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THE PHILOSOPHICAL TURN: EXAMINING THE FOUNDATIONAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND THE POTENTIAL FOR AN ALTERNATIVE IMAGE OF THE STATE

Mainstream International Relations theory (neorealism, neoliberalism and positivist constructivism) largely adheres to a model of the state as a rational unitary-actor. This model is deemed necessary because the goal of the mainstream theories is to isolate the systemic causes of international state behavior. This goal is predicated upon certain underlying philosophical presuppositions, namely: 1) the privileging of material over ideational causes, and 2) the analytical distinction between state and international levels of analysis. The first presupposition leads to a focus on material forces (e.g. weapons and economic resources), largely excluding the impact of ideas. The second presupposition isolates systemic forces, bracketing-out the internal domestic politics of states types of government for example. This focus on material and systemic forces is facilitated by the rational unitary-actor image of the state. However, if the goal is to understand alternative causal factors (e.g. individual agency, domestic politics, multi-level shared idea for example) then an alternative model of the state becomes necessary. The model proposed here is one based upon Weber's methodological individualism and views the state as a "pluralistic" (rather than unitary) and "fallible" (rather than rational) international actor.

Keywords: *International Relations, States, Neorealism, Material Forces, Rational-Actor*

Introduction

With the advent of Waltz's neorealism, mainstream International Relations (IR) theory shifted away from several classical realist principles, ultimately creating an altered set of foundational presuppositions specific to its own logic. The foremost presupposition asserts that the fundamental causes of international relations derive from structured material conditions at the systemic level. This assertion has various theoretical consequences including the eclipse of *ideational* explanations by *material* ones, a sharper analytical distinction between *domestic* politics and *international* politics, and adoption of the state as a *rational unitary-actor* model. While all these positions prove

advantageous if one's goal is the analytical isolation of *systemic* causation; for various other purposes, there are significant drawbacks. The seriousness of these drawbacks depends on the validity of the base assumption that the fundamental causes of international relations are systemic. While the validity of the neorealist framework seemed strongest during the Cold War, since the end of that bipolar condition many aspects of the theory have been challenged. This has occurred in part due to the perception that mainstream IR theories have been unable to explain adequately the causes of the end of the Cold War and a variety of subsequent international events.

One of the reasons for neorealism's post-Cold War crisis involves its *parsimony*. In opting for simplicity, the theory ignores many pertinent causal factors; including a variety of ideas and practices at the individual and domestic levels.¹ If indeed these alternative factors are necessary to explain adequately international behavior, then the construction of an alternative to the rational unitary-actor state model is one way to include them. Such an alternative could include the *plurality* of individual and group actors that constitute the state, as well as the shared ideas institutions, norms, beliefs, desires, etc., which motivate state policy and action. As such, the purpose of the current work is to investigate the need for a more complex model of the state than that provided by the rational unitary-actor image.

Waltz, who, in the process of constructing the most influential IR theory to date, inevitably sowed the seeds for various challenges. Buzan, Jones, and Little argue that Waltz, attempting to create an epistemologically *positivist* realist theory, stirred up interest in the "philosophical foundations" of IR theory.² They write, "The epistemological straight jacket of empiricism has been loosened, and the field is now informed as well by more philosophically open tendencies."³ This epistemological "loosening" arguably inspired four *theoretical turns* in late 20th Century IR theory. These include a *micro-economic*, a *sociological*, and a *linguistic* turn, as well as the *philosophical turn* itself.

The Micro-Economic Turn

To make realism more materially oriented and "scientific," Waltz adapted *rational-choice theory* from microeconomics as one of the key elements of his systemic theory.⁴ Within this micro-economic turn, states are conceptualized as the IR equivalent of rational-actor individuals. Essentially, to justify this move Waltz posited states rather than embodied individuals as the unitary-actors comprising the international system.⁵ Consequently, states are *personified* and seen to pursue their own interests, understood as distinct from the interests of constituent actors.

Neorealism sees three essential elements as constituting the international system. First, the system is *anarchic*. In other words, there is no overarching

government or power which can enforce international laws.⁶ Consequently, the international order is a *self-help* system with states perpetually in fear of military attack by other states. Secondly, a *rational unitary-actor* model in which states are considered “like-units.” This effectively eliminates specific characteristics of states (i.e. domestic politics) from the analysis. Thirdly, the *distribution of material capabilities which is* essentially the distribution of economic and military power across the international system.⁷ This distribution is understood as a “systemic” cause, independent from any bottom-up unit level process. It is this systemic level distribution of power which is understood as the *primary cause* of international behavior.

Essentially, neorealism brackets-out *individual, ideational, and domestic level* aspects of international behavior in order to focus exclusively on systemic level causation. However, this parsimony comes at the cost of abandoning explanations that are more comprehensive.⁸ Regardless, the micro-economic turn has proven fruitful for IR research, giving rise to a variety of structure-oriented security studies approaches, as well as a more economic-oriented neoliberal institutionalism.⁹ Gerrard Ruggie argues that neorealism and neoliberalism share a similar rational-choice approach referred to as *neo-utilitarianism*.¹⁰ The term “neo-utilitarian” will be used here when referring to this shared rational-choice perspective.

