A History of Methods in International Relations Theory:

Toward a Modular Framework for Integrative Research

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Note:

It is strange to format a discipline in a century-long series of academic debates over largely unwinnable contests. But, the study of international relations as a social scientific practice does demand of us a *philosophy* of the study of international relations, and following from this, a *history* of the philosophy of the study of international relations, and indeed, further still, a *critical* history of the philosophy of international relations. This article has suggested one possible comprehensive solution to the meta-debate that has been overarching the various iterative disputes that have both tainted and given life to our craft. We need to emphasize the lived-in aspects as much as the foundations; yet, we ought to embrace anti-foundational considerations in an equal capacity. Notwithstanding the fact that this concession may render the international world incapable of being 'explained' in its entirety, it is my hope that perhaps inter-paradigmatic, and indeed inter-epistemological, tensions can be erased in an effort to amass a meta-theoretical framework granting mutual territory for multiple angles of analyses. This, I contend, is likely our best, and perhaps only, path forward as a cohesive, yet interdisciplinary field of study.

I.   <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

International relations (IR) as a discipline of study has both suffered from, and found communicative grounding in, a series of well-connected "Great Debates" between generations of conflicting theoretical schools. These various movements in the literature have been loosely divided into a succession of (typically) four rounds of debate between rival theoretical frameworks holding seemingly intractable empirical or normative assumptions about the nature or function of international affairs in particular, and the intelligibility of the social world in general. As summarised by Lake (2013), the IR landscape was first marked by a battleground between "realist" and "idealist" scholars taking place during the interwar period, developing fault lines that would persist for the majority of the twentieth century (p. 569). This would compose the first of the Great Debates. In the first few decades following World War II, a second Great Debate emerged between behaviorists, abiding by rigid scientific guidelines, in opposition to traditionalists who espoused the utility of examining historical developments, factors of contingency, and the complexities of individual leadership (p. 570). The third—and sometimes erroneously declared "last"—debate consisted of a more superficial chasm between neorealist, neoliberal, and constructivist paradigms that more or less served as an applied extension of the preceding realism-idealism debate. The fourth and terminal debate, I contend, involves a philosophical turn toward the foundations of social inquiry and the nature of what can be considered knowable, pitting positivists and interpretivists against each other. It is generally accepted in the literature that this debate has not been cleanly 'won' by either side (Lake, 2013, 2011; Smith & Owens, 2011; Checkel, 2012), with each camp's respective adherents largely retreating to their own academic enclave within the subfield. The withdrawal has caused the

study of international relations to become fragmented, owing mostly to this sort of stubborn bifurcation brought about by intellectual partisans.

In recent years, there have been a number of calls to reverse the so-called "balkanization" of the field (Colgan, 2016: 7), mostly advocating for a degree of cross-theoretical dialogue, and a pragmatic admission that both schools offer mutually enriching tools for problem solving (Price & Reut-Smit, 1996; Kowert & Shannon, 2002; Fearon & Wendt, 2002; Katzenstein, Keohane, & Krasner, 1998). At the same time, there have been counter-argumentative efforts that reify the divisions between the two predominant philosophies, pointing to certain fundamental rifts in methodology that demand consideration (Moravcsik, 1999; Mearsheimer, 1994). At the forefront of the great epistemic divide is a growing school of scholars who are crafting an obscure, though earnest, conciliatory framework for bridging the rival paradigms. Borrowing from recent developments in the philosophy of social science, "critical realists" (or critical naturalists) have provided a possible catch-all epistemology that accommodates for the ontological claims from both sides of the field (Jackson, 2010; Bhaskar, Esbjorn-Hargens, Hartwig, & Hedlund, 2016). I intend to situate this emerging interface within the established canon of IR theory in such a way that it provides space for a possible détente between opposing theoretical factions. To this end, I will illustrate my solution using the concept of modular design, borrowed from the processes of computer software development, and directed acyclic and cyclic graphs drawn from discrete mathematics.

