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**TAKING THEORY SERIOUSLY: PRAGMATISM, TRUTH, AND THE  
FOUNDATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY**

**BY**

**DONALD J. ROGERS**

**A Thesis Submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirement for the  
Degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**Department of Political Studies  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba**

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FOUNDATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY**

**by**

**DONALD J. ROGERS**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree  
of  
Master of Arts**

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*For Tamara  
Whose love and support has kept the light flickering*

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## ABSTRACT

Recent Critical challenges to the Realist theoretical perspective in international relations (IR) suggest that its dominant intellectual status is waning. The positivism in Realism has been attacked as spurious social inquiry, as have its foundational analytical concepts. Critics submit Realist theory as a dogmatic polemic against "utopian" thinking with no basis for claiming a theoretically superior status. Alternatives to Realist theory attempt to delineate the extent to which the practice of theory reflects both a normative and a constructive element of our intellectual urge to know. It is the contention of this thesis that both approaches are mistaken in their conception of a permanent Truth as having intrinsic properties which are discerned either rationally or scientifically. In place of these two alternatives a pragmatist position is offered here; an approach that sees the "truths" expressed in Western theories as based in intersubjective agreements which determine what constitutes knowledge and the ultimate theories derived in response to the problems giving rise to inquiry. Since the historical context of theories are bound to change, the nature and status of these agreements are subject to periodic adjustment. Accepted epistemological assumptions thus no longer stand up without justification—a fact obscured by a Western tendency to both foundationalist thinking and empiricism. Recognising this, a philosophical pragmatic approach to inquiry will be used to show the need for both Realists and Critical IR theorists to take theory seriously, to cease with their propensity to use theoretical discourse to champion useless metaphysics instead of opening the discussion to all voices who may have something of value to contribute to the collective quest to solve theoretical problems.

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## INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War can be interpreted in a number of ways, but at the very least it ended what was hitherto a novelty in world politics—an ideological rivalry that turned traditional notions of interstate politics into a game based on pitting one eschatology against another. In that sense it was a unique historical context. Reading Francis Fukuyama, the end of the Cold War in the favour of the West was a vindication for laissez-faire liberalism worldwide and the end of so-called History, an ideological incarnation to which the West was immune. Rhetoric aside, Fukuyama's histrionics are mystifying yet perfectly understandable given the simple, ethnocentric, and ideological ways the West typically inclines to view international politics. The types of ethnic conflict which appear of late to be the norm rather than the exception defies typical theoretical explanations of the causes of conflict and the manner with which they are dealt. And the blunders that seem also to be the norm as the Western powers attempt to solve problems that it does not understand (or has not *tried* to understand) through dubious means, suggests that the way international politics is viewed is in need of an overhaul. In short, the extant body of theory in international relations has little to offer in terms of insight about what brought the end of the Cold War, or how one is to understand a world in which former European enemies share a common currency only fifty years after they nearly annihilated one another, or where two former superpowers work together on peacekeeping missions, placing themselves in the middle of a centuries old ethnic quagmire, when stock market plunges have a snowball effect worldwide, and when every nation worldwide has access to an abundance of American television and culture. Citing

a slightly amended Chinese proverb: these are interesting times we live in.

And yet, according to Realist theory, they are the same old anarchic, structured, power-dominated times that have always marked world politics. It is suggested here that the world is now contextualised by vastly different social and political relations from that of the Cold War era or any other era before that. To speak of social and political relations in international affairs has, however, meant to speak within the narrow confines of anarchy, power, structure, interest, and sovereignty as stipulated by the dominant disciplinary discourse. To speak of aspects counter to these conceptions, notions such as cooperation, agency, identity, is seen as somehow unorthodox in a discipline which prefers to amend the meanings implied by these terms rather than discard them when they become untenable. The predominant theoretical perspective in international relations (IR) theory, that of Realism, has used these concepts in an attempt to establish them as the permanent context of world politics. And in so doing, it often proceeds discursively as if the use of these mere terms was enough to ensure their real meaning in the everyday experiences of real-world agents. They do not however, exist; rather they are constructs which have, in the past, helped scholars explain international politics. It appears that today, the ways in which international politics is traditionally understood via such concepts is becoming ever more unuseful.

The problem is the extent to which these constructs are posited as parts of a permanent context of world politics. Critics have rightfully chosen to attack the positivism used by Realism to justify this permanence seeing it for what it is; an intellectual gloss used to conceal normativity behind an "objective" veneer, and a rather poor attempt to

conceal a conservative, Great Power ideological perspective as a "reality" of world politics. Critical IR theorists have admirably sought to re-orient theoretical discussions of international relations around issues of crucial importance to twentieth century political theory: the intersubjective recognition of agency, notions of identity and difference, and theory as practice. But the theoretical criticism at times betrays an intellectual arrogance that is just as unpalatable as that of Realists. In their moral contempt for the manner in which Realism appears to provide an intellectual alibi for the exclusionary practices of theory and action in international politics, critical theorists, in their enthusiasm and genuine ethical concern, forget themselves as they champion an emancipatory alternative that seems equally guilty of the same kind of discursive construction of reality as Realists. Such tendencies borrow from the Enlightenment based Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas; an exponent of theoretical practices of norm justification that are to say the least, essentially contested. Post modern critical IR approaches eschew this emancipatory import from Critical Theory, but are far too hasty in abandoning their faith in reason, thus tending to promote a scepticism without justification.

These intellectual divides are unsettling given the extent to which the wisdom and judgement needed for good practice in world politics depends in large part upon the intersubjective understandings of the what and the why of international relations. Discourse in International Relations theory marks what Kuhn would refer to as a discipline in a pre-paradigmatic stage, which on the upside presents a worthy intellectual proponent with an opportunity to reestablish IR theory as a theoretically robust discipline. But this cannot be done so long as IR theorists think that knowledge needs a permanent



footing before one can say anything definitive about world politics. The reason that the sides in the theoretical debates appear not to be talking about the same thing is because they insist on starting with their respective metaphysical commitments before theorising. At the end of their journey they wind up with two "incommensurable" theories that ostensibly defy any impulse to compare them or rationally choose the better of the alternatives. It is at this point that theoretical debates in IR become somewhat polemic as both sides castigate one another for their insipid intellectual commitments. This is ostensibly why these theories are incommensurable, and it is this which feeds the appearance that there is no way out of the rift. Stepping back from the debate, it is astounding, yet perfectly reasonable as to how this could have happened. Both sides are more committed to their metaphysical platforms about what the world is rather than to the establishment of some intersubjective basis through which an understanding world politics is made possible. To take a crude example the rift is tantamount to an American and a Briton sticking to their respective use of the word 'soccer' and 'football' to describe a game where two teams dribble a ball with their feet, on a field with specific dimensions, and attempt to put the ball past a man who tends a space defined by two vertical posts joined by a horizontal crossbar. The two sides talk about the same game, but the disagreement tends to hinge on the definitional representation rather than the substance of the game itself, and the insistence that the debate stay at the level of the abstracted words rather than to the game itself forever forbids any kind of reasonable solution. Does this not describe the terseness of the debate in IR theory? How reasonable is it to stay at the level of abstraction when attempting to understand and act

**authentically? Does it not also show the limitations of attempts to posit that words and concepts can be used to correspond to or perfectly describe something as intersubjective as a "game"? Finally, what matters most, the word (or definition), or the fact of the intersubjective understandings that make the game possible?**

**It should be noted here that the two sides are not on equal footing. Since Realism is the founding disciplinary theory, it is generally the standard against which alternatives are judged; a fact which is problematic given the empiricist leanings of its protagonists. Realists are not to be singularly faulted for accepting the dubious dichotomies of fact/value, or reality/utopia as the foundational relationship giving life to its analysis. Thinking in this way has been common in Western epistemology since Descartes' creation of the mind and the external world as two distinct realms of existence, and the evolutionary mistrust of the mind's ability to apprehend and make true statements about this "external" world. In a nutshell, the separation of science from philosophy is based on the extent to which the subjective influence of the mind is said to have been methodologically removed from the apprehension of external reality. Philosophers such as Kant attempted to put philosophy squarely ahead of science, but others since have realised that no amount of analytic rationality can deal with the fact of a world with real political and social relations. Which brings one to the basis of twentieth century critiques of knowledge. These critiques summarily dismiss the notion that what is understood as knowledge is anything other than intersubjective, and that in so far as one speaks of human relations, then talking about a "world" as existing independently of those relations, or talking about the world as if it were possible to remove oneself from that world, is an**

arrogation to scientism where it clearly has no place. The Cartesian notion of "two worlds" and the dichotomisations that come with it have therefore taken a beating in this century. So too has the Kantian universality implied in his notion of *a priori* rationality.

These twentieth century critiques provide the intellectual grist for the mill of Critical IR theory. The first problem that these critics have is with the presumption that what Realists are talking about is a reality that is somewhat resistant to human intentions to influence that reality. More importantly, these critics have imported the post-modern scepticism of discursive disciplinary constructions such as science, positivism, and "rationality" itself as powerful but obscure systems of resistance to liberating or transformative practices in the lifeworld. That Realism continues to be the predominant approach in IR theory is seen as less a product of its superior ability to explain and understand international phenomena, and more a reflection of the extent to which its positivism and historicism typically negate the influence of agents and experiences on the course of political life. This mostly explains the deserved disdain not only for the Realist meta-theoretical assumption—that the world is an object, and that true knowledge is scientific—but also the disdain for its theoretical constructions of anarchy and sovereignty; concepts that explicitly define in advance specific identities and practices for agents in the world.

This is to suggest that there is much more to understanding Realism's dominance in the IR scholarly community than its accordance with the "reality" of world politics. Critical IR theorists attempt to show that Realism's positivism resists intersubjectivity and openness in theoretical practice thus making it a poor tool for understanding world

politics. Critics are questioning the nature of the generalisations that make up the Realist conception of international politics, suggesting that too much is assumed away by consigning the actions and intentions of political agents under the rubric of anarchy. Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, is for many a regression of international theory since it formally instantiates the discipline of International Relations on a firm positivist footing. It tends to subordinate the contingent nature of unique events, past and present, to an abstract theoretical system that codifies them and tucks them away in the dustbin of History. R.B.J. Walker observes

Claims to novelty ... have an appropriate location within the established conventions of contemporary intellectual life. Even the startling dissolutions and reconstitutions of 1989 can seem like business as usual once one is sedated by contemporary philosophies of history, by scholarly procedures that, no less than established political interests, are ready and willing to put novelties and uncertainties in their proper place....Theories of international relations...are interesting less for the substantive explanations they offer about political conditions of the modern world than as expressions of the limits of the contemporary political imagination when confronted with persistent claims about evidence of fundamental historical and structural transformation.<sup>1</sup>

Arguments of this nature are characteristic of the kinds of criticism levelled at the Realist theory of international politics. In sum, what Realist critics are really arguing against is the notion that international politics can be known scientifically and that Realists have successfully done so. They claim that to understand international politics is to proceed normatively rather than inductively, sensing that knowledge is ontologically embedded in the human commitment to physical, moral, intellectual, and social liberation. For the most part the thesis is sympathetic to the meta-theoretical assumptions of these

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<sup>1</sup> R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 4-5.

critical approaches, especially since I too, like Martin Wight many years ago, am inclined to disparage the paucity of theory in IR.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that critical IR theory attempts to move IR theory away from its empiricist roots and positivist theoretical tendencies and back to the level of political analysis it is a positive step for the discipline. But in so far as critical theory is rooted in emancipatory ends or is antithetical to the act of theory itself, IR discourse degenerates into a metaphysical battle over whose theory best corresponds to a "Truth" rather than a discourse aimed at practical theory. Rorty gives a good way out of this tendency, "Once we dump the idea that the aim of inquiry is to represent objects and substitute the view that inquiry aims at making beliefs and desires coherent, then the Parmenidean question of how we can represent accurately what does not exist is irrelevant, and the notion that there is a truth about what is real gets set aside. So the only notion of 'object' we need is that of 'intentional object.' "<sup>3</sup> In other words, it may be time to scrap Realist theory because of its intellectual attachment to essentialism—that is, because it depends upon the metaphysical notion that there is a world "out there" to be discovered through inquiry and illuminated via theoretical laws and generalisations. Critical theories need to expand their lines of attack beyond their obsession with positivism in Realism and refrain from the metaphysical assertion that their rationalist, cognitivist theories correspond to the emancipatory Truth of human history. Both sides ought to be mindful of the fact that the world is both a field of inquiry

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<sup>2</sup> A charge levelled by Martin Wight in "Why is There no International Theory", in Herbert Butterfield, Martin Wight, *Diplomatic Investigations, Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 106.

*and* action—the one inseparable from the other—and one where there may be as many disparate sets of beliefs and values giving rise to action in the world as there are agents.

This is a rather lengthy justification of the theoretical impetus for the thesis to follow, but it is quite necessary since the pragmatist position being argued throughout the examination gets much of its intellectual juices from aspects of both sides of the theoretical fence splitting IR theory. The pragmatist resists the urge to take sides since this has in many instances in Western thought meant clinging to one metaphysicalist dogma over another. This is anathema to the full blown commitment to intersubjectivity that the pragmatist position sees as a necessary element of "good theory." Good theory is not an explanation of "reality" or an elegant justification of a master plan for worldwide "emancipation." A good theory is one that has been ideally justified as "true" by as wide a body of discussants as is possible and which also allows us to "do better" rather than "to know" the Truth. Accepting this, determinations of "better" always depend on intersubjective agreement, and that intersubjective agreement is contingent on both the identity of the discussants and the historical exigencies in which they discuss. Unlike Realism and Critical IR theory, the pragmatism being advocated here never assumes that a theory hooks on to a reality, or that a theory is ever indefinitely true. New contexts and unrecognised agents always make politics something that is unfolding, rather than something that is permanent. This is why an attachment to concepts of anarchy and sovereignty are particularly threatening in theory as they are in practice, since they oversimplify the effects of identity and agency in an understanding of world politics. It is the argument throughout the thesis that in so far as Realists and emancipatory critical

theorists are not taking seriously the notion of intersubjectivity, contingency, and language, as important elements of theory—which key thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Rorty, and Putnam have shown—they are not taking the act of theory seriously at all. Both sides have a tendency to posit metaphysical universalisms as theories, and as mentioned above, this stems from a singular commitment on both sides to the existence of Truth. Post-moderns extol the virtues of not taking theory seriously, so a discussion of their relevance to IR theory is necessarily brief and in passing in this examination.

The thesis to follow may appear as something of an enigma depending upon the reader's particular level of familiarity with philosophy, political theory, or international relations theory. What I have attempted to do is discuss the many issues that currently divide the scholarly community in international relations by juxtaposing a rather complex and relatively arcane (in spite of its widespread popularity) philosophical pragmatic approach into IR theory. It shall be up to the reader to decide if what is before them is good IR theory or good philosophy (or disconcertingly, whether it is a poor demonstration of either). No doubt, experts in either philosophy or international relations theory will be slightly dissatisfied with the presentation and treatment of the main points of the two disparate disciplines which are being rather impiously married here. To say the least, there is much more that I could have said about either pragmatism, post-modernism, Critical Theory, and the many points of Realism. I am well aware of the omissions. Without giving the reader too much ammunition with which to cut down the following examination, the common practice of making an argument at the intellectual expense of

another's straw man is not abandoned here. In spite of this, I hope that I have been somewhat successful in allowing the reader to see that the approach that I have taken here is somewhat unique in relation to those things which are currently said in international relations theory.

Before proceeding to a brief summary of the chapters, I would like to say a few words about the choice of subject matter. Just before making the final decision as to the content of this master's thesis I happened to come upon Hilary Putnam's *Reason, Truth, and History*. At the time I was intellectually committed to writing a thesis similar in kind to the Critical IR theories which I have criticised rather vehemently in this examination. However, I found the dogmatic and polemic tone with which the critiques of Realism often proceeded to be offensive and counter to my own sensibilities. Furthermore, I happened not to believe that the emancipatory goals of theory as *they* discerned them to be, were something that could be defined or reasonably justified given the plethora of ways one could conceive of such goals on the scale of world politics. When I read Putnam I was taken not only by the honesty with which he approaches his subject matter, but with the fact that in form as in content, his philosophy invites challenge and amendment as much as it offers valuable insights to the resolution of common intellectual dilemmas. This is to be explained partly by his intellectual disdain for the kinds of permanent Truths which often, but not always, turn open-minded scholars into unwitting dogmatists, and partly (mostly, I suspect) from a personal affability, one which sees scholarship more as cooperation than competition. I did not sense this approach in either of the Realist, Critical IR theory, or, especially, post-modernist perspectives. It came as



no surprise as I read more of his works to learn that Putnam is as notorious for changing his mind as he is for his pragmatism. Thus, I was hooked.

Chapter one will give a short genealogy of Western thinking about truth and knowledge from Descartes to the present in order to provide a basis for the critiques of both Realism and Critical IR theory in subsequent chapters. Because the examination does not delve further into the many challenging issues brought out in this first chapter, the reader will no doubt be left a little unsatisfied with the coverage of any, or, perhaps all of the elements brought out. This cannot be helped. Two things are essential to Chapter one: the first, that knowledge and truth are, or have thus far been, inseparable; the second, that how we obtain such knowledge and what this knowledge is for distinguishes one approach from another. I will attempt to show how Western thought has historically and mistakenly seen Truth as having intrinsic properties, the contents of which are appropriated in the mind or through methods and languages that help latch on to, or that correspond with, this Truth. This historical tendency has led to a neglect of the extent to which intersubjectivity and contingency designate what one means by language, science, and ultimately, truth in the first place.

Chapter two of the thesis will subject the Realist theoretical tradition to much scrutiny. In an attempted to establish an object of study, Realists have inclined to a reliance on over simplified readings of Thucydides, Machiavelli, and even of E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau. This suggests that whatever "Tradition" that exists in Realism is largely a fabrication, but one which seems to have been accepted by both Realists and its critics. However, there is one thing that unifies all modern Realists; a belief in the

distinction between reality/utopia or fact/value, and the vastly divergent theoretical standpoints dictated by them. A closer reading of both Carr and Morgenthau indicates that this is something of a departure from their original pragmatic impulse to orient theory away from idealisations of world politics and toward better practice of world politics. Having provided good critiques of utopians for their rationalisations of politics, both thinkers appear to surrender to empiricism when getting down to the business of theorising world politics, implying that they are talking about the harsh "realities" of international political life. The positivist revision of Kenneth Waltz represents a theoretical refinement that is the next step to the empiricism fostered by a generation of Realists, but further clouds the minds of IR theorists of the extent to which theory and practice are linked.

Chapter three will be used to demonstrate that critical IR theory represents a pragmatic step in the development of IR theory, but falls short of the mark when it begins to seriously talk about theory as part of the Enlightenment project. The most important contributions that critical IR theorists make is in their emphasis on the extent to which normativity resonates throughout the act of theory—indeed that theory is a normative act in itself—and the extent to which theories that are not intersubjective are implicitly marginalising other voices in theory and in practice. By arguing for a Western notion of universal emancipation this intersubjective, democratic theoretical impulse is lost.

Finally, chapter four attempts to keep the question of theory in IR alive by illuminating the extent to which the metaphysical projects of both Enlightenment IR theory and Realism are really remnants of a western debate over philosophical realism.

Post-modern relativism and the appearance of theoretical incommensurability are seen negative outcomes produced by the intractable rifts between Realism and its Critical counterparts. In the end, the point of this final chapter is to provide a philosophical rejoinder to the kinds of arguments that are being brought into IR theoretical discourse which obstruct the progress of IR theory into a more human centred non-metaphysical approach to knowledge. This can only be done by all sides taking theory seriously, which means engaging in a *real* debate by making an honest attempt to understand the other's theoretical position and abandoning the view that the whole enterprise is either entirely flawed or intractable.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Thinking About Truth: Freedom, Foundation, and Fallibilism**

*For if we too in these investigations are trying to understand the essence of language—its function, its structure,—yet this is not what those questions have in view. For they see in the essence, not something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement, but something that lies beneath the surface. Something that lies within, which we see when we look into the thing, and which analysis digs out... The essence is hidden from us: this is the form our problem now assumes. We ask: "What is language", "What is a proposition?" And the answer to these questions is to be given once and for all; and independently of any future experience.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

#### *Introduction: Knowledge and the Search for Truth*

Realism is the dominant theoretical perspective in International Relations (IR) theory. The discipline's early protagonists, E.H. Carr and Hans J. Morgenthau were the first to comprehensively state the main purpose of inquiry into international affairs: to sift through the plethora of idealisms about the way the study of world affairs ought to be conducted and to get to the heart of the "realities" of world politics. According to these and later Realists, the study of international politics takes place within the framework provided by the notions of anarchy, sovereignty, and power; the intractable elements of world politics. It is further alleged that in order to understand the effects of these influences on the course of world affairs, it is imperative that one abandon whatever idealistic or subjective influences which happen to cloud one's perception of the facts before them. A more thorough analysis of Realism and its main tenets will be the subject of the next chapter. For the purposes of this chapter, it is essential to understand the assumptions about theory and knowledge that are being forwarded by almost every Realist

since Carr and Morgenthau. The first is the belief in a realm of "facts" that is distinct from the human interactions which make a "fact" a possibility in the first place, and the second, given this belief, that it is possible, or desirable, to remove subjectivity and values from the process of inquiry about these facts.

Underlying what will be a lengthy critique of this position is the problematic implied by two simple but pressing questions pertaining to the nature of knowledge: what is it exactly one is attempting to know, and how does one go about knowing it? As far as this examination is concerned, truth has always been the aim of inquiry, but the intellectual divide over the nature of truth has been especially candid since Descartes' mind/body dynamic and subsequent developments in the growth of science piqued the western fascination with knowledge, certainty, and technology. However, the nature of truth will always remain an open question, thus making any theoretical position that proceeds as if the matter of truth were settled once and for all, either by an ontological attachment or via an epistemological one seem both spurious and unjustifiable. Unfortunately, there has been a propensity in Western thinking to try to think of Truth as a "thing" and to rely upon certain intellectual creations as a means to hook onto it. In Kant's time, one sees the mind as the avatar of Truth, in today's time, language and rational dialogue are seen as the means of getting at it. Before post-modern critiques made their intellectual mark, however, it was science that was ostensibly the best means through which knowledge of things was apprehended. In terms of understanding the significance of human relations, these appear to be rather unsatisfactory "solutions" to the problem of truth.

The typical Western propensity with respect to truth mentioned above has been amply reflected in the theoretical debates that are shaping the future of IR theory. Realism for example, assumes that the content of what is meant by "Truth" is settled, the main problem thus being the challenge of coming up with a method through which these contents are appropriated by inquisitors. This is an empiricist view of knowledge, and in its most modern incarnation (neo-Realism), Realist theory relies upon generalisations and covering laws which employ the methods of a long disreputed form of logical positivism. Such a theoretical leaning gets its early impetus from Carr and Morgenthau's "reality/utopia" distinction, the overarching epistemological dichotomy in IR theory. The evolution from empiricism to the positivism that now marks neo-Realism formalises the metaphysical attachment to the "reality" believed to exist by early Realists. It also ostensibly allows the Realist to discount normative theories on the ground that their focus on "values" clouds perception of the "facts" of international life. Realist meta-theoretical assumptions about how to theorise international politics delineate a metaphysical realist position,<sup>4</sup> which "is the notion that there is—in a philosophically privileged sense of 'object'—a definite Totality of All Real Objects and a fact of the matter as to which properties of those objects are the intrinsic properties and which are in some sense perspectival."<sup>5</sup> Demarcating a distinction between what kinds of theories are factual and what are "utopian" in the sense that Realists have done represents a true belief that there is a place where all "real" objects exist and which are only apprehended in a certain

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<sup>4</sup> The subject of philosophical realism will be more fully discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>5</sup> Hilary Putnam, "The Question of Realism," in *Words and Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994 303.

**manner.**

**Critical IR theorists have launched a challenge to this kind of theorising, many (excepting postmodern critics) with a very Hegelian notion of knowledge as a dialectical process of self-conscious liberation and self-improvement. They do however, remain somewhat ambivalent about the universalisms inherent in such an approach. To the critics of Realism, knowledge practices are aimed more at social construction than they are at ontological disclosure, the typical position of empiricists. Akin to critics in philosophy and political theory, metatheoretical IR critiques are essentially trying to show how the positivism in modern Realism constrains, limits, and negates responsible action because of the narrowness of their constructed image of reality. In other words, the Realist knowledge of reality is limited by their epistemological approach. These critics are attempting to rationally take back the Truth—as liberty or emancipation—but in so doing are just as caught in the grip of an alternative metaphysical picture.**

**What follows is a rather abbreviated intellectual history of the debate over the links between truth and knowledge. There is no pretense here to be offering anything other than an introduction to those issues that mark the divides between Realists and Critical IR theorists in the theoretical debates in the discipline of IR theory, the finer points of which will appear in later chapters. Issues of Truth, representation, rationality, and language are highlighted in this chapter in order to illuminate the thrust of theory debates in international relations. The larger point of course, is to note that that discord over the relationship between Truth and knowledge in metatheoretical debates in IR theory wage their battle upon the same intellectual ground as political theorists and**

philosophers have for centuries. The Realist longing to establish an independent discipline has obscured this fact, and the Critical IR theorists, much to their credit, have spent as much time convincing Realism that IR theory is as much about political theory as it is about world politics. All IR scholars must be cognizant of current thinking about practices of knowledge, which converge around the ways in which ontology and epistemology are intricately intertwined with notions of agency, intersubjectivity, and practice, in addition to the ways in which they have traditionally been associated with Truth. It is the argument of this examination that the modern pragmatism of Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam is the most useful twentieth century mode of thought through which the merits of Realism and Critical IR theory approaches are adjudged. For pragmatists, the Western epistemological impulse to theorise as if doing so was uncovering a particular a-temporal Truth is highly tendentious and is countered with an antimetaphysicalist (and therefore anti-epistemological) position that demonstrates the fallibility of any notion of truth over time.

It is essential to understand that theories are about real people whose shared beliefs deeply penetrate the theories that are ultimately constructed about the world. Since the dynamics of the community always change as new agents and identities arise and interact—and as the goals of the community change with them—it is impossible to expect that any theory can be useful indefinitely. This means that theories reliant on ontological mystifications and universalist propositions are going to be hopelessly inadequate in offering any illumination about human beings in a current context. Intuitively, theory and inquiry seems to equip the scholar with a better means of understanding the changing



nature of intersubjective values. Its purpose is best construed as a "recontextualisation of beliefs,"<sup>6</sup> rather than as aimed at painting a permanent picture of the world,<sup>7</sup> in either of its empirical or moral frames. Such tendencies in thinking about theory need to be abandoned. To do so requires an acceptance of the evolutionary epistemological shift away from linking knowledge with universalising abstractions to a novel emphasis on orienting the theoretical antenna toward particular political problems involving and accounting for real agents. This is only accomplished if thinking about truth as having an intrinsic nature is abjured in favour of a higher level of comfort with the sense that any true assertion is true for only a time. In other words, true assertions are fallible, or contingent; that is, they are applicable in different times and under different circumstances. For international relations theory, this would represent a massive metatheoretical leap away from the kinds of ideological snares in which IR theorists have continually found themselves.

### *Western Thinking About Truth and Knowledge*

The tension that exists between the dominant Realist theories and the critical challenges to this theory mirrors the same tensions that have been the subject of intellectual divide in Western thought since Descartes; namely the scepticism over the

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<sup>6</sup> See Richard Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualisation," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> On this point see, James Conant, "Introduction" in Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life*. In examining the work of Wittgenstein and his emphasis on the fact of "pictures" as the root of understanding, Putnam notes "if certain philosophers are attacked by Wittgenstein for being in the grip of a picture,...what is wrong is not that pictures are bad." (liv) It is the contention here that a "good picture" of international politics is possible, but that the discipline is currently impeded by *a* picture, and not a necessarily good one at that.

resolution of questions pertaining to the ability of the mind to apprehend knowledge of an "objective" world. The Cartesian solution to this tension ultimately rested in an unshakeable faith in reason to produce certain knowledge, through his invention of the mind which "provided a field of inquiry which seemed prior to the subjects on which the ancient philosophers had had opinions, it provided a field within which certainty, as opposed to mere opinion, was possible."<sup>8</sup> Thinkers ever since have grappled with the fact of "knowing" anything about the world of sense experience and the level of certainty inherent in such knowledge. One of the most outstanding contributions of twentieth century social and political theory has been to re-orient the philosophical problems posed by Cartesian dualism and the oscillations between empiricism and rationalism fostered by this problematic within the context of Enlightenment modernity. The notion that knowledge and meaning are related concepts, such that knowledge can no longer be justified as either methodologically separable or grounded in an ontologically prior realm of truth or objectivity are new to this century. In contradistinction to earlier eras (but really beginning with the Nietzschean critique of rationality) epistemological debates in this century have been framed within the overarching context of liberty and practice.

Critiques of epistemology and rationality, not to mention sophisticated philosophies of science, have indelibly exposed the self-imposed and oppressive limits of knowledge that have brought to light suspicion of the notion of Truth as a category independent of our rational reconstructions of it. Realism and its critics are very much caught in the same problematic as they debate over issues of the "reality" of international politics, the former

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 136.

positing an empiricist apprehension of this reality, the latter positing an moral-rationalist and/or anti-foundational critique of such empiricism. While the serious philosophical distinctions that mark the various critics of Realism are profound, there does appear to be a common strain that enjoins them all, namely, the complete denial of the epistemologically superior position of Realism and a critique of the foundations upon which this status is erroneously claimed. As Brown notes, "the common feature of the new approaches is the belief that all varieties of social and political thought dominant in the West since the Enlightenment—the discourses of modernity, perhaps—are in crisis."<sup>9</sup> For the most part critical theory is oriented to a constant problematisation of the Realist ontological and epistemological assumptions, taking their bearings from novel developments in the philosophy of science, notably the pathbreaking work of Thomas Kuhn, and from political theory/philosophy, the works of Jurgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida particular among them. This line of criticism gains its force from developments in the intellectual thought in philosophy and political theory.