The Sociological Turn

Headley Bull developed many of the ideas constituting the *English school*.¹¹ Bull argued that interstate relations develop ideational norms among states; resulting in a shift from a Hobbesian international system, where states coexist under conditions of perpetual fear and mistrust; to a Grotian-type *international society*, where international norms mitigate the violence characteristic of anarchic systems.¹² This development, from international “system” to “society,” sees international relations becoming less hostile and more cooperative. The emphasis on international norms was in many ways a precursor to a broader sociological turn within the discipline developed under *constructivism*.

To develop constructivism, Alexander Wendt explored deep philosophical questions surrounding the ontological and epistemological foundations of IR.¹³ Wendt sought to challenge the materialist orientation of neorealism through developing a *social constructivist* approach to IR, one which recognized the importance of bringing ideas *back-in* to the discipline.. However, like the neo-utilitarian theories, Wendt confined his analysis to factors at the *systemic level*. Consequently, his constructivism upholds an image of the state as a personified unitary-actor. Wendt’s constructivism was in the leading vanguard of a far-reaching *sociological-turn* in IR, where a variety of sociological theories social constructivism, historical sociology, and critical theory to name a few were adapted to explore international relations issues.

The Linguistic Turn

While Wendt claimed constructivism was part of a “positivist project,” this is not the only epistemology associated with either constructivism or a variety of other ideationally oriented perspectives.¹⁴ Some IR scholars utilize post-positivist, post-structuralist, and post-modernist theories borrowed from across the social sciences to develop a *linguistic turn* for the discipline. Linguistic approaches, largely flowing from Wittgenstein through Foucault, have been adapted to explore how threats to state security are discursively constructed to legitimize various degrees of political authority and control.¹⁵

Following this turn, the concept of “securitization” was developed to explain how a security discourse is frequently part of a political strategy often for *domestic* rather than *international* purposes.¹⁶ One important implication of this is that there may be no intrinsic connection between the discourse surrounding state security and actual external material threats.¹⁷ Within the linguistic turn, the state is seen as a product of discourse rather than an ontologically existent entity, and consequently, related perspectives generally do not view the state as a rational unitary-actor. However, viewing the state as a purely discursive construct is significantly removed from the *material* reality of the state; including embodied individuals and military hardware. This can lead to a dangerous underestimation of actual security threats with potentially catastrophic consequences.

The Philosophical Turn

In what some see as an extension of Wendt’s constructivist critique of neorealism,¹⁸ scientific realists have further problematized the foundations of the discipline through a *philosophical turn*. Utilizing ideas from the philosophy of science and philosophy of mind, scientific realism confronts many of the presuppositions of IR theory. According to Joseph and Wight, scientific realism works “at the level of philosophical critique, challenging the philosophical assumptions of much contemporary IR theory and in so doing it also introduces important epistemological and ontological insights in its own right.”¹⁹ Scientific realists claim to provide a scientific alternative to positivism, addressing many of the post-positivist critiques of positivism without regressing into a relativistic, anti-science position.²⁰ While it is debatable whether the perspective successfully develops a pragmatic *non-positivist* position; nevertheless, adherents have inspired a reengagement with the philosophical foundations of mainstream IR. Consequently, in light of both the limitations of neo-utilitarianism to contend with various post-Cold War events and the shortcomings of linguistic theories concerning material security threats, this is arguably a necessary step towards any development of a more comprehensive IR theory. Concerning the state, scientific realists hold varied

positions. In his later work, Wendt shifts towards scientific realism, using the perspective to argue that the state is literally a personified “superorganism” with its own interests and goals.²¹ However, other proponents of scientific realism maintain that the state is comprised of a complex array of social relations. What scientific realists all tend to have in common, however, is the belief that states are comprised of *emergent properties* which cannot be adequately understood if analysis is restricted to the individual level substrate.²²

While the discipline has seen other influential perspectives, arguably these four “turns” represent the most influential theoretical developments since the end of WWII. Importantly, one thing the various turns all have in common is an engagement with the “third debate” in IR theory involving the positivist/post-positivist divide. Many scholars have taken an interest in scientific realism because it seems to offer resolutions to this debate.²³ Buzan, for example, claims that scientific realism “mitigates the binds of relativism and reflexivity that have restricted so much self-proclaimed postmodernist and poststructuralist work.”²⁴ However, while offering some legitimate solutions scientific realism brings significant problems of its own, especially concerning the idea of *emergent* social properties which encourages the analytical *reification* of social structures. What follows is an examination of many of the issues which motivate scientific realism without arriving at the same conclusions. Basically, the goal of this investigation is to assess whether the rational unitary-actor model of the state unnecessarily restricts analysis to systemic level causes; perhaps obscuring the impact of alternative factors, particularly individuals, ideas, and domestic politics. If this is the case, then perhaps a more complex model of the state is necessary; one which takes account of alternative non-systemic forces.

