Agents, Structures and International Relations

Politics as Ontology

Colin Wight

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The agent–structure problem is a much discussed issue in the field of international relations. In his comprehensive analysis of this problem, Colin Wight deconstructs the accounts of structure and agency embedded within differing IR theories and, on the basis of this analysis, explores the implications of ontology – the metaphysical study of existence and reality. Wight argues that there are many gaps in IR theory that can only be understood by focusing on the ontological differences that construct the theoretical landscape. By integrating the treatment of the agent–structure problem in IR theory with that in social theory, Wight makes a positive contribution to the problem as an issue of concern to the wider human sciences. At the most fundamental level politics is concerned with competing visions of how the world is and how it should be; thus politics *is* ontology.

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Agents, Structures and International Relations
Politics as Ontology

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For Penny and Alex

Contents

Figures

Acknowledgements

A book that explores the relationship between agents and structures inevitably comes to recognise that all social production emerges in an environment where the most important factors are largely invisible in the final product. This is particularly the case in intellectual endeavours, despite the persistent image of a solitary scholar producing a work that is theirs alone. *Ex nihilo nihil fit* – out of nothing nothing comes. The invisible environment that has structured, formed and produced this book is composed of a varied range of factors, which have all contributed to the final product, but which equally bear no responsibility for what is contained within. In no particular order, I would like to thank the people, organisations and institutions that have made this book possible.

Steve Smith has been a constant source of support and inspiration. It was Steve who first triggered my interest in the links between social theory, the philosophy of social science and international relations theory. We do not necessarily agree on what those links are, or what the implications are, but we agree that they are important. Michael Nicholson was my PhD examiner, became a friend and encouraged me to complete the book. It is a pity I was never organised enough to do so before his death in 2001. The book would surely have been improved had he been able to comment on the final draft. Douglas Porpora has been a great friend and has shaped my thinking on these issues in fundamental ways. His influence can be felt on every page. Hayward Alker, Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Ken Booth, Walter Carlsnaes, Ian Clark, Mick Cox, Tim Dunne, Toumas Forsberg, Jonathan Joseph, Andrew Linklater, Richard Little, Nicholas Onuf, Heikki Patomäki, Alexander Wendt, Nick Wheeler, Howard Williams, and Michael Williams have all provided theoretical insights, encouragement and points of disagreement that have shaped the outcome in various ways.

Introduction

There is a way of thinking about International Relations (IR)[1] that seems to saturate all theoretical discussion within the discipline. Although it can take different forms, the underlying logic of this mode of thought is simple to articulate: IR theory, so the argument goes, is structured by a set of deep epistemological (sometimes methodological) divisions that prevent the attainment of anything approaching an integrated body of knowledge. Attitudes to this issue vary. Some accept it at face value, albeit often with a sense of regret. Others consciously embrace and defend it, arguing that it provides the conditions under which theoretical pluralism might be safeguarded. Then there are those who attempt to provide a bridge across the divides in the hope of achieving a more comprehensive body of knowledge of the dynamics, processes and outcomes the discipline studies. This book suggests a different approach. There are simply no epistemological or methodological divides to accept, defend or bridge. If correct, the argument advanced in this book promises nothing less than a comprehensive reassessment and restructuring of the theoretical cleavages that divide the discipline.

But if there are no fundamental epistemological or methodological divisions that structure the discipline, how are we to explain the heated theoretical debates that regularly emerge and seem to confirm the existence of such a divide? There are two answers to this question. One locates the source of these debates and divisions in a form of disciplinary identity politics. The divisions are not real, but represent attempts by competing groups to control the circulations of power within the discipline through excluding and marginalising alternative theoretical

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[1] Capital letters denote the academic discipline of IR; lower case the practices that discipline purports to study.

approaches. Although there is something to this answer it has the effect of trivialising the debates and misses the point that there are real and causally effective patterns of disagreement within the discipline and beyond. The second answer, which is the focus of this book, suggests that the divisions are real, but that their source is ontological, not epistemological or methodological. If we want to explain the divisions that structure the discipline and gain a deeper understanding of what divides the theoretical landscape of IR, we need to engage in some sustained 'ontological investigations'. There is, however, an altogether more important argument for sustained ontological inquiry.

Politics is the terrain of competing ontologies. Politics is about competing visions of how the world is and how it should be. Every ontology is political.[2] If there were no ontological differences there would be no politics. What we are and who we might become have always been the most fundamental of political questions, even if their centrality has been obscured under the sheer weight of epistemological and/or methodological debates. As such, understanding the ontological differences that lie at the heart of competing visions of the world should be the aim of any properly conceived critical discipline of IR. Linking politics and ontology in this way allows us to see that the issues covered in this book are not simply abstract theoretical speculations, but are implicated in, and possibly determinative of, the construction of political and social worlds. This has implications for how we theorise IR. All theories presuppose a basic ontology from which all other considerations follow. No ontology, no theory. In this book, I examine the often hidden ontologies that underpin theories of IR.

Putting ontological matters at the heart of analysis reverses a long-standing dogma of traditional IR scholarship. Under the influence of a broadly conceived positivist account of science epistemology has been privileged over ontology. According to this positivist account, a science enters its mature stage when it rejects metaphysical and ontological dogmas and reflects on its own status as a science. Good science is said to follow a simple and well-detailed set of procedures. Define what counts as the set of epistemological and methodological procedures for generating legitimate knowledge and ensure that these are followed. A glance at the training given to new entrants into the discipline confirms the commitment to this account. Courses on research methodology are

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[2] Žižek (1999: 158).

de rigueur, those on ontology almost completely absent. In effect, the ontological furniture of IR is taken to be self-evident.

This epistemological way of approaching the issue is deeply ingrained and it is not only positivists who adhere to it. Friedrich Kratochwil, for example, in an otherwise exemplary analysis that attempts to develop a non-positivist account of rules and norms, argues that the important answers to fundamental questions concerning human action are located in our concept of knowledge. The stated aim of his inquiry is not to illuminate possible and actual worlds, but rather, to highlight the epistemological presuppositions that underpin competing worldviews.[3] What is striking about Kratochwil's analysis is the absence of a single argument linking worldviews to epistemological presuppositions. Kratochwil simply assumes that world-images are dependent upon, and derived from, corresponding concepts of knowledge.[4] This assumption is endemic within the discipline. This assumption is also wrong. What we think we know exists has no bearing on what actually exists. In fact, despite his commitment to uncovering epistemological presuppositions, Kratochwil's account only illuminates if we understand his argument in ontological terms. Kratochwil aids our understanding of international processes because he provides an exposition of what rules and norms are and how they function in the realm of international politics and international law.

As the positivist account of science came under increasing attack during the latter part of the twentieth century, the importance of ontology to research practice has been increasingly recognised. Robert Cox argues that '[o]ntology lies at the beginning of any enquiry.'[5] R. B. J. Walker likewise argues that 'contemporary world politics must be addressed at the level of basic ontological assumptions'.[6] And Alexander Wendt grounds his social theory of international politics in an ontological starting point.[7] These viewpoints cohered in the mid-1980s with the emergence of an ontological debate that was claimed to be integral to all theoretical positions. This was the agent–structure problem.

This book uses the agent–structure problem as a vehicle to unpack and illuminate the competing ontological perspectives that underpin IR theories. There are three reasons for this choice. First, the agent–structure problem is essentially an ontological problem. Epistemological

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[3] Kratochwil (1989: 21).   [4] Kratochwil (1989: 21).
[5] Cox (1996b: 144).   [6] Walker (1993: 82).   [7] Wendt (1999: 6).

and methodological issues arise as a result of how differing theories resolve this problem, but these are supervenient on the more basic ontological issues. Hence, all attempts to understand the agent–structure problem in purely epistemological and/or methodological terms will fail. The only comprehensive way to address an ontological problem is at the level of ontology. Understood as an ontological problem the agent–structure problem is best understood as a series of attempts at constructing social ontologies. Given that all theories have their own preferred solution, this means that the agent–structure problem is a problem with no overarching and definitive solution.

In many respects, the language of a 'problem' constitutes a barrier to our understanding of the issues. The agent–structure problem cannot be solved in the sense of a puzzle with an answer, but rather represents competing visions of what the social world is and what it might become. As such all theories, practical discourses, ethical injunctions and political practices contain a solution to the agent–structure problem. Perhaps this means that we have too many solutions. If so, this is something we need to address, not cover up with methodological and/or epistemological platitudes. Examining IR theory through the agent–structure problem allows us to concentrate on the deep ontological differences that structure debate, rather than accepting an epistemological framework that hinders constructive theoretical dialogue. Unpacking the varied ways in which IR theories conceptualise the basic elements of international politics can help us assess the validity of their theoretical and empirical claims. This is important. In my view, the sharp divisions that have developed between a scientific IR and a non-scientific IR are misleading. All those interested in the subject of political interactions with a global scope are engaged in the same enterprise. We all seek to explain the phenomena that interest us. Where we differ is in how we define our basic units of analysis and what we think the most important causal processes are.

Second, this means, as Alexander Wendt has argued, that all theories presuppose a solution to the agent–structure problem, whether explicitly acknowledged or not.[8] Differing theories all have their own proposed ontology. All theories suggest key variables, factors, units and processes, just as all political accounts of the social world contain within them accounts of why and how the world is the way it is, and through a critique of this world how it might be improved. As such, research is

[8] Wendt (1987).

only possible on the basis of some or other ontology. Uncovering these deeply embedded and often implicit ontologies can play an important role in terms of understanding the theory and practice of international relations.

The third reason is perhaps the most important and relates to the link between ontology and politics. For whilst it is correct that all social theories presuppose a solution to the agent–structure problem, the fact that the social world contains within it the theories and beliefs of the agents acting in it means that the agent–structure problem is already presupposed in social action. In fact, social action would be impossible, and probably unnecessary, without some underlying social ontology. Two examples illustrate this.

The first concerns the Butler inquiry into British intelligence failures in Iraq during the run up to the Iraq war of 2003.[9] The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, announced the inquiry on 3 February 2004 after political pressure forced him to concede that there was a case concerning intelligence failures surrounding Iraq's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction.[10] Initially, the British inquiry, led by Lord Butler of Brockwell, took a very narrow view of the terms of reference and intended to focus only on 'structures, processes and systems'.[11] This had always been a contentious view within Britain and many critics of the inquiry were keen to see its remit extended to include those individuals believed to be responsible. When, and largely as a result of a dispute surrounding this issue, Michael Howard, the leader of the British Conservative Party, withdrew his support from the inquiry, Lord Butler was forced to issue a clarifying statement.[12] The inquiry committee members made it clear that they would follow the analysis wherever it led, including uncovering any faults attributable to individuals. However, according to Butler, the committee must start by looking at 'structures, processes and systems' before considering which, if any, individuals should be held accountable.

There is a social ontology playing an important political role here. The responsibility of individuals is claimed to be of secondary importance and is embedded within a wider and more causally efficacious structural context. Butler's assumption is that the real causes of intelligence failures, in relation to Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, are located

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[9] Butler (2004b).
[10] President Bush had previously been forced to concede the necessity of a similar inquiry charged with looking at US intelligence failures.
[11] Butler (2004a).   [12] Butler (2004a).

in 'structures, processes and systems'. This has major political implications. By beginning his inquiry in 'structures, processes and systems', rather than individuals, Butler has made an explicit series of choices that will influence the recommendations of the committee. However, in making this choice, it is not clear whether Butler, or any of the committee members, had a well thought-out account of what they meant by 'structures, processes and systems'. Hence, although there is a social ontology underpinning Butler's inquiry it does not appear to be a well-formulated one.

The second example represents an explicit attempt to integrate academic work on the agent–structure relationship into a policy outcome. On 22 April 1993, an eighteen-year-old black student called Stephen Lawrence was attacked and killed by a group of white youths in the south-east London suburb of Eltham. The subsequent police investigation was deemed lacklustre and the media, politicians, community leaders and Stephen's parents argued that a far-reaching investigation into the handling of the murder inquiry was necessary. In July 1997, the new Home Secretary, Jack Straw, announced the inquiry and appointed Sir William Macpherson to chair the hearing. The Lawrence public inquiry put the police and British justice as a whole on public trial. It raised allegations of systematic corruption and institutionalised racism. The idea of institutional racism was particularly contentious because it opened up the possibility that responsibility for racist acts may reside elsewhere in the social field than in the practices and intentions of individuals. Organisations, and perhaps even society itself, might be said to be racist even if the individuals upon whose activity they depend were not. The report makes a set of policy recommendations in the hope of bringing about change in race relations in Britain. Recommendations, that is, based on a set of particular ontological understandings of the social world.

These two attempts to attribute causal, and possibly moral, responsibility to collective social forms stand in stark contrast to Mrs Thatcher's assertion that 'there is no such thing as society'.[13] According to Thatcher, there are only individuals and families. Thatcher's vision of the world, based on this commitment to individuals, shaped a generation of political action in Britain and beyond.[14] The fact that politics is constructed on the basis of such visions is not surprising. Every social actor enters

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[13] Thatcher (1987).
[14] Adonis and Hames (1994); Cole (1987); Croft (1991); Kavanagh and Seldon (1989); Overbeek (1990); Riddell (1991).

into social practice on the basis of some or other social ontology. What is surprising is that the academic study of international relations has failed systematically to unpack the ontologies that underlie the political practice it professes to study. This book is an attempt to begin such a debate.

Put simply, if the agent–structure problem is an ontological problem, and if all theories, and forms of political practice, presuppose a solution to this ontological problem, then my claim is that we can learn more about the world of international relations and the way we theorise that world through an analysis of the manner in which differing theories address this problem than we can through a series of ritualised commitments to a priori epistemological positions.

Taking ontology seriously illuminates three interrelated, and equally important, aims (and associated consequences) of the argument developed in this book. First, the epistemological differences that structure theoretical debate within the discipline are deeply embedded within, and dependent upon, prior ontological positions. In order to show this, the book defends and develops a version of scientific realism as a counter to a more epistemologically orientated positivist vision of science. Second, since what divides competing theoretical positions are conflicting views of the elements and causal processes that constitute international relations, the book engages in a sustained inquiry into the social ontologies embedded within the dominant theories of IR. Taking Walker's point seriously, this is an inquiry at the level of 'basic ontological assumptions'. Consequently, the book examines how the core concepts of structure and agency are defined, developed and employed by the various theoretical positions within the discipline.

The book does not address the wider ontology of social life, which would include, inter alia, processes, practices and events as causally efficacious entities. These are obviously important elements of any social ontology. However, whilst processes, practices and events can impact on, and be constitutive of, agents and structures, they only occur in structured contexts and through the practices of agents. Hence, the explanation of processes, practices and events will require some account of agents and structures. Moreover, since agents and structures are themselves 'products-in-process', to analyse agents and structures is to examine both entities as products and processes.

In addition to examining the fundamental ontological building blocks of IR theories, I also examine them in terms of how they facilitate more or less adequate solutions to the agent–structure problem. This analysis

is firmly located at the level of metatheory. The book does not endeavour to provide a theory of international politics. Indeed, one argument of the book is that no such theory is possible. This argument follows logically from the third aim of the book, which is to examine the epistemological and methodological consequences associated with differing ontological accounts of structure and agency. The consequences of this latter analysis are radical for our understanding of the role of IR theory.

First, no general theory of IR is possible, if by this we mean a body of knowledge that facilitates prediction and control through the production of a few general laws and principles.[15] The attempt to construct a parsimonious theory of IR is not only flawed and doomed to failure, but also politically and ethically dangerous. It is dangerous, and this is an emotive word, because such theories are apt to provide scientific legitimacy for particular forms of political practice. The promotion of western forms of democracy based on the scientific validity of a theory of democratic peace is but one example of this process.[16] This is not to suggest that we should never attempt to put theory into practice. Indeed practice without theory is inconceivable.[17] However, we need to be aware of the limits of our theoretical endeavours if practice is to remain subject to the important process of political negotiation that remains an essential component of practice itself.[18]

Second, whilst the outcomes of theoretical research into IR phenomena can never produce knowledge that equates to that of the natural sciences, the general form of knowledge production in both domains is remarkably similar. This distinction between process and outcome is important in understanding why I continue to be committed to a science of IR whilst at the same time denying that IR theory can ever replicate the achievements of many (not all) of the natural sciences.

The plan of the book

The structure of the book follows logically from the overarching argument. Thus, ontological issues are analysed in more detail than epistemological or methodological ones. Chapter 1 provides the argument for the privileging of ontology over epistemology. It does so by elaborating and defending a version of scientific realism in opposition

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[15] Flyvbjerg (2001: 25–37).   [16] Cox et al. (2000).
[17] It is possible to conceive of a theory that is never put into practice; hence the relationship between theory and practice is asymmetrical.
[18] Bourdieu (1977).

to both positivist visions of science and hermeneutic (and postmodern) rejections of science as an appropriate mode of analysis for human activity. Contra Wendt,[19] however, and consistent with the argument of the book, the aim of this chapter is not to defend, or elaborate, scientific realism as an epistemology or methodology of science, but rather to use scientific realism to demonstrate why ontology is at the heart of all inquiry. As such, a substantial part of this chapter examines the particularities of social life and asks whether these have properties that might make them objects of scientific analysis. The chapter concludes that a science of the social is possible, but that important limits need to be imposed on its ambitions.

The account of scientific realism elaborated in the chapter is also rather didactic in tone. As such, it does not consist of an in-depth engagement with the criticisms that have emerged of Wendt's version of scientific realism.[20] I make no apologies for this. Many of these criticisms are based on a poor understanding of what scientific realism is, and a superficial account of what the implications of adopting it are for research practice. The chapter attempts to correct these misunderstandings by providing a clear account of what I mean by scientific realism.

There are two additional reasons for developing an account of scientific realism in relation to the agent–structure problem. First, many of the contributors to the agent–structure debate within IR theory, and beyond, have explicitly embedded their arguments in a scientific realist framework. Hence understanding scientific realism is a necessary corollary to understanding their arguments. Second, scientific realism explicitly argues for the transcendence of the science/non-science dichotomy and, as such, represents perhaps the strongest counter-argument to the idea that science is an inappropriate mode of knowledge generation for social practice.

Chapter 2 puts the agent–structure problem in the context of its historical development within social theory. I discuss the roots of the problem and examine the dominant attempts to arrive at a solution. This is an important chapter since those contributing to the agent–structure debate in IR theory have also embedded their proposals in theoretical developments taken from social theory. I use these debates from social theory to show how the agent–structure problem is essentially an ontological issue and illustrate the potential range of possible solutions as currently conceptualised. In addition, I analyse the manner in which this problem

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[19] Wendt (1999: 40).   [20] Chernoff (2002); Kratochwil (2000); Palan (2000).

has played an implicit role within IR theory, as well as briefly discussing the range of alternatives proposed by recent and explicit contributions that tackle the problem head on. Although largely a survey of the range of approaches to the agent–structure problem within social theory and IR, this chapter makes a significant contribution to our understanding of what lies at the heart of the problem.

Chapter 3 examines the agent–structure debate in IR theory in some depth. My main concern here is to show the manifold confusions that arose when the agent–structure problem was addressed by the discipline. So confusing was the debate that one pair of commentators concluded that it was not always clear that the contributors were discussing the same problem.[21] Indeed, as the debate developed it was clear that agreement could not be reached on which aspects of the problem were ontological, epistemological or methodological; and at times it was not clear just what the core of the problem was considered to be. This confusion is not surprising. As an ontological issue at the heart of all social practice, the agent–structure problem has implications that go well beyond its initial specification as a theoretical problem.

I identify five key issues that arose in the debate, two that are integral to the agent–structure problem and three that are not. First was the question of the nature of agents and structures and their interrelationship. Second, the question of differing modes of investigation required to study agents and structures respectively. Third, the issue of whether Waltz is a reductionist. Fourth, the question of whether the level-of-analysis problem and the agent–structure problem are one and the same. Fifth, the issue of the relative proportions of agential versus structural factors determining social outcomes. Of these five issues, only the first and second are properly understood as aspects of the agent–structure problem; and even then, the first takes priority over the second.

Chapter 4 examines the dominant accounts of structure that circulate within the discipline. Structure is a word that appears regularly in most accounts of international relations. Despite the regularity of its use it is not always clear what differing writers mean when using the term. What is a 'structure'? Under a positivist account of science this question was at best a meaningless distraction, and at worst a bar to the advance of science. What mattered was not what structure was, but what we thought it was and what use we could put the concept to. This positivist way of approaching the question of structure played into the hands of

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[21] Friedman and Starr (1997).

methodological individualists who likewise had no need to ask deep and searching questions of collective social forms. I identify two distinct structural traditions and five models of structure that are deployed within the discipline. Distinguishing between them is vital if we are to understand the varied approaches to structure deployed by theories of IR.

Equally, an analysis of differing accounts of structure will enable us to assess their strengths and weaknesses as well as the potential political implications of integrating them into our analysis. It is also crucial if we are to understand how international relations as a realm of human activity is structured; if indeed it is. I use two criteria to form an assessment of the validity of differing accounts of structure. First is the extent to which they help facilitate explanation of social phenomena that we might reasonably attribute to structural forces. Second is an assessment of their ability to provide an integration of agents and structures into one account.

Chapter 5 performs a similar analysis in relation to agency. If the analysis of the concept of structure (with some notable exceptions) within the discipline is underdeveloped, the situation in respect of agency is nothing less than a dereliction of duty. I am aware of no systematic disciplinary treatment of the concept of agency; this despite the fact that it is a term that features regularly in the vocabulary of most theoretical approaches. Nor am I referring here to the absence of a rigorous treatment of the key unit of analysis within the discipline (the state), even though this absence is indictment enough.[22] My concern is with the deeper ontological issue of what is agency? What entities can legitimately be called agents? How do differing theories conceptualise their key agents, and what are the conditions of possibility for effective agency? The chapter proceeds by examining the theory of the state agency embedded within recent attempts to transcend the agent–structure problem. On the basis of this analysis, I then turn my attention to views of social action and introduce some important theoretical distinctions between differing types of social actors. The chapter also explicates a theory of agency and attempts to connect this to issues of political agency through an analysis what is meant by 'state agency'.

Chapter 6 examines the epistemological issues that emerge when considering the agent–structure problem. These have generally revolved around the issue of whether or not IR can be a science. In particular,

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[22] Hobson (2000).

contemporary debate on this issue has centred on the problematic issue of a *via media* between positivist and postpositivist approaches. I attempt to demonstrate just why this epistemological view of the *via media* is wrong. In short, my claim is not that the *via media* is impossible, but that it is not necessary. It is not necessary because there are simply no epistemological differences that provide insurmountable barriers to the testing of knowledge claims, and differing theoretical positions are not closed modes of thought, but rather are always already deeply integrated and constructed out of engagements with each other. As such, an epistemological *via media* is not necessary because there is nothing epistemologically fundamental to bridge. Hence, whilst this chapter is ostensibly concerned with epistemology, its underlying aim is to put 'epistemology in its place'. Epistemology has an important role to play in both politics and research practice, but it is a role that is supervenient on ontological issues.

Chapter 7 is concerned with the methodological issues that emerge in discussion of the agent–structure problem. Once again, my aim is to show how many of the issues traditionally claimed to be methodological actually have a basis in competing ontologies. The chapter begins with an examination of methodology. Following this, I show how the distinction between 'Explaining' and 'Understanding' is methodological not epistemological. However, I also show how these methodological differences are firmly embedded with ontological considerations. As such, an understanding of these ontologies is logically prior to understanding the possibility of a methodological account that can incorporate both 'Explaining' and 'Understanding'. This methodological discussion has important implications for our understandings of theory and I introduce a distinction between two types of theory to illuminate this. These are 'structural understanding' and 'historical (or narrative) understanding'.[23] These two types of theory constitute differing analytical moments of the research process, but importantly 'structural understanding' takes priority, since 'historical understanding' is seen to be a form of narrative that links causes together in a meaningful sequence. As such, 'historical understanding' deploys 'structural understanding' in its explanations. The same is not true of 'structural understanding', which can exist, and be of value, independently of 'historical understanding'.

Taken as a whole, the book is not an attempt to explain why IR is on the wrong track, and how it got there. These important issues will form

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[23] Lloyd (1993).

the subject of a second volume that will deal with *International Relations and the Idea of Science*. In this book, I want to show how ontological issues can have epistemological and/or methodological consequences, but also practical ones of an ethico-political nature. Through the 'ontological investigations' which follow I also hope to show how, contrary to received opinion, some of the problems of IR theory can be rationally resolved and offer diagnostic clues to the nature of social, political, economic and ethical issues within the realm under study.

The attempt to proceed with research in advance of the kind of ontological studies conducted in this book, or the reduction of all theoretical disputes into debates over methodology and epistemology, presumes, as Walker notes, 'that we have acceptable answers to questions about what kind of world it is that we are trying to know'.[24] IR presumes too much if it presumes this. As such, a conceptual inquiry into the nature of the objects in that part of the social world we call international relations must necessarily precede any empirical investigation. In this sense what IR theory needs is, first and foremost, some 'ontological investigations'.

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[24] Walker (1993: 85).

1 IR: a science without positivism?

In this chapter, I situate the account of science that underpins my position in relation to a number of competing perspectives on science and social science. The obvious way to do so would be to describe my position in terms of one of the dominant epistemological 'self-images' of the discipline.[1] Given my scepticism towards these 'self-images', however, such an approach is not possible. An alternative might be to situate my perspective in terms of persons rather than paradigms.[2] In part, this is inevitable given the strictures of scholarly practice, although this also has its problems. Importantly, when I ground my position in persons it is only in terms of those specific arguments with which I am concerned. A reference to a given figure should not be taken to imply complete agreement with everything they say.

In the contemporary social theoretic imbroglio, it is difficult not to situate one's position in relation to positivism. Positivism constitutes, not only the standard around which the mainstream is said to converge, and the focal point around which non-mainstream approaches situate their criticisms, but also, perhaps, the definition of science itself. This is a serious error, and the aim in this chapter is to take issue with any attempt to treat positivism and science as co-extensive terms and to sketch the outlines of a non-positivist theory of science and, *mutatis mutandis*, a social science not constructed on positivist foundations. In sketching such an account, I also hope to illuminate some of the confusions surrounding the label 'positivism' and to show how a non-positivist account of IR can accommodate many of the so-called 'postpositivist' criticisms of positivism without regressing into a debilitating, and potentially relativistic, anti-science stance. The account of science articulated in this chapter

[1] Smith (1995).   [2] Waever (1997).

can be understood as broadly consistent with that of Alexander Wendt.[3] Both Wendt and I advocate a form of scientific realism. However, there are differences, both in terms of our respective understandings of scientific realism and in terms of the consequences we draw. Most important in terms of the aim of this chapter is Wendt's claim to be a positivist.[4] My position is that a consistent scientific realism must eventually lead to a wholesale rejection of positivism. Understanding why this is the case, however, requires a deeper philosophical understanding of positivism than that currently employed in the discipline.

Positivism

Contemporary social science is structured by a series of seemingly irresolvable antinomies: individualism versus collectivism, constructivism versus realism, objectivism versus subjectivism, materialism versus idealism, mind versus matter, macro versus micro, and agency versus structure. These antinomies are both derivative of, and constitutive of, a problem that challenges the very status of social science itself: 'To what extent can society be studied in the same way as nature?'[5] This is the issue of naturalism. The agent–structure debate in IR highlighted how closely the issue of naturalism is related to the agent–structure problem. In many ways, the agent–structure problem is structured by a series of responses to the question of naturalism. As such, it can be cast in the guise of a Cartesian–Kantian two-worlds problem, where mind and body, noumena and phenomena, agents and structures are seen as distinct realms, each generating its own particular epistemological and methodological problem-sets and/or resolutions. The world of agents is the subjective realm of individual choice, whereas structure refers to an objective realm of impersonal forces. Once this mode of thinking is accepted, the need for two separate and irreconcilable modes of inquiry seems self-evident. I disagree. The separation of ideational content from the material conditions of possibility for such content is fundamentally flawed and, in the form it has developed in social science, is partly the result of an adherence to a flawed account of science.

Whenever internecine warfare breaks out within the social sciences, the issue of naturalism, or a version of it, plays some role. The development of IR theory, for example, is often understood in terms of three

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[3] Wendt (1999).   [4] Wendt (1999: 39).
[5] Bhaskar (1979: 1). See Hollis (1996) for a consideration of this issue within IR.

so-called great debates.[6] In all of these 'great debates' the issue of naturalism, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, was a key factor. In the first great debate – between realists and idealists – Carr claimed that the difference between realism and idealism was similar to that between alchemy and chemistry.[7] This distinction was important for Carr; it highlighted the fact that realism purported to be a science whereas idealism/utopianism was little more than ideological wish-fulfilment. The second debate focused primarily on methodological issues and was driven by conflicting accounts of how to conduct social scientific research.[8] The third debate has been the most explicit in terms of examining the status of social science and hence the role of naturalism has been made clear.[9]

In all of the debates the underlying logic concerning the issue of naturalism is similar and two traditions are typically represented. The first – the naturalist tradition – asserts that there is, or can be, an essential unity in method between the natural and social sciences. The second – the anti-naturalist hermeneutic tradition – posits a radical distinction in method between the natural and social sciences.[10] Despite the substantial differences which separate these two traditions, they are united in their acceptance of an essentially positivist account of natural science.[11]

Any resolution of the naturalist/anti-naturalist dichotomy is dependent upon the answers given to two prior questions. First is the status of science itself. The question of whether the methods of the natural sciences are applicable to the social sciences will depend upon what those methods are. If the practices of scientists are not conducted according to positivist criteria, as contemporary accounts within the philosophy of science would seem to suggest, then it may be time to reconsider and redraw the parameters of the naturalism/anti-naturalism divide.[12] Second is the nature of the social. For even if we can agree on the science issue, we are still left with a question concerning the extent to which

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[6] See, for example, Schmidt (1998, 2002); Smith (1995).
[7] Carr (1946: 1–11).   [8] Bull (1969); Kaplan (1969).
[9] Biersteker (1989); George (1989); Holsti (1989); Lapid (1989); for a critique see Waever (1996).
[10] Bauman (1978); Dreyfus and Hall (1982); Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982); Gadamer and Linge (1976); Gadamer et al. (1988); Ginev (1997); Lindholm (1981); Martinez (1997); Outhwaite (1975); Roy (1993).
[11] Bhaskar (1989: 66).
[12] Chalmers (1992); Feyerabend (1975); Harding (1991); Kuhn (1970b); Psillos (1999).

our agreed framework might be applicable to the study of social objects. This chapter is primarily concerned with the first of these questions – the status of science – but in answering this question the ontology of social life must necessarily be addressed.

All of the structurationist writers who have contributed to the agent–structure problem in IR theory have grounded their claims in a scientific realist philosophy of science.[13] Hollis and Smith, on the other hand, whilst aware of scientific realism, continue to adopt a positivist vision of science.[14] This accounts for many of the misunderstandings; science means different things to different people. And accounts of science are built on metaphysical foundations.[15] The idea that the natural and social sciences require radically differing, and potentially incommensurable, modes of inquiry is underpinned by the same mind/body split, and account of science, which scientific realism directly contradicts.[16] In short, contemporary disciplinary practice equates science with positivism. Even Wendt, whilst fully aware that scientific realist accounts of science directly contradict positivism, declares himself a positivist because of his commitment to science.[17]

Science and positivism are not synonyms for one another. Positivism is a theory/philosophy of science. And there are alternative theories/philosophies of science. The position advocated in this book is based on a scientific realist account of science. As an alternative to the positivist model of science, scientific realism is poorly understood within the discipline.[18] Wendt provides a solid introduction and, as already noted, many of the key arguments advanced in this chapter replicate and support his account.[19] However, Wendt's confusing claim regarding his own positivism and his attempt to construe his position as a *via media* reinforce disciplinary self-images rather than fundamentally challenge them. Scientific realism does not supply a *via media* between two unacceptable extremes, but provides a way of demonstrating what

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[13] By 'structurationist writers' I am referring to those contributors to the agent–structure debate who explicitly ground their work in either Bhaskar or Giddens. This is a problematic category that will undergo critique as the argument of the book develops.
[14] Although Smith advocates scientific realism in the closing dialogue. Hollis and Smith (1990: 207).
[15] This is the import of the Whitehead excerpt cited by Wendt (1999).
[16] Hollis and Smith (1990).   [17] Wendt (1999: 39).
[18] See, for example, Chernoff (2002) and Kratochwil (2000). Krasner (2000: 131) argues that Wendt's introduction to scientific realism should be required reading for any student of international politics.
[19] Wendt (1999). See also Dessler (1989); Patomäki (2002); Patomäki and Wight (2000).

the extremes share in common, as well as situating a genuine alternative to both.[20]

The orthodox, positivist account of science has come under sustained attack from a range of sources in the latter part of the twentieth century.[21] When considering these critiques it is important not to lapse into the kind of criticism that dismisses positivism as a hopelessly naive and outmoded doctrine.[22] Many of the key components of a positivist account of science are highly flawed, but it is not acceptable to dismiss them out of hand. The scientific realist critique of positivism takes issue with many of the fundamentals of positivism, but it does so out of a sincere commitment to science as a valid practice in terms of knowledge generation, and importantly, one that can be extended to cover the social world. But this should not be taken to imply that science is considered the only valid form of knowledge. Much less is science the supreme form. Knowing how to 'go on', buy newspapers, cook dinner, watch TV and engage in a range of other human activities all require valid knowledge, knowledge which would not necessarily be considered scientific. What marks scientific knowledge out from other forms of knowledge is that it attempts to go beyond appearances and provide explanations at a deeper level of understanding. This implies that the scientist believes that there is a world beyond the appearances that helps explain those appearances. Hence, empiricist theories of science are always going to be found wanting.

Understood as the attempt to go beyond appearances and provide explanations at a deeper level of understanding, many, if not all, the dominant positions within contemporary IR are rightly deserving of the label science. Equally, and despite avowals to the contrary, insofar as they do attempt to go beyond appearances and refer to deeper processes, all such approaches reply on an implicit (sometimes explicit) realist metaphysic.[23] Typically, however, and because of well-founded

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[20] At times, Wendt seems to indicate just this, and many of his most cogent points suggest important similarities between the more radical extremes of both positivism and post-positivism. See Wendt (1999: 49, 67, 90). For an explanation of the similarities see Patomäki and Wight (2000).

[21] It is not possible here to document fully the breadth and depth of the attacks on the positivist orthodoxy. However, a good survey of this literature can be found in Oldroyd (1986). See also Chalmers (1992).

[22] George (1994) comes close to adopting this tone.

[23] Wendt (1999: 90). This is even the case in those instances where authors explicitly deny it. Chernoff (2002), for example, attempts to refute the role of this commitment to philosophical realism, but his critique only makes sense if we conclude that the explanations he does provide tell us something that we did not previously know. Hence, his own explanation already implies a depth ontology.

concerns over proliferating ontological claims regarding non-observable entities, many philosophies of science have taken an instrumental (non-realist) view of theoretical terms. Indeed, some of the more sceptical positions within philosophy, and some versions of contemporary post-structuralism, even take an instrumentalist (non-realist) view of observable entities. The debate between a realist and anti-realist philosophy of science is the fundamental metaphysical issue that structures competing philosophies of science.

Positivism, in attempting to limit the legitimate boundaries of knowledge claims, took an anti-realist metaphysical position and privileged the methodological elements of knowledge construction. According to the positivist model of science, there is a general set of rules, procedures and axioms, which when taken together constitutes the 'scientific method'. Although the various strands of the positivist tradition may disagree over the exact content and form of these axioms, the need to define them is common to all versions.[24] Michael Nicholson, for example, one of the most sophisticated defenders of positivism in IR, suggests that a commitment to the 'covering law model of explanation', or something like it, is a necessary component of all science.[25] Scientific realism, on the other hand, sees the 'covering law model' as neither necessary nor sufficient for any model of science.[26] But it is not just the 'covering law model' which scientific realism rejects; it is the very attempt to demarcate a 'scientific method'. For scientific realists there can be no single 'scientific method'. Understood as the attempt to provide depth explanations of phenomena, it must be the case that differing phenomena will require differing modes of investigation and perhaps different models of explanation. Contra positivism, then, for scientific realists, the content of science is not the method.[27]

The differences between a positivist model of science and a scientific realist account derive not from methodological concerns, but from fundamental metaphysical (hence ontological) issues, which then feed into methodological matters. For some versions of positivism, this would be a contentious claim. The more radical versions of positivism deny the validity of metaphysics. I take it, however, that the more radical versions of positivism are not a valid target, since very few contemporary positivists would wish to defend the extreme versions.[28] There is little

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[24] Halfpenny (1982).   [25] Nicholson (1996).   [26] Bhaskar (1997: 12).
[27] King et al. (1994: 9) take the opposite view; quoting Karl Pearson (1892) they argue that 'the unity of all science consists alone in its method'.
[28] Nicholson (1996: 18).

point in aiming a critique at radical positions that are not actively held by anyone; although sadly many of the critiques of positivism within the discipline are directed at only the most radical versions.[29] By focusing my critique on the metaphysics of positivism, on the other hand, I hope to avoid some of the problems encountered by other accounts of positivism articulated within the discipline.

Steve Smith provides a prime facie well-developed account of positivism that has been accepted by many within the discipline.[30] According to Smith, positivists generally adhere to four fundamental assumptions, or rules. These are (1) the unity of science thesis, (2) the distinction between facts and values, (3) the belief in regularities and (4) a commitment to an empiricist epistemology.[31] Yet Smith's own attempt to spell out these four essential characteristics of positivism begs the question of how many of the chosen principles a given theorist need commit to before being deserving of the label.

Equally, Smith's account is essentially positivist in his own terms: (1) Smith must believe that there are people who regularly hold such views (his regularity principle); (2) Smith can only be understood as asserting that his account of positivism accurately reflects something of the 'facts' of the position and these four principles are not simply a reflection of his values (the fact/value distinction); (3) Smith supplies empirical evidence in support of his factual claims (the commitment to empirical validation); (4) Smith applies all of these principles to a social object (positivism) (the commitment to the unity of science). Hence, Smith's account of positivism is a positivist account if his definition is correct. The point of this is not to demonstrate that positivists would reject Smith's four criteria. In fact, most positivists would accept them. But then so would many others who would not wish to be considered positivists; and many more would implicitly rely on these assumptions in their practices (including Smith himself). To get around this problem we need a deeper analysis of positivism that demonstrates why positivists generally hold these views.

I view positivism as a general philosophical outlook that is primarily orientated towards the development of an account of science. As such, it is only one account of what constitutes science, and the metaphysical principles to which it adheres are important if we are to understand it. There are many versions of positivism and much that divides those who

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[29] See, for example, George (1994).
[30] Smith (1996); see also Adler (2002).   [31] Smith (1996: 15–16).

claim to be positivists.[32] However, these caveats aside, positivism can be characterised in the following manner. (1) Phenomenalism: the doctrine that holds that we cannot get beyond the way things appear to us and thereby obtain reliable knowledge of reality – in other words, appearances, not realities, are the only objects of knowledge. (2) Nominalism: the doctrine that there is no objective meaning to the words we use – words and concepts do not pick out any actual objects or universal aspects of reality, they are simply conventional symbols or names that we happen to use for our own convenience. (3) Cognitivism: the doctrine that holds that no cognitive value can be ascribed to value judgements and normative statements. (4) Naturalism: the belief that there is an essential unity of scientific method such that the social sciences can be studied in the same manner as natural science.[33]

From these philosophical assumptions, most positivists adhere to the following beliefs about the practice of science. (1) The acceptance of the 'covering law model' of explanation (often referred to as the Deductive-Nomological or D-N model). An explanation is only valid if it invokes a law that covers, in the sense of entailing, all cases of the phenomena to be explained. (2) An instrumentalist treatment of theoretical terms. Theoretical terms do not refer to real entities, but such entities are to be understood 'as if' they existed in order to explain the empirical phenomena; there is no epistemological warrant (grounds for belief) that such entities really exist; the proper way to evaluate theoretical concepts and propositions is not through the categories of truth and falsity but through judging their effectiveness. (3) A commitment to the Humean account of cause. To say that event *a* necessitated event *b* need be to say no more than 'when *a* occurred, so did *b*'. This leads to causal laws being interpreted as 'constant conjunctions'. (4) A commitment to operationalism, which entails that the concepts of science be operationalised – that they be defined by, and their meaning limited to, the concrete operations used in their measurement. For example, the meaning of a mental term is exhausted, and solely measured, by the observable operations that determine its use. So 'Jane is thirsty' means Jane says she is thirsty if asked, drinks water if given the chance, and so on.

It is important to note that there is a close relationship between the philosophical assumptions and the proposed account of scientific practice. In particular, the commitment to phenomenalism and nominalism is directly related to the commitment to the instrumentalist treatment

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[32] Halfpenny (1982).   [33] Kolakowski (1969).

of theoretical terms, the Humean account of cause and the covering law model. The principle of phenomenalism, for example, entails an instrumentalist treatment of anything that is said to be beyond experience. The principle of nominalism reinforces this instrumentalism since words and concepts are claimed to be simply conventional symbols or names that we happen to use for our own convenience. Moreover, the phenomenalist belief that we cannot get beyond the way things appear to us, and thereby obtain reliable knowledge of reality, necessitates some version of the Humean account of cause.

