resulting from the convergence of its subject matter with the structural conflicts and bipolar confrontation

of the global Cold War [1]. Assumption underlies every school of thought and constitutes the foundation of theory, which presupposes and entrenches certain beliefs and views [2]. This paper identifies classical realism from its modern, structural variant, arguing that the theorization of classical realism is inextricably tied to its assumptions about human nature. However, the assumptions of human nature are subject to different interpretations to arrive at different realist propositions for explaining various issues, which leads to a fragmented and obscured "realist psychology [3, 4]." Likewise, there is yet any systemic explication of classical realism's human nature assumptions through interpretations of the paradigm's early literary roots to reveal and explain the lineage of realist pessimism and its tragic vision of morality. Therefore, this essay traces classical realism's pessimistic view of morality back to its theoretical origins—the foundational works by Thucydides and Niccolò Machiavelli. It will make explicit the realist psychology and offer a refined and coherent view of classical realist assumptions about human nature through the selective interpretations of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and Machiavelli's *the Prince*. This paper will reemphasize the connections between the implicit or often neglected classical realist assumptions about human nature and the pessimistic theory.

## 2  The Realist Paradigm of International Relations

In his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn coined the concept of "paradigm," referring to a widely recognized exemplary camp of scientific research, which marks the maturity of a science and provides models for a community of practitioners who solve real-world problems with the agreed-upon methodological and theoretical frameworks [5]. Given the unbroken lineage tracing back to ancient Greece and its evolution into a normal social science in the American scholarly community, the realist traditions arguably constitute a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense. The realist paradigm, like other mainstream IR theories, is first and foremost state-centric, which assumes nation-states as the solitary, purposive actors in the international system, engaging in power political calculations of self-interest, with the priority being the maximization of national power. The pursuit of power, either as an end itself or a means towards security and domination, constitutes the integral element of realist international relations theories.

However, the key assumptions about state behaviors, "the causes of war and conditions of peace [6]," diverge between classical realism and its modern and scientific counterpart, structural realism. Structural realists maintain that state behaviors are determined by external factors, driven primarily by the pervasive and formidable anarchic structure. Anarchy, an integral concept for structural realism, refers to the qualities of the international system absent of an overarching sovereign authority capable of enforcing laws by force as in domestic political contexts [4]. The "third image" or the structural forces compels states to engage in intense zero-sum games and competitions [7]. States are rational actors who constantly aggrandize their power and the resulting security to increase the chances of survival in the uncertain, hostile, and anarchic international system [4].

On the other hand, classical realism relies on the "first and second image," [4] the individual and state levels of analysis or the internal factors to explain and predict

the causal conditions, the recurrent behaviors of states and the patterns of international politics [7]. Classical realism postulates that states and humans alike are driven primarily by the universal and unchanging human nature. Thus, states are subject to the same pathologies as humans, and rationality cannot always be observed. The flawed if not wicked human nature creates compelling motives for individuals and states alike to pursue power and self-interest while downplaying or even opposing morality and justice [8]. This almost cynical law of human nature entrenches a tragic vision for classical realism. It laments the recurrence of great power tragedies: the predominant material power blinds the great power to the need for self-restraint, which, thus, falls into the realm of *Realpolitik* and advances its self-interest through coercive means. The self-regarding, egoistic, and hubristic great power dismissing morality and justice in its interaction with actors in the international system would easily overexpand itself and ends in self-destruction [9]. Also, the tragedy of great power politics transcending time and space would unceasingly recur in history, given human nature and the resulting irresistible compulsions as constant variables in the equation of power politics. As Hans Morgenthau, the founding father of classical realist tradition, stated, tragedy is a "quality of existence," which reveals the paradigm's pessimistic understanding of human nature as the framework of international relations [9].

## 3   Human Nature and Origins of Classical Realism's Pessimism and Cynicism

Classical realism's tragic vision of international relations is first and foremost about but not limited to the self-defeating great powers compelled by human nature and necessities. The pessimism also manifests itself in classical realism's skepticism of the applicability of ethical norms to international power politics [11]. In his *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau argues that "international relations occupy an autonomous realm of power politics exempt from moral judgment and immune to moral restraint [10]." Therefore, the following sections will return to the literary roots of classical realism's theoretical insights tracing the origins of classical realism's pessimism first to Thucydides' and Machiavelli's human nature assumptions and then to their respective views of morality in conflicts with the compulsions of realist necessity.