The *methodological approach* used here involves an intertextual examination of the ideas behind the various theoretical turns. The micro-economic turn is predominantly explicated through the work of Waltz, while the other turns are variously explored through the work of Wendt and the scientific realists. Weber is also brought in to investigate the potential for his form of *methodological individualism* to provide a foundation for an alternative state model. This intertextual approach utilizes both descriptive and explanatory methods to evaluate several prominent philosophical presuppositions in mainstream IR theory. This framework divides this study into three parts: 1) investigates the mainstream bias towards *materialist* over *ideational* explanatory factors; 2) questions the analytical value provided by the *levels of analysis* distinction, and 3) explores the advantages and drawbacks of the state as a *rational unitary-actor* assumption.

It is hoped that this investigation might better enable the discipline to incorporate: a) a stronger role for ideational forces in IR; b) the inclusion of multi-level factors which influence international behavior; and c) a role for individual agency in an alternative model of the state. Ultimately, the

goal is to weigh the rationale for a more complex theory of the state; one which might provide an analytical counterweight balancing what are arguably broad disciplinary biases towards overly parsimonious materialist and systemic explanations. Regardless of the obstacles, IR theory will continue to find innovative and insightful ways to address foundational concerns as investigations into the international behavior of states continue to develop.

The Material, the Ideational, and the Individual

Waltz's neorealism aimed to shift the discipline away from the classical realist paradigm. Classical realism especially as delineated by Morgenthau, Carr, and Niebuhr saw a large role for "human nature" in the causes of international aggression.²⁵ Inspired by Hobbes, classical realists viewed the human character as innately violently, egoistic, and capricious, and this darker irrational side of humanity was understood to manifest itself in international relations. Consequently, an egoistic drive for power was understood to perpetuate the threat of violence and war. Waltz wanted to move IR theory away from speculation about human nature, and towards a *systemic theory* more conducive to empirical positivism. To accomplish this, IR needed objective observable causal factors. Waltz found these factors in the structure of the international system, comprised of the *distribution of material capabilities* (weapons and economic resources) among unitary-actor states. As a consequence, neorealism realism is in essence a *materialist* theory.

But what of the role of ideas in influencing state actions? For contemporary realists, material systemic constraints are seen as the *primary* causal factors behind international behavior. *Neoclassical* realists, for example, view ideas and institutions as important; however, they differ from the classical realists in giving systemic factors a fundamental causal role. As Rathbun puts it, "Neoclassical realism begins with the premise that ideal state behavior is that which conforms to the unitary actor and objectivity premises of neorealism but shows that when these conditions are not met empirically, domestic politics and ideas are the culprits."²⁶ In other words, domestic politics and ideas are causally contingent, diverting states from what would otherwise be optimal rational action oriented towards systemic constraints.²⁷ For *offensive* realists, the influence of ideas on international relations is paltry compared to the impact of objective systemic constraints reduced to materially-oriented conflict and power politics.²⁸ In addition, for *defensive* realists, such as Waltz, while ideational factors are acknowledged, their analysis is considered a form of *reductionism*, by which Waltz means ideas are epiphenomenal, supervening on material systemic forces.²⁹

Alternatively, outside of contemporary realism there is an alternative debate concerning the impact of ideas on state behavior. Some important contributions in this regards were made by Karl Deutsch and his concept of

pluralistic security communities.³⁰ Essentially, Deutsch believed that even within an anarchic system states could develop trust towards one another leading to what he referred to as “peaceful change.”³¹ Later on, the *English school* developed an ideationally based Grotian *international society* (and a more vaguely defined Kantian *world society*) which remains pertinent today.³² However, the most influential Cold War era challenge to neorealism came from *neoliberal institutionalism*, which although remaining significantly materialist in orientation contains the concept of *international regimes* which allow for some impact of ideas on international behavior.³³ Then came Wendt’s *constructivism*, which made an influential effort to bring sociological concepts concerning the importance of “ideas” into the IR mainstream. According to Wendt, the impact of ideas at the systemic level fundamentally mitigates material systemic forces; and consequently, as the title of his seminal paper implies, “Anarchy is What States Make it.”³⁴ However, although dealing with ideas, Wendt maintains the unitary-actor model and the systemic focus of neo-utilitarianism. By contrast, also exploring ideas, a variety of discursive-oriented *post-positivist* approaches developed out of the *linguistic turn*.³⁵ Finally, in terms of the impact of ideas within the *philosophical turn*, scientific realists suggest that both the state and international system are imbued with broad social structures in part comprised of *emergent* ideational institutions.³⁶

With the reintroduction of the ideational back into IR theory, especially through the various discursive theories, questions concerning the relationship between the material and the ideational came to the fore. The debate over the veracity of mainstream material-oriented theories has proponents arguing that any shortcomings are necessary and insignificant compared to what the paradigm can explain; versus critics who argue that significant alterations in IR theory (perhaps even to the extent of a *paradigm shift*) need to take place. In terms of neorealism, these shortcomings involve the theory being overly materially-oriented, positivistic, and deterministic; ultimately proposing frequently incorrect predictions and even at times dangerous solutions to certain international problems³⁷—universal nuclear proliferation as a catalyst towards world peace for example³⁸ For discursive theories, shortcomings surround their being too ideational, post-positivistic, and relativistic; leading to “academic” theories, which run the risk of becoming increasingly detached from “real world” security issues.