Hume was radically sceptical about the persistence and existence of reality outside the human mind and perceptions. For Hume, there are only perceptions based upon impressions, and ideas, which, if they are justified, can only be legitimated on the basis of experience. That is, he claimed that there is nothing outside an individual's perceptions/experience. In common with most sceptics, Hume was deriving ontological arguments from epistemological ones. Since we could never know there was an external reality, the only reality we could legitimately refer to was that which could be experienced.[34]

As with most sceptics, in practice, Hume adhered to a form of empirical realism. But in limiting what can be meaningfully said of the world to what could be experienced, Hume faced a difficult problem vis-à-vis causation. Hume noted that a common-sense understanding of causality involves the notion of force through which the cause somehow produces the effect; in essence a necessary connection. But, and as a result of his scepticism, Hume argued that since no such force or necessary connection can be empirically verified (experienced), such a common-sense understanding is in error. For Hume, causation is just one of the three 'bonds that unite our thoughts together'.[35] All we ever observe, he argued, is the constant conjunction of events. Given this, the commitment to the D-N model of explanation becomes inevitable.

Thus the philosophical assumptions that underpin positivism play a fundamental role in the account of cause that is accepted. From an anti-realist perspective, there is simply no warrant, given that existence is a function of being experienced, for the belief in non-observable causal mechanisms. Rejecting these deep philosophical assumptions can lead

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[34] Also according to Hume, since experience could not be divorced from a subject which experiences, he concluded that the 'science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences' and the basis of this science of man can only be that of experience and observation. Hume (1967: 88).

[35] Hume (1962: 50).

to the development of a fundamentally different account of science and once we have a different account of science the question of naturalism needs to be readdressed.

Scientific realism

The approach to philosophy

It is important to note that the scientific realism advocated here begins by placing some rigorous limits on its scope of application. These limitations are derived from the mode of argumentation employed to arrive at the philosophical assumptions underpinning the account of science. For Roy Bhaskar, the philosophy of science examines a specific set of existing practices, in this case science, and as such, it provides no transhistorical transcendent truths. The approach is transcendental in the sense of examining the conditions of possibility for a given set of practices, in this instance science.[36] Because philosophy has as its object of inquiry a set of actually existing social practices – again in this case science – it is always a historically located enterprise. The most it may aspire to is the possible enunciation of insights pertaining to those practices from which the arguments are derived. There can be no philosophy in general, but only the philosophy of particular, historically determinate, social forms. The specific topic that forms the object of concern for any philosophy provides premises for its arguments and potential referents for its conclusions. This both historically embeds it and establishes its particular character. No philosophy can consider itself privileged by some special (high) subject matter or (superior) mode of truth.[37]

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[36] Bhaskar labels his approach transcendental to indicate the close links to Kant. It is not identical with Kant's transcendental approach. For Kant, transcendental logic is the apparatus of concepts and principles, common to all rational minds, that organises experience and is thus logically prior to it. Thus for Kant, transcendental inquiry would be one in which a critical philosophy works out the presuppositions of our knowledge. In effect, the question: 'What must be the case for knowledge to be possible?' Having established these presuppositions they must be considered ahistorically, existing as they do prior to experience. It is for this reason that Kant labelled his philosophy 'Transcendental Idealism'. Bhaskar, on the other hand, asks the question: 'What must be the case for science to be possible?' Now, insofar as science is a human practice with a discernible history, Bhaskar's conclusions cannot be ahistorical; that is, they provide no timeless routes to secure knowledge. Moreover, since Bhaskar's concern is with both the ontological and the epistemological conditions of possibility for science it is simply incorrect to view him as giving ontology priority over epistemology. Science makes no sense without both dimensions.
[37] Bhaskar (1986: 12).

Equally, the analysis of the conditions of possibility for science does not legitimate, or depend upon, particular scientific theories, but makes the more fundamental claim that reality itself must be of a certain form if science itself is to be possible. Scientific realism is derived from the practice of science, not particular existing scientific theories; such theories are always in principle revisable and/or refutable.

This is an important point. Many of the rejections of scientific realism within IR suggest that because some of the theoretical entities postulated in theories have turned out not to exist then scientific realism itself is problematised.[38] This view rests on a mistaken understanding of the claims of scientific realism. Scientific realism suggests not that the theoretical entities postulated in all scientific theories must have existed at some point in time, but only that science progresses because in their practices scientists set out to test the reality of the proposed mechanisms. Some may exist, and some may not, but it is the attempt to differentiate between the two that drives the scientific enterprise on. Scientific realism makes intelligible what scientists do; it does not require the assumption that all claims relating to theoretical objects are necessarily correct. Indeed, no matter how much epistemological support there may be for the existence of a given theoretical entity, the ontological question of whether or not it exists is independent of the epistemological claims. This makes scientific realism a necessarily fallibilist enterprise.[39] Again, this fallibilism at the heart of scientific realism runs counter to claims that scientific realism rests on the naive view that science uncovers truths of the world, which once discovered are immutable. For scientific realists the productions of science are always open to revision and reformulation. The dialectic of science is never ending and no scientific discovery, or claim, is ever beyond critique.

The scientific realist approach to the philosophy of science, in particular, and philosophy in general, indicates a reversal of a long-standing philosophical orthodoxy and a turn away from epistemological concerns to those of ontology. Since Kant's 'epistemological turn' philosophers have prefaced their inquiries about the nature of *being* with discussions of the fundamental limits of human knowledge.[40] The roots of this 'epistemological turn' can be traced to the scepticism of David Hume. Hume's scepticism awoke Kant from his 'dogmatic slumbers'. Kant's answer to this scepticism was to defend science and its objectivity, but

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[38] Kratochwil (2000).   [39] Peirce (1940).
[40] It might be more accurate to see this epistemological turn as beginning with Descartes.

only at the price of cutting his ontological cloth to fit his epistemological givens. Kant argued that the world is intelligible only because it is inscribed in the structures of human understanding.[41]

If there is incontestable scientific knowledge and an objective world order, argued Kant, it emanates from the universal categories of human understanding – not the inexorable nature of the world.[42] Whilst Kant accepted the existence of a 'thing-in-itself' we could never know it. Time, space, form, content and meaning, in effect the phenomenal world that we confront in our day-to-day mediations, were all categories, and a consequence, of the human mind. The practical effect of giving priority to the epistemological question of what we can know over the ontological question of what there is to know, however, has been an impoverished ontology, in which what there is must, in principle, be knowable to the human mind. What there is has become dependent upon what could be known. This problem has become most acute in empiricist philosophies of science where what lay beyond experience could not be said to exist and *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived) became the motto of the day.[43]

For realist philosophies of science, to be is more than to be perceived and the nature of the object itself may well place limits on what we can know of it and how we might come to know it.[44] The knowledge we might gain of sub-atomic particles, for example, will differ from the knowledge we might gain of societies because sub-atomic particles and societies are differing types of thing. In this respect, scientific realism can be understood as an endorsement of Paul Feyerabend's methodological claim that 'anything goes'.[45] The attempt to specify epistemological and/or methodological criteria for science in advance of ontological commitments is an act of unnecessary closure. Any discourse on epistemology or methodology is bound to be more or less arbitrary without a prior specification of an object of inquiry. Epistemological questions cannot be settled in advance of, or distinct from, ontological questions.

The relativisation and historicisation of epistemological claims regarding science validates the realist move to ontology and provides a more open, less dogmatic approach to epistemological matters. This is not to say that ontological statements can be dogmatically asserted. All ontological assertions will require some form of epistemological

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[41] Kant (1934).   [42] Kant (1934: 26, 87–89, 171–177).
[43] The full phrase is *esse est aut percipere aut percipi* (to be is to perceive or to be perceived), which makes room both for experiences and for experiencers. Berkeley (1988: para. 3).
[44] Outhwaite (1987).   [45] Feyerabend (1975).

support.[46] The scientific realist approach to epistemological concerns is to reject 'epistemological monism' in favour of epistemological opportunism.[47] This can be viewed as a rejection of all attempts to build robust epistemological fortresses that allow us to 'be certain of our experiences but not about that of which they are experiences (the external world, other minds, or even our own bodies)'.[48]

Understood as the attempt to provide depth explanations, however, a series of metaphysical commitments is still implied. Broadly put, I consider these to be: ontological realism (that there is a reality independent of the mind(s) that would wish to come to know it); epistemological relativism (that all beliefs are socially produced); and judgemental rationalism (that despite epistemological relativism, it is still possible, in principle, to choose between competing theories).

Ontological realism

Every theory of knowledge must logically presuppose a theory of what the world is like (ontology), for knowledge (epistemology) to be possible. In which case, all philosophies, cognitive discourses and practical activities presuppose a realism – in the sense of some ontology or general account of the world – of one kind or another.[49] The question is not whether to be a realist, but of what kind. The history of philosophy is replete with examples of philosophers, often self-professed idealists, who are forced in one way or another to be realists about something: Plato about the *forms*; Hegel about *Geist*; Berkeley about *God*; Hume about his own *scepticism* and *sensations*; Nietzsche about *will to power*; Derrida about the *text*.

For good reasons philosophical realism is an unfashionable position within contemporary social theorising.[50] Realism normally implies that objects have a mind-independent existence. Social objects clearly violate this principle: no people, no social objects. Social objects depend upon minds. This has led all manner of positions to declare that 'reality is a social construct',[51] or that 'there is nothing outside of discourse'.[52] And there is something important to these claims as a result of well-founded epistemological humility regarding existential claims.

Contemporary anti-realism can be traced, on the one hand, to the rejections of, and attempts to transcend, positivism, which is wrongly believed to adhere to philosophical realism; and, on the other hand, to

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[46] Wight (1999).   [47] Morrow and Brown (1994).   [48] Outhwaite (1987: 19).
[49] Bhaskar (1989: 2).   [50] See Hacking (1999).
[51] Berger and Luckmann (1967).   [52] Campbell (2001).

the twentieth-century fascination with linguistics. As should be clear the first is simply mistaken. Positivism has always been an anti-realist philosophical position. Indeed, all empiricist theories of knowledge are anti-realist at bottom, even though they try to finesse their way to speaking of an independent world.[53]

When positivists overtly espouse realism it is at best an empirical realism as opposed to the depth realism enunciated by scientific realism. The linguistic/conceptual (anti-)realists, on the other hand, are forced into theory/practice inconsistency and affirm in their practices that which they seek to deny.[54] Even contemporary postmodern sceptics wish us to take their pronouncements as 'real'. Incisive here is the notion of 'referential detachment', which is the detachment of the act of reference from that to which it refers.[55] Referential detachment establishes the difference between the reference and that to which is being referred, as well as the possibility of another reference to it; which is a condition of possibility for intelligible discourse about any form of object. Discourse, even if taken to be about itself, must be objectified as a real social entity for us, or anyone else, to refer to it again, e.g. for the purposes of clarification of its meaning. Thus, for example, when faced by a sceptic who wishes to state their scepticism, we need only ask them to repeat or clarify the meaning of their initial statement. To do so they must regard their initial statement, or its content, as a socially real entity that is external to them.

Realism, then, is a practical presupposition of all human activity. That we can only know things under certain descriptions does not negate the ontological status of that to which we refer. Rather, it makes it imperative that we clearly distinguish between 'things' and the way we 'talk about things'. Any coherent account of being and knowledge of being must take seriously the proposition that 'to be' is more than 'to be perceived'.[56] If there is a distinction we can draw between that which *is* and that which is *perceived*, and between the real and the imaginary, it hardly seems credible, except in extreme circumstances, that we should knowingly prefer the latter to the former. Our ability to survive in the world relies upon our ability to distinguish between the real and the imaginary.[57]

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[53] Hollis (1996: 303–304).
[54] See Wendt's comments in relation to Roxanne Lynn Doty, for example (2000). The existence of such theory/practice inconsistencies and splits is often a distinguishing mark of incorrect philosophical arguments, and as such, can provide a weapon of immanent critique. See Bhaskar (1993b: 51, 117, 299; 1994: 65–66).
[55] Bhaskar (1994: 257).   [56] Outhwaite (1987: 1).   [57] Bunge (1993).

Of course, we can only know things under certain descriptions.[58] But there is no inference from 'there is no way to know a thing except under a particular description' to 'there is no way to know that that thing exists (and acts) independently of its particular description (and descriptions in general)'.[59] If humanity ceased to exist we have good grounds for assuming that sound would continue to travel and that heavy bodies would fall to the earth in exactly the same way; although obviously there would be no one to know it.[60]

Empirical realists and contemporary linguistic/conceptual realists both commit two closely related philosophical errors. The first consists in the way both positions define the real. Whereas the former defines the world in terms of our experience of it, the latter defines it in terms of our theories and/or linguistic conventions. Both give an epistemological category an ontological task. This is an error that Bhaskar calls the 'epistemic fallacy': the transposing of epistemological arguments into ontological ones.[61] This is clearest in positivism where all that we can know is what we can experience and what we cannot experience has a mere methodological function, but no ontological import. But statements about being cannot be reduced to, and/or analysed solely in terms of, statements about our knowledge of being.

The second error consists in the belief that the possibility of being experienced or the possibility of being conceptualised, and/or talked about, is an essential feature of reality itself. This assumption is unwarranted. There is no reason to assume that all of existence might be susceptible to human cognition. What empirical realism and linguistic/conceptual realism both overlook is a causal criterion for the ascription of something as real. Of course, given the prevalence of the Humean account of causation this is hardly surprising. On a realist ontology, on the other hand, being is independent of human experience and/or expressions of it. Indeed, 'all science would be superfluous if the outward appearances and essences of things directly coincided'.[62] Science, then, is driven by a commitment to a deep realism, and not just an empirical realism. The understanding of science as a social practice requires the depth realism suggested by scientific realism.[63]

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[58] Bhaskar (1979: 250). [59] Bhaskar (1991: 24). [60] Bhaskar (1978: 21).
[61] Bhaskar (1997: 36–38). [62] Marx (1966: ch. 48).
[63] Chernoff (2002) argues that science does not need this depth realism. However, whilst his points concerning the conventionality of all science are well taken – indeed scientific realism would insist on it – the realism issue refuses to go away. The role of conventionalism in science is important, but it does not provide an exhaustive account of what drives

A commitment to depth realism presupposes that there are things, entities, structures and/or mechanisms that operate and exist independently of our ability to know or manipulate them. It also presupposes that appearances do not exhaust reality, that there are things going on, as it were, beyond and behind the appearances that are not immediately accessible to our senses. The laws of nature, the entities, structures or mechanisms which are often not empirically 'observable', are what Bhaskar terms the 'intransitive objects of knowledge' and exist independently of (wo)man and independently of his/her ability to know them.

Science is possible, then, because the world consists of 'intransitive' objects which form the focus of scientific discourses; with the aim of science, in particular, being the production of knowledge of mechanisms that in certain combinations produce the phenomena that are actually manifest in experience/appearance. Moreover, if experimental practices and findings are to retain their credibility, the causal source of the regularities identified in experimental settings must refer to a stratum of reality that is not directly given in experience and which endures outside the artificially constructed closure of experimental situations. The causal laws that science has discovered must be transcontextual – that is, must operate in open and closed systems alike – if we are to make any sense of the application of science outside the confines of tight experimental closure. The clarity and order that appears to accompany law-like regularities in the laboratory often disappears when we attempt to explain outcomes in the open world of everyday life. Thus, the objects of scientific inquiry are not only constant conjunctions or other such empirical regularities, but also the structures or mechanisms that generate such phenomena. This suggests that the Humean account of cause as 'constant conjunctions' is inadequate.

If causality is not to be equated with sets of constant conjunctions, what is it? To make sense of the scientific enterprise, causality must be understood in terms of the intrinsic nature of what is being studied, the interactions between that and other things, and the causal powers and liabilities involved.[64] A scientific realist causal account would involve

science on, particularly if we wish to explain the inherently sceptical nature of the scientific enterprise. No matter how much general agreement there might be concerning core issues of any science, the practice of scientists is to take any, and every, claim as potentially subject to doubt. Only the commitment to realism can explain this constant process of critical inquiry. Indeed, a conventional account of science would tend towards conservativism.
[64] Bhaskar (1978: 229–238); Psillos (2002); Tooley (1987).

the theoretical identification of these structures and mechanisms and their causal powers. The explanation identification and cataloguing of the powers, effects and liabilities these entities possess and produce, not prediction, becomes the object of scientific knowledge. In effect, many of the crucial questions in science are concerned, not with the mapping of causal relations in time, but with the causal power of entities, structures and mechanisms.[65]

Surface forms or phenomena, and our experiences of them, do not exhaust the real. What we experience is the result of a complex interaction of these structures and mechanisms, which in controlled experimental conditions produce law-like regularities. If we are to make sense of how this experimental knowledge is then put into practice in open systems, then these same entities must also generate effects in the world beyond the laboratory, but devoid of the interventions of scientists not in the same clean, recurrent stream of cause and effect. Outside the human-induced effects of experimental closure they are part of a natural interactional complexity that results sometimes in particular causal relations, whilst at other times in the suppressing or complete neutralisation of the generative effects in question.

Experimental activity and the manufacturing of constant conjunctions can be seen as an attempt to intervene in nature, and suppress these counteracting forces, in the hope of isolating specific mechanisms.[66] As such, the Humean concept of causation, based as it is upon constant conjunctions, is also dependent upon closed systems.[67] In open systems, on the other hand, laws can only be universal if they are interpreted in a non-empirical way; that is, as designating the potential (in)activity of structures and generative mechanisms, which are not reducible to, and act independently of, any particular set of constant conjunctions.

This account of cause differs in substantial ways from those positivist accounts that dominate the discipline. A good, and influential account of the positivist view of causation is provided by King, Keohane and Verba.[68] First, these authors treat causality as only a *theoretical* concept, not a real force in the world.[69] This means that their analysis is focused on causation as measurement of change. Second, their account is clearly a very strong Humean account. In fact, according to King et al., causality can be defined in terms of 'causal effect'.[70] And causal effect is the 'difference between the systematic component of observations made when

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[65] This is what Wendt (1998) refers to as 'constitutive' theory.
[66] Hacking (1983). [67] Bhaskar (1978: 33–55). [68] King et al. (1994)
[69] King et al. (1994: 76). [70] King et al. (1994: 85).

one variable takes one value and the systematic component of comparable observations when the explanatory variable takes on another value'.[71] Causation, then, is not a force in the world, but a measurement, or observation, of change between two variables.

In the course of their discussion, King, Keohane and Verba discuss the more realist-inspired causal mechanisms approach to causation. According to these authors, the central idea of a 'causal mechanisms' approach is to understand causation in terms of a mechanism that exists between cause and effect.[72] This account is confusing because it posits first a cause, then a mechanism, and then an effect. In fact, much of the literature on causal mechanisms does not deal with the issue this way, but rather views the mechanism as the cause and not as a supplementary item in the process.[73] Moreover, King et al. accept that it is, in fact, causal mechanisms that produce effects.[74] Yet, because of their positivist bias they privilege the measurement of effects and argue that their definition of cause is logically prior to a mechanisms approach.[75] But, of course, the reverse is actually the case. For having accepted that it is causal mechanisms that produce effects, what King et al. go on to describe is one account (and only one) of measuring these effects. Hence the authors do not provide a definition of causation so much as an account of measuring the causal power of mechanisms.

The problem with King et al.'s account is that it attempts to maintain a positivist ontological stance on the status of mechanisms. Thus, even causal effect is defined in solely theoretical terms.[76] Claims about mechanisms are not references to real entities and/or processes, but rather they represent analytical constructs that facilitate prediction and/or control. On this analytic view, mechanisms have no existence until posited in theories. There are three major problems with this approach.

First, it is at odds with the practice of science. Scientists generally do not simply postulate a mechanism and then stop inquiries if prediction and/or control follow. Scientists routinely put their theoretical posits to the test. They probe them, push them, take them apart, and generally attempt to ascertain whether the posits possess the properties ascribed to them in the theory. Social scientists do, or at least should do, the same, even if not in the same manner. This is what drives the dialectic of science on. Second, the analytical approach to mechanisms lets the theorist off the ontological hook. If theoretical posits (mechanisms in

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[71] King et al. (1994: 81–82).   [72] King et al. (1994: 85).
[73] See, for example, Bunge (1997, 2004); Machamer et al. (2000); Stinchcombe (1991).
[74] King et al. (1994: 86).   [75] King et al. (1994: 86).   [76] King et al. (1994: 79).

this instance) are not attempts to refer to real entities the theorist has no obligation to give an account of them. What matters is that they play their circumscribed role in explanation. As long as they fulfil this role no further investigation is necessary. Third, the analytical view can make no sense of how prediction and control are possible; it fails to describe the mechanisms through which knowledge of mechanisms is turned into control and manipulation. Something that is not real cannot be manipulated and/or controlled.

I advocate a realist definition that treats mechanisms as ontological. Claims about mechanisms are not merely analytical but represent attempts to grasp real processes. Indeed, 'an explanation proper consists in unveiling some lawful mechanism'.[77] An explanation, then, provides an account of how the underlying mechanisms work and the existence of the mechanisms is not dependent upon their specification in any theory. As Bhaskar puts it, 'the construction of an explanation for . . . some identified phenomenon will involve the building of a model . . . which *if* it were to exist and act in the postulated way would account for the phenomenon in question'.[78] Mechanisms posited in theories, then, are *claimed* to exist. Note the stress on the *claimed*. A scientific realist interpretation of mechanisms does not entail that all mechanisms suggested in every theory exist. If this were the case science would have no need to go beyond mere claims. The important point, however, is that when mechanisms are introduced into a theory they are claimed to exist with the suggested powers and liabilities.

For realists it is only if the mechanisms claimed in the theory have the suggested powers that manipulation and control are possible. This is what lies at the heart of the concept of cause. Causal analysis is centrally concerned not with how events are linked but with what powers entities possess. It is only once we understand the powers and liabilities of entity X that we are justified in claiming it is causally responsible for outcome Y. Moreover, it is only if the mechanism possesses those powers and liabilities that help explain the phenomenon that we can be said to have a good theory. It is perfectly possible, however, for a scientific theory to claim the existence of some mechanism when no such mechanism exists; the history of science is replete with such examples.[79] How do we assess the evidence in support of mechanisms and know when we have a good theory (which, of course, is really the question King, Keohane and Verba attempt to answer)? The answers to this question are varied:

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[77] Bunge (2004).   [78] Bhaskar (1979: 15).   [79] Carey (1995).

some testing of the posited mechanisms would not go amiss, but then informed scientific debate, consideration of the evidence, coherence of argument, opinions of peers, and social power and politics (broadly conceived) will also all play a role. Most important, in terms of causal mechanisms, will be practice: will knowledge of causal mechanisms help in terms of the manipulation and control of the phenomenon that is of concern? As Bunge argues, we wish to understand mechanisms in order to exercise control.[80] King, Keohane and Verba's attempt to limit causation to a theoretical concept only, on the other hand, is unable to explain how the knowledge we might gain of such mechanisms can be put to use.

I distinguish between two important types of social mechanisms: control and causal mechanisms.[81] Although this is a distinction that makes a difference, it is important not to draw it too firmly since in certain instances one type of mechanism can operate as the other. The first type of mechanism is that of 'social control'. Thus, for example, we talk of 'mechanisms' to monitor, and hence control, arms proliferation ('arms control mechanisms'); or mechanisms to ensure efficient collection of taxes. In general, this concept of mechanism is derived from a technological understanding. According to this view, a mechanism, even a social mechanism, is a process or technique for achieving a desired end state or outcome. In many respects when we refer to social mechanisms this is what we mean: the arrangement or relation of the parts as adapted to produce an effect. The idea of producing 'an effect' demonstrates the close relationship between control mechanisms and causal mechanisms, and hence the reason why we should be wary of drawing the distinction too sharply.

Although mechanisms of social control can evolve organically or spontaneously and effect (hence be considered causal) outcomes in an unknown manner, in the vast majority of instances they are consciously designed. Hence, although unobservable they are generally not unknown. Indeed, in many instances because of their 'function' in terms of desired outcomes very much is known about them. Equally, although 'control mechanisms' attempt to control social processes they do not always succeed, and in many respects knowledge of the mechanism helps facilitate non-compliance. Hence governments can circumvent arms control procedures; and tax avoidance is endemic, and in

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[80] Bunge (2004: 16).
[81] This should not be taken to rule out the possibility of further distinctions.

many respects institutionalised, precisely because the collection mechanisms are so well known.

The second important type of mechanism much deployed in social science is that of a 'causal mechanism'. In general, it refers to the operative or motive part, process or factor in a concrete system that produces a result. In this sense, a causal mechanism can be regarded as the process, entity or state-of-affairs involved in, or responsible for, an action, reaction or outcome of a natural or social phenomenon. However, since events and processes in open systems are usually the result of many interacting mechanisms, what we generally mean when referring to a causal mechanism is that this particular mechanism played a decisive, or at least important role. Importantly, this means that scientists are not only interested in the measurement of 'causal effect' as King, Keohane and Verba suggest, but rather attempt to catalogue, understand and explain what it is about X entity that gives it the power it has to produce the measured effect. Hence, the measurement of 'causal effect' might indeed be analytically prior to the specification of a causal mechanism, but no scientist worthy of the name would be content with mere measurement.

This scientific realist account of causation, and the reconfigured goal of scientific explanation that follows from it, has consequences for the mode of inference adopted in descriptions of the scientific method. Under a Humean account of cause and its methodological complement, the D-N model of explanation, debates about the 'correct' method for the identification of constant conjunctions have focused on the relative limitations and/or advantages of induction versus deduction, or those of proof and falsification.[82] From a scientific realist perspective, the preferred mode of inference is neither induction nor deduction, but primarily, retroduction.[83] This consists in the identification or conceptualisation of some phenomenon of interest to the development of a theory, including, inter alia, the utilisation of analogy and metaphors, which may identify the mechanism, structure or condition that is responsible for the given phenomenon. This helps highlight an important critique of empiricist theories of science.

The empirical realist error is the conflation of three domains, or levels of reality, into one – that of the empirical. In contrast to this, scientific realists argue that in order to make sense of the scientific enterprise we need to distinguish between the domains of the empirical

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[82] Popper (1959, 1972).   [83] Peirce (1996).

(experiences and impressions), the actual (events and states-of-affairs – i.e. the actual objects of potential direct experience) and the real or non-actual (the deep structures, mechanisms and tendencies).[84] If the word 'empirical' is to have a particular meaning in human knowledge, it must be restricted to denote only that which we humans experience at particular locations in space and time. This should not be taken to imply a rejection of the importance of the empirical to human knowledge production. Any coherent epistemology requires an empirical component. In order to say things *are* or *are not* as they seem, we need to look, to experience, to examine. We do not need, however, to make knowledge, in its entirety, dependent upon experience; this is the error of empiricism. The empirical is not exhaustive of reality but it does constitute a crucial element in any epistemology. Scientific realism is not opposed to empirical research and can incorporate it into its account of science without reducing scientific practice to nothing but an exercise in empirical data gathering. The empirical forms an important core to our understanding of the world around us, but it does not exhaust it.

Importantly, in order to maintain the intelligibility of science, it is not only a matter of these domains of reality being distinct, but that we recognise that they are, or can be, unsynchronised or out of phase with one another. Experience, the domain of the empirical, for example, may well not coincide – be in phase – with the actual; events can happen without anyone to experience them. Likewise, events may typically be out of phase with the mechanisms that govern them: the conditions of possibility for a war, for example, may be present (armies, and a potential area of dispute), yet perhaps no war emerges owing to action of a countervening mechanism (diplomacy, for example). Reality is stratified and the realm of appearance or the empirical is (1) distinct from, (2) often, and even normally, out of phase with (that is to say, disjoint from) and (3) perhaps in opposition to the phenomena (or phenomenal forms) they generate.[85]

The arguments for depth realism suggest that the universe (material matter) existed prior to the emergence of humanity (biological matter) and that what living organisms there are, are composed of, surrounded

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[84] Bhaskar (1978: 56–62).
[85] This realist ontology embodies a commitment to the following aspects of reality which are crucial to any emancipatory critical science: (1) transphenomenality – going beyond appearances; knowledge may be not only of what appears, but of underlying structures which endure longer than those appearances and generate or make them possible; and (2) counter-phenomenality – knowledge of the deep structure may not just go beyond, and not just explain, but also contradict appearances. See Collier (1994: 6).

by and dependent upon matter. In this very limited sense, matter may be said to be more 'basic' than life and to be necessary for life; life can be said to be more 'basic' than rationality and to have preceded it; and matter, life and rationality can all be said to be more 'basic', and to have preceded, human society and history. This is what it means to talk of reality as being stratified. A shallow understanding of this stratification would suggest that those sciences that explain a more basic layer could claim explanatory primacy over those explaining a less basic layer. Such explanations are common. Modern genetics seems to suggest all explanations of human behaviour can be traced to the one level, that of genetics.[86]

This is a position known as reductive, or eliminative, materialism,[87] and is one in which the *less* basic sciences, the social sciences for example, are required only insofar as the *more* basic sciences, physics and chemistry, are still in a state of discovery and development. For a reductive materialist, it is accepted, in principle, that all of reality will be susceptible to a reductive explanation based at the most basic level known. Richard Rorty can be considered a reductive materialist.[88] Some scientific realists accept this position.[89] However, many other scientific realists reject it. Mario Bunge and Bhaskar, for example, advocate an emergent ontology, in which, although the more basic sciences might be able to explain something about the mechanisms of the less basic ones, they cannot explain them away.[90] The laws discovered and identified at one level are irreducible to those at other levels. Each level has its own emergent powers that, although rooted in, emergent from and dependent upon other levels, cannot be explained by explanations based at the more fundamental levels. The emergent levels, then, have powers and liabilities unique to that level.[91]

Moreover, when a mechanism at a particular level has been identified, described and used to explain some phenomenon, it itself then becomes something to be explained; and often this explanation will be incomplete without recourse to other mechanisms located both horizontally and vertically in relation to the explained mechanism. Scientific progress is a process where our knowledge of nature is deepened and underlying each mechanism, or level, there are always other levels waiting to be explained.[92] As Sandra Harding puts it, '[w]e cannot strip nature bare

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[86] See, for example, Murray and Herrnstein (1994); Wilson (1997); Winner (1983).
[87] Armstrong (1993); Armstrong and Malcolm (1984); Churchland (1984).
[88] Rorty (1971a, 1971b).   [89] Churchland (1984).   [90] Bhaskar (1978: 113); Bunge (1996).
[91] Bhaskar (1994: 73–81).   [92] Losee (2004).

to reveal her secrets, as conventional views have held, for no matter how long the striptease continues or how rigorous its choreography, we will always find under each veil . . . more veils'.[93]

This ontological commitment to depth, when combined with the theory of emergence, has important consequences for all forms of scientific explanation. It entails that reductive explanations, in either upwards or downwards directions, will not suffice. Some entities, humans for example, will be subject to laws operative at more than one level. Hence, the identification and distinguishing of vertical and horizontal explanations is necessary. Emergence means that although the more complex levels of reality, for example, societies, presuppose the more basic or less complex levels, for example, people, explanations of them are not reducible to the other. The rejection of all forms of reductionism will be of paramount importance when I come to discuss the individual–society/agent–structure relationship in later chapters. But it also has major implications for how we understand the realm of international relations. For it legitimates a distinct realm of human activity at the level of the international, as well demonstrating how this realm cannot be studied in a manner that assumes its isolation from other realms located both horizontally and vertically in relation to it.[94]

Epistemological relativism and judgemental rationalism

The commitment to depth realism also has implications for how we understand the process of knowledge construction. For if we reject the view that descriptions of reality are directly given to us in experience (the world of experiences/appearances does not exhaust the real) and, rejecting that they emerge *ex nihilo*, we are left with a problem of explaining just how our descriptions do come about and also of explicating why some seem to be better than others at capturing various aspects of the world. It would seem that knowledge must emerge through a transformation of pre-existing knowledge; a set of antecedent materials; theories, paradigms, models, facts, speculations, linguistic conventions, beliefs, hunches, hypotheses, guesses, symbolic gestures and so on. Knowledge is a social product, dynamically produced by means of antecedent social products – albeit on the basis of a continual engagement, or interaction, with its (intransitive) object.

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[93] Harding (1991: 12).
[94] It is for this reason that I prefer to think of the discipline in terms of a form of global sociology.

As a mode of knowledge production concerned with something other than itself science can be mistaken about its objects. Hence science is an inherently fallibilist enterprise. Since it is fallibilist it is also necessarily continuously critical of its own knowledge claims. The relationship between fallibilism and realism is often misunderstood. Anti-realists take refuge in their ontological humility and accuse realists of a naive commitment to unfashionable terms and concepts such as truth and falsity. Yet to make a statement that things are X and not Y is not to be dogmatic, but to 'lay one's cards on the table', and 'to expose oneself to the possibility of refutation'.[95] In order for one's theory to be open to refutation it must be the case that the theory is attempting to provide an account of something; it is only this that allows the possibility for others to refute one's claims and hence disprove them. To say that this is not X or Y but only my opinion is to make a statement about a subjective state, not a statement about the world and hence cannot be wrong. Scientific realism, on the other hand, recognises that the science of any given time can be wrong about its object. Indeed, the continuous possibility of being wrong drives science on.

The growth of scientific knowledge has to be seen as a form of work; work, that is, that takes existing scientific theories as its starting point, even if only to reject them and/or transform them into ever deeper knowledge of the world. Science is an active intentional examination, and possible intervention, into nature or some aspect of the world. It is an accomplishment of people – scientists – using taught and/or acquired skills in order to deepen existing knowledge through the transformation of existing knowledge. These raw materials are those existing transitive objects that are transformed into new transitive objects and hopefully, although not necessarily, enhance and deepen knowledge. This process can be understood as 'the social production of knowledge by means of knowledge'.[96]

If science is work, it will require people capable of carrying out such tasks as are required by the specific sciences. Scientific training is typically required to produce knowing scientific subjects – scientists.[97] To become a knowing scientific subject requires the acquisition of a historically specific set of ideas, which in turn, allows such a subject to exploit the required set of techniques and skills in order to fulfil a particular

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[95] Collier (1994: 13).   [96] Bhaskar (1978: 185).
[97] Bhaskar (1978: 187). Such training is not, however, always necessary to produce scientific knowledge: an untrained person might at any time stumble on the answer to a scientific question and produce scientific knowledge, knowledge, that is, that explains.

role. For example, the untrained eye looking through a microscope may, indeed probably would, fail to see what, to one trained in such matters, may be a deadly virus.[98] Likewise, whereas a shadow on a lung X-ray may appear as little more than dark patches to the patient, to a trained radiologist it may represent a potentially fatal disease.

Equally, since it is difficult to conceive of our minds being formed outside of the influence of specific societies, non-scientific knowledge is also historically specific. Different societies will instil different ideas and practices. Given the historically specific nature of knowledge, we have to accept the fact of *epistemological relativism*; namely, that all beliefs are socially produced, so that knowledge is transient, and neither truth values nor criteria of rationality exist outside of historical time. It is conceivable that all of our current stock of knowledge could be overturned at some point in the future. But this requires only that we recognise the relativity of our knowledge at any given time, not that we cease the work of knowledge production, or the attempt to differentiate between differing knowledge claims.

To recognise that science is the social production of knowledge by means of knowledge means no more than to place it within, rather than outside of, history. That is, that 'whenever we speak of things or of events, etc. in science we must always speak of them and know them under particular descriptions, descriptions which will always be, to a greater or lesser extent, theoretically determined'.[99] Science is an activity, a process in thought and practice that attempts to articulate in thought the natures and constitutions and ways of acting of things that exist independently of that thought. This is a radically different way of viewing the process of knowledge production from conventional accounts. For the dominant accounts of knowledge production have attempted to purge this epistemic relativism by insisting either that knowledge must conform to objects or that objects must conform to knowledge; that either how we speak must be a function of things, or things must be a function of how we speak.[100]

This is a dichotomy we need not embrace. Knowledge may change without objects and objects change without knowledge.[101] Scientific realism is epistemologically relativist, that is, relativist about the transitive object, not ontologically relativist. And because it is knowledge of

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[98] For a good overview of this see Chalmers (1992: 22–37). For a more comprehensive treatment see Hanson (1963).
[99] Bhaskar (1978: 249).   [100] Schwyzer (1973: 205).   [101] Bhaskar (1978: 249).

an intransitive object, some knowledge claims may be better than others. Hence there is at least the possibility of judgemental rationalism. The acceptance of epistemological relativism, then, does not require us to embrace judgemental relativism. In fact, there may be, and often are, good grounds for preferring one theory or account of some aspect of the world to another.

Within contemporary social science the denial of judgemental rationalism is often tied to considerations of incommensurability. Incommensurability signifies the idea that there is no common measure among paradigms[102] of inquiry, so that the inhabitants of paradigms 'live in different worlds',[103] hold 'mutually exclusive beliefs'[104] and/or employ 'differing language games'.[105] The incommensurability thesis tells us, in essence, that our ontological, epistemological and methodological commitments result in differing 'patterns' and insofar as these 'patterns' genuinely do differ they preclude communication between inhabitants of differing paradigms and hence any judgement about their validity. As R. D. McKinlay and Richard Little put it, '[s]ince different patterns are a function of different epistemologies, there is little constructive debate that can take place between them'.[106] Devoid of 'constructive debate' the possibility of making judgements about the respective merits of competing positions seems impossible.

If the incommensurability thesis is the most serious obstacle to judgemental rationalism, its refutation is a necessary step in getting dialogue underway.[107] The denial of incommensurability, it should be noted, does not reveal how communication between differing approaches might be achieved in practice, but merely demonstrates that communication is, in principle, possible. Here I want to draw a sharp distinction between a philosophical rejection of the incommensurability thesis and the real, and often substantial, problems of translation and understanding that arise when attempts at cross-paradigm communication are attempted. These problems cannot be evaded or wished away by epistemological

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[102] I use the term paradigm interchangeably with theory and set aside the problematic way in which Kuhn used the term 'paradigm'. Margaret Masterman (1970a), for example, identified twenty-one differing ways in which Kuhn used the term. Of course, the ambiguity, vagueness and general slipperiness of the terms has affected their use in IR theory, and it is not often clear that scholars have the same thing in mind when employing them. In terms of this chapter, I will use something close to Kuhn's (1970a: 271) more inclusive notion of a 'disciplinary matrix': Paradigm: a set of models of scientific explanation, exemplary experiments, background assumptions about the world and the like in the context of which researchers formulate specific research problems.
[103] Kuhn (1970b).   [104] Feyerabend (1975).   [105] Lyotard (1984).
[106] McKinlay and Little (1986: 15).   [107] Sankey (1994, 1997).

edict or philosophical argument. Yet communication does occur and communicative exchange between differing conceptual frameworks does not depend upon a theory-neutral meta-language or set of common standards. The possibility of cross-paradigm communication can only be realised through genuine attempts at such a dialogue. Such attempts are negated in advance if the incommensurability thesis is accepted.

When discussing incommensurability an important distinction should be made between the sense – the meanings, definitions, etc. – of two theories and the referent of those theories. Clearly, two expressions with a different sense can have the same referent, as in Bill Clinton the president of the USA and Bill Clinton the husband of Hilary Clinton. In both instances, the referent *Bill Clinton* remains the same, although the sense of each sentence has changed. Where incommensurability of sense is being asserted, there will nevertheless be a common referent; the difference in sense will be attributable to a number of differences and distinctions within each claim; the referent, however, will remain the same. This should allow a rational choice between theories on similar grounds to those proposed by Imre Lakatos.[108] That is, that theory X should be preferred to theory Y if it can explain more of the *same phenomena* under its own descriptions.

For example, what Lavoisier designated 'oxygen', Priestley called 'de-phlogisticated air'. Lavoisier's theory of oxygen, however, explained more than Priestley's theory of 'de-phlogisticated air', hence it was rational to choose Lavoisier's theory over Priestley's.[109] This does not imply that Lavoisier's theory was 'true' in a naive metaphysical sense, and clearly, and notwithstanding all the evidence to the contrary, we could, at some point in the future, come to reject Lavoisier's theory of oxygen – although this seems unlikely at the present. The point is simply that given the evidence available it was the best choice that could be made.

Moreover, if there is no common referent, in what sense might we say the theories clash? And if the theories do not clash, incommensurability ceases to be interesting. No one suggests that Marx's theory of 'wage-labour' is incommensurable with Darwin's theory of evolution. Incommensurability, in any meaningful or interesting sense of the word, is meant to signify a conflict, of some form or other, between theories. If two theories have no common referents it is difficult to conceive of how they could clash, if by this is meant the negation or contradiction

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[108] Lakatos (1970).   [109] Davis (1966).

of propositions asserted by the other theory; theories can only be said to clash if they clash about something they share in common.

Where two theories lack a common referent incommensurability seems trivial or meaningless. There would seem to be no problem about a scientist being a Lacanian psychoanalyst and a Keynesian economist. One criticism of this position, however, might be for the advocate of incommensurability to accept the existence of a common referent, but to push the incommensurability of sense within clashing theories. In this case it might be argued that, although there may be good grounds for preferring one theory to another, no one could ever have those good reasons, since the understanding of one theory would preclude the understanding of the other. A common example of just such an argument is that of Kuhn's 'gestalt switch', normally presented by way of an image that can be seen as either a rabbit or a duck.[110] Yet, once the dual aspect of the duck/rabbit picture is captured we seem to switch easily from seeing rabbits to seeing ducks. So can scientists, who move from one worldview into another, whilst at the same time knowing both the possibility of moving back into the previous worldview and understanding the one they are in, and knowing the one they are not in.