Twentieth century critiques of modernity have their origins in eighteenth century Kantian epistemology which was essential in elevating rationality to a prominent position in obtaining knowledge. Kant's philosophy was a direct challenge to the philosophy of empiricists such as Hume who were convinced that the only relevant knowledge was that which could come from experience and observation. Hume's nominalism proposed that "general statements about the world that do not have their reference in independent,

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<sup>9</sup> Chris Brown, "Turtles All The Way Down": Anti-foundationalism, Critical Theory, and International Relations," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23(2), 214.

observable atomised objects should not be afforded real knowledge status."<sup>10</sup> The empiricist project of Hume was centred around the notion of causation, and observation was not as much oriented to finding causes as much as it was to focusing on the observable effects that were produced.<sup>11</sup> For Hume and other empiricists, the regularities of the world which are revealed via observation were enough to assure them the status of an "objective" world. The problem with this (philosophical) realist conception, however, is that pure sensations and their relatedness to an "objective" world are meaningless in and of themselves, and attempts at methodological formalisation are inundated with the types of subjectivism and metaphysics which Hume and the empiricists were attempting to refute.<sup>12</sup> In international relations, a similar problem is encountered as neo-Realists posit "anarchic structures" that appear to exist without being able to articulate (or justify) adequately a method or principle that would allow any given theorist to arrive at the same conclusion given the similar historical data.

In contradistinction to the untenable position of the empiricists, Kant attempted to provide a philosophical explanation of how a subject orders his experience in a manner that allows him to reasonably make substantive epistemological, moral, and practical judgements. Kant believed that "we can never explain the world as it appears to us merely by reference to experience; to do so we need necessary principles logically prior to and

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<sup>10</sup> Jim George, *Discourses of Global Politics, A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1994, 51.

<sup>11</sup> See on this point Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, especially pps. 48-50.

<sup>12</sup> This highlights the empiricist problem of trying to draw a distinct line between facts (seen here as "experiences") and values (which are ostensibly "subjective"), which is not easily done. On this point See Putnam, "The Impact of Science," in *Reason, Truth, and History*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

independent of experience."<sup>13</sup> Knowledge of the phenomenal world (the world of appearances) is conceived by Kant as the result of *a priori* knowledge which allows the mind to synthesise and make sense of apparently random empirical phenomena, and which also allows the mind to make analytic statements which are true independent of experience. In general, Kant's *a priori* rationality is what is said to be the means through which thinking beings are able to judge and act in accordance with the universal categorical imperatives rather than having to consign themselves to the uncertainties implicit in a particular context or sensation. According to Kant, thinking beings have the capacity to understand the significance of all the minutiae of sensations and experiences by reducing them to the axioms of "rationality." In essence, rationality is in this case the foundation and judge of *all* knowledge, and therefore the key to epistemic, moral, and aesthetic truth. As Rorty notes, "Kant put philosophy 'on the secure path of science' by putting outer space inside inner space (the space of the constituting activity of the transcendental ego) and then claiming Cartesian certainty about the inner for the laws of what had previously been thought to be outer."<sup>14</sup> The offshoot of Kantian philosophy is the universalism that this implies; all subjects have this moral capacity<sup>15</sup> and to talk about morality or truth is to think of it as something pre-given in a like manner to all who are capable of thinking.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hans Reiss, "Introduction" in *Kant: Political Writings*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 137.

<sup>15</sup> Although he was willing to concede that some are more disposed to it than others.

<sup>16</sup> In other words, that the Truth mirrors itself on the mind. See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

Kant's solution to the empiricist scepticism was however problematic for Hegel, who was more interested in establishing a rational system which would have more practical implications in the lifeworld. The basis of Hegel's philosophy rested in the concept of *recognition* of subjectivity (and therefore rationality) in idealised objectivity, with the chief end being the justification of the state as the basis for social order (or community) and the actualisation of rational identity.<sup>17</sup> His critique severely weakened the subjective transcendental tenets of Kantian rationality and would be the cornerstone for Marx's materialism based on concepts of alienation and reification of the oppressive relations of production; things which would ostensibly produce revolutionary consciousness and transformative action. Most importantly, Hegel's critique of Kantian epistemology introduces the seeds of thinking about rationality and knowledge as being represented inter-subjectively (and therefore objectively, in a phenomenological sense) and socially self-formative (*Bildungsprozess*); as liberating and creative rather than static and empirical. These ideas would later be central to the development of Critical Theory and communitarian ethical arguments of the twentieth century, albeit without the implications of Hegel's speculative mythologisation of the concrete objective world, which implicitly subjugates all to the Absolute Spirit, or Geist (or State).

It is the contributions of both Kant and Hegel to which modern notions of knowledge as *telos*, as self-formative, and as transformative are owed. For underlying both Kant's and Hegel's project of securing a place for rationality was finding a means

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<sup>17</sup> See Axel Honneth, "Recognition and Moral Obligation", *Social Research*, 64(1), Spring 1997. Recognition in the sense developed by Hegel pertains to the moral claim for respect in relation to other subjects within a moral community. As the cornerstone of the ethical nature of the state "there obtains a form of recognition that allows subjects to esteem one another in those attributes that contribute to the reproduction of the social order."(21)

to resolve the fundamental antinomy between the age-old question of natural necessity and the Enlightenment notions of freedom and rationality. For Kant as for Hegel, rationality was not something that was merely an antenna through which the phenomenal world was appropriated. For them, rationality was an active participator in normatively constructing the world. For Kant this construction was in the idealised mind, whereas for Hegel, it was a process of self-conscious recognition of self in other, a dialectic process of *Aufhebung*, or overcoming (negation), of alienated Spirit.<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of modern critiques of epistemology, Hegel's philosophy is essential in planting the seeds of a radical critique based on a metaphysics of Being as *becoming*, thus focusing modernity's consciousness on time.<sup>19</sup> It is from Hegel that one is today able to make critiques about the situated context of knowledge as in itself a reason for criticism.<sup>20</sup> From Kant one is able to move away from brute data empiricism toward a subjective basis for normative judgement and critique.

In the late nineteenth century, the appearance of Nietzsche's critique of rationality in its various incarnations from Plato, to Judeo Christian transmogrifications, to Cartesian dualism and the arrival of Enlightenment rationality (given its most systematic treatment in Kant) has proven an insurmountable blow to transcendental rationalist epistemology.

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<sup>18</sup> On these points, recognition of self in other, and the master-slave relationship as exemplifying the antinomies of freedom and natural necessity see G.W.F. Hegel; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, A.V. Miller-trans., New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. See especially 111-119.

<sup>19</sup> See Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity's Consciousness of Time," in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, Fredrick Lawrence trans., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> This is a major source of internal contradiction, which Hegel's philosophy provides. For Hegel's goal seems to have been to establish the infinitude of self-actualised Spirit while it sought to advance this view in a vision of History as self consciousness overcoming of the contingency of the present.

For Nietzsche believed there was something stifling intellectually and aesthetically to man's "will to power" (will to live) which was a product of systematised and institutionalised practices of rationality and knowledge such as Christianity and science, both of which are based in a faith in "truth"

It is clear that science too rests on a faith; there is no science 'without presuppositions'...it always rests on a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests—that even we devotees of knowledge today, we godless ones and antimetaphysicians, still take our fire from the flame which a faith a thousand years old has kindled: that Christian faith, which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth, that truth is divine...<sup>21</sup>

Nietzsche's critique of the foundations of knowledge in truth was a direct attack on the privileged representations implicit in Kantian transcendental rationality. Nietzsche's radical scepticism about the empiricist proclivities in western rationalism, paired with his metaphysics of Power, would pave the way for pivotal twentieth century critiques of knowledge and rationality in the figures of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and later post-modernists. Heidegger's work fundamentally changed the way the twentieth century would think about history and most importantly, was an essential critique of modernist (technical) rationality and ontology which would be grist for the deconstructivist mill of future post-modernists. For Heidegger, modernity is based on the Cartesian duality of subjectivity and objectivity which are manifest as the antinomy between man and nature. The ethos of modernity is Hegelianism gone all wrong, via the impulse to a technical subjugation of an objective realm as the expression of the modern will to power. This manifests itself politically as a "technical politics of power and control" and economically as "the technical organisation of men and machines which aims at the objectification and

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<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Gay Science" in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Portable Nietzsche*, New York: Penguin Books, 1982, 449-50.



exploitation of nature."<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, the rationality and "truths" implicit in the modernist commitment to science and technical progress are seen as mere instruments of subjugation and mastery rather than as authentic reflections of Being which is indeterminate and necessity-less; "there is in [Heidegger's] view no inevitable or irresistible necessity that impels man toward one particular goal...rather man dwells on the *question* of his goal."<sup>23</sup> In other words, Heidegger is deeply troubled by what he sees as a downward spiral inherent in the western tradition of thinking from Plato to the present which has been oriented to a quest for certainty as to what thinking is for. His philosophy is an "attempt to struggle free from what he came to think of as the underlying assumption of the West—the assumption that truth is somehow a matter of the stronger overcoming the weaker."<sup>24</sup> For him the solution to this kind of thinking is a pragmatic one: to give up the notion of truth as certainty, since this certainty is always accomplished by a constant rational redescription of things, and also to escape from Time; "to recapture a sense of what time was like before it came under the spell of eternity, what we were like before we became obsessed with the need for an overarching context which would subsume and explain us...he would like to recapture a sense of *contingency*, of the fragility and riskiness of any human project—a sense which the ontotheological tradition has made it hard to attain."<sup>25</sup> Implicit

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Allen Gillespie, *Hegel, Heidegger, and the Ground of History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 127.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism," in Hubert Dreyfus, Harrison Hall, eds., *Heidegger: A Critical Reader*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992, 212.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 214. Emphasis in original.

in this notion of contingency is the belief that who beings are and the desires that drive them are vastly different today than they were yesterday and from that which they may be tomorrow.

The thought of the later Wittgenstein was a major turning point in Western thinking about the role of language and meaning in constructing the edifice of what is known as "truth." There is no doubt that Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is among the most important philosophical and political treatises in this century.<sup>26</sup> This is due mostly for the sense in which it brilliantly examines the extent to which such things as the nature of truth and certainty are things which are learned intersubjectively through speech and action. Wittgenstein was not the first to discourse widely on language, logic, and reference; J.L. Austin, Gotlob Frege, W.V.O. Quine, Bertrand Russel, and John Searle all made invaluable contributions in their explorations of this difficult subject,<sup>27</sup> but it is Wittgenstein's work that stands out, due mostly to the simplicity, scope, and wide-ranging implications of his thinking on these matters.

Wittgenstein's philosophy is instrumental in helping the Western thinker to see the logical fallacies in positing a permanent truth to which language corresponds. Rationality, meaning, and language are contingent as Wittgenstein sees it. They are not categories of knowledge that are pre-given to a subject or to a world without subjects; the significance of these categories are established through interaction and are learned or constructed through speech and action, or what he calls a "language game", "When philosophers use

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<sup>26</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Ascombe trans., New York: Macmillan, 1958.

<sup>27</sup> A subject which is well beyond both the scope of this examination and the intellectual grasp of its writer.

a word—'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name'—and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?"<sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein's work is an attack on the typical didactic esotericism of western thinking which far too often tends to obfuscate the nature of the "things" understood by applying terms, concepts, and categories which are said to lay outside of everyday interaction and/or perception. In so doing, Wittgenstein "rejected the essentialism of language in favour of a notion of socially constructed and applied 'language games' which emphasised the way that language was actually used, in different times and places, and how it constructs a reality as part of a speech act."<sup>29</sup> The notion of truth as something that exists in distinction from the shared ways in which it is described through language seems, through a deeper understanding of the functions of language, hopelessly flawed. There is no language(s) that is not intersubjectively-based based even if there were such a thing as an "objective" world (which there is not). Moreover, the assertion that there can be such a thing as a "neutral" or merely descriptive system of language, as in say science or rationality, seems rather suspicious given the nature in which language is essential in both constructing and understanding the world. The arrival of Wittgenstein and others who would focus on the role of language in social life has shaped the modern (and post-modern) notion that language is something that comes between, rather than stands outside of, human beings.

The emphasis on the role of language and discourse as deeply penetrating, or

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<sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, no. 116.

<sup>29</sup> George, *Discourses of Global Politics*, 143.

oppressing, the collective psyche of a community is generally the starting point for the post-modern body of thinking that has become influential in the latter part of this century. The post-moderns focus their critiques (or deconstructions) at the typically Western manner of thinking which is reliant on foundational dichotomies such as fact/value, self/other, subject/object, true/false, and a host of other relations which define and limit knowledge and practice. The implications of Wittgenstein's thought on the contingency of language and the intersubjective basis of "truth" are taken much further as post-moderns claim that just as language has been misconstrued as corresponding to *a* Truth, so too has it been instrumental—through discursive practices—in constructing, defining, and constraining human agents on the basis of this alleged Truth. Michel Foucault's work is emblematic of this body of thinking, which has been an essential intellectual tool through which received wisdom about Truth, knowledge, and the nature of identity, has been stripped of its grounding in dubious fictional "narratives," in order that the autonomy of subjects proceeds unconstrained by knowledge practices. This is done, however, without an explicit account of, or justification for what exactly the post-moderns mean by autonomy, or as it is conventionally known, "freedom." As Taylor notes, "Foucault's analyses seem to bring evils to light; and yet he wants to distance himself from the suggestion which would seem to inescapably follow, that the negation or overcoming of these evils promotes a good."<sup>30</sup> This line of criticism is commonly leveled at post-moderns who condemn modern forms of power/domination without offering a good explication as to why one ought to take the implicit truths of their argument as a serious

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences, Philosophical Papers, Vol 2*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 152.

alternative to prevailing notions of Truth. It seems as if the post moderns are confident that the mere utterance of dissatisfaction with the un-liberating state of language and discourse are enough to signify the inherent truth of such utterances.

In proceeding with a new language of liberation, post-modernists seem to aspire to create a new theoretical approach for the intellectual community, the contents of which at one and the same time ostensibly expose the limits of the old metaphysical logocentrism as it transgresses it. This is reflected in Derrida who extols the Heideggerian notion of 'erasure,' where the written word in a text appears crossed out, "This erasure is the final writing of an epoch. Under its strokes the presence of a transcendental signified is effaced while still remaining legible, is destroyed while making visible the very idea of the sign. Inasmuch as it de-limits onto-theology, the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism, this last writing is also the first writing."<sup>31</sup> The urge to a wholesale erasing of the metaphysical past to which Western thinking has inclined is tempting were it not for the fact that the eraser is made of the same stuff it purports to erase. Moreover, addressing the societal problems to which thought (post-modern thought included) is always oriented, is not so easily solved by trivialising past ways of thinking—which themselves provoke the modern intellectual/experiential crisis—but is accomplished by attempting to find out how thinkers became, as Wittgenstein would say, "trapped in the grip of a picture," or, how successive truths became *the* Truth. Post-moderns do not take such an approach to inquiry, preferring to indict philosophy altogether for leading Western civilisation to the fire one too many times. The veneration of the new (or the post-) and

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Of Grammatology," in Peggy Kamuf ed, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, 40.

the chastisation of the old that this implies typifies the relation of one generation to the next.

One strains to find the liberating capacities in this, since the language of the post-modernists appears—as did the language of Marxists who swore upon the false consciousness of the masses in an earlier time—to be as resistant (nay, repellant) to the everyday experiences of human beings as any other didactic political or philosophical doctrine. The intellectual need to distinguish and distance their body of thought from others—and the creation of idiosyncratic jargon to go with it—betrays the typical arrogance and urbanity which has always marked radical/critical politics, thus impeding the realisation of the truly democratic aims they advocate. This trend continues in the work of other post-modernist figures such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Georges Bataille. Although they take their philosophical bearings from the arguments of Heidegger and Wittgenstein (in many instances, also from Sartre), who argued about the contingency of language and discourse as they abjured ontology, they leave them behind once their deconstruction of foundations is done. The post-modern philosophical position represents a radical move away from the mere anti-essentialism of Wittgenstein and Heidegger into a sceptical retreat into theoretical relativism, taking theories, beliefs, and the author himself down the slide of nihilistic aporia with it. Primary to all social relations, it is asserted, is the existence of and prevalence of a power dynamic. To the post-moderns, *any* assertion appears to risk unwittingly parroting a 'regime of truth' and in so doing, abetting the dominion of power, "truth isn't outside power,...Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of

constraint...[and] is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and extends it."<sup>32</sup> Aside from the normative assumptions implied in the post-modern disdain for power, the extent to which purposive inquiry is subsequently abandoned by their project is disconcerting given the very useful critiques of epistemology—as it has traditionally marginalised agency and identity—contained in their thought.

That the extension of knowledge as truth is to be prevented by eliminating discursive 'forms of constraint' that define, confine, subject, limit, and situate the subject within the boundaries established by the the assumption of a Truth is generally the position taken by post-modernists. In international relations, the postmodern way to avoid the setting of boundaries is via an intertextual approach, "a critical inquiry into an area of thought where there is no final arbiter of truth, where meaning is derived from an interrelationship of texts, and power is implicated by the problem of language and other signifying practices."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the logic goes, if there is no such thing as foundational Truth, then there is no such thing as 'reliable' knowledge since any epistemic statement or language of justification is permeated with power, or worse, perspectivity, and therefore subject to suspicion. In many ways this betrays a more profound need for absolutist foundations to knowledge than even that desired by metaphysicians. It is tantamount to asserting, as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and their International Relations

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<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, 72,74.

<sup>33</sup> James Der Derian, "The Boundaries of Knowledge and Power in International Relations," in James Der Derian, Michael Shapiro, eds., *International/Intertextual Relations*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989, 6.

advocates Michael Shapiro, James Der Derian, and David Campbell all implicitly do, that if there is no foundation, there is nothing that can make any assertion more acceptable than any other.

What one ends up with in such an approach is a renewed glorification of solipsism, a result of the question-begging logic of an approach that effectively argues that no assertion is wrong, because the very judgement of wrong-ness (or unreasonableness) is itself a mere reflection of power. But, "is it not *obviously* contradictory to *hold* a point of view while at the same time holding that *no* point of view is more justified or right than any other?"<sup>34</sup> As Putnam asserts, the post-moderns extol "a version of 'methodological solipsism,' a doctrine according to which the best way for me to think of concepts purporting to refer to other people is for me to think of them simply as intellectual devices which are useful for the purposes of predicting and systematizing my own experiences."<sup>35</sup> How do *I* know that there is no such thing as anarchy, or that the language used to construct international politics is a mere by product of power relations, asks the post-modernist? Because *I* think that it is. Other than this their theory allows for no basis to claim to offer a justifiable assertion, to distinguish between a reasonable statement or "making noise."<sup>36</sup> In criticising this kind of relativism Putnam notes, "The argument is that the relativist cannot, in the end, make any sense of the distinction between *being right* and *thinking he is right*; and that means that there is,

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<sup>34</sup> Putnam, "Two Conceptions of Rationality," 119.

<sup>35</sup> Putnam, *Words and Life*, 298.

<sup>36</sup> See Hilary Putnam, "Two Conceptions of Rationality," in *Reason, Truth, and History*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981.



in the end no difference between *asserting* or *thinking*, on the one hand, and *making noises* (or *producing mental images*) on the other" <sup>37</sup> What if for example, one just happens to think relativist IR theory is wrong; how could a relativist discount such a view?<sup>38</sup> For international relations theory, this means that there is no real way of judging the extent to which one theoretical offering, say Realism, is better than any other theoretical offering, say Critical IR theory, since there is no 'Truth'-ful way to discern between utterances. If this is the case, however, then why bother theorising?

A distinctly different politico-philosophical movement, that of Critical Theory has its lineage in the theorists that make up the Frankfurt School of Social Criticism, arriving at roughly the same time as Wittgenstein and Heidegger were making their mark. Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse were the most prominent among this group of thinkers whose exile to the U.S. was the scene of some fertile intellectual achievements. These thinkers were highly pessimistic about the liberating potential of Marxist thought and about modern society in general, but really diverged from traditional thinking in their conception of science as a social activity.<sup>39</sup> Their disdain for the oppressive limits effected by the scientific edifices of modernism is similar in kind to that of Heidegger, but their critique is a much more focused one in the sense that it is positivistic science which appears to them as the key culprit behind the obliteration of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 119. It is here that the illogical aspects of relativism become untenable for anyone interested in putting theory on the path of usefulness. To the relativist Putnam asks, "If any point of view is as good as any other, then why isn't *the point of view that relativism is false* as good as any other." Emphasis in original.

<sup>39</sup> Tom Bottomore, *The Frankfurt School*, New York: Tavistock Publications, 1984, 29.

modernity's liberating potential.<sup>40</sup> It seems that the Frankfurt School thinkers were overwhelmed by the obscure forms of domination that had evolved beyond the mere class distinctions that had been evident in the previous century, for they were able to offer no form of constructive alternative to the perils of a society swallowed up by the forms of technical rationality evident in the growth of bureaucracy and other forms of cultural/social engineering along the lines of positivistic science.

However the sceptical culture critiques of the Frankfurt School would be the (distant) basis for a new kind of emancipatory theory which today exhibits itself in thinkers loosely labelled under the auspices of "discourse ethics". These thinkers have taken up where the pessimism of the Frankfurt School left off, offering a "rational" alternative to both science and philosophy's failings in settling questions of practical morality.<sup>41</sup> Jürgen Habermas leads the newer generation of Critical Theorists, a group which also includes the related (but not entirely identical) thought of Karl Otto-Apel, Seyla Benhabib, Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Albrecht Wellmer, and Stephen K. White (to name a few). Against the relativism of the post-moderns, these figures still place veritable faith in rationality but reject the notion that it is contained independently within the knowing subject or that it is something that can be ascertained within the narrow confines of modern scientific language practices. Most importantly, their critiques are based in a fundamental disdain for the West's propensity to see rationality as scientific

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 78.

or technical rationality.<sup>42</sup> The problem with scientific rationality being used to understand human affairs is that it is only capable of apprehending "intersubjective reality which is brute data identifiable" but is unable to grasp the shared normative principles which are the basis of community.<sup>43</sup>

According to these theorists rationality has many faces, with the primary one being the ontological moral interest in the Good<sup>44</sup> as the intersubjective basis for a just and stable community. In keeping with developments in theories of language these thinkers account for the intersubjective, dialogical elements in their development of principles of rational norm justification and do not see language or rationality as inherently oppressive in itself as do the post-moderns. Their focus is instead on dialogical aspects of language and discourse (democracy, for example) as a means through which rationality and Truth are justified and validated. To Apel, Habermas, and Benhabib, oppressive linguistic/social practices are the result of distorted communication and their remedy is to make way for unforced dialogical agreement as a means to expose oppressive practices and live according to principles of justice as the ontological foundation of the community. The focus of these thinkers is to justify a series of procedural practices which resemble a

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<sup>42</sup> See Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971. If there is any work that can be referred to as a Canon in Critical IR Theory this is it.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1, 1985, 38-9.

<sup>44</sup> The Good as justice and emancipation. In other words, the Platonic Good amended to account for the Enlightenment, a Good which these theorists are not always ready to explicate. In seeing virtue in the good, these thinkers share a place in political theory with communitarians and neo-Aristotelians such as Allan Bloom, Amitai Etzioni, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer. For obvious reasons the Marxian lineage of Critical Theorists makes the means a little more radical; the ends however are the same. A liberal, such as this writer, sees much irony in this.

perfect democratic debate through which liberating practices of justice as the basis for a community can be identified and instantiated in the greater society.

In spite of these theorists' commitment to the Good, a notion which is subject to disputes within a political community let alone beyond it, Habermas proclaims the transcendental (universal) relevance of his discourse ethics.<sup>45</sup> Habermas and his many Critical Theory adherents reflect a scepticism toward modern truth and rationality as distorted versions of positivism, and orient their critiques on a language-based system of emancipatory interest. In so doing, they have reinvigorated the Kantian universalist project, albeit via an intersubjective or communicative basis for their universalist ethics. The premiss of discourse ethics rests on the question, "what norms or institutions would the members of an ideal or real communication community agree to as representing their common interests after engaging in a special kind of argumentation or conversation? The procedural model of an argumentative praxis replaces the silent thought-experiment [of an individual moral agent] enjoined by the Kantian universalizability test."<sup>46</sup> For them, knowledge and truth are sustained within and by the community, and, in the absence of free and uncoerced dialogical practices aimed at emancipation, are illegitimate forms of domination fostered by a singular attachment to instrumental rationalistic interests as opposed to emancipatory interests. In other words, the truth with which one lives is one constructed on the basis of technico-rationalistic practices which are based in the false

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<sup>45</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application, Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.

<sup>46</sup> Seyla Benhabib, "In the Shadow of Aristotle and Hegel: Communicative Ethics and Current Controversies in Practical Philosophy" in *Situating the Self, Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, New York: Routledge, 1992, 24.

legitimacy of scientific technical progress and come at the expense of the "other" side of progress, namely moral/political progress. Therefore, current knowledge practices merely perpetuate oppressive social practices; the point of epistemological critique being therefore to expose (deconstruct) and transform theory and practice toward more emancipatory ends. In short, knowledge and truth are aimed as much at emancipation as they are at building a technically sophisticated world.

*Thinking About Truth as Fallible, Contingent, and Intersubjective*

The way one approaches the matter of truth largely determines the extent to which knowledge practices recognise the intersubjective elements that give life to the theoretical enterprise. Currently, as has just been shown, there is much debate as to the manner with which Truth is a regulative concept for inquiry, and even Critical Theorists who have successfully refuted the usefulness of positivism in the social sciences still have difficulties relinquishing the sense that knowledge is oriented toward an empirical Truth. This is unfortunate since they end up merely positing one metaphysical abstraction while seeking to rationally/linguistically deconstruct another (that of positivism). That it is a more democratically free and egalitarian procedural approach to knowledge does not matter since the end game is still to justify a principle of universal Truth once and for all, albeit in an ethically distinctive social contract situation. The rationalist principles of knowledge justification espoused by Critical Theorists resemble the conditions set forth by John Rawls, who wrote this century's most prominent treatise on justice, with the notable exception that their position implicitly disavows his liberal, deontological

approach.<sup>47</sup> The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas, which incorporates a profound commitment to principles of argumentation and dialogical discourse as the basis for knowledge, claims that this practice is oriented to one context: justice and emancipation. "Anyone who seriously engages in argumentation must presuppose that the context of discussion guarantees in principle freedom of access, equal rights to participate, truthfulness on the part of participants, absence of coercion in adopting positions, and so on."<sup>48</sup> This Critical Theory approach has been the basis of many critiques of Realist IR theory, which is equally unfortunate, since there is something implicitly unjustifiable in the use of theory that has a deep attachment to a particular metaphysical project. It is one thing to question the validity of positivism; it is quite another to suggest that another approach will get one to the Truth one is looking for. What is needed in international relations theory is not an alternative metaphysics of international politics, but rather, a theoretical approach that can give a basis for theory that need not rely on questionable ontologies and even more questionable epistemologies which capture and perpetuate them. What IR theory needs is a pragmatist approach to theory.

In general pragmatism carries with it a deep disdain for traditional notions of Truth, known ever since the ancients as an extra-human, extraphenomenal place, waiting

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<sup>47</sup> See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971. The distinction is best simplified by thinking of Rawls' "Original Position," which is the social contract situation, and the Veil of Ignorance, which is a unique way of positing a Kantian noumenal agent, as disinterested subjects who choose one among many varying proposals of justice. On the other hand the Critical Theorists posits agents in an "ideal speech situation" who are *interested* because they are intersubjectively linked by a conception of Justice. The Rawlsian principle of justice is, in the writer's opinion, much more useful as an analog for thinking about principles of international ethics since it does not assume an ontological sense of mutual interest, or alternatively, a "harmony of interests." It does however, assume an interest in justice, thus presenting some problems in justifying its application to international relations.

<sup>48</sup> Habermas, *Justification and Application*, 31.

for us as we proceed theoretically toward it. This thinking about Truth has been the proverbial oasis in the desert, the Promised Land; it has allowed unjustifiable practices to continue by strategically alienating humans from one another and from themselves by positing a collective self-consciousness of inadequacy in relation to Truth, while at the same time insisting that some (traditionally the West) are closer to it than others. Furthermore, the desire for "objectivity" as a means of searching out the extra-phenomenal Truth has clouded the sense in which there is no theory without normativity. In fact, it ought to be the emphasis of theoretical inquiry itself to discover the extent to which the "truths we live by" are in fact well justified beliefs translated into orderly practices. As Rorty notes, "If we could ever be moved solely by the desire for solidarity, setting aside the desire for objectivity altogether, then we should think of human progress as making it possible to do more interesting things and be more interesting people, not as heading towards a place which has somehow been prepared for humanity in advance."<sup>49</sup>

This encourages thinking about the process of theory justification as something that brings agents together to discuss the beliefs they share in common and to work through those points on which they diverge. It disavows thinking about theory debate as a battle of wills over competing visions of Truth, for this is fruitless and ultimately discourages agreement. As Rorty says, the community of scholars "should see themselves as involved in a long-term attempt to change the rhetoric, the common sense, and the self-image of their community."<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, this has not been the typical approach to

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<sup>49</sup> Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Rorty, "Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?" in *Truth and Progress, Philosophical Papers, Vol. 3*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 41.

justifying theories in Western thinking. Searches for knowledge have often led to the mistaken sense that its practitioners have come closer to the goal of finding the ideal procedure, language, or method which will help them grab on to some intrinsic notion of Truth. In Kant, for example, it was *a priori* rationality which allowed the thinker to come into contact with the absolutes implicit in Truth. Today, it is idealised languages (like positivist science), or idealised speech situations (discourse ethics), which are the key to the Truth hidden behind the simulacra of everyday experience. These are examples of a peculiar brand of representationalism, which ascribes to the belief that there is indeed a way in which the "objective" world leaves its mark, either in the signs that we use to describe it, or in the minds of the thinkers who attempt to reflect on it.<sup>51</sup>

The pitfalls of this approach to thinking about Truth and theory will be shown in the analyses of Realism and emancipation-oriented Critical IR theory. In the terms of what has been demonstrated in this chapter, it is important to think of ideas common to IR theory—notably the idea of the world as structured by "anarchy" or the identification of agents as "sovereign" or the pursuit of knowledge as "emancipatory"—as products of a type of thinking about theory which gets its substance from correspondence views of Truth. Given the presentation of Wittgenstein's work on the contingency and intersubjectivity of language, it does not seem plausible that any concept, description, or idealisation of the features that ostensibly comprise the "realities" of world politics make much sense as purely definitional terms. As Taylor has said, "the vocabulary of a given social dimension is grounded in the shape of social practice in this dimension; that is, the

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<sup>51</sup> On these two points see Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, especially Part II on "Mirroring."



vocabulary would not make sense, could not be applied sensibly, where this range of practices did not prevail."<sup>52</sup> That language and thought describe something "outside of themselves"—a relation *between agents*—is why Putnam is unwilling to abandon a moderate version of realism.<sup>53</sup> It is the widespread attachment to metaphysical realism, where thought and language are thought to extend beyond the pale of intersubjectivity (into "objectivity"), that offends him. It is the assertion here that champions of such concepts as those above are attempting to do just that: describe something that exists beyond the realm of human relations. Therefore, it is not the attempt to say here that the mind and that language are incapable of representing anything, it is just to say that they do not represent that which is beyond "the familiar," or that which is beyond everyday experience.<sup>54</sup> To think of representation in this way is to decry the kind of Archimedean thinking that has plagued Western thought for far too long.