In order to make a compellingly justified solution, in the following pages I will provide a *periodization* of the Great Debates, with a strong emphasis on the *third and fourth*, as they are (i) the most analytically rich, and are (ii) the most theoretically relevant to the proposed solution. Though I have no delusions about my ability to remap the landscape of IR theory, or close the

centuries-long epistemic dilemmas it presides over, I do reserve some faith in the utility of using

emergent social scientific movements toward a "critical naturalism" to potentially ease tensions

amongst theoretical hardliners. In the Postscript section I will expand on my solution by using

directed graphs in order to better demonstrate my meta-theoretical logic. This assumes that a

"modular" framework, like those used in the design of computational and neural networks, can

provide a sound illustration of my proposed solution. This would establish a visual pathway in

which each modular node represents a different theoretical input along a variety of connected

layers that each perform a discrete logical function on the proposed observation (meta-

theoretical, epistemic, methodological, ontological, and micro-ontological). Due to pressing time

constraints, this portion of the paper remains underdeveloped, and subject to further expansion.

Even so, with hope this may quiet the near-theological devotions of IR sectarians and ultimately

give cause for a return to the seemingly radical task of substantive conversation.

II.   THE ONTIC DEBATES

The first Debate took hold of the IR literature following World War I and remained a significant

line of cleavage for the majority of the twentieth century, reaching a boiling point, however, in

the months immediately preceding the Second World War. A class of theorists informed by

assumptions of power politics and a Hobbesian, self-interested human nature, led primarily by

advocate E.H. Carr, reacted against the Wilsonian idealists that came to the fore during the

interwar period. The idealists were motivated by a utopian vision of the world in which

international institutions, such as the newfound League of Nations, held a unique ability to

prevent conflict between states through the manufacturing of aligned interests and

interdependence (Lake, 2013: 569). The inherent conflict pursuant to state-specific interest

maximization—seen by realists as a prima facie truth of world politics—was challenged by idealist thinkers who rejected it as a "Great Illusion", instead favoring the Wilsonian, and indeed Kantian, promise of a peaceful institutional order rationally carried out by the spread of liberal democracy and a capitalist mode of production that would entangle the world's economies in a state of interdependence (Angell, 1933; Miller, 1995).

Although the emergence of WWII largely stifled the debate at the time, it is important to grasp that the only substantial division between the two camps were in terms of ontological preferences or assumptions, which allows for methodological pluralism (Lake, 2013: 570). In other words, the realist-idealist separation exists only on surface-level analyses of *what there is* in the international sphere, what is the most relevant operating unit, and what underlying motivations drive decision making. Thankfully, at this point in time the field had not yet been mired in uncompromising claims over what *can be known* and, following closely behind, *how* that knowledge can be considered valid. Thus, the theorists of the time shared mutual territory to make predictions or affirmations with respect to empirical and rationally-derived claims about international relations; both schools drew from historical or sociological case studies, large-*n* data samples, and perceived descriptive patterns of the world that indeed bore a resemblance to what we would now call mid-range theory (Lake, 2013: 572).

With this iteration of the realist-idealist debate mostly closing in the wake of World War II, a new cross-disciplinary and more methodologically focused debate came to replace it. This time around the landscape came to be marked by a rivalry between behaviourists—those who claimed that inquiry into IR could only be progressed through the formal methods of the physical sciences—and the traditionalists, who favoured historicism and interpretative methodologies. At its climax during the 1960s, the IR literature had become polarized by the traditionalists who

maintained that world affairs were too complex, contingency prone, and multi-dimensional for basic quantitative methods to capture, while on the other hand behaviorists were seen as attempting to revitalize the field as a truly social scientific enterprise of equal status to economics as well as their natural science counterparts. It becomes clear, then, that this Debate was not so much a "battle of the paradigms" as it was a conflict of methodologies.

Proponents of the traditional school argued in favor of contextualizing observations of the social world, claiming that it would accord more explanatory power than rigorous verification criteria which would, ultimately, provide "very little of significance that can be said about international relations" (Bull, 1966: 361). This creed would go on to become one of the lynchpins of the traditionalist's reactionary position—only careful introspection of historical trends, critical historical junctures, counterfactual analyses, and accounts of agent-level contingencies could generate theory of sufficient scope and breadth. At this time, the other side of the field eschewed such longitudinal studies, instead favouring large-n data sets, applying the comparative method to find commonalities (or dissimilarities) across cases with similar (or dissimilar) dependent or explanatory variables. From this, researchers could extract deductive theories that had the privilege of (i) generalizability, (ii) testability, and (iii) causal claims verified by logical-empirical confirmation. These methodological benefits would go on to compose the constituent pillars of the behaviorist's criteria for good, falsifiable research (Lake, 2013: 570). To provide an illustrative example, consider the statistical method, an essential behaviorist methodology, and how it might be able to permit the researcher to observe a pool of data and confidently draw useful conclusions based on principles of Bayesian probability. In one instance, an article used evidence from a general attitudinal survey to consider the effects of endorsements of female political candidates in Jordan on public support (Bush & Jamal, 2014).