IR undergraduates carry out this task (which according to advocates of incommensurability should be impossible) with relative ease, understanding classical realism, on the one hand, and then moving on to Wallersteinian structuralism, and thence on to poststructuralism, whilst at the same time understanding the different views and knowing which view they are currently holding. One would expect that this is a condition of possibility for the passing of university exams. Hence, there is no reason to assume that it is impossible to communicate between different theoretical or conceptual schemes or that a scientist cannot know the same object under two or more different descriptions. To show the difference between Newtonian and Einsteinian dynamics and that the latter is an advance on the former a scientist must be capable of doing so.[111]

Perhaps the most basic deficiency in the view that cross-paradigm communication and judgemental rationalism is impossible is that this assumes that all concepts pertaining to a particular paradigm are tightly welded together in a monolithic hermetically sealed bloc. It thus seems that there can be no shades of difference of meaning, only total consistency within paradigms, or total incompatibility between

[110] Kuhn (1970).   [111] Bhaskar (1997: 249).

paradigms. This assumption completely underestimates the tensions within paradigms as well as the significant areas of overlap between them. Paradigms are not hermetically sealed bodies of thought, each uniquely creating its own worlds, and there are often significant areas of overlap – epistemological and ontological – between clashing paradigms. If incommensurability were an in-built feature of meta-theoretical frameworks, it is not at all clear that we could articulate the claim that paradigms do differ. If each of us lives and works within one incommensurable paradigm, how is it possible to understand and communicate with others – even if our understanding only extends as far as to delineate the differences? Given incommensurability such a delineation would be impossible to formulate. In short, communication could not take place unless some descriptive and practical presuppositions were shared in common and it would be unnecessary if there were no discrepancy between them.[112]

The possibility of a complete thorough-going incommensurability is not rejected in theory, only that anyone from within one of the competing theories could ever know it. It is certainly conceivable to think of 'two epistemic communities travelling on, so to speak, semantic world-lines that never meet and know nothing of each other'.[113] And the possibility always exists that a third party could describe just such a position. But the advocate of incommensurability is interested in clashes of theories and his/her knowing they clash, not theories unaware of the points of difference.

If the relationship between two or more clashing theories is one of conflict as opposed to mere difference, so that they constitute genuine alternatives, and that such alternatives are of the same world, then they must possess some commonality of reference, such that the ontological conditions of possibility for resolution are fulfilled. On the other hand, if the theories share no common area of referential overlap, then no sense can be attached to the notion of a clash. In this latter case, the idea of moving from one theory to another makes no sense; let alone the criticism of one by the other and/or communication between them. *Ipso facto*, truly incommensurable theories cannot be considered as alternatives for the same group of people over time or for different communities at the same time. None of the above, however, should be taken to imply a neglect of the very real difficulties facing theorists, anthropologists, translators or contributors to a dialogue holding extensively differing

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[112] Bhaskar (1979: 153).   [113] Bhaskar (1986: 74).

worldviews. These, however, are practical difficulties the resolution of which will involve skill, ingenuity and hard work.

Ultimately invocations of incommensurability and denials of judgemental rationalism, whilst seemingly providing a safe haven for the critical theorist, do the opposite. As Stefano Guzzini has noted, '[o]nce accepted, however, Kuhn's concepts became a welcome protective shield used by realists (and others) against attacks from other schools. Now, the concept of incommensurability legitimises business as usual at the price of a predefined pluralism'.[114] Equally, it is difficult to uphold the philosophical justifications for incommensurability when one considers Kuhn's amplification of his position on this matter. In terms of judgemental rationalism, Kuhn has emerged as a firm critic of the incommensurability-as-non-communication-and-mutual-exclusivity thesis. Kuhn first dissociated himself from the idea that incommensurability entails a denial of cross-paradigm communication in the postscript to the second edition of *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.[115]

Likewise, in response to a question at a conference in 1982 Kuhn gave a qualified 'yes' to the possibility of 'full communication across the revolutionary divide'.[116] In 1990, Kuhn repeated this point asserting that 'anything that can be said in one language can, with sufficient imagination and effort, be understood by a speaker of another'.[117] Incommensurability, then, for Kuhn, does not imply that meaningful cross-paradigmatic communication is impossible, but rather that it is best understood as being a rejection of any notion that envisions a straightforward activity governed by explicit rules specifying which words or phrases in one language may be substituted for given words or phrases in other languages.[118]

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[114] Guzzini (1993: 446).   [115] Kuhn (1970a).

[116] It is interesting to note that philosophers of science have questioned the notion of 'revolutionary science'. John Krige (1980), for example, argues that the discontinuities that emerge in science can span generations. The move from the Ptolemaic account of heavenly bodies to the Copernican version took over a century. This hardly constitutes a revolution. Likewise, Stephen Toulmin (1970) has criticised Kuhn for the sharp distinction he draws between normal and revolutionary science. Toulmin argues that not only has Kuhn drawn the boundaries too sharply in separating the two, but also that *no* revolution – scientific, political or otherwise – can be accurately described in such dichotomous terms: continuities always exist and the very ground of revolution must originate from somewhere unless we are to believe revolutions emerge *ex nihilo*.

[117] For Kuhn's changing position on this see, Kuhn (1970a; 1982; 1990).

[118] Kuhn (1990: 229).

There are reasonable grounds, then, for the acceptance of judgemental rationalism, and the fact that we can only enunciate our thoughts through language in historically and spatially specific circumstances does nothing to negate this claim. Fallibilism can be embraced without endorsing a debilitating epistemological nihilism. Nor do we need to know that a particular viewpoint is 'true', since the choice we face is very rarely, if ever, that of a single account of a given phenomenon. On the contrary, theories are refuted or accepted by virtue of their explanatory power vis-à-vis both the object they seek to explain and their ability to go beyond competing accounts.

The scientific realist account of science sits comfortably with our intuitions; indeed, Alexander Wendt has suggested that scientific realism is prima facie unremarkable.[119] However, in terms of social science the implications are far reaching. Once the errors of positivism are exposed and placed within the context of a realist theory of science a reconsideration of the question of naturalism becomes a possibility. If science is not conducted according to positivist criteria, then we may begin to inquire into the conditions of possibility for a social science that is not predicated upon either the acceptance of positivism, or its outright rejection. A nascent postpositivist social science will no longer be dependent on its identity by always relating itself to a now discredited philosophy of science.[120] In effect, scientific realism opens up the possibility of a social science free from positivist residues.

From science to social science

The positivist account of science does not, epistemologically, methodologically or ontologically, provide an accurate model of the actual practices of scientists. Insofar as science is successful in understanding, explaining and manipulating nature, in closed laboratory situations and/or in the open world, it is because it operates with, and utilises, a multi-layered realist conception of the world; even if scientists rarely make this explicit. According to this realist model of science the world is seen to be an ensemble of powers, propensities and forces which are a result of the ways in which things and entities are composed, structured and related to each other within systems. These powers, propensities and forces can be given abstract formulations as laws, but these laws

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[119] Wendt (1987: 351).
[120] On this, as well as Bhaskar's work see Bohman (1991); Collin (1985); Thomas (1979).

are used to help refer to and explain real complex situations, processes and events. It is the discovery of the real powers, propensies and forces of the world that gives science its explanatory power.[121]

Furthermore, new levels of reality may emerge from the combination of particulars into systems, and these new levels will possess their own emergent powers. Thus, science has to construct explanations of causation on several levels without always attempting to make reductions to lower levels. Given that reality consists of these complex structured entities, each possessing its own powers, propensies and forces, the problem of epistemic access takes on a different form to that suggested by positivism. The practising scientist does not search for constant conjunctions of observable events, but rather is involved in a process of modelling hypothetical mechanisms and inferring their necessary existence from their effects within emergent structured systems.[122]

Constant conjunctions, then, are not laws, but a potential mode of their identification; their value is epistemological not ontological. This highlights the creative and social aspect of science; scientific understanding is seen to consist in the move from a base in sensory perception and partial understanding to uncover unobserved and hypothesised entities, powers, structures and systems. This is achieved through the use of metaphors, analogies, similes, models and conjectures, and so forth, the role of which is to infer from the known the unknown. Once this non-positivist account of science is accepted, any argument about the possibility of a science of society that bases itself on positivism is bound to be misleading. If positivism cannot be assumed the correct account of the method of natural science, the question of naturalism versus antinaturalism must be re-examined.[123]

Ontologically this re-examination takes the form of establishing three important factors about societies. First, societies are *irreducible* to people; social forms are a necessary condition for any intentional social act. Second, their *pre-existence* establishes their *autonomy* as possible objects of study. Third, their *causal power* establishes their reality.[124] All social activity presupposes the prior existence of social forms. 'Speech requires language; making materials; actions conditions; agency resources; activity rules.'[125] Put simply, these can be seen as arguments for the *reality* of social forms that are not explainable solely in terms of individuals.

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[121] Bhaskar (1978).
[122] See for example, Patomäki (2002: 124–142) for an account of one such procedure called 'iconic modelling'.
[123] Keat (1971: 15).   [124] Bhaskar (1979: 31).   [125] Bhaskar (1979: 43).

Of course, societies are (in part) made up of people who have causal powers that can be brought to bear upon the material world, but people do not exhaust the social. The pre-existence of the English language, for example, is a necessary condition in order for individuals to speak it; it does not determine what they do speak.[126] In order to speak and communicate we need to learn a pre-existing language with its own set of rules that exist independently of us (language as a structured *condition*). In general, we do not talk to reproduce or transform the language intentionally, but rather for our personal ends and goals in our day-to-day interactions (practice as *production*). However, in our talking we reproduce and, in some instances, transform the language (practice as *reproduction/transformation*). Equally, our language only endures if we talk, and it has no existence of its own apart from our speech acts (structure as *outcome*).[127]

This example suggests that the social ontologies of individualist and structuralist theories are deficient in one or other area. On an individualist reading there are actions (speech) but not the conditions (language) that make action possible, whereas on a structuralist account, there are the conditions that make action possible but no actions.[128] Social action never occurs outside of a social setting, but social settings, or, as more commonly put, social structures, 'don't take to the streets'; that is do not in themselves act. Societies are an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions that individuals reproduce or transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. Societies do not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification); but nor are they the product of it either (the error of voluntarism).

Society is both the ever-present condition, that is, the material cause, and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency.[129] This is what Anthony Giddens has called the 'duality of structure'.[130] All social practices have an action and a structural aspect that is integral to the practice. The crucial ontological issues in terms of the agent–structure problem are those concerned with the nature of these action and structural aspects and their relationship. Different resolutions to the agent–structure problem provide differing accounts of this social ontology. Asking the reader to accept a promissory note of further development, however, I want to assert that all social practices take place within a

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[126] Bhaskar (1979: 44).
[127] This example is drawn from Collier (1994: 146). However, it might be possible for languages to endure although no longer spoken; through written texts perhaps.
[128] Bhaskar (1979: 46).   [129] Bhaskar (1979: 43).   [130] Giddens (1976: 121).

relationally defined field of potential. Moreover, it is these relations that constitute the structures of the social world. The study of social objects, then, is primarily concerned with the persistent relations between the various planes of activity that constitute, and causally impact upon, social life.[131]

One important aspect of this relational ontology is that these relations constitute our identity as social actors. According to this relational model of societies, one is what one is, by virtue of the relations within which one is embedded. A worker is only a worker by virtue of his/her relationship to his/her employer and vice versa; a wife only by virtue of her relationship to a husband and vice versa; to be a buyer implies a relationship with a seller and vice versa. 'Our social being is constituted by relations and our social acts presuppose them.'[132] At any particular moment in time an individual may be implicated in all manner of relations, each exerting its own peculiar causal effects. This 'lattice-work' of relations constitutes the structure of particular societies and endures despite changes in the individuals occupying them. Thus, the relations, the structures, are ontologically distinct from the individuals who enter into them.[133]

At a minimum, the social sciences are concerned with two distinct, although mutually interdependent, strata. There is an ontological difference between people and structures: 'people are not relations, societies are not conscious agents'.[134] Any attempt to explain one in terms of the other should be rejected. If there is an ontological difference between society and people, however, we need to elaborate on the relationship between them. Bhaskar argues that we need a system of mediating concepts, encompassing both aspects of the duality of praxis into which active subjects must fit in order to reproduce it: that is, a system of concepts designating the 'point of contact' between human agency and social structures.[135] This is known as a 'positioned practice' system. In many respects, the idea of 'positioned practices' is very similar to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*.[136]

Bourdieu is primarily concerned with what individuals do in their daily lives. He is keen to refute the idea that social activity can be understood solely in terms of individual decision-making, or as determined by supra-individual objective structures. Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* can be viewed as a bridge-building exercise across the explanatory

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[131] Bhaskar (1979: 35–36).   [132] Collier (1994: 140).   [133] Bhaskar (1979: 46).
[134] Collier (1994: 147).   [135] Bhaskar (1979: 51).   [136] Bourdieu (1977).

gap between these two extremes. Importantly, the notion of a *habitus* can only be understood in relation to the concept of a 'social field'. According to Bourdieu, a social field is 'a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined'.[137] A social field, then, refers to a structured system of social positions occupied by individuals and/or institutions – the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants. This is a social field whose form is constituted in terms of the relations which define it as a field of a certain type.

A *habitus* (positioned practices) is a mediating link between individuals' subjective worlds and the socio-cultural world into which they are born and which they share with others. The power of the *habitus* derives from the thoughtlessness of habit and habituation, rather than consciously learned rules. The *habitus* is imprinted and encoded in a socialising process that commences during early childhood. It is inculcated more by experience than by explicit teaching. Socially competent performances are produced as a matter of routine, without explicit reference to a body of codified knowledge, and without the actors necessarily knowing what they are doing (in the sense of being able adequately to explain what they are doing).[138] As such, the *habitus* can be seen as the 'site of the internalization of reality and the externalization of internality'.[139]

Thus social practices are produced in, and by, the encounter between: (1) the *habitus* and its dispositions; (2) the constraints and demands of the socio-cultural field to which the *habitus* is appropriate or within; and (3) the dispositions of the individual agents located within both the socio-cultural field and the *habitus*. When placed within Bhaskar's stratified complex social ontology the model we have is as depicted in Figure 1. The explanation of practices will require all three levels.

Society, as a field of relations, exists prior to, and is independent of, individual and collective understandings at any particular moment in time; that is, social action requires the conditions for action. Likewise, given that behaviour is seemingly recurrent, patterned, ordered, institutionalised, and displays a degree of stability over time, there must be sets of relations and rules that govern it. Contrary to individualist theories, these relations, rules and roles are not dependent upon either knowledge of them by particular individuals, or the existence of actions by particular individuals; that is, their explanation cannot be reduced to consciousness or to the attributes of individuals. These emergent social

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[137] Wacquant (1989).   [138] Bourdieu (1977: 79).   [139] Bourdieu (1977: 205).
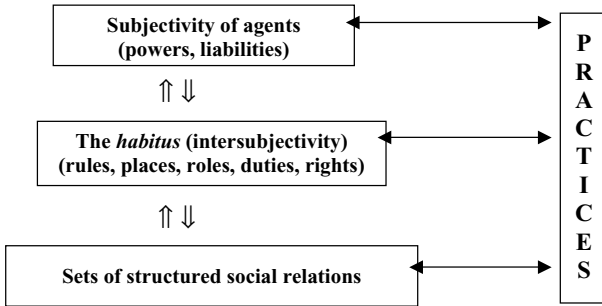
Figure 1 A framework of social practices

forms must possess emergent powers. This leads on to arguments for the reality of society based on a causal criterion. Society, as opposed to the individuals that constitute it, is, as Foucault has put it, 'a complex and independent reality that has its own laws and mechanisms of reaction, its regulations as well as its possibility of disturbance. This new reality is society . . . It becomes necessary to reflect upon it, upon its specific characteristics, its constants and its variables'.[140]

Society has a specific shape and form and it has material and potentially empirically perceivable effects, despite the fact that it would seem to be in principle unobservable. In this respect, we would be justified in saying that social power is real, if it results in observable human action, utterances and, perhaps, institutionally organised patterns of behaviour. Thus, and preserving the insights of hermeneutic theorists, social action occurs in large part as a result of the knowledge and beliefs about social situations that are shared by groups of people. However, it is equally important to note that roles, rules and relations structure behaviour in ways that are sometimes opaque to consciousness, decisions or choices. Hence the conceptual aspects of society do not provide an exhaustive social ontology.

On this view, society does not simply consist of individuals and/or groups and their activity, but rather is the sum of the relations within which individuals and groups stand. Thus the *raison d'être* of the social sciences consists in the move from the specification of manifest phenomena of social life, as conceptualised in the experience of the social agents concerned, to the uncovering of the social relations that necessitate and

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[140] Foucault (1984a: 242).

regulate such experiences and phenomena. This gives social science a critical impulse insofar as the agents, whose activities are necessary for the reproduction of these relations, may be unaware of the social relations which (in part) explain their activities. It is through the capacity of social science to illuminate such relations that it may come to play an emancipatory role.

Social knowledge and the limits of naturalism

In the above section I attempted to fill in the ontological backcloth to social knowledge; in effect, an examination of the kinds of things societies are. I argued that society was real, and that it has emergent powers irreducible to the exercise of powers at the level of individual agents, but which are only evident in the intentional activity of those agents. In this section, I want to examine what kind of knowledge it might be possible to attain of such an ontological curiosity. I intend to carry this out by adopting a two-phase strategy. First, I will examine the limits to naturalism that arise directly from the account of society developed above; and second, I will deal on a broader level with some general objections which might be raised about the uniqueness of social scientific knowledge as opposed to knowledge of the natural world.

The model of society outlined above is, I believe, a major improvement on individualist or structuralist alternatives. However, as an object of inquiry, it is still necessarily abstract and theoretical; that is, it would seem to be in principle unobservable. Much like gravitational and magnetic fields, it cannot be empirically identified independently of its effects. Scientific realists argue that it can be known to exist through its causal powers, but not shown to exist.[141] This is a situation that has its counterparts in the natural world; hence there is no natural–social watershed here. An ontological difference that does make a difference, however, lies in the fact that 'society not only cannot be empirically identified independently of its effects, but it does not exist independently of them either'.[142] However, there would seem to be no real epistemological consequences that stem from this ontological proposition. Rather, the main epistemological/methodological difficulty vis-à-vis societies is not their imperceivability per se but the fact that they are open systems.

Here I want to draw attention back to the reconfigured notion of cause outlined in a realist view of science. Causality, it will be recalled, is construed as tendencies that may, or may not, manifest themselves in open

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141 Bhaskar (1979: 49).   142 Bhaskar (1989: 82).

systems where many mechanisms interact such that some tendencies may counteract others. The epistemological implication of this is that the social sciences, denied the ability to construct closed systems, are unable decisively to test their theories. Epistemologically it follows that knowledge of social objects can never be placed on as firm a footing as that of the natural sciences. This means that the criteria for the rational confirmation and/or rejection of theories in the social sciences cannot be predictive and must be explanatory. Equally important is that theories be developed in a non-ad hoc manner such that they are able to allow for, and preferably explain, a possibility once it is realised, when such an outcome could never have been predicted given the openness of the social world. Thus, for example, charges that neo-realist theories of international relations failed to predict the end of the Cold War are beside the point.[143] Where such theories have patently been shown to be deficient, however, is in the fact that such a dramatic change was inexplicable in the terms of such theories even after the event. The ability to predict outcomes in open systems is beyond all science.

Although the lack of decisive test situations may, and indeed generally does, affect the epistemological confidence we attach to our theories it does not change the fact that the study of social objects can still be considered science. Particularly if science is defined, as it is here, in terms of its aims (the production of depth explanations) rather than in terms of its methods. Moreover, in terms of policy relevance, if we have valid claims to social scientific knowledge based on explanatory criteria, then we are just as warranted in applying our knowledge in open systems, as are the natural sciences.[144] In any case, the choice within any theoretical dispute in the social sciences is not of whether to apply a particular theory to the world, but rather one of which theory to apply. There is no non-theoretically grounded social practice; hence, at a bare minimum, there will always be the theories held by the actors concerned and the social scientific theories and as such we will always be faced with a choice between two or more theories.[145] Despite the acceptance of epistemological relativism, judgemental rationalism can and still does apply and we will require good grounds, other than something akin

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[143] On this see, for example, Kratochwil (1993).

[144] Richard Hamilton (1996) has argued that the greatest impediment to advances in social knowledge is the lack of independent validation of research results. Social scientists, argues Hamilton, simply do not attempt to carry out the reiterative validation of data that characterises research in the natural sciences. Thus, he contends, researchers simply fail to check the veracity of research data in many social studies.

[145] Unless, of course, all the theories coincide.

to the 'tossing of a coin', for preferring one theory to another. In this respect, the main differences between the natural and social sciences lie in a lack of epistemic certainty afforded to the social sciences, as opposed to any ontological difference vis-à-vis the status of laws, causes and such like. These in the natural world, as in the social world, are analysed as tendencies inherent in the powers of things and not constant conjunctions of events.[146]

However, although ontologically speaking the status of laws may remain the same in the natural and social worlds, there are clear limits on naturalism that can be derived from ontological considerations based on the properties possessed by societies. Bhaskar identifies three properties:

1. Social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the activities they govern.
2. Social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the agents' conceptions of what they are doing in their activity.
3. Social structures, unlike natural structures, may be only relatively enduring (so that the tendencies they ground may not be universal in the sense of space–time invariant).

To these three properties, Wendt adds a fourth:

4. Social kinds, unlike natural kinds, have both an internal and an external structure. External structures not only are contingently related to social objects, but are constitutive of them.[147]

All points, although intuitively sound, require qualification and modification. First, in relation to Wendt's point, many natural structures also have both an internal and external structure. The earth, for example, is constituted as a result of both internal and external structures. The relational ontology proposed in scientific realism makes internal and external constitution a facet of all objects; hence we should not make too much of this distinction.[148] Both natural and social objects are constituted (in part) by external relations. Moreover, as Andrew Collier has suggested, all of the distinctions might not be as firm as they might appear. Do, for example, natural structures exist independently of the activities that they govern? Do molecules exist independently of the activities of their component atoms, or living organisms independently of the activities of

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[146] Bhaskar (1989: 83).   [147] Wendt (1999: 71).   [148] Bunge (2004: 190).

their organs, or the solar system independently of the movements and gravitational pulls of the planets?[149]

The idea that 'social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the activities they govern' would seem to suggest that there are no such things in the social world as unactualised and/or unexercised powers.[150] The denial of unexercised powers, in terms of natural objects, for example, would be the same as saying that an entity, a gun perhaps, did not have the power to kill unless this power was being exercised. No doubt such thinking lies behind slogans such as 'guns don't kill, only people do'. Whatever the truth of this statement, the ability to kill with guns is also dependent upon guns having the power to kill, whether or not such power is always and at all times being exercised. In terms of social objects, the denial of unexercised powers leads to similar problems. For this would mean that a group of people attempting to free themselves from oppression could only be said to have the power to do so when they exercised that power. This proposition has to be rejected; social groups and social structures can possess power that they do not actualise.

Within the social world, some powers are clearly reliant on some particular activities, but not necessarily the activities that result from those powers being exercised. The British state, for example, could not exist without the activities of its agents, but it also possesses powers that it does not exercise, such as the power to suppress insurrection or the power to wage nuclear war. It does not have to exercise this power, in part, because everyone knows it possesses it. Likewise, a large corporation may be able to prevent protests about environmental degradation it causes, simply because the firm is a major local employer.[151] The firm has the power to withdraw from the area, which might lead to increased unemployment in the region, and this exerts an influence over the local population without it being exercised.

However, whilst the British state need not be exercising its power to put down insurrection violently, such power is only maintained insofar as some activities related to the unexercised power are carried out.[152] Thus, for example, the maintenance of the power of the British state to put down armed insurrection is dependent upon activities such as 'the raising of taxes, the recruiting, training and equipping of armed personnel . . .'[153]

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[149] Collier (1994: 245).   [150] Benton (1981).   [151] Benton (1981: 17).
[152] Bhaskar (1979: 174).   [153] Benton (1981: 17).

In relation to the time–space dependent nature of social structures, Ted Benton argues that although social structures themselves may only be relatively enduring, the laws governing those structures may well not be.[154] Modern capitalist societies, for example, have not always existed. And there may well come a time when they cease to exist, and in this sense Bhaskar is right to claim that they are not time–space invariant. Nevertheless, in another sense, it would be correct to formulate, in a conditional manner, a law of the form: 'whenever such capitalist societies emerge, with the relevant structures, then these tendencies will operate'. Laws formulated in this conditional manner are commonplace within the natural sciences.[155] And there is no reason why the social sciences should not also construct such laws.

With regard to the concept-dependent nature of social structures, a difference between knowledge of the social world and knowledge of the natural world does emerge: the social sciences are part of their own field of inquiry. This means that the social sciences are internal with respect to their subject matter in a way in which the natural sciences are not. This necessitates an examination of the extent to which the objects of social scientific explanation might be termed intransitive; that is, exist and act independently of those who would wish to know them. Now it seems to be almost universally accepted, apart from by perhaps a few behaviourist outposts, that within a social setting the agents' conceptions of what they are doing are not external to the description of what they are doing. A war, for example, cannot accurately be described as a war without reference to the participants' perception of their situation as one of hostility. If they do not perceive the situation in this manner, then no amount of social scientific tinkering will make it a war. Thus large numbers of men (*sic*) running around woods in standard army battle dress may be engaged in army exercises or actually engaged in combat, and what *they* think *they* are doing plays a crucial, although perhaps not decisive, role.

The issue of concept-dependence, however, does not rule the idea of intransitive objects in terms of social inquiry. The events of 11 September 2001, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Holocaust were as they were, independent of anything we might write of them today, just as the men in army battle dress are engaged in a particular activity, and one, it needs stressing, that can be misdescribed by a putative observer. Moreover, whilst social structures are reliant upon men and women for their

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[154] Benton (1981: 18).   [155] Collier (1994: 244).

reproduction and/or transformation, the notion of intransitivity can be maintained in the present tense, as well as in the past. Social structures can be regarded as intransitive to individual men/women, and even perhaps large groups of persons, but not to humanity as a collective. Hence social objects, whilst concept-dependent, are not necessarily dependent upon the concepts of those who would wish to come to know them, but rather are dependent upon the concepts held by those agents whose activities reproduce them.

Although social behaviour always consists of more than the simple possession of the right concept, some social behaviour, whilst not existing independently of any concept, does exist independently of its adequate concept. Of course, there are social relations where this is not the case. There are instances of social practices where if the participants did not possess the correct concept the object would cease to exist. In such practices, '[i]f each party to the relationship changes his or her conception of what the relationship is, then the relationship ipso facto ceases to exist'.[156] Friendships are a good example. However, whilst a relation of friendship might be of this form other social relationships, a marriage for example, cannot be. For even if both parties to a marriage change their understanding of the relationship the dissolution of the marriage will depend upon other social (and external to the agents' conceptualisations) factors. In fact, the vast majority of social relations do not have this internal relationship with agents' concepts. Where society surrounds and sustains a relationship with sanctions, including coercive powers, social relations are sustained through immense changes in participating actors' conceptions of what they are doing (employer/employee relationships, imperial domination, and marriage are three clear examples of such social structures).[157]

It is important when discussing this issue that the centrality of agents' ideas and concepts is not lost. And this is certainly a major difference between the social and natural sciences. However, this is an ontological difference, not an epistemological one. The important question is whether this ontological difference implies epistemological ones. To many hermeneutic thinkers the fact of consciousness in the social world means that we require a different kind of knowledge. I disagree. There is certainly something more to know when we study social objects, and the methods we employ to discover this something else will also differ. And whilst the basis of our epistemological claims in relation to

[156] Benton (1981: 17).   [157] Benton (1981: 17).

differing objects may vary, we will find the same basis applied in both the natural and social sciences. What we are facing here is not a natural versus social science epistemological split, but a range of epistemological positions that are deployed in both the natural and social sciences. The fact is that in both the social and the natural sciences it is humans who wish to know. Humans have a limited, yet varied, number of ways in which they generate and substantiate knowledge, and these ways of knowing are used extensively in both the natural and social sciences.

In some respects the concept-dependent nature of the social sciences affords a point of entry for social scientific inquiry not available to the natural sciences. In terms of theory construction a natural scientist, faced with a mass of seemingly incoherent and unconnected data, requires a theory in order to make sense of the data and make decisions about what is, and what is not, relevant to the particular inquiry at hand. The difficulty for the natural scientist is deciding on an adequate starting point for inquiry. For a social scientist, on the other hand, most of the phenomena of interest will already be identified under certain descriptions as a result of the concept-dependent nature of the social world. The starting point for any investigation of social phenomena must be the concepts of the agents concerned.[158]

It is in this respect that the hermeneutic tradition, in highlighting the importance of the conceptual moment in social scientific work, has made a real contribution. Its error lies in its inability to sustain the notion that these conceptualisations may themselves be false. That is, that the agents' beliefs of what they are doing may well be based on misunderstandings of the conditions of their doing; what Bhaskar has termed the 'unacknowledged conditions' for action.[159] The concept-dependent nature of social relations, then, does not mean that because agents must have some concept of what they are doing they will always have the right concept. Some concepts held by agents 'may actually function so as to mask, repress, mystify, obscure or otherwise occlude the nature of the activity concerned'.[160] Agents' knowledge, then, is not incorrigible, and this opens up a unique possibility for the social sciences, that of critique.

In common with other sciences, the social sciences present ideas claimed to be more or less 'true' of the object under study. Unlike the natural sciences, however, the object studied by social science includes ideas; people act in accordance with ideas. Now, many of the important

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[158] Bhaskar (1989: 85).   [159] Bhaskar (1989: 94).   [160] Bhaskar (1979: 175).

ideas in a society will be ideas about features of that society. Nevertheless, important or not, these ideas about a particular society, or social outcomes, could conceivably be wrong. For example, there are many ideas about the causes of global poverty: imperialism, access to natural resources, unequal modes of development, unequal access to global trading regimes, lack of education, wilful maliciousness and so on. A social scientific study might suggest that the *real* causes of global poverty lie in the structure of particular societies, the world market, government policy, or any combination of these and other factors. Thus, the possibility exists that if the social science had it right the people who described it otherwise may have it wrong.

The point is not to raise the question of what are the real causes of global poverty – that can only be ascertained by substantive social scientific inquiry – but the more logical one that a putative social science will necessarily be critical of at least some part of its object. Equally important will be the fact that a social science would need to explain why such false beliefs were held and the role they played in that society. This opens up the possibility for social theory, and knowledge in general, to play a role in an 'emancipatory spiral',[161] since social scientific knowledge of a particular set of beliefs may lead to a change in those beliefs. To say some particular institution or social structure causes false belief is to criticise it; and, 'given (other things being equal) that it is better to believe what is true than what is false, it is also better (other things being equal) that institutions that cause false beliefs should be replaced by, or transformed into, those that cause true ones'.[162]

Thus although the hermeneutic moment and the agents' own conception of their activity provides perhaps our only starting point, it has no privileged position in social scientific knowledge. In essence, arguments about the activity- and concept-dependent nature of the social world can be seen as attempts to arrive at a reconfiguration of the transitive/intransitive distinction which is a condition of possibility for science. In this respect, the distinction holds in the social world, although in an attenuated form, since social objects 'exist and act independently of the knowledge of which they are objects'.[163]

Our access to social objects is primarily and necessarily hermeneutic but there would seem to be no reason why this should lead us to accept that the forms of explanation pertaining to the natural and social worlds

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[161] This notion is most clearly articulated in Bhaskar (1986).
[162] Collier (1994: 172).   [163] Bhaskar (1979: 14).

must be sharply distinct. This is not to say that the specific forms of explanation relevant to each domain will not be different, only that it will be a matter of degree rather than a sharp differentiation. We should not become fixated on the term naturalism any more than one should get hung up on the term anti-naturalism.[164] The position advocated here could equally well be termed 'qualified non-positivist anti-naturalism' as well as 'qualified non-positivist naturalism'.[165]

What difference, then, will the adoption of a scientific realist philosophy, both in general and in the social sciences in particular, make to our research practices? What form will our knowledge take and crucially, to what use might it be put? Foucault has convincingly shown how knowledge and power are inextricably linked.[166] Knowledge *is* power and may well have consequences beyond that intended and may be put to uses other than that originally envisaged. Knowledge, then, and somewhat contrary to the Enlightenment view, is not necessarily the road to freedom. Yet, does this mean that ignorance is? Of course not. Is the lack of knowledge of the effect of gravity really a good thing if one is walking near a cliff-top? It would seem strange to describe a falling person as a free person in virtue of their lack of knowledge. Freedom cannot depend upon ignorance unless we are to deem a people ignorant of their oppression free. Knowledge, however, although necessary, is insufficient for freedom.[167]

Countless people are aware of the conditions of their oppression but are unable to do anything about it. 'It is salutary to remember that there is a logical gap between "knowing" and "doing" which can only be bridged by "being able and wanting to do in suitable circumstances".'[168] There is no realm of undetermined pure freedom; rather emancipation is the 'transformation in self-emancipation by the agents concerned, from an unwanted and unneeded, to a wanted and needed, source of determination, [which] is both causally presaged and logically entailed by explanatory theory, but that . . . can only be effected in practice'.[169] Thus, although social science has the ability to inform and affect values and actions, it does not follow that either can be wholly determined or reduced to social scientific knowledge. Social science cannot, in and of

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[164] See Throop and Knight (1987).   [165] Shotter (1993: 187).
[166] See, for example, Foucault (1973; 1984b).
[167] I am defining freedom here as: (1) to know one's real interests; (2) to possess both (a) the ability and the resources, i.e. generically the power, and (b) the opportunity to act in (or towards) them; and (3) to be disposed to do so. See Bhaskar (1986: 172).
[168] Bhaskar (1986: 171).   [169] Bhaskar (1986: 171).

itself, determine or provide the sole grounds for values, because there are other things of value in life than explanatory knowledge. Moreover, it cannot, again, in and of itself, determine or provide the sole justification for action, because it is always located in the space of 'will, desire, sentiment, capacities, facilities and opportunities as well as beliefs'.[170] As a social practice social scientific knowledge emerges in an open world and it is always a contingent matter whether its tendencies are actualised or not.

Explanatory knowledge, scientific knowledge, gives us an informed choice, not a blueprint for living. And once it enters the public domain social scientific knowledge is subject to political and ethical manipulation and negotiation by the actors involved. Observable behaviour has to be explained by uncovering the nature of those entities as well as the complex relationships in which the entities are constituted. What we require are theories of the relatively enduring structures of society, which impact upon our lives. Theories, that is, that are not reducible to observations of individual behaviour or a hermeneutic study of intentions and actions. The open nature of the social world, allied to the lack of possible closure, does present problems in terms of epistemic access. And how we validate the move from observation of empirical phenomena to uncover these hidden layers becomes a central concern. However, the unobservable nature of aspects of the natural world has not prevented the advance of natural science, and the unobservable nature of social entities, such as rules, roles, relations and meanings, should not be viewed as an insurmountable barrier to social scientific knowledge.

Some parts of the social world will be, in principle, opaque to our senses; the intentionality of actions and the socially constituting power of beliefs and understanding are always going to remain to some extent personal and ambiguous. However, society also has a real and relatively enduring set of structural properties that exert effects and which can be the subject of scientific inquiry. The fact that these structural properties only manifest themselves in the behaviour of individuals requires that we take seriously the intentions, meanings and understandings of the agents involved. Indeed, the interplay between these structural properties and the intentions, reasons and meanings provides fertile ground for the development of a critical social science. Scientific realism, then, does not deny the importance of investigating common-sense understandings of social situations. These are a necessary starting point for

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[170] Bhaskar (1986: 171).

any social inquiry, but they must be susceptible to critical investigation in a scientific manner using theories, models, hypotheses and empirical observation.

Social structures, rules, roles and relations, like the powers, dispositions and forces of nature, cannot be directly perceived, but rather have to be studied and inferred from their effects. Nonetheless, given a causal criterion for the ascription of reality, they can still be considered real. It is only if they are real that they can have causal power and effect outcomes. Social science, like natural science, always takes place within frameworks consisting of ontologies, methodologies, models and general theories, and in order to see our way clearly through these, will require, given the unobservable status of our postulated mechanisms, the use of metaphorical and analogical reasoning.

Scientific knowledge should be seen as a pragmatic 'product-in-process' that results from a gradual convergence between our philosophical and methodological frameworks, our theories, our hypotheses and our data. Coherence and convergence between all of these, although the regulative ideal, is rarely complete. The important term, here, is *our*. Knowledge is a social product and all our claims might potentially turn out to be incorrect. It will be what we make of it, and discontinuities, revolutions and wrong turns will be part and parcel of it. Despite our epistemic doubt, however, we are still justified in talking in terms of a science of society. This is so because there are some things that the sciences share in common as opposed to other forms of human knowledge acquisition. What makes a particular practice a science is not its form of validation, but its commitment to public validation of its structure and form of reasoning, the constant questioning of its beliefs, its notion of, and belief in, the possibility of epistemological convergence and its commitment to a multi-layered realism.

More than these, however, what distinguishes scientific knowledge from other forms of knowledge is its explanatory content. This point cannot be over-stressed. What distinguishes scientific knowledge is not the method of knowledge acquisition, nor the immutable nature of the knowledge produced, but the aim of the knowledge itself. Scientific knowledge is explanatory and as such a great deal of knowledge of the social world is deserving of the label science even if it does not deserve the label positivism.

2 The agent–structure problem: from social theory to IR theory

A central concern and fundamental problem for any scientist is the issue of conceptualising an object of inquiry. In terms of social inquiry the answer to this problem can seem deceptively simple. Since society consists of people, social scientists should study people. Yet simplicity has its own problems[1] and despite the fact that many social scientists (and politicians) accept the equation 'society = people + their activity', many reject it. For what, in the first instance, are people? How are people formed and what properties do they possess? And is that all society is – people? Is there not more to the social world than simply people – what of that excess element, the consequences of their activity? What if their activity takes on an independent ontological existence and forms part of the circumstances in which people act and hence reacts back upon them? One does not have to be a Marxist to accept that people act but not in circumstances of their own choosing.[2] And what if these circumstances construct those people rather than those people constructing these circumstances? In which case, social inquiry should concern itself with the circumstances rather than with the people. Two simple views of society: society is people, or society is the circumstances within which people are formed.[3]

The opposition between these two views has played a fundamental role in structuring all forms of social inquiry, including IR. Owing to a commitment to positivist principles, however, this problem has generally been addressed as a *methodological* issue; hence the labels 'methodological individualism' and 'methodological structuralism'. What is

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[1] Bunge (1993).
[2] Marx (1962: para 2). This is probably the classic statement of the agent–structure problem.
[3] Perhaps the best overview of these two positions is Dawe (1979).

actually at stake in the opposition between these two views is the *onto-logical* question of the nature of the object we would come to know: what are its constituent elements and how are they interrelated? This ontological question has come to be known as the agent–structure problem, although aspects of it have appeared in various other guises: macro versus micro, individual versus society, action versus structure, and so forth.[4] Understood as a problem of object conceptualisation we can see why Wendt argues that 'all social scientific theories embody an at least implicit solution to the "agent–structure" problem'.[5]

For now, I want to set the agent–structure problem in context so that we can illustrate some of the problems with the most influential formulations of it. To this end, this chapter will outline some of the most important attempts to grapple with this problem. First I will outline Max Weber's and Emile Durkheim's influential solutions. Weber and Durkheim are useful starting points because they set the limits of the continuum into which other approaches can be situated. Following this I detail some important attempts to go beyond Weber and Durkheim, and then show how IR theories presume positions on the agent–structure problem even if these are not always made explicit. But first a word of caution.

To label something a problem suggests both the possibility of a solution and the need to elaborate one. Roxanne Lynn Doty, for example, seems to view the agent–structure issue in this manner.[6] In respect of the agent–structure problem, however, there can be no solution in the sense of solving the conundrum so that we know the 'answer', or the problem no longer appears as a problem. Every social theory has its own 'solution/answer' to the problem, but this does not mean that the problem has been dispensed with. We may want to reject some formulations and favour others, but again, this does not mean that the problem has been solved. The agent–structure problem is an issue that must be addressed by all approaches and it is the manner in which it is addressed which represents a major point of theoretical dispute. If ever the agent–structure problem were solved, in the sense of requiring no further discussion, then social theoretic activity would come to an end, and along with it political, economic, cultural and ethical dispute. In this sense, the agent–structure problem is political. I ask the reader to rest content with a promissory note that the validity of this assertion

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[4] Layder (1994).   [5] Wendt (1987: 337).   [6] Doty (1997).

will be defended in later chapters. For now we need to delve into some of the most influential solutions.