### 3.1   Fear, Glory, Advantage and the Athenian Dilemma

"Fear, glory, and advantage," the three most basic yet timeless human motivations rooted in human nature, were clearly articulated in the speech by an Athenian at Sparta in response to Corinth's accusation [12]. Fear is the paramount human drive that compels states to seek power and ensure state survival. The advantage, which arguably refers to the tributes from Athens' allies, was also essential to maximize security. Glory came into play as giving up the empire was dishonorable and indicated weakness [1]. This famous "Athenian thesis" portrays the establishment and expansion of the empire as a natural and inevitable outcome of the ever-growing Athenian material power. To quote Thucydides, "we have not done anything in this (maintaining the empire) that should cause surprise, and we have not deviated from *normal human behavior* (my emphasis)

we simply accepted an empire that was offered to us and then refused to surrender it [12]." It reveals Athenian perceptions that human nature perfectly justifies the establishment, maintenance, and expansion of empire as "normal human behavior," and driven by the three human motives, the Athenians were compelled to do so by realist necessities.

Propelled by human nature to maintain the empire, Athens, however, adopted a pure power political means. In "the speech of Athenians" and "the Mytilenean debate," justice and morality were dismissed as insignificant and dispensable compared to the struggle for power, domination and hegemony driven by irresistible human motivations [11]. In the Melian Dialogue, the Athenians effectively entrenched the proposition that "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must" as the timeless axiom of international relations [12]. Also manifested is the Athenian perception that coercion backed by power is a superior means to law, convention, treaty, and moral persuasion. Likewise, might supersede right between states with asymmetrical powers, and whatever justice means is up to the strong to interpret.

This power-political thinking and the three human motivations effectively led Athens into a trap that this paper defines as the "Athenian dilemma." In his last speech, Pericles drew an analogy of empire as a tyranny that "it may have been thought unjust to seize, it is now unsafe to surrender [12]. Taking Melos and Mytilene as examples, the violent conquest of Melos and suppression of rebellion at Mytilene would alienate the Athenian allies and the neutral city-states. On the other hand, mercy would indicate weakness and add to Athenian insecurity. Thus, the Athenians could no longer "walk away" from their empire, which they seized and maintained through coercive means, as the empire was a choice of either subjugating or being subjugated [12]. The triumph of power politics, necessities, and the resulting Athenian imperialism over moral consideration led Athens into a disastrous dilemma and contributed to its final demise, which has profound implications for and insights into Thucydides' view of morality.

Athens degenerated from the legitimate Greek leader of the anti-Persian league to an arrogant imperialistic power, irrationally overexpanding its sphere of influence through coercive means. Blinded by its predominant material power to the need for self-restraints, the Athenians actively negated the possibility of pursuing moral means in achieving political ends and hubris led to imperial behaviors and self-defeating overexpansion. However, contrary to the Athenian example, the island of Melos, which clung to good faith, morality, and mere hope, incurred a similar fate as Athens, complicating Thucydides' true lesson and view of morality [13]. Thucydides, on the purpose of his *History of the Peloponnesian War,* states that "Events in accordance with human nature will recur in similar or comparable ways" and that "my work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last forever [12, 13]." This paper argues that the unmitigated failure of Athens and the fate of Melos reveal a tragic view of the irresolvable and inescapable tensions between realist necessities of state survival and morality, which contributed to the pessimism of classical realism.

## 3.2 The Wickedness of Human Nature, Necessities and Machiavellian Views of Morality

Machiavelli's work, *the Prince*, is the pinnacle of pragmatism, cynicism, and pessimism about politics, which assumes and presupposes the universal wickedness of human nature

and, consequently, the irreducibility of politics to morality [8, 11]. He warns that "men are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain [14]." Surrounded by men as such, the stability of the ruler's reign, order and state survival are never to be taken for granted. The prince is one erroneous decision away from losing his state, and the political norms for the prince are constant danger and insecurity. With the premise of the wickedness of human nature, the subjects are the primary enemies of the prince with whom he should always contend. Thus, wicked human nature creates pressing necessities for the prince to ensure the state's survival and manipulate his wicked subjects, in other words, to "resist evil with evil" [3] and learn how "not to be good." To better reveal the implications of Machiavelli's understanding of human nature and his views of morality, it is instructive to further specify the necessities the prince faces.