The study used a large sample size (*n*=1650) and controlled for geographic location and other relevant demographic characteristic such as age, sex, country of origin, and levels of income and education (p. 37). The results found that when respondents were informed of a recent legislative amendment that increased the total minimum number of seats reserved for women in the national parliament, they were not—in statistically significant terms—any more likely to support the amendment after endorsements from local imams nor from US government-funded organizations (p. 40). In fact, imam endorsements caused a decline in support among female respondents compared to the mean level of support without endorsement; this result contradicts general expectations and is said to warrant further research (p. 40). Now consider for a moment how the traditionalist might interpret these results. With a high degree of confidence (>95%), we can be assured that *foreign and domestic* political endorsements do not positively correlate with public support for female political candidates in Jordan. When viewed from the lens of the traditional IR theorist, this result may raise more questions than it solves. As much as this finding may supplement or contribute to theory, it is subject to errors of inference through the abuses of over-determining tools such as statistical significance (over *substantive* significance) using the R^2 correlation coefficient, and the presumption of generalisability from a single test—from a single data set—without retrials or further experimentation (Braumoeller & Sartori, 2004). Moreover, a traditionalist would likely object to atomising knowledge in this way on the grounds that it is incomplete, prone to omitted variable biases that could be solved through historical-contextual situating, and vulnerable to the pitfalls of systematisation without due interpretation, reflexivity, or the explanatory narration necessary for granting the theory full heuristic utility. Perhaps, on the whole, this point of debate could best be summarised as a dispute over the primacy of reliability versus generalisability.

In the last few decades of the twentieth century behaviourism, in large part, appeared to have won over a considerable amount of influence in the dominant IR literature. Kenneth Waltz (1979) thrust structural realism to the forefront of the discipline, offering a contemporary behaviorist account of realism defined by considerations of ordering principles—anarchy and self-help—housed within systems-level structures that constrain or prescribe state behavior. Dubbed "neorealism", Waltz and his cohort made a compelling case for a revival of realpolitik in international relations scholarship, while adjusting for the various relevant structures that interfere with both state cooperation and unbridled power maximization, such as the maintenance of a balanced distribution of power and capabilities. Neorealism would find its nemesis shortly thereafter with the advent of neoliberalism, a version of liberalism also sharpened by the insights of behaviorism. Neoliberalists critiqued certain assumptions held by the neorealist, such as presence of *true* international anarchy; contrarily, this new brand of liberals reasserted the primacy of complex inter-dependence and institutional mediation as a mechanism for state cooperation (Snyder, 2004). In the same vein as the former behaviorists, neoliberals applied a nomological method to examine how international institutions and absolute gains (both in terms of economic and security advantages) could reform how we think about (i) cooperation between states, and (ii) how the *rational interests* of state actors could serve as a constituent factor for peace, and not conflict (Lake, 2011: 470). In a less visible capacity, Marxist scholars, including the Neo-Gramscian and neo-Marxist, also found their place in this Debate, especially with respect to dependency theory and political economy. Marxist theory remained in keeping with the neoliberal/realist custom of examining material and structural aspects of international politics, typically in terms of economic modes of production, but abandoned their fixation on cross-border conflict and cooperation by alternatively focusing on observations of class, global

capitalism, and international economic superstructures (Linklater, 1986). The historical-materialist account of the capitalist, and speculated post-capitalist, international orders espoused by Marxists required a largely traditionalist methodology, employing interpretation and protracted contextual analyses, supplemented with *normative* foundations regarding value-loaded conceptualizations of emancipation, oppression, and social justice (p. 305). Although the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet bloc brought a sharp decline in traditional Marxist international relations theory for a period of time, as a whole it was responsible for introducing overt normative ends into their methodology—this would serve as the basis for the *critical school* of social and political theory that would later take the discipline by storm. However, with regards to the larger inter-paradigm debate, the ontological (and certainly political) differences between the respective parties brought about the equivalent of a cross-paradigm shouting match for some time— a by-product of strict "theoretical monism" upheld by the various conflicting sects (Checkel, 2012: 227). This, in short, constituted the foundation of the third Great Debate, and what would later be described as the "war of the paradigms" (Colgan, 2016: 2).