This means that traditional notions of truth as Truth, as something "objective" and with intrinsic properties to which language and thought correspond, have to be left behind. In its place should come the idea of truth as "idealised justification" and of knowledge, in so far as it refers to a truth,<sup>55</sup> as a "compliment paid to well justified

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<sup>52</sup> Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 33-4.

<sup>53</sup> See Hilary Putnam, "The Question of Realism," in *Words and Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. In this essay Putnam takes issue with Richard Rorty's "short way with the question" of realism saying that "Rorty moves from a conclusion about the unintelligibility of metaphysical realism...to a skepticism about the possibility of representation *tout court*," 300. For another statement of Putnam's realism, see "Realism With a Human Face," in *Realism With a Human Face*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

<sup>54</sup> See Putnam, "The Question of Realism," 297-300.

<sup>55</sup> On these two points see Hilary Putnam, "Reference and Truth" in *Realism and Reason, Philosophical Papers Vol. 4*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

beliefs."<sup>56</sup> Accepting this view will help to dispose of the prominent metaphysical impulse to cling to an idealisation of a ready-made world yet to be uncovered, and a similar propensity to construct epistemologies that correspond to that world. Implicit in all of this is the incorporation of the position of Thomas Kuhn that it is *beliefs* about the world that inform the way problems are derived and the manner in which they are solved.<sup>57</sup> These changes in beliefs call for amendments or additions to the types of problems the theoretical enterprise seeks to address. In the social sciences this means that privileged contexts and epistemologies need to be constantly re-examined and re-justified in an effort to identify the extent to which they foster better practice, defined here as practice oriented to an awareness of how today's problems are best resolved, not how yesterday's solutions are applied today. It is the belief that too many modern approaches to theory have resisted the attempts at epistemological openness because epistemology for far too long has clung to the notion that knowledge (and identity) is bounded to, that it needs a permanent grounding in, Truth to be relevant at all. In sum, Putnam expresses the most attractive elements of pragmatism which, it is argued here, are essential in understanding the theoretical debates that add life to the discipline,

What I find attractive in pragmatism is not a systematic theory in the usual sense at all. It is rather a certain group of theses, theses which can be and indeed were argued very differently by different philosophers with different concerns, and which became the basis of the philosophies of [Charles Sanders] Pierce, and above all of [William] James, and [John] Dewey. cursorily summarised these are (1) antiscepticism: pragmatists hold that doubt requires justification as much as belief...; (2) fallibilism: pragmatists hold that there is never a metaphysical guarantee to be had that such-and-such a belief will never need revision (that one can be both fallibilistic and antisceptical is perhaps the unique insight of

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<sup>56</sup> Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," 24.

<sup>57</sup> See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970

American pragmatism); (3) the thesis that there is no fundamental dichotomy between "facts" and "values"; and (4) the thesis that, in a certain sense, practice is primary in philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

It will be the argument of this examination that this approach, which sees truth as a product of intersubjective agreement and as subject to periodic recontextualisation would be a most fortuitous adaptation for a discipline that must constantly confront rapidly changing circumstances and account for widely varying and conflicting identities. Given the number of states and the permutations and combinations of national projects, it seems nonsensical for a discipline such as international politics to cling to a single notion of Truth, or to think of theory in this manner. The things political agents believe, the way they act, and the ends they seek are all intricately linked to their sense of self and their implicit desires. These beliefs and actions also related to, identify with, diverge and often change as one interacts with other agents. This presents each actor with a wide range of other identities and situations that require an approach to life more analagous to painting a useful picture than consulting a roadmap; prescribing actions that are more akin to writing an open-ended novel than to following a script. This calls forth the need for a critical opening of this Realist dominated discipline, and more importantly, a need for a practically-oriented approach to theory; one which does not set itself up to getting caught in the trap of reifying, conflating, and permanently instantiating a particular context of world politics by clinging to a metaphysical picture of "reality." In later chapters, critiques of Realism and Critical IR theory will get its life from the four fundamentals of pragmatic thinking above. The first step to rehabilitate the IR scholar's

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<sup>38</sup> Hilary Putnam, "Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity," in *Words and Life*, 152.

thinking about theory, however, is to "get rid of the idea of the 'View From Nowhere'—the idea of a sort of knowing that has nothing to do with agency, values, or interests—[which] might be of cultural importance."<sup>59</sup>

It is essential in understanding a pragmatic approach that the implication of this line of thinking is to disavow the traditional Western empiricist, epistemological fact/value, true/false, objective/subjective dichotomies. All theories both reflect and help to perpetuate a certain set of values rather than distinguish themselves according to their ability to corroborate methods and languages that secure their correspondence with Truth. Realism has for far too long presupposed that it is possible to stay within the realm of "facts" and that staying there means to discern the realities of international politics, which are then used to ostensibly foster more "realistic" practices. The fact that many Realists still do not see any problem with suggesting that objective facts are the basis for theoretical inquiry reflects their ascription to a problematic modern divinisation of scientific rationality; the kind that clings to these dichotomies as an essential relation between believing and knowing, circumspection and certainty. The rational construction of science as the key to good, value-free knowledge has confounded the sense in which this distinction is "hopelessly fuzzy because factual statements themselves, and the practices of scientific inquiry upon which we rely to decide what is and what is not a fact, presuppose values."<sup>60</sup> Realist theory has to account not only for the values reflected in its

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<sup>59</sup> Richard Rorty, "Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace" in *Truth and Progress, Philosophical Papers, Vol. 3*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 45.

<sup>60</sup> Hilary Putnam, "Fact and Value," in *Reason, Truth, and History*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 128.

theory and the practices which the theory helps to perpetuate, but also for the epistemological method it uses to arrive at the theory.

Such a statement usually elicits defensive postures since many who level such critiques are also inclined to do so with a moral condemnation based in a particular ideological or philosophical standpoint. That is not the intent of the argument being made here. The whole point of this examination is to show the ways in which much theory in IR has been a product of a particular metaphysical viewpoint. This cannot be the most fortuitous basis for action, since the metaphysical abstractions used to structure such theories are likely to be situated and context-dependent and therefore of little relevance for scholars presented with novel problems. In this, a pragmatist normative objection is expressed. Theories whose internal logic forbids a "way out" or an amendment to its premises and theoretical practices when genuine arguments appear to reasonably challenge the theory usually do so because of the unwillingness of its adherents to let go of their metaphysical attachments. Alternatively, however, "pragmatists do not urge us to ignore sound arguments against what we believe, when such arguments are advanced; they do urge us not to confuse the 'intuitions' of metaphysicians with genuine arguments."<sup>61</sup> In keeping with the pragmatist commitment to fallibility, this means that the truth of standing theories, seen as well-justified beliefs, have to remain open to scrutiny, but so too do challenges to the standing theories. This does not deny that there may very well be genuine problems with prevailing beliefs and practices, but it does mean that "the criticisms of our beliefs and actions which are associated with various kinds of

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<sup>61</sup> Putnam, "Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity," 156.

intellectualistic metaphysics, and with equally intellectualistic scepticism, will not stand up to close scrutiny."<sup>62</sup>

This explains why Critical and postmodern IR critiques have not been widely accepted as a better alternative account of beliefs about international affairs and the practices justified by them. Subjecting Critical IR theories to scrutiny, agents in international affairs do not (perhaps unfortunately, but perhaps not) appear to be oriented to "global emancipation" as many Critics imply, nor do many theorists, even those most radically opposed to Realism, accept the post modern radical scepticism with respect to theory and knowledge practices. Indeed, that we engage in ontological and epistemological debates as vigorously as we do, refutes this hypothesis. Moreover, the post-modern participation in these debates, which more often than not explicitly spurns the debate for taking place at all, is self contradictory to the extent that their suggestion that other approaches merely reflect misguided or power-dominated discourse does in fact presuppose that there is a better approach to theoretical inquiry.<sup>63</sup> While the post-modern theories have given the twentieth century thinker ample ammunition against the kinds of metaphysical Truths which have plagued western epistemology for far too long, they have shot themselves in the foot in discounting the important role that an *anti-foundational* (not relativist) notion of truth might just have in the future practice of inquiry altogether. Instead, they tend to write as if inquiry was the mere production of fiction rather than a

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>63</sup> A discussion of the post-modern place in IR theory shall be the subject of the following chapter.

substantive process of addressing the ethical dilemmas posed by political exigencies.<sup>64</sup>

A real problem for the discipline of IR theory is the extent to which Realist IR theory does *not* take Critical or post-modern theoretical challenges seriously at all. This is implicit in their attachment to positivism which does not take any non-empirical theory as a valid contribution. Realist theories do not take the "agent point of view seriously, and ... look at everything from the third person descriptive point of view."<sup>65</sup> This is prevalent among the Realists, who differ in the extent to which they attribute outcomes to political agents, but are unanimous in *not accounting for their own agency* as a theorist, and for not taking stock of what they are doing when they are theorising. They do not see that the act of theoretical justification of a belief by logical necessity implies a "recommending of that belief or action"<sup>66</sup> and that such an enterprise is indicative of a normative commitment to reflect on practice. In other words, when theorising, Realists do not necessarily perceive themselves as engaged in a normative act, and getting Realists to see theoretical construction as such is what Critical IR theorists have been attempting to do. They have just been doing it from a metaphysical plank which makes it seem, to this writer, an unjustifiable vantage point.

As this chapter attempted to show, evolutions in Western thought about knowledge and truth have been permeated by the notion that the two are as linked in ways that figures such as Descartes, Kant, and Hegel could not have seen and that a

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<sup>64</sup> A more thoroughgoing critique of the post-modernist relativism will appear in Chapter 4.

<sup>65</sup> Putnam, "Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity," 167.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

**discussion of issues of agency and language in the act of theory itself problematise the extent to which theory can purport to devise a system of languages that correspond to an objective Truth. Key figures such as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida, have been essential in inaugurating an intense debate as to the nature of Truth and the ways that it can or cannot be justified, or, whether the notion is itself entirely relevant. What has been offered in this chapter is a schematic view of the issues that provide the basis for metatheoretical IR critiques of late.**



## CHAPTER 2

### **Constructing a Context: Realism and the Object of International Theory**

#### *Introduction*

When E.H. Carr wrote the *Twenty Years' Crisis*, a work which would become one of the few Canons that define international relations theory, he did not set out merely to establish his view of the method through which to theorise international politics. He also set out to state his case that the so-called "utopian" ways of looking at the world in the interwar years led to actions which were, in hindsight, impractical, the effects of which culminated in the devastation of World War Two. He was critical of idealisations of a world that everyone wanted but clearly did not exist at the time, and posited that theorising world politics must account for the dialectics of theory and practice. But Carr's theoretical impetus was mostly a response to what he feared was a crisis in the practice of international affairs, and his theory sought to mitigate this problem by attempting to illuminate the vicissitudes of international politics which had clearly escaped the rhetoric of diplomats and statesmen. It was his goal to spell out the realities of an international politics that had clearly averted the apprehension of practitioners. Hans Morgenthau had a similar project in mind when he penned *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*; a polemic against rationalist inspired moral precepts in which early twentieth century foreign policy was grounded. In response to what he saw as the nefarious doctrines of nazism, he was sceptical of morality in politics, which to him represented only the instantiation of the ethics of the powerful, rather than representing an absolute good. Morgenthau

understandably stated his case more poignantly and tragically than Carr, lamenting the evil and implicit destructiveness that inheres in politics. The arguments of Morgenthau and Carr, the two founding fathers of Realist international relations (IR) theory, were an avante-garde critique of modernist metaphysical rationalism—within the long established tradition of political realism—rearing its ugly head in international politics, and these criticisms established the basis of a new empirically-oriented discipline.

Kenneth Waltz's more systematic theory of international politics formalised the laws and generalisations of international politics gleaned from the works of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and their twentieth century counterparts into a better empirical theory. This was an ostensible sign of disciplinary maturity as the study of international politics now rested on a firm social scientific footing. Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* finally exorcised the remnants of hermeneutics in the Realism of Hans Morgenthau, Martin Wight, and Hedley Bull by constructing a Realist social science for the future. In spite of the significant and novel epistemological implications of Waltz's reconstruction of Classical Realism, the sense that there is a "reality" that exists beyond the pale of human cognitions of or participation in that reality is an assumption that underlies both variants of Realism. Both strains express an eagerness to eschew normative approaches as naive, and to displace the ephemeral notions of freedom and justice espoused by utopians with an architectonic of international politics based in power, anarchy, and sovereignty. The implication is to confine the discourses of international relations within the narrow boundaries established by these foundational concepts, and by appeals to an alleged Tradition embedded in the assumption of an "objective" realm of

"facts" about world politics. It is, as R. B. J. Walker has noted, an explication of what/who is inside and outside of disciplinary discussion, and an attempt to freeze "complex philosophical questions into a permanent problem: either an internal debate between realists and idealists or a progressive struggle to establish a properly empirical social science against the recalcitrant metaphysicians, ideologists, historicists, hermeneuticists or critical theorists."<sup>67</sup> Underlying this frozen relation between utopians and realists is the assumption of an implicit distinction between facts and values; Realism being the attempt to construct a privileged context situated in the realm of facts, against which incoming discourse is gauged for relevance and consideration. This context has unwittingly been accepted as critical theorists surrender the facts to the Realists as they apply their meta-theoretical correctives, not recognising the extent to which they themselves have been co-opted by the alleged Tradition constructed by Realists.

Since the instantiation of axiomatic foundational concepts of anarchy, power, and sovereignty through disciplinary discourse, international theorists have failed to see the temporal origins of such notions. That is, Realist discourse has taken these concepts in their initial historical context and conflated them to fit subsequent experiences, not recognising that the meaning and substance of these concepts, or their contemporary relevance, is subject to constant justification and re-justification.<sup>68</sup> Their "reality" is contained completely within the discourses that give them meaning; these are concepts that have been reified by rationalising away their social/historical context and through

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<sup>67</sup> R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 87.

<sup>68</sup> See Richard Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualisation," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*.

discursive practices engendered in the neo-Realist empiricist epistemological turn. The neo-Realist revision implicitly assumes that the problem of ontology is settled by placing one's faith in epistemology to remove the objective "is" from the subjective "ought" once and for all.

As Hume showed centuries ago, however, it is impossible to justify logically a *method* of induction and/or generalisation that can refute claims of subjectivism. The utility of induction is therefore, as much a subject of (rational) argumentation as are, say, principles of ethics.<sup>69</sup> One ought not assume that principles of induction are forever valid. They merely represent a stopping point where a scientific community has agreed (perhaps grudgingly) that such qualifying procedures are sufficient. In international relations theory then, one must not think any procedure of induction as valid indefinitely, if it can be valid at all, but rather, as an intuitive principle to which all in the community can agree. This is the starting point for twentieth century philosophy of science critiques which have revealed that positivism is inundated with subjective and rationalistic influences, thus dashing the illusion that science progresses beyond the purview of rationality, or if you like, of subjectivity.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the implicit fact/value split that gave positivism its early methodological legitimacy has come into much disrepute this century; much of this due to the contributions of Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, and Imre Lakatos.

Accepting this qualification, then, the Realist standpoint is best seen as a rational construction of reality, which clings to a poorly justified, empiricist conception of the

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<sup>69</sup> See Hilary Putnam, "Two Conceptions of Rationality" in *Reason, Truth, and History*.

<sup>70</sup> See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

proper analysis of world politics. It is one that is perpetuated in certain implied readings of Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, of Machiavelli, and even of Carr and Morgenthau themselves. Waltz's theory forecloses further ontological debates by finally accepting anarchy and power politics as permanent features of the international system, and uses sovereignty as a narrow analog of political agency. Historical analysis in the empiricist sense understood in international theory is thus used to inductively instantiate a specific privileged context; hence the many critiques of "positivism" which mark much of IR theory literature today. Critics assert that the Realist construction of an "international realm" of inquiry adopts the epistemological typology of the West in which ethical questions are assumed away by the implicit acceptance of a particular, dichotomous ontology.

Developments in philosophy and political theory have shown that this Western view of knowledge has for too long been dominated by interests which have incessantly trumped human freedom and responsibility by rationalising away, negating, or constructing particular subjects and agents by situating them within a particular discursive reality or Truth. In this chapter the point shall be to problematise the fundamental Realist distinction between "facts" and "values." In contrast to many critics of Realist IR theory, the point of dispute shall be less with the fact of elements of "positivism" in Realism—although this is a problem—than with the fact that the use of positivism itself is reflective of a prior ontological belief in an "out there." In other words, the empiricism in Realism clings to a particularly Western notion of representation; one which has compelled IR theorists to constantly construct (and then depend on) concepts, narrow (or

particular) readings, and (epistemological) methods that are supposed to help them get a grip on some metaphysical Truth (hence their positivism). In this, one detects an attempt to keep inquiry "within a logical space which forms an intrinsically privileged context";<sup>71</sup> that is, an attempt to establish a "reality" to which international theory corresponds without necessarily recognising the extent to which values permeate all aspects of the construction of concepts, the acceptance of readings, and the relevance of an analytical procedure. The Truths inherent in Realism are determined more by the metaphysical attachments that make a "factual" approach to world politics possible than they are a representation of the "realities" of international politics. Such an approach to theory encourages particular interpretations and practices instead of orienting knowledge to better practice—one that acknowledges the context-dependence and intersubjectivity of interpretation and the existence of heterogeneous agents in the world of experience.

### *"Conceptualising" a Context*

It is a common complaint among critics of Realist theory that there is no legitimate theoretical basis upon which Realism can claim either that it is "right" in the sense of being accurate, or that it is better than any other theory that they may be willing to offer up in its stead. They have been rightly critical of the assumption that Realism theorises the realities of world politics, to a degree that normative theories do not. Ever since E.H. Carr, it has been the Realist credo that "[Realist theory] emphasises the

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<sup>71</sup> Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualisation", 96.

acceptance of facts and the analysis of their causes and consequences. It tends to depreciate the role of purpose and to maintain, explicitly or implicitly, that the function of thinking is to study a sequence of events which it is powerless to influence or alter."<sup>72</sup> Such a line of thinking has provided the impetus for an intellectual Tradition beginning with Carr and running through Morgenthau and Waltz that has attempted to justify a context of theorising which characterises international politics as a domain of human endeavour irretrievably subject to the whims of natural necessity. The world being influenced by the vagaries of necessity, world politics becomes the object of scrutiny having its aims at an accurate depiction of reality; "at this level, reality is neither the creation of the mind nor is it mediated by our perception of it. Otherwise it would not be, in an important sense, 'real'."<sup>73</sup>

Anarchy, the state of nature, and sovereignty are seen as the primary features of an international politics rooted in necessity, and one which proffers only opportunities to extend one's power in the struggle for survival in a self-help system. These are all conceptions that greatly influence the Realist's perception of international affairs. The problem of adequately capturing the sense of what is exactly meant by the neo-Realist concept of "anarchy" demonstrates vividly the problem with the empiricist's attempt to define a world in which agents act, think, and live with concepts. While there is nothing inherently wrong with using concepts to simplify or illustrate a point, there is something terribly wrong—ethically, politically, and intellectually—when a concept by implication

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<sup>72</sup> E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939*, New York: Harper Torchbook, 1964, 10.

<sup>73</sup> Martin Griffiths, *Realism, Idealism, and International Politics: A Reinterpretation*, London: Routledge, 1992, 20.

assumes away the intersubjective practices and intentions which determine political life in the world of experience. What aggravates is the extent to which anarchy has always been used to proscribe some behaviours and necessitate others. "In anarchy there is no automatic harmony....A state will use force to attain its goals if, after assessing the prospects for success, it values those goals more than it values the pleasures of peace.... The *requirements of state action* are, in this view, *imposed by the circumstances* in which all states exist."<sup>74</sup> Beside the narrowness<sup>75</sup> of political action implied in this assertion, other problems confound; where the goals come from, how the states in this anarchic situation know exactly which actions are proscribed and which are not, and the fact that circumstances (and one takes this to mean *historical* circumstances) always have, and one should suspect, always will, change are assumed away (or assumed to be explained well enough) in the concept.

There is good reason for derision over the concept of anarchy as a starting point for much Realist analysis, due mostly to the manner in which it effectively removes the notion of political practice from the determination of the agents who make up the social system. As Wendt notes, *anarchy is what states make of it* but in neo-Realism, "the role of practice in shaping the character of anarchy is substantially reduced."<sup>76</sup> In other words, anarchy is taken as a "thing" exogenous to the agents of international politics, rather than

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<sup>74</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1959, 160. Emphasis added.

<sup>75</sup>Or alternatively, behaviouralism.

<sup>76</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organisation*, 46(2), Spring 1992, 396.



as embodying a true political relation constituted by the intersubjective interaction between agents in an international polity. But if one thinks of international politics as a social realm, no matter how primitive, then the fact that agents are able to recognise the existence of rules, norms, and practices as limiting or dictating certain courses of action, then that in itself presumes that there is some (legitimate) basis through which these elements of an agent's political action are communicated. Wendt and other social constructivists tend to see this process of norm dissemination through political institutions, as "a relatively stable set or 'structure' of identities and interests. Such structures are often codified in formal rules and norms, but these have motivational force only in virtue of actors' socialization to and participation in collective knowledge."<sup>77</sup> This is a more acceptable, yet still problematic, explanation of how agents in the international system see their action as somehow limited in relation to the social milieu in which they interact, "institutions come to confront individuals as more or less coercive social facts, but they are still a function of what actors collectively know."<sup>78</sup> The only problem with the institutions seen in this view are that they are somehow still seen as subordinate to the "thing" called anarchy. One wonders where this attachment to the concept of anarchy comes, when its widespread use seems to have confounded rather than aided IR theory's understanding of the intersubjective relations that permeate world politics.

Realists such as Hedley Bull and Martin Wight are less to blame for the confusion over anarchy than neo-Realists and structuralists since they are much more apt to

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 399.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

recognise the obvious social nuances which must exist in any "system" where agents engage and understand one another in an orderly fashion—even where eruptions into conflict occur.<sup>79</sup> The real substance of the international system as a *social* system is exemplified in the following by Wight, "There is cooperation in international affairs as well as conflict; there are a diplomatic system and international law and international institutions which complicate or modify the workings of power politics; and there are even rules to limit the wars which have not been entirely without influence."<sup>80</sup> Bull also recognises the extent of the sociality of international politics: "A society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values form a society in the sense they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another..."<sup>81</sup> Moreover, "at no stage can it be said that the conception of the common interest of states, of common rules accepted and common institutions worked by them, has ceased to exert an influence."<sup>82</sup> These statements would suggest that any assertion that an analysis of international politics must proceed along the empiricist context of the "facts," as implied by Carr and Morgenthau, is questionable since the understanding of international politics requires an interpretive

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<sup>79</sup> See especially, Martin Wight, *Systems of States*, Leicester University Press, 1977; Martin Wight, *International Theory, The Three Traditions*, London: Leicester University Press, 1994; Martin Wight, "International Society," in *Power Politics*, Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad eds., London: Leicester University Press, 1978. See Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society, A Study of Order in World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977. A lengthy, in-depth discussion of the concept of anarchy, and the contributions of Wight and Bull, are not necessarily the focus of the discussion here. Discussion of anarchy is meant only to illustrate a common Western empiricist trend that is manifesting itself in the Realist's positing of a concept (anarchy) as a "fact" of political life.

<sup>80</sup> Wight, "International Society," 105.

<sup>81</sup> Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 13.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

analysis of the intersubjective relations through which these rules, norms, and values are shaped and conveyed between agents. This being the case, interpretations of international politics and the process of theory construction are both value-laden rather than empirical processes.

But this generally is not the tack taken by international scholars, Bull and Wight among them. There is still the attachment to anarchy as a *prior* condition (as opposed to a political outcome) of international politics, which feeds the contention that no matter how sophisticated and well-ordered are world norms and practices, the absence of *legitimate* authority overseeing these processes must perforce make the system anarchic. Wight states: "the international scene is properly described as an anarchy—a multiplicity of powers without government."<sup>83</sup> This is taken to mean that world politics is therefore not appropriately subject to the same kind of political analysis as is the domestic realm, since it lacks the very fundamentals of a political community: legitimate authority and a well-defined, common basis for a political community.<sup>84</sup> In other words, in international relations the "political" is much different than it is in domestic societies, since the traditional bases of political analysis—authority and moral/ethical judgements within a community—are not present, and hence, one is resigned to a political analysis distinct in

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<sup>83</sup> Martin Wight, "International Anarchy," in *Power Politics*, 101.

<sup>84</sup> Which suggests, in addition to the metaphor that anarchy is, that Realists are also in the grip of a spatial metaphor which dictates that political communities only exist within the arbitrarily drawn borders that define what is known as a "state" in international politics. The ethnic rivalries that have erupted in many parts of the world are challenging our narrow notion of what makes a political community. In addition, Wight's view of what constitutes a political community is an Aristotelian, communitarian one. There are others—liberal communities—and they problematise some of the notions, such as the unabashed freedom (which seems to be what Wight means by *his* use of the term sovereignty), which makes "international politics 'power politics' *par excellence*." Ibid., 102. Again, Wight's use of the term "sovereignty" differs markedly from neo-Realists, thus raising doubts about the understandings of sovereignty that have become commonplace.

kind.

This is implied in Martin Wight's exegetical remarks about the intellectual and moral poverty of theory in international politics, where, in contradistinction to the fact of progress within nations "international politics is the realm of recurrence and repetition; it is the field in which political action is most regularly necessitous,"<sup>85</sup> a fact which subordinates moral political action and progressivist international theories to the reality that "international anarchy is the one manifestation of the state of nature that is *not intolerable*."<sup>86</sup> Rather, agents in international politics are seen as bounded in their actions by the determinative influences of necessity, anarchy, and power, "as actors behaving in accordance with a script, and performing in a drama over whose plot and resolution they have no control."<sup>87</sup> This reality therefore is taken to be a justification for the belief that empiricism, rather than *political* analysis is the "appropriate epistemological stance consistent with a reality characterised by these ontological properties."<sup>88</sup>

The concepts used in formulating the Realist theory of international politics are merely a collection of metaphors of the natural kind which make short work of the very fundamental fact of human will and intentionality. As the above suggests, the concept of anarchy, as the neo-Realist incarnation of earlier Classical Realism's pessimistic assumptions about human nature, is a naturalistic in so far as it strips international theory

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<sup>85</sup> Martin Wight, "Why is There no international Theory" in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds. *Diplomatic Investigations, Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966, 26.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. Emphasis added.

<sup>87</sup> Griffiths, 20.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

of a substantive political/intersubjective component. Such is the basis for Carr and Morgenthau's instinctive adoption of the tenets of political Realism,<sup>89</sup> and Waltz's lack of epistemological reservation about his empiricism in *Theory of International Politics*, which merely formalised the main points of what Classical Realists had been saying all along (although with some equivocation): that international politics, lacking the tenets of a political community and a stable social order, is an a-social realm where the state of nature dictates predictable, observable behaviours with a constancy that is traceable from Thucydides' ancient Greece, through Machiavellian Renaissance Italy, to Hobbesian seventeenth century England, to the present. In so doing, the "post-World War II realist paradigm treated the principles of these writers as universal descriptions of objective reality, and created a 'realist' canon out of their texts, which carried off into a self-sustaining discourse carrying no guarantee of continued relevance."<sup>90</sup> In its most recent incarnation, that of neo-Realism, this objective world, given life by the initial works of Carr and Morgenthau, has been constructed by approaching the world as an empirical realm.

The language used to construct the discipline of international politics, the use of essential concepts such as anarchy, structure, balance, power, and sovereignty are part of a theoretical tradition constructed in order to simplify world politics for those engaged in

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<sup>89</sup> A discussion of political realism is unfortunately not the subject of this examination. However, a useful dissertation of the concept of political realism is given in R.N. Berki, *On Political Realism*, London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1981. Berki's account is an extraordinarily useful explication of this widely misunderstood and misapplied concept, especially for IR theorists seeking to better understand the realism of Carr, Morgenthau, Niebuhr and Bull.

<sup>90</sup> Paul A. Chilton, *Security Metaphors: Cold War Discourse from Containment to Common House*, New York: Peter Lang, 1996, 5.

theoretical attempts to describe these affairs. There is nothing implicitly wrong in this, for theory is all about simplification as Waltz rightly suggests. But neo-Realist theory in particular disproportionately overstates the significance of these imaginary constructs in the lives of real-world agents for sake of simple definition. Whether or not one is able to *define* adequately Carr's notion of "realism", Morgenthau's concept of "power", or Waltz's notion of "anarchic structures," there is nonetheless an inordinate amount of disciplinary consensus about the acceptance of these constructs for discussion, and debate hinges on the finer points of their definition. Therefore, there is a sense in which these terms have taken on a disciplinary life of their own irrespective of their significance for real world actors. They help the international relations theorist to make analytic statements in the sense envisioned by Kant; statements which have no need of experience, but are nevertheless true "by virtue of *meanings* and independently of fact."<sup>91</sup>

While there is no such thing as an "anarchy" or a "structure," the language of Realist theory carries forth definitionally as if it actually did exist, basing its entire empirical theory on this premise. How would it be possible to refute someone's definition of something that doesn't really exist? These concepts are therefore given meaning through their synonymous use in language, "meaning is [thus] what essence becomes when it is divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word."<sup>92</sup> Over time the word is accepted, but the ostensible essence to which words like anarchy, structure,

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<sup>91</sup> See W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View, 9 Logico-Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953. Emphasis added. Kant dichotomises between "truths which are analytic, those grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact, and truths which are synthetic, or grounded in fact", 20.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

and sovereignty correspond are forgotten. Neo-Realism is much more guilty of this than is Classical Realism, but it must not be forgotten that *all* Realists proceed as if there really is such a thing as *a* (single, human-independent) "reality". In other words, Realist theory has evolved in its empiricism from (inductive) generalities about the natural state of international affairs to a more sophisticated social scientific treatment of these generalities in neo-Realist theories, especially with the addition of "structure" to the IR vocabulary. This represents a growing resistance to see formal IR theory as adequately relating to the world of experience. This is problematic since hypotheses of an "anarchic" world, for example, are contradicted over and again by examples of sophisticated and legitimate institutions based exclusively on the urge of nations to cooperate. Sticking to hypostatic definitions, of course, the Realist sees these institutions as bastions of instrumental self-interest.