Given that men are ungrateful, liberty and generosity are entrapping when necessities oblige the prince to turn parsimonious. The prince will incur hatred and the infamy of meanness if the generous rule ceases. Therefore, being held liberal is burdensome for the prince in that it impoverishes and weakens the prince's reign, which should not be pursued unless it is a necessary means for political ends. On the other hand, parsimony enables the prince to rule as it strengthens himself vis-à-vis his subjects. Likewise, the infamy it incurs is negligible compared to the political cause of order and state survival [14]. Thus, one should be parsimonious as liberty makes the ruler both contemptible and hated.

Under the compulsion of maintenance of the state, it is better to be cruel as cruelty yields faith, unity, and security than be merciful, which indulges chaos and disorders. The same goes for fear and love. Given the ungrateful, fickle human nature, it is safer to be feared than loved if one cannot achieve both. Love and the resulting bottom-up support are at the subjects' discretion to maintain or withdraw, broken at every opportunity for their own utility as the wicked men are first and foremost "evaders of dangers [14]." However, fear, the top-down exertion of might and the dread of punishment compel the subjects to submit, which is at the prince's convenience. A prince should always prioritize what is his over what is someone else's [14]. The only thing the prince should notice is not to be hated as it brings no utility to his reign. According to Machiavelli, being feared is compatible with not being hated so long as the prince abstains from the property of his subjects, which represents the ideal statecraft a prince should harness [14].

Again, on human nature, Machiavelli argues that humans are both beast and man. The rule of law thus applies only to the man side of human nature, and the bestial side of men necessitates a prudent lord to resist evil with evil and simultaneously be a lion and a fox [14, 15]. In the Machiavellian sense, the lion refers to the traditional statecraft of domination and exertion of fear and coercion. The cunning and astute image of the fox has more profound implicit meanings. First, the prince should not hesitate to deceive or betray the promises if the necessities oblige him to do so. Second, the prince should not be entrapped by possessing good qualities. All he needs to do is deceive by only "appearing to have them" and by knowing how to "change to the contrary when necessary [14]. The political double game is a must for a prince to exert efficient and cost-effective control over his equally deceptive, wicked subjects and maintain his reign [15].

Dramatically different from Thucydides' sophisticated perception of morality, Machiavelli insists that the soundest political strategy for a prince is always to conform and submit to the amoral necessity of state survival, and attempts to escape from it is irrational, which would weaken his state [1]. Evil and immoral deeds are not only inescapable but necessary for the well-being of the prince and his state. International power politics is irreducible to justice and morality.

## 4   Conclusion

In conclusion, as a prominent theory within the realist international relations paradigm, classical realism's propositions and theoretical framework can be traced to early realist literary works such as Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Unlike its modern structural variant, which emphasizes the systemic level of analysis and the influence of external factors, namely the anarchic international system, classical realism attributes state behaviors to internal factors such as human nature [7]. The literary roots of classical realism often assume a problematic if not outright cynical and wicked human nature and the resulting motivations and compulsions. Based on the selective interpretations of Thucydides and Machiavelli's human nature assumptions and implications, this paper found that classical realism's innate pessimism does not emerge from a vacuum. Instead, it has a lineage tracing back to tragic writers like Thucydides, whose cynical views of human nature seal the pessimistic orientation of classical realist international relations theory. While conceding the primacy of force, classical realism still explores the compatibility of morality with the necessities of international power politics. The perceived uneasiness between political ethics and amoral necessity is evident in Thucydides and Machiavelli's writing. Deriving from the rise and fall of Athens, Thucydides' History laments the irresolvable tensions between morality and compulsions resulting from human nature. On the other hand, Machiavelli, dwelling on the most cynical perceptions of human nature, expresses the tragic divergence of politics from morality that political leaders should not be bound by moral considerations when making political decisions because state survival is at stake. These tragic views of morality or moral skepticism also add to the pessimism of classical realism. Despite providing detailed systemic interpretations of the literary roots of classical realism's human nature assumptions, this essay is not exhaustive in interpreting all the influential thinkers to whom realist IR theories are indebted. Future studies could focus on expanding the scope of interpretation of human nature assumptions not only to other political philosophers whose thoughts bear realist connotations but also to realist theorists themselves, such as Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr. Targeted interpretation and analysis of classical realists' assumptions about human nature are instrumental in resolving the fragmented and obscured realist psychology.

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