Warring gods: Weber versus Durkheim

It is commonplace to present Weber and Durkheim as representing extreme poles of competing accounts of the social.[7] Weber is said to represent an individualist approach; Durkheim a structuralist. Although there is something to this representation, and I shall employ it, it is important to realise that neither Weber nor Durkheim represents a naive version. That said, within the works of these two sociological giants one can find very clear, and sophisticated, expressions of widely divergent social ontologies. It is because of this clarity and sophistication that Weber and Durkheim feature so prominently in the lexicon of the agent–structure problem.

Weber did not deny that there is more to social life than individuals; he simply thought that what more there is can be explained in terms of individuals, that is, can be reduced to some property pertaining to individuals. Hence Weber can rightly be considered a methodological individualist, but not an ontological individualist.[8] Likewise, Durkheim, as a structuralist, did not deny the existence of people; he simply rejected the idea that social explanations could be couched in terms of people. Indeed, for Durkheim, what people were was the result of social conditions.

Weber's methodological injunctions are derived from his social ontology. He insisted that human beings and their relationships in social institutions were distinctively different from facts of nature, because human beings directed their actions to each other in terms of meaning. Humans consciously seek to achieve certain ends; they make choices and employ certain means, whilst discarding others, in striving to attain these ends. Hence, the social action of men/women could not be explained in the same manner as that applicable to the explanation of 'objects' and 'things'.[9]

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[7] Weber (1968); Durkheim (1964).

[8] These are important distinctions. As I use the terms, an ontological individualist (or structuralist) makes the strong claim that only individuals (or structures) exist. A methodological individualist (or structuralist), on the other hand, makes only the weaker claim that methodologically only individuals (or structures) explain outcomes. A methodological individualist (or structuralist) may or may not also be an ontological individualist (or structuralist). However, an ontological individualist (or structuralist) must, to remain consistent, also be a methodological individualist (or structuralist). On these distinctions see Bhargava (1992); Udehn (2001).

[9] Weber (1968: 7).

Weber argued that sociology should be concerned with the actions of individuals directed towards each other (i.e. social action).[10] Such action can be seen as sets of means employed to achieve particular goals, and must be understood in terms of the meanings that individuals give to it, which Weber called 'subjective understanding'. This 'subjective understanding', the understanding of the purposive actions of individuals, was, claimed Weber, the distinguishing feature of sociology. For Weber, sociology 'shall be taken to refer to a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action . . .'[11]

This stress on 'subjective understanding' should not be taken to imply that Weber denied the existence of societies as entire systems of interconnected institutions and groups. He agreed that societal, or 'associational', systems formed a distinctive level of phenomena – a 'distinctive configuration' – that was objectively there.[12] He opposed, however, any reification of these as entities, because, in his view, such entities only 'existed' in the sense that the subjective meanings and motives shared by all members of society were such as to sustain the probabilities of these continuities of behaviour. For Weber, collectivities are 'solely the resultants and modes of organisation of the specific acts of individual men, since these alone are for us the agents who carry out subjectively understandable action'.[13] In one of the classic statements of methodological individualism Weber declared: 'When reference is made in a sociological context to a state, a nation, a corporation, a family, or an army corps, or to similar collectivities, what is meant is *only* a certain kind of development of actual or possible actions of individual persons.'[14]

There are three important points to make in relation to Weber at this point. First is his thoroughgoing individualism: social collectives are only a certain kind of development of individuals. They possess no properties of their own and explanation of them must be located within the subjective understanding of the individuals concerned. Second is the inference that this 'delusion' about the nature of collectives is not only a theoretical problem but also one that occurs when any reference is made to collectives in a social context. Presumably then, all talk of the 'state' by state leaders and publics is misguided and is actually a reference to individuals. This puts the agent–structure problem very much at the

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[10] Weber claimed that social action can be classified into four types, but that it would be very unusual to find actions in the real world that contained only one of these ideal types (1968).

[11] Weber (1968: 4).   [12] Weber (1968: 13).

[13] Weber (1968: 13).   [14] Weber (1968: 14).

centre of all claims vis-à-vis the social world. Third is the manner in which Weber draws conclusions about the nature of sociological explanation from his ontological considerations. This is important because it highlights the manner in which the epistemological and methodological problems that many writers see as aspects of the agent–structure problem are actually derivative of the ontological problem of object specification.

Durkheim was also concerned with meanings, but he saw the most important meanings, as well as other 'social facts' and 'social currents', as having an existence over and above the individuals. These formed a 'collective consciousness' into which individuals had to be socialised.[15] In his seminal work *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim argued that 'social phenomena must not be explained reductively', and that '[w]henever a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon we may be sure that the explanation is false'.[16] The main thrust of Durkheim's thesis is that no theory or analysis that begins from the individual can successfully grasp the specific properties of social phenomena. For Durkheim, society is not the mere sum of individuals; on the contrary, he maintained that social reality for the individual is the reality received by him/her. The individual does not create the social: (wo)man does not create the language (s)he speaks, but learns it from his/her group/society; (s)he does not invent the methods of work (s)he applies, but uses those present in the era in which (s)he emerges; (s)he does not invent his/her own religion, but professes one of those which already exist. Put simply, (s)he must adjust his/her ways of thinking, feeling and acting to the ways accepted by society.[17]

Durkheim was keen to demonstrate that sociology had a distinctive subject matter of its own – at a level distinct from biology and psychology – and hence maintained that 'social facts' existed as things in their own right; that they were interlinked by cause-and-effect relations in the social system as an entirety, that changes in them could only be explained in terms of other 'social facts', and not in terms of the conscious action of the individual members of society. Thus, an important principle of the sociological method, for Durkheim, was that causes of social facts are to be sought exclusively in terms of other social facts and this entailed a rejection of all biological and psychological explanations. Durkheim argued that 'social life must be explained, not by the

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[15] Durkheim (1976).   [16] Durkheim (1964: 103–104).
[17] Durkheim (1964: xvi–xvii, 3).

conception of it held by those who participate in it, but by profound causes which escape consciousness'.[18]

Thus, whilst both Weber and Durkheim can be seen to be concerned with meanings – with people's ideas – Weber gives analytical priority to the individual, whereas for Durkheim, sociological inquiry must posit the social whole as ontologically and analytically prior. It needs to be stressed that when conducted under the rubric of a positivist account of science, the debate between 'methodological individualists' and 'methodological structuralists' is easily portrayed as exclusively methodological. The positivist belief that ontological questions can be dealt with at the level of methodology explains why these positions are called 'methodological individualism' and 'methodological structuralism'.

However, it is important to distinguish between a genuine methodological individualism and a more radical ontological individualism.[19] The two positions are closely related, but whereas an ontological individualist must be a committed methodological individualist, it is conceivable for a methodological individualist to reject ontological individualism. The same can be said of various forms of structuralism. A methodological individualist is committed only to the view that the appropriate mode of explanation resides with individuals, but it does not follow from this belief that the methodological individualist rejects the reality of social wholes. The ontological individualist, on the other hand, is committed only to the reality of individuals; hence the appropriate methodological stance must also be methodological individualism. Many individualists do not deny the ontological reality of collectives and many structuralists do not deny the ontological reality of individuals. What they *do* dispute is the role played by each in explaining social outcomes. In general, when a particular theorist advances methodological individualism without endorsing ontological individualism, they do so on the basis of a methodological account of what constitutes good science. As demonstrated in chapter 1, on a scientific realist account of science, methodological answers to ontological questions are always to be viewed with suspicion

The strength of both the Weberian and the Durkheimian approach to the analysis of social phenomena is derived from the weaknesses of the other. Each displays a *prima facie* plausibility in virtue of the inadequacies of the other. Given this, it is tempting to try to develop

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[18] Lukes (1975: 231).   [19] Bhargava (1992); Udehn (2001).

a general model of society capable of synthesising these conflicting perspectives, on the assumption of a dialectical interrelationship between society and individuals. One example of such an approach is that developed by P. Berger and T. Luckmann.[20] According to their model, in their social activity human beings create institutions such as the state, which become established as external realities, and which, in turn, confront emergent generations. Political, societal, economic, religious and cultural institutions and processes, they argue, are enshrined in traditions, customs and rituals which through time take on an 'objective character' as external realities.[21] These realities are reinforced and objectified through language and other symbolic forms – emblems, flags, legal and governmental procedures, rules of kinship, etc. – all of which become ways of expressing the 'reality' of such things. Language plays a crucial role in this model since it enables people to think and speak of things that are removed, or absent, from everyday face-to-face behaviour.[22]

According to the Berger and Luckmann model, then, society forms the individuals who create the society, which then shapes and forms the individuals and so forth, in a continuous dialectic. Society, for Berger and Luckmann, is never anything other than a human product, and society itself is simply human activity that has become 'objectified' in the form of knowledge or symbolic practices.[23]

The problem with this attempt to transcend the individualist–structuralist dichotomy is that it seems simply to add the problems of both into one account. Thus, and as Bhaskar points out, in their efforts to avoid the errors of individualism and structural accounts they reproduce the errors of both.[24] By suggesting that society is simply an objectification, or externalisation created through language, they replicate the error of viewing society as nothing but the activity of individuals, and, by suggesting that individuals are subjective reflections of these objectifications, they endorse a deterministic view of the individual. Simply adding a dialectical motif to this relationship does not help.

In effect, for Berger and Luckmann, both individuals and structures continue to be pale reflections of one another. For example, they tend to portray individuals as if they were separate from interaction with other people and there is little in-depth discussion of social activity. Consequently, the discussion of the range of social practices in which people engage is very limited in scope. On the other hand, there is too much

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[20] Berger and Luckmann (1967).   [21] Berger and Luckmann (1967: 65–145).
[22] Berger and Luckmann (1967: 49–61, 82).   [23] Berger and Luckmann (1967: 79).
[24] Bhaskar (1979: 41).

emphasis on the importance of knowledge and symbolic forms and too little on the ways in which material factors are related to, and have an effect on, these things. Equally, and despite their emphasis on the importance of history, there is little specification of the unequal distribution of material resources in societies in specific historical circumstances. Thus, there is no analysis of the manner in which goods, power, authority and money are distributed throughout societies and structure social action, or of the varied ways in which certain kinds of knowledge, and access to it, reflect this distribution.

In an attempt to get around this problem two new perspectives have emerged within social theory that directly tackle the relationship between structure and agency and seek to unite them. One is the morphogenetic approach most commonly associated with Margaret Archer, but which has its roots in general systems theory associated with Walter Buckley.[25] The second is that of structuration, and is generally linked to the work of Anthony Giddens, Roy Bhaskar and Pierre Bourdieu.[26]

Both Bhaskar and Giddens attempt to transcend the individualist/structuralist dichotomy through what Giddens calls the 'duality of structure' in which 'the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organise'.[27] Structure, according to Giddens and Bhaskar, should not be viewed solely as a constraining element of the social world, but rather the structural properties of social systems should be seen as *both* enabling *and* constraining. As Bhaskar puts it, 'the existence of social structure is a necessary condition for any human activity. Society provides the means, media, rules and resources for everything we do.'[28] Moreover, these structural constraints do not operate independently of the motives and reasons actors have for what they do. Thus, society is the '[u]nmotivated consequence for all our motivated productions. We do not create society – the error

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[25] Archer (1985, 1995); Buckley (1967). Another theorist who is often linked to the systems theory tradition is Niklas Luhmann (1982), and his work has been taken up by some theorists in IR (see Albert and Hilkermeier, 2003). Luhmann's work is not considered in this book for two main reasons. First, I agree with Hamilton (1996: 169) that 'Luhmann's systems theory represents the most radical attempt yet seen to exclude the human actor from any account of structure and system.' Second, according to autopoiesis theory, which forms the basis for Luhmann's account of the social, systems have no structure. Luhmann makes communication the sole causal dynamic of all systems.
[26] The linking of this disparate group of theorists is generally attributed to Thrift (1983). It is important to realise that although Giddens' work and Bhaskar's are similar in many respects, and Wendt, Dessler and others seem to view them as one and the same, they are not identical. Indeed, I intend to argue that what divides them is much more substantial than that which unites them.
[27] Giddens (1984: 25).   [28] Bhaskar (1989: 3–4).

of voluntarism. But these structures which pre-exist us are only repro-
duced or transformed in our everyday activities; thus society does not
exist independently of human agency – the error of reification.'[29]

Archer's morphogenetic approach has much in common with that
of Giddens and Bhaskar. Both the morphogenetic and structurationist
approaches agree that action presupposes structure and vice versa, and
both acknowledge that action in a social setting is ineluctably shaped by
the unacknowledged conditions of action and that such action can gen-
erate unintended consequences which form the context of subsequent
interaction. However, there is a crucial difference that Archer discerns
between her theory and that of Giddens. As she puts it, '[w]here they
[morphogenesis and structuration theory] differ profoundly is in how
they conceptualise it and how on that basis they theorise about the
structuring (and restructuring) of social systems.'[30] For Archer, what is
missing from the 'structurationist' approach is the ability to incorpo-
rate the distinction between synchronic and diachronic structural and
agential effects and/or influences.[31]

Morphogenesis denotes *both* the inner and outer form of a 'thing'
or structure and also a process or developmental aspect of that same
'thing' or structure.[32] Hence, claims Archer, '[m]orphogenesis is also a
process, referring to the complex interchanges that produce change in
a system's given form, structure or state'.[33] Such an approach allows
for the introduction of an end product, 'structural elaboration', which
differs from Giddens' notion of a 'visible pattern'. For Giddens, these
'visible patterns' can best be analysed as recurrent social practices and
have at best a 'virtual status', whereas Archer's 'elaborated structure' has
properties which cannot be reduced to practices alone. Archer's point
is that 'analytical dualisms' cannot simply, and programmatically, be
replaced by a 'duality', insofar as socio-cultural systems imply discon-
tinuity between initial interactions and their product – the elaborated
structure, or complex system. Hence, the dualisms – voluntarism and
determinism, synchrony and diachrony, individual and society – that
Giddens is keen to overcome are essential elements of social practice
and must be theorised.

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[29] Bhaskar (1989: 4).   [30] Archer (1990: 74).   [31] Archer (1985, 1990, 1995).
[32] Archer also claims that 'the "morpho" element is an acknowledgement that society
has no pre-set form or preferred state: the genetic part is a recognition that it takes its
shape from, and is formed by, agents, originating from the intended and unintended
consequences of their activities'. See Archer (1995: 5).
[33] Archer (1990: 75).

Insofar as Bhaskar's resolution of the agent–structure problem is commensurate with that of Giddens, then we can presume that Archer wishes to distinguish herself from Bhaskar also. However, although Archer did initially claim that a realist ontology was not a requirement for morphogenesis, she has recently come to see the necessity, not only of a realist social ontology, but of a realist metatheoretical framework and metaphysics for morphogenesis.[34] To this end, Archer has tied morphogenesis specifically to Bhaskar's account of social science and attempted to disentangle Bhaskar's resolution of the problem from that proposed by Giddens. In effect, Archer now sees Bhaskar's 'critical naturalism', and in particular, his model of society – the TMSA, (Transformational Model of Social Activity) – as a complex social ontology to which is to be wedded 'morphogenesis' as an explanatory social methodology.[35]

This was an important development which signalled recognition that the agent–structure problem could not be addressed simply at the level of methodology. In part, this necessity of ontological speculation arose out of attacks on the positivist orthodoxy, particularly those based upon scientific realism. For scientific realists the important questions were about the nature of agents, structures and their relationship. Whether agents and structures could be integrated into one account would depend upon how the properties of each were theorised. Outside of a narrowly conceived positivistic account of science, it was no longer sufficient to present methodological solutions to ontological questions. The ontological cat was now very clearly out of the epistemological and methodological bag.

Within IR, this ontological turn helps explain why so many of the contributors to the agent–structure debate have approached the problem from the perspective of scientific realism. Equally, however, positivist approaches to the problem, despite recognising its ontological character, have fallen back on methodological solutions. Friedman and Starr, for example, simply admit their inability to deal with the complex metatheoretical issues raised by the agent–structure problem and fall

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[34] Archer argues, '[i]f the adoption of a realist ontology is the litmus test, I leave it to the reader to apply it to the theory of structuration. It is not really a palm coveted by the morphogenetic perspective, which is based on neo-Kantian rationalist foundations.' Archer (1990: 88). Her recognition of the need for a realist social ontology and metaphysical framework forms the rationale behind her most recent work: Archer (1995, 2000).
[35] Archer (1995: 15–16).

back on a form of methodological individualism.[36] Importantly, Friedman and Starr do not neglect the role of structures in social outcomes; however, they do insist that only 'methodological individualism' can help us grasp the dynamics of the agent–structure relationship. Their position is a 'weak' form of methodological individualism, but not an ontological individualism. But it nonetheless disappoints since it fails to give adequate explanatory weight to the structural elements of the social world.

This brief outline of the basic dichotomy and recent attempts to transcend it shows the sharp divisions surrounding this issue. Indeed, so sharp *are* the divisions surrounding this particular problem that one pair of theorists has been forced (or is it chosen?) to take up a position which declares in celebratory fashion that 'there are always two stories to tell'.[37] For Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, the ontological, epistemological and methodological commitments entailed by one position vitiate against any form of compromise or resolution of this problem. It is not that we are unaware of the role of both agents and structures in any adequate social theory, it is that each element requires its own distinctive mode of inquiry. 'The agent–structure problem is not settled by deciding what proportions to put in the blender. Agents and structures do not blend easily in any proportions, and the solutions to the problem tend to be unstable.'[38] That these two theorists put forward this proposition in the context of IR testifies to the importance of the agent–structure problem for IR theory.

Analysing IR phenomena: individual choices or structural forces?

Although the language of agents and structures was alien to IR until recently the discipline has nonetheless been forced to grapple with a version of the problem in the guise of the 'levels-of-analysis' problem.[39] This has meant that IR theory, in common with other social sciences, has its proponents of the individualist and structuralist approaches, although these positions are perhaps less explicitly articulated than in social theory.

In *What is History?* E. H. Carr provides an early and explicit discussion of the issue couched in terms of a critique of abstract individualism.[40] Carr's discussion of the issues is slight, but highly sophisticated, and the

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[36] Friedman and Starr (1997).   [37] Hollis and Smith (1990, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1996).
[38] Hollis and Smith (1991: 393).   [39] Singer (1961).   [40] Carr (1987: 31–55).

position he attempts to outline pre-dates many of the later attempts to address the problem. Importantly, in an argument that prefigures that advanced in this book, Carr argues that the commitment to individualism, whilst a 'barrier to our understanding of what goes on in the world',[41] is also a force that has shaped history.[42] Equally important is that Carr also tackles the problem from an epistemological as well as an ontological angle. Thus Carr brings together, albeit in a loosely formulated manner, the ontological problem of the nature of agents and structures with the problem of naturalism.

Epistemologically, Carr rejects the idea that an abstract individual, the historian, can simply collect historical facts. Facts certainly exist independently of the historian for Carr, but they only become historical facts when the historian draws attention to them. And it is the historian who decides which are the important facts to collect. This draws attention to the historian. Who is he/she? Why choose these facts and not others? What factors govern the choice of facts? In many ways Carr would reject phrasing the issue in these terms, for such a framing implies an abstract individual – the historian – who collects facts according to their interests. Of course, Carr accepts the existence of a historian who chooses, collects and shapes historical facts into a narrative. But Carr's historian is no abstract individual. For Carr, individuals are social phenomena.[43] This means that to understand the collection and compilation of historical facts would require acceptance of two important truths: 'first that you cannot fully understand or appreciate the work of the historian unless you have first grasped the standpoint from which he himself [*sic*] appreciates it; secondly that that standpoint is itself rooted in a social and historical background'.[44] Thus, Carr's historian is a mirror of the society in which they work.[45] The historian is the product of historical forces.[46]

Ontologically, Carr's individuals are social and historical products. Carr constructs a devastating critique against what he calls the 'Bad King John' theory of history: the belief that history can be written in terms of great individuals.[47] For Carr, there is no distinction that can be drawn between societies and individuals.[48] As one would expect with a writer as perceptive as Carr, however, he is keen to reject the idea that 'all-powerful forces' determine the actions of individuals.[49]

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[41] Carr (1987: 35).   [42] Carr (1987: 33–35).   [43] Carr (1987: 35).
[44] Carr (1987: 39–40).   [45] Carr (1987: 42).   [46] Carr (1987: 40).
[47] Carr (1987: 45).   [48] Carr (1987: 47).   [49] Carr (1987: 49).

Yet, despite his insistence that this view is 'nonsense', Carr does ultimately lean towards structural determinism. Although he is at pains to stress that society is nothing other than individuals acting together, he asserts that the historian investigates what lies behind the act and that in terms of this aim the motivations of agents are irrelevant.[50] Certainly, Carr was concerned with great men (*sic*) in history, but Carr's great men were always representatives of existing forces; always products of their age; always mirrors of society. Carr claims that it is essential that we recognise that individuals are both the products and the agents of historical processes.[51] Yet in making individuals the products of society he can view their practices as nothing other than the production of forces beyond their will.

Kenneth Waltz provides a better-known example of an explicitly structural account of international relations phenomena.[52] Waltz begins by delineating two kinds of theories, reductionist and systemic, which broadly map on to the individualist/structuralist typology discussed thus far. For Waltz, and in a very Durkheimian manner, reductionist approaches are those that claim that 'the whole is understood by knowing the attributes and the interactions of its parts'.[53] Waltz claims that this is all that is required by 'reductionist' theories: '[o]nce the theory that explains the behaviour of the parts is fashioned, no further effort is required.'[54] Waltz is clearly dissatisfied with reductionist approaches and claims that 'it is not possible to understand world politics simply by looking inside of states'.[55] 'What is it', asks Waltz, 'that intervenes between interacting units and the results that their acts and interactions produce?'[56] Waltz's answer was 'structure'.

It is not necessary to delve deep into the specifics of Waltz's theory in order to understand that he sees structures as playing a fundamental role in explaining international outcomes. How much of a role and whether they play the only role are the important questions. Does he mean to suggest that structures determine outcomes? Does he intend to imply that structural causes are the only causes? The answer to both questions is no. Yet, despite his claims to the contrary,[57] many commentators still treat his theory as determinist and lacking any awareness of unit-level causes.[58] In part, this claim of determinism can be attributed to a general belief that all structural theories are determinist; this is certainly Richard

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[50] Carr (1987: 52).   [51] Carr (1987: 55).   [52] Waltz (1979).
[53] Waltz (1979: 18).   [54] Waltz (1979: 60).   [55] Waltz (1979: 65).
[56] Waltz (1979: 79).   [57] Waltz (1979: 78–79; 1986: 343–344).
[58] Hollis and Smith (1990: 110); McSweeney (1999: 216); Ruggie (1983); Ashley (1986).

Ashley's and Bill McSweeney's view for example.[59] However, there is no reason why structural theories should necessarily imply determinism. Indeed Waltz anticipated just this line of critique and rejects it.[60] In *Theory of International Politics* Waltz insisted that unit-level causes matter, and that even as the 'structure of the system affects the interacting units . . . they in turn affect the structure'.[61]

It is worth noting that Waltz's use of 'systemic' to describe his theory has only added to the confusion on this issue. Waltz intended only to highlight the fact that there were causes operating at the structural level of the system and to provide an account of the dynamic of such causes. Yet, since he defines the system as consisting of interacting units and system structure[62] and provides only a theory of the structure then his theory is not genuinely a theory of the system. Indeed, as he himself notes, the 'aim of a systems theory is to show how the two levels operate and interact'.[63] Since he patently fails to do this, his theory cannot be a systemic theory even on his own terms. It is for this reason that I prefer the label 'structural realism'.

However, insofar as Waltz intends his theory to be a theory of the structure of the system that explains international outcomes in terms of this structure, then I think his theory is rightly deserving of the label 'methodological structuralism'. It is a 'methodological structuralism' because Waltz is quite clear that theories have no requirement to be realistic.[64] Interestingly, although Waltz attempted to locate some explanatory potential at the level of structure both Richard Ashley and Alexander Wendt claim that his theory is ultimately individualist.[65] I will deal with this issue in more detail in chapter 3; however, it is clear that both Ashley and Wendt take this position on Waltz because they see the issue in ontological rather than methodological terms.

An example of an IR theorist taking a consistent methodological and ontological structuralist approach is Immanuel Wallerstein.[66] For Wallerstein, the main focus of inquiry is not the international political system, but rather capitalism, which he views 'as an entire system'.[67] According to Wallerstein, the existence of a particular distribution of power or capabilities within the international political system cannot

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[59] Ashley (1984); McSweeney (1999: 216).   [60] Waltz (1979: 40).
[61] Waltz (1979: 42). See also Waltz (1979: 18, 40, 48–49, 58, 73, 87) for claims that unit-level factors matter.
[62] Waltz (1979: 79).   [63] Waltz (1979: 40).   [64] Waltz (1979: 8).
[65] Ashley (1986); Wendt (1987).   [66] Wallerstein (1974, 1979, 1983, 1984).
[67] Shannon (1989: 23).

be explained without reference to the underlying economic order. He begins his analysis from a clearly stated structuralist premise arguing that the basic unit of analysis for social scientists is the social system. A system, moreover, that clearly determines, shapes and creates its constitutive elements: '[t]he major social institutions of the capitalist world-economy – the states, the classes, the peoples, and the households – are all shaped (even created) by the ongoing workings of the world-economy.'[68] In Wallerstein's analysis the basic units are themselves structures: 'the political superstructure of the capitalist world-economy is an interstate system within which, and through which, political structures called sovereign states are legitimised and constrained'.[69] Wallerstein's approach is Durkheimian in character, although as Wendt indicates, a better point of reference might be Louis Althusser.[70]

An example of a theorist taking an individualist approach in IR is Hans Morgenthau.[71] The starting point of Morgenthau's analysis is the 'will to power', and the behavioural dynamic that drives this 'will to power' is 'human nature'. Morgenthau locates two sources of this will to power: (1) a Hobbesian logic of competition; and (2) a universal desire to dominate rooted in human nature. The Hobbesian logic of competition might seem to suggest that Morgenthau builds into his theory a structural dimension. However, as Michael Smith has suggested, the second source tends to dominate the first and hence the 'logic of competition' is derived from human nature.[72]

According to Morgenthau, men seek power because of some evil inherent in their very nature. For Morgenthau, this is an essential and universal lust for power as an end in itself, which knows no limits. Moreover, since the lust for power *is* universal, 'there is no escape from the evil of power, regardless of what one does'.[73] This pessimism inevitably leads Morgenthau to declare that international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power: 'the desire to dominate is a constituent element of all human associations'[74] and 'the evil that corrupts political action is the same evil that corrupts all action'.[75] Morgenthau sees the social world as constituted, and formed by, the struggle for power inherent in human nature. The starting point of any inquiry begins, then, for Morgenthau, with individuals and the lust for power that drives them. Certainly, collective notions, such as 'national interest', play a vital role;

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[68] Wallerstein (1990: 508).   [69] Wallerstein (1990: 508).
[70] Althusser and Balibar (1970); Wendt (1987: 345).   [71] Morgenthau (1946, 1966).
[72] Smith (1986: 136).   [73] Morgenthau (1946: 201).
[74] Morgenthau (1966: 17).   [75] Morgenthau (1946: 195).

however, 'national interest' is itself a consequence of man's (*sic*) innate 'will to power'.

Morgenthau takes the reductionism inherent in individualist approaches seriously and locates the causes of political outcomes in biology. This would tend to make a science of IR redundant, insofar as we already know the causes of international outcomes and they are outside the realm of social inquiry. For Morgenthau, we can only understand state behaviour in the light of these biological causes. From this ontological belief Morgenthau draws a perfectly valid methodological conclusion, arguing that in order to understand state practices we need to 'put ourselves in the position of a statesman who must meet a certain problem of foreign policy under certain circumstances'.[76] And if we cannot put ourselves in the positions of statesmen we should look over their shoulders and eavesdrop on their political calculations.[77] It is in this sense that Hollis and Smith are right to see Morgenthau's theory in very individualist terms, at the level of both ontology and methodology.[78]

These approaches are ideal types and none of the above-mentioned theorists falls consistently into either individualist or structuralist camps. Yet elaboration of these positions demarcates the parameters of the problem and shows how positions on social ontology play a fundamental role and how easy it is to neglect, or be forced to ignore, vital factors in any sociological analysis.

The inadequacies of structuralist or individualist accounts of IR have formed the background against which the agent–structure debate emerged in IR. In general, the introduction of the language of agents and structures can be seen as part of a broader programme aimed at increasing the range of resources available to theorise international relations phenomena.[79] It was inevitable that any attempt to address the inadequacies of Waltz's overt structuralism would be attentive to the manner in which social theory had addressed the issue. Three important attempts, by Alexander Wendt, David Dessler and Walter Carlsnaes, provide examples of the suggested (Bhaskarian/Giddensian/Archerian) resolutions imported from social theory.[80]

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[76] Morgenthau (1966: 5).   [77] Morgenthau (1966: 5).
[78] Hollis and Smith (1990: 97).   [79] Lapid (1989).
[80] These are not the only attempts. See also Bieler and Morton (2001); Cerny (1990); Doty (1997); Jabri and Chan (1996); Suganami (1999). See Hollis and Smith (1991) for a critique of the attempt simply to incorporate the theoretical work from cognate disciplines directly into IR.

Arguably, the most influential of these structurationist contributions has come from Wendt.[81] For Wendt, any solution to the agent–structure problem must begin with a metatheoretical specification of the relationship between agents and structures that avoids reduction of one to the other. A conception that can allow '[t]hat the capacities and even existence of human agents are in some way necessarily related to a social structural context – that they are inseparable from human sociality.'[82] Rejecting individualist and structuralist accounts, Wendt's chosen metatheoretical stance is that of Giddens' structuration theory underpinned by scientific realist philosophy. Structuration theory is 'a conceptual framework or meta-theory for thinking about real world social systems'.[83] Such an approach, argues Wendt, 'tries to avoid what I shall argue are the negative consequences of individualism and structuralism by giving agents and structures equal ontological status'.[84] Structuration theory presents us with a radically different social ontology from that articulated in individualist or structuralist accounts. As Wendt puts it, '[t]his conceptualisation forces us to rethink the fundamental properties of (state) agents and system structures.'[85]

Wendt sees it as primarily an ontological problem. Moreover, he suggests that the consequence of adopting a structurationist ontology, and giving equal ontological status to both agents and structures, will necessarily involve two differing but complementary forms of explanation. The first is a question of 'how is action X possible?'; the second 'Why did X happen rather than Y?' 'How' questions are concerned with what could happen (the possible), whereas 'Why' questions are concerned with what does happen (the actual). 'How' questions are essentially structural in form; 'Why' questions historical. Structural analysis explains the possible; historical analysis explains the actual.[86] Hence, Wendt accepts that there is a fundamental link between ontology and methodology.

Although Wendt wants to preserve the distinctions between structural and historical explanations, he believes not only that they can, but that they must, be combined in any adequate social theory. This combination is to be effected through what Wendt calls 'structural-historical' or 'dialectical' analysis. The method by which 'structural-historical' analysis advances is to 'bracket off' first one mode and then the other, 'that is, taking social structures and agents in turn as temporarily given in order

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[81] Wendt (1987).   [82] Wendt (1987: 355).
[83] Wendt (1987: 355).   [84] Wendt (1987: 339).
[85] Wendt (1987: 339).   [86] Wendt (1987: 363).

to examine the explanatory effects of the other'.[87] Hence for Wendt, the methodological issues are derived from the ontological ones. 'Bracketing' is only necessary if both agents and structures are to be theorised in one account.

David Dessler also attempts to move towards a resolution of the agent–structure problem in IR, again primarily using structuration theory underpinned by scientific realism.[88] Dessler is irritated by metatheoretical debates that suggest little in the way of recommendations pertaining to 'empirical' research. The task he sets himself is to determine how philosophical insights might generate empirical pay-offs, and to show how the metaphysical victories claimed by scientific realism can be exploited to generate a progressive research programme in the structural analysis of international politics.[89]

Dessler begins by distinguishing between 'positional' and 'transformational' models of structure.[90] Waltz's theory, according to Dessler, is a paradigmatic case of a positional model, with Bhaskar's theory cited as an example of a transformational model. In a 'positional' theory, system structure is the result of the positioning of ontologically prior units. And the structure of the system is seen to be the result of the unintended consequences of interacting units.[91] Thus, in the positional model, structure is the (unintended) environment in which action takes place; it is an environment to be confronted and mediated, but not changed. In a transformational model, on the other hand, structure consists of materials for action and these materials potentially undergo transformation as action unfolds. The materials are not incidental to action, but are the media through which action is made possible.[92]

Focusing on the necessary conditions for action allows Dessler to consider the ontology of Waltz's theory. Structure, he argues, must consist of something more than anarchy and the distribution of power. It must also encompass the media through which rational action is effected.[93] Following a position previously outlined by Onuf and Kratochwil, Dessler suggests that a crucial ontological component of any transformative

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[87] Wendt (1987: 364–365).   [88] Dessler (1989).
[89] Dessler (1989: 443). Dessler may be mistaking the role of metatheoretical speculation, and the move from metatheory to substantive theory is not an easy one to make. Giddens (1983) is sceptical that his structurationist ontology can survive the move from one level of theorising to the other: 'I would not seek to insert the idea of structuration as directly into a research context as . . . [t]he theory of structuration . . . is not a magical key that unlocks the mysteries of empirical research . . .' (1983: 75, 77).
[90] Dessler (1989).   [91] Dessler (1989: 448).
[92] Dessler (1989: 466–467).   [93] Dessler (1989: 459–460).

model of social activity must be rules.[94] 'All social action depends upon the pre-existence of rules, implying that even under anarchy, rules are an essential prerequisite for action.'[95] This implies that Waltz's 'positional model' requires an implicit reliance on social rules although these are not theorised by Waltz.

Whilst the positional model presupposes rules, even if these are unacknowledged, there is an essential difference between the positional and transformational models with regard to these rules. In the positional model, 'the rules (conventions and norms) are fixed parameters of action', which once created by interaction of the units are unintentionally reproduced, whereas in a transformational theory, these rules 'are the material conditions of action', hence agents – states – can intentionally appropriate these resources and through action reproduce and/or transform the system.[96]

Dessler suggests three benefits that might be forthcoming if such a transformational account is accepted: (1) such a theory would help to explain the forces within the decision- and policy-making processes that generate state behaviour, drawing explicit links between structural and unit-level theories; (2) it might provide improved horizontal linkages across issue areas, thereby blurring, and perhaps extinguishing, the false dichotomies of high and low, and domestic and international politics; and (3) a transformational approach might, as a result of its ability to provide explanations of peaceful change, have a direct relevance to policy-making procedures orientated towards removing structural determinations.[97] In all of these conclusions, and in his insistence that any structural ontology must be broadened to include rules, Dessler, like Wendt, sees the problem in ontological terms.

Another attempt at a resolution of the agent–structure problem is that advanced by Walter Carlsnaes.[98] Once again, the entry point into this debate is his dissatisfaction with both the conventional individualist and structuralist accounts and the resolution suggested by Wendt. Like Wendt, Carlsnaes warns against simplistic solutions that give primacy to either agents or structures. However, Carlsnaes also draws an explicit link to the issue of naturalism and rejects those approaches that adhere to either strict explanatory or interpretative accounts. Unlike Wendt and Dessler, Carlsnaes does not turn to Giddens. Indeed, he suggests that

[94] Dessler (1989: 454–463); Kratochwil (1989); Onuf (1989).
[95] Dessler (1989: 458).   [96] Dessler (1989: 460–461).
[97] Dessler (1989: 471–472).   [98] Carlsnaes (1992).

Wendt 'is proposing a starting point that at least Giddens' conceptualisation of structuration theory arguably cannot accommodate'.[99]

Carlsnaes' position on this is derived from Archer, who had argued that Giddens' 'central conflation', or concept of 'duality', precludes the possibility of analysing the empirical interplay between agents and structure over time. This 'central conflation' rules out the possibility of conducting the kind of 'historical analysis' suggested by Wendt, because such a conflation is unable to incorporate the 'dynamic interplay' between agents and structures over time. 'Giddens', argues Carlsnaes, 'cannot incorporate the notion – quintessentially historical – that structure and action work on different time intervals.'[100] This was an important contribution to the debate since it suggested that there may be problems with the attempt to weld Bhaskar and Giddens into one account.

Carlsnaes suggests that explanation should proceed on the basis of 'morphogenetic cycles', which can be analytically broken down into intervals in order to penetrate the dynamic interplay, or relations, between structure and action over time. In this perspective, actions are not only causally affected by structures, but subsequently affect them, indicating a mutually dynamic relationship between the two over time.[101] Such an approach, he concludes, accommodates an institutional *qua* structural perspective towards foreign policy analysis, whilst at the same time incorporating an interpretative epistemology.[102] Indeed, Carlsnaes suggests that this approach allows him to combine explanation and understanding and should be viewed as not only 'an attempt to . . . resolve the agency–structure issue' but also a means of providing a 'metatheoretical foundation for such a methodological reorientation of the field'.[103] Again, Carlsnaes suggests a difference between the ontological problem of object conceptualisation and the methodological problem of how to study this reconceptualised object.

There are two further explicit attempts to address the agent–structure problem that I want briefly to discuss, neither of which is embedded within a structurationist ontology. The first of these is that proposed by Roxanne Lynn Doty. Doty rejects Carlsnaes' claim that this is a problem beyond the pale of poststructuralism and sets out to push past the boundaries of Richard Ashley's premature 'corralling' of this problem

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[99] Carlsnaes (1992: 258). [100] Carlsnaes (1992: 258). [101] Carlsnaes (1992: 284).
[102] Carlsnaes (1992: 267). [103] Carlsnaes (1992: 267).

as an 'undecidable paradox'.[104] According to Doty, when the agent–structure debate first emerged in IR it promised a reconceptualisation of both agents and structures and their interrelationship. Doty notes that although the notion of structure has been thoroughly reworked, the concept of agency has received much less attention. Doty suggests that poststructuralism can be seen as the agent–structure problem par excellence since only it thoroughly forces us to rethink our social ontologies.[105] She claims that, although the agent–structure writers have provided important openings and insights for a critically orientated IR, the full implications of these openings remain unexplored owing to the inability of the agent–structure writers to accept and thematise the indeterminacy at the heart of the agent–structure problem.[106]

Doty argues that poststructuralist discourses are able to provide a more radical approach to the issue of indeterminacy, as opposed to the more conservative understanding gained through what she perceives to be the modernist discourse that underpins previous attempts to address the issue. Specifically, she argues that a poststructuralist discourse could lead to a more radical and critical way of conceptualising the agent–structure issue.[107] Doty suggests that the ontology of agents and structures should be replaced by an ontology of practices; practices, that is, that are radically indeterminate. Given her concern to redress the balance away from a concern with structures to agency and practice, the net effect of Doty's position is to locate agency in the indeterminacy of practices. Doty's solution to the agent–structure problem can be summed up in the following manner: agents and structures are seen to be effects of practices. Or as Doty puts it, 'The subject, agent, is determined not determinative';[108] practices are autonomous and determinative; what stops, or halts, the charge of determinism is that that which determines, namely practices, are themselves radically indeterminate.[109]

This position replaces the determinism of conventional structural accounts with a new 'indeterminate determinism' of poststructuralism. Equally, Doty does not explain what she means by practices, hence it is difficult to see the methodological implications of this new ontology. In fact, despite the explicit attempt to introduce a new ontological framework for understanding the agent–structure relationship, Doty shies away from making any explicit ontological claims. But what in

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[104] Ashley (1989); Carlsnaes (1992: 246). Cox (1996a: 494) had likewise seemed to suggest that this was a conundrum with no solution.
[105] Doty (1997: 388). [106] Doty (1997: 366). [107] Doty (1997: 376).
[108] Doty (1997: 379). [109] Doty (1997: 377).

Doty's account enables practices? What are the conditions of possibility for practices? What are the causal powers and processes that produce practices? These questions are never fully addressed.

Doty's attempt to address the agent–structure problem is, in many respects, similar to what might be called 'process', or 'relational' ontologies.[110] Indeed, even Wendt seems to be moving in this direction.[111] According to Wendt, 'process' is in some sense prior to both agents and structures.[112] This means that agents and structures are best understood as processes. As Wendt puts it, 'even individuals are just bodies, not "agents", except in virtue of social practices'.[113] And social practices are themselves processes. Hence on this ontology, the properties that both agents and structures possess are a function of the social practices that have constituted them. At the heart of this relationalist ontology is the belief that the

> agent–structure problem cannot be overcome by treating each level as highly autonomous. Rather than start, analytically, with agents and structures, the idea is to begin with networks of social transaction and the processes of interaction between actors. In this sense, social transactions are the basic building blocks of social theory, and through them one examines the interplay of actor-level decisions and social structure.[114]

Whatever the merits of this approach, it is clear that it does not avoid the need to engage theoretically with both agents and structures. As Jackson and Nexon admit, 'by focusing firmly on the relations *between* agents and structures, the idea is to lodge causal and constitutive analysis directly in the analytical terms that provide linkage between the two'.[115] But this is surely just an analytical choice and not an ontological position. Understanding the linkage(s) between agents and structures is undoubtedly an important issue, but it cannot take the place of ontological specification of the objects that stand in such relations. As such, and despite the attempt to avoid talking in terms of agents and structures, such approaches inevitably have unthematised accounts of agents and structures as core elements.

