



The Mahābhārata and the classical realist tradition

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Abstract

This paper analyses the Mahābhārata as a seminal work of classical political realism, articulating a worldview that predates but profoundly resonates with the twentieth-century realist tradition of E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr. The epic champions an interest-based statecraft centered on Rājadharmā (the duty of kings) and Artha (statecraft) while offering a sustained critique of idealistic or utopian governance. Through its narrative, the Mahābhārata explores core realist tenets: the centrality of power, the flawed nature of humanity, the priority of national interest, and the prudent often tragic management of conflict. This study argues that the epic not only anticipates but richly embodies the philosophical and practical concerns of classical realism.

Keywords: Political realism, mahābhārata, statecraft, anarchy, hans morgenthau, animus dominandi, power politics, realpolitik, classical realism, security dilemma

Introduction

Reading the Mahābhārata through the lens of modern political realism reveals it to be a sophisticated laboratory of political thought. The epic stages the core debates that animate contemporary realist theory: Is conflict driven by human nature (as classical realism posits) or by systemic anarchy (as structural realism argues)? Should states seek sufficient or maximal power (defensive vs. offensive realism)? How do domestic factors and leadership mediate systemic forces (as in neoclassical realism)?

Classical realism, articulated by mid twentieth century thinkers such as E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau emerged as a corrective to liberal idealism. It roots enduring conflict and ambition in international politics in a pessimistic view of human nature specifically in what Morgenthau termed the Animus Dominandi the insatiable human lust for power. This paper contends that the Mahābhārata is a seminal text of this classical realist tradition. Its narrative is not primarily about impersonal systemic pressures but about how inherent human flaws ambition, fear, honour and envy drive political catastrophe and shape statecraft. The epic provides a millennia-old exploration of core classical realist themes: the ubiquity of the struggle for power, the critique of moralistic utopianism, and the prudent, interest-defined management of political life.

Human Nature as the Engine of Conflict

The central conflict of the Mahābhārata originates not from an impersonal security dilemma but from a quintessentially classical realist source: flawed human nature. Duryodhana's character personifies Morgenthau's Animus Dominandi His actions are not merely strategic responses to threat but stem from an innate and consuming drive for domination fuelled by envy and an unbounded desire to possess what others have.

Duryodhana operates as a classical realist archetype. His manoeuvres are driven by a perceived need to maximize relative power. He fears the growing capabilities of the Pāṇḍavas, their alliances, personal prowess and moral authority thus seeks to permanently weaken or eliminate them to secure his own hegemony. The infamous dice game

and the subsequent attempted assassination are not merely acts of petty malice but rational if ruthless power-maximizing strategies in an uncertain world. His humiliation in the royal court, his visceral hatred for the Pāṇḍavas' prosperity and his refusal to cede "even a needlepoint of land" are driven by a lust for power and prestige that mirrors Morgenthau's warning about the "limitless desire for power" finding "virulent expression in politics." Hastināpura becomes the medium through which this appetite is expressed and justified.

Krishna as the Classical Realist Statesman

Classical realism advocates for a foreign policy guided by a prudent calculation of interest defined in terms of power. Krishna embodies this principle as the supreme realist strategist. His statecraft moves beyond moral absolutism to a contextual, consequentialist ethics of responsibility a quality Morgenthau identified as the highest virtue in politics.

Krishna's diplomacy blends classical prudence with defensive logic. His attempts at negotiation reflect a defensive realist's belief that clear signalling and dialogue can manage threats. However, when faced with intractable revisionism exemplified by Duryodhana's offensive realism, Krishna authorizes morally ambiguous tactics under the rubric of Apaddharma (conduct in times of distress). This aligns with classical realism's acknowledgment that political necessity rooted in human flaws (such as Duryodhana's greed) sometimes mandates distasteful action to restore a stable balance.

Āpaddharma is the epic's indigenous formulation of realpolitik or Raison D'état. Krishna's counsel to Yudhiṣṭhira to lie about Aśvatthāman's death or his sanction of Bhīma's blow to Duryodhana's thigh are not presented as violations of Dharma but as its politically necessary adaptation. They reflect the classical realist insistence that political ethics are distinct from personal morality; survival and the restoration of legitimate order may require morally difficult acts.

Krishna's final peace mission to Hastināpura exemplifies Morgenthau's belief that politics is governed by objective

laws rooted in human nature. It is not an appeal to universal morality but a clear-eyed assessment of interests and a warning about the correlation of forces. When diplomacy fails he orchestrates a strategy however morally ambiguous deemed necessary to achieve the normative goal of restoring Dharma. This reflects the classical realist supreme virtue: prudence.

Yudhiṣṭhira and the Burden of Power

Yudhiṣṭhira's arc embodies the classical realist tragedy of politics. He is the "good man" compelled to navigate a realm defined by power and conflict. His deep moral anguish after the war, his reluctance to rule and his ultimate despair are not signs of weakness but a profound recognition of the ethical cost of political action.

Yudhiṣṭhira's trauma illustrates the classical realist insight later echoed by thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr that political authority and justice are ultimately inseparable from violence and moral compromise. His desire for a pure, non-violent kingship is revealed as a utopian fantasy in a world where power must be contested and exercised.

Structural Elements: The Security Dilemma in Embryo

While the Mahābhārata is predominantly a classical realist text centered on human nature, it also contains embryonic structural insights. The mutual suspicion and arms-racing between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas after the exile each side gathering allies, weapons and strategic advantages can be read as a nascent security dilemma. Even actors without inherently expansionist desires are forced into competition by the uncertainty of the other's intentions and the anarchic context of their rivalry. This dynamic anticipates later realist formulations by scholars such as John Herz. This element suggests that the epic also contains seeds of what would later evolve into structural and neoclassical realism, where situational dynamics and systemic pressures interact with unit-level variables.

Classical vs. Structural Realism in the Mahābhārata

The Mahābhārata's emphasis on human nature as the primary driver of conflict places it firmly within the classical realist tradition. However, its occasional glimpses of systemic pressures invite comparison with structural realism as articulated by Kenneth Waltz downplays human nature in favour of anarchic systemic constraints.

As Chris Brown notes in his analysis of Waltz, structural realism explicitly rejects human nature as a variable, treating it as either unknowable or irrelevant to systemic theory. In contrast, the Mahābhārata like Morgenthau and Niebuhr places human flaws at the centre of political explanation. This divergence highlights a key theoretical fault line within realism itself, one that the epic engages implicitly through its layered narrative.

Conclusion

Through the lens of classical realism the Mahābhārata emerges as a profound and early inquiry into the permanent problems of political life. It diagnoses the human lust for power as the engine of conflict, champions a prudent, interest-based statecraft over moralistic idealism and confronts the tragic necessity of moral compromise in governance. In doing so, it provides a narrative foundation for themes that would be formally articulated millennia later by Carr, Morgenthau and Niebuhr.

While the epic occasionally prefigures structural concerns such as the security dilemma, its core orientation remains classical rooted in a deep often pessimistic understanding of human nature. The Mahābhārata deserves recognition as a crucial text in the global canon of political realism offering timeless insights into the interplay of power, ethics and survival.

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