Morality and politics according to Hans Joachim Morgenthau

The author attempts to re-construct the views of Hans Morgenthau on the relation of morality and politics, seen dialectically, and of some of the consequences of this relation in the sphere of political decisions and actions. The key thesis of the American political scientist in this context may be deemed to be the one which posits that, in the field of political activity, it is impossible to comply simultaneously with the requirements of an effective political action, for which the most important objective is to succeed, and with the ethical principles, in the light of which, an action that is inherently good is paramount. Thus, if success, as the overriding and, in principle, the only objective of political action is incompatible with the final objective of ethics, then politics is, because of necessity, an inevitable evil.

In Morgenthau’s belief, those who rule are particularly responsible for acting effectively and wisely for the sake of protecting a widely understood national interest and the prosperity of both the millions of contemporary citizens and future generations. A wise action, he suggests, should be compatible not so much with requirements of an ethical and moral character, as with the principles of the art of politics, and ought to be guided by prudence. He also pointed to the negative and even dangerous consequences of regarding politics as a struggle, on a moral plane, between ‘the good’ and ‘the evil’ rather that a combat for interests articulated in terms of power and aspirations to power.