The importance of this can be seen in Jackson and Nexon's critique of Legro's account of identity. According to Jackson and Nexon, conceptualising 'identities as relations – as intersubjective properties – requires

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[110] Jackson and Nexon (2003); Legro (2000).   [111] Wendt (1999: 313–369).
[112] Wendt (1999: 313).   [113] Wendt (1999: 313).
[114] Jackson and Nexon (2003).   [115] Jackson and Nexon (2003: 5).

that they be irreducible to the beliefs of any single party in a transactional setting'.[116] This argument is sound but it does not follow that the beliefs of the agents are unimportant to the dynamic outcomes of such relationships. In a set of master and slave relationships within a given society, for example, we can expect to find large variations in how these relationships play out over time, despite the fact that the social context within which they occur is to all intents and purposes identical. And part of the explanation for such variation will be found in the beliefs of the actors involved. Indeed, despite their attempt to locate causal mechanisms solely in process and relations, the agents, in particular, seem to be indispensable to the explanations of US foreign policy Jackson and Nexon offer:

> In order to explain shifts in US policy, it is necessary to examine the ways in which these rhetorical commonplaces – which were of course embedded in and exemplary of a variety of concrete social ties and institutions – interacted with one another, and with other commonplaces such as 'anticommunism' that had been fixtures of the discursive landscape for quite some time. *How* specific people located at key positions combined these arguments, and the specific policy consequences that they drew from them, exercised a significant impact on US policy.[117]

Andrea Bieler and Adam Morton provide an account of the agent–structure relationship based on the work of Robert Cox.[118] Cox had recognised the importance of this issue although he tended to treat it as an unanswerable conundrum, something akin to a 'chicken and egg' type question.[119] This issue only emerges as a genuine paradox if the central difficulty of the agent–structure relationship is one of temporal precedence. As I show in chapter 3, this issue is not integral to the agent–structure problem, but follows from particular solutions to the problem. Bieler and Morton suggest that Cox's work, and neo-Gramscian approaches more generally, can provide a valuable set of insights on the agent–structure relationship. According to Bieler and Morton the social ontology developed by neo-Gramscian perspectives involves a 'distinct notion of "historical structures" that has direct relevance to issues of agency and structure'.[120]

This ontology is to be wedded to a historicist method developed to reveal the logics of the 'historical structures' that characterise specific eras. The aim of this historicist method is to locate the connections

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[116] Jackson and Nexon (2003: 8).   [117] Jackson and Nexon (2003: 15).
[118] Bieler and Morton (2001).   [119] Cox (1996a: 494).   [120] Bieler and Morton (2001: 17).

between the mental framework through which social actors engage in practice and the material world that constrains both what people can do and how they think about action.[121] Here again we have explicit recognition of the two important aspects of the agent–structure problem: ontology and methodology/epistemology. Indeed Bieler and Morton see three major dimensions to the agent–structure problem. These are an ontological concern with the analysis of historical structures; a methodological appreciation of both explanatory and interpretative modes of inquiry; and a preoccupation with rethinking matters of ontology while also remaining sensitive to matters of epistemology.[122] Despite this encouraging beginning, Bieler and Morton ultimately privilege methodological questions over the ontological matters. As they put it,

> by focusing in more detail on the method of historicism, it soon becomes clear that a series of implicit challenges are made to conventional assumptions in IR that have framed debate on agency and structure . . . we will outline the method of historical structures, that combines Wendt's terms 'structural' and 'historical' analysis, as it has relevance to issues of agency–structure.[123]

The work of Hollis and Smith represents an important approach that questions the feasibility, possibility and efficacy of all attempted resolutions. Hollis and Smith do not advance a particular solution to the agent–structure problem themselves, but rather suggest good reasons why we should be suspicious of all solutions. The Hollis and Smith matrix (see Figure 2), in particular, provides an especially helpful (but problematic) visual way of conceptualising the manner in which the problem of naturalism intersects with the agent–structure problem.[124] This way of presenting the issues is quite common.[125] Such diagrammatic devices, however, should always be deployed with an understanding of their limitations.

If we take seriously the proposition that social objects are socially constructed we must accept that those social actors that currently make up the discipline construct the modes of inquiry that develop within IR. Since these actors always act in a setting constructed on the basis of historical understanding of the discipline, then the importance of studying

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[121] Cox (1996b: 52). [122] Bieler and Morton (2001: 17).
[123] Bieler and Morton (2001: 17).
[124] Ultimately the aim of this book will be to challenge the image the matrix provides.
[125] See, for example, Hollis and Smith (1990: 5, 215); Onuf (1989: 56–65); Wendt, (1999: 29, 32).

	Explaining	Understanding
Holistic	External structures	Collective rules
Individualistic	Rational choices	Reasoned choices

Figure 2   The Hollis and Smith matrix

the intellectual history of the discipline is made clear.[126] Diagrammatic devices, such as the matrix employed by many of the agent–structure writers, may be valuable aids in teaching complex issues, but they also have their problems. As Hollis and Smith put it, 'there is a limit to how much analysis can be given with a simple 2×2 matrix'.[127] Despite this warning, however, the deployment of the matrix by Hollis and Smith produces an image of rigid boundaries that may not hold when the issue is considered in other discursive and less dichotomous ways. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, they are guilty of conflating the 'reality of the model' (which is an analytical construct) with the 'model of reality' (which is rooted in the social reality under study).[128] Here Bourdieu's notion of the 'synoptic illusion' provides a useful corrective.

According to Bourdieu there are all sorts of cognitive devices – metaphor and analogy are good examples – which we use to structure, produce and impart our knowledge of the world. One of the most common and important is synopsis: the simplification and condensation of complex information into a unified frame of reference; statistics, of course, being some of the most influential, useful and dangerous modes of representation. This is a procedure that is both common and necessary in everyday discourse and in the practices of scientists. Bourdieu identifies three specific kinds of synoptic accounts or presentations: diagrams, genealogies and calendars.

Bourdieu argues that with diagrams the intention is to render visible in two-dimensional space the logical relationships between specific social phenomena: activities, expressed preferences, ontological,

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[126] Schmidt (1998).   [127] Hollis and Smith (1990: 216).   [128] Jenkins (1992: 81).

methodological and epistemological differences, or whatever. Bourdieu identifies two major problems with such diagrams.

First, the relationships created between entities in the diagrams are often an artefact of the exercise of the production of the diagram: they do not exist in practice. Because these relationships never actually occur in interaction as depicted in the diagram, what appears to be logically incompatible 'on paper' may be compatible in practice.[129] In effect, the entire diagrammatic creation is a kind of fiction, which does not exist in reality. Second, these diagrams always do violence to time and space. For, on the one hand, they represent in simplistic two-dimensional form what is, in fact, multi-dimensional, and on the other hand, all sense of the playing out of strategies in practice over time is lost.

Such devices are not without their uses and there are clear presentational advantages insofar as a great deal of information can be presented in a readily digestible form. But there is an important political dimension to the use of such diagrammatic techniques when they are applied without due concern for their status as distortions of social reality in a well-meaning attempt to introduce clarity to complex issues. False clarity, argues Bourdieu, is often an integral part of the dominant discourse that encourages acceptance of the status quo.[130] The production of an over-simplified and over-simplifying discourse about the social world may provide weapons for the manipulation of the social world in dangerous ways. Again, nothing better illustrates this than the misuse and abuse of statistics.[131] Thus, for Bourdieu, social scientific discourse must be as complex as is demanded by the problem under consideration. It is important, then, for the effects of synopsis, as a theoretical construction of social reality, to be kept firmly in view. More significantly, such diagrammatic devices, when viewed as theoretical constructs, can help expose the analytical difficulties in reducing complex practices to a linear series or diagrammatic totality. As Bourdieu puts it:

> The grouping of factual material performed by the diagram ... removes that advantage one has when manipulating separate relationships ... by forcing one to relate each opposition to all others. It is this very property of the synoptic diagram that led me to discover the limits of the logic imminent in the practices which it sought to make manifest ... the logic of practices can only be grasped through constructs which destroy it as such.[132]

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[129] Bourdieu (1977: 107).   [130] Bourdieu and Passeron (1977: 10–49).
[131] Dorling and Simpson (1999); Reichmann (1962).   [132] Bourdieu (1990a: 10–11).

Of course, all types of representation of social reality, and particularly those in the written form of sociological texts, are a synoptic procedure and Bourdieu accepts that this is indeed the case. What, then, are the possibilities of avoiding illusion in our analyses of social life? Can the process become sufficiently self-conscious and reflexive, sufficiently objectified, or is distortion an inescapable fact of life if one is writing social science? I think the latter is indeed the case, and the distortion of social reality is an inescapable fact for all of us, even in our everyday lives. Underpinning this belief, however, and what makes it possible, is the notion that our representations are indeed that (distortions) and not mere constitutive performative utterances in the process of creating worlds.

The argument advanced by Hollis and Smith is based on a pessimistic conclusion about the possibility of any resolution to the agent–structure problem. According to Hollis and Smith, 'there are always two stories to tell'.[133] The reason this is so, it is claimed, is the existence of 'two mutually exclusive epistemologies'.[134] In short, no resolution to the agent–structure problem can be forthcoming because the problem is one 'of whether the social world is to be understood or explained'.[135] This is the issue of naturalism and as already noted has been a crucial concern within the social sciences.

For Hollis and Smith there are always going to be 'two stories' to tell about any social outcome: one based on the intersubjective and subjective choices made by individuals; the other based on structural forces external to those individuals and which may be unknown to those agents. At times Hollis and Smith seem to argue that it is a form of epistemological incommensurability that vitiates against any combination of these two stories, whilst at times, the problems are seen to be primarily the result of ontological considerations.[136] However, and despite these shifting concerns, it is clear that Hollis and Smith consider the major problem with combining agents and structures to be that the two key ontological elements of the social world require radically different modes of investigation.

Hence whilst the agent–structure problem is not simply an ontological matter, the ontological aspects of the problem take priority. But the

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[133] Hollis and Smith (1990: 410).   [134] Smith (1994: 18, 19).   [135] Smith (1994: 18, 19).
[136] In their reply to both Carlsnaes and Jabri and Chan (1996), Hollis and Smith put forward the 'epistemological' argument, whereas in their book and reply to Wendt they seemed to suggest that the problem was ontological in nature. See Hollis and Smith (1990, 1991, 1994, 1996).

problem also encompasses epistemological, methodological and meta-physical issues as well. In this respect, all adequate resolutions of the agent–structure problem will require a metatheoretical perspective that can elaborate the properties of agents and structures and their interrelationships at the level of social ontology, as well as situating a philosophical account of the social sciences that can allow for the possibility of either a rapprochement between interpretative understanding and structural explanation or perhaps a transcendence of the dichotomy.

3 The agent–structure problem in IR theory: preliminary issues

Part of the solution to any problem is the correct specification of that problem. Debate surrounding the agent–structure problem within IR theory has become confused because it is not always clear that the participants in discussion of the issue are talking about the same problem. Questions that are considered to be epistemological by one contributor are believed to be methodological by another. Ontological issues are regularly confused with matters of explanation and there is widespread confusion about just what the problem is. The aim of this chapter is to identify what lies at the heart of the agent–structure problem and disentangle this from the other issues that surfaced during the debate surrounding this issue within IR, but which are not an integral part of it. It is important to examine the nature of the agent–structure problem in order to ascertain whether the contributors to the debate are addressing the same problem. This clarification gains added significance if we are to remain clear about the distinctions, if any, between differing forms of problem – levels-of-analysis problem, agent–structure problem and macro–micro problem – and about what they entail. It is also necessary because it is the only way of evaluating the arguments for and against particular points of view: we can only understand why some theorists have advocated certain approaches and others objected to them, and judge whether their arguments are sound, if we know what the problem is and what it is they are advocating/objecting to.

As a means of identifying and specifying the various issues that are relevant to the agent–structure problem I examine the agent–structure debate that emerged in IR during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The chapter begins by situating the agent–structure debate within an International Relations context and addressing the issue of whether Waltz's

theory is itself reductionist, as well as assessing the validity and importance of this issue to the agent–structure problem. Following this, I disentangle the issue of the relevant causal weighting attributable to agents and structures (which I argue is an empirical problem) from the agent–structure problem (which is a theoretical problem). I then address the relationship between the agent–structure, micro–macro and the levels-of-analysis problems, arguing that these represent distinct problems that are analytically best separated. Finally, I conclude and specify the core issues that I consider constitute the agent–structure problem.

Waltz: reductionist or not?

Apart from Carr's early treatment of the issues, the origins of an explicit concern with the agent–structure problem within IR theory can be traced to the work of Kenneth Waltz, particularly his 1979 book, *Theory of International Politics*.[1] In this now seminal text Waltz outlined his 'structural realism', the first truly, or so Waltz claimed, structural theory of IR. The intricacies of Waltz's theory are not the concern of this chapter and have been much discussed elsewhere.[2] What is important is that the various contributors to the agent–structure debate, whilst all sharing a basic dissatisfaction with Waltz's account of international structure, do not reject the idea of structural theorising itself.

David Dessler, for example, contrasts his 'transformational model of international structure' with Waltz's 'positional model'.[3] Dessler maintains that Waltz's aim of 'connecting the system-wide distribution of power to patterns of state behaviour, is, as far as it goes, unobjectionable'.[4] Equally, for Dessler, the 'implication of scientific realism is that structural theory can be much richer and more powerful than that advocated by Waltz'.[5] Dessler does not want to reject the insights developed by Waltz; on the contrary, he claims that Waltz's causal claims can be considered as 'special, limiting cases' of a transformational model.[6] 'A transformational theory of structure can', not only 'absorb the unrefuted content of Waltz's explanatory schema', he argues, but also, go beyond this 'unrefuted content' and provide explanations for outcomes which Waltz's theory is incapable of explaining.[7]

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[1] Waltz (1979); see also Buzan et al. (1993).
[2] See, for example, Keohane (1986); Buzan et al. (1993).
[3] Dessler (1989).   [4] Dessler (1989: 463).   [5] Dessler (1989).
[6] Dessler (1989: 465).   [7] Dessler (1989).

Alexander Wendt, although broadening the scope of his analysis to include a critique of Wallerstein's 'world-systems' theory, likewise uses Waltz's 'structural realism' as a counterpoint to his own preferred 'structuration theory'.[8] In addition, his recent work makes his commitment to structural theorising explicit.[9] For Wendt, structural theorising is not to be rejected simply because of the inadequacies of Waltzian 'structural realism'.[10] What are required are richer and more accurate structural accounts.[11] Equally, Hollis and Smith's book, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* is framed around a set of analytical categories first developed by Waltz in his 1959 book, *Man, the State and War*, and developed by David Singer to become the level-of-analysis problem,[12] and Waltz features prominently in their book as a paradigmatic example of a 'purely structural theory' of international relations.[13]

Thus, the concern with the agent–structure problem within International Relations theory derives not from a wish to reject structural theorising, but from a desire to construct better structural theories,[14] structural theories, that is, that are not susceptible to the many critiques and deficiencies from which Waltz's theory supposedly suffers. As Hollis and Smith put it, '[s]pace is to be cleared by attacking Waltz's systemic account in a way which makes the new a remedy for the defects of the old'.[15]

Wendt's and Dessler's view of Waltz differs from that of Hollis and Smith in one fundamental way. Whereas Hollis and Smith view Waltz's theory as a 'more refined systemic and structural account of international relations',[16] both Wendt and Dessler argue that in Waltz's theory the unit, in this case the state, is ontologically prior.[17] This means that for Wendt and Dessler, Waltz's theory is essentially 'individualist', whereas for Hollis and Smith, it is 'structuralist'. The difference in the two interpretations lies not in competing accounts of Waltz's theory, but in how to interpret it from the perspective of the agent–structure problem. Hollis and Smith view the agent–structure problem as primarily methodological, whereas Wendt and Dessler view it in ontological terms; this distinction mirrors that outlined in the previous chapter between a methodological form of individualism and an ontological

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[8] Wendt (1987).   [9] Wendt (1999).
[10] See, for example, Wendt (1992a, 1994, 1995, 1999); Wendt and Friedheim (1995).
[11] Wendt (1999: 12).   [12] Hollis and Smith (1990); Waltz (1959, 1979); Singer (1961).
[13] Hollis and Smith (1990: 92–118).   [14] On this see also Buzan et al. (1993).
[15] Hollis and Smith (1990: 399).   [16] Hollis and Smith (1990: 36).
[17] Wendt (1987: 341); Dessler (1989: 449).

form. Indeed Wendt draws an explicit division between what he calls 'explanatory reductionism' and 'ontological reductionism'.[18] Waltz, claims Wendt, is guilty of the latter but not the former.[19] Dessler too claims that 'ontologically speaking', in Waltz's theory, 'it is the interaction of the units that creates the structure of the system'.[20]

This is an important difference in terms of understanding the agent–structure problem. All parties to the debate accept that Waltz gives explanatory priority to system structure. There still remain important questions of whether only structure explains outcomes, and of the extent to which it determines outcomes, but there can be little doubt that structural realism primarily intends to explain outcomes in terms of structural properties. Given a purely methodological approach to the issue Waltz is a structuralist. However, Wendt, and to some extent Dessler, argue that the form of his structuralism is deeply affected, and perhaps compromised, by prior ontological commitments.

Wendt argues that Waltz's structural, or neo-, realism reduces the 'structure of the state system to the properties and interactions of its constituent elements, states . . .'[21] In essence, Wendt's claim is that Waltz's neorealism has made the state ontologically primitive, or prior, to the system structure. Thus for Wendt, Waltz's theory is 'ontologically reductionist'.[22] This has the effect, claims Wendt, of precluding neorealism from examining the essential properties of its primitive units, which in the case of neorealism are states.[23] In essence, Wendt's argument is that the state, as the primitive unit, is taken as given and has a set of properties which neorealism is unable to theorise, but which nonetheless play a major role in Waltz's theory.[24] This situation arises, argues Wendt, because neorealism's individualist conceptualisation of system structure is too weak to support a social theory of the state.[25]

Wendt argues that a theory or model of the state is a necessary requirement in order to build systemic theories of international relations. More than this, and given Wendt's claim that all social theories embody an implicit solution to the agent–structure problem, what Wendt is really claiming is that Waltz has a theory of the state, albeit one that is based on a 'set of pre-theoretical assumptions, grounded in intuition or ideology'.[26] And, moreover, that such models or theories will inevitably affect the content of those theories.[27] 'The consequence', argues Wendt,

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[18] Wendt ([1987]: 342).   [19] Wendt ([1987]).   [20] Dessler ([1989]: 449).
[21] Wendt ([1987]: 339).   [22] Wendt ([1987]: 342).   [23] Wendt ([1987]: 342).
[24] Wendt ([1987]: 341–343).   [25] Wendt ([1987]: 343).
[26] Wendt ([1987]).   [27] Wendt ([1987]).

'of making the individual ontologically primitive is that the social relations in virtue of which that individual is a particular kind of agent with particular causal properties must remain forever opaque and undertheorised'.[28]

The idea that Waltz's theory is 'ontologically reductionist' originates with Richard Ashley.[29] Ashley had criticised Waltz for his commitment to statism, by which he means a metaphysical commitment to the state that is prior to scientific analysis and falsification.[30] In making this claim Ashley likens Waltz's treatment of the state to the methodological individualist treatment of the individual. Whereas methodological individualists treat 'collectivist concepts as aggregations of individual wants, needs, beliefs and actions, so also does the neorealist refract all global collectivist concepts through the prism of the state'.[31] According to Ashley, neorealism is statist before it is structuralist, and this makes Waltz's account of structure atomistic.[32]

The criticisms of Ashley and Wendt are significant insofar as they highlight the necessity of distinguishing an individualism and/or structuralism that views the issue only in methodological terms from a more ontological treatment of the problem. For there are no purely methodological accounts: for X to be the explanation of Y requires an account of both X and Y. This points out the fact that both methodological individualism and methodological structuralism already embody deep ontological commitments even if these are not made explicit. Waltz certainly does have a theory of the properties of states; they are rational, egoistic and unitary. Waltz accepts this but argues that all theories must necessarily make assumptions.[33] And theoretical assumptions, for Waltz, cannot, and need not, be realistic.[34]

This highlights another important aspect of any attempt to understand the nature of the agent–structure problem. Waltz's treatment of theoretical assumptions takes an instrumentalist (positivist) slant, whereas Ashley and Wendt treat theoretical entities in philosophically realist terms. Waltz accepts that, in reality, states are not as assumed in his theory, but he does not accept that theoretical assumptions need to be realistic. The thrust of Ashley and Wendt's critique, on the other hand, is that there is little to be gained, and many potential dangers, in theoretically treating the state as unitary, egoistic and rational, if, in fact, it is not. It should be obvious where my sympathies lie in this matter.

[28] Wendt (1987: 343).   [29] Ashley (1986).   [30] Ashley (1986: 270).
[31] Ashley (1986).   [32] Ashley (1986: 272, 288).
[33] Waltz (1986: 338).   [34] Waltz (1979: 6, 89)

It may well be, given our current stock of knowledge, that we have to accept certain theoretical assumptions, but treating entities 'as if' they were of such and such a form can only act as a theoretical placeholder in the absence of further theoretical development. An instrumentalist treatment of theoretical terms cannot be allowed to hold back the pace of theoretical development.

This issue aside, and accepting the veracity of both Ashley's and Wendt's claims in relation to Waltz's treatment of the state, is his theory ontologically reductionist in the sense of reducing the properties of system structure to properties of agents? Does he, as Wendt claims, reduce the 'structure of the state system to the properties and interactions of its constituent elements, states . . .'?[35] Or, to put it in Ashley's terms, is Waltz's account of structure 'never anything more than the logical consequence of the parts taken together'?[36] My answer is no. Whatever the problems with Waltz's theory he does not treat the system structure in individualist terms. Both Ashley and Wendt argue that he does, because both take a particularly strong view on the nature of structuralism.

According to Wendt, Waltz's theory is ontologically reductionist in two ways. First, although neorealism does see system structures as 'constraining the agency of preexisting actors', it does not view them as 'generating state agents themselves';[37] and, second, the neorealist definition of structure is reducible to the properties of states.[38] In terms of the second point, Wendt suggests that the distribution of capabilities, as a key element in Waltz's definition of structure, is a property of states.[39] Waltz anticipated this criticism and his answer is convincing.[40] The capability of an individual state is a property of that state, but the *distribution* of capabilities within the system is not. And this is not simply an aggregative measure, but a relational one; the distribution of capabilities can only be ascertained relationally. In fact, as we shall see when I address the issue of structure in chapter 4, the distribution of capabilities refers to the 'relations of difference' (of capabilities) within the system, and this is a structural property.

But what of Wendt's first point, that neorealism cannot account for the manner in which structures generate, or constitute, agents, which according to Wendt is a property of all correctly construed structural theories? Interestingly a generative view of structure does not rule out the ontological possibility of agents emerging, but it does insist that

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[35] Wendt (1987: 339). [36] Ashley (1986: 287). [37] Wendt (1987: 342).
[38] Wendt (1987: 341). [39] Wendt (1987). [40] Waltz (1979: 98).

what properties those agents possess are derived from properties of the structure. On Wendt's reading, then, a structural theory can only be genuinely considered structural if the behaviour *and* properties of the agents are explained in terms of the structure.[41] Yet even Wendt himself does not suggest that all of the properties of agents can be explained in terms of system structures.

For example, Wendt suggests that there are two ways to theorise about properties of the state. The first is in terms of its internal organisational structure. The second is in terms of the external or social relations in which it is embedded. [42] For Wendt, all social actors require explanation in terms of both dimensions. Of course, not every theory can be expected to give such a comprehensive account, and Wendt's own theory focuses primarily on the external (international) relations that constitute state identity and interests. Nonetheless, theoretical space is highlighted in which the internal (domestic) relations that constitute the state can be theorised. But Waltz also accepts that domestic structures also constitute states, while claiming that such structures are not a concern of his theory.[43] Moreover, he accepts the possibility both of state properties changing over time and of structure affecting the properties of agents.[44] Admittedly, he does not place a great deal of emphasis on how this might happen and his accounts of socialisation and competition are very slight.[45] Nonetheless, as with Wendt, the possibility is accepted.

Hence it seems incorrect to say that Waltz's theory is 'ontologically reductionist', in the sense that the properties of structures are said to be derived from the properties of the agents. A better description might be that it is a 'thin' form of structuralism that attempts to account for the effect of structure on state behaviour, but not on state constitution. Of course, we may still find such a form of structuralism wanting, and I will deal with this issue in chapter 4 when I deal with competing accounts of structure. But even so, nothing is gained, except confusion, if we label Waltz's theory individualist.

Ashley goes further than Wendt, insisting that in genuine structural theories 'the standpoint of the structural whole affords the only objective perspective'.[46] This suggests, not only that agents are generated by structures, but also that they are completely absent at the ontological level. Elsewhere, however, Ashley admits that the structural whole is constitutive of its elements.[47] So some elements are still present. We

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[41] Wendt (1999: 16).   [42] Wendt (1987: 343).   [43] Waltz (1986: 339).
[44] Waltz (1979: 76; 1986: 339).   [45] See Wendt (1999: 100–102).
[46] Ashley (1986: 287).   [47] Ashley (1986: 286).

should not, however, make too much of this concession since Ashley is clear that on his understanding of structural theory not only are the properties of agents completely determined by the elements, but there are only relations of difference without positive terms.[48] Hence, in Ashley's account of structuralist theories, agents are really structural reflections and can be completely ignored.

Ashley goes so far as to suggest that a truly structuralist perspective sees the structural whole as having an independent existence that is *prior* to the existence of its constituent elements.[49] A social structure *prior* to agents? A society existing in and of itself *prior* to the emergence of people? Can this really be what Ashley suggests constitutes a structuralist perspective? If this is where the bar is set for determining what constitutes a structuralist theory then little wonder Waltz does not qualify. But then again, I doubt anybody would. Certainly, some structuralists do insist that structure has an autonomous existence independent of agents. And others have come close to suggesting that the properties of agents can be understood solely in terms of structures. And still others are keen to see structures as playing a decisive role in determining the nature of agents. But even in this latter case there have to be agents in order for them to be determined. But few, if any, structuralists conceive of a metaphysical structural whole existing wholly *prior* to and independent of all agents. The significant issue here is emergence.

Waltz, deriving his theory from microeconomics, argues that system structure emerges out of the interactions of the units.[50] Once in place the structure can be said to operate behind the backs of the units in a way that shapes their behaviour irrespective of whether they are aware of it or not. Given Waltz's instrumentalist treatment of theoretical terms there are interesting questions as to how something which does not really exist can 'shape and shove' anything, but we can set these aside for now.[51] The important point is that once in place the structure is said to play a major role in explaining outcomes. Ashley, however, suggests that any theory that sees structure in emergent terms is ontologically reductionist;[52] if the structure is viewed as emerging out of the interactions of the units, he argues, the theory is ontologically reductionist.[53] Dessler too makes a very similar point, arguing that since structure emerges out of the interactions of units, the units take ontological priority in neorealism.[54]

[48] Ashley (1986: 265).   [49] Ashley (1986: 286).   [50] Waltz (1979: 89).
[51] Waltz (1986: 343).   [52] Ashley (1986: 271).
[53] Ashley (1986).   [54] Dessler (1989: 448).

The real issue here, which I deal with in chapter 4, concerns competing accounts of what a structural theory should be. Ashley and Dessler are confusing ontological priority with explanatory priority. It is explanatory priority that Waltz is drawing attention to, not ontological priority. In fact, I think Waltz is ambivalent on the ontological status of structure. In neorealism, however, the most important factor in explaining outcomes is structure. Structure has explanatory/methodological priority. The units play a very limited explanatory role. If Waltz can be claimed to be making any ontological claims regarding structure these are very weak. Waltz's claim that social structure emerges out of the interactions of individuals is certainly compatible with some readings of Durkheim's version of structuralism.[55] Durkheim too saw social reality as emerging out of the interactions of the elements: 'Whenever certain elements combine, and thereby produce, by the fact of their combination, new phenomena, it is plain that these new phenomena reside not in the original elements, but in the totality formed by their union'.[56] Social phenomena arise, Durkheim argued, when interacting individuals constitute a reality that can no longer be accounted for in terms of the properties of individual actors. All that is required on such a view is that once in place the structure is seen to have a set of properties that cannot be defined in terms of the agents. Waltz's theory meets this condition, although, as indicated, the ontological status of structure in his account is not clear.

There is nothing inherently problematic, from some structuralist perspectives, in Waltz's suggestion that structure emerges out of the interactions of units. Indeed, one might ask, if not from the interactions of units, then from where? *Ex nihilo*? Social structures are dependent upon social agents for their reproduction. No agents, then no structures. Of course, social agents are located in time and space and are 'thrown into' a set of social relations that pre-exist them; so in this sense social relations are prior to individual agents, but not to all agents. Yet, those pre-existing social structures were themselves the products and conditions of generations of previous actors. As a theoretical, and empirical, point, Waltz's suggestion is sound: structure must logically have emerged out of the interactions of agents (however defined). It is not necessary to inquire back in time, to a 'state of nature' perhaps, in which the first social structures emerged, in order to theorise social structures today, although of course, a historical study of such structural development would be a

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[55] Waltz (1986: 339) argued that his account was based largely on Durkheim.
[56] Durkheim (1964: xvii).

valuable exercise.[57] The agent–structure problem is an ontological issue, not a chronological one.

There are, however, two important corrections required of Waltz's position. First, we need not accept that social structures are always 'unintended'. Some social structures, such as the international economic order that emerged after the Second World War, certainly display elements of intentionality.[58] Second is that we may well want a stronger account of structure that can deal with Ashley's and Wendt's suggestion of structure as constituting (in part) agents. The emergence of social forms, however, is an integral part of social reality and Ashley is wrong to infer that a consistent structuralist must insist that structure exists prior to agents; there can be no agents without structure and no structure without agents. This issue of competing accounts of structure and the nature of structural theorising will be addressed in chapter 4.

Explaining social outcomes: agents or structures and modes of analysis

In his 1987 article *The Agent–Structure Problem in International Relations Theory*, Wendt seems clear and unequivocal about his understanding of the problem.[59] The agent–structure problem, he argues, emerges out of two ontological propositions about social life that lie at the heart of all social scientific inquiry.[60] On the one hand, 'human beings and their organizations are purposeful actors whose actions help reproduce or transform the society in which they live'. Yet, on the other hand, we recognise that 'society is made up of social relationships, which structure the interactions between these purposeful actors'.[61] In effect, recognition that there can be no social act outside of a social context, but equally social contexts, in and of themselves, do not act.

Wendt suggests that once these two propositions are accepted it follows that the agent–structure problem is really two interrelated problems, one ontological, one epistemological.[62] I deal with the ontological problems in chapters 4 and 5, namely the nature of agents and structures and their interrelationship. The epistemological problem, which is

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[57] Bhaskar's theory of 'synchronic emergence' would enable us to account for the way social structure emerges at the moment of interaction, and hence the problem of chronological priority does not occur. See Bhaskar (1978, 1979).
[58] See Schild (1995). [59] Wendt (1987).
[60] Wendt (1987: 337). [61] Wendt (1987: 338).
[62] Wendt (1987: 339). Wendt neglects the methodological dimensions, which I shall deal with in chapter 7.

actually many problems, will be the focus of chapter 6. However, in relation to how we conceive of the agent–structure problem itself, Wendt claims that two issues are involved in the epistemological question. Importantly, Wendt insists, correctly in my opinion, that these epistemological issues are derivative of how the prior ontological issues are addressed.

The first epistemological issue concerns the mode of explanation pertaining to agents and structures.[63] Here Wendt is referring to the explanation/understanding divide suggested by Hollis and Smith, paralleling, of course, Weber's distinction between *eklaren* and *verstehen*.[64] This is a question about the particular form of inquiry applicable to the constituent elements of the social sciences. According to Hollis and Smith, 'there are always two stories to tell, one explanatory and the other interpretative, and . . . they cannot finally be combined'.[65] At first sight this distinction may seem to be one of competing epistemological positions related to specific understandings of science. Yet even if one begins with an a priori epistemological position, such as Explanation = X (positivism perhaps), it makes no sense to argue that X (positivism) is inapplicable to the study of Y (the social world) unless one has an account of Y such that it may or may not be susceptible to study by X; that is, a position on the agent–structure problem: a social ontology. The distinction between 'Explanation' and 'Understanding', then, is based firmly on ontological considerations about the nature of the entities in the social world. Hollis and Smith endorse this view, arguing 'that ontology is what counts in the end' and that the two stories 'stem from conflicting ontologies'.[66] In this way the ontological question of the nature of agents and structures and their interrelationships is prior to the question of the mode of investigation required to study them.

The second epistemological issue, according to Wendt, is that of the relative importance of agential explanations and structural explanations in social theory.[67] It is common, for example, to consider questions pertaining to the agent–structure problem to be of the form: was the end of the Cold War attributable to Gorbachev, or to the systemic factors pertaining at the time? This seems to be a straightforward question about the relevant causal factors producing outcomes. E. H. Carr addresses the problem in these terms.[68] Whilst clearly an important issue, however, it

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[63] Wendt (1987: 339).   [64] Hollis and Smith (1990); Weber (1968).
[65] Hollis and Smith (1994: 244).   [66] Hollis and Smith (1991: 410).
[67] Wendt (1987: 340).   [68] Carr (1987: 44–45).

is not one of concern to the agent–structure problem, but rather derives from particular resolutions of the agent–structure problem.

The issue of causal factors determining outcomes is an empirical not a theoretical question. Furthermore, the question of whether particular social outcomes were the result of agential or structural forces cannot even be raised unless one has first attempted to resolve the agent–structure problem and hence cannot be integral to it. As Wendt notes, structural theorists agree that 'an adequate international relations theory must be more structure based than agent orientated'.[69] Agent-centred theories would reverse this prioritisation, favouring agential explanations over structural ones.

Recent theoretical accounts of the agent–structure relationship suggest that both agential and structural factors are relevant.[70] But this does not imply that percentages can be allocated to agential and structural factors in advance of concrete research. To suggest as much would be to suggest that theory completely determines outcomes; that is, that having allotted our preferred percentages to agents and structures accordingly, all concrete social situations would be deemed to fit this model. As Martin Hollis and Steve Smith put it, the agent–structure problem is not one of deciding what proportions of agents and structures to put in the blender.[71] The agent–structure problem is not about the relative proportions of agential versus structural factors determining social outcomes, but about constructing theoretical accounts able to guide empirical research that can do justice to the chosen theoretical elements.

The empirical, and important, question of whether agents or structures determined a particular outcome and/or how influential each factor was cannot be addressed in advance of empirical research of the prevailing structures, and consideration of the particular agents and structures present in any given social situation. And this is an empirical issue, not a theoretical one. It is an issue, however, that is only ever raised in an ontologically specified framework.

For example, the question of whether agents or structures determined outcomes cannot be raised under orthodox individualist and/or structuralist accounts, which already settle the matter in advance of concrete research: outcomes are either all structure or all agential; or, if one were to be charitable, structural factors, although acknowledged in individualist accounts, are deemed inconsequential to explanation, with this

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[69] Wendt (1987: 340).   [70] Wendt (1987); Dessler (1989); Carlsnaes (1992).
[71] Hollis and Smith (1991: 393).

elision reversed in structural accounts. This empirical consequence of the agent–structure problem is important, for it implies that 'no general, transhistorical or purely philosophical resolution of these problems is possible'.[72] This is a clear recognition of the limits of any theoretical discussion relating to the agent–structure problem.

The agent–structure, levels-of-analysis and macro–micro problem(s): one or many problems?

According to Wendt, Hollis and Smith 'reduce the agent–structure problem to one of the levels of analysis'.[73] Hollis and Smith do argue that the level-of-analysis problem and the agent–structure problem cannot be separated, but is this the same as a reduction of one problem to the other?[74] Do Hollis and Smith mean to suggest, as do Margaret Archer and Jeffrey Alexander, that the agent–structure and level-of-analysis problems are one and the same, or that one problem always implies the other?[75] I argue that the two problems can quite easily be separated analytically and are in fact two distinct problems.

David Singer's levels-of-analysis piece is rightly considered a landmark in the theoretical development of the discipline.[76] According to R. B. J. Walker, not only is this way of thinking about the discipline 'all pervasive' but it has been subjected to 'very little critical appraisal'.[77] This assessment is not wholly correct and there have been various attempts to address the problem in a critical manner.[78] Despite these endeavours, the attractiveness of Singer's initial formulation still seems to grip the collective disciplinary imagination. It is clear, however, that the manner in which the discipline understands the level-of-analysis problem suffers from a number of conceptual confusions. This is not an outright critique of Singer, but rather an acknowledgement of the theoretical progress made within the discipline since his piece was first published. In this sense, Waltz is wrong to claim that 'nothing accumulates not even criticism'.[79] We may not have answers to many of the

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[72] Bhaskar (1983: 87).   [73] Wendt (1992b: 181).
[74] Hollis and Smith (1992: 188–198).   [75] Archer (1995); Alexander et al. (1987).
[76] This typology is normally attributed to Singer (1961), although Singer derived his account largely from Waltz (1959).
[77] Walker (1993: 131).
[78] Berkowitz (1986); Buzan (1995); Moul (1973); Mouritzen (1980); North (1990); Onuf (1998); Patomäki (1996); Yurdusev (1993).
[79] Waltz (1979: 18).

questions which trouble the discipline, but we are beginning to develop a clearer view of just what the questions are.

First, as W. B. Moul and Yuri Yurdusev have argued, Singer confuses the level-of-analysis with the unit-of-analysis.[80] Both unit-of-analysis and level-of-analysis are choices that all analysts must make. The question is which takes analytical priority in terms of developing a research programme? The unit-of-analysis refers to the object of inquiry; the level-of-analysis to how to explain the aspect of the object under consideration. Thus one can conceive of state behaviour as the unit-of-analysis and this unit can be explained in terms of differing levels. It is a distinction between what we want to explain (the unit) and how we explain it (the level): the explanadum and the explanans. The implicit unit-of-analysis for Singer is the behaviour of the nation state and he suggests two levels that might provide fertile explanatory ground: that of the international system, and that of the national state itself. It would be possible to reverse this and make the international system the unit and explain its properties in terms of states. Put this way, the system is the unit-of-analysis, and its behaviour, if we can speak of a system behaving, is explained in terms of states.

The distinction between unit-of-analysis and level-of-analysis indicates an important point about the treatment of levels within IR. As Wendt has argued, the level-of-analysis problem is 'a problem of explanation: of assessing the relative importance of causal factors at different levels of aggregation in explaining the behaviour of a given unit of analysis'.[81] The reference to a 'given unit of analysis' indicates that important ontological decisions have been made prior to those relating to the 'level-of-explanation'. This prior ontological commitment, which is elided in Singer's account, illuminates a second problem with Singer's treatment of the issue.

As Nicholas Onuf suggests, Singer's use of levels-of-analysis specifies only the analyst's point of view.[82] This means that for Singer, the levels were only 'of analysis' and no ontological commitment to 'levels of being' is implied.[83] As developed by Singer, the purpose of the level-of-analysis problem is the 'prevention of analytical confusions that might be introduced by misleading cross-category hypotheses'.[84] As Walker argues, this methodological approach to the problem allows the analyst

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[80] Moul (1973); Yurdusev (1993). This point has been reiterated by Buzan (1995).
[81] Wendt (1991: 387).   [82] Onuf (1998: 202–205).   [83] Bunge (1963).
[84] Walker (1993: 131); Singer (1961: 77). 'Whether he selects the micro- or macro-level of analysis is ostensibly a mere matter of methodological or conceptual convenience.'

the 'privilege of having one's cake and eating it' whilst 'smothering ontological contradictions with epistemological platitudes'.[85] According to Onuf, the level-of-analysis problem 'is not simply methodological, despite the practice of announcing it as such . . ."levels of being" matter, and it matters how they relate to levels of analysis. The problem is also ontological'.[86]

This failure to draw any ontological distinctions explains how Singer can treat the level-of-analysis problem, the agent–structure problem and the micro–macro problem as one and the same. Whilst these problems are related, they are not, as Margaret Archer claims, 'historical and comparative variations on the same theme'.[87] They are not simply different nomenclatures attached to the same problem. Certainly they all express the same underlying imperative: that of understanding and explaining how social parts relate to social wholes. But to say that they all relate to this imperative is not to say that they address it in the same way.

The agent–structure problem can be understood as a sociological development of what used to be called the individual–society connection. It is a move beyond the individual–society framework because it opens up the possibility that some agents may not be individuals and considers how these differentiated agents relate to the structures in which they are embedded. It is also a move beyond the individual–society framework because it considers society to be the sum total of agents, structures and their relationships. As such, it helps us move beyond considering individuals as somehow separate from society, or society as separate from individuals.[88] So although the agent–structure problem is a sociological development of the individual–society connection the two problems are quite distinct.