Despite sharing mostly incongruent ontic assumptions, some scholars, such as those of the English School, found common territory across the neoliberal-neorealist paradigms by maintaining the principle of anarchy but conceding that a "society of states" operates within a structure of 'ruling' norms that restrain the use of state force (Bull, 1977). Though remaining committed to the Hobbesian axiom of international anarchy, the English School construed this principle in such a way that it could break from its formerly deterministic nature. On account of their inclusion of shared *norms* and *ideas* into the realist-rationalist framework, the English School ushered in a third theoretical model to the already hotly contested paradigm war. This particular model, known as constructivism, countered the mainstream conventions of the field by

offering a reflectivist (or "interpretivist") ontological agenda which did not support the preconceived objectivity of international structures (Wendt, 1987). The tendency for the mainstream to take their structural assumptions of world politics for granted prompted a new generation of theorists to deride their assessments as self-reifying, functionalist accounts of state behavior, and thus subject to skepticism from those who question the usefulness of applying inferences of necessity. In their positive contribution, constructivists proclaim that these 'objective' structures are instead socially or historically constructed by human ideas and therefore *not* a deterministic production of human nature, anarchy, or any other 'essential' quality of the international arena. According to the constructivist, immaterial concepts like identities and interests are said to play a foundational role in predicting how states will behave in ways that the mainstream's structuralism cannot (Kowert & Shannon, 2012).

With the development of mid-level theory within IR scholarship, it became increasingly accepted that there was, in fact, space for "multiple valid and…even complementary paths to understanding" (Lake, 2011: 478). In recognizing that different methods of explanation are likely to be better suited to different kinds of questions, it was suggested that efforts toward verisimilar narratives (interpretivism) and efforts toward nomothetic approaches to causality (behaviourism) are each more apt to apply to different kinds of cases (p. 475). For instance, the nomothetic mission of locating *cause* as ΔX co-occuring with ΔY (when controlling for external variables), can provide useful insights when the availability of data is readily accessible in sufficient quantity such that regression discontinuity models, and other formal heuristics can be of statistical value. Meanwhile, the narrative task of a constructivist provides a descriptive inference that grants order, signification, and other hermeneutic benefits to the analysis, such as why "relations are historically *so*, and not otherwise" (p. 475). The credible application of reflexive

methods in the study of international relations gave rise to new trends in the literature, such as feminist theory, which pivoted the analytical focus inward toward the lived experiences of women, that could be usefully built on top of insights from existing IR orthodoxy. Sylvester (2013) observed this conciliation as a process of "travel[ling] on parallel, coexisting, and nonintersecting paths" (p. 613). This sort of theoretical pluralism effectively negates issues of intellectual mono-culturalism, a quality of sure undesirability in academic spheres.

This prototypical 'division of labour' solution proved to work with considerable success in ameliorating the paradigmatic divide. There is perhaps no better evidence of this than the cooling of tensions between constructivism and neorealism brought about in light of Fearon and Wendt's (2002) seminal "domain of sequencing" resolution in which each theory works in isolation of the other, only passing the analytical burden to the other once their methods have been exhausted (p. 64). One can pronounce this movement in the inter-paradigm relationship as having shifted from theoretical pluralism to one more suitably described as mutual hole-patching. This is said to require a "pragmatic interpretation" of their respective ontologies, explicitly geared toward concerting a positive-sum, collaborative method of problem solving (p. 65). From thereafter, it became commonplace in the literature for one to find references to the "neo-neo" and "neo-constructivist" syntheses owing largely to their common rationalist commitments, and the emergence of interstitial (or "mid-level") theory that provides accessible ontic terrain for inter-paradigm discussion (Owens & Smith, 2011: 294, Waever, 1996). As espoused by Lake (2013), with this newfound collegiality came the supposed end of the Paradigm Wars, and along with it the third Debate.

