

## Revisiting Realist Ethics

*Thursday, 19 June 2025 09:00 (1h 30m)*

Once dismissed as an oxymoron, Realist ethics continues to develop apace. The papers on this panel contribute to the growing interest in this field of study with a collection of papers that probe the past, present, and future of Realist ethics. The panel highlights the diversity of Realist ethics, including the tensions within Realism and also between Realism and its putative originators and current theoretical interlocutors.

The panel begins with Chris Brown's examination of the central concept of prudence, which is alleged to link Realism to ancient Greek political philosophy. Brown is not convinced that the modern, Realist concept of prudence as caution is compatible with the Aristotelian principle of *phronesis* – a disjunction that allows him to excavate the differing character of political judgment in both traditions of thought. Seán Molloy further explores the role of judgment in Realist ethics by reference to the parallels between E.H. Carr and Machiavelli, who – although deeply influenced by the ancients, nonetheless ushers in a distinctly modern way of thinking about the relationship between political necessity and moral requirement. Molloy argues that Carr is more Machiavellian than Morgenthau realised, which provides the former with greater philosophical resources than Morgenthau recognises when alleging his thought is that of a 'disastrous' Machiavelli without *virtù*. Carmen Chas rounds out the critical-historical part of the panel by focusing attention on Georg Schwarzenberger's attempt to think the relationship between politics and ethics in terms of international law and the standard of civilisation.

The panel concludes with two papers that examine Realism in relation to contemporary theory. Guilherme Marques Pedro reads Reinhold Niebuhr's work in the light of the burgeoning literature on ontological security, conjoining the insights of both approaches to develop an 'ethos of security' that foregrounds the importance of anxiety and angst to redirect ethics away from the impossibility of ultimate security to a focus on the achievement of security understood as a condition that can only be achieved in a precarious and imperfect manner. The final paper by Haro Karkour examines a faultline in John Mearsheimer's thought between his insistence on the theoretical primacy of survival in offensive Realism and the profession of a personal morality that leads him to condemn Israel's actions in Palestine. This faultline, Karkour argues, has important implications for Mearsheimer's theory that leaves him open to the charge that his activity as a public intellectual – whether one agrees with his criticism of Israel or not – is without a genuine intellectual basis.

**Track Classification:** Ethics and World Politics Working Group