Gerard Ruggie has argued that “neo-utilitarian” theories and discursive post-positive perspectives are *not* additive and that analysts must accept this fundamental incommensurability.³⁹ However, one could argue that incommensurability, rather than an absolute condition is more a matter of degree; and that we should not rule out the possibility that the neorealist focus on material structure is in some sense comparable and contrastable to discursive ideational factors, thereby allowing a more comprehensive, albeit tentative, picture of the international order. However, how to approach any

integration between material and ideational perspectives? Scientific realists try to develop a philosophical means through which additive analysis can be accomplished, although most adherents accept this approach has significant difficulties and drawbacks. Scientific realists combine what they see as the necessity for ontological realism with epistemological relativism, and through this move claim to provide a middle ground where positivism and post-positivism can come together.⁴⁰ However, this leaves the perspective open to the critique that if epistemology is relative then there is no logical way to develop knowledge which more or less accurately reflects ontological reality. Hence, this position remains mired in a post-positivist relativism.

What scientific realism is lacking is a means through which to ground discourse by incorporating some form of materialism. Arguably, one way to attempt this is through the neorealist distribution of material capabilities. However, this is not the only form of materialism which affects international relations. Another important and often overlooked factor involves the material impact of human embodiment. In other words, nothing in international relations is accomplished without an actual individual carrying out some action (even if only pushing a button). When individuals organize into collectivities we get the formation of complex entities, such as the state, which consist of an irreducible material-side through human embodiment and physical resources. Bull hints at this alternative when he writes, “World order is more fundamental than international order because the ultimate units of the great society of mankind are not states (or nations, tribes, empires, classes or parties) but individual human beings...”⁴¹ This quote exposes the lack, in both mainstream neo-utilitarian and ideational alternatives, of a theory of the state which can account for the impact of *individual agency*, in terms of specific individuals and collectivities, on international behavior.

Against this idea of an individualist-oriented IR, Wendt writes, “... many students of group intentionality have concluded that however desirable in theory, reducing group intentions to an individual is often impossible in practice.”⁴² However, contradicting Wendt’s claim, within sociology there are social constructivist theories *symbolic interactionism* and *ethnomethodology* for example which argue for a methodological individualist, as opposed to structuralist, approach. For the most part, however, these individualist alternatives have had little impact on mainstream IR. However, one finds in the work of Max Weber a theory in which individual intentions can be developed to comprehend group intentionality. With his interpretive *social action theory*, Weber provides a kind of *collectivist individualism* distinguishable from the *atomistic individualism* of microeconomics. In Weber’s collective individualism it is the shared ideas and coordinated practices of individuals which give rise to the collectivities which shape social reality.⁴³ The implications of this position for IR are that rather than unitary-actor states responding primarily to structural forces, both the state and its propensity towards either aggression

or cooperation develop from networks of interactions among actual embodied individuals. Such a move would require a more complex individualist-oriented model of the state

A Weberian individualist perspective allows the synthesis of material reality with discursive constructs because people are comprised of both *material bodies* and *ideational minds*. While embodied individuals interact with an objective physical world, an understanding of the ideational motivations behind these interactions is necessary to fully understand collective social behavior. Consequently, when neorealists view the international system from a predominantly materialist point of view; while they can compare the relative distribution of material capabilities across the system, this does nothing to explain the predisposition of various states towards the use of these capabilities. On the other hand, if the system is understood predominantly from an *ideational* perspective, excluding the materiality of both individuals and security threats, we disconnect analysis from the physical world—or what Marx understood as “embodied human practice.”⁴⁴

It is embodied human practice which informs Wendt’s “group intentionality,” leading to the development of complex collective entities such as the state. Rather than unitary-actors, Weber’s methodology allows for states comprised of specific individuals as well as multi-level collective actors; including, for example, economic classes, religious denominations, and political parties. Ultimately, some form of Weberian individualism can help the discipline avoid the pitfalls of both an overly materialistic positivism and an excessively ideational constructivism or post-positivism. Although discursive constructs have an influence on how power is manifested in myriad forms, once formed the material extensions of power have the real ability to dominate and destroy the very minds and bodies from which thoughts and actions emanate. The pen and the sword both exist as methods of change and control in international relations, one not being comprehensible in any pragmatic sense without the other.

