
RATIONALITY AND THE ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

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INTRODUCTION: RATIONALITY AND THE ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT

A traveller on the back roads through northern France near its borders with Belgium is struck by the number of cemeteries. These do not contain the mortal remains of the elderly and unfortunate of the region, but those of many young men from all over the world who had little reason to want to go there in the first place. However, between 1914 and 1918 many did go, to live for a while in misery, discomfort and terror, and a tragically large number died there. Small and unimportant towns like Passchendaele, Verdun and Mons, small rivers like the Somme, are now symbols of the wastage of young men's lives by societies which, by many other criteria, were highly civilised. The whole area seems a colossal monument to doomed youth, and indeed was seen as such by many of the generation who went there and survived it. Poets and writers such as Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen have made the experience vivid for later generations. It may be the literacy of the participants as well as the sheer scale and horror of the events which has made the First World War¹ so particularly vivid for so many people who have no direct memories of it. If this were one isolated event in history, we would look at it with horror. Unfortunately it is not. Barely twenty years after the men had crawled out of their trenches, their successors were involved in an even more destructive war. Nor does the habit seem to have been broken. War still appears to be an absorbing occupation for human beings.

As far back as we can tell, people have devoted some of the best of their minds and bodies to the problem of killing their fellows. Humans are the only animals which take the business of killing other members of their species with such seriousness. Other primates kill members of other species, usually for food. Members of the same species fight amongst themselves for mates, territory and so on, but they rarely

¹ The First World War was given its title as early as the Armistice in the title of a book by Repington (*The Great World War*) 'to prevent the millennial folk from forgetting that the history of the world is the history of war' (A. J. P. Taylor 1965). A bleak comment.

fight to the death. Killing amongst the non-human primates is equivalent to murder rather than to war. War is a predominantly human activity. Despite its frequency, it is an activity which conflicts with the aims of most other human activities, such as the quest for wealth, knowledge, a happy family life and so on, all of which are much better pursued under conditions of peace. The paradox is apparent. As Thomas Hobbes remarked, 'Avoid the "state of warre" in order to pursue the "Arts of Peace".'

War is not universally abhorred. People's attitudes towards violence culminating in death and suffering are ambivalent, combining horror for its obvious miseries with fascination for its splendour and the opportunities for gallantry and even for a noble death which war provides. People's ambivalence towards violence, I shall argue, is one of the problems we have to face. Attitudes to war during the twentieth century seem to have altered somewhat, and common belief seems to regard it as a regrettable necessity rather than as something desirable in itself. The vast slaughter of the First World War may have had something to do with this. Perhaps more important is our greater belief in the prospects of controlling society. War at one time was regarded as inevitable – it still is by some. However, slavery was once also thought to be part of the natural order of things, though now it is an almost defunct institution. Hence, despite the many horrors of social life such as those caused by poverty as well as war, we are less inclined than our ancestors to see the 'natural order of things' as being quite as natural as they did. Even if we cannot necessarily form utopias, we can at least see society as to some degree malleable and open to constructive change. Once war is seen not to be an inevitable feature of human life, there is the prospect of working to stop it rather than making the best of a bad job. Despite this change in attitudes, we have so far had very little success in stopping wars being fought. It is still the case that societies get into positions where, to many people, the only way out seems to be to fight. Why should this be?

War appears as the supreme example of irrationality. It is the wanton destruction of life and the general conditions of human happiness. War may well destroy the human race in its entirety; it will almost certainly still cause much misery and suffering in the future as it has in the past. To link it, then, with rationality would seem unusually absurd. I aim to show the contrary; far from being absurd, it is the rational analysis of the dilemmas posed by wars and the threats which holds out some hopes for the future.

There are two basic aspects of rationality which will be explored in this book, rational conduct and rational belief. The two involve rather

different problems. The first is a question of action: what is 'rational conduct' or 'rational behaviour' in the sort of situations which arise in international relations? The second is a question of belief: what can we rationally believe about the behaviour of people in the international system? Rational behaviour presupposes rational belief, but, as will become clearer later, there is more to it than that. Further, we consider rational beliefs about the international system without being too directly concerned with behaviour even if at some stage, though possibly a much later one, the issue of behaviour becomes significant, unless curiosity alone is what motivates our enquiries.