The hypostatic impulse (there are numerous others) is a sign of a perpetuating disciplinary tunnel; a narrow and foundational framework of analysis from which the IR theorists must not stray in order to produce a "legitimate" theory. To do otherwise acquires the thinker the label "utopian," or worse, renders their work irrelevant, suggesting as George does through his "textual approach", that Realist IR theory is a 'closed' discipline, which "post modernism has exposed for what it is: a textual tradition become 'reality', a peculiar reading of (Western) philosophy and history become transhistorical/transcultural fact; a way of framing 'meaning' and 'knowing' shaped by Newtonian physics and Cartesian rationalism...IR is a discursive practice."<sup>93</sup> The language

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<sup>93</sup> Jim George, "Of Incarceration and Closure: Neo-Realism and the New/Old World Order," *Millennium, Journal of International Studies*, 22(2), 1993, 233.

of anarchy, power, and structure have therefore ostensibly fashioned the discipline along the lines of an empiricism which seems to hold true no matter what experiences, or rather, what the context of these experiences otherwise indicates. Kratochwil adds,

The search for invariable laws of international politics has not only significantly reduced the set of interesting questions, it has also led to premature closure...as in the world of love, reality increasingly proves nothing. Neo-realists are more and more engaged in a Platonist preoccupation with form (anarchy, law of uneven growth). The unchanging or cyclical nature of international politics substituted for the investigation of actual processes and decisions. Whole sectors of international reality become marginalised...<sup>24</sup>

What is needed is a revision in thinking about theory where neither theoretical constructions nor experiences are relegated to absolute standards by which knowledge of international politics and what is "reality" are taken as valid. There has to come a time when the concepts, methods, or theories that one relies upon to order his understanding of the world are actually brought face to face with the world in which agents interact; otherwise theories truly are just useless (or, impractical) abstractions. In so far as human beings are moved to understand their world for the purpose of better practice, acting in accordance with an abstraction is relatively futile, if not often dangerous—as this century's earlier conflagrations and omnipresent Cold War have shown. The tendency to rely *exclusively* on concepts, methods, and theories for understanding is very prevalent in the Western epistemological tradition, but in this century, such practices have come under fire. What is being advocated here is an approach to theory that does not fall into the trap of developing overly sophisticated theories which assume that getting at a reality

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<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Kratochwil, "The Embarrassment of Changes: Neo-realism as the Science of Realpolitik without Politics," *Review of International Studies*, 19(1), January 1993, 64.



is something that is done methodologically<sup>95</sup> rather than intersubjectively to the same degree that agents in the world actually function. Every once in a while the theories and concepts that one has come to rely on for knowledge have to be judged against what is really happening in the world. This is what Quine is getting at when he repudiates the Kantian "imaginary boundary between the analytic and the synthetic," and instead advocates a manner of proceeding where "each man is given a scientific heritage plus a continuing barrage of sensory stimulation; and the considerations which guide him in warping his scientific heritage to fit his continuing sensory promptings are, where rational, pragmatic."<sup>96</sup> In other words, it is time to change the manner in which one thinks of "good theory," since for far too long "good theory" has meant something more like "rational" rather than "practical."

*Readings and Mis-Readings of Realism: Uncovering the Pragmatic Spirit of Realism*

Defenders of Realism have established the facticity of foundational concepts through a linguistic-narrative construction of an immutable Tradition from which Realist theory acquires its legitimacy. This tradition relies upon an exclusive acknowledgement of the authority of the Tradition's protagonists and, more erroneously, upon the authoritative interpretations of these thinkers. In reaction to the critiques of Richard K. Ashley, for example, Gilpin affirms the three Great Realist Writers, Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Carr, noting that "these three writers combined scientific elements in

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<sup>95</sup> Say, by sticking to the "facts" which just encourages the creation of general or "covering"-type theories to explain patterns and regularities.

<sup>96</sup> Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," 46.

their thinking...by trying to ground the 'science' of IR on the realities of diplomatic practice"<sup>97</sup> What needs to be pointed out however, is the extent to which the works of these writers are context-dependent, and more importantly, the extent to which subsequent readings of these authoritative writers reflect the self-image of the era in which they are interpreted. What has come to be understood by modern Realists and critical theorists alike is that the Realist theoretical position has relied on the conveyance of rather suspect readings of classical writers in the history of intellectual and political thought, and of disciplinary progenitors such as Carr and Morgenthau. This ostensible Tradition has been contrived in order to justify the manner in which thinkers from Thucydides to Morgenthau have been saying the same things; that the world is, and has always been, constituted by anarchy and power interests. It is suggested here that there are ways of approaching the works of supposed contributors of Realism in a way that leads one to much circumspection as to the consistency of the Tradition itself. While there is a general attachment that all Realists share—a metaphysical belief in a "factual" realm—the extent of Realism as a solid paradigm is less than well established. As Kratochwil asks,

What would international relations as a discipline look like if the autonomous sphere of activity was after all, not constituted by the deep structure of 'anarchy'? What would be the status of realist verities, for which an array of witnesses from Thucydides to Machiavelli, Hobbes and the European tradition of reason of state is invoked, if it turned out that such alleged continuities exist, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder? What if those verities were nothing more than highly problematic, not to say tendentious interpretations?...To raise such questions is not only gauche in terms of the unspoken rules of the profession...to bring up these questions means to re-open the issue of relevance.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Robert Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism" in Robert Keohane, ed. *Neorealism and its Critics*, 306.

<sup>98</sup> Kratochwil, "Embarrassment of Changes", 69.

Without advocating relativism, there is no real way through which an "objective" judgement of any interpretation of either Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes or any other founding Realist can be said to be better than any other. For much too long, the most prominent interpretations of these writers extols the extent to which their witnessing of political affairs in their time has garnered the "realities" of international politics. Unfortunately, these "realities" have been discerned (or, codified) at a relatively late stage of human history—within the last sixty years. Only in the last three hundred years have humans had the arrogance to ascribe the label of "certainty" to their inquisitive activities, and to say that Thucydides or Machiavelli could have dreamed that they were doing the same thing is to characterise these thinkers as savants, rather than inquisitors. It seems somewhat careless to impute what is taken to be good historicism today to be similar to that which Thucydides took as good history (or whatever it was he thought he was doing) over two thousand years ago. One must not forget that before Thucydides, Herodotus was considered to be among the great historians of the time; an historian whose methodology was as reliant on the Oracle at Delphi as it was on observation and intuition. Surely it must be admitted that Thucydides could not have approached his subject matter with the methodological and theoretical rigour as is expected in historico-political scholarship today. This leaves what he said and what he *did not say* (given other historical records) open to much interpretation.

Debates continue among classicists today as to the substance and meaning of Thucydides' work. What does Thucydides mean exactly, when he asserts that "the truest cause, the one least openly expressed, that Athenian greatness and the resulting fear

among the Lacedaemonians made going to war inevitable"?<sup>99</sup> Does he mean that war *is* inevitable, or does he mean that *this* war was inevitable? Realists in general take the former of the two propositions, although they tend to diverge on the finer points as to why this is so. Kagan suggests that antecedent events prior to the war, which Thucydides for the most part chooses to gloss over, does not support his conclusion that "any assertion that war was inevitable after the Thirty Years' Peace of 446/5 does not arise from the evidence but must be imposed *a priori*."<sup>100</sup> There are many more questions than answers implied in a reading of Thucydides' great work, and it is not the suggestion here that all Realists ascribe to a particular reading of Thucydides. However, there is a sense in which the work of Thucydides has come to be *generally* understood—correctly or incorrectly—to mean either of two things: analysis of interstate relations can be done "objectively" since even Thucydides did it, and conflict has always been inevitable in interstate relations; that the international system is anarchic.

There is also no reading of Thucydides which can fully satisfy questions about both his interpretation of the War itself and the meaning of the War in terms of its contribution to an understanding of world politics. A different reading of Thucydides supports the hypothesis that it is much more fortuitously interpreted as a politico-ethical treatise on the base possibilities of human nature when all sense of practicality and proportionality are sacrificed amidst political strife. One does not so readily detect much commentary (implicit or overt) regarding the vicissitudes of the "international system" and

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<sup>99</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Steven Lattimore trans., Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998, 1.23.

<sup>100</sup> Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969, 180.

the inevitability of war arising from this system, suggesting that if one is hard pressed to appropriate Thucydides as illuminating any truths about politics, it would accord with Waltz's "first image" approach to international politics; a reductivist view which sees the causes of war as related to its individual protagonists.<sup>101</sup> For it cannot be denied that there is some meaning in the way Thucydides emphasises the importance of key figures such as Themistokles, Perikles (whom Thucydides accords a high level of regard, in spite of his "detached" account), and Alcibiades, or events such as the siege of Potidaia, the sparing of Mytilene, the Melian Dialogue, and the baseness of civil war in Corcyra. From his account of these people and events, not to mention the manner in which they are presented,<sup>102</sup> it can be hypothesised that Thucydides did actually emphasise the particularity of events and the influence of actors, rather than their ascription to the laws of politics. This highlights a significant point of departure for Classical and neo-Realists in their appropriation of Thucydides as a paragon for their theoretical approaches, the former allowing for the importance of individual actors and domestic politics (as was Thucydides' intent, for example the notion of *stasis* which permeates throughout the *Peloponnesian War*), and the latter creatively ascribing outcomes in his account to structures inherent to the Greek states system.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> See Waltz, *Man, The State, and War, A Theoretical Analysis*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.

<sup>102</sup> Peter Pouncey suggests that Thucydides was prone to a narrative method he refers to as the "binding technique" which speaks to the unstated meanings and judgements which are conveyed merely by Thucydides' presentation of events in a specific order, which Pouncey takes as a rejoinder to those who accept Thucydides' intention to present an "objective" account of the war. See Peter R. Pouncey, *The Necessities of War: A Study of Thucydides' Pessimism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Doyle points out that the different approaches that make up the Realist tradition, each appropriate Thucydides in their own different way, and that only Classical Realism, its allowance for the differences of states and the significance of political actors can rightfully claim a strong allegiance with the work of Thucydides. He refers

The appropriation of Thucydides highlights the difficulty in relying upon certain readings of texts in order to construct a Tradition in the image of an overall theoretical goal. In the case of Thucydides, problems arise in using his work to justify the position that balances of power conform to the logic of an "international system" that waxes and wanes from conflict to peace depending upon the equilibrium of balance,<sup>104</sup> or to argue for the ineradicable resistance of power politics from the tenets of ethics. These interpretations are being imputed to, rather than drawn from, his work, which in itself poses no problem so long as particular readings are sustainable under critical scrutiny. It is suggested here that typical readings (or, interpretations of readings) do not stand up. The same problem arises with Machiavelli, whom has come to be narrowly caricatured concomitantly with the evolution of Realism as a "'paradigmatic realist' reduced to instant formulas on the priority of power over ethics... the necessity of violence and intrigue..ends justifying means and raison d'etat."<sup>105</sup> Indeed, Waltz himself makes an argument similar to that being made here in the very analytical *Man, the State, and War*, when he notes,

That Machiavelli was the the theorist of Realpolitik makes it easy to assume that to have a general understanding of Realpolitik is to have an adequate understanding of Machiavelli himself. The great political

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to Thucydides as a minimalist realist who "[assumes] that the processes and preferences of states vary and are open to choice influenced by both domestic and interstates considerations" Doyle, "Thucydidean Realism", *Review of International Studies*, 16(3), July 1990, 224.

<sup>104</sup> See Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*. With respect to balance Waltz notes, "If a conditional balance becomes the conscious goal of states, then one would expect the balancing process to be one of greater precision and subtlety... Thus among the Greek and Italian city-states and among the European nation-states, any state threatening to outstrip the others in power could expect that an attempt would be made to check it." (210) He thus brings together historical eras that span over two millennia to prove that "balance" has always been at work in international affairs.

<sup>105</sup> Jim George, David Campbell, "Patterns of Dissent and the Celebration of Difference: Critical Social Theory and International Relations", *International Studies Quarterly*, 34(3), 1990, 285.

philosophers demand being read and read again, and one finds that each rereading brings an enlarged and deepened understanding. With Machiavelli, the least philosophical of the political philosophers [sic], one is inclined to forego recurring consideration of the whole of his thought and instead dip into his political writings and extract maxims, which may enlighten, horrify—or even amuse.<sup>106</sup>

However, in later writings, as Waltz attempts to justify the maxims of international politics, he detracts from his earlier wisdom with respect to interpreting sophisticated philosophical treatises by reducing Machiavelli's philosophical importance, and worse, lumping him in with thinkers that surfaced hundreds of years later, "Ever since Machiavelli, interest and necessity—and *raison d'etat*, the phrase that comprehends them—have remained the key concepts of *Realpolitik*. From Machiavelli through Meinecke and Morgenthau the elements of *the approach and the reasoning remain constant*."<sup>107</sup> Machiavelli would not have endorsed a notion of *Realpolitik* as having characteristics that remain constant, and would have also dismissed the so-called scientific attributes of his work,<sup>108</sup> especially since *social science* often acts in much the same manner as did the Christian Good in Machiavelli's time; it forces actions to accord with dogmatic dictates rather than current political circumstances. As Morgenthau notes, "the scientism of Machiavelli...is, in the history of mankind merely an accident without consequences, a sudden flash of lightning, illuminating the dark landscape of man's hidden motives but kindling no Promethean fire for a grateful posterity."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 212.

<sup>107</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1979, 117. Emphasis added.

<sup>108</sup> Attributed by Gilpin, see above.

<sup>109</sup> Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965 169.

Perhaps it is time for Realists to read Machiavelli again and perhaps it is also time for Realists to read Realists again as well. For the ways modern Realists (and hence the discipline) have now come to see Machiavelli are particularly troubling (and insipid). Critics are rightfully critical of neo-Realists' appropriation of his work, but their displeasure also reflects, once again, a rift in what is generally taken to be a singular Realist tradition. Machiavelli's political philosophy itself was an explicit attempt to justify the virtues of *pragmatic*—not formulaic—action as a means to maintain the power of the Prince, rather than the Church, over the Republic. It was a resistance against the Good, narrowly proselytised by the Church, which was "corrupting in its own terms and [carrying] its corruption wherever it goes."<sup>110</sup> But there is nothing that *ipso facto* explicitly condemns ethical action, in so far as this is taken to mean acting in accordance with the responsibilities entailed in maintaining the Republic. Morgenthau understands this as he notes, "For a realist like Machiavelli convergence [between ethics and politics] was possible only as an accident, if what was required by the rules of the political art—the primary concern of the political actor—happened to coincide with what was required by the rules [sic] of ethics."<sup>111</sup>

To Machiavelli, living according to "necessity" meant never subordinating one's action to the tenets of religious/moral or any other dogmas, and his philosophy sought to

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<sup>110</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 77.

<sup>111</sup> Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, 35. There is much indication that in many of Morgenthau's commentaries on ethics that he is generally confused as to the fundamental difference between morals and ethics. Carr makes this confusion many times throughout his *Twenty Years' Crisis*. This, unfortunately, does appear to be one tradition that both Realists and neo-Realists unequivocally share, and perhaps Realist IR theory would be less anti-normative if it had a better sense of the distinction between the two.



affirm one's public (read: political) life through action that need neither always be wicked nor always good.<sup>112</sup> It certainly did not mean just the acquisition of power, "it cannot be called virtue to kill one's fellow-citizens, to betray one's friends, to be treacherous, merciless and irreligious; power may be gained by acting in such ways, but not *glory*."<sup>113</sup> Glory is not the same as interest, and Realists can claim Machiavelli as their own only in so far as their reference to power as a perpetual presence in political life; to instrumentalise power by referring finite goals such as national interest, or to situate it within the confines of anarchic structures is to move beyond, indeed it is to flatly contradict, what Machiavelli intended. As Walker notes "not only has the conventional interpretation turned Machiavelli into a simple relativist, but he has been given a particular space in which to act—not the community in which peace and progress are possible but the supposed home of pure power, the so-called international anarchy."<sup>114</sup>

Underlying Machiavelli's work is a profound anti-universalist, anti-instrumental tendency which can only be creatively used to construct a politics of permanence in the manner which has been done by Realists. For Machiavelli's political treatise was a

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<sup>112</sup> Since these distinctions are typically made by religious and other authorities whose end goal is to limit or constrain political action altogether and destroy it altogether. On this point Arendt notes, "Goodness, therefore, as a consistent way of life, is not only impossible within the confines of the public realm, it is even destructive of it," *The Human Condition*, 77. Note also on this point the similarities between Machiavelli and Nietzsche's points on the role of Good in political and moral life. It is a wonder, given this similarity, why Nietzsche is not as prominent in international relations theory as is Machiavelli. The deconstructive techniques and the relativism of postmodern critical IR theorists have likely made Nietzsche an unattractive choice of intellectual heritage for most IR Realists. This does not mean, however, that intellectual similarities do not exist, it just means they are not so readily acknowledged.

<sup>113</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Quentin Skinner, Russel Price, eds., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 31. Emphasis added.

<sup>114</sup> Walker, *Inside/Outside*, 41.

problematisation of the inherited religious and political traditions of Renaissance Italy; it was an attempt to justify a resoundingly new notion of *raison d'etat* (as Waltz and all Realists have noted), which did not need religious, moral, or universal authority as a basis for defining the political community. In spite of the tensions this implies,<sup>115</sup> the most important point appears to be Machiavelli's awareness of time and the need to get beyond the universalist impulse to situate political life within the edifices of universalist foundations. This does not mean relativism as much as it does an awareness of the historical context in which the Prince finds himself, which requires that action is rooted in the moment, a caveat that reminds him that "one should not rely on a fixed point of reference. What has worked before may not work again. Even though one might imitate earlier expressions of *virtù*, there can be no reliance on a tradition that makes claims about how things have always been, still are, and will always be."<sup>116</sup> To the Realist gadfly who seeks to whisper into the ears of diplomats and politicians the world over, intent on bringing an image of the world as anarchic, power as "self-interest," and the action of a sovereign as circumscribed by "structure", Machiavelli might be inclined to respond that,

since circumstances vary and men when acting lack flexibility, they are successful if their methods match the circumstances and unsuccessful if they do not. I certainly think that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman, and if you want to control her, it is necessary to treat her roughly. And it is clear that she is more inclined to yield to men who are impetuous than to those who are calculating.<sup>117</sup>

There are also problems with Carr's place in the Realist Tradition, since his

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<sup>115</sup> See Walker who notes that Machiavelli's articulation of a political community as grounded in inside/outside, self/other, is also called into question by his own transformative political theory of action. See especially pps., 34-38.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>117</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 87.

realism as a whole is a more nuanced and sophisticated critique of contemporary utopian viewpoints and a hope for progress than both his detractors and supporters are willing to accept, "The philosophical pillars embedded in his scholarship are of [sturdy] design: not relativism, but rather mistrust of purported omniscience, coupled with confidence in gradual progress and enlightenment in human affairs; not determinism, but an awareness of historical inertia and the importance of human agency in overcoming that inertia."<sup>118</sup> Rather than a grand indictment of utopian thought in the discipline, and optimism in general, Carr promotes the attenuation of overexuberant idealism in so far as it is a gloss for the excise of the interests of the dominant powers, "In so far as the alleged natural harmony of interests has any reality, it is created by the overwhelming power of the privileged group, and is an excellent illustration of the Machiavellian maxim that morality is the product of power."<sup>119</sup> This argument against a morality of international affairs is indicative of a sophisticated pragmatic critique of rationality; one which would gain acclamation from a post-modern IR theorist. Furthermore, Carr's viewpoint reflects the same disdain for clinging to a particular image of the world as both corruptive and as implicitly limiting the range of practical diplomatic/political solutions. There is, however, no indication whatsoever that these viewpoints *inter alia*, proscribe ethical behaviour as such.

What is being argued here is that Realist IR theory has its origins in a real pragmatic disdain toward metaphysical rationalism prevalent in popular ideologies in the

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<sup>118</sup> Paul Howe, "The Utopian Realism of E.H. Carr" *Review of International Studies*, 20(3), 1994, 279.

<sup>119</sup> Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 80.

early part of this century. Over the years of theoretical evolution, Realism has moved away from the pragmatism that gave it its initial intellectual succour, toward an empiricism which rightfully offends many who disparage some of the ethical implications of such a move. The antimetaphysical epistemological urge in the theories of Carr and Morgenthau, sought to avoid theorising international politics with a moral agenda in mind since such tropes implicitly impeded the practice of international politics. Indeed, the works of Carr and Morgenthau are permeated with a deeply pragmatic spirit in their approach to international theory. This pragmatic impulse has largely been passed over in a theoretical turn toward empiricism. For pragmatists such as Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, the starting point of inquiry is a deep disdain for the manner in which metaphysicalism in the West has occluded the practical aspects of theory. This seems to be the initial argument of both Carr and Morgenthau. In Morgenthau, the theoretical impetus can easily be read as an aesthetic approach to practice; as one which affirms life while concomitantly eschewing rationalism, science, and the fallacious moral ontologies they perpetuate. Morgenthau's *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics* resonates with images of life as the struggle for and desire for power, an immutable and omnipresent element of social human relations; "there can be no actual denial of the lust for power without denying the very conditions of human existence in this world."<sup>120</sup>

Analogous to Nietzsche's will to power, Morgenthau believes there is something life affirming in this struggle for power; something which provokes the cause to act efficaciously irrespective of often ill intended consequences. As Morgenthau "whenever

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<sup>120</sup> Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, 201.

we act with reference to our fellow men, we must sin, and we must sin when we refuse to act; for the refusal to be involved in the evil of action carries with it the breach of the obligation to do one's duty."<sup>121</sup> This is comparable to the vicissitudes of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, who is extolled by Zarathustra who coins: "Man must become better and more evil"—thus *I* teach. The greatest evil is necessary for the overman's best."<sup>122</sup> For Morgenthau, as for Machiavelli and Nietzsche, following the predicates of morality merely perpetuates injustices of a *different* kind: "by avoiding a political action because it is unjust, the perfectionist does nothing but exchange blindly one injustice for another which might even be worse than the former."<sup>123</sup> The injustice may very well be that the Overman or the Prince loses their principality, as France and Britain almost did during World War Two, by following the tenets of unchecked idealism.

In spite of Morgenthau's laudable critical exegesis of rationality and the frivolous virtues of morality in international politics, the later development of his major theoretical treatise represents the kind of formalisation and intellectual procrusteanism that defies the aesthetic virtues of action as a creative enterprise implied in *Scientific Man*. Unfortunately for the discipline, this particular work is always overshadowed by his *Politics Among Nations*; a work which explicitly defines what will become the dominant theoretical position in the discipline, but more ironically defies his own notion of the pragmatics of theory and practice by permanently situating action within a discursively conceived

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spake Zarathustra," in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Portable Nietzsche*, New York: Penguin Books, 1982, 400.

<sup>123</sup> Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 202.

context of power and balance, and instrumentalising international politics by ascribing action as "interest". This is one of the means through which the study of international relations could be turned into an objective social science, an enterprise which Morgenthau himself viewed with some apprehension, offering the following caveat in his early remarks before subsequently defining the immutable realities of international politics, "No study of politics, and certainly no study of international politics in the last third of the twentieth century, can be disinterested in the sense that it is able to divorce knowledge for its own sake."<sup>124</sup> Nonetheless, Morgenthau, in spite of himself, continues to theorise world politics as a "distorted reification of the abstraction of necessity in the form of a struggle for power."<sup>125</sup> Combining his philosophically sceptical views of international politics with his disdain for social scientific theory as empirically verifiable or operational, "Morgenthau seems to be arguing that as a philosophy, or set of principles, his 'realism' is true but empirically unverifiable."<sup>126</sup>

In this Morgenthau exerts the tensions of Western epistemology between wanting to make 'true' statements about *a* world or *a* reality, while maintaining the right to a deep seated intellectual reservation about exactly how to make these 'certain' or 'true' statements. The arrival of Waltz precluded debate of the first element of the epistemological dilemma (the relevance or necessity of 'true' statements), focussing instead on the finer points of theoretical development. In other words, neo-Realism ceased

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<sup>124</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th edition, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973, 23.

<sup>125</sup> Griffiths, *Realism, Idealism, and International Politics*, 65.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

arguments over the "nature" of international theory, settling on anarchy and power as foundational concepts, and proceeded to justify the orientation of inquiry toward a metaphysical world of "facts" which has been mistakenly attacked as "positivistic" by Critical IR theorists. While the use of positivism is a negative strain that permeates some aspects of Realism, it is argued here that the real problem is the assumption of a world "out there" that makes positivist inquiry relevant in the first place.

In spite of the anti-rationalist critiques that are a significant underlying element of the theories of both Morgenthau and Carr, they failed to address directly and substantively the larger issue of epistemology in international relations. This implicitly advocates the alternative un-pragmatic view that an objective, value-free approach to theorising world politics is necessary, thus instantiating the fact-value dichotomy. Realist theory has ever since been firmly attached to a self-image of theorising at the level of facts as opposed to values. As Realist theory continued to legitimise its theoretical premise of international anarchy and power politics on the basis that these were the truths of international politics,<sup>127</sup> intellectual trends in politics and philosophy were significantly repudiating the claims that a truth existed at all, or that received wisdom about it has come to be generally dependent upon the dictates and practices of the most powerful rather than having any content in and of itself—a view similar to that expressed by Carr some years earlier.

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<sup>127</sup> Although I do not think that this is at all what original Realists such as Carr, Morgenthau, Herz, or Niebuhr were asserting. They were however, prone to naturalist-type arguments which took their intellectual cues from a pessimism about a-social human nature in international politics; a current of thinking that has been given more sophisticated theoretical treatment in neo-Realist theories.

*Putting the "Facts" on Shaky Ground: Agency, Identity, Interpretation*

Critical IR theories have attempted to move the discipline of international relations away from the kind of approach to theorising formalised by Waltz and other neo-Realists—who take their bearings from Morgenthau and Carr's distinction of facts and values and other defining dichotomies such as Realism/idealism and true/false. Accordingly, a pragmatic approach to theory resists these dichotomies, highlighting the extent to which one's embeddedness in intersubjectivity, one's relatedness to others cannot so easily be disposed of the moment one attempts to sit down and understand one's environment. One simply cannot turn the world into an object in response to the intellectual impulse to "know" something significant about it. In other words, it is becoming more acceptable (or less blasphemous) to hypothesise that a theorist is as intentional an agent as an actor. The pursuit of knowledge essential to theory construction, as such, cannot be extricated from the intersubjective basis to which the agent and the practice of theory are themselves linked, and hence, cannot be seen as rooted in an extra-subjective notion of Truth. The process of theory itself is as practical as it is self-actualising for a community; to the modern-day pragmatist it expresses a watered-down version of the Hegelian notion of *Bildungsprozess*, without the *telos* of History or the immanence of Geist.

These arguments put the fundamentals of Realist theory of international politics on shaky ground in so far as they are dependent upon, or assume, a *specific* interpretation of the work of Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Carr. Disciplinary coherence with respect to IR theory relies to a great extent upon these interpretations, but more importantly, the



extent to which these authorities have been used to justify a particular context for international politics. This context relies upon readings of readings of the authorities in the Tradition and highlight the difficulties of the "hermeneutic circle," unavoidable since "what we are trying to establish in our quest to understand is a certain reading of text or expressions, and what we appeal to as our grounds for this reading can only be other readings."<sup>128</sup> This is not to suggest that interpretations are no basis from which to construct a discipline, but rather it is to suggest that this construction should never, and ultimately can never, get beyond the limits of human interpretation even by something as ostensibly non-subjective as empiricism and science. For international relations, like any other social science, is a social construction, it is a figment of the imagination, and has no meaning and significance other than that which is ascribed to it through theories about it. This fact is inescapable when a discipline attempts to isolate a social realm constituted by differentiated agents for the sake of understanding it. Furthermore, as Griffiths notes, "Realism is simply a set of assumptions about the world rather than a theory, let alone anything so pretentious as a social scientific paradigm"<sup>129</sup> These assumptions gain their force through the conveyance and debate among those who seek to understand international politics, rather than through their implicit embeddedness in an empiricist or positivist procedure. It is these assumptions that always inform what the discipline regards as an interesting or noteworthy "fact."

This does not make current readings of classical or groundbreaking works wrong

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<sup>128</sup> Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers. Vol. 1*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 18.

<sup>129</sup> Griffiths, *Realism, Idealism, and International Politics*, 3.

in an historical sense, as long as one does not fall into the insatiably Western trap of taking an historical example and subordinating it to a thing called History. Realist theory, especially neo-Realism, like many other humanistic/social science disciplines has succumbed to this temptation. For example, it is somewhat dubious that current readings of Thucydides laud the *Peloponnesian War* for its scientific approach to history, or its illumination of the insatiable instability of the anarchic Greek "states system" and a shift in relative balances of power as the cause of the war. This reflects a common and mistaken historicist tendency to interpret contingent historical events in modernist self-images and to conceive of all new historical experiences as cumulative rather than unique in their own right. While it is perfectly reasonable to suggest interpretations of particular historical events, it has been common practice in international relations to follow an historicist tendency to "attribute structure and process to epochs, to impute latent driving forces, to detect algorithms in patterns of recurrent events, to sort out events into categories and kinds of happenings, and otherwise to move analysis onto a surreal plain, apparently, but not always demonstrably, anchored to the empirical one."<sup>130</sup> And the international theorist must, again, be mindful of the fact that when "examining the past for theoretical edification, interpretive problems are compounded by the fact that his documentary sources are most often texts written by historians, so that the most that can result are interpretations of interpretations."<sup>131</sup> The use of the Tradition not only instantiates a particular set of empirical immutabilities of international politics as the basis

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<sup>130</sup> Donald J. Puchala, "The Pragmatics of International History," *Mershon International Studies Review*, 39(1), April 1995, 4.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

for disciplinary analysis, but also imposes a particular interpretative method for the understanding of future historical events.