Levels of Analysis and the Unitary-Actor State

Mainstream IR theory distinguishes three potential levels of analysis: the individual level, the domestic or states level, and the international or systemic level—Waltz alternatively referred to these as the “first, second, and third images.”⁴⁵ Positivist-oriented IR theories generally consider structured systemic forces to be the fundamental causes of international behavior.⁴⁶ More specifically, Waltz’s neorealism draws a distinction between *structure* and *process*, with structure generally understood as the distribution of material capabilities across the system, and process as a unit level phenomenon through which specific state policies are determined.⁴⁷ However, Waltz was not completely clear about the nature of *process*, at times suggesting its

dependence on systemic forces rather than having any independent causal impact. Since Waltz, neorealists have generally considered unit level process the area of inquiry specific to *foreign policy* studies, with the examination of systemic causation deemed the proper focus for *international politics*.⁴⁸ In part, the assumption of the state as rational unitary-actor enables systemic forces to be analytically isolated from the “noise” of unit level process. Mirroring micro-economic theory, where individuals make rational decisions concerning material interests, neo-utilitarians search for objective material interests for unitary-actor states. These interests are conceptualized as the states struggle for *security* and the *material capabilities* through which states project power across the international system.

Although largely understood as offering a clear alternative to the predominantly materialist orientation of the neo-utilitarian perspectives, Wendt's *constructivism* has several things in common with the mainstream framework. For one, Wendt subscribes to a “states systemic project,” a commitment not shared by all constructivist-oriented theorists.⁴⁹ This project accepts the state as unitary-actor image and a fundamental causal role for top-down systemic forces. This framework, as well as Wendt's commitment to *positivism*, leads him to accept the importance of the distinction between levels of analysis. As Wendt asserts,

*Theories of international politics are distinguished from those that have as their object explaining the behavior of individual states, or 'theories of foreign policy.' It is important that IR do both kinds of theorizing, but their dependent variables, aggregate behavior versus unit behavior, are on different levels of analysis and so their explanations are not comparable.*⁵⁰

But why are different levels of analysis not comparable? In answer, Wendt argues that attempts to compare levels must undergo a shift from “systemic theory” to a “theory of the state.”⁵¹ This is something systemic-oriented positivists want to avoid, in part because parsimonious systemic theories appear more “scientific” than messy “reductionist” explanations. This supposed messiness is largely due to unit level explanations being contingent on a plethora of *historical* and *subjective* variables making them difficult to quantify; and hence, not readily conducive to empirical methodologies. Wendt hopes to avoid these difficulties by restricting the role of ideas to those held by unitary-actor states exclusively at the systemic level. It is in this sense that both Waltz and Wendt adhere to a common framework where the separation of levels of analysis enables a focus on systemic forces. Where they differ, however, is in their understanding of the nature of systemic causation as either fundamentally material or ideational.

Scientific realists argue that the division between domestic and systemic levels of analysis is a consequence of a commitment to a *positivist*

project. Many IR scholars, from a broad range of perspectives largely outside of the constraints of positivism, which include scientific realism, critical theory, historical sociology, post-positivism/structuralism/modernism, and feminist theory argue that positivism is not a privileged methodology necessary for the study of international politics. For many of these non-positivist perspectives, the assumption that micro and macro-levels are not comparable, and that they can be studied in isolation from one another, is problematic.⁵² Scientific realists, for example, argue that once the positivist project is rejected, strict adherence to the levels of analysis divisions appears as not only provisional but indeed oftentimes unnecessary.⁵³ Arguing that the levels of analysis distinction has no fundamental theoretical justification, Koivisto writes,

Recent meta-theoretical debates have been important not least in highlighting that the carving up of world politics into select spatial levels is enabled by a particular set of philosophical, often methodological commitments and have thus unsettled the view that the resultant 'levels-of-analysis' framework provides a social ontology of world politics. Scholars have also suggested social scientific alternatives to framing objects of analysis in IR.⁵⁴

As an alternative, Koivisto posits “multi-scaler” forces, which *emerge* from unobservable, yet real, structural forces spanning the levels of analysis.⁵⁵ For Koivisto, these forces involve collective actors engaging with various institutions and practices, leading to the “emergence” of complex social relations *not reducible* to explanations at the individual level.⁵⁶ Scientific realists tend to view socially-structured entities as having, according to Rivas, “real emergent existence, properties and causal powers (that) cannot be reduced to their individual components.”⁵⁷

The scientific realist challenge to the levels of analysis distinction is unavoidably a challenge to the image of the state as a personified unitary-actor. However, there is no broad consensus within scientific realism as to what constitutes the state, other than the idea that it is comprised of collective entities with emergent properties. Interestingly, however, Wendt, utilizing scientific realist ideas on emergence, argues that the state is *actually* a personified “superorganism.”⁵⁸ Concerning this perspective, Koivisto writes, “Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Wendt’s theory of state personhood is that Wendt left the state unit/international system distinction untouched.”⁵⁹ Rather than viewing the personified state image as a necessary component of the unit/system distinction, Koivisto seems to suggest the opposite, that a personified state image should lead one to *deconstruct* the unit/system distinction. If states are personified superorganisms, with their own interests and agency, then the unit level process takes on new significance, potentially muting the impact of systemic forces.