In practice we believe what we believe for a whole range of reasons, including habit and laziness. In the minutiae of everyday life this may not matter too much, and indeed may save us a lot of trouble. However, if we are to look at serious issues such as what causes wars, it is crucial that we consider carefully the grounds for our beliefs. If we believe that the balance of power or the control of the arms race reduces the risk of war, we must ask ourselves why we believe such things. Further, belief is not an all or nothing business, but commonly involves belief with some degree of doubt, a factor which raises some further complications.

In general the classical study of international relations² has been casual about the bases for belief. Scholars such as Hedley Bull, Martin Wight and Hans Morgenthau make generalisations about behaviour but take little interest in why we should believe in them other than by referring to some haphazardly chosen examples. They seem to regard as peripheral what I hold to be central – namely the question of what are appropriate reasons for believing in such generalisations. There is now no excuse for neglect. There has grown up a whole new aspect to the discipline which, however crudely and awkwardly at times, places the testing of hypotheses as central to its endeavours. Much of this book, though particularly part IV, is an implicit or explicit criticism of the more recent exponents of this classical point of view. This is not a criticism of the 'historical method'. These authors' use of historical examples as illustrations of their generalisations – in the case of Wight with an extraordinary breadth of historical knowledge – does not mean that they are using the historical method as it is generally used. Historians are not typically interested in formulating generalisations,

² By the 'classical' or 'traditional' school of international relations theorists I mean such relatively modern writers as Hans Morgenthau in *Politics amongst Nations*, Martin Wight in *Power Politics* and Hedley Bull in *The Anarchical Society*. All were opposed to the social scientific approach to international relations and conflict, Bull and Morgenthau explicitly and Wight implicitly. I discuss such views in greater detail in chapter 12.

whereas these writers are trying to justify their generalisations but without being clear about the nature of such justification.

Though the problem of why we believe what we believe is a basic philosophical problem, we shall attack it only from half way through and, even then, bear in mind that we are illustrating the problem rather than justifying it from first principles. Essentially we start with the assumption that our methods of understanding the natural world are broadly right and look at the consequences in a number of cases of assuming whether social behaviour can be looked at in broadly the same way. In this book I do not justify it more than superficially. Anyone who wants a fuller justification of this approach should consult my *Scientific Analysis of Social Behaviour: A Defence of Empiricism in Social Science* (London: Pinter, 1983).

Rational conduct is conduct which results from choices based on rational belief. However, while to base action on rational belief is a necessary condition for rational conduct, it is not a sufficient condition. Under uncertainty, criteria for rational choice become less clear, while in conflict they are frequently downright ambiguous. Rational choice and rational conduct become far from clear-cut concepts in conflict, a point which is central to the discussion in chapter 4. 'Rational choice theory', as this style of theory is not unnaturally known, normally assumes that people are consistent and coherent about what they want. There are good reasons to doubt this, and I try to broaden the approach by analysing the nature of preference in greater detail, particularly in chapter 6 and I discuss the problem of crises as an extension of rational choice theory in the following chapter. I see rational choice theory as a part of a tradition, or a 'scientific research programme', in Lakatos's terms, rather than a body of accepted theory. It is inadequate by itself but is invaluable as a basis for analysis.

Though war is in some general sense irrational, there are two immediate ways in which rational belief and rational conduct relate to its analysis. First, if a war breaks out, it can be waged in rational ways. Totally against our will we might find ourselves forced into considering wars or threats of wars. Strategy is the study of how to act rationally in the use of and in the face of violence. It may, though it does not necessarily, presuppose the approval of violence.

Secondly, because some form of behaviour is irrational, it does not mean we cannot analyse it by rational means and act rationally, taking the irrationalities into account. Medieval witch-hunts were not rational – they were doubtfully so even in terms of the beliefs of the day (Cohn 1975). It is not only possible but necessary to analyse such

phenomena by rational means in order to avoid some repetition of similar sorts of behaviour. The emphasis of this book is similar. Central to it is the notion that we cannot answer the question 'How can war be stopped?' without going back to the question 'Why are wars fought?' The second question will not give an automatic answer to the first, but it is a necessary prerequisite. This can be done only by means of a rational analysis.