This is made possible by the kind of mid-level theory that Moravcsik (1999) called for in order to foster inter-paradigm dialogue on substantive issues. It should be noted, however, that

the author framed this request in terms favorable to the empirical sensibilities of the neo- schools by warning against the "causally epiphenomenal" role of ideas as a potential danger to theory testing (p. 675). I contend that Moravcsik's insistence on the necessity of *direct* material falsifiability to be essentially confusing the constructivist's ontological objective as one dedicated to uncovering immediate logical-causal mechanisms. For reasons to be explored in the following section, I believe this is not the case. Likewise, Checkel (2012) would also go on to advocate for inter-paradigm bridging through the use of meta-theory; likely, an explanatory model capable of accommodating the various sub-surface differences regarding what can be considered valid theory through common evaluative criteria (p. 240). At this point it becomes clear that the now blurred tripartite Debate between neorealism-neoliberalism, neo-Marxism, and constructivism largely dissipated into a fourth Great Debate, one fought as intently as those that preceded it; however, it was unique in its location on explicitly epistemological grounds—a battlefield yet uncontested in the literature.

III.   THE EPISTEMIC DEBATE

The difference that confronts us is not in the method but in the objectives of knowledge.... which methodological dispute serves only to conceal and neglect, something that does not so much confine or limit modern science as precede it and make it possible.

-     Hans-Georg Gabamer, *Truth and Method*

Until this point the various discussed methodological and theoretical camps have, for the most part, diverged along ontological lines. In other words, along presumptions of *what* exists in the international world, and subsequently what is of importance for the sake of theory-building;

commonly, these dividing lines are extended to include metaphysical questions pertaining to methodology, specifically addressing how entities such as states may be categorised, grouped, or hierarchized within international systems and how they might be further subdivided along greater commonalities. In large part, the purpose of this section is to impart in the reader an appreciation for how conveniently agreeable debates of this nature actually are. What are not so compromising, however, are Great Debates having to do with the limits, foundations, and meaning(s) of knowledge and from what measure they can possibly be derived.

Take, for a moment, Wendt's (1987) response to the neo-Marxism versus neorealist dispute over the role of structure and agency in the study of international relations. Whereas the Marxist is quick to defer to macro-scale processes of dependency and class struggle as the determinant of international phenomena, and the neorealist privileges the micro-scale agency of the nation-state, Wendt proposes a relational solution by which both are "mutually constituted or co-determined entities" (p. 350). Known as structuration theory, the privilege of defending this constructivist ontology is made possible only by deference to "scientific realism"— a philosophy which rejects the assumed equivalence of "the real" with the experientially knowable (p. 351). This served as a first-order epistemological response to the empirical purism of the "neo-" schools. As empiricists, the neo- schools held that mere observable *effects* alone cannot deduce knowledge, as what exists is strictly a function of what can be sensed directly from experience— it stands, therefore, that the empiricist would have to be, at best, agnostic about phenomena exhibiting properties of "mutual constitution". Touching on the same issue, but framed in slightly different terms, a number of prominent theorists predicted that rationalism—that is, the rigorous belief in deductive reasoning maintained by the neo-schools—would form the next axis of Debate over epistemological supremacy with the constructivists (Katzenstein, Keohane, &

Krasner, 1998). Emerging from what they perceived to be a "new intellectual opening" following

the end of the Cold War, constructivist epistemologies would blur existing fault lines within the

field around actor preferences and their shared norms, ideas, and identities by introducing

"overarching debates from the natural and social sciences" (p. 648; 655).

This brings us to confront the final, and likely terminal, methodological Great Debate in

the IR literature: positivism versus interpretivism (sometimes conflated with "post-positivism").

In plain terms, positivism is a collection of multiple epistemological approaches that share the

foundational assumptions in the efficacy of (i) data derived from empirical evidence, and (ii) its

interpretation through reason and logic, as the only source of true positive knowledge (Larrain,

1979); albeit, this statement has no intention of ever "being proved" as a truth claim itself (p.

197). And here lies the crux of the debate: positivism, on the whole, relies on a Humean account

of causality and a foundational claim of scientific laws as being those extracted from the

empirical unification of events. These assumptive premises have been questioned as to whether

they are consistent with some general "goal of understanding" (Smith, 2006: 192). Smith (2006)

goes on to point out that the antithetical method employed by the interpretivist of rejecting

natural or social causality contradicts their inclusion of this world in their research should it

maintain any pretenses to science or 'inquiry' (p. 192). We can now infer that the ontological

status of causality, and thus what can be known about the world *in general*, presents a rift

between the two parties that fundamental obstructs their ability to meaningfully communicate

with each other—or, in more temporal terms, there is no mid-level theory on which these

epistemologies can interact.