The disciplinary custom of subordinating historically unique events to an overarching History, is also instrumental in an evolving disciplinary negation of the status of agents in international theory. Classical Realists such as Carr, Morgenthau, Bull, Wight, and Aron,<sup>132</sup> were much more willing to allow for the influences of identity and agency in international affairs as having a significant effect on international outcomes. The prominence of the 'diplomat' in their examinations of world politics, however, was still subordinated to the ontologically prior notion of "anarchy", which still tends to confine action to a narrow matrix of behaviours. Neo-Realists, take this further, however, by subordinating the role of agents entirely to structures and substituting their identities much more substantively with a conception of "sovereignty" that seems analagous to "homogeneity." Such an approach rather hastily discounts the degree to which a structure depends on its agents for the substantive norms that make it functional. Bull, Wight, and Aron were much more inclined to see this and would have discouraged the kind of determinism engendered in the notion of structure as it has come to be known in neo-Realism. To a large extent, it is the interaction of agents that generates the "anarchic structure" in the first place, to the same degree that this interaction is generated by them. In other words, "understanding international relations...must involve understanding a much more extended range of interactions than the discipline of International Relations has thus

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<sup>132</sup> See Raymond Aron, *Peace and War. A Theory of International Relations*, New York: Praeger, 1966.

far acknowledged."<sup>133</sup> To confine the actions of agents within the narrow bounds dictated by structure neglects the fact that these agents, states, have identities which are "mutually constitutive and constantly undergoing change and transformation."<sup>134</sup> In other words, to look at sovereignty in the manner in which neo-Realists would have us do effectively encourages the international theorist to abjure the manner in which the heterogeneous agents and identities figuratively shape, interact within, and ultimately change the nature of the "international system."

These arguments help to demonstrate that international relations theory is much more amenable to theoretical heterodoxy rather than orthodoxy; a point which is the *modus operandus* of theorists who are critical of the Realist Tradition. Most who are resistant to these new theoretical contributions have pejoratively referred to the new "theoretical pluralism" as mere "relativism." While to some extent, many of the postmodern attempts to open the discipline to perspectives other than Realism suffers for their overexuberant tendency to tout a viewpoint that implies 'anything goes', the larger point that most critical IR theorists want to make is that one language, one perspective, is not sufficient to capture the multiple identities, (or "realities") interpretations, and understandings that help to constitute the lifeworld of international affairs. The Realist viewpoint not only purports to conflate one's identity, the Western one, and to rely upon one interpretation of politics, power politics, but it also seeks to explain it all using one language, that of positivism and science.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>134</sup> Thomas J. Biersteker, Cynthia Weber, "The Social Construction of State Sovereignty," in Biersteker and Weber, eds., *State Sovereignty as a Social Construct*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 11.

But the significance and meaning that Realist theory imparts about the world depends in large part upon the use of and communication of language to shape and construct a coherent meaningful world in the mind's eye of the theorist. Formal languages such as science cannot be unequivocally used as a means through which one can gain knowledge that corresponds to an empirical realm of international politics. As twentieth century philosophical focuses on language as an essential avatar of both meaning and significance have illustrated, language has been used and misused to adjoin Descartes' constructed mind and a fixed, outside world to which mind independent language corresponds. Debates in this century have intensified over the issue of whether language<sup>135</sup> can be seen to correspond to an "objective" world, or whether language is a rational attempt to construct meanings that over time have come to be seen as "reality" in which case deconstructions of discourse are essential in breaking the foundations of this construction. For the time being at least, it appears that the postmoderns, who take the latter view, are winning the day. Many Realist critics assume this latter view, and, much like post-modernists such as Derrida and Lyotard, are sceptical of the "narratives" (or rationalisations) which are used to establish the reality and meaning of international politics. As Shapiro notes, "whether a given aspect of social reality is a matter of contention or is regarded as natural and unproblematic, meaning is always imposed not discovered, for the familiar world cannot be separated from the interpretive practices through which it is made."<sup>136</sup> To postmodern and Critical Theory IR theorists, the Realist

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<sup>135</sup> Or formal languages such as science, for example.

<sup>136</sup> Michael Shapiro, "Textualizing Global Politics" in Shapiro and James Der Derian eds., *International/Intertextual Relations*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989, 11.

assertion that it is a theory which derives its premises and substance from the "facts" is disputed out of hand as not only impossible, but to the Critical Theorists, unethical in its implications. The preliminary goal of reconstituting international relations theory then, is to deconstruct the current body of knowledge about so-called "reality" to make room for approaches to which link together theory and practice.

Arguments of this nature are a natural corollary to the assertions by twentieth century thinkers that language and meaning are indeed not elements of knowledge construction that can be called "objective" no matter how well established a methodology has proven in filtering out subjective influences. The very languages of epistemological practices have themselves come to be thought of as mere products of logocentric (dichotomous) strategies which construct the world in the images of the dominant power interests. Furthermore, as Critical theory has shown, there are knowledge-constitutive interests that fall beyond the purview of empiricism, the chosen approach of Waltz and the neo-Realists. Robert Cox, Ashley, and George have all been major proponents of these viewpoints, which attempt to usurp the neo-Realist commitment to an empirical theory of international politics that reduces the context of politics to the static notions of anarchy, and proscribes the notion of theory as practice.

By suggesting that international politics is a unique empirical realm, inquiry about it is safely distanced from social or ethical analysis which is inapplicable in so far as it does not allow any breakthroughs in empirical knowledge. Such an attitude betrays a remarkable acceptance by many Realists, as noted above, that international politics is necessarily an a-social realm, which effectively absolves it from the same kinds of social

criticism (or analysis) developed in adjunct fields of study. This assumption is unjustifiable given that all the pertinent issues of classic political theory such as power, interest, obligation, justice, and liberty are not only present in the works of classical international literature (even if they are historically more prevalent in the juridical literature of Grotius, Vattel, and Pufendorf, than in the theoretical works), but also resonate in political movements having significant political implications the world over. Furthermore, the limits of knowledge, and the contingency of human behaviour are assertions which cannot be so easily overlooked by theorists in international affairs. More importantly, there is an assumption implicit in all empiricist thinking that there is an Archimedean point from which the knower is able to look uninterestedly at the events which make up human history; a standpoint which ostensibly transcends the historically and intersubjectively contingent nature of the methodology and meaning imputed to such events. In the disciplines of philosophy and political theory, such assumptions about reality and how it is understood have come under fierce attack as a perpetuation of dogmatic, oppressive social practices having their origins in a modernist commitment to scientific-technical knowledge rather than liberating political transformation. Critical international relations theory implicitly refutes the empirical nature of the international realm focussing instead on the concern of larger critical social theory to "ground meaning as unambiguously social, historical, and linguistic in construction, and to connect knowledge to power."<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> George, Campbell, "Patterns of Dissent," 271. On the Relevance of critical social theory and post-positivist critiques of IR theory see also, Justin Rosenberg, "The International Imagination: IR Theory and 'Classic Social Analysis'," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23(1), Winter 1994.

Given that international politics is constituted by agents who bring their distinct identities, intentions, and political agendas to the international stage, and interact with other such agents, the hypothesis that these dimensions are uninteresting or irrelevant to international political analysis, and that theories derived about them are "empirical," is mysterious indeed. That said, it is among the most important contributions of the new body of critical literature that it has framed knowledge of international politics firmly within the Western epistemological tradition, in spite of there being a separate realm of inquiry called "international relations." The reality of course is that Waltz and the Classical Realists (Carr and Morgenthau) before him are very firmly entrenched in this tradition, with Waltz's theory allegedly advocating a more reputable place for International Relations theory; a move out of the interpretive realm of *doxa* into the more certain realm of *episteme*, resting on the laurels of its inductive covering laws as a theoretical backdrop. Such a transition has, given the developments in twentieth century philosophical critiques, struck critical theorists as much as it would Karl Popper—whose philosophy of science was aimed at refuting the dogmatism of Marxist and fascist ideologies—as a dogmatic turn in IR theory.<sup>138</sup>

Lacking these basic critiques of knowledge and developments in the broader fields

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<sup>138</sup> For example, one of Popper's main projects was to devise a critical rational method through which it was possible to demarcate between science and pseudo-science, and thus reduce the impact of anti-democratic ideologies. He was very critical of theories which viewed science as ideally based in probability, infallibility, verifiability, or inductivism, believing that theories are scientific to the extent that they are subject to novel tests and subsequent refutation. If a theory is not testable or refutable it is not scientific. Moreover, theories formed inductively are, according to Popper prone to a dogmatism in their unwillingness to see refuting instances as problematic for theory. See *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965. This is applicable to critical IR theory challenges to neo-Realism, the hypotheses of which (especially that of anarchy) only creatively can still be applied to real world events. For more on dogmatism passing itself off as knowledge see Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies, Vol II*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966.



of philosophy and political theory, Realism appears to the scholar familiar with critiques of modern epistemology, as a theory which presumes that it need not incorporate the main tenets of political analysis advanced *this* century, preferring to rely in substance upon thinkers who are elemental to Western thought, but whose sustained authoritative relevance to international relations theory has been poorly justified. It is suggested here that the pragmatist approach of thinkers such as Rorty and Putnam is useful for inquiry in IR theory. These thinkers are mystified by the Western tendency to rely on the metaphysical self-images of earlier eras whose relevance to modern ethical, epistemological, or moral dilemmas is questionable. As Rorty rightly complains, "one way of becoming more sensitive to the achievements of one's own time is to stop asking questions that were formulated in earlier times."<sup>139</sup> Instead, it is more important to "think of [theoretical] progress in the way in which Thomas Kuhn urged us to think of it: as the ability to solve not only the problems our ancestors solved, but also some new problems"<sup>140</sup> As mentioned above, the reliance on thinkers whose intellectual authority for their time is well established, has been more oriented to the discoverance of patterns and regularities which are alleged to shed some light on the state of contemporary international politics, when such a goal would be best fulfilled if one's intellectual sights were set on the "image of making rather than finding,"<sup>141</sup> as the basis for understanding the world. But such an intellectual orientation is possible only if the desire for

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<sup>139</sup> Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress, Philosophical Papers Vol. 3*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 6.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>141</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?", 28.

"objectivity" as the basis for theoretical inquisition can be dropped in favour of a theoretical enterprise aimed at good practice while being fully aware that historical contexts change and old justifications (that is, theoretical contextualisations) with them.

This being the case, one wonders if E. H. Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis* would look the same if he had written it today, at the close of the Cold War, as opposed to during the inter-war period. New problems and new opportunities requiring new theories to understand and imaginatively deal with them, would suggest that he would not have. Moreover, mirroring the complaints of modern-day critics, E.H. Carr lamented; "consistent realism excludes four things which appear to be essential ingredients of all effective political thinking: a finite goal, an emotional appeal, a right of moral judgement and a ground for action."<sup>142</sup> While the first two of these ingredients are suspect the latter two are major omissions for any modern political theory. One can however understand their absence from the thought of Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, which begs the question as to why Realist theory of international politics continues to assert the authoritative position of these figures in their thought. If one acknowledges even the smallest relevance of the developments in modern politico-philosophical analysis up to this century any theory of politics that does not account for the significance of language, practice, and meaning in the lives of contemporary subjects—not to mention the problematised ways of framing knowledge itself—appears to be extraordinarily incomplete. These are not problems partially or substantively addressed by Thucydides, Machiavelli, or Hobbes, which means that any modern IR theory ought to have something

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<sup>142</sup> Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, 89.

to say about these elements of human understanding. One suspects that Carr was both wise and humble enough to know that his solutions would not be solutions that would hold up indefinitely, especially since he apparently always hoped that the context of history would make a more harmonious world a possibility.

*Conclusion: The Critical Theorist Objects to the Realist "Object"*

Critiques of Realist theory focus primarily on the elements of neo-Realism which, according to them, have inappropriately narrowed (or obfuscated) the object of study and have excluded normative theoretical projects from being taken seriously. These critics have rightly pointed out that the methodological assumptions in Realism inherently are making a significant yet unjustified epistemological assumption: namely, that there "is" something that can be known. At the level of theory this assumption is extraordinarily important since one's methodology not only determines what philosophers of science have denoted as the "context of discovery" but also the "context of justification". In other words, the methodology ultimately determines the means through which discoveries are made about "reality", and also about how such discoveries are to contribute to knowledge, via tests of validity, falsification, or other methods. Critics have challenged the Realist assertion that the analysis of international affairs is a realm in which things are "discovered", suggesting that this is not language that is appropriate to human affairs. Rather, it is said, since human action is both intentional and meaning determined, reality in this, as in any other social realm, is made. Therefore, one cannot so easily categorise historical outcomes into laws and generalisations which reduce human behaviour to

simple categories of understanding; categories which themselves are a product only of particular identities and contexts. Since human action is meaningful and wrought with political intent, the only discoveries that are to come out of inquiry are those which ostensibly lead us to see the limitations on action imposed by continuing one's attachment to static, closed, and contingent contexts. The act of inquiry is therefore best seen as a willingness to confront new identities, and new contexts; as a means to shed light on the distortions in communication that intrinsically but need not necessarily forestall solutions to new problems.

Accepting these assumptions has a number of ramifications for international relations theory; the most important of which is a fundamental dispute as to the object of inquiry in international affairs. For starters the neo-Realist assumption of a world "out there" is not really sustainable, nor is the loose attachment to positivism that this entails, since in this there is necessarily an assumption that *formalised* languages (such as science) correspond to a reality which is somehow beyond regular cognitions or experiences. The first step is to break free from the trap of the "empiricist metaphysic"<sup>143</sup> which implicitly allows Realists to allege that the facticity of their approach justifies a cold reception to normative approaches, which are ostensibly stuck at the level of values. In abjuring empiricism, Realists can no longer assert that human reality is of the natural kind, since there is no such thing as "Nature's own language,"<sup>144</sup> which gives the theorist concepts such as anarchy, sovereignty, or structure. That is, there is no such thing as a neutral

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<sup>143</sup> See George, "Of Incarceration and Closure".

<sup>144</sup> See Hilary Putnam, "The Question of Realism," in *Words and Life*, 302.

language constituted by concepts or an empirical way of getting at them. Nor are there concepts and methods that correspond to an objective Truth. The concepts one uses and the ways one arrives at them—and their relevance in the world of experience—are products of intersubjectivity, not manifestations of a "real world." All of this is value-laden, from the urge to inquire in the beginning, to an agreement on concepts and theories at the end.

The kind of empiricism that permeates Western epistemology and which Realists have accepted denies the extent to which theory in itself is a value-laden (and therefore ethical) enterprise. While the methodology of positivism has been seen by critical IR theorists as the primary source of scorn, it is asserted here that this is less important than the initial blindness to the metaphysical commitments implied when one accepts that there are facts which can be methodologically captured in the first place. This assumption allows one to totalise intellectually History as a linear, teleological object. It is evident that such a view of history is a projection of a modern self-image being conflated into universal history, which regrettably draws one to the use of such terms as 'laws,' 'generalities,' 'anarchy,' 'structure,' and 'sovereignty' as providing a ground for the study of international relations. Griffiths sees this as a reductionist epiphenomenalism which, "consists in treating political events as essentially the outcome of some environing structure which is itself explicable in terms of scientific laws...Political reality is thus treated as reducible to something else."<sup>145</sup> In this chapter, Quine has been used to illustrate how this epiphenomenalism is reflected in the production of concepts which Realists

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<sup>145</sup> Minogue, Quoted in Griffiths, *Realism Idealism and International Politics*, 103.

assert as pertaining to a reality of international politics over and above the experiences and intentions of agents. This problematic aspect of Realist theory has less to do with their positivism and more to do with their faith that analysis of politics takes place on either the side of facts or that of values, and that only the former pertains to the Truth of international affairs.

It is the denial of an "objective" world that is the starting point for a critique of realism. More importantly, however, a critique of epistemology as something aimed at certitude, a tradition begun with Descartes, is at the heart of these critiques. Having refuted the assumption of the certainty of objective knowledge of international politics, a massive scepticism permeates critical literature about the absence in Realist theory, as practice, of any discussions of justice, freedom, community or identity. Discussion of these issues has hovered in the margins largely because of the fact that the theoretical impetus for international relations, those theories of Carr and Morgenthau, eschewed such discussions as both frivolous, dangerous, and largely irrelevant to the practice of foreign policy. Furthermore, the relevance of ethical discussion of international affairs has always been proscribed by the alleged positing of the "impossibility theorem, which all realists take to be axiomatic and therefore in no need of defence: there exists no actual or immanent universal consensus that will or can for a long time satisfy the real and emerging wants and needs of all states and peoples"<sup>146</sup> The main thrust of new approaches to international politics needs to address the manner in which this "impossibility theorem," notions of "objectivity," and Western empiricism are firmly based in drawing distinct

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<sup>146</sup> Richard Ashley, "Realism and Human Interests", in *International Studies Quarterly*, 25(2), June 1981, 219.

disciplinary boundaries based on particular identities, languages, and practices. This has also left out consideration of ethical principles; a substantive debate over which has been absented from international theory for far too long. All theories in the social sciences are permeated with ethical commitments of one kind or another, even if the extent of this ethos is to "do better". Much like other Western epistemologies, Realist international relations has focused on using "objective" theory to justify a particularly Western, conservative, pessimistic world view which neglects the influence of agency and excludes other identities as offering alternative ways thinking and doing in world politics.

## CHAPTER 3

### **An Opportunity Wasted: Enlightenment Critical IR Theory as a Safe Haven For the "View From Nowhere"**

#### *Introduction*

Post positive critiques of Realism have become commonplace in the disciplinary literature of international relations. They have posed a challenge to the theoretical dominance of Realism through critical epistemologies that seek to establish the links between knowledge and practice and the ways so-called "objectivity" has been essential in the negation of agency and the marginalisation of identity. The focus of post positivist critiques of Realism is their "rejection of transcendental (decontextualised) criteria for assessing epistemological, ontological, and/or normative claims and therefore the necessity of taking responsibility for the world(s) we make—including criteria we construct for assessing epistemological, ontological, and normative claims."<sup>147</sup> Moreover, values are reflected in theories, which are further reflected in practice, and the act of theoretical engagement logically implies that problems or uncertainties in the nature of practice are what gives rise to the act of theoretical inquiries in the first place. To some extent this has given rise to the theoretical impulse of critical IR theorists, who challenge Realist theoretical and epistemological assumptions—which, given the plethora of identities and unique contexts that occupy the political landscape of world affairs—that perpetuate a Western propensity to ground itself in a closed, time-bound ontology and scientific rationality. Such criticisms represent a pragmatic belief that knowledge is directly related

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<sup>147</sup> V. Spike Peterson, "Introduction," in *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992, 19.



to practice and that both are permeated with intersubjectivity and values. The Western tendency to use knowledge to justify a privileged context inherently produces practices that constrain and subject other identities. By pragmatically practicing "theoretical reflexivity," critical IR theorists hope to encourage more open, democratic practices by engaging in and constructing theories along the lines of openness, and to foster a willingness to include the voices and perspectives of a multitude of identities in theoretical discourse. Critical IR theories bring with them the realisation that inquiry can only be conceived as something that takes place within the purview of a community and thus call for a "democratisation of inquiry."<sup>148</sup>

There is strong argument to be made that a pragmatic approach to international relations theory would appropriately address the profound ontological and epistemological problems associated with Realist theory and practice in international relations. The critical approaches to IR theory are a positive step in a pragmatic direction in so far as they challenge the embeddedness of one theory and one context of international politics, and provoke a disciplinary shift in thinking about the act of theory as related to, indeed as linked with, the practice of politics. It is helping to imbue a renewed disciplinary propensity to look critically upon oneself even as one theorises; to look for one's own agency and values in the theories one constructs and supports, and to refrain from thinking about theory as detached from its subject matter. But in this, the critical IR theories have a tendency to stray too far into theoretical excess. On the one hand, those approaches influenced by the Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas mistakenly seek to

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<sup>148</sup> See Hilary Putnam, "Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity," 173.

replace the positive empiricism with an emancipatory theory that is as abstract and unjustifiable as the neo-Realist theoretical approach. On the other, the post-modern theories have a tendency to resist unreasonably the impulse to construct theories altogether, believing the whole enterprise as tainted by an (ontological?) proclivity of theory and knowledge as instrumental practices of discursive dominance.<sup>149</sup>

In some senses the traditional epistemological impulse of the West has had a propensity to perpetuate dominative practices, but this impulse can be overcome if a more pragmatic approach to theory—one that renounces the notion of a particular Truth, in favour of one which asserts the fallibility of truth over time—were adopted. The focus of this particular examination is to highlight the pragmatic impulse of critical IR approaches, and to show how this positive step is undermined by a focus on emancipation as Truth. Although this seems at first to be an endorsement of post-modern critical IR approaches, in a later chapter it will be shown how such theories are flawed in so far as they tend to advance unwittingly an arrogant perspectivism that hinders theoretical progress more than it stimulates open discussion. These questions can only be addressed by dropping the traditionally Western notion of Truth and its accoutrements from the theoretical vocabulary and by taking the act of theory as *practice* seriously.

### *The Pragmatic Impulse of Critical IR Theory...*

One of the larger points of the previous chapter was to show how Realist theory,

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<sup>149</sup> This in fact is where they part ways with pragmatists who do believe that theory is possible, if only within a certain context. A discussion of the ramifications of post-modern theory for international relations will appear in the following chapter.

in its initial orientation away from rationalist idealisations of world politics, has its origins in a pragmatic approach to theory. In so far as Realist protagonists such as Carr and Morgenthau subsequently endorsed the view that IR theory is about just the facts, they veered intellectually into the dangers inherent in an approach which disavows the intractable subjective elements implied when it is time to interpret, and worse, systematise, a random assortment of collected facts. In so doing one also enters fertile ideological ground. Both Carr and Morgenthau initially articulate a distinctly critical meta-theoretical stance in expressing a disdain for the manner in which the closed, teleological Histories of the utopians were instrumental in discounting historical contingencies and fostering pragmatic responses to what was evidently taking place in world politics. But they stopped short of opening the way for a truly sophisticated theoretical position when they implied that in response to the utopians, IR theorists must rely only on the facts of world politics; the facts taken to be a lack of harmony, constant power struggles, and the incompatibility of politics and ethics in world affairs (in other words, anarchy). In addition to this is the implication—one which is rarely ever explicitly stated—that theorising about international politics is not a reflexive activity. Theorising is said to be a product of detached observation and must never become clouded by the intentions or wishes of the theorist. What is denied in Realist assertions about "reality" is the nature in which *theorising itself is an act*; a denial which betrays the pragmatism of their anti-ideological approach when world politics is permanently situated in the context of an "observed reality" from which a theory is constructed. Not only is the empiricism in this suspicious, but it also serves to consign action within the narrow

parameters established by a theory, rather than broaden action to respond to the shared experiences of agents in world politics.

Waltz's neo-Realism is the first real attempt to disclose explicitly what is a readily apparent Realist meta-theoretical position: theories order and make sense of reality, and in so far as they explain this reality they are in many ways an *abstraction from* that reality. The intellectual disciplinary turn towards the positivism in Waltz's abstract neo-Realism seems to represent a final turn away from seeing political agents and unique events as adding anything new to one's perception of what has already been systematically categorised as the "realities" of international politics. These abstractions need not necessarily conform to the empirical facts of international politics since in many ways theories are a sort of fictitious construction which helps the theorist determine what it is he is studying; "without at least a sketchy theory, we cannot say what it is that needs to be explained, how it might be explained, and which data, how formulated, are to be accepted as evidence for or against hypotheses."<sup>150</sup> Furthermore, "a theory, though related to the world about which explanations are wanted, are always distinct from that world. 'Reality' will be congruent neither with a theory nor with a model that may represent it."<sup>151</sup> That the neo-Realist revision of Classical Realism is seen as an acceptable development to "Realists" seems ironic to this writer given the profound reticence for ideological abstraction which allegedly gave rise to the theory in the first place. In this, it appears that some Realists are confused as to whether what makes good theory is good

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<sup>150</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 17.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

empiricism or good positivism. Both approaches, however, seem to maintain a strong belief in the theory's correspondence to the "facts" if only because it disavows subjectivism.

However, Waltz himself concedes the methodological fine line between theories and facts, observing that in the end, "both induction and deduction are indispensable in the construction of theory, but using them in combination gives rise to a theory *only if a creative idea emerges*."<sup>152</sup> This suggests that in devising a theory of international politics, there is a strong element of intuition, rationality, and more importantly, wisdom which cannot objectively be removed from the process of theorising itself. It also means that the basis for rejecting or accepting theories ultimately resides within the community of experts, rather than implied in the method itself, as Waltz concedes above, and suggesting as Popper does, that there is a critical element to scientific theory which can never be empirically removed.<sup>153</sup> But Realist theory seems to have evolved away from the initial critical urges which gave the discipline its initial vitality and moreover, in abstracting from "reality," neo-Realism further disengages the notion of theory as practice, preferring instead to think within the intellectual limits of a reality contextualised by anarchic structures, sovereignty, and a narrow notion of power. There is no question of the extent to which theory has limited practice by permanently situating the reality it helps to explain in such a narrow frame.

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<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>153</sup> See Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965. Issues of method, rationality, and objectivity as it pertains to theory choice will be the subject of the next chapter.

The exuberance of the renewed critical-transformative epistemological urge in international relations theorising is a pragmatic corrective for this evolving lack of critical, meta-theoretical critique in Realist theory. With the exception of the focus on emancipation as a basis for theoretical-critical impulse, this new strain of critique is a positive development in IR theory since its primary emphasis is to address many of the points made above. The self-image of Realist post-positive critics is very pragmatic in their attempts to re-orient the disciplinary theoretical enterprise as inextricably linked with practice. They seek to offer a rejoinder to an empiricist theoretical tradition which has sought to justify and re-justify the same ontological picture of the world through an evolving methodological system which closes the minds of theorists to the nature in which thinking itself is related to the inter-actions of agents and the need for better practice. Closure and negation in Western *thinking* merely perpetuates closure and negation of agency and identity in *practice*; it is a legitimisation for continued violent and unethical practices in world politics justified according to a continued attachment to an "anarchic" picture of world politics. To critical theorists the Realist marginalisation of epistemological critiques based in notions of intersubjectivity and recognition, as well as those which conceive of theory as constructive and transformative, signify that Realism, the dominant paradigm in IR, provides an intellectual alibi for suspect practices worldwide.

In this vein, critical IR theorists have pounced on Waltz's reliance on induction as the basis for discerning the facts of his theory and as a basis for Realist rejection of non-empirical theories, positing that such a methodology is far from being either neutral

or objective. The point of these critiques is to repudiate the notion that alternative theories in international politics can successfully be eliminated by recourse to methodological arguments alone. Moreover, critical theories assert that the act of theorising is a social act, and is a constitutive process in itself; an element of theory that can never be removed no matter how sophisticated the methodology. And, as Hoffman wrote in the early stages of Critical IR Theory debates: "Critical Theory, therefore, seeks not simply to reproduce society via description, but to understand society and change it. It is both descriptive and constructive in its theoretical intent: it is both an intellectual and a social act."<sup>154</sup> In spite of the significant theoretical divisions between the approaches that constitute the numerous perspectives that make up Critical IR theory, the one belief that appears to unite them all is that knowledge of, and theories about, the world are inextricably linked with the creation, or control, of that world. As Steve Smith notes:

What international theory rarely accepts, although there have been important, and always marginalised, exceptions through history, is that our rationalisation of the international is itself constitutive of that practice. The selfsame 'reason' which rules our thinking also helps constitute international practice. In short, international theory is implicated in international practice because of the way that theory, in the main, divorces ethics from politics, and instead promotes understanding via a 'reason' separated from ethical or moral concerns...My claim is that the dominant strain in international theory has been one which sees ethics as applicable to the kind of community which international society cannot be. Thus, in the name of enlightenment and knowledge, international theory has tended to be a discourse accepting of and complicit in, the creation and re-creation of international practices that threaten discipline and do violence to others.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Mark Hoffman, "Critical Theory and the Inter-Paradigm Debate", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 16(2), Summer 1987, 233.

<sup>155</sup> Steve Smith, "The Self-Images of a Discipline: A Genealogy of International Relations Theory" in Smith and Ken Booth, eds., *International Relations Theory Today*, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1995.

Critiques of Realist theories have highlighted a number of issues that problematise the theoretical underpinnings not only of positivism as it applies to the human sciences, but also to the fact that in practice, the pessimistic and sceptical tenets implied in the concepts of power and anarchy, have served as a justification for conduct unbecoming of the Western commitment to moral and political progress. Noting the critical study of John Vasquez's *The Power of Power Politics*, George observes that "as a particular image of the world employed by Realist policymakers, power politics promoted certain kinds of behaviour and often leads to self-fulfilling prophecies."<sup>156</sup> It is the focus on power politics and theories that inherently assume anarchic structures as the framework in which world actors must relate that Realist critics believe to be the reason for the marginalisation of approaches with transformative goals in mind. Many of the critical theories proceed with the intent of widening the scope of IR theory by "articulat[ing] a cosmopolitan vision of world politics without relapsing into the naivety and superficiality that Carr castigated in early idealism, and without compromising normativity by falling back into realism."<sup>157</sup>

For the moment, this "transformative" urge is seen here as at least a preliminary corrective to the kinds of practice fostered by a Realist reluctance to accept that their particular world view may be subject to some revision, or rather, a presumption that their particular theoretical position is infallible. The transformative urge, to the extent that this relates exclusively to transforming meta-theoretical practices in International Relations

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<sup>156</sup> Jim George, *Discourses of Global Politics*, 13. See also John Vasquez, *The Power of Power Politics, A Critique*, London: Frances Pinter, 1983.

<sup>157</sup> Richard Devetak, "The Project of Modernity and International Relations Theory", *Millennium, Journal of International Studies*, 24(1) Winter 1995, 40.



theory, is a significant rejoinder to the propensity of Realists such as Robert Gilpin, to view theoretical pluralism, or at the very least, non-Realist criticism of their theoretical position, with unwarranted suspicion.<sup>158</sup> Gilpin for example, apparently flabbergasted by a somewhat vitriolic polemic levelled by Richard Ashley, disingenuously shirks the entire theoretical debate by suggesting that Ashley's criticisms are ill founded because he refuses to define what neo-Realism is, "although we are charged with having betrayed the realist heritage, at no time does he actually tell us what that heritage actually is. As a result, I do not know why we are called 'realists,' much less 'neo'."<sup>159</sup> While Gilpin highlights a problem in establishing lines of communication through which both positivist-oriented and political theory/philosophy-oriented speakers can understand one another, for him to suggest that there is confusion as to what Realism is betrays a typical arrogance and closed-mindedness that incites such vitriolic responses in the first place. While one can pretend that there is no such thing as a dominant perspective in the discipline, one cannot pretend that a discipline which theorises about real people in real political situations can be impervious to *political* (or, social) analysis, no matter whether it originates in this discipline or whether it originates in "other" disciplines. Politics is politics, quite simply, and if Heidegger, Habermas, Rorty, or Putnam do not appear to belong in a discipline that speaks definitively about politics and about *theories* of politics—in spite of their major contributions to political and epistemological discourse—then there is something very

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<sup>158</sup> See Richard Ashley's somewhat polemical critique of neo-Realism, "The Poverty of Neo Realism," in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989. See also, Gilpin's response, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism" in the same edited volume.