Alternatively, from a Weberian perspective, rather than a personified unitary-actor with emergent properties, state agency may be in principle understood through the collective actions of its constitutive individuals. Consequently, analytical focus on the shared ideas and coordinated practices of these individuals has the potential to bridge the divide between domestic politics and international relations. This is possible because the same individuals are simultaneously *multi-scaler* actor, comprising both domestic systems within the state and states as actors within the international system. This is not to deny the important role of systemic level analysis utilizing the unitary-actor image. Such analysis is indispensable for understanding patterns of international behavior which persist over long periods, especially *balance of power* politics among the various types of great power polarities. However, if the analytical goal is to explore the possibilities of *systemic transformatio*, then the dynamic unit level process of foreign policy formation, as it derives from the collective multi-scaler thoughts and actions of constituent individuals, needs an IR theoretical accounting.

In search of a more scientific theory for IR, positivist approaches whether neo-utilitarian or constructivist have made *exogenous* the unit level process, which guides the formation of foreign policy. While this move facilitates the theoretical isolation of structural forces, which undoubtedly provide the discipline with indispensable insights, it also comes with significant drawbacks. Scientific realists explain how the levels of analysis separation is *not* an epistemological necessity, and how it restricts the ability of IR theory to contend with the impact of unit level forces on state behavior. However, scientific realism tends to advance ideas concerning *emergent* structural forces with downward causal agency autonomous from the individual level substrate. From a Weberian perspective, this type of autonomous agency is a form of reification.

As an alternative to positivism, Weber advocates *verstehen*. *Verstehen* involves an *interpretivist* approach, essentially exploring the meanings individuals express as the motivations behind their social actions. This methodology is widely considered an alternative to more materialist *behaviorist* methodology, which focus on observable actions rather than the meanings behind the actions.⁶⁰ Interpretive methodologies counter the tendencies towards reification brought about by “emergence,” helping to understand the shared ideational institutions behind structured social practices. Ultimately, both scientific realism and Weberian interpretivism offer *non-positivist* approaches, which aim to avoid a post-positivistic relativism. To accomplish this, however, the theory needs to be grounded in material reality. Scientific realism offers a materialist ontology disconnected from an epistemological relativism, which ultimately cannot escape the relativist trap of post-positivism. Alternatively, it is Weber’s interpretivist methodology, coupled with the material embodiment of the individual, which allows us to imagine “multi-scaler” institutions and

practices behind collective action. If a model of the state can be constructed using this type of individualist methodology, then the distinction between the domestic and international levels of analysis can be relaxed, and in some cases discarded completely.

A Pluralistic Fallible nation: An alternative theory of the state

What exactly is the ontological status of the state within mainstream IR? Is the rational unitary-actor model a theoretical abstraction, useful for the analytical isolation of systemic factors— but not intended as real? In that direction, Waltz “freely admits” that states, “are in fact not unitary purposive actors.”⁶¹ Moreover, Robert Gilpin remarks, “Of course the state does not really exist,” and further warns us against committing “the fallacy of reification.”⁶² As well, Richard Little claims that to talk of the state as an actor is, “simply a form of shorthand,” which refers to, “the human agents who represent the state.”⁶³

From a neorealist perspective, rather than looking at domestic variable, the point is to isolate the systemic force, that impact upon state behavior. Waltz argues that the assumption of states as unitary-actor/like-units is necessary to theoretically isolate systemic factors. This isolation moves IR away from theories, which posit specific characteristics for various states.⁶⁴ Waltz strives for a systemic theory, not because system forces are unequivocally causally primary they may or may not be but rather, because they facilitate a materialist and parsimonious theory more conducive to empirical evaluation.

But there are serious problems with this whole attempt to isolate systemic causes and make IR more scientific. For one, it is not at all clear that systemic forces are more causally fundamental than alternative factors. As well, the subject matter of IR is not the same as that of the natural sciences, and consequently the ideas and intentions of the individuals who comprise states almost certainly matter. These problems could be alleviated if neorealists were to remember that the state as the unitary-actor model is, as Little puts it, “simply a form of shorthand,” rather than a reality.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, such qualifications tend to be forgotten in practice, and predictions and policy prescriptions are developed from “reductionist” systemic theories reductionist not in Waltz’s sense, but rather, in the sense that potentially vital causal factors are left out of consideration.

In his earlier writings, Wendt appears to accept the unitary-actor model as a theoretical abstraction necessary to maintain the states-centric paradigm. However, in his later work, he presents a nuanced defense of *genuine* state personification. Wendt describes the *four* main properties which, in his view, make states actual unitary-actors: “(1) a unitary identity that persists over time; (2) beliefs about their environment; (3) transitive desires that motivate them to move; and (4) the ability to make choices on a rational basis, usually defined as expected-utility maximisation.”⁶⁶ Wendt even goes as far as to argue

that the state might actually be a manifestation of a *collective consciousness*, inhabiting a kind of emergent *superorganism*. To try to justify these assertion, Wendt borrows many of the arguments surrounding *emergence* and *downward causation* developed by IR oriented scientific realists.