In advancing further with respect to the positivist's dilemma, it would be a disservice to

the debate to not continue expounding its foundational difficulties. At its core, the positivist

advances a causal mechanistic framework that rests upon grossly unempirical assumptions regarding "timeless necessary connections" between causal events (that is, the inextricable quality linking ΔX with ΔY); however, to accept this as true would be to accept that *nothing*, in empirically verifiable terms, binds X and Y together, and the fact that "all past [X] has been [X and Y together, and the fact that "all past [Xs] have been [Ys] is a matter of cosmic coincidence" (Hildebrand, 2016: 4). This is a cogent description of David Hume's critique of inductive reasoning which, in broad terms, posits that inductive arguments are concerned with inferential justifications from the premises; however, inductive premises are justified themselves by subjective experiences which themselves have no immediate bearing "on *how* the inference *from* that premise *to* the conclusion is justified" (BonJour, 2010: 53).

At this point, one begins to recognize the depth of the epistemic problem, but perhaps not the application. It would be useful, then, to bring to mind the methodologies of the neo- schools, the constructivists, and the traditionalists—those of the so-called mainstream—and consider the fact that in all cases, despite their ontological or assumptive differences, they share a devotion to empirically derived casual insights of the international world. In a more liberal sense of the term, it can be said that they hold common commitments, of varying degrees, to 'scientific' causal insights made possible by the foundational claims of positivism. It would be helpful to evoke the fact that even the methodological outliers of this type—say the work of neo-Marxists— derive: (i) causal claims, (ii) regarding material modes of social organization, (iii) from empirical observations, (iv) presumed as objective to the observer.

Interpretivism, alternatively, as an *epistemic* tradition in IR, has recently found significance as the basis of the emergent critical and postmodern schools; under the 'interpretivist' umbrella, they share an "incredulity toward metanarratives and foundationalist

[justifications of knowledge]" (Smith & Owens, 2011: 287). In staunch opposition of positivism, they make no clear distinction between an objective and subjective world independent of interpretation, instead framing their contributions more in terms of "critiques" and commentaries on the prevailing impositions of language, or "discourses", which reify hierarchies of power that shape the lived-in experience of those affected by international affairs (Mearsheimer, 1994; Smith & Owens, 2011: 295). The interpretivists assert that knowledge-power relations are mutually constituted to create "regimes of truth", the 'nature' of which being subject to the various accounts of those experiencing it relative to their position within the power-hierarchy (Smith & Ownes, 2011: 287). By this scope, any attempt at explaining or inferring a 'real' truth, or making a claim to a reality as it 'really' is, or even a claim to an objective causal mechanism would be in violation of their epistemic doctrine. The indistinguishability of an assumed real world from the "virtual" world—or discourse-represented world—has been fleshed out in more precise detail in the IR literature in recent years (Der Derian, 2000; Der Derian, 2009; McCarthy, 2015).

In the following section I provide a condensed account as to how we as international relations theorists might be able to reconceptualise the stagnancy of the fourth Debate with the help of critical developments in the philosophy of social science. This may provide a useful starting point for correcting the attendant contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in both the positivist and interpretivist frameworks identified in the literature (Hopf, 2007: 56; Smith, 2006: 192), and move closer toward research integration across epistemologies.

IV.   AN EPISTEMIC BRIDGE

This section seeks to logically demonstrate the heuristic value of critical realism (or "critical naturalism") in potentially providing a link between the positivist and interpretivist epistemologies applied in IR scholarship. As a wholesale philosophy of social science, critical realism (CR) closely resembles the structuration theories as espoused by Wendt (1987) in its support for a conjoining of agent and structure in creating a "dialectical synthesis" without subordinating one to the other, while further claiming that social structures are fundamentally linked to spatial/temporal structures and thus these contextual elements demand inclusion in social research (p. 356). Put more succinctly, the social and the structural world are seen by CR as inter-dependent, therefore they are both required for explanations of social phenomena by necessity; they ask, consequently, what structural elements must be present in time and space for certain agent-level social events to occur, and how the possible arrangements of these elements are also determined by the behaviors of agents (p. 363). Indeed, it stands to reason that one would have to, at least temporarily, assume as 'fact' that the structural-material *and* the agent-interpretive co-exist such that you can observe the effects that one has on the other. At this point I am due to admit that methodological issues may arise in carrying out these principles— however, addressing the potential drawbacks in this respect would extend this article beyond its scope. There are interesting possibilities for future methodological research to be explored in this regard.