<sup>159</sup> Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism," 302.

wrong with the discipline. The problem with Realist theory that infuriates is the pretense that *international* politics is about something different from other (domestic) politics; that it is about anarchy, sovereignty, or national interest and that these entail a political dynamic that is vastly different than that in domestic politics. This exemplifies a profound reticence to accept political analyses that do not derive from the discipline of International Relations.

For example, in somewhat lampoon-like fashion Gilpin cites the following statement by Ashley, "For eschatological discourse (evident in phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and some hermeneutical sciences) the objective truth of the discourse lies within and is produced by the discourse itself."<sup>160</sup> He responds, "Unfortunately, *International Organisation* failed to send an English translation with the original text. Therefore, although I am sure that this statement and many like it throughout the article are meaningful to Ashley. I have no idea what it means. It is this needless jargon, this assault on the language, that gives us social scientists a bad name."<sup>161</sup> While one must sympathise with Gilpin's frustration at the level of frivolous intellectual grandstanding that appears to be a pre-requisite for much post-modern interlocation, one cannot sympathise with the lack of willingness on Gilpin's part to engage in a fruitful intellectual debate. Gilpin's caricature of Ashley is curious indeed given that "[he] engages explicitly in theoretical debates and speaks with authority on theoretical issues...it was Gilpin in *The Political Economy of International Relations* who invoked Thomas Kuhn as an influence

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<sup>160</sup> See "Poverty of Neorealism," 281.

<sup>161</sup> Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition," 303.

and who was confident enough to take on the complex issue of Marxist ideology. Yet, in relation to Ashley's criticism of his theoretical position, he suddenly doesn't know what all of this 'means'<sup>162</sup> Indeed if one reads Gilpin's sophisticated and path breaking study of International Political Economy, the kind of confusion expressed by Gilpin is perplexing. Unfortunately, it shows some resistance to engage the more sophisticated (and at times more confounding) level of critique being offered by those who want to bring IR theory into the twentieth century. Bringing IR theory into the twentieth century in many ways means, trivially, admitting that international theory is *political* theory, and hence, is subject to the same judgement and circumspection as is to be expected for any such theory.<sup>163</sup> One suspects that Gilpin's comment arises less from of a misunderstanding of Ashley's discourse and more from an urge to safeguard IR theory from a disciplinary intrusion by discourse more prevalent in the humanities, political theory prime among them.

This is exactly why all efforts must be maintained to ensure that new critical approaches continue to flourish in the disciplinary literature; frivolous or not. For theoretical progress can only come with the willingness to accept that however elegant a theory may be—and the staying power and influence of Realism attests to its overwhelming elegance—it may sooner or later become highly disputatious, as the voluminous collection of anti-Realist critical literature suggests. While the remaining

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<sup>162</sup> George, *Discourses of Global Politics*, quoted from "Thinking Beyond IR: Critical Theory," n. 13.

<sup>163</sup> On these points a couple of excellent works are worth noting here. See Howard Williams, *International Relations and the Limits of Political Theory*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. See also, Charles R. Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979.

elegance of Realist theories appears to be challenged not only by the course of real-world events but by those who make up the disciplinary community of scholars, the unwillingness to accept that other approaches might have something of value to offer in terms of knowledge often appears (see above) as much more a sign of anti-intellectual dogmatism than it does of the scholarly value of the theory.

This is not to say that Realist theory has not changed faces to accommodate valid theoretical challenges. The variants of Realism in the form of neo-Realism, neo-Liberalism, hegemonic stability theory, regime theory, and interdependence suggest some level of theoretical malleability. However, neither of these variants pose a real threat to the ontological or epistemological assumptions of Realism. That is, the primacy of power politics, of anarchy, and sovereignty and the research generated by them are left standing. Post-positivist critiques attack the very core of Realist assertions, by transgressing the boundaries of the international politics established by Realism, but are "expanding at the margins without, however, significantly affecting the centre."<sup>164</sup> The centre here is represented by the binary logic of the metaphysical realism alluded to in the previous chapter, the "structuring of paired opposites that at once differentiates one term from another, prefers one to the other, and arranges them hierarchically, displacing the subordinate term beyond the boundary of what is significant and desirable."<sup>165</sup> Of course, the most significant binary relations in the discipline of IR theory are the foundational one, fact/value, the epistemological one subject/object, and the disciplinary hierarchy

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<sup>164</sup> V. Spike Peterson, "Transgressing Boundaries: Theories of Knowledge, Gender and International Relations," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 21(2), Summer 1992, 184.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

**Realism/idealism. The steadfastness of Realists to cling to these dichotomies appears to those on these "margins", voices which have not been taken seriously in the formation of IR discourse, as a disciplinary wall that opens its door only to those speaking the language of those on the inside.**

**But who is to say that the Realist approach is a more justifiable one if there appears to be reasonable arguments that it is not? For Karl Popper, the honesty of any theoretical hypothesis is determined by the extent to which it could provide the conditions for its own refutation.<sup>166</sup> Whether or not one agrees with Popper, the plethora of theoretical challenges and the responses they elicit in defending against them attest to the intellectually stifling manner in which Realist positivism resists the meta-theoretical urge to offer theories that do not accept the naturalist assumptions implied in this approach. As George notes "[positivist empiricism] cannot by its own metatheoretical logic allow for a non-empiricist alternatives because, whatever else such alternatives represent, they cannot by empiricist definition represent 'real' knowledge of the world 'out there'."<sup>167</sup> The resistance implied in clinging to this naturalist, essentialist view of the human lifeworld stifles the development of theoretical progress since it inherently assumes that the kinds of inter-subjective, social, linguistic, rationalistic bases of what the West has called "knowledge" and which new critical approaches are attempting to account for in theories of international politics, are invalid. As is often the case with theoretical constructions based on an inductive accrual of laws and generalisations, the propensity of Realism is**

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<sup>166</sup> See Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*.

<sup>167</sup> George, "Of Incarceration and Closure," 207.

not to seek out instances which refute its theoretical propositions, but rather to seek out instances which merely confirm the assertions of the theory. Thus, "our propensity to look out for regularities, and to impose laws upon nature, leads to the psychological phenomenon of *dogmatic thinking* or, more generally dogmatic behaviour: we expect regularities everywhere and attempt to find them even where there are none; events which do not yield to these attempts we are inclined to treat as a kind of 'background noise'; and we stick to our expectations even when they are inadequate and we ought to accept defeat."<sup>168</sup>

The empiricist trap,<sup>169</sup> which intellectually chains the scholarly gaze to the vistas of an "objective" world, leads the so-called Realists into an anti-scholarly procrusteanism as they ignore or trivialise evidence that does not confirm the "realities" implied by their ontologies, and as they ignore or discount alternatives out of hand that refuse to 'speak the same language' (a language with which they do not concur) of the theory they seek to refute. The fallibilism implied in Popper's conjectural approach to theory is a useful exemplar of what a theorist of international politics must always assume: that a particular theory may be useful today, but it may not be so tomorrow, in so far as useful is taken to mean that it does not account for the intersubjective beliefs that shape intellectual, social, and political life and foster better practice. It has been the assertion all along that the Realist's aversion to questioning the nature of "facts" as they pertain to theory construction painfully detracts from the premise that theory aims at resolving dilemmas

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<sup>168</sup> Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 49.

<sup>169</sup> Or, what George has referred to as the "empiricist metaphysic" in "Of Incarceration and Closure." On this point see also Chapter 2 of this examination.

in practice in the real world, or rather, that inquiry is an intellectual response to changing contexts that render old theories and practices and ways of dealing with the world ineffective.

The justificatory epistemological discourses of Realist theory are therefore in need of a body of critical discourse in order to de-legitimise the authority of its epistemological, but more importantly, its ontological assumptions. For, the Realist epistemology has, "[taken] historically specific-modern-ontological options as given. The spatial framing of the relation between an autonomous subject set apart from the objective world is especially crucial, for it resonates with the same modernist dichotomies that have been reified so smoothly within claims about state sovereignty and political realism. Epistemologies that simply affirm these dichotomies are not obviously the most appropriate place from which to investigate a world in which boundaries are so evidently shifting and uncertain."<sup>170</sup> Generally speaking, the critical notion of "theoretical reflexivity" essential to critical approaches very much infuses the discipline with the pragmatic spirit of theoretical fallibilism, theory as practice, and a disavowal for the fact/value dichotomy assumed by Realists to distinguish their theories from utopian ones. Realist critics have brought into the discipline the Hegelian notion of theory as 'critique' and have sought to replace Realism with "an on-going process of 'theoretical reflection on the process of theorising itself'", emphasising the "creative role of human consciousness," and engaging "in social criticism in support of practical political activity

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<sup>170</sup> Walker, *Inside/Outside*, 8.

oriented toward societal transformation."<sup>171</sup> Critical IR theories are a welcome first step in loosening the grip of the typical Western epistemological conception of knowledge as "objective" knowledge, which permeates Realist IR theory, but there are many problems with seeing theory as "transformative" or "emancipatory," since this entails more dogmatic, un-pragmatic thinking.

Critical IR theorists have shown how the dominance of the Realist paradigm has fostered practices of domination and subjugation along the lines of Western, modern, technical rationalism, thus evoking the Heideggerian critique of the modern tendency to conceive of truth and power as dominance and subjugation. Such an approach precludes the recognition of "other" agents whose own identities, epistemologies, and ontologies may conflict, complement, or add to one's own. Not only does this limit the extent of practically-oriented theory, but so too does it limit the ability of creative or imaginative action as the professed homogeneity of states and the framework of anarchy prevent the state, "within this general framework...from [having] any hope that through the actions it takes, or refrains from taking, it may succeed in transforming the wider context."<sup>172</sup> In constructing an epistemological world view based on the notion of 'the world' as object and creating a privileged space for empirical analyses based on this world view, the discipline of international relations becomes irrevocably time-bound to the self-images of the historical context in which the theory and method were devised. In the meantime,

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<sup>171</sup> Mark Neufeld, *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 20.

<sup>172</sup> Jean Elshtain, "International Politics and Political Theory" in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, eds., *International Relations Theory Today*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, 276.



agents and identities interact leaving such theories unable to understand new developments and account for the recognition of unseen or marginalised agents calling forth new solutions or adjustments in practice. For as Elshtain notes, "the context for the conduct of international relations is not a world of thoroughgoing anarchy but, rather, a world laced through and through with historically constituted and reconstituted understandings, rules and notions about what is or is not a clear-cut (as opposed to a murky) occasion for reaction and response ranging from diplomacy to boycotts to war."<sup>173</sup> One would suspect, then, that a world so constituted would necessitate concomitant sea-changes in the way one thinks of world politics, or alternatively, at least foster a sense that theorising international relations is incommensurate with ontologies that suggest permanence rather than flux.

But this cannot be the assumption of positivists, and what has been asserted throughout this examination is that this is because of the metaphysics of an "object" which gives positivism its methodological *raison d'être*. Post-positive critics of Realist theory reject this assertion, believing the converse, that theorising is permeated with normative intent, the most prominent of intentions being a commitment to self-conscious development. Furthermore, there is the fundamental belief noted above in the comments of Smith and Elshtain that maintaining a disciplinary attachment to positivism is to encourage benign neglect and perpetuate unsavoury practices which are justified by the gloss of the "necessities" of world politics. Such is the proclivity given the Realist separation of ethics from politics, which is furthered by the instantiation of a repudiated

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

scientific methodology as a means to understand world politics. This is in keeping with the initial theoretical impulse to theorise at the level of facts, which as Carr lamented, removes an important aspect of political analysis, that of judgement.<sup>174</sup> It is this notion of ethico-normative judgement, implicit in all theories, which the Critical IR critics purport to inscribe upon the epistemological regimen of IR theorists. In so doing, it is their assumption that these critical epistemological practices will lead to better practices in the lifeworld.

In bringing this new critical perspective to international relations, thinkers such as Richard Ashley have incorporated the Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas whose philosophical-ethical aim is to overcome the dominance of instrumental rationality over other "knowledge constitutive interests."<sup>175</sup> Ashley identifies three such interests each of which, "as general cognitive interests, delineate viewpoints from which the constitution of knowledge is guided."<sup>176</sup> Practical cognitive interests focus on intersubjective knowledge, technical cognitive interests focus on control over the objective environment, and emancipatory cognitive interests are interested in "securing freedom from 'hypostatized forces'....[and] is the knowledge-guiding interest of all critically oriented sciences."<sup>177</sup> Identifying Morgenthau as a practical realist and Waltz as a technical realist,

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<sup>174</sup> And it should be emphasised that I do not speak of *moral* judgement, but other kinds of theoretical judgement to determine the extent to which a theory reflects the intersubjective beliefs of the time. In order to deliberate there must be some standard of judgement which itself can only be understood as arising in a community (of scholars, citizens, doctors etc.).

<sup>175</sup> See Richard Ashley, "Realism and Human Interests" .

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

the main thrust of his argument is the assertion that "within the technical aspect of realism, as in positivist reconstructions of science, the background intersubjective understandings that go into the making of theory are not to be systematically interpreted or criticised."<sup>178</sup> In a manner similar to Thomas Kuhn, Ashley highlights the extent to which all theories are a product, in some degree or other, of numerous intersubjective agreements which permeate everything from the problems looked at, the methods used, and the procedures which ultimately determine whether a theory is accepted or rejected. A critical position seeks to make all the subjective elements of this process the subject of critique, since it has been common practice in the West to accept uncritically the *scientific* method as yielding the most epistemological fruit.

This is in keeping with the arguments developed by Jürgen Habermas and the Critical Theory school mentioned in Chapter one. In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas asserts that positivism, as the accepted methodology of the human sciences, is only one element in the total process of human development, but one which has nonetheless presided over all other methods of knowledge and human progress, "thus positivism could forget that the methodology of the sciences was intertwined with the objective self-formative process (Bildungsprozess) of the human species and erect the absolutism of pure methodology on the basis of the forgotten and repressed."<sup>179</sup> The influence of positivism in Western epistemological thinking has its origins in the work of Comte, whose positivism sought to erect a means through which science would be

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>179</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 5.

protected from epistemological self reflection.<sup>180</sup> It was in the nineteenth century that scientific knowledge and the methodology of positivism began to take precedence over concerns about moral progress and self-reflective knowledge which were subsequently marginalised as being on the fringes of knowledge or being written off altogether as useless metaphysics. This popular line of thought provoked many subsequent Western thinkers, Marx the most important of them, to develop theories which purported to discern the precepts of the human condition "scientifically" (methodologically), even if they were aimed at eventual liberation. Part of Habermas' project in this work and much more systematically in his later works on discourse ethics, is to reinstate the validity of rationalist theoretical practices that are ontologically rooted in the Enlightenment project of emancipation, and to reverse ethically the hegemony of positivism, which has led the Western world to unwittingly favour epistemology (its practices of knowledge) over ontology (its emancipatory interests). The first step in seeing this project through however, is relinquishing the notion that methodology can be objective, and to see theories as subject to critical reflection, in order to reveal epistemological assumptions that enhance oppressive practices in the social lifeworld.

The adoption of Critical Theory by many IR theorists is symptomatic of a very significant problem for theory in the social sciences in general and international politics in particular. IR has been dominated by a single strain of thinking in which "the more far reaching epistemological problems posed by those who seek to understand what is involved in making knowledge claims about social and political processes have been

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 67.

pushed aside in favour of even more restricted concerns about method and research techniques"<sup>181</sup> Moreover, Realism has adopted a kind of thinking about international politics that disingenuously and insidiously implies that action and interests are a product of anarchic structures rather than political objectives, and that analysis must not impute any other than rational/instrumental goals to actors. This is in keeping with the strategy typical of other social sciences such as economics (the most successful of them all), where the subjectivity of the actors is assumed away and the field of inquiry is instead objectified to protect analysis from normative or value-driven approaches. Such an approach represents an erroneous attempt to remove the notion of agency from theory and in so doing, removes the agent from practice as well. As noted in the last chapter, however, there is an inexorable link between values and theory and between these and practice.

In so far as the post positive critiques expose the flaws in empiricist analysis and the extent to which such an approach encourages a collective blindness to the limits of theory and practice this engenders, the Critical Theory oriented critiques, and the "theoretical reflexivity" they adopt, represent a pragmatic shift in IR thinking. They do so because they implicitly perpetuate the view that theories are both fallible and context dependent, and are more compatible with the notion that theories are a mere reflection of prevailing intersubjective beliefs about what is good theory and how such theory allows one to understand practice in light of a theory. This implicitly assumes in many ways that the theoretical edifice upon which the world is understood is subject to revision

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<sup>181</sup> Walker, *Inside/Outside*, 81.

whenever shifts in beliefs occur about what made a particular theoretical viewpoint "true" in more ways than others. It thus represents the "democratisation of inquiry" necessary for a truly intersubjective approach to knowledge, and has the seeds of a greater propensity toward taking all identities seriously by engaging in an "open conversation"<sup>182</sup> rather than discoursing within the closed context constructed by positivism. In international relations theory this is essential as forgotten or marginalised agents appear and demand recognition in international politics and in theories about international politics. This can only be done if the act of theorising is constantly oriented to the incorporation of intersubjectivity and to the notion that inquiry is seen as a value in itself. Theorising is an ethical practice, aimed at achieving practical goals; "when we allow inquiry to be democratised simply because doing so helps us achieve those practical goals, we are engaged in goal-oriented activity ... [and] even when we are engaged in goal oriented activity we also are guided by norms of rationality which have become terminal values for us."<sup>183</sup> That the act of theory and the norms that regulate it are value-laden is what critical IR theories are helping the discipline to see, and in so doing, they are chipping away at the privileged context, identities, and narrow practices encouraged by the Realist attachment to empiricism and positivism.

*The New Wine in an Old Metaphysical Bottle: Constructing an 'Emancipatory' Context*

The above discussion hinted on a couple of occasions that a slight exception was

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<sup>182</sup> See V. Spike Peterson, "Introduction."

<sup>183</sup> Putnam, "Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity," 173.

taken with the extent to which critical IR theory's "transformative" aims were widened to mean more than a meta-theoretical transformation away from positivism, but were meant as a shift toward emancipatory theory. The rest of this analysis centres around a discussion of the problems of such an emancipatory approach to theory in international relations. Many of the theorists oriented to the tenets of "theoretical reflexivity" have done so in a manner which is contrary to the pragmatic approach being offered here, and in fact, such approaches represent something of a regression given the unsavoury practices championed in the name of "reason" in this and earlier centuries. While the range of thinkers and the theoretical pedigrees from which they derive are varying, in general these theorists cling to the Enlightenment notion of knowledge as progressive in so far as it is liberating, and are suspicious of the dearth of emancipatory discourse in international relations. To some extent it is troubling that much of the epistemological critiques, developments in theories of language and discourse, and the anti-foundational trends in thinking that underscore intellectual movements in this century have failed to make their mark on the unfolding discourse in international relations theory. The wave of critical IR theory is attempting to make up for this unacceptable absence, but much of it is doing so in a fashion which merely propagates the foundationalist, rationalist, a-temporal tendencies of Western epistemology which plague Realism.

One of the problems with the post-positivist debates in IR theories is that the problem of "incommensurability"— the sense in which there is no common language

through which holders of competing theoretical positions (or paradigms) can communicate<sup>184</sup>—has a stifling effect on reasoned debate. For those who adhere to incommensurability as a stumbling block, the problem is that there is no vantage point from which either of the theoretical competitors could be judged; that there is "no algorithm of theory choice"<sup>185</sup> and hence, the divide between Realists and critical IR theorists is irreconcilable. To speak of such incommensurabilities is highly mistaken in a discourse over a theory of politics. That exponents of the two competing theoretical paradigms, the Realist and emancipatory critical IR approaches, can engage and understand the other's point of view suggests that only a dogmatic unwillingness to come to terms with the dogmatic elements of their respective theoretical premises prevents them from seeing the middle way out of the dilemma, which, as has been suggested here, begins with the pragmatic tossing aside of the foundationalism inherent in the two approaches.

The intellectual divide between Realists and critical IR theorists is similar to other debates in politics and philosophy this century, and it appears as though IR theorists are now forced to choose to hang their intellectual hat on either of these two poles, or alternatively, flee to the relativism of the post-modernists. The ontological rift between the Realists and the emancipatory critical IR theorists demonstrates unequivocally that the discipline is mired in what Bernstein refers to as "Cartesian anxiety"; a philosophical

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<sup>184</sup> For example See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, especially chapters IX and X; Neufeld, *Restructuring of International Relations Theory*, pps. 50-57; Putnam, "Two Conceptions of Rationality," pps. 114-119. The notion of incommensurability will appear in the next chapter of this examination.

<sup>185</sup> See Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.



world view which leads to a fruitless search for foundations of knowledge and an algorithm through which to validate and reject theories.<sup>186</sup> As Griffiths notes, "philosophical idealism and realism both start with Cartesian dualism, but 'resolve' the antinomy by fleeing to opposite extremes."<sup>187</sup> Realist theory has its origins in a flight to the side of "reality" in response to the plethora of so-called utopian images of the world which marred prudent diplomatic practice in the earlier part of this century. And the "reality" that is commonly accepted by Realists as the arena in which international politics is supposed to take place is as much a subject of scepticism as are any theories about such a reality. Critical and post-modern approaches have been instrumental in identifying the ways in which Western thinking about knowledge has obfuscated the extent to which knowledge practices are by their very nature an ethical activity which can indirectly and systematically marginalise both individual human beings and unique events when the impulse to understand provokes one to rely on over-simplified methods and permanent pictures of reality.

The problem is that emancipatory critical IR theorists do not stop at the argument that theories and thought are context dependent or that Realist ontological commitments impose a meta-theoretical distortion of "reality." There is a tendency to contribute to the same epistemological dichotomies as the Realists, by implicitly accepting the fact/value relation, but preferring to theorise entirely about the normative dimension of "reality." This encourages a descent into the same rationalist/modernist epistemological trap as

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<sup>186</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983, 23.

<sup>187</sup> Griffiths, *Realism, Idealism, and International Politics*, 23.

Realists. In this case however, a prototypical emancipatory theorist is a disembodied agent, "[who] has fully distinguished himself from the natural and social worlds, so that his identity is no longer to be defined in terms of what lies outside him in these worlds."<sup>188</sup> It appears that they do not take to heart the caveats offered in the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Heidegger about the contingency of language, and hence (by implication) of the temporality of notions of "progress," "reality," or "emancipation." In other words, the Critics assume that in the act of critique, one can do so as if it were possible to step beyond the boundaries of one's social milieu and posit "alternative" concepts, languages and assertions that are somehow distinct from the current understandings of reality.<sup>189</sup> In spite of the more intersubjective revisions of the discourse ethicists, there is still the faith that reason is related more to universality than it is stuck in contingency; that reason can somehow detach itself from the present once one engages in dialogical norm debate. While it is easy to see how Realist theories can be accused of adherence to such a "detached" notion of the knowing agent, since positive theory appears to express few doubts about the status of observations which merely *describe* the "object" of international politics, the ontological commitments of these emancipatory critical IR theorists' are much more nuanced. It is the rootedness to some kind of "normative world" to which emancipatory discourse appeals for rational justification that strikes the

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<sup>188</sup> Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology" in *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 195, 7.

<sup>189</sup> For example, Mervyn Frost, (in "The Role of Normative Theory in IR," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23(1), 1994) is critical of an approach to social analysis adopted by Justin Rosenberg who extols the use of C. Wright Mills' *Classic Social Analysis* as a normative basis for IR theory, because of he "maintains that the sociological investigation of the problem can be carried out in an objective way..." 111. See also Justin Rosenberg, "The International Imagination: IR Theory and 'Classic Social Analysis'," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23(1), 1994.

pragmatist as an odd theoretical twist in response to current dilemmas that give inquiry its intellectual impetus.

In this, emancipatory critical IR theorists' imply that in abandoning the Realist uses of positivism to deduce theories of power politics and anarchy as the immutable elements of international political life, that their rationally determined "alternative" world view posited on the basis of Enlightenment moral imperatives of justice and emancipation represents a more reasonable assertion about the direction of world politics. This assertion, in keeping with the Western Enlightenment, brings with it a Kantian and Hegelian melange which conceives of morality and knowledge as appropriated reflexively, justified intersubjectively, and unfolding in the lifeworld through successive stages of history. Their problem with Realist theory is not just that its positivist attachments to anarchy, instrumental power, and sovereignty limit the disciplinary reception of critical approaches that seek to broaden the scope of theory and practice, but that these discursive constructions, especially sovereignty, limit the extent to which international politics is seen by theorists as a single social system, or "global polis,"<sup>190</sup> prone to the same kinds of emancipatory social movements in domestic politics. For example,

The starting point for critical international theory is to question the legitimacy of those institutions and practices that define identities or communities against others and, as a consequence, implicitly devalue outsiders. The sovereign state, as an example of this exclusion par excellence, necessarily becomes the prime target. As one of the strongest exclusionary forces in world politics it remains a considerable barrier to universal emancipation [sic]....the [problem] is that the sovereign state is based on the assumption that 'politics is impossible without enclosure'...Such enclosure restricts the development of community thereby preventing emancipation. Universal emancipation would involve the replacement

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<sup>190</sup> See Neufeld, *Restructuring of IR Theory*.

of such exclusionary social relations by inclusionary ones.<sup>191</sup>

As has been suggested numerous times throughout this examination, there is a problem both with the nature in which Realism inherently asserts that international politics is not subject to social/political analysis in a like fashion as domestic politics,<sup>192</sup> and with the manner in which sovereignty is a concept that discursively limits the recognition of identity and agency in the theorising and in the practice of international politics. There is much sympathy for the viewpoint of social constructivists who assert that agents and the social space in which they interact are mutually constitutive, and that the norms that make these social relations possible and orderly are to a great extent defined and abstracted away through the definitional use of concepts of anarchy and sovereignty.<sup>193</sup> Understanding this cannot easily be done within the narrow inside/outside parameters of Realist positivism, nor can there be much serious discussion of the manner in which national identity affects and is affected by their relation to other such states.<sup>194</sup> So there is no opposition with either the premise of such theories or with the first two sentences of the statement above.

But why the need for the critique of the Realist conception of sovereignty as based in its obstruction to emancipation? Does one necessarily require the moral predicates of "justice" or "emancipation" to see the discursive methodological negations of identity and

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<sup>191</sup> Devetak, "The Project of Modernity and International Relations Theory," 39.

<sup>192</sup> That is, there is a problem that politics is divisible into mutually exclusive spheres, which is here taken to be an extraordinarily ludicrous assertion.

<sup>193</sup> See Biersteker and Weber, "The Social Construction of State Sovereignty". On the limits of a definitional use of concepts, see Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," which was discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>194</sup> See R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside*.

difference inherent in positivism as perpetuating substandard theoretical and real world practices? It has been the assertion here that theoretical justification and critique needs nothing other than the firm footing of the intersubjective basis which makes any theory 'true' in the first place. As has been asserted here, the aim of inquiry is to discern or "recontextualise" the extent to which theories as idealised justifications confirm or contradict the intersubjective beliefs about what it is being talked about—in this case, the extent to which inherited theories about international politics are still justifiable in the context in which humans currently live and act.<sup>195</sup> If there are identities and agents that are excluded from the debate, which the concept of sovereignty indirectly does, then the apparent intersubjectivity of any theory and the practices fostered by it are subject to dispute. In so far as critical international theory seeks to "reinstate the *project of modernity* as the framework for international relations theory,"<sup>196</sup> it is unacceptable as an alternative theoretical "framework" to the Realists' use of positivism as the framework of its international politics, because it too sets out to permanently situate thought and action within the narrow boundaries implied in "project of modernity," and clings to the Truth that such a project actually exists.

The problem with such a world view is not that its *ethical* position that knowledge is aimed at better practice cannot be justified—it is the implicit assumption that it is justifiable<sup>197</sup>—but rather, the manner in which such a position is still in need of an

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<sup>195</sup> See Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualisation."

<sup>196</sup> Devetak, "The Project of Modernity," 40. Emphasis added.

<sup>197</sup> In so far as the notion of an ethical approach to theory is limited to "better practice," a notion which is identified as reasonable by the community, not according to a particular ontological commitment.

ontological assumption of Truth as a regulative and justificatory ideal and a language which is independent of the social context from which the critique is generated.<sup>198</sup> It is the assumption of a *particular*, Western teleological road map to which global human progress conforms which strikes the writer as a rather unsavoury position for those committed to the act of constant critique. How can one be sure that there are not *competing* teleological road maps, and whose is better? This, ironically, is what precipitated the flight into "objectivity" in the discipline in the first place, in spite of the deeply spirited critical/pragmatic content in the exegetical remarks of Morgenthau and Carr. Today, the corpus of emancipatory critical IR theory has weakened the theoretical dominance of Realism, but has not weakened, or rather, eased the fundamental split between those who conceive of knowledge as rooted either in Truth as factual/objective/innocuous or as inscrutably value-oriented/ subjective/ transformative.