Although Singer does not explicitly locate his analysis within a Weberian/Durkheimian continuum, Onuf correctly notes that Singer sees the issue of level-of-analysis as a problem of methodological individualism and collectivism and hence confuses the level-of-analysis problem with the individual–society problem.[89] He also conflates this ontological problem of object conceptualisation with the micro–macro problem.[90] The micro–macro problem overlaps with both the agent–structure problem and the level-of-analysis problem, but is not identical to either. The micro–macro problem is concerned with the distinction between analysis of face-to-face conduct (everyday activities, diplomatic exchanges)

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[85] Walker (1993: 135). [86] Onuf (1998: 207). [87] Archer (1995: 7).
[88] Layder (1994: 4). [89] Onuf (1998). [90] Singer (1961: 77).

and more impersonal phenomena such as institutions and the distribution of power and resources. As such, micro and macro refer to differing levels of social reality at which units-of-analysis can be specified.

The micro–macro distinction differs from the agent–structure problem in that the agent–structure problem is concerned with the character of social reality whereas the micro–macro problem is concerned with a particular aspect of the predefined social reality that is selected for consideration.[91] Again, the agent–structure problem is analytically prior to the micro–macro problem because a consideration of the micro–macro problem can only be made on the basis of some or other social ontology. That is, that unless one has a social ontology that admits of macro- and micro-level phenomena, then the micro–macro issue cannot emerge as a problem.

The micro–macro problem differs from the level-of-analysis problem because it is primarily a unit-of-analysis issue, not one of level-of-explanation. It is easy to confuse the micro–macro problem with the level-of-analysis problem, but only if one blurs the distinction between the unit-of-analysis and the level-of-analysis. In a sense the level-of-analysis as traditionally understood in IR is something of a misnomer and it is more accurately understood, as Wendt seems to imply, as the 'level-of-explanation'.

Weber provides a good example of how the problems relate to one another and some of the consequences that flow from certain resolutions to the agent–structure problem. Weber argued that the study of social activity should be concerned only with the actions of individuals directed towards each other (i.e. social action). This clear ontological statement represents Weber's social ontology (the agent–structure problem). This does not mean that Weber considered the study of macro phenomena invalid. Weber certainly studied macro phenomena himself, religion and bureaucracies, for example. However, given his position on the agent–structure problem, Weber could argue that collectivities are 'solely the resultants and modes of organisation of the specific acts of individual men [*sic*], since these alone are for us the agents who carry out subjectively understandable action'.[92] This means that for Weber, the study of macro phenomena was only a prelude to a more individualistic level account. Or, to put it another way, that the ultimate level-of-explanation for all social phenomena was that of individuals.

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[91] Alexander et al. (1987); Huber (1991); Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel (1981).
[92] Weber (1968: 13).

So although one could study macro-level phenomena, the level at which they were to be ultimately explained was that of individual subjective understanding.

This example shows the necessity of distinguishing between the agent–structure problem, the micro–macro problem, the unit-of-analysis problem and the level-of-explanation problem. Weber could advocate the study of macro-level phenomena safe in the knowledge that his commitment to an individualist social ontology would provide the correct level-of-explanation for macro phenomena. In this sense a position on the agent–structure problem is analytically prior to both the micro–macro problem and the level-of-analysis problem (level-of-explanation). Again, as Hollis and Smith put it, 'the level-of-analysis [level-of-explanation] problem in international relations cannot be tackled in isolation from the view taken of what is meant by international system, and that is an ontological question'.[93]

Understood as a level-of-explanation problem we can make some important points about what the discipline calls the level-of-analysis problem. According to Walker, all talk of levels may be seriously misleading since it implies a vertical ordering of the relations between individuals, states and system, whereas these might be better grasped as horizontal relationships.[94] I think, however, that it is possible to defend a vertical yet non-hierarchical (in the sense of an a priori privileging of one level over another) account of levels whilst accepting and expanding on Walker's horizontal point. In effect, the image we need is one of vertical levels spread horizontally.

Singer takes the behaviour of states as his unit-of-analysis and posits two levels at which explanation of this unit might be based: that of the international system and that of the nation state itself. Although Singer suggests only two levels, his discussion opens up the possibility of a third level below that of the nation state: that of individuals. Singer's recognition of a level-of-explanation below that of the nation state is predicated on an unthematised social ontology, a social ontology within which Singer can view individuals as only fulfilling roles defined in terms of state interests. Thus, Singer can argue that 'nations may be said to be goal-seeking organisms which exhibit purposive behaviour'.[95] According to Singer, state officials can legitimately be considered 'cultural dopes' fulfilling predefined roles in the maintenance of national interests.

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[93] Hollis and Smith (1991: 395).   [94] Walker (1993: 134).   [95] Singer (1961: 84–85).

International system

Level of analysis: first debate   vs

Nation state

Level of analysis: second debate   vs

Bureaucracy

Level of analysis: third debate   vs

Individual
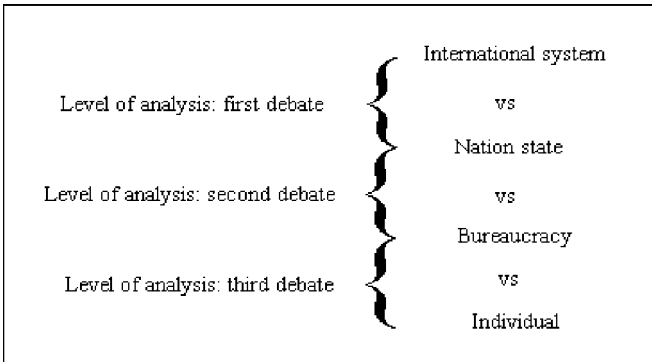
Figure 3 The dominant IR account of levels-of-analysis

Although Singer only posited two levels, most treatments of the level-of-analysis problem follow Waltz's three-level typology and add extra levels as required.[96] Hollis and Smith provide a good example of how the discipline typically conceives of these levels (see Figure 3).[97]

On this treatment of the level-of-analysis problem, the levels are related as agents to structures. This formulation forces/allows the relocation of agency at every move up or down the levels, so that what appears as a structure on one level becomes an agent on another. Hence, at what Hollis and Smith call the first debate, the international system plays the role of structure with the nation state as an agent. At the level of the second debate, the nation state appears as a structure with the role of agent now played by bureaucracies. Individuals only appear on this model at the level of the third debate, where bureaucracies now constitute the structure and individuals play the role of agents. What appears as a structure at one level becomes an agent at another level.

The agent–structure problem is playing a role here, albeit in a very unsystematic manner. Underlying this account is a particular view of what it means to be an agent; an account of agency, that is, that can allow that properties and powers attributed to one theoretical entity can be attributed to others. This treatment of the level-of-analysis problem takes the relocation of agency as unproblematic. Certainly there are resolutions to the agent–structure problem that can legitimate such an account. However, others would find this deeply problematic.

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[96] Waltz (1959); Mouritzen (1980).   [97] Hollis and Smith (1990: 197).

Walker, for example, frames his critique of the level-of-analysis problem in terms of the manner in which its seemingly neutral delineation of levels occludes the way particular concepts of time and space are the very conditions of possibility for such a framework. For Walker, 'conceptions of space and time cannot be treated as some uniform background noise, as abstract ontological conditions to be acknowledged and then discarded'.[98] Walker notes how the shaping of these conceptualisations has been a 'political process'.[99] These 'spatial constructs', he argues, played a 'decisive role in determining the cultural forms of European civilization'.[100] Concepts of time and space represent the ontological possibility of the 'political' as opposed to neutral methodological ways of framing political space.

Whilst the basic thrust of Walker's position is sound, and the development of all concepts must occur in political space, it does not follow that such concepts are reducible to the particularities of the political space in which they were framed. Walker's position is a version of the 'genetic fallacy': the belief that a perceived defect in the origin of a claim or thing is taken to be evidence that discredits the claim or thing itself. Or it can be understood as a form of 'collective ad hominism' where concepts developed in political space and time are claimed to be nothing other than reflections of the processes that have formed them. Both positions are problematic.

Einsteinian relativity, for example, developed within a certain political time and place, but it is not reducible to such a political framing. The relationship between concepts and the political context of their framing is an empirical question, not an a priori logical necessity. Moreover, even if concepts can be shown to bear the traces of the political context in which they were framed, it does not follow that this throws doubt upon their validity. As Bourdieu notes, 'the discovery that someone who has discovered the truth had an interest in doing so in no way diminishes his discovery'.[101] Ultimately, Walker provides a devastating critique of the level-of-analysis issue within IR, but little guidance on how to move beyond it. However, he does highlight some of the important ontological presuppositions that enable the problem to emerge as a problem.

Onuf's discussion of the level-of-analysis problem is particularly helpful in identifying and exploring 'all the questions that proliferating schemes bring to mind'.[102] Onuf brilliantly surveys the range of issues

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[98] Walker (1993: 130–131).   [99] Walker (1993: 128).
[100] Walker (1993: 129).   [101] Bourdieu (2000: 3).   [102] Onuf (1998: 194).

pertaining to the level-of-analysis problem and provides a succinct survey of the various ways the discipline has dealt with the problem, as well as articulating the various issues that emerge with differing proposals. A particular strength of Onuf's analysis is the manner in which he shows how any consideration of the level-of-analysis problem has to contend with an intellectual terrain 'far beyond the confines of contemporary international thought'.[103] However, like Walker, Onuf provides little in the way of constructive comments about how the scheme might be developed or transcended. Indeed, Onuf's parting comment is to reiterate Ludwig von Bertalanffy's legitimation of the need for talk of levels in terms of emergent laws not reducible to the properties of their component parts; a comment that does little other than reiterate that there is a problem to be addressed.[104]

There have, however, been contemporary attempts to think beyond simple critique or problem specification in terms of the level-of-analysis problem. Barry Buzan attempts to differentiate the unit-of-analysis from the level-of-explanation and then to disaggregate the levels into component parts.[105] This is very much a position I endorse; however, there are two fundamental differences between my understanding of the issue and that of Buzan. First, Buzan, although disaggregating the levels into explanatory variables, does not fundamentally challenge the relationship between the levels and hence implicitly accepts (or leaves unchallenged) the assumption that the levels are related as agent to structures. The second, and related, problem is that Buzan sees the agent–structure problem as a rather 'complex debate going on in the background', whereas I see it as the very condition of possibility for any proposed resolution to the level-of-analysis problem.[106]

Heikki Patomäki's treatment of the level-of-analysis problem has been characterised by Onuf as an attempt to 'do away with levels altogether'.[107] I think that Patomäki's position neither does away with levels nor provides an adequate response to the problem. Patomäki argues that rather than levels we should 'talk about different kinds of interpenetrated contexts'.[108] This seems to be redescribing the problem rather than addressing it. Levels, for example, can also be described as interpenetrating and contexts can be described as layered or stratified. What we want to know is the nature of the levels/contexts and how they interpenetrate.

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103 Onuf (1998: 194).   104 Onuf (1998: 219).   105 Buzan (1995).
106 Buzan (1995: 213).   107 Onuf (1998: 194).   108 Patomäki (1996: 108).

Patomäki's notion of interpenetrated contexts is similar to that suggested by Ian Clark, although Clark is prepared to admit the utility of continuing to think in terms of levels.[109] Although not explicitly describing it as a resolution to the levels-of-analysis problem, Clark's notion of intersecting domestic and international structures is an attempt to rethink the relationship between the domestic and international levels and the position of the state in relation to them. His discussion of the intersection of structures is useful in highlighting the manner in which interpenetration might occur and in demonstrating how the state is situated, and constituted, in the space where structures – both domestic and international – intersect. Yet, we still need to reinsert human agency into the picture as well as formulating some idea of the various modes of intersection.

The idea of levels is closely related to the notion of emergence. Emergence refers to the relationship between two entities, such that one entity arises out of the other, but is capable of reacting back on the first and is in any event causally and taxonomically irreducible to it.[110] Each identified level will have its own laws and modes of operation, which, while embedded within the level out of which it emerged, are not reducible to that lower level. Mario Bunge has used the idea of emergence to develop nine ways in which scientists talk of levels and argues that of these nine only two are valid ways in terms of the social world.[111]

The first use of the term level is that of an 'emergent whole', which is conceptualised as an entity that, in some respects, behaves as a unit. A level, in this sense, is a concrete or ideal whole, a self-contained unit characterised by qualities of its own, and if complex and concrete, by a strong interaction of its parts. The lower-order wholes are the building blocks of the higher-order ones; the latter emerge through the interaction of lower-order individual units. In some cases, the higher levels constitute part of the environment of the lower ones. The second meaning of level Bunge thinks applicable to the social world is less specific. Here, a level simply refers to a section of reality characterised by a set of interlocking properties and laws, some of which are thought to be peculiar to the given domain and to have emerged in time from other (lower or higher) levels existing previously. Notice how in both definitions no sense of hierarchy is implied, nor any causal priority; lower levels are, conceptually at least, able to affect the higher levels and vice versa.

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[109] Clark (1998).   [110] Bhaskar (1993b: 397).   [111] Bunge (1963: 36–49).

There are times when the understanding of a level as an emergent unit is appropriate: human beings, for example, clearly emerge from the levels below them and function as a unit. But the legitimacy of this theoretical move in terms of social science cannot be made in isolation from a discussion of the properties pertaining to the chosen levels (i.e. a discussion of the agent–structure problem). Moreover, for reasons related to the irreducibility of human agency, Bunge's second definition of a level might be a more productive way to proceed in terms of *social* science. This sense of level allows us to rethink the levels identified by Singer, without rejecting them completely. Crucially, we now see that thinking in terms of levels relating to one another as agents to structures is not the only way to proceed; we can think in terms of levels without thinking of the emergent level in terms of a self-contained unit. We can talk of 'interpenetrated contexts', whilst recognising that we need to think clearly about the properties of the entities said to be interpenetrating each other.

In the social world both agents and structures are necessary for any social act to be possible. Equally, as I argue in chapter 6, agency, in the social sciences, cannot refer to a social organisation since it is only through the acts of embodied human agents that action can occur.[112] With Onuf I suggest that we treat the levels identified by Singer as 'levels-of-being' that require further disaggregating into their component parts (Figure 4 should help clarify what I mean here).

The first thing to note is that a realist formulation of the issue asks us 'levels of what?' Figure 4 relates to levels of political organisation, but could be amended to cover other aspects of the social field: legal, economic, social and cultural, for example. In each of these examples the form, number and type of the levels may differ since there is no need to assume that one levels scheme fits all. Notice also, that on this understanding of levels there is no need for a distinct individual level since individuals feature in every level and are tied into their social contexts; in this sense the micro and macro levels are linked through human agency. The location of individuals at every level is important since it highlights the fact that it is through the differing 'positioning' of

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[112] This is not to say that the methodological 'bracketing out' of human agency is necessarily ruled out. In open systems it may well be the case that the 'bracketing' of certain elements is essential in order for research to proceed. However, there is a difference between 'methodological bracketing' and the ontological confusion of the properties of one entity with another.
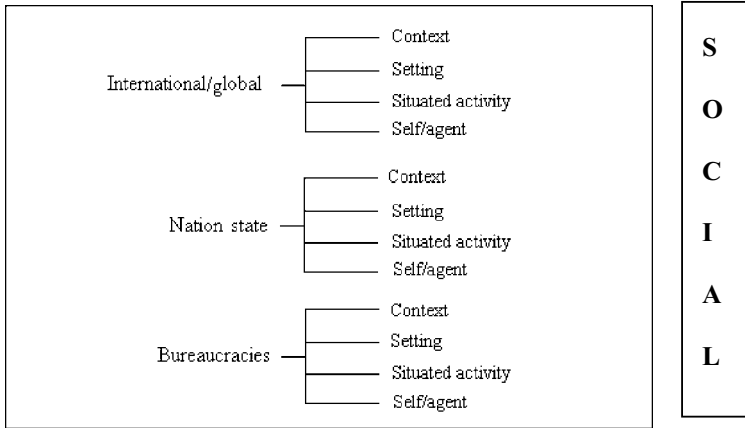
Figure 4 A reconfigured version of levels-of-analysis

individuals that the various levels interact. In effect, this way of thinking of the issue links micro and macro phenomena.

There is clearly scope for the development of intermediate, subordinate and superordinate levels. The levels indicated are merely suggestive and they should not be understood as an exhaustive typology.[113] The components included in the levels are derived from categories developed by Derek Layder and are likewise merely meant to be suggestive.[114] What is important to convey is the idea that each and every level includes individuals and their various structural contexts, but also the manner in which these structural contexts are dynamic and interact with each other. Structural contexts are 'products-in-process' as well as 'processes-in-production'.

Equally, researchers should feel free to focus their attention on any particular component. As with all such synoptic devices when it comes to their application in concrete research it is a matter of emphasis as to which element has the primary focus. Moreover, it needs to be stressed that the elements of this diagrammatic representation of the realm of international relations shade into and interweave with each other: Patomäki's interpenetration. This is an important point, for although it

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[113] I have employed the standard typology of levels used within the discipline. However, there is no reason why a differing typology might not be employed. Mario Bunge, for example, has suggested that the social can usefully be divided into five levels: the nano-level; micro-level; meso-level; macro-level; mega-level (Bunge 1996).
[114] Layder (1993).

may be necessary to give more emphasis to one element, it is vital to understand that they are all bound together in the ongoing flux of social life; hence the pictorial demonstration of a context that all levels share in common. In this respect, part of the context for each of the levels is the other levels. The point is that this kind of selective focusing of research should be seen as deliberate and selective and related to the research question, and not as a result of an a priori theoretical tendency to see one aspect as more important than any other.

The self, or agent, seems self-evident but must be treated with care. I engage in an in-depth discussion of this issue in chapter 5. Of course, selves cannot easily be separated from the social situations in which they are routinely embedded and researchers will have hard decisions to make about which aspects of agency to privilege. The powers of human agents to act in the world are derived more from their social positioning than from biological factors; hence social positionality is internally related to agency. Even though agents are always structurally embedded it is important to distinguish between the differing levels of agency since it helps direct attention to the way individuals are empowered by, respond to and are affected by their social involvements. Despite these qualifications, however, the notion of self refers to an individual's sense of identity, personality and perception of the social world as these things are experienced and/or influenced by her, or his, social experience. Social selves, however, are ongoing social constructions and we should reject extreme psychological explanations that view the individual as a separate unit possessing a fixed inner core or essence.

Situated activity shifts the focus away from a concern with the individual's response to various kinds of social situations towards a concern with the dynamics of interaction itself. Such a focus on the dynamics of interaction directs our attention to the manner in which gatherings of, or encounters between, several individuals can tend to produce outcomes and properties that are a result of the interchange of communication between the group as whole rather than the behaviour of the individuals viewed singly. That is to say, situated activity displays emergent properties that are the result of the way in which individuals interact and coalesce, but which are not predictable through an analysis of the individuals alone. Thus, there are two aspects of situated activity: first, the involvement of the individuals concerned is such that each episode of comparable activity will bear the unique imprint of the particular configuration of individuals involved; and, second, the ongoing dynamic

nature of the interactional process itself reacts back upon those individuals in unforeseen ways.

Setting refers to the way the nature of the setting within which activity takes place will make a difference to the manner in which those individuals interact. The incorporation of the setting of situated activity highlights the impossibility of writing out the materiality of the social world or the reduction of it to a dependent variable. A good example of the role of setting in producing outcomes might be that of the Reagan/Gorbachev fireside summit in Geneva in 1985.[115] But consider also the difference between a one-off encounter between diplomatic colleagues in an office corridor and the interaction between those same colleagues in a social setting such as a restaurant. In both examples, the kind of setting in which such interaction takes place is significant to the activity itself; again this links micro and macro social phenomena. In this respect, certain activities vary according to the extent to which they tend to be limited to specific settings and specific individuals. Thus, the setting has a set of properties that cannot be reduced to little more than particular patterns of activity. Settings, that is, have a set of properties that are identifiable apart from specific instances of situated activity. However, it is important to stress that these properties are dependent on the more general activities that constitute the setting in the first place and thus setting is linked to context.

Context highlights the manner in which selves, situated activity and settings exist within a structurally organised context. For example, the concept of a diplomatic exchange presupposes that there is a larger organisational context that makes diplomatic exchange possible. Moreover, we also assume that this structure would persist irrespective of those particular participants and their specific routines and rituals. That is to say, that if two diplomats, or state leaders, retire, it may be the case that certain routines and rituals might disappear along with them (although perhaps to be replaced by other state leaders who succeed them). However, it would also be true to say that the organisational structure of the state system remains despite a change in personnel.

Whilst settings and situated activity are always and only sustained insofar as they are reproduced and/or transformed by the social activities of agents, from the point of view of specific participants entering these settings, they are experienced as already-established forms of organisation, with which they have to contend in various ways.

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[115] Mandelbaum and Talbott (1987).

Moreover, all social reproduction and/or transformation takes place under conditions inherited from the past. These conditions represent the pre-established quality of social forms that have been reproduced and/or transformed in the past and which confront new generations of individuals as objective structural contexts which reward certain forms of behaviour and punish others. As such, these structural contexts entail forms of power and authority that decisively influence social activity in these settings and contexts.

Context, as was the case with self, situated activity and setting, has to be viewed as a stratified concept; thus there are many contextual layers. The gendered nature of state roles, such as the army, for example, has to be seen in the wider context of gender social relations that locate women in certain kinds of occupation.[116] It is only in this context, and in the even wider one of the power and control implicated in patriarchal relations in society in general, that we can begin to understand phenomena such as mass rape in war.[117] This particular example also demonstrates the interpenetrative nature of levels and contexts.

Moreover, as this example makes clear, the question becomes not one of how to integrate agents and structures into one coherent account, but one of how it could ever be possible to consider methodological individualism or methodological structuralism as viable alternatives. That is, that at certain junctures it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to separate out the effects of the immediate setting and the more macro variables such as patriarchal power relations or class relations. Similarly, it is impossible to understand the way in which these wider, macro structures are reproduced over time unless we understand how more micro processes feed into them. The example of gender relations and a state occupation such as soldiering is a good one since it highlights the manner in which the immediate settings of activity (the barracks or the battleground) are firmly connected to increasingly remote relations of domination and subordination in the wider social fabric. The organisation of army occupational roles is an excellent example of the way in which intermediate social forms spread the influences of macro processes and factors into micro-level activity and back again. In this sense, macro processes feed into activity and in some way make it possible, while the micro activity itself reproduces these wider social relations.

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[116] Enloe (1988, 1990, 2000); Walby (1988).
[117] Allen (1996); Chang (1997); Seifert (1993); Stiglmayer (1994).

Given the above discussion, then, how does the reformulated version of the level-of-analysis problem relate to both the theoretical and empirical dimensions of the agent–structure problem in International Relations theory? In general terms, I argue that thinking of the levels in this disaggregated manner will help facilitate research that aims to integrate agents and structures. Equally, the reformulated levels-of-analysis problem indicates the erroneous nature of exclusively structural approaches to research that tend to deny or undervalue the importance of agential attributes and the interpretative element of all social analysis. In this regard, structural phenomena make no sense unless they are related to the social activities of individuals who reproduce them over time. Conversely, agential phenomena cannot be fully understood by exclusive reference to their internal dynamics; they have to be seen as conditioned by circumstances inherited from the past, as well as driven by beliefs about potential futures.

In other words, agential actions have to be understood in relation to the influence of the structural contexts and settings that provide the wider social context and vice versa, as well as in terms of the unfolding structural dynamic that occurs as interaction takes place. Thus, agential and structural contexts are inextricably bound together through social activity. Moreover, the reconfigured approach to the levels-of-analysis developed here avoids the notion of reification which often accompanies structural theorising. As I have described them, structural phenomena are clearly the outcome of human activity and hence the fear of reification is unwarranted and exaggerated.

In many respects the view I am articulating here shares many similarities with Wendt's discussion of 'two levels of structure'.[118] We both stress the fact that micro and macro phenomena are structured, and that the two domains interpenetrate. However, there are major differences between our respective positions. Many of these differences revolve around our differing interpretations of what structure is, and this will be discussed in detail in chapter 4. However, at this point it is worth noting that I reject Wendt's attempt to specify the relationship between micro and macro structures as one of supervenience; particularly if, as Wendt argues, supervenience is understood as a non-causal relationship.[119] For this would seem to suggest that micro and macro structures do not interact in a causal manner. Now it seems to me that there is

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[118] Wendt (1999: 145–157).
[119] Wendt (1999: 156). In fact, supervenience is not always understood in a non-causal way. Supervenience often figures in philosophical discussions of mental causation. Kim

no logical reason to rule out the possibility of causal relations between micro and macro structural phenomena. Indeed, if there are not causal links between micro and macro phenomena it is difficult to see how they are interrelated at all. Wendt, of course, sees this relationship as constitutive and not causal.

According to Wendt a constitutive relationship has effects, but these are not causal. Despite his attempts to explain this issue, it still seems confused. Constitutive theory is not a theory that charts causal flows. It is, as Wendt puts it, a type of theory that provides explanations of what an entity is. Wendt cites the double-helix model of DNA as a good example. However, DNA has certain causal powers in virtue of its constitution, and it makes no sense to refer to these as constitutive effects and to set them in opposition to causal effects. Hence we can maintain the necessity of constitutive theorising to science without accepting Wendt's argument that we need to distinguish between causal and constitutive effects. The causal effects of the master–slave relationship (which is a constitutive relationship) cause certain types of behaviour in both master and slave. The relationships that constitute them as certain types of social actors *are* what cause them to behave in certain ways. Moreover, this analysis does not violate the requirements of independent existence and temporal asymmetry of causal analysis, because the relationship is independent of any particular master or slave and existed prior to either entering into the relationship. Constitutive theory as I understand it is perfectly consistent with the analysis of causation detailed in chapter 1. How things are constituted is a vital part of the research enterprise, and hence constitutive theory has a vital role to play. But if things have a set of powers in virtue of how they are constituted, then it makes perfect sense to talk of their causal power and the idea of constitutive effects can be understood in causal terms. After all, if things have the power to effect X, then we have all the justification we need to say that they play a causal role.

As should now be clear from these preliminary discussions, the level-of analysis, micro–macro and the agent–structure problems, whilst closely related and implicated in one another, are distinct problems, although with significant areas of overlap.[120] Research based at the micro-level-of-analysis is primarily concerned with face-to-face social

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(1993) has suggested that causal efficacy and explanatory relevance are 'transmitted' via supervenience connections, from physical characteristics to mental ones. The idea is that mental characteristics figure in 'supervenient causation'.

[120] Layder (1994: 1–11).

interaction; thus it overlaps with issues of self-identity and subjective experience as well as the idea that people are social agents who can fashion and remake their circumstances. Similarly, research based at the macro-level-of-analysis concentrates on more remote large-scale social phenomena. As such, it overlaps with the notion of structure that forms the context of social behaviour, yet is not reducible to it. The central difference that separates the level-of-analysis problem and the agent–structure problem, then, is that the former is primarily a problem of explanation concerned with the appropriate level of analysis and research focus, whereas the latter problem is concerned with the nature of the levels and the ligatures binding them.

As I have tried to make clear, despite these points of overlap the distinctions between the various problems are not without substance. More importantly, the conflation of the agent–structure problem with the 'level-of-analysis' or micro–macro problem can lead to the mistaken assumption that structure is only relevant to macrosociological issues. By separating the two problems we can see that microsociological contexts have strongly defined structural properties and that macrosociological phenomena do not operate independently of agents. Agents imply structures and vice versa, in a complementary non-antagonistic manner.

I have attempted to sift through the many issues that arose in the agent–structure debate in order to arrive at a more adequate understanding of the agent–structure problem itself. First, I looked at the issue that formed a substantial element of the debate between Wendt and Hollis and Smith: viz. whether Waltz's theory was itself reductionist. I argued that the claim that Waltz's theory is ontologically reductionist relies on a particular reading of the agent–structure problem and the role and nature of structural theories. It is only if the agent–structure problem is addressed solely in ontological terms that neorealism deserves the label individualist.

Durkheim clearly thought individuals were real and that structures emerged out of their interactions. What Durkheim did not believe, however, was that social outcomes could be explained solely in terms of the dispositions, wants, intentions and beliefs of those individuals. Likewise, Weber clearly accepted the ontological reality of social institutions, but rejected any notion that these forms of social organisation could be said to have dispositions, wants, intentions and beliefs of their own which could be said to exist independently of the dispositions, wants, intentions and beliefs of the human agents who comprise them.

The dispute between Durkheimian and Weberian approaches to the study of the social world is essentially an analytical, or methodological, disagreement over the appropriate level of the social world in which to root the explanation of social outcomes. Methodological individualism and methodological structuralism are not arbitrary labels and the attempt to construe Waltz's theory as ontologically reductionist bears little relation to the agent–structure problem as it is known in social theory. However, raising the issue as an ontological question does highlight the fact that a purely methodological attempt to address the issue is always going to fail since such solutions are always predicated on ontological assumptions, however well theorised.

In terms of whether agents or structures could, a priori, be said to be more influential in determining social outcomes, I argued again that this issue is derived from deeper ontological concerns. Although prima facie an important aspect of the agent–structure problem, I have argued that this issue is not an essential element. To ask the question of whether agents or structures were causally responsible for a given social outcome is to accept the potential causal status of both. Individualist and structuralist theories, on the other hand, reject this assumption and concede causal power only to one or other element. If we do take both agents and structures to be important, as the agent–structure problem suggests we must, then the particular influence of both in any social outcome will be a crucial issue, but not one that can be settled theoretically prior to empirical research. Who the agents are, what the structural context is, and how influential each was, is an empirical matter once we take both agents and structures seriously.

In terms of the relationship between the agent–structure, the level-of-analysis and the micro–macro problems, I argue that these constitute distinct problems and that the conflation of them results in considerable confusion. Most notably, the conflation of the agent–structure problem with the level-of-analysis problem can lead to the mistaken assumption that structure is only relevant to macrosociological issues. In separating the two problems, we can see that microsociological contexts have strongly defined structural properties and that macrosociological contexts do not operate independently of agents. This insight will be of the utmost importance when we come to investigate agency at macrosociological levels. Thus, on the reading advanced here the agent–structure problem is embedded within every level of social reality, whereas the level-of-analysis problem is concerned primarily with the level and scale of analysis.

Of the five issues identified at the outset of this chapter only two remain integral to the agent–structure problem: (1) that of the nature of agents and structures and their interrelationship; and (2) the question of differing modes of investigation required to study agents and structures respectively. This latter issue, however, is derivative of the solution advanced for the former issue. That is, that the distinction between 'Explanation' and 'Understanding' only emerges if we are forced to conclude that agency refers to human agents. Or, as Hollis and Smith note, it is only when we are forced to look at the 'lowest level where human individuals are the units', that 'Understanding starts to compete with Explaining'.[121] This puts ontology firmly before any other considerations. It is an explicit recognition that the ontological question of the nature of agents and structures and their interrelationship is prior to the question of the mode of investigation required.

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[121] Hollis and Smith (1990: 200).

4 **Structure**

In this and the following chapter I intend to examine the various ontological issues raised in the agent–structure problem. Put simply, the ontological problems concern the nature of both agents and structures, and, since I argue they are mutually implicated, their interrelationship. My decision to deal with the ontological issues in advance of the epistemological and methodological questions reflects the scientific realist belief that the ontological questions are of a more fundamental nature than those of epistemology and/or methodology.[1] These latter issues, however, are not to be relegated to a second-order significance. All substantive ontological claims require epistemological justification. Likewise, the delineation of a complex social ontology will imply various methodologies apropos its study. Thus, and to reiterate, ontological issues take analytical priority only because any discussion of epistemology and methodology in an ontological vacuum would be arbitrary.

For scientific realists, and contrary to positivists, theoretical terms may, and often do, refer to real entities.[2] Thus, for any realist approach the importance of developing theoretical accounts that capture some sense of the objects they purport to describe is pivotal. But scientific realism is not ontologically dogmatic. It combines a robust depth realism with an equally robust epistemological relativism about existential

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[1] This point seems to have been universally accepted by all participants in the agent–structure debate, with even those pressing the epistemological case most strongly accepting that 'ontology is what counts in the end'. Hollis and Smith (1991).
[2] This position should not be confused with the idea that we should attempt to construct 'realistic' theories in the sense of theories that grasp the totality of the object under study. See Waltz (1979: 1–17). Abstraction is a necessary component of all theorising. The point is that we assume the postulated theoretical entities and their relationships are as suggested in the theory. See Sayer (1992: 85–92, 186–190).

claims made within a particular science. To be a realist in this sense is to take ontological commitments seriously, and to postulate theoretical entities with extreme caution; and importantly, to accept the need to defend them on ontological and not simply methodological, or pragmatic/instrumentalist, grounds. Little wonder, then, that among realist social theorists the question of what structure refers to has been the subject of heated debate.[3]

But not all theoretical positions are as preoccupied with making explicit what they mean by structure. In general, poststructuralists and positivists are happy to use the term structure but only instrumentally: it is 'as if' structure existed; even if both mean different things by structure. Since the status of claims regarding structure in these accounts is not ontological, there is little need for them to make clear how they use the term. As long as the postulated term helps explain/predict the phenomena there is no need to examine it further. This has the effect of letting them off the ontological hook. After all, if you are not actually claiming that X entity exists in Y form there is little need to defend the claim that X entity exists in Y form. Neither is it enough simply to say that X has a structure, since this is an unremarkable and uninteresting claim. To talk meaningfully about structure will require some indication of what the structure is, what powers it possesses, and a sense of the role it plays in explanation.

Robert Merton has claimed that structural analysis 'must deal successively with micro- and macro-level phenomena . . . [and] therefore confronts the formidable problem . . . of developing concepts, methods, and data for linking micro- and macro-analysis'.[4] In terms of the agent–structure problem this stands as an indicator of our yardstick when assessing competing accounts of structure. Structure is that aspect of social life that ties the various elements together and is probably, in principle, something that can never be brought into the realm of the observable. Without the ability to put structure under a metaphorical microscope and say 'look, that's what structure is', we are left with assessing the extent to which accounts of structure either do, or do not, help us explain social phenomena. Our criterion is explanatory depth, not parsimony. From this it follows that a range of approaches to structure may well be valid; indeed perhaps even necessary.

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[3] See Kontopoulos (1993) for an excellent survey of the differing structural logics.
[4] Merton quoted in Blau (1976b: 5).

Structure: two traditions and five models

Despite the frequency with which the concept of structure appears in sociological and IR literature the concept remains ambiguous and imprecise. According to Merton, there is not a single comprehensive theory of social structure, but a plurality of theoretical orientations that make structural analysis 'both polyphyletic and polymorphous'.[5] Different theories define structure in different ways, although until the emergence of the agent–structure debate in IR this was not universally recognised. More often than not structure is defined implicitly rather than explicitly. Waltz obliquely engages in a discussion of differing accounts of structure, but ultimately fails to see that these are *different* accounts in his desire to construct all alternative accounts as reductionist.[6] Hence for Waltz, alternative accounts of structure are not genuinely structural if they are, in his terms, reductionist. Thus, for example, Waltz argues that 'definitions of structure must omit the attributes and the relations of units'.[7] Notwithstanding that this is a curious claim given Waltz's own relational account of structure (distribution of capabilities), it would rule out as structural one of the strongest and most influential accounts of structure in the sociological canon, that of Marxism.[8]

The debate surrounding structural theory in IR has failed to engage with the fact not only that there are different models of structure, but also that there are two distinct structural traditions.[9] The difference between these two traditions was clearly outlined by Raymond Boudon.[10] Boudon personally favoured what I will call the continental tradition, but he was clear that although they shared some superficial similarities they were very different forms of analysis. Confusing these two traditions can lead to serious misunderstandings about both the scope and form of varying types of structural theory. This is most evident in Richard Ashley's damning critique of Waltz.[11] Ashley criticises Waltz for being insufficiently structuralist. Drawing on E. P. Thompson's[12] critique of Louis Althusser, Ashley provides one of the most influential commentaries on neorealism. What seems to have gone unnoticed,

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[5] Quoted in Blau (1976b: 32).   [6] Waltz (1979: 73).   [7] Waltz (1979: 40).
[8] Waltz does insist on the recognition of differing notions of 'relation'. However, this claim is still problematic in relation to Marx, given that Marx considered the attributes of the units (their class) as integral to any account of social structure.
[9] Buzan et al. (1993: 7) acknowledge the potential differences but do not deem them important since they still see a common thread running through all forms. I am indebted to Douglas Porpora for the basis of this argument.
[10] Boudon (1971).   [11] Ashley (1984).   [12] Thompson (1978).

however, is that the model of structuralism Ashley uses to assess Waltz is not applicable to Waltz. Waltz was not attempting to develop a structural theory in the sense Ashley understands structuralism. Hence it comes as no surprise that Waltz's model of structure fails to live up to the structural imperatives outlined by Ashley. Waltz is operating in the sociological structural tradition associated with Durkheim, Merton and Talcott Parsons, whereas Ashley outlines a model of structure firmly embedded in the tradition associated with Durkheim, Althusser, Lévi-Strauss and Saussure. This latter tradition is known as structuralism and it is important not to confuse the two approaches.[13]

Durkheim provides a complicating factor in this easy separation, since he is embedded within both traditions. Ashley locates Durkheim within what he considers to be structuralism.[14] The structural sociological tradition is also keen to claim Durkheim as its own and to disavow any link between its approach to structure and that of structuralism. Waltz, of course, also cites Durkheim as a major influence.[15] In a 1976 volume produced by the American Sociological Tradition, with the remit of discussing social structure, none of the invited contributors is willing to discuss what they consider to be the new 'structuralism'. Indeed many are quite scathing about it and are keen to put a considerable distance between this new 'structuralism' and their own approach. As Peter Blau puts it in his introduction, the 'most conspicuous absence is Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. Although this approach seems to have gained wide acceptance among social scientists in Europe and in some intellectual circles in the United States, most American Sociologists have rejected it, as have most American anthropologists and none of the social theorists asked was interested in presenting Lévi-Strauss's views.'[16]

In the same volume Merton places the rejection of continental structuralism as the second defining characteristic of his understanding of structural sociology. For Merton, 'the basic ideas of structural analysis in sociology long antedated that composite intellectual and social movement known as structuralism', and 'although structural analysis in sociology today has been affected by certain communalities of structuralism serving as a cognitive context – for example certain parallels between Saussure and Durkheim – it does not historically derive from these traditions'.[17]

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[13] Harland (1987, 1993); Jackson (1991).   [14] Ashley (1984).
[15] Waltz (1979: 114).   [16] Blau (1976b: 2–3).   [17] Merton (1976: 32).

The confusion surrounding Durkheim's influence on both traditions is embedded within his definition of social facts. As Edward Tiryakian has pointed out, Durkheim had two versions of social facts.[18] The first of these are 'facts of social morphology – ecological and demographic facts (the volume and density of a population, birth and death rates and so forth)'.[19] The second type of social fact is those Durkheim referred to as 'collective representations'.[20] These are generally considered to be collective beliefs, values, norms and conventions. Tiryakian describes the distinction between the two kinds of social facts as that between the quantitative physical facts of human society and the qualitative, non-material, psychological aspects.[21]

This distinction within Durkheim's treatment of social facts helps explain how his work comes to be associated with both traditions. The collective representations account of social facts has been adopted by the continental tradition and tends towards a more qualitative and subjectivist treatment of structure. Equally, this tradition tends to be critical of the positivist methodology associated with the alternative treatment of social facts embedded within Durkheim. In contrast to this, and as a result of its commitment to a positivist methodology and associated quantification, the sociological tradition of structural inquiry has focused on the morphological variables.[22] This means that this sociological tradition tends towards a rigorous objectivism and eschews all subjective elements. The split between these two traditions mirrors that between a materialist account of structure and a more idealist account. In Durkheim's own terms this split is problematic and there is no explicit commitment within his work to this division. Yet in a philosophical environment where epistemological and methodological concerns were allowed to dominate ontological matters, it was inevitable that such a split would become enshrined in disciplinary norms. As such, this distinction does represent the starting point for a more nuanced understanding of the two structural traditions.

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[18] Tiryakian (1962). In fact, Durkheim had three versions of social facts: first, those social facts relevant to the organism of society as a whole: its population, its technology and its territory/environment; second, the social facts underlying the social institutions within a society: the institutions of the state, education and family, for example; third, the facts relating to the norms, the values and the moralities of a society: what Durkheim called the 'collective representations' of a society which constituted a society's culture. See Durkheim (1964: 50–59).

[19] Tiryakian (1962: 17).   [20] Durkheim (1976).   [21] Tiryakian (1962: 17).

[22] This is not the whole story and various elements of the sociological tradition have concentrated on the collective representations (Goffman 1959). However, where this has occurred the sociological mainstream has viewed this as a non-structural approach.

The morphological account of social facts concentrates on those aspects of societies that are external to individuals. In many ways structures are simply aggregates of individual level properties given a macro form. For the morphological tradition, structure is a set of social facts external to individuals. Structure is an environment within which individuals act. The collective representations account of social facts, on the other hand, sees social facts as intrinsic to the identities and modes of being of individuals. These collective representations constitute what it means to be an individual. The continental tradition of structuralism, then, sees this constitutive aspect as essential to any form of structuralism. The sociological structural tradition, on the other hand, based as it is on Durkhiem's morphological treatment of social facts, simply does not accept the claim that social structures constitute individuals. Rather structure is largely viewed as a constraining (sometimes enabling) environment.

