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Political Idealism vs. Political Realism

Throughout the course of history, the concepts behind idealism and realism in international politics have been found many times. While both theories rest on assumptions about the basic human principles, the ideas of realism and idealism differ greatly, both in execution and in the parties who are considered to be in power.

Political realism is a concept that can be found in theories as early as the late 16th century. According to the basic principles of political realism, the state is the highest form of power in terms of international relations and all other organizations that might play a part in international acts are merely acting as tools for the larger state power. Realism is based in the idea that humans act based on a selfish need for power, and will do whatever it takes to maintain that power, as well as gain more. Because human beings run states, it is only logical that the states’ actions be governed by the human pursuit of power. From a realism perspective, war should only be entered into with the intention of gaining state power. Any war that the state enters into should be advantageous, and any war that might leave the state with less than they started with should be avoided. The idea that the United States should not have gotten involved in the Vietnam War, held by Hans Morgenthau, is an example of political realism. Morgenthau believed involvement in Vietnam was superfluous, as Vietnam held no threat to the American power. Not only that, but Morgenthau believed that the U.S. was pursuing moral values in Vietnam, which goes against the ideas of selfish human nature found in the theories of political realism.

Political idealism, founded in Western liberal traditions, holds a strong belief in the good in human nature as opposed to the inherent selfishness brought forth in political realism. Political idealism stipulates that states are not masses of power being run by the power-hungry needs of those in charge, but rather the embodiment of the wishes of the mass of human beings that exist beneath the government. Those who believe in idealism hold faith in a human’s ability to overcome the selfish need for power and replace it with morals, values, and principles that strive for peace. Reciprocity, selective war, and trade between nations are all fundamental ideas in the pursuit of peace set forth by the theory of political idealism. Many believe that the human epitome of idealism is the American president Woodrow Wilson. Wilson held a deep faith in morality and democracy, and his actions during World War I illustrate his aspiration to help others. President Wilson ultimately entered into the war in order to help establish harmony in Europe by fighting against Germany, whose actions Wilson believed to be unproductive and hostile in terms of peace.

Whereas political realism rests in the ideas of Social Darwinism which state that the strongest nations survive, political idealism is rooted in the utopian principle that goodness exists in all people. Political realism exaggerates the point that all states should be independent and govern based on their own state’s need for power and control. When paired with the theory of Social Darwinism, it becomes clear that each state should be focused on strengthening his own power, lest a more ambitious government wipe him out. Alternatively, political idealism holds faith in the thought that should goodness trump selfishness, and all nations are able to cooperate and find common ground, peace may be achieved. World peace is a Utopian idea that has been examined many times throughout history, and no successful model has ever been found. In political idealism, it is thought that the non-governmental organizations, such as the United Nations, may actually be used as instruments to promote cooperation between states. On the realism side, Plato and Aristotle, as well as many others throughout history, argued that self-sufficiency might only be achieved at the expense of others. This exemplifies the ideas of political realism and Social Darwinism, or putting your own interests above the interests of others to ensure your own well-being. On the other hand, Immanuel Kant, an advocate for political idealism, wrote in his essay titled *Perpetual Peace*: “In order to join national interests, states must often forgo short term interests or goals in order to secure the longer term interest in peace and morality.” All of Kant’s ideas are predicated on the Utopian goal of world peace.

While they ultimately differ in many ways, political realism and idealism share many fundamental perspectives. First, both theories argue that the world is ultimately anarchy, because of the many different government structures that exist and because of the lack of a world power. Though they attempt to resolve it in different ways, it is clear that both realism and idealism seek to ultimately release the state from the chaos of international relations. Second, the basic selfish human nature serves as a basis for both theories. In realism, it is thought of as a necessity and a way to explain and predict the actions of the state. In idealism, it is regarded merely as an obstacle that the basic goodness of humans can overcome. Third, in both realism and idealism, war is approached as a being that should only be entered into under the right circumstances. Political realism is not opposed to war, but states that war should only be entered into as a means of gaining power or standing against a threat to the state’s power, whereas political idealism theorizes that only certain states should go to war with each other. Kant believed that democratic states will rarely go to war with other democratic states and that it is the oppressive states that will most often be found at the heart of war.

While the theories of political realism and political idealism share underlying ideas and beliefs, the divide between the two is clear and staggering. History has found embodiments for both ideas, and even today, both realism and idealism can be found in the decisions and executions of international relations.

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