This Truth behind emancipatory approaches to IR is not empirically observable, but rather, is representationally given to the mind and appropriated reflexively; an epistemological position, which as noted above, forgets the contingency of agency and language in so far as the emancipatory thinker is capable of removing herself from the world in order to come up with assertions about it. Such an approach fosters a kind of

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<sup>198</sup> See Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*. With respect to the Realist-Relativist split, two ends of a dichotomous view of knowledge that Putnam seeks to refute, he notes, "Relativism, just as much as Realism, assumes that one can stand within one's own language and outside it at the same time. In the case of Realism this is not an immediate contradiction, since the whole content of Realism lies in the claim that it makes sense to think of a God's Eye View (or, better, of a "View from Nowhere"; but in the case of Relativism it constitutes a self-refutation," 23. This particular argument is instrumental to understanding the rift between Realists and those who advocate "theoretical pluralism" as in and of itself a virtue for the discipline even as they offer alternative world views which implicitly, but most often explicitly, polemicise against Realism's world view. One must ask, why is one standpoint better than the other? Both sides have no answer for this question.

thinking that neglects the fact of agents in the world who "have to come to grips with it, experiment, set ourselves to observe, control conditions. But in all this, which forms the indispensable basis of theory, we are engaged as agents coping with things. ... [and] once we make this point, then the entire epistemological position is undermined. Obviously foundationalism goes, since our representations of things...are grounded in the way we deal with those things."<sup>199</sup> It is the assertion here that both the Realist and emancipatory IR critics do not account for the fact of the theorist's agency in an intersubjective community as having a profound affect upon the manner in which one approaches the problem of theorising a world to which one's life is intimately bound. This affects what one deems to be a "good approach" to theory, and allows one to say with some degree of confidence that "indeed, this is a legitimate hypothesis." Alternatively, this intersubjective notion of reasonableness proscribes the "timeless" relevance any theory simply because such assertions mirror the manner in which a community (today) has agreed to solve its problems.

Contrary to this assertion, emancipatory IR approaches still believe that the object of inquiry remains as it does for the Realist: establishing the nature of the things theorised (or, alternatively, the nature of "reality") rather than trying to make sense of the manner in which agents think about and deal with the world. Alternatively, both Rorty and Taylor agree that understanding without understanding actively engaged agents as they interact with their environment, as Realist and emancipatory critics forget, is meaningless once new contexts and problems confront old epistemological/ontological images of the world.

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<sup>199</sup> Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," 11.

This therefore necessitates a corrective in one's thinking which sees theory as generating and justifying knowledge of intersubjective beliefs which hold our communities together. For Rorty, this means the search for "essences" needs to be dropped, and the aim of inquiry becomes a "reweaving of beliefs rather than a discovery of the natures of objects...a belief [being] what it is by virtue of its position in a web."<sup>200</sup> Again, this reweaving of beliefs must be based in intersubjectivity and in practice, but perforce can only be limited in its universal relevance to accommodate for the fact of other webs of belief in other communities.

The emancipatory project to counter neo-Realist empiricism, thus encourages a "rationalistic turn" as a means to glean the foundational Truths of international politics and infuse IR theory with a higher degree of normative discourse. Rengger notes that "to do what it needs to do (ie., identify those elements 'universal' to world order, etc) [Critical Theory] is dependent upon what Oakeshott calls rationalism."<sup>201</sup> In this the Western epistemological commitment to Truth as final and permanent is maintained, "a key aspect of the rationalist form of discourse,..is 'the Pursuit of the Ideal'...[which] must be foundationalist, at least to some degree."<sup>202</sup> Therefore, the commitment to a constant level of critical scrutiny regarding the normative epistemologies which may be rationally well-justified and contemporarily true, but which may inescapably become unjustifiable as new contexts foster a need for intellectual change to deal with them more practically, is

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<sup>200</sup> Richard Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualisation," 98.

<sup>201</sup> Nick Rengger, "Going Critical? A Response to Hoffman," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 17(1), 1988, 84.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.



undermined.

In reality, the emancipation-oriented theories merely offer the open minded IR theorist with an *amended* intellectual platform which claims to address ethically the ostensibly morally bereft shortcomings of Realism by retreating to a rationalistic alternative that accepts the political significance of framing the world, all the while continuing to anchor itself to a static, timeless notion of the Truth of world politics much like Realists. It is the argument here that a caveat needs to be placed in front of the emancipatory transformative goals; that is, one is equally capable of doing violence by presupposing that there is a *universal* truth of human history and acting internationally as if all were (or ought to be) subject to it. The emancipatory end, and the chains that bind the world over, which international theory ought to set out to solve, inevitably relies on a narrative history common to all. In constructing an emancipatory-cognitive epistemology, emancipatory critical IR theorists must remember that "all our conceptions may simply be historically contingent, that there is, in other words, nothing that is 'universal to world order' because there is nothing that is universal at all."<sup>203</sup> As Rorty notes,

The pragmatist utopia is thus not one in which human nature has been unshackled, but one in which everybody has had a chance to suggest ways in which we might cobble together world (or Galactic) [sic] society, and in which all such suggestions have been thrashed out in free and open encounters. We pragmatists do not think there is a natural "moral kind" coextensive with our biological species, one which binds together the French, the Americans, and the Cashinahua....For we think that there was nothing to emancipate, just as there was nothing which biological evolution emancipated as it moved along from the trilobites to the anthropoids. There is no human nature which was once, or still is, in chains. Rather, our species has—ever since it developed language—been

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 86.

making up a nature for itself. This nature has been developed through ever larger, richer, more muddled, and more painful syntheses of opposing values.<sup>204</sup>

While the fundamentals of emancipatory critiques of Realist epistemology are more than justified, the ontological commitment to Enlightenment progress and the universalist moral-transformative approach to theory it informs, are therefore highly problematic. Hidden in this tendency to make transcendental universal arguments with respect to justice and epistemology is mere ethnocentrism wrapped in a much more palatable moral veneer. Such theories are a product of the same kind of "metaphysical activism" as Realism. They are a constant and implicit attempt to justify a transcendental picture; a system of language practices that relates to a "fixed set of language-independent objects."<sup>205</sup> The positive contributions of these spirited approaches is wasted in an attempt to replace one ontology with another, more metaphysical, unjustifiable one. Just as the language of positivism has been convincingly repudiated as the means through which correspondence to a metaphysical reality is obtained, so too is the language of rationalism; even those who are procedurally ethical, democratic, and intersubjective, cannot justifiably claim to represent the permanent Truth grounding a community. For this too assumes that theories correspond to Truth, albeit a Truth more ethically justifiable because of its ostensible moral prerogatives. Once one abandons the notion that IR theory ought to have one privileged representation, however, then the dogmatic non-reflexive nature of disciplinary theoretical debates would become superfluous, and notions that only empirical

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<sup>204</sup> Richard Rorty, "Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 213.

<sup>205</sup> See Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, 27.

theories that correspond to the "real world" are acceptable theories would have little merit.

Emancipatory critical theorists, appear to have neglected this reality, tending to focus too much on positivism as the epistemological culprit rather than the metaphysical realism of Realists. By conflating, as Beate Jahn observes "the epistemological and methodological levels, [they] use the normative element of the former as a guiding principle of their theory [while] giving up the methodological requirements whose function is precisely to safeguard theory from this danger, they end up producing...the attempt to legitimately determine practical goals by thinking."<sup>206</sup> In other words the emancipatory critics apparently forget that "the context of justification" is as critical to theoretical debate as is a critical intent. Justification is what protects a discipline, from frivolous, polemic, and dogmatic treatises passing themselves off as knowledge—and maintaining a commitment to justification always keeps the conversation going. Thus, the "celebratory pattern" of theoretical plurality extolled by Lapid and other critical IR theorists, one which "celebrates the 'liberating' potential of the Babel of theoretical voices,"<sup>207</sup> is in serious need of qualification. Such a "celebratory pattern" does not appear to take into consideration the criticism that while their critiques of positivist epistemology may be winning more and more momentum among IR theory scholars, the question of justification is far from settled. The wave of post-modern IR literature appears to be very unmindful of Lapid's caveat that "methodological pluralism may deteriorate into a

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<sup>206</sup> Beate Jahn, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Critical Theory as the Latest Edition of Liberal Idealism", *Millennium, Journal of International Studies*, 27(3), Winter 1998, 623.

<sup>207</sup> Yosef Lapid, "The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era," *International Studies Quarterly*, 33(3), 1989, 238.

condition of [what Feyerabend would refer to as] epistemological anarchy under which almost any position can legitimately claim equal hearing."<sup>208</sup> Without bringing in the notion of justification into international relations theory, and here the post modernists must share the guilt, the sense of judgement and wisdom are forgone elements both in theory and in practice.

The modernist Enlightenment rationalism behind emancipatory approaches leads these theorists to the "empirical production of other epistemological approaches and, hence, [a reproduction of] the justification and mystifications of human unfreedom which these alternative approaches ... are bound to produce."<sup>209</sup> This leads them to produce theories which are posited as an alternative to existing societal relations,<sup>210</sup> derived merely through rationalistic speculation, which, lacking any kinds of justification, are as conjectural, platitudinous, and dogmatic as are any Realist empirical theories. For while the accusatory finger is pointed at the Realist for positing a "reality" based on a spurious objective world, such theorists put in its place "emancipatory projects" as the "real" basis not only of theory, but of politics proper. This is merely another discursive positing of an analytic Truth posed in opposition to the empirical (synthetic) truths represented by the Realist's objective world, which brings one back to Quine's notion of the "third dogma of empiricism."<sup>211</sup> Here one sees the classic case of a representationalist, correspondence

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>209</sup> Jahn, "One Step Forward," 627.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 623.

<sup>211</sup> See chapter 2 of this examination.

view of Truth rearing its ugly head again. What the divide between Realists and many critical IR theorists seems to hinge upon is how the world is represented. The question itself betrays the manner in which these theorists cling to the notion that the world has intrinsic features that are "better described by some of our terms rather than others."<sup>212</sup> What is being argued here is that representation of a "reality" or Truth is neither accomplished rationally as the emancipatory IR "scheme" nor is it comprised of intrinsic content as Realists and other empiricists would have it. This means that distinguishing between these two alternative ways of framing the world must start by "dropping the attempt to sort out propositions by whether they are 'made' true by 'the world' or by 'us'."<sup>213</sup> In other words, it is imperative that both Realists and Critical IR theorists cease with their quibbling about which of their approaches is best able to describe a world (or, a Truth).

Clearly this aptly describes the point of dispute between Realists and its emancipatory critics, and leads one to conclude that assertions of an "emancipatory project" to which knowledge is ontologically rooted and to which praxis (theory and practice) is oriented are the intellectual "schemes" of sophisticated minds attempting to justify a particular notion of the Truth of human history. Such theorising requires as much grand narrating as does the Realist assertion that anarchy, power, and sovereignty are the "content" of international politics. To the new brand of critically oriented minds in international politics, emancipatory critical theories are beginning to sound as compelling

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<sup>212</sup> Richard Rorty, "Charles Taylor on Truth," in *Truth and Progress, Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1998, 86.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

as Realist theory did to the Cold War oriented minds of scholars fifty years ago. Moreover (ironically), emancipatory IR theorists are exposed to arguments which rightfully warn that the emancipatory interests likely to prevail are Western emancipatory interests, spawning a scepticism similar to that shown by E.H. Carr over a half century ago that such theorising merely reproduces Western power structures the world over. The development of "soft power" theory by Joseph Nye (a Realist) appears to address the issue of power in a novel and more realistic fashion, accounting for how power and influence operate in an interdependent world at the socio-cultural level, rather than just at the level of *Realpolitik*.<sup>214</sup> It also speaks to the easy manner through which Western domination is possible in a world electronically wired together, and where borders do not abate the flow of information and knowledge from people to people. With respect to the spread of moral approaches then, Carr's caveat apparently still obtains today.

In other words, emancipatory IR theorists undermine their own emancipatory approach to knowledge by encouraging a universalist cultural approach to world politics which still does not fully recognise the existence of "other" identities. In so doing, they do not take the commitment to a truly intersubjective theory and to "better practice" seriously enough. The post-moderns address this but philosophically marginalise the extent to which identity is substantive and intersubjective by seeing it as just a discursively constructed phenomenon.<sup>215</sup> Emancipatory IR theorists do not appropriately treat the problem of justice as a matter that is left unsettled in the discourses of

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<sup>214</sup> See Joseph Nye, "The Changing Nature of World Power" in Charles Kegley Jr., Eugene Wittkopf, eds., *The Global Agenda*, 4th edition, McGraw-Hill, 1995.

<sup>215</sup> More will be said about the post-moderns in the following chapter.

philosophy and political theory from which their conception of emancipation, freedom, as well as rationality and truth are borrowed. To import debates over conceptions of justice and freedom and the epistemological debates they spawn into international politics without noting that they are essentially contested concepts debated between post-moderns, communitarians, and Critical Theorists—debates over how justice and freedom are nominally justified—merely assumes that the matter is settled. It forgets that the question of 'whose justice?' or 'which rationality?'<sup>216</sup> is a subject of debate within communities and is a matter with substantive implications for defining the identity of these communities. If one accepts the argument that the action and interaction of states in international politics is determined by the motives and intentions of substantive agents rather than determined by anarchic structures,<sup>217</sup> then one must be wary that the acceptance of a conception of justice or knowledge as "true" in international politics may merely perpetuate a kind of *cultural* dominance which is also "complicit in the creation and re-creation of international practices that threaten discipline and do violence to others."<sup>218</sup> This has major implications for the future conception and practice of human rights, the international court of justice, the spread of democracy world wide, and presents the discipline with a host of new complexities in dealing in an ethically responsible fashion with issues of sovereignty and intervention.

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<sup>216</sup> This concept was borrowed from an Alasdair MacIntyre book of the same name.

<sup>217</sup> See Naeem Inayatullah, David Blaney, "Knowing Encounters: Beyond Parochialism in International Relations Theory," in Yosef Lapid, Friedrich Kratochwil, eds., *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996.

<sup>218</sup> Quoted from Steve Smith, see n. 155.

These are issues for which the role of theory is vital, and only to the detriment of good practice does one rely upon single conceptions of Truth and conceptions of knowledge that do not take seriously the disparate voices of agents and the existence of multiple identities. It has been argued thus far that both Realism and emancipatory IR theories forward untenable solutions to the problem of theory and truth as a goal of inquiry. Indeed, that they believe that the problem has a solution is highly problematic. Regrettably, both theories have relinquished their initial pragmatic impulse which encourages democratic inquiry aimed at wisdom and imagination, choosing instead to construct edifices of Truth to which the theoretical gaze must be oriented. It has been suggested that this leads only to poor theoretical and real world practices. It has also been suggested that dispensing with the notion of a stable, permanent Truth as a regulative principle guiding knowledge is a significant step in working through the intellectual chasm encouraged by theoretical approaches stuck in their respective ontologies. This being done, the question might be asked, 'how does one proceed from here'? This shall be the subject of the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 4

### **Taking Theory Seriously: Pragmatism, Progress, and Theoretical Debate**

*When reading the works of an important thinker, look first for the apparent absurdities in the text and ask yourself how a sensible person could have written them. When you find an answer...when those passages make sense, then you may find that more central passages, ones you previously thought you understood have changed their meaning.*

Thomas Kuhn<sup>219</sup>

#### *Introduction*

The first three chapters of this examination of Realism and Critical IR theory have for the most part relied on a deconstructive technique in order to show how the pragmatic inclinations of both theoretical approaches have been pilfered by justifications of epistemologies rooted in a *particular* image of the world (ontologies). The point has been to show the flaws in how the two sides have chosen to engage the *question* of theory, and to demonstrate by implication, that perhaps there is a better way to approach the question of theory in international relations; one that does not however, assume that any resolution is indefinite. The question has plagued Western epistemology since at least Descartes, and has its roots in ancient Greece, namely, 'how does one make a true statement about a world which to some extent is hidden from us'? The assumptions in this are, of course, that there *is* a world, and that any true *statement* is subordinate to the Truth to which it is making an assertion about. This is the assumption inherent in the classic position of philosophical realism. With respect to this realism, Western thought has oscillated

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<sup>219</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, xii.

between scepticism and idealism about the extent to which "thought and language hook onto the world";<sup>220</sup> over how it is possible to verify or justify the extent of our intellectual approximations of this hidden reality, "in short, [debate hinges on the assertion] that some true statements which are fully intelligible to us may nevertheless be, as the point is widely expressed, evidence transcendent."<sup>221</sup> This leaves any theoretical community to its own devices to determine the extent of the truth-value of its conceptual and/or its epistemological systems.

It has been shown here that there is much virtue in the nature of the substantive critiques being offered by the surge of critical IR theory in the theoretical discourses. To a large extent, the fact of multiple theoretical approaches in IR is a good thing in so far as it thwarts disciplinary "attempts to establish an orthodoxy of a particular perspective or methodology."<sup>222</sup> This is because for the longest time the discipline of international relations theory was perplexingly satisfied with the Realist treatment of the question above: that there is *a* reality, and one can only make true statements about it by approaching knowledge empirically. Recently, this view has been challenged in the "Third Debate [which] is.. a consequence of a rapidly changing 'reality' and the failure of successive generations of inductionists to fulfil their promise of a genuinely cumulative body of knowledge."<sup>223</sup> Moreover, arguing in the previous chapters that the variety of

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<sup>220</sup> Putnam, "The Question of Realism," 297.

<sup>221</sup> Crispin Wright, *Realism, Meaning and Truth*, Second Edition, Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993, 1-2.

<sup>222</sup> Kai Holsti, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Which are the Fairest Theories of All?," *International Studies Quarterly*, 33(3), 1989, 256.

<sup>223</sup> Yale H. Ferguson, Richard W. Mansbach, "Between Celebration and Despair: Constructive Suggestions for Future International Theory," *International Studies Quarterly*, 35, December 1991, 364.

agents and identities give rise to a *variety* of 'realities' of world politics, "theoretical pluralism is the only possible response to the multiple realities of a complex world."<sup>224</sup> The Critical approaches in the 'Third Debate' have attempted to move the discipline away from the Realist conception of Truth and certainty into an acceptance of "what our fundamental attitude should be toward the prevailing condition of uncertainty".<sup>225</sup> The problem is that critical theories do so from a standpoint where the fact of a Realist picture of "the world" is less of a problem than are the content and method of getting to the picture. In the terms used previously, Enlightenment critical IR theory disingenuously uses the notion of theoretical fallibility<sup>226</sup> to defeat the Realist empiricist metaphysic only to subsequently construct an alternate metaphysical picture; thus showing some discomfort with theoretical uncertainty in the end.

It is argued here that the fact that "many schools of international theory contend but few genuinely communicate"<sup>227</sup> represents a hostility toward a genuine effort to take theory seriously once and for all. It is the resistance to take seriously Wittgenstein's profound philosophical advice that substantive answers to the question of theory cannot be discerned without a "willingness always to make the other's questions real for oneself"<sup>228</sup> that has led to the popularity of post-modernism in both political and IR theory. Post-moderns are rightly sceptical of the propensity to retreat into metaphysical

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<sup>224</sup> Holsti, "Mirror, Mirror," 256.

<sup>225</sup> Ferguson and Mansbach, "Between Celebration and Despair," 365.

<sup>226</sup> Which can synonymously be used for 'uncertainty'.

<sup>227</sup> Ferguson and Mansbach, "Between Celebration and Despair," 364.

<sup>228</sup> James Conant, "Introduction" in *Putnam, Realism With a Human Face*, liii.

enclaves in response to the question of the relation between theory and truth, but are far too quick to shrug off the important questions that give rise to the argument altogether. Furthermore, the unwillingness to take intersubjectivity and theoretical justification more seriously leads to the appearance of an ostensible "incommensurability" between Realist and critical IR theories. That there is an *argument* in the first place suggests that this is not the case, but a shared unwillingness to see truth as something that is justifiable, instead of either permanent or irrelevant, perpetuates intractable theoretical positions.

That said, the following is a philosophical justification for bringing IR theory back to the level of "common sense" in so far as this is taken to mean the manner in which judgements of the reasonableness or "truth" of theoretical statements are gauged by virtue of interlocutionary rather than epistemological forces, and by the extent to which they continue to relate to the everyday lives, to the *Lebenswelt*, of agents. Underlying this is the tenet that truth is neither hidden nor permanent, it is just what is justifiable given the values that shape the language, practices, and agents at any given historical moment. What must be done in order for the discipline to "progress" is to do away with the propensity to mediate our intellectual sense of judgement of the world through theoretical precipices that have led us to "lose our sense of the genuineness of our conviction in the reasonableness (or unreasonableness) or truth (or falsity) of certain actions or claims."<sup>229</sup> In short, the point of this approach is to keep the *question* of theory constantly alive.

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<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, I.

## *The Philosophical Realism in IR Theory*

Meta-theoretical differences between Realists and their critical counterparts hinge around the extent to which Realists make theoretical assertions about the "reality" of world politics and the converse sense in which Critical IR theorists of all stripes<sup>230</sup> see the act of making true statements about "reality" as inexorably linked with a normative urge to make way for a more liberating human condition (or freer world). What has been thus far left unsaid is the extent to which the controversy mirrors that of a debate over philosophical realism.<sup>231</sup> While a full discussion of these debates is well beyond the purview of this examination, it is extraordinarily useful to approach theoretical debates in IR theory from this perspective to get some sense of why the two sides appear to be supposedly "incommensurable" and why post-modern approaches to IR theory have become so attractive to scholars who are sceptical of the Realist position. It has been the underlying intent of this entire examination to demonstrate the manner in which Realists and critical IR theorists have been iterating two conceptions of Truth; to denote the sense in which either side advocates two distinct sides of a philosophical realist position.<sup>232</sup> Crispin Wright aptly locates the problem of realism:

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<sup>230</sup> Even the postmoderns, who prefer to leave their epistemological assumptions unsaid, disdain "knowledge practices" as True because of the ways in which these have led to unfree practices in society. They just prefer not to offer a "more free" theoretical method of knowing truth in the same manner as the critical theorists. This is the point of departure for the two 'dissident' theories.

<sup>231</sup> It should be noted here that Realism with the upper case 'R' denotes IR realism, while the lower case realism denotes the philosophical realism.

<sup>232</sup> I have used the notion of Truth to imply this argument, for simplicity, since what is understood in theoretical debates over Truth is much more widely apprehended than what is understood by debates over philosophical realism and anti-realism. Suffice it to say, however, it is a non-relativist anti-realism that is being supported here.

**Realism is a mixture of modesty and presumption. It modestly allows that humankind confronts an objective world, something almost entirely not of our making, possessing a host of occasional features which may pass altogether unnoticed by human consciousness and whose innermost nomological secrets may remain hidden from us. However, it presumes that we are by and large and in favourable circumstances capable of acquiring knowledge of the world and understanding it. Two sorts of ability are thereby credited to us: the ability to form the right concepts for the classification of genuine, objective features of the world; and the ability to come to know, or at least reasonably believe, true statements about the world whose expression those concepts make possible.<sup>233</sup>**

**The nature of the antagonism between Realists and Enlightenment critical IR theory is similar in kind to the divide between the sceptical and idealist ends of the philosophical realist spectrum. Realist IR theorists side with realist sceptics who "agree that our investigative efforts confront an autonomous world, that there are truths not of our making. But he disputes that there is ultimately any adequate warrant for regarding our routine investigative practices as apt to issue in knowledge of, or reasonable belief about the world...the sceptic disputes that we have any reasonable basis for our confidence that we can so much as conceptualise the world as it really is."<sup>234</sup> Naturally, this scepticism with respect to the human capacity to come up subjectively with substantive conceptualisations of the world is the prime basis of positivism, and the belief that a method of filtering out the mind from the process of making true statements about international politics has been the mantra of Realism ever since Carr and Morgenthau. Conversely, Enlightenment IR critics, as idealist realists, think that the Realist realism "is founded on a misunderstanding of the nature of truth. It is an error to think of our investigations as confronting an objective array of states of affairs which are altogether**

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<sup>233</sup> Wright, 1.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

independent of our modes of conceiving and investigative enterprises. No truth is altogether 'not of our making.' Rather reality is ...a reification of our own cognitive nature, with no more claim to autonomy than a mirror image."<sup>235</sup>

There is much reason to be highly critical of the metaphysics implied in this consistent realist belief in an "objective" world. That Realism and Critical theory seem to be talking about two different worlds stems from the fact that the former have chosen the scientific realist position which sees only the "content" of reality, what one can clearly observe, as offering true knowledge of a world, while Enlightenment IR critics have chosen to rely on conceptual "schemes" as offering glimpses of Truth. Starting from these metaphysical positions it comes as no initial surprise that these theories are incapable of speaking to one another, because they do not really speak about the world in which we live. This is a product of "the pressure to know, which leads us to legitimate forms of knowledge, is one that also leads us into metaphysical confusion....stretching our ordinary concepts out to a point where they cease any longer to have an application."<sup>236</sup> The articulation of a concept in itself is not necessarily to be condemned, but the striving for genuine knowledge must always abide by the tenets of the profound ethical imperatives implicit in the urge 'to know,' which seem always to get lost somewhere in abstraction. Theoretical elegance and disciplinary professionalisation have indeed got the best of the international scholar's sense of the everyday orientation of theory. What else can one make of such 'things' as anarchy, sovereignty, emancipation, and structure? How do the

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> James Conant, "Introduction" to Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, xlvii.

**theories of Realism and Critical IR theory relate to the shared experiences of those whose lives are bound to the world about which they purport to speak? Who are the theories talking about if not human beings in a world?**

**This is the problem with IR discourse as it is seen here. Many critics in the discipline have noticed, with rightful consternation, the sense in which the dominant Realist theory has rarely ever questioned the sense in which the assertion of an existing "reality"—constituted by anarchy, power, and sovereign states—and the assertion of a non-subjective manner in which to apprehend it are not so abundantly fruitful in really getting at the human element in matters of international politics. But in their dissatisfaction with Realism they tend to fall into the same trap<sup>237</sup> by seeing theoretical assertions as having to be assertions about a "reality" and, much worse, doing so with the insinuation that the Realist picture is "wrong" (morally and epistemologically) in so far as it proceeds positivistically to show this picture. These positions have been presented in previous chapters. The point here is to shed some perspective on the bleak future prospects for IR theory as a result of theoretical engagements between two metaphysical theories.**

**The first point of note is the extent to which these theories do not really engage one another at all. How could they? They aren't talking about the same "picture," which seems strange to one who might ask with some confusion, 'but are we not talking about the same world?' or perhaps more succinctly, 'are we not *living* in the same world'? The urge "to know" about the world has led IR theorists to reproduce a common Western**

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<sup>237</sup> Which I have previously called the 'empiricist trap,' see Chapter Three.



mistake: to construct an epistemological platform that is entirely based in a particular metaphysical picture of the world. From these platforms assertions of 'real' knowledge are launched. In previous chapters the initial pragmatic impulse of both Realism and Critical IR theories was located by pointing to the sense in which both approaches arose out of some dissatisfaction with existing ways of looking at the world. And for the most part the dissatisfaction sprung out of the flaws in *practice* promoted by current theoretical fashions. But as the proponents proceeded to expose the fallibility of the prominent theoretical images of the day, they concomitantly contrived another unique picture of the world to serve as a basis of their theory.

Today the two sides, Realism and Critical IR theory, argue from disparate vantage points whose internal logic seems to forbid taking the other side's view seriously. The only kind of 'debate' that is possible in such a scenario is one of assertion and counter assertions about essences and realities rather than an attempt to see how theoretical propositions, words, and concepts actually play out in the world. It is the goal of the approach encouraged here to stop the two sides from "shrugging off" the other and to see "that the brilliant thinkers who propound such theories are in the grip of an intellectual yearning worth taking seriously."<sup>238</sup> One cannot but help get the sense that both Realists and Critical theorists do not take one another's arguments very seriously, and that the root cause of this derives from the construction of their own ontologies, epistemological systems, and concepts that are commensurate with this misguided philosophical approach to international politics.

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<sup>238</sup> See Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988, 6.

What needs to be done is to accept that the realist philosophical approach is evident in both Realism and Critical IR theory, that both approaches have yielded to the Western epistemological urge to seek the foundations of knowledge in a metaphysical abstraction. This in itself is not necessarily just a negative thing. In fact, it is quite common, "A simple induction from the history of thought suggests that metaphysical discussion is not going to disappear as long as reflective people remain in the world."<sup>239</sup> The best way out of the theoretical dilemma is of course to see each theory as such; for each to recognise that their theories *are* metaphysical, how they logically became metaphysical, and to try to exorcise them of their metaphysical content. In doing so the point of theoretical investigation must then "bring words [and theories] back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."<sup>240</sup> This cannot be done as long as the two sides seem unwilling to approach the other's philosophical premisses empathetically. In this sense, the metaphysical attachments necessarily become a negative thing as opponents appear much more like dogmatists as they attempt to protect their theoretical edifices.<sup>241</sup> Until such a time as theorists accept the fallibility of their own theories, debates over the comparative truth-value of competing theoretical systems are as irrelevant as they are self-refuting. A caveat by Wittgenstein is useful here, "For we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, an object of

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<sup>239</sup> Putnam, "Realism With a Human Face," 19.

<sup>240</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, no. 116

<sup>241</sup> For two unsympathetic and condescending polemics see Ashley, "The Poverty of NeoRealism" and the response by Gilpin, "Realism, the Richness of the Tradition," in Keohane ed., *Neorealism and its Critics*. For the most part however, Realists have been the most dogmatic in their unwillingness to accept Critical IR theories as offering valid statements about international relations. This is obviously a privilege accorded by virtue of their dominant theoretical position in the discipline.

comparison—as, so to speak, a measuring rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond. (The dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy.)”<sup>242</sup>

If it is possible to assert that Wittgenstein has had anything to offer the twentieth century in terms of how it approaches deep questions about the extent of the connection between words, thoughts, objects, and agents, then perhaps there is some wisdom to be gleaned for the debates in international relations theory. It is unfortunate that both Realists and Enlightenment IR critics have spent much of their theoretical energy trying to establish an elegant relationship between their theories and the metaphysical object to which their empirical systems, concepts, words, and definitions correspond rather than to establish the relationship between these elements and the intersubjective interactions that establish their meaning in the first place. In this sense, IR theorists who focus on the role of norms and the extent to which these have a significant influence in shaping the relationships between international agents show much promise for the discipline not only in so far as they acknowledge the importance of Wittgenstein for international relations, but also to the extent that such approaches orient their theories to the realm of actual human affairs.<sup>243</sup>

But for now, the debates over how one can make true assertions about even the development of norm-governance in international affairs is still subordinate to the larger

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<sup>242</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, no. 131. Emphasis in original.