None of this is to claim that the two structural traditions share nothing in common. Both, for example, are committed to the belief that societies should be studied as total systems, or connected wholes (i.e. structures), and that the important factors of these connected wholes are their internal patterns of connection, and not the isolated elements of which these structures are composed. Despite these commonalities, however, the two traditions are drawn from very different intellectual resources and have taken differing trajectories. The structural sociology tradition took its lead from Durkheim and Marx, but largely developed through the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons and systems theory. Absent from its development is any sense of engagement with structural linguistics or Freudian themes. The continental tradition likewise began from an engagement with Durkheim and Marx, but its trajectory was defined through an engagement with the work of Freud, and in particular, the linguistic theories of Ferdinand Saussure. It was further developed through an, at times, hostile engagement with conflicting views on the philosophy of the subject and to varying degrees embedded a rejection of existentialism or any notion of the active self-reflective human subject. The key sources in this respect were Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre.[23] Most important, however, is the engagement with Saussure.[24]

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[23] Heidegger (1996); Merleau-Ponty (1962); Merleau-Ponty and O'Neill (1974); Sartre (1983); Sartre and Mairet (1948); Sartre and Barnes (1957).
[24] Saussure (1960).

From these two traditions, Douglas V. Porpora has identified four ways in which the term structure is applied in the literature. These four conceptualisations of structure, whilst not claimed to be exhaustive, do represent the most commonly held views and serve as a useful typology when discussing the issue.[25] It is important when considering structure in this manner not to assume that theorists are always consistent in their use of the term. Often the same theorists will use the term structure in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. That they do so, however, only serves to highlight the necessity of examining its use. According to Porpora, the four most common uses of the term structure are:

1 Patterns of aggregate behaviour that are stable over time.
2 Law-like regularities that govern the behaviour of social facts.
3 Collective rules and resources that structure behaviour.
4 Systems of human relationships among social positions.[26]

To these I would add:

5 Relations of difference that constitute and define the properties of elements.

Although these accounts of structure are drawn from beyond the boundaries of academic IR, examples of their use can be found within the discipline; hence it is instructive to consider them. It is important to reiterate, however, that particular theorists may embed their work in combinations of the various accounts of structure.

Structure as patterns of aggregate behaviour that are stable over time

The first conception – patterns of aggregate behaviour that are stable over time – tends towards individualism. It is derived from the structuralist-functionalist tradition and is generally both a methodological and ontological form of individualism. Randall Collins makes his commitment to this account of structure and the ontological form of individualism clear, arguing that social structure refers to 'repeated behaviour in particular places',[27] and that 'strictly speaking there is no such thing as a "state", an "economy", a "culture", a "social class". There are only collections of individual people acting in particular kinds

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[25] Porpora (1989).   [26] Porpora (1989: 195).   [27] Collins (1981).

of microsituations.'[28] And it is from within these microsituations that the causal explanation of social outcomes must be situated.[29]

Sociologist George C. Homans provides another strong articulation of this account. Homans argues that structure refers to 'those aspects of social behaviour that the investigator considers relatively enduring, or persistent'.[30] For Homans, structures are the 'relatively permanent features of societies and groups whose characteristics and interrelations we intend to describe, analyze and explain'.[31] Homans is clear that although we need to explain structural properties, the basis of this explanation is not structural at all, but rooted in the 'nature of humanity'.[32] As such, he is adamant that no distinctly structural methodology is required.[33] Ontologically Homans is scathing about any use of the term structure to refer to a whole that is greater than its parts. Indeed, he suggests that the term 'structural effect' could quite easily be replaced by the term 'collective effect' with no loss of explanatory scope.[34] This is so, he argues, because the so-called 'structural effect' is actually concerned with the influence of a 'collection of individuals'.[35]

> Why should things recognizable as social structures exist at all? In answering this question I have tried to show how relatively enduring structures, a status system, for instance, can be created and maintained by the actions of individuals, actions of course taken under the influence and constraint of other individuals. That is, I have tried to explain the properties of certain simple structures using as propositions the propositions of behavioural psychology.[36]

Since social patterns, institutions and organisations are only abstractions from the behaviour of individuals they cannot do anything.[37] Structure, on this view, cannot be much of an independent variable, since abstractions do not possess causal power.[38] Structure is simply the observed behaviour of individuals acting through time; and as such, it is reducible to that behaviour and explainable only in terms of individuals. Surprisingly, this account of structure does appear in some constructivist IR literature, with Vendulka Kubálková, for example, arguing that 'structure refers to recurring patterns of social behaviour'.[39] However, it is not normal for constructivists to adhere to this account of structure owing to its inherent individualism.

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[28] Collins (1981: 988).   [29] Collins (1981: 990).   [30] Homans (1975: 53).
[31] Homans (1975: 63–64).   [32] Homans (1974: 64).   [33] Homans (1975: 56, 57).
[34] Homans (1975: 56).   [35] Homans (1975: 56).   [36] Homans (1975: 64).
[37] Collins (1981: 989).   [38] Porpora (1989: 197).   [39] Kubálková (2001: 22).

Hedley Bull provides another example of this view of structure from within IR, although it is not the only account of structure in his work. Bull's concern was international order. By 'order' he meant a 'pattern of a particular sort'.[40] Moreover, this pattern is simply 'human activity that sustain[s] elementary, primary or universal goals of social life'.[41] And this human activity, in turn, is sustained only insofar as the 'basic goals' of men (*sic*) are orientated towards the maintenance of such a pattern.[42] International order, then, for Bull, is a 'pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society'.[43] In Bull's account what actually explains the pattern of order we observe are the 'primary goals' of the constituent units. This makes Bull a consistent methodological individualist. Whether he was also an ontological individualist is not as clear.

Structure as law-like regularities that govern the behaviour of social facts

The second account of structure, as law-like regularities among social facts, is one of the most common, within both sociology and IR. Typically associated with Durkheim, and in particular his morphological account of social facts, structure in this view refers to the way social facts, or group properties, are related to each other by a pattern of law-like regularities.[44] These social facts are said to be capable of exercising external constraints on individuals. According to Durkheim, social facts should be explained only in terms of other social facts and not in terms of processes and phenomena at the level of individuals. Simply put, social facts (commonly called social forces) are the influence, or external constraint, placed on an individual by society or social institutions. In *Suicide*, for example, Durkheim attempted to show how differences in suicide rates could not be explained in terms of the motives of individual suicide victims.[45] Suicide, he argued, was explainable only in terms of the lack of cohesion and integration of different groups.

This meant that the social fact of suicide could only be explained in terms of what Durkheim called 'concomitant variations' in other social facts. These variations were law-like, for Durkheim, because they were stated in an 'if . . . then' form.[46] For example, *if* social cohesion and integration decreased *then* suicide would rise. It follows that the task of

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[40] Bull (1977: 3).   [41] Bull (1977: 5).   [42] Bull (1977: 5).   [43] Bull (1977: 8).
[44] Porpora (1989: 197).   [45] Durkheim (1951).   [46] Porpora (1987: 14).

the social scientist is to uncover the law-like regularities and describe social structure. This approach to structure is holist in the sense that it excludes all consideration of unit-level factors. Durkheim's approach was not only a form of methodological structuralism, but also an ontological structuralism; Durkheim was a realist about social wholes.

This account of structure plays a major role in the structural realism developed by Waltz, although Waltz is a methodological structuralist but not an ontological structuralist. Waltz is committed to explaining outcomes in terms of structures, but is not committed to accepting that such structures actually exist; and particularly not that only structures exist. The distribution of capabilities is seen to be a social fact that helps explain concomitant variations within the system. The relationship between the social facts of the distribution of capabilities is said to be law-like in the sense of '*if* X distribution *then* Y behaviour'. This account of structure is linked to the 'covering law', or D-N model of explanation.[47] According to the covering law model, scientific explanation consists of the subsumption of a given phenomenon under a law.[48] In the first two pages of *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz makes his commitment to the 'covering law' model explicit: 'Laws establish relations between variables . . . If *a* then *b*, where *a* stands for one or more independent variables and *b* stands for the dependent variable: In form, this is the statement of a law.'[49]

Now if such a law, even stated in probabilistic terms, relating the distribution of capabilities to system stability did exist, we might expect that some measure of the optimum distribution of capabilities for optimum stability could be determined. Waltz suggests that, in terms of the relationship between the distribution of capabilities and system stability in an anarchical system, such a law exists in the form of 'two is the best of small numbers'.[50] If the distribution of capabilities were to be unbalanced in an upwards direction, then given that the law expresses a negative causal relationship, we can expect system stability to fall. It might even be possible to express this in statistical terms. Thus a change in the distribution of capabilities could, in theory, be the sole explanation for a change in system stability without reference to what is going on at the level of the individual units.

This suggests that structural pressures are not exerted through the motivations, wants, beliefs and desires of agents. What explains changes

[47] Porpora (1989). [48] Nicholson (1996: 48–49).
[49] Waltz (1979: 1). [50] Waltz (1979: 161).

in one set of social facts is another set of social facts, and this relationship is law-like. This approach is consistently Durkheimian, at least in terms of its treatment of morphological social facts. Social facts are explained by other social facts. And structure is not only separate from human agency, but also something whose effects are not transmitted through human agency. Hence, whilst Wendt is correct to argue that neorealists do have a 'conception of the agent–structure relationship . . . that recognizes the causal role of both state agents and system structures',[51] this causal role is of two entirely separate realms with no necessary theoretical specification of the relationship between them.

Indeed, despite Waltz's repeated claims that unit-level causes matter, they are distinct from structural-level causes. For Waltz, structural-level causes can operate with no changes occurring either at the level of, or within, agents. Agents and structures are distinct and structural causes can operate independent of agents and vice versa. This may be a resolution of the agent–structure problem, but for many it is an unsatisfactory one. This approach attempts to arrive at explanations without recourse to the motives of individuals and views structure as a domain that is autonomous of individual powers and propensities.

Structure as relations of difference that constitute and define the properties of elements

I have not dealt in great depth with the first two accounts of structure since it is clear that the former is an explicit form of individualism (at times both ontological and methodological) and the latter an explicit form of structuralism (in Durkheim, both methodological and ontological, and in Waltz, merely methodological). As such, neither can be said to represent a resolution of the agent–structure problem able to incorporate agents, structures and their interrelationships into one theoretical account of social activity. This explains why neither has featured in any substantive way in the agent–structure debate. Perhaps this is not a valid criticism. Neither of these approaches to structure accepts the claim that an integration of agents and structures into one account is either necessary or desirable; and Waltz does not seem to think it possible.[52] But the fact that an integrative framework was lacking did lead to the attempt to develop sophisticated approaches to structure that viewed this as a serious problem.

[51] Wendt (1987: 341).   [52] Waltz (1986: 340).

The first of the alternatives I consider is of structure as 'relations of difference'. In many respects this version of structure is strongest in the continental tradition. However, it also plays a role in Waltz's theory. Yet, because Waltz is only operating with Durkheim's morphological view of social facts, he limits these relations to a causal, but not a constitutive, function. Waltz argues that the definition of structure requires that we concentrate on how the units 'stand in relation to one another . . . How units stand in relation to one another, the way they are arranged or positioned, is not a property of the units. The arrangement of units is a property of the system.'[53]

This is clearly a relational view of structure. It is also based on relations of difference, differences, that is, between the various capabilities possessed by states. It is these 'differences' that define the distribution of power within the system. What places it firmly outside the continental structural tradition is that Waltz only considers relations between certain configurations of power, with power defined in a particularly narrow and materialist way that is consistent with a morphological treatment of social facts. As he puts it, power 'is estimated by comparing the capabilities of a number of units'.[54] In limiting the form of relations that can be said to be properties of the system to the distribution of capabilities, Waltz excludes the possibility that structural changes can lead to changes in the units.[55] This point is reinforced given that Waltz's overall account of structure is a combination of these 'relational differences' and law-like regularities, both embedded within Durkheim's maxim that social facts should be explained only in terms of other social facts.

Another account of structure within social theory and IR theory based on the idea of relations of difference emerges in poststructuralism. This is an account that does see these relations as constitutive.[56] Poststructuralists, and the structuralists that preceded them, take their cue from a radicalised version of Saussure. But why Saussure? Why should an account of the structure of language be applicable to the study of the

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[53] Waltz (1979: 80).   [54] Waltz (1979: 98).

[55] It is interesting to note that Waltz does, in fact, suggest that structure 'affects both the interactions of states and their attributes'. Waltz (1979: 100). However, it is not clear how he can consistently maintain this position given his harsh separation between unit-level and system-level factors.

[56] Poststructuralism emerged out of structuralism. Structuralism also took structure to refer to relations of difference. However, structuralism, at least in its continental form, never really took hold in IR, where the dominant structural account was that of Waltz. There has never been a dominant theory of IR based on structuralism as conceived here. There is, however, still quite a lot of structuralism within poststructuralism.

social? The answer to this is complicated and the intellectual history is complex, but there are two general factors we can discern. The first was a general intellectual turn towards the study of language within social theory and philosophy. This is known as the linguistic turn and it placed language at the heart of all analysis.[57] Second is the widespread belief among theorists that the driving logic of the social is the transmission of meaning.

In short, the social milieu in which structuralism emerged, and a specific view of the object under study (ontology), already predisposed social theorists towards the development of linguistic models of structure.[58] Irrespective of how the story unfolds all continental structuralists believed that societies, myths, works of literature and so on have the 'structure of a language'. Poststructuralists take this further, arguing that language is a meta-structure that structures all other structures. Both structuralists and poststructuralists take the structure of one human domain as the model for other domains.

Saussure had suggested that meaning was to be found within the structure of a whole language rather than in the analysis of individual words. The early continental structuralists were drawn to this insight since it meshed so well with their belief that the explanation of social processes had to be embedded within a generalised theory of structure. What Saussure gave them was a linguistic model of structure to work with. A key component was the claim that language is a system of pure oppositions.[59] According to Saussure, the conceptual side of language is made up 'solely of relations and differences with respect to other terms of language, and the same can be said of its material side'.[60] This meant that in 'language there are only differences . . . a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms'.[61]

The implication of this was radical, particularly if a model of the structure of language is extended to cover all aspects of the social. It

[57] Lafont (1999); Rorty (1967).
[58] It is also clear how deeply indebted to hermeneutic insights these approaches were. However, where structuralists were in agreement that there was a deep structure (of meaning perhaps) to uncover, poststructuralists rejected even this assumption.
[59] I concentrate on this aspect of Saussure because it is the most important in terms of the current discussion. There were, however, five main elements to Saussure's view of language: the distinction between langue and parole; the distinction between the diachronic and synchronic; the arbitrariness of the sign; the oppositional structure; and the priority of speech over writing. See Jackson (1991).
[60] Saussure (1916: 117–118).   [61] Saussure (1916: 120).

implies that these relations of difference are prior to, and constitutive of, the positivities of language and hence every element embedded within a structural field. It was particularly radical if taken, as it often is, to imply a wholesale denial of reference and the view that the study of the social can be reduced, or limited, to the study of language.[62] The radical nature of this claim was to a large extent glossed over by the early continental structuralists, who were still intent on pursuing a science of linguistics. As long as the belief in an organising principle to structure was maintained (provided by context, a centre, or perhaps the totality of a shared social system), the infinite regress that was implied could be dealt with.[63]

Poststructuralists, although still embedding their account of structure in Saussure's framework, were keen to reject the idea of an objective, or scientific, account of structure, and the belief that the context itself could provide the grounds upon which the potentially infinite play of differences could be halted. Poststructuralists took the idea of 'differences without positive terms' to its logical conclusion. The clearest articulation of this came in Jacques Derrida's 'Structure, Sign and Play' piece.[64] Derrida notes how what has long being considered outside of the process of structuring is the notion of a centre or origin to structure itself. If the positivity of all words emerges out of the play of 'differences without positive terms', then this process would apply likewise to the notion of structure. This is what Derrida means by the structurality of structure.

> Structure – or rather the structurality of structure – although it has always been at work, has always been neutralised or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure . . . but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure.[65]

[62] Norris (1990, 1997).

[63] The possibility of an infinite regress occurs because of the claim that there are only differences without positive terms. Hence any term in language, 'dog', for example, gets its meaning from what it is not. Hence 'dog' is not 'cat', is not 'rat', is not 'mat', etc. However, given that 'cat' too gets its meaning from the play of differences, then 'cat' can only be defined in relation to what it is not; perhaps 'mat', 'mouse', etc. See Huysmans (1998). It has always puzzled me in discussions of this issue why the chosen differential terms are already closely related to the one that is supposedly under discussion; this implies that the questioner already knows what the term means. If language is structured by the play of differences without positive terms one may as well say, 'dog' is not 'war', is not 'nuclear submarine', is not 'tank'.

[64] Derrida (1988b).   [65] Derrida (1988b: 278).

We can relate this to Waltz's organising principle of anarchy. This centre is not a natural point but a constructed effect. The concept of structure itself succumbs to its own deconstruction; the deep structure the structuralists attempted to uncover was not a secure ground upon which explanation could be based, but was itself the product of a hidden (absent, yet to be revealed) process of structuring. All structures, Derrida argues, have a centre, or point of origin, which allows the structure to function, but this centre is itself structured. Given the extension of language to all domains, this insight applies equally to the concept of truth. Truth was no longer to be viewed as a positivity to be uncovered, or discovered, but was itself produced as an effect of the play of differential relations. And once truth was seen to be a structured effect, the very idea of an objective science of structure no longer seemed possible. Poststructuralism, then, involves a rejection of two of the key ideas of structuralism: (1) the idea that there are definite underlying structures with clear organising principles that could explain the human condition; and (2) that it is possible to step outside of discourse and survey the situation objectively.

This is a long way from Waltz's relational view and, although both Waltz and the poststructuralists base their account of structure on 'relations of difference', we should not jump to the conclusion that the outcome is the same for both. Because they are embedded in differing structural traditions the ways in which the relations of difference work themselves out is very different. There are two particularly important differences. First, Waltz sees a logic to structure derived largely on the basis of the organising principle of the structure: anarchy. For poststructuralists there can be no such organising principle, but rather what appears as an organising principle is in reality a constructed effect of an absent set of alternative structural principles. Second, for Waltz, the relations of difference emerge out of distributional differentials, whereas for poststructuralists the relations of difference are purely linguistically derived and are prior to, and constitutive of, the relata. Yet the fact that neorealism and poststructuralism develop accounts of structure predicated on relations of difference does suggest that there may be some similarities between them. And indeed there are. Both, for example, are strongly anti-humanist and this anti-humanism means that both also locate agency in structures, an issue I address in chapter 5.[66] Both, in their

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[66] This is a particularly ironic point given Ashley's reliance on Thompson to critique Waltz. After all, Thompson's own critique of Althusser was a humanist critique.

own ways, are deterministic, even if the determinism of poststructuralism takes an indeterminate form. This is particularly clear in Roxanne Lynn Doty's poststructuralist attempt to address the agent–structure problem.[67]

According to Doty agents and structures are seen to be effects of practices. Or as she puts it, 'The subject, agent, is determined not determinative';[68] practices are autonomous and determinative; what stops, or halts, the charge of determinism is that that which determines, namely practices, are themselves radically indeterminate.[69] What we have here, then, is an 'indeterminate determinism'. What is particularly interesting about this account is the manner in which Doty places agency in this space of indeterminism (an issue I will address in chapter 5).

How does this account of structure stand as a response to the agent–structure problem? In Waltz's case we have already seen how his account of structure places a firm, and unbridgeable, line between agents and structures. In fact, Waltz makes no effort to integrate the two into one account. Moreover, in focusing solely on the relations of difference between material factors, or morphological social facts, and embedding his explanation exclusively in terms of the relations between these social facts, he is unable to show how these social factors shape, shove, enable and constrain agents. If he were to attempt to link structure to his units Waltz would be violating the Durkheimian principle of only explaining social facts in terms of other social facts. The relations of difference operate according to their own laws and do so behind the backs of human subjects. The two mechanisms Waltz does identify that might suggest some agential input – socialisation and competition – can only be behavioural responses to an external environment. Moreover, in treating structure as always (and only) an external environment he is equally unable to consider the possibility of structural changes leading to constitutive changes in the units. Changes, that is, not only in terms of their behaviour, but in terms of their identities and modes of being.

In many respects the situation with poststructuralism in terms of the agent–structure problem is similar, in others far worse. First, in constructing an account of structure derived from linguistics and applying this to all domains of social activity, poststructuralists are unable link together the various domains of social life. Indeed, all social life is to be read as a text, and the underlying ontology is flat, one-dimensional and reductionist. This seriously underplays the specifics of the differential

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[67] Doty (1997).   [68] Doty (1997: 379).   [69] Doty (1997: 377).

planes of social life. Moreover, where agents do play a role it is only in terms of the structural imperatives of the structures. Indeed, in many poststructuralist accounts agency is located in structures. Despite the repeated references to the construction of social life and the construction of structural principles, it is not agents who do this construction but the structural logics of relations of difference, even if this logic is indeterminate. Agents, or selves, are mere ciphers for the universal principles of language. They are not even, as should be clear, positivities. Indeed, agents, much like the structurality of structure, are actually an illusion.

Structure as rules and resources

The idea of structure as 'rules and resources' is most closely associated with Anthony Giddens. It is also an account of structure firmly embedded within the linguistic turn. Wittgenstein, the Wittgensteinian-inspired Peter Winch,[70] speech act theory and Jürgen Habermas are the philosophical inspirations, as well as the more sociological reading of Durkheim in which social facts are understood as 'collective representations'. In terms of the agent–structure debate within IR it is possibly the most influential account of structure. Giddens, in particular, developed it as a way to address exactly this issue. He arrives at this account of structure as a result of his dissatisfaction with prevailing solutions to the agent–structure problem, and the construal of structure as 'rules and resources' is integral to Giddens' structuration theory. Although IR theorists adopting a structurationist framework have changed Giddens' structuration theory in various ways, the core commitment to structure as 'rules and resources' remains.

The notion of structure as 'rules and resources' arises in most constructivist accounts. Onuf is committed to it, Kratochwil broadly supports it and Wendt has accepted it at times.[71] However, Wendt has also suggested two further notions: structure as social relations – which I will deal with in the next section – and structure as intersubjective meanings, which I will deal with as a subset of the rules and resources approach. The idea of structure as 'rules and resources' is also embedded within the

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[70] See, for example, Winch (1958). Giddens' overt Winchianism is demonstrated by Porpora (1993). Other schools of sociology that have tended to view structure in these terms are ethnomethodologists and some symbolic interactionists, as well as those Wittgensteinian-inspired scholars who employ linguistic analogies to conceptualise social structure.
[71] Kubálková (2001: 64).

English School[72] but equally, it has also been deployed by Keohane and can be said to be consistent with neoliberal approaches in general.[73] It is also apparent in Gramscian and neo-Gramscian perspectives, although these are best understood as the subset dealing with intersubjective understandings.[74]

I intend to show how, despite the all-too-obvious attractions of this account of structure, it ultimately fails: (1) as a resolution of the agent–structure problem; and (2) to account for a range of phenomena that occur in the social world and which might legitimately be attributable to structural forces. In terms of an adequate resolution of the agent–structure problem, structure cannot, as Giddens suggests, be taken to refer to 'rules and resources'. For this formulation makes structures little other than virtual existents reliant for their causal efficacy entirely on agential understandings of such 'rules and resources'. In effect, this formulation tends to produce a voluntaristic form of social theory.[75]

Although Wendt is generally attributed with first introducing the terminology of the agent–structure problem to IR theory, it was Onuf and David Dessler who unambiguously, and systematically, make the case for an account of structure as 'rules and resources'. According to Dessler, the scientific realists' solution to the agent–structure problem starts from a single premise – namely that all social activity presupposes social forms. Hence, 'state action is possible and conceivable only if there exist the instruments through which that action can be carried out'.[76] Structure refers 'to the social forms that pre-exist action'.[77] But what might these media or social forms – structure in Dessler's terminology – be? Dessler argues that two sorts of instruments, or media of action, are necessary:

[72] Dunne (1998); see also Dessler (1989). However, despite Bull's introduction of rules, they are not a necessary part of the definition of the pattern of behaviour that constitutes order. As Bull puts it, 'I have sought deliberately to find a definition of order in social life that excludes the conception of rules. This is because . . . I believe order in social life can exist in principle without rules.' Thus Bull does not see rules as constitutive of social life. They are a nearly ubiquitous 'means of creating order in human society, rather than part of the definition of order itself' (1977: 7). This, of course, runs counter to Onuf's treament of rules (Onuf, 1989).

[73] Keohane (1989).

[74] 'The historicist method, as developed by Cox, is concerned with perceiving historical structures that characterize particular epochs and are themselves the result of collective human action over time. The aim is to focus on the intersubjectivities that constitute the historical structures of the social material world.' Bieler and Morton (2001: 17).

[75] The voluntaristic nature of Giddens' theory, especially in its treatment of power, is exposed by Alex Callinicos (1985: 133–166).

[76] Dessler (1989: 453).   [77] Dessler (1989: 452).

> First nations must have resources, the physical attributes that comprise 'capability.' A military strategy requires military forces; monetary policy, financial instruments; trade policy, the goods and physical infrastructure of trade; and so on. Second, nations must have available rules, the media through which they communicate with one another and co-ordinate their action.[78]

For Dessler, the media, the social forms, or structure, that make social action possible are 'rules and resources'; essentially Giddens' view of structure. Moreover, he argues that his transformational model 'shows why all rules deserve structural status . . .'[79]

Onuf takes a similar view, and his account is perhaps the most sophisticated and most sustained treatment of structure as 'rules and resources' within IR theory.[80] Onuf begins by accepting the importance of the linguistic turn.[81] Rules, in turn, are derived from language; hence if we want to understand rules we should study language. Rather than turn to Saussure, Onuf locates his approach in the speech act theory of John Searle and J. Austin.[82] From this, Onuf argues that rules and language can never be separated, because 'rules govern language', and perhaps more importantly, that they constitute each other.[83] Indeed, Kubálková argues that Onuf considers language to be primary, or more basic than agents and structures.[84] Onuf provides support for this view, arguing that language is a universal feature of the human species, and hence rules are an ever-present feature of the human condition and practice.[85] This means 'to study international relations, or any other aspect of human existence, is to study language and rules'.[86]

Wendt's position on structure as 'rules and resources' is not as clear. In his 1987 agent–structure article Wendt had originally suggested that Bhaskar's account of structure as social relations was preferable to that of structure as 'rules and resources'.[87] Yet in this same piece he also argues that 'the deep structure of the state system, for example, exists only in virtue of the recognition of certain rules and the performance of certain practices by states . . .'[88] By the time of his 1991 book review of

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[78] Dessler (1989: 453).   [79] Dessler (1989: 463).
[80] Kratochwil likewise adopts this perspective. However, Kratochwil is concerned only to construct a framework around rules insofar as it suits his immediate purposes (Kratochwil, 1989: 11). Onuf, on the other hand is attempting to construct a general paradigm for IR based on the primacy of rules.
[81] Onuf (1989).   [82] Austin (1975); Searle (1969).
[83] Kratochwil (1989: 6); Onuf (1989; 47).
[84] Kubálková (2001: 64). See also Onuf (1989: 23, 30).
[85] Onuf (1989: 30).   [86] Kubálková (2001: 64).
[87] Wendt (1987: 357, fn. 57).   [88] Wendt (1987: 359).

Hollis and Smith, however, Wendt's commitment to structure as rules and resources is clear:

> A constructivist approach to the relation between agency (deeds) and social structures (rules), in other words, needs to recognise the distinctive and complementary contributions of constitutive and causal theory. By explicating the rules governing social contexts a constitutive approach shows how it is possible that in those contexts certain actors are empowered to engage in certain practices and others are not, and it also shows how those practices – when performed – in turn instantiate (or fail to instantiate) the rules.[89]

What is interesting about this formulation is how the notion of resources plays no role. Indeed, Wendt seems to suggest that the processes and mechanisms governing social contexts are nothing but rules. In part, this can be explained as a result of Wendt's sharp separation of ideas and material factors and his desire to construct an idealist ontology as a counter to the supposed materialism of Waltz. But the neglect of the resource side of Giddens' structural equation is already embedded within Giddens own account and it is also something that emerges in Onuf's work. It is, in fact, a logical consequence of the manner in which Giddens understands the relationship between 'rule and resources'. According to Giddens:

> Structures can be analysed as rules and resources, which can be treated as 'sets' in so far as transformations and mediations can be identified between the reproduced properties of social systems . . . A distinction is made between structure and system. Social systems are composed of patterns of relationships between actors or collectivities reproduced across time and space. Social systems are hence constituted of situated practices. Structure exists in time-space only as moments recursively involved in the production of social systems. Structures have only a virtual existence.[90]

This passage stands as a lucid declaration of his position and the clearest possible statement of why this formulation ultimately fails either to transcend the agent–structure problem, or form a matrix of possibilities that might help explain social outcomes. The key passages are the claim that structures exist 'only as moments recursively involved in the production of social systems' and that structures have only a 'virtual existence'. It is worth pausing for a few moments to consider the broad

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[89] Wendt (1991: 390). [90] Giddens (1981: 26).

outlines of Giddens' position before moving on to unpick its problematic aspects and to consider how these issues feed into accounts of IR embedded within this view of structure.

First, Giddens is keen to move beyond the notion of a structure as an objective set of relations that agents face, but also beyond any account of social activity that reduces explanation to individuals. He formulates his concept of structuration in order to make the argument for the 'mutual dependence of structure and agents'.[91] Or, to put this in the language of contemporary IR, agents and structures are 'mutually constituted'. Structure is to be understood as 'both the medium and outcome of the practices which constitute social systems'.[92] The important point is the distinction between structure and a social system, and the fact that structure is the outcome of practices that constitute the social system; hence the social system is an outcome of practices, but not an input to them. In an innovative and bold theoretical move Giddens argues that the 'social system' refers to patterns of objective relations[93] (what many had previously called structure), and that structure refers to 'rules and resources'.[94]

The problem with this formulation is that the processes of structuration take place only at the level of structure, and Giddens never effectively ties these processes to the social system, or set of objective social relations. This lack of a link to the social system, allied to his definition of structure, absents the objective relations from his account of the processes of structuration and makes it an entirely phenomenological process. He says little about how objective relations structure and motivate behaviour, or about how structured behaviour affects the system (the relations). In effect, the objective relations are beyond the scope of the process of structuration, and hence beyond structural analysis. In many respects this is simply a reversal of Waltz's position.

According to Porpora, the conceptualisation of social structure as 'rules and resources' ultimately 'ends up reducing the organisational features of society to an epiphenomenon of human behaviour', and is 'unable to account for the range of phenomena we expect social structure to explain'.[95] This means that many of the important causal factors that arise from the organisational features of society are neglected, hidden or denied if structure is interpreted as 'rules and resources'.

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[91] Giddens (1979: 69).   [92] Giddens (1981: 27; 1979: 69).   [93] Giddens (1979: 64).
[94] Giddens (1979: 64).   [95] Porpora (1989: 196).

Giddens argues that the pattern of relations we observe in the social world refers to social systems not structure. These patterns of relations do not in themselves constitute social structure but are structured by structures, which for Giddens consist of 'rules and resources'. These 'rules and resources', he argues, govern the systemic pattern of relationships we observe in our day-to-day activities. Rules come in various forms. Some are more explicit and codified than others. Others are unwritten and/or implicit and apply to the minutiae of everyday face-to-face social interaction. These informal rules can be considered as analogous to 'formulae' that enable us to go on in social situations even if we are unable explicitly to state in detail the specific 'formulae' for any given situation.

Resources can be split into two kinds: allocative and authoritative. Allocative resources refer to material objects, such as raw material and/or land, which enable people to get things done, go to war or exert control over a group of people. Authoritative resources complement these and refer to non-material factors, such as status or hierarchical positions, and enable command over other human beings.[96] According to Giddens, resources generate power and underpin the ability of social actors to effect change in their social circumstances.

When taken together, Giddens argues that these rules and differing kinds of resources enable people to do things, to make a difference in the social world. Indeed, for Giddens, this 'ability to do' is the defining feature of agency. 'Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently.'[97] This view of agency reveals a constant aim of Giddens' theory. For Giddens endorses a view of social analysis that has more in common with that of Winch than those approaches that view social outcomes in terms of structure. Or, to put it another way, Giddens' approach to social theory is deeply suspicious of all forms of objectivist structuralism.

Giddens argues that the enabling content of 'rules and resources' has been ignored in conventional objectivist structural approaches, which have tended to focus on the constraining nature of structure. Contrary to this, he argues that structures also generate behaviour by providing the 'rules and resources' that stimulate and enable it. Social structures

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[96] This represents a clear attempt to integrate Durkheim's two versions of social facts into one account.

[97] Giddens (1984: 9).

are not analogous to natural phenomena, such as tidal waves, volcanoes and hurricanes, which may inflict destruction on human societies 'without their in any way being able to do anything about it'.[98] The power embedded within social structures does not 'act on' people like forces of nature and compel them to behave in a particular way. Rather, for Giddens, social structures only exert their power by entering into the consciousness of individuals. In short, 'structural constraints do not operate independently of the motives and reasons that agents have for what they do'.[99] Social systems, social structures and institutions, 'exist only insofar as they are continually produced and reproduced via the duality of structure'.[100]

This means that structure is, in some sense, 'internally related' to activity. It has no existence beyond the situations in which people are immediately acting.[101] Structure only exists in those instances in which the 'rules and resources' are actually being employed in the activities of people. This is what Giddens means when he says that structure only exists in its instantiation in human action. Structure in this sense has only, to use Giddens' own words, a 'virtual existence'. Structure 'has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activity'.[102] This ties structure firmly to the knowledge agents possess.

There would seem to be nothing wrong in saying that social relations and practices are reproduced through, and in, the activities of people in virtue of their reasons and motivations (although Giddens is dismissive of the role of motivation in social outcomes, an issue I shall return to later). But, and in order to remain consistent with the scientific realist philosophy advocated by Wendt and Dessler, there does seem to be something strange in the claim that they have no existence – and *inter alia* causal power – beyond these things, or that their effects are dependent upon agents' knowledge of them. Indeed, in tying social structure so closely to knowledge, Giddens is guilty of reducing an ontological category to an epistemological one. Moreover, as Derek Layder notes, it also seems to suggest that 'reproduced practices' are the same things as people's reasons and motivations; or at least, are explainable in terms of them.[103] It should be clear what the problems with this are in terms of an adequate resolution of the agent–structure problem, which according to Wendt, should give agents and structures 'equal and irreducible

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[98] Giddens (1984: 181).   [99] Giddens (1984: 181).   [100] Giddens (1977: 134).
[101] Layder (1994: 139).   [102] Giddens (1984: 26).   [103] Layder (1994: 141).

ontological status'.[104] For on Giddens' reading structures are merely epiphenomenal effects of agents' knowledge, reasons and motivations. In effect, in construing structure as 'rules and resources' Giddens ends up with precisely the voluntaristic account of social inquiry he was so keen to reject.

Giddens – and Wendt and Dessler by implication – seems guilty of reducing the totality of social being to phenomenological/psychological phenomena. Margaret Archer claims that one reason for the construction of the theoretical barriers that divide individualists from structuralists is institutionalised academic concerns related to the maintenance of academic disciplinary boundaries. Identifying what she terms 'conflationary theorising', Archer argues that the agent–structure problem reflects 'the traditional dispute about the relations between the two disciplines of psychology and sociology, one which found the Individualists and Holists on opposite sides'.[105] On the one hand, argues Archer, 'upwards conflationary theories', Archer's generic term for individualists, ultimately seek to make the individual the terminus of their explanations and abstract this psychological individual from the social context. Structuralist theories, on the other hand, which Archer labels 'downwards conflationary theories', take the opposite point of view, with the individual seen in Durkheim's terminology as 'indeterminate material', with the motor of any explanation located firmly in social facts.

Archer's point has ontological and methodological implications. In terms of the methodology of the agent–structure debate, she is claiming that Giddens' account of structure as 'rules and resources' ultimately elides both psychology and sociology in favour of an expanded remit for *social psychology*. The ontological point is that the conceptualisation of structure as 'rules and resources' eventually leads to a denial of both agents and structures in favour of an 'ontology of praxis'. Giddens' structuration theory, largely as a result of its conceptualisation of structure as 'rules and resources', tends to flatten out social reality, since structure is only ever something which is directly and immediately implicated in the activities of human beings and has no existence other than such instantiations. Whatever the merits of this formulation, it does not seem consistent with the realist philosophy the structurationist writers in IR claim to be utilising, or provide a robust way of linking agents and structures into one account.

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[104] Wendt (1987: 339).   [105] Archer (1995: 103).

For scientific realists the notion of a layered reality and the concept of emergence are crucial aspects of the general ontology. Bhaskar rejects the psychological reductionism of methodological individualism and he is equally unequivocal in his rejection of the sociological reductionism of the methodological structuralism. Given the commitment to emergence in the social world, it does not seem feasible that scientific realists could accept Giddens' elision of psychology and sociology in favour of 'social psychology'. Indeed, according to Bhaskar, 'there is an ontological hiatus between society and people',[106] a 'hiatus' that demands we distinguish sharply between the 'genesis of human actions, lying in the reasons, intentions and plans of people, on the one hand, and the structures governing the reproduction and transformation of social activities, on the other'.[107] The need to recognise and theorise the hiatus lies in the emergent properties displayed by the social world. 'For the properties possessed by social forms may be different from those possessed by the individuals upon whose activity they depend.'[108]

Bhaskar, then, and contra Giddens, sees a clear difference between the realms of the social and psychological sciences, and argues that '[t]he problem of how people reproduce any particular society belongs to a linking science of "socio-psychology".'[109] Giddens, on the other hand, sees nothing other than this linking discipline. In wishing to avoid the errors of individualist and structuralist theories, which did elide one or other dimension, Giddens has gone too far and denies that the social world displays emergent properties. The scientific realist opposition to this form of conflationary theorising is explicit: it 'is only if social phenomena are genuinely emergent that realist explanations in the human sciences are justified . . .'[110] For without emergence it is always possible that a reductionist explanatory programme would suffice. Insofar as Wendt wishes to advance a consistent form of structural theorising predicated on the basis of scientific realism he too must be committed to emergence.

The structurationist opposition to emergence, on the other hand, is defended by Ira Cohen: 'structuration theory postulates no emergent properties . . .'[111] because 'the non-emergent description of the structural properties of systems, all revert in one way or another to the central notion that institutionalised practices and relations may be regarded as more basic constituents of order than either individuals or the properties

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[106] Bhaskar (1979: 46). [107] Bhaskar (1979: 44–45). [108] Bhaskar (1979: 44).
[109] Bhaskar (1979: 45). [110] Bhaskar (1986: 104). [111] Cohen (1989: 93).

of collectivities'.[112] Here we can see the force of Archer's critique, with Cohen arguing that institutionalised practices and relations are more basic than individuals or the properties of collectivities. This is not to say that Giddens and other structurationist theorists deny the existence of 'institutionalised properties of social groups or collectivities', but that 'it must be clearly understood that these are not emergent properties in any ontological sense of the term'.[113] This can only be understood as a clear commitment to a form of 'methodological praxis' theory and a rejection of any holistic ontological social wholes.

Thus, although united in their opposition to the individualist denial of structural properties and the structuralist elision of human agency, Bhaskar's and Giddens' theories cannot be considered as complementary. Whereas Bhaskar accepts that agents and structures are mutually implicated, he does not accept the reduction of one to the other that occurs when the two are conflated (which is at the same time a elision of them) – and hence a concern only with the 'methodology of praxis' as advocated by Giddens. The denial of emergence within structuration theory also leads to a denial of the causal efficacy of patterns of relationships, which for Giddens constitute the social system and are a dependent variable playing no causal role. The denial of the causal impact of relationships neglects many important questions that should be of interest to any social scientist, and hence structure as 'rules and resources' also fails to provide an adequate explanation of social outcomes.

For example, the independent causal impact of relations is crucial in understanding coercion and the exercise of social power. Rules of resource allocation, such as those introduced in the post-war international economic sphere, have made certain states dependent on other states in terms of investment and in respect of the purchasing of the products of the dependent state. That dependency itself is neither a behaviour nor a rule. There are no rules stipulating that workers in developing countries must be dependent upon western financiers and consumers

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[112] Cohen (1990: 42). Giddens' own opposition to the concept of emergence in the social world is clearly spelt out in Giddens (1984: 171–172), where he states in his discussion of Durkheim's theory of 'emergence': 'Social systems do have structural properties that cannot be described in terms of concepts referring to the consciousness of agents. But human actors, as recognisable "competent agents", do not exist in separation from one another as copper, tin and lead do. They do not come together to form a new entity by their fusion or association.'

[113] Cohen (1990: 42).

for their livelihood. Rather, such dependency is a relationship, albeit an asymmetrical one. Admittedly, this relationship is a consequence of rules of allocation, but it is a 'consequence that has consequences'.[114] For it enables the International Monetary Fund, for example, to coerce dependent states into (among other things) submitting to structural adjustment programmes that in turn reproduce the rules of allocation that bring about the relationship. Yet, even at the moment of rule constitution the rule makers are always already implicated in relationships that enable and motivate agents to behave in certain ways. Given that the social world is processual in form there is no point in entering into pedantic discussions about what has priority in chronological terms – rules or relations. Both are necessary for adequate social explanation.