Although scientific realism does not go as far as Wendt in postulating the state as an actual superorganism,⁶⁷ in asserting that collective entities with emergent properties are ontologically real, it is understandable that such conclusions could be drawn from the logic of the position. However, rather than an actual personified entity, scientific realists tend to view the state as part of an *emergent* “institutional ensemble;”⁶⁸ comprised of “institutionalized social relations and strategic actors”.⁶⁹ These *ensembles*, however, are not restricted to the domestic realm; or as Koivisto states, “The emergentist approach to a level does not give the nation-state ontological primacy over the international; instead, the state and the international levels could be seen to arise from both similar and dissimilar social processes and conditions.”⁷⁰ Essentially, for scientific realists the state, along with the state’s system, emerges from broader structural condition, which encompass all social entities, including the state; and all social system, including the international system. The *linguistic turn* brought with it a *discursive* ontology, which inevitably extended to the disciplines “theory of the state.” IR proponents of the linguistic turn are in agreement with Gilpin as concerns the claim that the state does not really exist. However, whereas neorealists like Gilpin see the unitary-actor state as comprised of an individual level substrate,⁷¹ linguistic theories take issue with the entire concept of the individual, which for many proponents only exists as a discursive construct. This discursive ontology extends to the nature of the state, the reality of which can never be grasped outside of the way language determines the parameters of our capacity to think and talk about it. This perspective is valuable in that it captures the *ephemeral* nature of the state, in terms of how both social actors and analysts perceive it; however, it is also problematic in minimizing the impact of material forces, especially military forces with the capacity for non-linguistically-mediated destructive capabilities.

In essence, the unitary-actor state model upheld by the neo-utilitarian and constructivist mainstream is unable to account for the impact of non-systemic level ideas on international behavior. As well, the discursive alternatives deconstruct the whole concept of the state, and in the process relativize what are actual material security threats. If both these claims are valid, then IR would do well to heed John Hobson’s advice and reevaluate the disciplines entire understanding of exactly what kind of entity is this thing we call “the state.”⁷² For neo-utilitarians, a theory of the state “drops out” from the framework in favor of the billiard ball image of unitary-actor states which behave as like-units. Wendt’s personified state and scientific realism’s emergent “institutional ensemble” are both problematic in that they *reify* not only the

state but social systems in general. And discursive theories do away with the state as an existent material entity altogether. In light of these conditions, if the theoretical goal is to construct an alternative to the unitary-actor model, what characteristics would this model need to entail to address some of the shortcomings of the alternatives? Two possibilities will be suggested here: 1) the state as a *pluralistic* entity, and 2) the state as a *fallible* nation.

Pluralistic Entity vs Unitary Actor

An alternative model could embrace some form of Weberian-inspired methodological individualism to develop a *pluralistic* (as opposed to *unitary-actor*) model of the state. Ultimately, the actions of states are always *peopled* actions; states being incapable of having autonomous goals, fears, desires, or rational interests, as only embodied individuals have these traits. Of course admittedly, individuals form collectivities to pursue shared ideas through coordinated actions; but to the best of our knowledge such collectivities do not have interests and agency autonomous from their component individuals—except, as previously noted, as a kind of theoretical shorthand.

Through the individual consisting of both *ideational mind* and *material body*, an individualist methodology enables the analytical comparison of the discursive and physical aspects which comprise the state and ultimately the international order. However, there are at least three alternative forms of individualism to consider. One is the *atomistic individualism* of microeconomics, which develops an abstract model of individuals as *rational actors*. This type of individualism was adapted by Waltz to form the neorealist assumption of states as rational unitary-actors conceptualized as behaving “like” individuals. The second form of individualism is that of *specific individuals*. Concerning the behavior of states, this type of individualism is found in foreign policy studies where specific political actors— various state leaders, elite politicians, and diplomats, for example —basically devise and drive state policy. The third form is Weber’s more *collectivist* methodological individualism. While Weber acknowledges the usefulness of the *atomistic* and *specific individuals* approaches, he puts forth two additional methodological tools: the *averages of groups*, and the *ideal-type*.⁷³ Unlike the unitary-actor model, these tools allow for the evaluation of a plurality of shared ideational institutions and their impact on the collective behavior of groups, which comprise the state.

A pluralistic image of the state could be constructed with the goal of examining the individually mediated ideational institutions which, being multi-scaler, simultaneously span the domestic and international levels. Some examples of these types of institutions relevant for IR include *cosmopolitan* vs *communitarian* senses of identity, *free-trade* vs *interventionist* economic policies, and *democratic* vs *authoritarian* political ideologies. An alternative state model would also be pluralistic in the sense of being comprised of key

national components. These national components would be aggregates of individuals as opposed to *reified* collective units with autonomous agency and interests. Possible components include various *political, economic, and socio-cultural* groupings of *elite actors* with shared interests and identities. As well, various segments of the populace can be methodologically distinguished, perhaps conceptualized as some form of electoral *constituents*, market *consumers*, and epistemic cultural *communities*.