<sup>243</sup> See especially, Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical And Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989. The premisses of Kratochwil's approach are lauded here, but the extent to which his use of Wittgenstein and norm-formation for a social constructivist approach is met with some apprehension. On this point see also Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.

debate over how one is to make a true statement about international affairs at all. To this extent the implicit debate going on between the Realists and the Enlightenment IR critics have extraordinary relevance for the future of the discipline—and in this sense it is possible to speak of progress—in so far as they expose the flawed metaphysical systems to which both sides are grounded. In so doing, the debate promises to make IR scholars take theory more seriously by virtue of the fact that matters of truth are confidently perceived as a constant mystery with only temporary solutions; it will help to rid international politics from the insipid and arrogant modernist position of being able to define all past, current, and future human problems and then articulate the method for their solution. In so far as the debate between Realists and critical theorists stays at the level of an abstract argument over whose system more adequately solves the problem of Truth for the discipline, adjudicating between the two positions requires a sensitivity to the profundity of the philosophical issues involved in these rifts. Whether intentional or not, the surge of critique levelled by critical IR theory at Realism is exposing the kind of metaphysical thinking inherent in *both*. In so doing, an opportunity to bring IR theory back to the level of making truth claims that are derived from, and judged in, the context of the life world is possible. This brings theoretical debates over truth back to the level of the world to which it is supposed to reflect in the first place:

Rather than looking with suspicion on the claim that some value judgements are reasonable and some are unreasonable, or some views are true and some are false, or some words refer to and some do not, I am concerned with bringing us back to precisely these claims, which we do, after all, constantly make in our everyday lives. Accepting the "manifest image," the *Lebenswelt*, the world as we actually experience it, demands of us who have (for better or for worse) been philosophically trained that we both regain our sense of mystery (for it is mysterious that something can be both *in* the world and *about* the world) and our sense of the common (for that some ideas are "unreasonable" is, after all, a

*common* fact—it is only the weird notions of "objectivity" and "subjectivity" that we have acquired from Ontology and Epistemology that make us unfit to dwell in the common).<sup>244</sup>

### *Intersubjectivity vs. Incommensurability*

It is the assertion here that the issues of judgement and reasonableness of assertions in IR theory will be permanently exiled from theoretical discussion so long as the divide between critical IR approaches and Realist approaches is seen as incommensurable. This is partly due to two meta-theoretical strains that resonate throughout the discipline: that the fact/value dichotomy is an acceptable metaphysical distinction underlying truth claims, and that there needs to be some kind of Epistemological Method to discern truth values. But it has more to do with an embedded disciplinary attachment to philosophical realism, which explains the ineradicable image of a True world, and clouds the extent to which the "true" world is determined by the nature of intersubjective beliefs. The sceptic may interject that in so far as the pragmatist extols the relevance of *belief systems* in giving substance to claims of reasonableness, he also tacitly supports *both* the Realist and the Enlightenment belief systems; that he is a closet relativist, since both are products of "rational" argumentation, or, are believed with good reason. To say this would be to miss the entire pragmatist argument. But it would also be to accept metaphysicalism and incommensurability.

The problem with the manner in which Realists and Enlightenment IR theorists have chosen to arrive at their unique theoretical position is that it is not tantamount to a coagulation of intersubjective "beliefs" at all. Their philosophical systems are rooted in

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<sup>244</sup> Hilary Putnam, "Why is a Philosopher?", in *Realism With a Human Face*, 118. This quote also appears in Conant, "Introduction" xlix.

metaphysicalist ontologies which act as the foundation of their theories, which then taint everything from notions of what is true, what is false, what is a fact, what is a value, and so on. This is the clearest sense of what is implied in Kuhn's many uses of the notion of scientific paradigm.<sup>245</sup> His *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, among other things, has helped refute thinking about methodology and theory as objective elements, but as aspects corresponding to paradigms, which "are the source of the methods, problem-field, and standards of solution accepted by any mature scientific community at any given time."<sup>246</sup> Thomas Kuhn's controversial critique of scientific realism argues the point that science is more about intersubjective beliefs and justificatory practices than it is about objectivity and truth<sup>247</sup>; a view which has accorded him the mantra "relativist" by his many detractors. Posited against real relativists such as the postmoderns, this label appears rather unfair, for Kuhn's point has been instrumental this century in illuminating the fact that theory need not remain inexorably true for all historical contexts in order for it to be valid, useful, or successful in a scientific community. Although the appropriation of Kuhn for the purposes of social science is rather dubious, the essence of his theory—that the epistemological commitments of a scholarly community depend to a great extent upon a pre-determined agreement about these issues beforehand—can illuminate how tenuous *any* notion of 'truth' really is, and how unlikely is the proposition that there is *a* Truth beyond that which is proffered by those committed to the ideal that one actually exists. In

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<sup>245</sup> See Thomas Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

agreement with the postmoderns, Kuhn would argue that knowledge is not always True, but would qualify such an assertion with the fact that what counts as knowledge *does* depend in a large measure on what is considered contemporaneously "true," within the context and capabilities of the *scientific* community.

In so far as international relations is dominated by theoretical positions attached to a paradigmatic self image, there will never be any way out of the theoretical quandary between Realists and Critical IR theorists. As Wight rightly notes, "uncritical acceptance of the incommensurability thesis can all too quickly become a legitimisation of apartheid for paradigms, a dialogue of the deaf which precludes any exploration of the possibility of synthesis, integration, or some other mode of unification among meta-theoretical approaches."<sup>248</sup> What segregates the respective theories and prevents them from genuine resolution of their competing truth claims is the fact that their methods of justification are internal rather than intersubjective. In fact, in noting the problem of incommensurability "the first step is to notice that the concept of incommensurability is not the problem, the problem is the concept of commensurability. The *argument* about incommensurability rests on a dichotomy, between on the one hand radical incommensurability (and ultimate incommunicability) *among* paradigms and on the other hand radical incommensurability and communicability *within* paradigms."<sup>249</sup> Part of this problem lies in the acceptance of thinking about theories as evolving out of something like a paradigm system in the first

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<sup>248</sup> Colin Wight, "Incommensurability and Cross-Paradigm Communication in International Relations Theory: 'What's the Frequency Kenneth?'," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 25(2), Summer 1996, 292.

<sup>249</sup> Ole Wæver, "The Rise and Fall of the Inter-Paradigm Debate," in Smith, Booth, Zalewski eds., *International Theory Positivism and Beyond*, 171.

place. This provokes a tendency to think that in a paradigm one has a "closed sign system has been achieved which gives a stable and *ultimate* meaning to its participants."<sup>250</sup>

In previous chapters, the fact that both Realist and Enlightenment IR theorists each purported to concoct epistemological systems to discern Truth was problematised. As the two theoretical approaches attempt to communicate (implicitly), why this was so is now readily apparent. Since the Realist and critical IR theorists each have their own systems of determining what kind of statements are true and which are false, there is no way to judge between them; there is no language of justification or algorithm for theory choice that could not be seen to hail from either theory in this scenario. The fact that "the proposed construction of alternate tests and theories must proceed from within one or another paradigm-based tradition"<sup>251</sup> leads to the appearance that proponents of competing international relations theories "are always at least slightly at cross-purposes."<sup>252</sup> Since both approaches originate in a real human desire to solve human problems, they are not necessarily at cross purposes, but nonetheless have constructed a rather efficient means of stifling debate through their metaphysical attachments. In any case, as George and Campbell rightly note, Kuhn did not necessarily see that that competing paradigms were incomparable, but rather noted the extent which paradigm debates did exclude "the possibility of comparison and evaluation in terms of some neutral, atheoretical or non-

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>251</sup> Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 146.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 148.



normative methodology reflecting an independent realm of factual evidence."<sup>253</sup> For Kuhn the only way out of paradigm debates is for the scholarly community to ultimately *make a decision* based on a (intersubjective) belief as to which one holds the most promise in the future.<sup>254</sup> This decision can only be made by taking the arguments of any interlocutor seriously enough to see that any problem that arises necessarily suggests its own solution. This is especially so in international relations, where to some degree the the fact that one can frame something as a theoretical "problem" suggests that something of ethical, intersubjective, or epistemological substance is being violated. In other words, there is an implicit assertion that something is no longer "true" about Realism, which spurns debate.

The Critical complaint with Realism ostensibly derives from the manner in which positivism neatly ostracises false or value-laden statements, but their real problem appears to be with the metaphysical assumptions rather than with the positivism. The choice to malign the positivist elements of Realism rather than the metaphysical elements is abundantly clear; because metaphysical arguments are being used. The first obvious mistake that Critics make in their attack on Realism is to accept the disciplinary fact/value dichotomy, which then provokes an "over-reaction to what it has considered, mistakenly, to be a positivist dogma; the separation of 'subject from object'....[which] has precluded thinking from examining the ontological conditions of possibility for a resolution of the problem of incommensurability; in effect critical thinking within IR theory has tended to

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<sup>253</sup> Jim George, David Campbell, "Patterns of Dissent," 275.

<sup>254</sup> Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 157. Although Kuhn explicitly says that problem solving potentialities is not the issue which determines paradigm choice, the larger point of the role of normativity in making judgements between truth claims is the most relevant point here.

cede reality to positivism."<sup>255</sup> This tacit acceptance of the Realist articulation effectively splits off a critical discussion of everyday problems since the argument here is that even the Realist conception of reality is flawed. But the most important error in the acceptance of theoretical incommensurability is the extent to which the 'foundational fallacy' which underpins it remains relatively unscathed.<sup>256</sup> To the extent that both theories are perceived as so disparate as to warrant assertions of their own incommensurability—this, in spite of the real world of intersubjective experience—suggests that "[the approaches] can all be seen to be contributors to the naturalism debate. In fact, the differences between them can be seen to revolve around how each frames its own ontological and epistemological commitments in accord with, or in opposition to, its perceived account of science, generally, and mistakenly taken to be positivism."<sup>257</sup>

In the end, the problem of incommensurability between the competing bodies of theory in international relations merely shows how metaphysical systems are extremely useful in producing an abundance of assertions about possible realities<sup>258</sup> but lead scholars blindly into an abyss once an effort is made to make some determinative judgement between competing truth claims. To accept the condition of incommensurability as *the* obstacle to communication between competing theoretical approaches threatens to encourage practices of knowledge that stay at the level of metaphysical abstraction instead

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<sup>255</sup> Wight, "What's the Frequency," 295.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 298. Substituting what Wight's use of the term 'naturalism' with what is here called philosophical realism, makes this particular argument more readily useful here.

<sup>258</sup> Assertions which, as has already been mentioned, are in accordance with the particular metaphysical commitment.

of at the level of agents who speak, act, and engage one another on a day to day basis. It encourages an unacceptable mistrust in the intellectual ability to encounter the question of theory as something that is always open for debate, even if the substantive notion of "truth" claims about the world seems to have been apparently settled. Most importantly, seeing theoretical propositions about the world as incommensurable perpetuates a neglect of the sense in which the languages one uses to exact a theoretical proposition in the first place relies upon a significantly shared conception of what it is under dispute. Realists and Critical IR theorists take the language which allows them to make competing claims about international affairs for granted. They forget that, "without a vast common ground, there is no place for disputants to have their quarrel."<sup>259</sup>

What has to be kept in mind is the fact that the languages used to discern the extent of beliefs about the world are also the same languages with which one acts in the world; there is no getting around this. It must be accepted that part of the determinations of what is a fact, value, reality, utopia in international relations cannot be separated from the sense in which the *meaning* of these concepts exists by virtue of their constant use in making assertions. They do not however, describe or latch on to "the world" nor are they "made" true by us, they just are true. This being the case, common notions that are said to define international relations—*anarchy, sovereignty, power, interest, and emancipation*—all appear, influence, and then even subside in their impact on the way agents think about and act in the world. They are not, however, elements of some hidden reality that the mind or science has been able to uncover; rather they were conceived as

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<sup>259</sup> Donald Davidson, "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," in Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy eds., *After Philosophy. End or Transformation?*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987, 167.

a means to solve the problems that gave rise to the act of theory in the first place. It just so happens that the acceptance of anarchy, sovereignty, structure, and emancipation in IR parlance was mistakenly justified as some kind of empirical representation of something intrinsic rather than something intersubjective.<sup>260</sup> As Putnam notes, "we should reject the assumption that thinking is manipulating items with no intrinsic relation to what is outside the head."<sup>261</sup> That this is not taken to heart is, yet again, another example of the pervasiveness of philosophical realism in IR.

Finding one's way out of the intellectual stalemate in IR theory requires that the dichotomies associated with the foundational disciplinary fact/value distinction and the associated epistemological frameworks are abandoned, and a renewed faith in the ability to live without all the answers is restored. Putnam writes,

Our image of the world cannot be justified by anything but its success as judged by the interests and values which evolve and get modified at the same time and in our interaction with our evolving image of the world itself. Just as the absolute "convention/fact" dichotomy had to be abandoned so...the absolute fact/value dichotomy has to be abandoned, and for similar reasons. On the other hand, it is part of that image itself that the world is not the product of our will—or our dispositions to talk in certain ways either.<sup>262</sup>

### *Post-modernism, Relativism, and IR Theory*

Before offering an account of why the relativism implicit in post-modern theoretical discourse would be a necessarily negative development in IR theory, the extraordinarily essential critiques of the the manner in which Western foundational thinking has necessarily excluded issues of identity and difference from entering into

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<sup>260</sup> On this point See, Putnam, "The Question of Realism," especially pps. 306-307.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>262</sup> Putnam, "Realism With a Human Face," 29.

epistemological consciousness must be granted. In so far as it refrains from constructing empiricist epistemological edifices which act as a frame for a certain picture of reality, theorising with a post-modern sensitivity to the variety of agents and identities in the lifeworld ensures that oppressive practices are not being passed off as "knowledge." This generally is the starting point for most current critiques of epistemology, Critical Theory included. Never explicitly endorsing an alternative ontological commitment in the act of critique is what distinguishes the postmodernists from the other critical approaches, however, and also feeds the appearance that this approach is the best way to ensure immunity from the modern tendency to descend theoretically down the path of metaphysicalism in the same ways as have Realist and other critical IR approaches. Indeed, it would be something of a white lie were it not admitted that to a large extent the critique of the Realist and Enlightenment critical IR theories in the previous chapters relied very much on a post-modern anti-foundational critique of identity and epistemology.<sup>263</sup>

The descent into relativism is what makes post-modern theories in the social sciences and humanities seem so untenable to those committed to engaging in the important theoretical questions that are of imminent intellectual and ethical concern. It is

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<sup>263</sup> Which explains the more extensive use of Rorty's pragmatism in past chapters and his relative absence in this chapter. There is an ongoing debate between Rorty and Putnam over the extent to which pragmatism does or does not endorse a more watered down notion of truth. Both thinkers start with a critique of metaphysics but are embroiled in much debate over whether this justifies abandoning the "urge to know" altogether. For the record, I side wholeheartedly with Putnam, who thinks it strange to even "argue" without at least having some sense of 'truth', as situated and context sensitive as it may be. Rorty strays awfully close to the French philosophers, especially Derrida for both Putnam and myself. For some points and counter points between these two pragmatists see Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*; Rorty, "Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace," in *Truth and Progress*; Putnam, "Realism With a Human Face,"; Putnam, "A Comparison of Something With Something Else," in *Words and Life*, a bonus chapter for its clarity on W.V.O. Quine as well.

one thing to say that the "urge to know" has failed in so far as it has often inclined to support foundational projects that purport "to have a totalistic explanation in the totality of what it explains," because this "goes beyond the bounds of any notion of explaining that we have,"<sup>264</sup> but quite another to say that that because of this inclination that the whole enterprise needs to be abandoned. In international relations this would have consequences in the lifeworld even more dire than they have been thus far under the aegis of the Realist world. Intellectual concoctions common to IR such as "anarchic structures" and "emancipatory global polis" are aspects of theoretical approaches that are far too sweeping in their claims to represent the entire world, let alone even the Western world from which they came. There ought not to be so much concern with "representing" the world in the first place. That Western thought has been inclined to such totalising, representationalist narratives is seen by the post-moderns, taking their bearings from Heidegger, as licence for making a rather scathing indictment on a cultural predilection to subjugate and dominate in the process of constructing totalising theories. That this is represented in epistemological practices is no surprise, and is just (according to post-moderns) cause for scrapping the questions that got us there in the first place. Putnam locates the post-modern scepticism as linked to the following,

The failure of our philosophical "foundations" is a failure of the whole culture, and accepting that we were wrong in wanting or thinking we could have a foundation requires us to be philosophical revisionists. By this I mean that, for Rorty or Foucault or Derrida, the failure of foundationalism makes a difference to how we are allowed to talk in ordinary life—a difference as to whether and when we are allowed to use words like "know," "objective," "fact," and "reason." The picture is that philosophy was not a reflection on the culture, a reflection some of whose ambitious projects failed, but a basis, a sort of pedestal, on which

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<sup>264</sup> Putnam, "Why is a Philosopher?," 117-18.

the culture rested and which has been abruptly yanked out. Under the pretense that philosophy is no longer "serious" there lies a hidden gigantic seriousness.<sup>265</sup>

In short, the post-moderns have taken the realist tendencies inherent in most Western theoretical undertakings to mean that somehow this is an *inevitable* outcome from attempting to solve the problem of truth.<sup>266</sup> Indeed the ostensible appearance of incommensurability between the two realist approaches outlined here feeds the post modern scepticism of theoretical inquiry altogether. But if the urge to see inquiry as inherently linked with metaphysics is dropped along with the corollary that true statements need a foundation, then notions like incommensurability and the relativist mantra "anything goes"<sup>267</sup> do not need to be taken as the only alternative to empiricism and ideology. For, if one follows the logic of Kuhn's solution of the problem of paradigm incommensurability to an extreme interpretation, which Feyerabend has done, then indeed, solutions to paradigm debates do appear on the outset to be irrational<sup>268</sup> and therefore undermine the alleged rationality of science and the prestige of rationality itself.<sup>269</sup> This is because the choice between competing paradigms seems to ultimately come down to, according to Feyerabend and to post-moderns, who is able to speak the loudest, or who

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<sup>265</sup> Putnam, "Realism With a Human Face," 20.

<sup>266</sup> On this and many other shortcomings of the post-modern approach, see Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

<sup>267</sup> See Paul K. Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, London: New Left Books, 1975.

<sup>268</sup> In the sense in which Kuhn himself admits that paradigm choice is a leap of faith, "A decision between alternate ways of practicing science is called for, and in the circumstances that decision must be based less on past achievement than on future promise. A decision of that kind can only be made on *faith*," *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 157. Emphasis added.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.* On incommensurability see especially Chapter 15, on the irrationality of science see, 196-200.

is able to best exclude other opponents in the debate,<sup>270</sup> rather than who is most 'rational', "A view that sounds 'rational' in any sense of this emotionally charged word has today a much greater chance of being accepted than a view that openly rejects the authority of reason....they [rationalists] will realise that even in science one is subjected to propaganda and involved in a struggle between opposing forces and they will agree that argument is nothing but a subtle and most effective way of paralysing a trusting an opponent."<sup>271</sup> Besides the question begging implied in seeing discourse in this way, what Feyerabend and other relativist followers forget is that just as normative elements led to the authoritative instantiation of ideologies passing themselves off as "knowledge,"<sup>272</sup> other normative elements have allowed such ideological reifications to become undone; thus allowing one to claim that an assertion of science's epistemological illegitimacy (at least for the human sciences) is somehow 'true.'<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> For a good *example* of the exclusivity of discourse in international relations and foreign policy discourse, see David Campbell, *Politics Without Principle: Sovereignty, Ethics and the Narratives of the Gulf War*, Boulder, CO: Lynnes Rienner, 1993. It is not the post-modern critique that elicits my scorn as much as it is the implications that they are so prone to draw for theory as a result of deconstructing narratives that always irks me. There is a profound ethical position being taken that is always regrettably left unjustified, when it comes down to talking about *where* theoretical claims come from. It is no surprise that Campbell invokes Emmanuel Levinas for discussing his view of ethics, since it is very useful in recognition of the Other (which ties into problematisations of sovereignty) and in this sense Campbell's explicit distinction between the moral and the ethical (See Chapter 6) is one which needs to be taken seriously by IR scholars who always seem to cringe at the sounds of 'ethics' entering conversation. See also David Campbell, "The Deterritorialisation of Responsibility: Levinas, Derrida, and Ethics After the End of Philosophy," *Alternatives*, 19(4), Winter 1994. The simplest of ethical concerns for any actor is to discern the answer to the following, 'can I act better?', rather than to the moral imperative, 'how should (or must) I act?'. To discern the difference think of the distinction between responsibility (to whom) and justice (for what).

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 297. Feyerabend notes that science and myth are closely related in the sense that they both "cap common sense with a theoretical superstructure."

<sup>273</sup> Christopher Norris, in "Truth, Science, and the Growth of Knowledge," *New Left Review*, No. 210, March/April, 1995, especially pps. 107-110, provides a good critique of the relativism implied in Kuhn's work which is subsequently lauded (with one suspects some consternation by Kuhn and his followers) in the 'epistemological anarchy' of Feyerabend.



What is readily apparent however, is that the post-modern philosophical world view seems to be one of despair with the degree to which the Western modernist commitment to its varied metaphysical projects have failed, and that this somehow means that asking the questions which have led to such metaphysical disasters have to be abandoned. For the future of IR theory it is essential to maintain a preoccupation with the question of how to make better statements about the world, even if in the past such questions led to unsavoury intellectual solutions. So long as thinkers as critical as Carr, Morgenthau, Cox, Ashley, Linklater, and George stay focused on asking the questions rather than settling for a solution, conceptual flaws and metaphysical tendencies in the theories will continue to be exposed and hopefully corrected. By orienting the intellectual sights of the theorist to the world *in addition to* his concepts and theories about it, both the theorist and the world are prevented from being "trapped in the prison house of our discourse."<sup>274</sup> In Chapters one and two, the manner in which Realists and Enlightenment theorists take the world away from the agents by ascribing meaning to words and concepts can now be revealed as the very thing which inhibits the development of better theory and practice in international relations.

In the philosophically charged debates that ensue in international relations, post-moderns are not really contributing very much to the resolution of this tendency since theirs is a point of view that inclines to discount the problem of theory altogether. However, their theories *are* instrumental in "show[ing] that and how both sides

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<sup>274</sup> Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*, 12.

*misrepresent* the lives we live with our concepts"<sup>275</sup> and how the foundational tendencies in theories have been a "potent weapon in the arsenal of the patriachs, racists, and imperialists."<sup>276</sup> To the extent that post-modern approaches have exposed many of the negative tendencies in Realist IR theory and the practices which they encourage, they are an essential body of critique that the discipline ought not marginalise. It is just the manner in which their approach implicitly usurps any basis for making a critique, even as they proceed to make a critique, that is problematic. This just ends up making a *mockery* of critique, and the theoretical controversies that come with it. This is in keeping with the post-modernist's general disdain for the futility of metaphysical debates over the centuries, and often leads to pronouncements about the 'end of philosophy.' As Putnam notes, however, "that a controversy is 'futile' does not mean that the rival pictures are unimportant. Indeed, to reject a controversy without examining the pictures involved is almost always just a way of defending one of those pictures (usually the one that claims to be 'antimetaphysical')."<sup>277</sup> In the end, post-modern IR theorists merely undermine the arguments of their fellow Critical IR counterparts and help to leave Realism as the more acceptable theory, if only for the fact that it abjures *unrepentant* idealism. Neufeld adds:

In the absence of a sustained effort by postmodern International Relations theorists to elucidate conceptions of reason and reasoned criticism which would allow us to discriminate between the positive as well as the negative dimensions of rationality, it will remain difficult to counter the suspicion that postmodern international relations is better suited to undermining the role of reason in toto than to expanding the notion of reason beyond the confines of positivist episteme

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<sup>275</sup> Putnam, "Realism with a Human Face," 20.

<sup>276</sup> Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*, 103.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

in a way consistent with reflexivity.<sup>278</sup>

Even though there may be some sense in which pure (a priori) "rationality" is suspect, there is, however, an intersubjective basis upon which one is able to make acceptable theoretical or critical statements, and that this is determined by the principles of *justification*.<sup>279</sup> The problem with relativists such as the post-moderns is they take for granted what it is that enables them to make any theoretical statements at all, especially critical ones. They forget that to engage in the act of critique one implicitly is making an assertion about the right-ness or wrong-ness of another assertion, and in saying 'you are wrong and I am right,'<sup>280</sup> one cannot skip the justification of the assertion and jump right into making the argument. This is no way to arrive at any understanding of world affairs. So there needs to be some sense of 'truth' to hold any theory together. But this does not mean, as Hollis and Smith assert, that "there is no alternative to understanding the world through interpretations and models and hence through what are, in the last analysis, intellectual fictions whose warrant is only that it is *as if* they were true."<sup>281</sup> It is the metaphysicalism implied in this kind of thinking about truth that has hindered IR discourse much too long.<sup>282</sup> The much maligned concept of anarchy is a perfect example of how IR theory often purports to make definitive epistemological statements through

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<sup>278</sup> Neufeld, *The Restructuring of International Relations Theory*, 64.

<sup>279</sup> See Putnam, "Two Conceptions of Rationality," especially pps. 119-124.

<sup>280</sup> Or, this is 'true' and that is 'false.'

<sup>281</sup> Hollis and Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*, 64.

<sup>282</sup> As was noted before, the erecting of concepts in the discipline is aimed at "hooking on to" an 'objective' world (which makes it a variant of metaphysical realism) rather than is it used as a means to best understand a 'concept' as it help agents to relate in the world.

its concepts rather than through an incisive examination of the conceptual relation to the world of experience.<sup>283</sup> In the end, there is nothing that could contradict the *concept* of anarchy exclusively because anything can be said to be 'evidence' of anarchy with some good reasoning.<sup>284</sup> It is the purpose here to see how the 'reasoning' of *concepts* is putting intellectual eggs in the wrong basket.

In order to understand how some statements can be asserted as more true or more reasonable than others, it is suggested that a good way to understand how an assertion can be asserted to be 'justifiable' is to refer to what Putnam calls 'internal realism'<sup>285</sup>; the notion that "truth (idealised justification), is something we grasp as we grasp any other concept, via a (largely implicit) understanding of the factors that make it rationally acceptable to say that something is true."<sup>286</sup> What this means is that to engage in debate always implies that there is some measure of judgement involved, and to some degree the point of the whole exercise is to arrive at an intersubjective agreement over beliefs as to what is 'true.' For pragmatists however, this 'truth' is not "truth as correspondence to a ready-made world."<sup>287</sup> It is instead an ascription to a *sense* of which assertions are more reasonable (not "rational" as per some method of determining rationality) than others. The decisions made about good versus better theories of international politics can reasonably

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<sup>283</sup> This was the subject of Chapter One of this examination.

<sup>284</sup> Or as Putnam would say, the concept "proves too much" to be of any real use. See Putnam, "How not to Solve Ethical Problems," in *Realism With a Human Face*.

<sup>285</sup> As opposed to metaphysical realism, the kind of realisms being criticised throughout this examination.

<sup>286</sup> Putnam, "Two Conceptions of Rationality," 122.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

be asserted with the caveat that there may at some later point be a better "reading" of international politics than the one that is currently accepted as reasonable (or "true").<sup>288</sup> This is not relativism, strictly because there is the tacit acceptance that certain understandings of world politics are better guides to the practice of politics than others; that even though beliefs that shape judgements of reasonableness of one theory over another may be just "reading the script of modernity"<sup>289</sup> they are all any community of theorists has to rely upon, and as mentioned time and again, practices and theories (as collections of belief) must constantly be evaluated and re-worked to see how they influence the course of events in the world of experience.

*Conclusion: Breaking Away From the Truth*

It has been argued throughout this examination that there is something terribly wrong with the disciplinary attachment to conceiving of theory as somehow linked with Truth rather than as simply a way putting heads together to figure out ways to live more effectively. That the two solitudes in the discipline do not see theory this way, indeed that their theoretical positions consign them to separate, solitary existences, ensures that as they dig like hedgehogs toward their own notion of Truth, they dig further away from each other intellectually, and further away from an intersubjective understanding of how theory and practice in international relations are best understood in the current historical

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<sup>288</sup> See Putnam, "How Not to Solve Ethical Problems," where the metaphors of "reading" and "adjudication" are used as a way of demonstrating how complex ethical problems can be resolved, if only temporarily. See especially pps. 181-185.

<sup>289</sup> Shapiro, "Textualising Global Politics," 18.

context. In a world rife with military calamities and peace, poverty and wealth, cooperation and enmity, does it make sense to waste intellectual energy digging around for Truth or does it not make more sense to engage in amiable, open dialogue in an effort to discern what we all really think about the state of international affairs as people who influence and who are influenced by the theoretical conclusions we draw? More importantly, to discuss how thought affects the state of affairs is to believe that only through practice can it really be determined whether or not the theoretical "truths" are really effective means of understanding the world. But there ought not be too much concern as to whether the theory IR scholars accept is a good theory as a matter of Truth; this project has been too grand in the past and will be so in the future. Theoretical goals need to be much more modest, to think that "truth" is what is believed to be so by agents at any given time; it is not something beyond the reach of human beings.

It is the pragmatic hope that what comes out of the debate is a more genuine attempt by both sides to take theory seriously, to stop harping on how "incommensurable" their approaches are, to cease retreating into their abstract intellectual enclaves, and to be much more cognisant of the sense that the act of theory in which they are engaged has real consequences; that practices encouraged by theories reflect upon the way a community thinks, and in some sense, upon who they are. The last chapters have shown how much of IR theory is in many ways perspectival to the extent that their metaphysical approaches are rooted in a Western, Cartesian dichotomous type of thinking that is grounded in Truth. The pragmatist hopes that the theoretical pluralism and reflexivity being practiced in the paradigm debates reveals the untenability of these metaphysical

commitments, demonstrating how they preclude good intersubjective inquiry to the same degree that clinging to one Truth inherently excludes rather than includes all voices in theoretical discourse.

The lessons that Kuhn taught the West about science and scientific progress also need to be learned here: that in many ways what determines the staying power of a paradigm depends on large measure upon the beliefs and values of the scientific community, and that the decision to choose between competing paradigms depends even more upon sea-changes in values.<sup>290</sup> Even if Kuhn's rather nebulous notion of "paradigm" were applicable to international relations, which it is not, the fact of the matter is that so long as theorists continue to resist the extent to which theoretical debates are an intersubjective act—a "reweaving of belief"—where judgements of the reasonableness of any assertion are determined by the community of scholars, rather than by their adherence to the strictures of an out dated theory, then there is very little reason to bother choosing either of the alternatives. But this does not encourage the descent into relativism, for there are equal dangers inherent in this approach, not only for IR theory, but also for the practice of international politics. What must be recognised, however, is the importance of the post-modern critique in IR discourse, before we move past its anti-intellectual, anti-theoretical premisses. It is imperative that IR theorists dispense with the notion that they have to preface their intellectual inquiries with a willing suspension of belief in order to be good theorists, since it is belief itself which gives the act of theory its reason and

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<sup>290</sup> See Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; see also "Objectivity, Value Judgement, and Theory Choice" in *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

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