Nonetheless, it is without doubt that CR presents an interesting framework for epistemological discussion. To assert that social structures require repeated conditional actions from the agent, and to further assert that the constitutive agents are "capable of consciously reflecting upon, and changing, the actions that produce them", is especially provocative (Bird,

2010: 75). If this is assumed to be true then it follows that *any* observations, in the form of research or otherwise, has the possibility of interfering with the generative mechanisms required for that observation to be considered accurate in the first place. This precludes observers from making *absolute* claims to causal relationships, but could still allow for speculative yet verifiable knowledge claims for theory-building (Note: is this not the 'objective' of knowledge anyway?). This is reiterated by Jackson (2010) as a critique of positivism owing to its interference with falsifiability tests; in other words, it is plausible that other mechanisms will simply counteract or otherwise negate the expression of the assumed causal mechanism. What this brings to bear on the discussion, is that under this theoretical framework there is an implicit "intransitive" quality to the external world which holds that our knowledge of the world constitutes a part of that world, while also holding that the existence of the world does not depend on this knowledge (Smith, 2006: 200). This quality is significant because it entertains the deeply held ontological positions of both the interpretivist and positivist. This sheds light on the promise of the critical realist ontology in potentially providing ground for *epistemic* revision that is hospitable to both the relativist and scientific realist.

In sum, it is important to note that I am not alleging that CR can assume a *foundational* justificatory role in grounding our knowledge about international relations. Certainly this would go against the central theoretical dictates of the postmodernist, and as a result spoil any attempt at establishing a framework for conciliation. Instead, what must be drawn from this insight is the potentiality for a general conceptual pathway toward lasting cross-epistemic dialogue. I contend that this ought to be of paramount importance to nonpartisan IR theorists, as intellectual solipsism and epistemological religiosity have accomplished little in the way of theoretical innovation and disciplinary growth. To this end, the most central contribution I hope to bring to

bear on the state of the literature is that Checkel's (2012) call for meta-theory "[to guide] plural

and synthetic research efforts", at least in a propositional sense, has now been raised. With the

emergence of future research in this topic there is hope that epistemological divides will be

transgressed in the IR theory literature, effectively closing the fourth, and most essential, of the

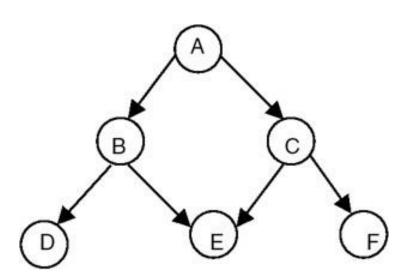Great Debates in the discipline.

V. POSTSCRIPT & CONCEPTUAL MODELS

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Figure 1. A simple directed modular network. Here 'A' would come to represent the 'meta-theoretical' input layer (critical naturalism, or CR), from which it then connects to the epistemic layers by mid-level meta-theories represented by the edges, or arrows. From thereafter, mid-level theories allow for parallel communication on the ontological layers.
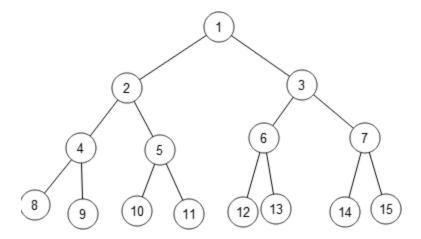
Figure 2. A more complicated directed tree. Succeeding mid-level theories allow for increasingly atomistic levels of analysis. The final input layer, the micro-ontological (Political psychology, etc.) could stand in one of the terminal nodes.
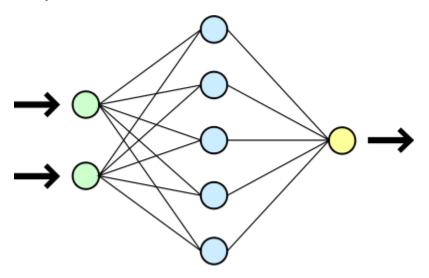

Figure 3. A simple dual-input neural network. This provides a more holistic illustration of the critical-natural solution. Here, the initial inputs (arrows) represent either of the two "intransitive" dimensions of the critical-natural phenomenology, either corresponding to positivist-oriented or interpretivist-oriented epistemologies (green dots). This graph demonstrates a more abundant state of literature positing mid-level theories, as represented by the web of connecting edges. The theoretical output is represented by the yellow dot after having been subject to analysis from the preceding input layers. The arrow then points outward, indicating its readiness for retesting.

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