Fallible Nation vs Rational-Actor

Besides being viewed as a pluralistic entity, an alternative state model should include the *fallible agency* of the state (as opposed to assuming states as *rational actors*). One important contribution towards understanding state fallibility involves the scientific realist assertion that all epistemological constructs are necessarily *fallible*.⁷⁴ Accordingly, there is no absolute way for *actors* to make infallible decisions or *analysts* to develop infallible knowledge. Within the neo-utilitarian paradigm, the rational state assumption is usually qualified, in that most sophisticated analysis sees rational state behavior as the *ideal*; as opposed to behavior being an *inevitable* state response to supposedly objective systemic constraints. Gideon Rose contends, “Purely systemic explanations of foreign policy presume a reasonably accurate apprehension by officials of the distribution of power and a reasonably direct translation of such apprehensions into national policy.”⁷⁵ Arguably, however, real-world foreign policy formation involves a far more complex and messy process, consisting of more than just the specific political actors directly involved, but also all manner of institutional pressures and systemic constraints, which determine the parameters within which the relevant actors formulate policy.

Michael Mann describes a theory of the state he labels *foul-up theory*. Through this concept, Mann tries to express the degree to which the state is; “chaotic, irrational, with multiple departmental authorities, presumed erratically and intermittently by capitalists but also by interest groups.”⁷⁶ Consequently, states can never hope to be consistent rational actors, pursuing strictly material interests oriented towards increased security or economic gains. While sometimes behaving rationally, states are also inescapably comprised of a plurality of fallible decision makers, formulating policies with imperfect information and because of various non-rational motives including an array of value-oriented beliefs, desires, and traditions.

This alternative *pluralistic-fallible* state model might better be conceptualized as simultaneously a *nation* and a *state*, thereby representing both the ideational and material elements which constitute complex political entities. Within this framework, the idea of “the state” can be used to focus on the *material* aspects of international relations —military weapons, economic resources, and embodied individuals in both their pluralistic

and fallible forms. This material view of the state is, however, significantly different from the unitary and rational state model adhered to within the IR mainstream. Alternatively, the idea of “the nation” can be used to focus on the *ideational* decision-making side of IR. This *national* aspect of the model would be comprised of the various shared-ideas traditions, norms, beliefs, desires, etc. —held by elements of the elites and populace —which motivate specific state policies and practices. From this perspective, “the state” could be metaphorically viewed as the physical body, while “the nation” would play the role of the conscious mind. Ultimately this would form a theoretical political entity that is simultaneously both material-state and ideational-nation. While the mainstream image of the state as rational unitary-actor will likely remain indispensable for the purposes of analytically isolating *systemic* forces, for other purposes this image can be *augmented* with a more complex *nation-state* model— ocmprised of alternative factors such as individual agency, shared-ideas, and domestic politics —in order to conceptualize the state as a *pluralistic* and *fallible* actor within the international order.

Conclusion

While mainstream theoretical frameworks have proven effective as tools to analyze the top-down systemic forces which push and pull states in various directions, they have been less successful in understanding the impact of bottom-up unit level forces. It was argued above that mainstream neo-utilitarian theories which view the systemic material-side of international relations as causally fundamental risk downplaying alternative causal forces —especially individual agency, ideas, and domestic politics. As a solution to the material/ideational divide, it was suggested that a Weberian-inspired methodology, taking account of the role of embodied individuals as the source of both agency and practice, might provide a means towards a pragmatic analytical synthesis. In other words, the supposed incommensurability of positivist and post-positivist perspectives cannot be asserted without exploring the links between the shared ideas and coordinated practices of the collectivities of individuals which comprise social reality. In the last section it was argued that Weber’s methodological individualism allows individuals to span the levels of analysis, simultaneously having a variety of identities and belonging to a number of communities including those which impact upon intra-state, state level, and international level institutions. In this direction, it was proposed that IR needs an image of the state more complex than the alternatives, which include: the rational unitary-actor abstraction of neorealism, the personified superorganism of Wendt’s constructivism, the reified emergent institutional ensemble of scientific realism, and the ephemeral and relativistic state as discourse found in the linguistic theories. Finally, it was argued that mainstream neo-utilitarian theories, which view the systemic material-side of international relations as

causally fundamental, risk downplaying alternative causal forces, especially individual agency, ideas, and domestic politics. As a solution to these theoretical drawbacks, an alternative to the mainstream rational unitary-actor model of the state was proposed. This alternative was described as a fallible-pluralistic model, taking account of both the fallibility of individuals and analysts, as well as the manner in which states are pluralistic rather than unitary actors in international affairs.

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