Of particular interest is the question of how best to avoid a danger of war. Often in human behaviour we find ourselves caught in 'rationality traps' where the only thing to do seems to be to declare war or carry out some other act which in the broader scheme of things appears manifestly irrational. The conditions where war breaks out seem prime cases of such rationality traps. However, reason can perhaps help us to avoid these or even show us how we can extricate ourselves from them if we fall into them. Simply to argue that war is irrational and that therefore it is pointless to think how one should act for the best within it is to assume an ideal situation.

In this book I stress three themes. The first is that of rational choice and the resulting rational conduct. I show that rationality is an inherently ambiguous concept when applied to conflict situations and is an area amply provided with paradoxes. Even in those cases where it is straightforward, there are considerable pressures which suborn people away from rational behaviour. This is the subject matter of part II of the book.

Secondly, in conflict analysis (as in any other field) we should constantly be self-conscious and self-critical about the grounds we have for believing things. This is the issue of rational belief, which is illustrated by four topics in conflict analysis discussed in part III which illustrate how the social scientist works. The problems of part III are rather different from those discussed in part II, but still problems subsumed under the general heading of 'a rational approach to the problem of international conflict'. In conflict analysis, we have learnt, are learning, and, we hope, will continue to learn, a great deal through systematic analysis of behaviour by the application of the methods of the social sciences. The process of analysis is not merely the assertion of prejudice and counter-prejudice, though this is not to deny that prejudice still plays a disproportionate role in the study of international relations, as in all other areas of human behaviour.

Finally, as a general background to many of the issues in this book, I argue throughout that conflict is a general phenomenon in social life. An understanding of one manifestation of conflict, such as industrial conflict, can often have significant implications for the understanding

of forms such as international conflict. There are various generic conflict processes which make it legitimate to use quite homely examples to illustrate patterns of conflict which appear in many different and often much more serious forms. A major distinction, however, is between conflicts which are violent or which threaten violence and those which do not. There are still links and parallels which may be very useful, but, as I argue later in the book, and in particular in chapter 6, issues can be raised in violent conflict which are absent when violence is absent.

These two central parts are sandwiched between two parts which essentially justify this mode of analysis and relate it to a broader intellectual context. Many of the disagreements about international relations and conflict analysis are disagreements in the philosophy of science – again the basic problem of why we believe what we believe.

Two contrasting errors tempt scholars. First, there is the error of exaggerated dogmatism. For example, consider two statements. The first is a common assertion of conventional wisdom: 'Deterrence has preserved the peace for the last forty years.' The second is the expression of radical wisdom: 'At least since the death of Stalin, peace in Europe has existed because neither of the power blocs particularly wanted to disturb the status quo. In particular, the Soviet Union has not attacked the West because it did not particularly want to.' Both are asserted with vigour and conviction, but there is no clear way of deciding between them. I do not mean this in the sense that it is an inherently undecidable question. To answer it, though, we need an advance in our theoretical knowledge of human behaviour and not just an addition of further facts about these particular situations.

The second error is the error of exaggerated humility. Some writers seem to imply that, ultimately, all we say about the international system is an account of our prejudices (Frankel 1988). On this view, we believe one of the above two statements about the USSR according to our temperamental dispositions so that, even in principle, we can no more decide between them on rational grounds than we can decide whether the works of Bach are a supreme manifestation of the human spirit or a collection of curious noises. I argue that this view is mistaken. We can analyse conflict through the methods of the social sciences, and our knowledge can increase. We therefore must pursue the discovery of theoretical propositions about the behaviour of human beings, tested by evidence, which will suggest whether the above propositions are true or false. In the case of the propositions about deterrence, we need fuller and better-attested theories about deterrence in order to discriminate between the hypotheses sug-

gested. We are acquiring such a knowledge. Our ability to make reasoned arguments is much better now than it was twenty years ago, but there is still a long way to go. The points I wish to emphasise are that it is possible to acquire such knowledge, that we have acquired some already, and it is rational to suppose that this will continue. It will be most disappointing if this book is anything but an interim report.