The issue of motivation, which should be an area of major concern to social scientists, is also an issue that can be easily neglected as a consequence of the conceptualisation of structure as 'rules and resources'. Nor is the issue of motivation only at the level of agency: it has a structural dimension insofar as structural configurations can motivate agents to act in certain ways. According to Giddens, 'motives tend to have a direct purchase on action only in relatively unusual circumstances, situations which in some way break with the routine . . . Much of our day to day conduct is not directly motivated.'[115] For Giddens, 'routine' refers to the 'habitual, taken for granted character of the vast bulk of the activities of day-to-day social life'.[116] What Giddens seems to be suggesting is that the vast majority of 'rule following' involves only repetitive unmotivated behaviour.[117]

This denial of motivation has serious consequences for theory and practice. First, we do not know what action an actor is engaged in simply by observing his/her behaviour. In order to ascertain whether an actor is scratching her/his head as a result of an itch or in order to make a signal, we need to know the actor's intentions. And, if an actor has an intention, then that actor also has a motive.[118] Indeed, against Giddens and with Porpora, I would argue that, 'unlike a knee-jerk or a sneeze, even the most habitual or routine action is motivated'.[119] Second, in denying the

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114 Porpora (1993: 220).   115 Giddens (1984: 6).   116 Giddens (1984: 376).
117 At best, within the terms of structuration theory, the only motivational factor can be said to be the motivation to preserve 'ontological security'. Giddens (1991: 187–201).
118 Lyons (1976: 501–516).   119 Porpora (1993: 221).

importance of motivation Giddens seems to be in danger of conflating the distinction between constitutive and regulative rules.[120]

For the argument that much day-to-day routine behaviour is not directly motivated only makes sense if 'rule following' is understood primarily in terms of regulative rules, whereby actors need make no decisions and simply repetitively and routinely follow some prescribed behaviour. But the denial of motivation makes less sense if we think in terms of constitutive rules, whereby a whole field of alternative actions is opened up and among which motivated decisions routinely must be made. In daily life we routinely make motivated decisions within the frameworks established by constitutive rules. What and where do we buy? Do we take the car or the train? Do we talk back to our bosses or keep quiet? For whom do we vote? And the issue of explicit deliberation applies even more to political leaders, since very few political decisions are routine in the same way everyday life might be considered routine.

The point is that even constitutive rules do not prescribe behaviours that can be followed mindlessly. They endow an array of alternative behaviours with meanings and social consequences among which we are motivated to choose. Rules do not determine what we shall do but only open up a field of possibilities that we may do.[121] In order to make sense of action within such a context we need to maintain the distinction between constitutive and regulative rules. Yes, perhaps all constitutive rules are regulative, but not all regulative rules are constitutive.[122] It is

[120] Onuf (1989) has explicitly embraced this conflation. Winch also explicitly conflated constitutive rules and regulative rules and at times Giddens (1979: 66–67) seems to broadly accept this position. Even his later attempt to distinguish between constitutive and regulative rules leaves his formulation ambiguous: 'Rules have two aspects to them, and it is essential to distinguish these conceptually, since a number of philosophical writers (such as Winch) have tended to conflate them. Rules relate on the one hand to the constitution of meaning, and on the other to the sanctioning of modes of social conduct.' Giddens (1984: 18). The ambiguity arises from the phrase 'rules have two aspects'. Is this a recognition that rules come in two forms, regulative and constitutive, or an argument to the effect that all rules have both a regulative and a constitutive aspect? I argue that the distinction between constitutive and regulative rules is an ontological one. Whilst it is certainly the case that all constitutive rules play a regulative function, it is not the case that all regulative rules are constitutive of the games they regulate. If this were the case then any violation of a regulative rule would also be a change of game. If this were to be the case the notion of constitutive rules as constitutive of the game would be redundant.

[121] Bourdieu (1990b: 60–61, 64–66).

[122] Onuf (1989: 47) seems to accept this in his discussion of Wittgenstein. 'In both instances rules tell us how to play the game. In the first instance, they "govern" the game. Not to use any of these rules alters the game and contributes to the multiplicity of games. In the second instance, rules guide play. Not to use a rule sacrifices guidance but neither the fact of play, nor the game itself.' If this is so, then it is clear that the distinction between constitutive and regulative rules is both implied and necessary.

not enough simply to ask how agents reproduce their routine behaviour; we still need to ask why they choose one routine over another. Giddens, on the other hand, as Cohen notes, 'has proposed no account of the nature or development of motives above and beyond that of ontological security'.[123] The concept of ontological security, however, differs little from realist arguments about self-interest and, as in realist theories, does too much work in the theories – even to the extent of explaining behaviour that is purely repetitive. Giddens goes as far as to suggest that all of the strategic behaviour examined by Erving Goffman, for example, has less to do with actors protecting their own and each other's ego than with maintaining 'ontological security'.[124] What Giddens presents us with is an all-embracing reduction of motivation to 'ontological security' that is simply unable to sustain the theoretical weight it is being asked to bear.

The missing dimension in Giddens' theory is the identification of a causal mechanism responsible for generating agents' motives. This is hardly surprising given his denial of the role of motivation in social action. Taking motivation as an important factor in social action, however, I suggest that emergent material relations constitute one such mechanism that can help explain the role of motivation.[125] According to Porpora, these relations are an emergent property that arises out of the conscious rule-following behaviour of human agents.[126] These emergent material relations have an ontologically objective and socially consequential existence, whether or not actors are aware of them. This point might seem to be opposed to the concept-dependent notion of social structures, but the point is simply that, although emergent material relations may exist objectively without agents being aware of them, they exist only if actors are doing something of which they are aware. Consider, for example, a game of chess.[127]

The constitutive rules of chess create the conditions of possibility for chess and are reproduced whenever two players sit down to play. From the outset, however, the rules give rise to certain objective material relationships. 'White', for example, begins with the initiative, while 'black' is initially placed in the reactive, or defensive mode.[128] Equally, as a

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[123] Cohen (1989: 227).   [124] Giddens (1984: 64). See also Goffman (1959).
[125] Porpora (1993).   [126] Porpora (1993).
[127] This example comes from Porpora (1993).
[128] It is important here to see that this relationship has an existence independent of its incumbents. It is certainly possible for black to begin and have the initiative. It is not a constitutive but a regulative rule of chess that white has first move. The relationship, on the other hand, is between first mover and second mover, not between white and black.

result of the constitutive rules the centre of the board becomes strategically important. These positions – having the initiative, being on the defensive, the strategic importance of the centre – are not rules but objective relational properties that emerge as a consequence of the rules. In this sense they are emergently material and have an existence, and *inter alia* causal power, that is not dependent upon the players being aware of them. Indeed, beginners at chess, in general, recognise neither the importance of the centre, nor the advantage awarded to first mover. Such an absence of awareness and knowledge of these relations has consequences whether or not the players realise them.

But do real-life analogies exist for the emergently material relations we observe in chess? Consider the relationship between the constitutive rules of capitalism and one emergent property of such rules: inequality. I certainly do not wish to suggest that capitalism alone generates inequality, only that its constitutive rules do 'tend' to generate inequality. Moreover, this emergent property is relational and has consequences independent of any knowledge pertaining to its existence. Few in developed western societies, for example, realise how narrowly concentrated wealth is in those societies, but this unequal distribution nonetheless has consequences: economic stagnation, for example, owing to insufficient demand. It is certainly not the case that the social consequences of inequality that impact on people in developing countries are dependent for their causal power on the beliefs of those people, or on capitalists (although it is a contingent fact that they might be aware of such outcomes) being knowledgeable of such inequality.

An example more germane to IR might be the relations of dependency as identified by Immanuel Wallerstein.[129] Such relations, if they exist at all, arose out of a set of constitutive rules that defined the international economic order in its present form. There are no rules that stipulate that such relations of dependency must be as they are, but rather such relations exert an independent causal effect which impacts on how the rules are interpreted by socially located agents. Inequality, then, is a relational property with important consequences of its own. These consequences occur irrespective of particular knowledge of such inequality, although, if the inequality becomes an object of knowledge, it can possibly lead to even more dramatic consequences.

Realists in IR might also point to competition between states as another example of a material relationship generated from the

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[129] Wallerstein (1974).

constitutive rules of statehood and sovereignty. For example, understood in terms of the rules relating to sovereignty in an anarchic environment, arms possessed by any one state can, potentially at least, be used to attack citizens of other states. Hence, arms possessed by any state in the system can be viewed as a potential threat to all states and perhaps even the system itself.[130] Because of this relationship of mutual threat, it is in the interest of each state leader, who wishes to maintain the sovereignty and autonomy of his/her particular state, to maximise its arms potential. Over the long run, state leaders become socialised to the requirements of this interest and act upon it. According to realists, as long as the competitive relationship endures then state interests remain the same over time, and not simply because it is routine to do so. Equally, it may well be the case that this structurally generated interest helps explain much that state leaders do: for example, the prioritising of arms purchases over welfare programmes. Such actions are not necessarily dependent upon state leaders being aware of this competitive relationship, but rather acting in harmony with their perceived interests. Interests, that is, that are, in part, generated as a consequence of this hidden competitive relationship.

Moreover, as Bourdieu has noted, many of these actions cannot simply be described as routine but are agents' novel and creative responses to situations defined in terms of their perceived interests. The relationship of mutual threat among states is constraining, enabling and motivating; no matter how humanistic or moral individual state leaders may be, they are constrained to act on certain motives if they wish to remain leaders of autonomous states.[131]

Questions of power and domination, issues central to International Relations theory, are elided through Giddens' conceptualisation of structure.[132] According to Giddens, domination is based on rules of authorisation and allocation; by authorisation, he means capabilities that generate command over persons, and by allocation he means

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[130] Classically described by Herz (1950) as the security dilemma.
[131] Bourdieu rejects the assertion that all social behaviour is rule governed. Introducing his notion of 'strategising', Bourdieu argues that in attempting to take the view of a detached observer looking for explanations, the sociologist produces a distorted understanding of the situation in question, a view which reifies and overemphasises ideals, norms, values, etc. These become represented as 'rules' that are claimed to govern or determine social action. Bourdieu uses the concept of strategising to encompass the fact that actors do have goals and interests, and is concerned to locate the source of their practice in their own experience of reality – rather than in the analytical models of the social scientist. See Bourdieu (1977).
[132] Thompson (1989).

capabilities that generate command over objects.[133] The important question, however, is who, or what, possesses these capabilities? Clearly, it is not individuals as individuals that possess these capabilities, but rather individuals as socially positioned agents/actors, or incumbents of social positions. In other words, the capability that is derived by authority or allocation is attached to social positions that are relationally defined and governed by rules. They are, in effect, the causal properties of those relationally defined positions and not the causal properties of the individuals who occupy those positions.

In places Giddens seems to accept this point.[134] Yet, if he accepts that some capabilities, causal properties and resources are deposited in social positions, and since social positions only exist in relation to one another, this is tantamount to accepting that social relations exert an independent causal influence on behaviour. Even if we accept Giddens' flattened ontology of the social world, an 'ontology of praxis' as Archer calls it, ontological questions still remain over his construal of structure as 'rules and resources' and his claim that these have only a virtual existence until instantiated by agents. In effect, what exactly does Giddens mean by 'virtual' and does this term also relate to the resources aspect of structure?

Or, as Ian Craib puts it, 'if they have a real existence, then it does not help to say that their existence is virtual and if they are real we must be able to distinguish them from agency'.[135] The standard argument in reply to this question is to admit the material aspect of social structures (resources), but maintain that these only acquire social significance insofar as there exists a set of social rules by which these material elements can be given meaning. In effect, this is Wendt's solution: he does not deny the existence of material structures but merely suggests that the causal power they possess is dependent upon the meaning they are given through the body of constitutive rules that define them as objects of a specific form. However, since such rules exist only in the heads of agents as 'memory traces', it is invalid to distinguish them from the agents who are their bearers, or from the practices that determine their invocation. Invoking 'intersubjectivity' as a means of getting round this

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[133] Giddens (1979: 100).
[134] Giddens (1989: 257) now admits that the 'structural properties of social systems, however, are not themselves rules, and cannot be studied as rules'.
[135] Craib (1992: 153).

problem does not help, unless it can be shown to operate independently of the subjectivities out of which it is constituted.[136]

Clearly, a scientific realist could not be happy with the ontological status of 'rules and resources' in this account. For: (1) many rules have an actual existence as in law, contracts, constitutions, and are anchored in time and space and exist and exert a causal influence (as penalties, entitlements, rights and obligations) independent of their instantiation – they have *autonomy*; (2) rules are often pre-existent, their invocation requires that they be already there (appeal can be made to them and sanctions introduced through them) – they are *anterior*; and (3) it is not necessary for them to be known to have an effect (ignorance of the law is no defence) – they have an independent *causal effect*.[137]

Similar ontological points can be made in respect of resources such as land, food, weapons and factories: (1) sometimes rules and intersubjective meanings are unidentifiable and unintelligible without reference to them (geographical features that divide populations, civilian casualties in war) – they have *autonomy*; (2) their prior existence and physical being frequently restricts the meanings which can be imposed upon them (we cannot eat nuclear weapons) – they are *anterior*; and (3) they impinge upon people rather than awaiting instantiation and their effects are often independent of interpretations placed on them (increases in the instances of skin cancer as a result of ozone layer depletion were not dependent upon our instantiation of it and would have occurred irrespective of our knowledge of it) – they exert a *independent causal influence*.[138]

The motor driving the conceptualisation of structure as 'rules and resources' is the wish to transcend what Giddens considers an immature view of structure, wherein structure appears to be 'external to human action'.[139] For Giddens, this naive view of structure is 'closely connected to the dualism of subject and social object: structure here appears as external to human action, as a source of constraint on the free initiative of the independently constituted individual'.[140]

Yet, in defining structure as 'rules and resources', Giddens accords social relations no independent causal role and seems, at best, to leave their ontological status indeterminate. The practical difference between structure as 'rules and resources' and structure as 'relations between

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[136] Wendt (2004) attempts to do just this. See Wight (2004) for the counter-arguments.
[137] Archer (1995).   [138] Archer (1995: 108).
[139] Giddens (1984: 16).   [140] Giddens (1984: 16).

social objects' is one of the causal significance of objective, and perhaps unknown to social agents, social relations. Equally, despite the fact that Giddens is clear that individualist theories of society are also to be rejected, the consequence of defining structure as 'rules and resources' is an ontological reduction of structure to agential understandings and instantiations of such structures: in effect, the individualism Giddens wishes to avoid. To put the point another way, the 'rules and resources' that Giddens considers to be structure all depend for their existence and causal power on their, at least, tacit acknowledgement by the participating agents. In this sense they are not objective or material and have no existence other than that they gain through agential instantiation. Structures then, for Giddens, are properties of agents.

For all Giddens' sophisticated talk about the duality of structure and structuration, he does not offer us a framework capable of resolving the tension between material and the ideational realms of social existence. Indeed as John B. Thompson and Derek Layder have noted, Giddens does not actually resolve the agent–structure problem as much as move it to one side by focusing on an entirely new problem and its solution.[141] That is, Giddens abandons the notion of an objective social reality independent of agential understanding. In this sense, the old problem is never tackled because it is no longer considered an important issue. We would be deluding ourselves if we thought the problem had been resolved in this manner.

Most importantly, if we accept Giddens' account of structure as 'rules and resources', what is neglected and/or hidden is the materiality, or we might even say the very reality, of social relations as causal factors in the social world independent of agential understanding: rules belong as much to the subjective realm as agency. This has the effect of denying the possibility of emergence within the social world. 'Thus, the duality of structure and structuration mediate only among different elements of the subjective realm and do not touch base with material circumstances.'[142] It is for this reason that many of Giddens' critics have accused him of a form of subjectivist idealism,[143] and insofar as Onuf, Dessler and Wendt advocate Giddens' view of structure within IR theory, this charge likewise, at least potentially, applies.

Kubálková, drawing on Onuf, demonstrates the manner in which this account of structure ultimately subordinates material factors to rules.

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[141] Layder (1994: 141); Thompson (1989).
[142] Porpora (1993: 202–203). [143] Porpora (1989: 203).

'When we scratch the surface of what we are told about such key concepts as power, interest, and anarchy, we find rules, including rules that turn the material features of the world into resources and the rules that turn our needs and wants into interests.'[144] Rules take primacy in the 'rules and resources' account of structure. Rules are the master principle through which all explanation will be provided. Rules make the world go round and are the sole explanatory variable that we require. Onuf attempts to arrive at a more balanced view: 'Resources are nothing until mobilised through rules, rules are nothing until matched to resources.'[145] Unfortunately, he never shows how this relationship plays out and indeed he cannot, since the difficulty is inscribed in the account of structure itself: an account, that is, that neglects the relational aspects of social life.

Structure as intersubjectively negotiated meanings

This account of social structure is embedded within a 'rules and resources' based model, yet adds some critical amendments in order to make the relationship between 'rules and resources' clear. For, although I have argued otherwise, it might be possible to construct an account of social structure as 'rules and resources' where both elements are given equal ontological (and hence causal) weight. Onuf attempts just this. Wendt, on the other hand, wants to distance himself ontologically from what he considers to be the materialism of neorealism and attempts to construct a social ontology much closer to that of the postpositivists.[146] This requires, Wendt seems to imply, an idealist social ontology; hence rules must be given ontological priority over resources, although it is not clear why resources should be considered as exclusively material. Certainly, Onuf does not treat them in this way.[147] Nonetheless, Wendt does draw a sharp distinction between social and material structures,[148] and given that he views social structures as, in part, constituted by rules, it might be reasonable to infer that material structures are the resource element of Giddens' account of structure. This would seem to imply that resources are no longer part of social structure. Support for this inference comes from Wendt himself who agues that materialist arguments, such as those made by neorealists, treat 'system structure

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144 Kubálková (2001: 65).   145 Onuf (1989: 64).   146 Wendt (1999: 39).
147 Onuf (1989).   148 Wendt and Friedheim (1995).

in purely material terms'.[149] Wendt continues, 'by material we refer to brute physical phenomena like natural resources and technological artifacts that exist independent of ideas'.[150]

These physical phenomena can be likened to Waltz's distribution of capabilities. The ownership by a state, under conditions of anarchy, of two thousand nuclear warheads is, for Waltz, a structural property in relation (and only in relation) to the lack of warheads by another state. These material structures, claims Wendt, possess no causal power independent of the social structures (the rules?) that give them meaning. In effect, Wendt's way of dealing with Durkheim's morphological account of social facts is to subordinate them to the collective meanings account. This approach represents a subtle, but important, change in Wendt's view of structure. By social structures, Wendt now argues, 'we mean the shared ideas or common knowledge embodied in intersubjective phenomena like institutions and threat systems'.[151] Thus, although Wendt has claimed that social structures have three elements, 'shared knowledge, material resources, and practices',[152] the material dimensions of structure possess no causal power independent of the intersubjective beliefs of the uses to which such 'brute physical phenomena' may be put.

Wendt is clearly aware of the potential problems with this and attempts to retain some materialist elements in his theory through his concept of 'rump materialism'.[153] Yet despite his claims to the contrary, I argue that, in both Wendt's social theory and his substantive theory of international politics,[154] the material world and material structure appear solely as dependent variables. For materialists, on the other hand, such as Waltz, material forces are the base of world politics with shared ideas at most comprising superstructure.

Contrary to this 'materialist' reading, Wendt's own position, which he now labels 'structural idealism', is based on the claim that 'the base is a shared knowledge structure and that material forces are significant only insofar as this structure gives them meaning'.[155] It is crucial here to be clear on what Wendt is claiming, for his notion of structure in his later work seems to be a reversal of his position vis-à-vis the agent–structure problem outlined in his 1987 article, and in particular, his many claims to

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[149] Wendt and Friedheim (1995: 690).
[150] Wendt and Friedheim (1995: 691).   [151] Wendt and Friedheim (1995: 691).
[152] Wendt (1995: 50).   [153] Wendt (1999: 109–113, 130–135).
[154] Wendt's substantive theory of international relations is solely 'ideas' based.
[155] Wendt and Friedheim (1995: 692).

view structure as having both material and ideational, or cultural, components.[156] The generative aspects of structure, for Wendt, now refer solely to intersubjectively arrived at 'ideas' that have no existence independent of the agents holding those 'ideas'. The dimensions of 'rump materialism' are only significant insofar as the structure of ideas gives them meaning. It is not clear whether by 'ideas' Wendt means to signify something broader than the concept of rules, since rules are, of course, also, at least prima facie, 'ideas'. However, I think it fair to conclude that something more is being claimed since not all ideas are also rules, although they may be governed by rules. Wendt's subtle change is intended to facilitate his move to an idealist social ontology; indeed at times he seems to suggest that the social world might be 'ideas all the way down'.[157] Admittedly, in *Social Theory* a question mark is placed after this assertion and he is at pains to defend the idea that some material factors do have an independent causal effect.[158] Yet Wendt cannot have it both ways here. The claim that 'material forces are significant only insofar as the structure of ideas gives them meaning' contradicts the claim that material forces exert an independent causal effect. Ultimately, given the wholesale absence of material factors in Wendt's substantive theory of international politics, I think it reasonable to conclude that, in terms of explaining social events and processes, Wendt does indeed believe that it is 'ideas all the way down', and that the introduction of 'rump materialism' is merely a palliative intended to deflect criticism.[159]

The root of the problem rests in Giddens' account of structure, and Onuf and Kratochwil are likewise open to the charge that material forces (although acknowledged) only play a role insofar as the structure of rules gives them meaning. Giddens' conceptualisation of structure as 'rules and resources', and the inherent subjective idealism it embodies, entails that Wendt's ideational view of structure would lead to the neglect of material factors, at least at the level of his substantive theory of international politics, but perhaps also at the ontological level as well. Again Wendt seems to supply some support for this view and argues that 'idealists are not saying that states do not act on the basis of power and interests but rather that this is contingent on the social structure in

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[156] Wendt claims, for example, that 'In the constructivist view, therefore the structure of the states system contains both material and cultural elements.' Wendt (1996: 50).
[157] Wendt and Friedheim (1995: 692).   [158] Wendt (1999: 109–113, 130–135).
[159] I agree with Wendt (1999: 110) that few, if any, theorists actually go as far as to deny the existence of material forces. The crucial point is not overt proclamations as to the importance of material factors, but whether or not such factors have a fundamental role in explanation.

which states are embedded'.[160] And since this social structure is now solely defined in terms of ideas it is ultimately an idealist explanation.

It is conceivable that Wendt's idealist turn arises as a result of the critique by Dessler of his 1987 position on social structure (yet to be discussed). Dessler had argued that Wendt had misinterpreted the scientific realist understanding of structure and in so doing tilts towards a structural determinism in his analysis of the relation between state and system.[161] Whatever the merits of Dessler's argument, his critique of Wendt's 1987 article can hardly be said to apply to Wendt's position in his 1992 article *Anarchy is What States Make of It*, where the freedom for individual actors to manipulate and, in certain circumstances, produce new social structures is considerable.[162] As Wendt himself puts it, 'sometimes situations are unprecedented in our experience, and in these cases we have to construct their meaning, and thus our interests, by analogy or invent them de novo'.[163]

It is important to re-emphasise that when Wendt refers to 'social structures' he means only 'ideas', or structures of meaning; material phenomena, although included in his reformulated definition of social structure, play no independent causal role. As Wendt puts it, '[a] gun in the hands of a friend is a different thing from one in the hands of an enemy, and enmity is a social, not material relation.'[164] Whatever the merits of this position, it is not consistent with scientific realism. Certainly, in accepting and arguing for the concept- and activity-dependence of social structures, scientific realists concede the importance of ideas in the social world. But it does not follow from this that material phenomena are external to social structuring or that ideas float free of the material contexts in which those ideas are embedded and emerge. All of these formulations represent residues of a dualistic Cartesian worldview with the material world existing independently of the social world; Wendt has admitted his commitment to such a worldview.[165] Yet, although acknowledging the existence of a material dimension to social life, he is adamant that it plays no role, other than that it gains through the meanings agents give to it in social structuring.

Yet the materiality of the social world has a causal impact at all levels. Social structures, whilst being concept-dependent, are not merely conceptual. A group of persons, for example, could not be said to be at war

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[160] Wendt and Friedheim (1995: 692).   [161] Dessler (1989: 452, fn. 45).
[162] Wendt (1992a).   [163] Wendt (1992: 398).
[164] Wendt (1996: 50).   [165] Wendt (2000: 166).

unless they and other relevant agents possessed some (not necessarily correct or fully adequate) concept of that condition and were able to give some account of it, namely to describe (or redescribe) it. But having the concept of war does not constitute being at war. War also involves physical acts in certain definite locations in space and time. War involves death and destruction and real embodied human beings becoming disembodied human beings. And the ability to go to war may be engendered, facilitated and/or constrained by material circumstances. Often the 'real' casualties of war, the innocent, that is, do not require the same concepts as the protagonists in order to suffer. Often the real casualties of war do not even consider themselves to be at war. War, much like all social life, always has a material dimension and invariably leaves some physical trace, which impacts back upon the ideational content.

Material forces can be shown to shape international politics through the dynamics of events such as the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. The ideas we have of Islamic extremism, of international terrorism, of US foreign policy, of unilateralism and multilateralism, of the UN, and of globalisation, to name but a few, have all been shaped, and continue to be shaped, by the material events of that day. Yes, the meaning of the events varies among individual and collective actors, but the fact is that these varied meanings exist in a complexly structured relationship to the events themselves. In effect, the meanings have no meaning outside of some relationship to the events. It is the material events themselves that tie the differential meanings into a complex whole which becomes a political problem. If this was not the case we could not say that we had conflicting interpretations and meanings (in effect, politics), only differing ones.

Wendt's construal of structure as intersubjectively arrived at meanings elides the material conditions of possibility for many social acts. His structural idealism entails that material elements have no social effects independent of the constructions placed upon them. What this neglects are the real effects of the material world upon us, independent of any act of instantiation or interpretation, or the manner in which material circumstances play a role in constructing the ideas we possess. The objective influence and causal impact of these social events is to leave many dead, enslaved, poor and disadvantaged, in a way that can be consequential in itself, and have an efficacy regardless of any meanings which are placed upon them. Equally, often the most far-ranging or subtle changes in structures of meaning will not lead to commensurate changes in the material substratum.

A useful distinction in this respect is that drawn by Lenin between material and ideological relations.[166] According to Lenin, ideological relations are 'such as, before taking shape, pass through man's consciousness', whereas material relations are 'those that take shape without passing through man's consciousness'.[167] The distinction between these two forms of relation is clear enough. Ideological relations gain their causal power as a result of passing through the consciousness of people; material relations, on the other hand, play a causal role irrespective of whether they pass through consciousness or not. Lenin's distinction implies that a material relation may exert a causal effect whether or not people are aware of it, but not that the causal effect will necessarily be the same if people are aware of it. Through their awareness and actions, people may modify, mitigate or neutralise the effect. But, of course, that awareness and those actions themselves are effects that were causally produced by the thing in question.

An example here might be that of AIDS. If I am unaware of AIDS, I may contract the disease and die; this is one causal effect of AIDS. If I am aware of AIDS, however, I may take appropriate precautions and adapt my behaviour accordingly, in which case it has another, but different, causal effect. Note also, that when construed this way, materiality does not, as Wendt seems to suggest, only have to refer to brute things. On this reading the material is simply that which exerts a causal effect, irrespective of whether it passes through consciousness. Indeed, Lenin explicitly argued that relations of production are material relations in the sense that they exist and are consequential, whether or not actors are aware of those relations. Patriarchy, presumably, would also qualify as another set of such relations. Lenin's notion of material relations is similar to Durkheim's concept of 'social currents'.[168] According to Durkheim, 'social currents' come to individuals from outside of our subjective or intersubjective states. We may not be conscious of the pressure that they are exerting upon us, but that pressure makes its presence felt whenever we attempt to struggle against the 'currents'. According to Durkheim, if this external coercive power asserts itself so acutely, it must be because it exists without our being conscious of it.[169]

Wendt is clearly not wishing to deny the reality of the material world. His claim is that it has to be endowed with social significance by agents in order to become causally effective. The construction of ontological

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[166] Lenin (1970). Available online at http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/.
[167] Lenin (1970: 14).   [168] Durkheim (1964: 50–59).   [169] Durkheim (1964).

barriers between physical and social reality, however, is highly questionable and displays residues of Cartesian dualism. Equally, is it not the case that there are properties of the socio-natural environment, such as famine and / or shortages of resources, that constrain the range of meanings that might be applied to them and the activities possible in light of them? Certainly interpretations can vary, and often do, but whether famine is seen as punishment from the gods or the result of international capitalism, it changes neither the fact that people starve, nor that certain social acts become impossible as a consequence of it.

Equally, the materialities of the social world, such as multiple deaths, mass rape and ethnic cleansing, even when the result of ideational structures such as identity, play a causal role in the maintenance of further cycles of violence. Images of mounds of dead bodies in mass graves in Bosnia, for example, limit the range and forms of responses to the participants of the violence coming to live together as neighbours again. In the same way images of the mistreatment of prisoners in Iraq have a fundamental impact on the legitimacy accorded to the occupying powers. Nor have we constructed our ideas of international terrorism, both before and after 11 September, out of thin air. Whatever ideas we have of these social processes are constructed on a material base: a material base without which the idea of prosecuting a war against international terrorism would make no sense; and a base without which the idea of criticising such a war becomes otiose. In social life the material and the ideational are always intertwined and it makes no theoretical sense to attempt to separate them, or to subordinate, or reduce, one to the other.

There is, then, more to dealing with social reality then simply coping with 'ideas'. There is negotiating with a whole range of social entities, including institutions, traditions and networks of relations that are irreducible to the prevailing 'ideas' of the day. In particular, it would be a mistake to think that we had overcome a social structure, like the economy or state, if we were successful in imposing our new description of it on the community.[170] If there are objective social structures, ideational, psychic and natural structures – structures that need to be tackled before we can move towards an emancipatory politics – mere redescriptions may be self-defeating. Equally, to note that meanings are socially constructed and that actors act on the basis of these meanings simply defers the larger question of why some meanings predominate

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[170] Rorty, for example, seems to suggest that our ability to redescribe the world lies at the heart of our humanity and hence freedom. Rorty (1980).

over others. If meanings and beliefs are caused, it would seem legitimate to ask how and why this particular meaning here and now? And answers to this question may require a material, or objectivist, basis. For example, any account of why Eskimos have twelve words for snow, whereas the nomadic tribes of the Sahara desert have none, must surely pay attention to issues of geographical location and the materiality of the circumstances in which these differing people live.[171]

The identification of the source of an experienced injustice in social reality, necessary for changing or remedying it, involves much more than redescription or the introduction of new innovative meanings, even if it depends on that too centrally. It is a complex matter of finding and disentangling webs of relations in social life, and engaging in explanatory critiques of the practices that sustain them. This may indeed often involve the detection of various types of false and otherwise unhappy consciousness. And this may lead on to critiques of the vocabularies and conceptual systems in which they are expressed, and the additional social practices with which they are implicated. Such explanatory critiques will necessarily involve *action* rationally directed to transforming or disconnecting the structures that explain the experience of injustice and other ills informed theoretical reflection has diagnosed. The point is to devise a social ontology that can allow us to develop substantive theories able coherently to maintain the relationships between the various factors.

In effecting such a sharp separation between the material and the social worlds and in construing material phenomena as 'brute physical phenomena like natural resources and technological artifacts that exist independent of ideas',[172] Wendt has left room in his theory for emergent material social relations independent of the ideas agents hold and which exert an independent causal effect. In this way Wendt, like Giddens, seems to have resolved the agent–structure problem by denying the reality of emergent material social relations; or at least giving them a subordinate role in his theory. As Wendt puts it, 'constructivists give priority to cultural over material structures on the grounds that actors act on the basis of the meanings that objects have for them, and meanings are socially constructed'.[173] And it is important that this is not read as simply a descriptive claim about what 'constructivists' do, thus leaving

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[171] Steven Pinker suggests that Eskimos do not have as many words for snow as current social science seems to suggest. See Pinker (1995).
[172] Wendt and Friedheim (1995: 691).   [173] Wendt (1996: 50).

other approaches open to incorporate material factors in a more serious manner. For constructivism is not a theory of international politics but a metatheoretical position that embodies normative claims about what 'good' social science ought to be. As such, this is a metatheoretical position that rules as inadmissible any substantive theory that accords material factors, or objective structures, an independent causal role. In effect, constructivists who follow Wendt on this issue are locked into a metatheoretical treatment of the relationship between material and ideational factors that precludes any opening up of the question of this relationship.

A critical social theory cannot simply replace research on what is with criticism of what is, plus assessments of what might be from the point of view of emancipation. Critical social science would be impoverished if it imagined that it could dispense with abstract and concrete knowledge of what is in society. And it would be an even poorer critical social science that failed to realise that the material and ideational elements of the social world were dialectically related. If certain mechanisms and social structures are to be overridden or undermined and new ones established, we need abstract knowledge of the structures of social relations and material conditions by virtue of which the mechanisms exist. And for some practical purposes, such as planning and/or material interventions into the world, a detailed concrete knowledge of the system may be needed too.

The social world, then, is not simply a redescription or human imposition on nature. Rather, it is both inscribed and constituted by, and exists within, a continuous causal dynamic interaction with the rest of nature. To fail to see this, and in particular that there are physical constraints on human social life – namely non-human forces to which we must be responsive – is a charter for ecological disaster, if not indeed species suicide. Of course, much of this is well detailed by Marx, and it is to the Marxian concept of social structure that I now turn.

Structure as social relations

The Marxian concept of social structure shares a superficial similarity with the Durkheimian account and the account based on 'relations of difference'. All three stress the role of relations, but crucially, what is related in each account is very different. For Durkheim, it was a set of relations between social facts (defined either morphologically, or in terms of collective representations) expressed as law-like regularities,

often interpreted as statistical correlations. As such 'structure' is seen to be the totality of the relations between these social facts. For accounts based on relations of difference it would depend upon what the elements standing in the relation were. On a Marxian account, on the other hand, social structure refers to the nexus of social relations among social classes.

These social classes are collectivities of individuals who are differentiated in terms of their place in the relations of production of a given society. For Marx, it was ultimately these relations of production which constituted the various structures of differing societies and allowed the specification of differences between differing types of society: slavery, feudal, capitalist, communist, etc.[174] These relations of production do not simply form modes of differentiation between social classes, but establish distinctive modes of practice that the members of each class must engage in; so in this sense they are also constitutive of social practices. And since people are born into a pre-given and structured social environment, these relations are also constitutive of social identities. So the relations of production (the social structure) also provide interests, identities and modes of being and doing. Porpora argues that this account of structure overcomes the opposition between agents and structure.[175] Social collectives are composed of individuals, hence the relations are between the individuals. The problem, however, is that Marx saw these relations almost exclusively in terms of class, and unless we think that social collectives can be reduced to the individuals comprising them, then the relations are between not individuals but social wholes. This means that in a Marxist social ontology the agents are social classes rather than human agents. However, with suitable amendments, I think a relational account of social structure is the most fruitful way forward.

At differing times in his oeuvre Wendt has adopted a changing account of what he means by structure, although his first formulation was largely based on social relations and consistent with that of Marx. For example, in his 1987 agent–structure piece, Wendt seems, initially at least, to veer towards viewing structure as sets of real, but unobservable, internal social relations.[176] 'Structuration theorists start out much

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[174] Marx ([1971](): Preface).   [175] Porpora ([1987](): 111).
[176] Making clear his preference for Bhaskar's account of structure over that of Giddens, Wendt says: 'A more important reason for relying on Bhaskar rather than Giddens, however, is the latter's weaker conception of social structure as rules and resources rather than as a set of real but unobservable internal relations.' See Wendt ([1987](): 357, fn. 57).

like structuralists by defining "structure" in generative terms as a set of internally related elements.'[177] This reference to structurationists defining structure in generative terms as internally related elements is confusing on two levels. First, it fails to distinguish between Bhaskar's and Giddens' accounts of structure. Second, it misses a vital distinction that distinguishes the Marxian relational account from the linguistic model of structure.

The linguistic model of structure views all relations as internal.[178] However, it is 'essential to recognise that some relations are internal and some are not. Moreover, some natural relations are internal, and many social relations are not'.[179] Relations, then, come in two forms and not all social relations are internal. In the linguistic model of structure all relations are internal and the internally related relations of difference constitute the individual elements of the structure, whereas for Bhaskar, although the elements are constituted (in part) by relations, they also have a set of properties not constituted by these relations. This small, but important, difference opens up the possibility of a social ontology that can accommodate differing elements whilst at the same time allowing for the possibility of co-constitution.

Wendt does not totally exclude external relations from his ontological framework. Indeed, his view of structure as 'sets of real but unobservable *internal* relations'[180] (emphasis added) quickly undergoes modification, with Wendt noting that '[t]he structures that constitute agents are of *two* distinct kinds: external, or social structures; and internal, or organizational, structures'[181] (emphasis added). Social structure now refers to external, not internal, relations, with internal relations now referring to 'organisational', not social, structures. This change raises many issues, not least questions of whether organizational structures are not also, at least in part, social. And if so, why the distinction? It seems, however, that the point Wendt is trying to make is perfectly correct, but in the confusing usage of internal and external relations unnecessary ambiguities are introduced. First, and thinking about how agents are constituted as agents (and leaving aside for the time being the issue of what we mean by an agent), there are clearly two ways in which agents are constituted. These might be considered as the extrinsic factors and the intrinsic factors. Importantly, both extrinsic and intrinsic factors can be composed

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[177] Wendt (1987: 357).   [178] Ashley (1986: 287).   [179] Bhaskar (1979: 54).
[180] Wendt (1987: 357, fn. 57).   [181] Wendt (1987: 359).

of both internal and external relations. An example here might be the state.

Considered as an agent/entity with causal powers, the state acquires its power through both its intrinsic properties and a set of extrinsic relations that help define it as an entity of a particular kind. It is important to understand this process if we are to understand the claim that agents and structures are 'mutually constituted entities'.[182] For it is only through their relations that they can be said to constitute one another. Moreover, it is only once we understand the difference between internal and external relations that we can see that this may be not 'mutual constitution' at all, but a form of 'asymmetrical constitution'.

Wendt argues that each type of structure helps 'explain a distinct set of the causal powers and interests of agents'.[183] These differing causal powers can be viewed as intrinsic or social in origin. The intrinsic properties of agents, which are a function of their internal or organisational structures, are: a level of *consciousness* such that reasons can be supplied for actions; *intentionality* in relation to decision-making; and *reflexivity* in relation to the monitoring of those decisions and their outcomes.[184] Wendt extends these intrinsic properties to states, arguing that, insofar as states can be considered 'goal directed units of action, they can be considered agents . . . '[185] Now it should be clear that, in relation to the state, there is simply no support for the claim that the intrinsic structuring is not also social. Complex social organisations and institutions, such as the state, do have an intrinsic structure, but this has to be understood as a social structure.

The problem with Wendt's way of putting the issue is that it leaves a site of ambiguity on which a specious reading might be constructed. A reading, that is, that might suggest that Wendt is advocating the possibility of a pre-social agent, an individual or state perhaps, with intrinsic causal powers, properties and liabilities derived from its internal relations and which exist independent of any external relations or social structure(s): an autonomous agent pre-existing independently of the social structures in which it is embedded.[186] If this were the case then Wendt's theory would show more similarities with neorealism than he clearly intends.[187]

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[182] Wendt (1987: 339).   [183] Wendt (1987: 359).
[184] Wendt (1987: 359).   [185] Wendt (1987: 359).
[186] Doty (1997), for example, seems to read Wendt in this way, as does Campbell (1998).
[187] See Ashley's (1986: 268–273) critique of Waltz on this point.

Wendt does not disregard the manner in which social structures play a role in constituting both the properties and identities of social agents, and his notion of external relations – social structures – plays a major role in his account. According to Wendt, although the internal or organisational structures are important in terms of explaining the 'subjectively perceived interests of agents . . . other causal powers and the real interests of agents are dependent upon and thus explainable only by the external or social structural context in which they are embedded'.[188] For Wendt, then, the internal relations are organisational in form and constitute the intrinsic properties of a thing, in this case agents. The external relations, or social relations, on the other hand, constitute the context in which the agents, as constituted by their internal relations, are embedded.[189] Again, compare this with Wendt's critique of neorealism, which Wendt claims views 'international system structures as consisting of externally related, pre-existing, state agents . . .'[190]

The language used here is confusing: Wendt cannot mean to suggest a social ontology in which agents have a set of intrinsic properties, which are constituted solely by internal organisational principles and relations, and who are embedded in a set of external social relations which constitute the only context for action. Wendt correctly sees that a better way of viewing system structures would 'see states in relational terms as generated or constituted by internal relations of individuation (sovereignty)'.[191] And in *Social Theory* Wendt clearly argues for a view of structure based strongly on a internal relations account. Yet the language is confusing and, in claiming that social structure is external to agents, Wendt will find it difficult to make good on his claims concerning internal relations: if social structure is external to agents, whatever properties, liabilities and causal powers accrue to agents in virtue of the social relations in which they are embedded can only be contingent features and not internally related to the identity and causal powers of the agents themselves. Thus, on Wendt's externalist reading of social structures, the identities, powers and liabilities which agents possess are derived solely from their internal or organisational structures and not the social relations in which they are embedded.

The problem is not that Wendt attributes to agents a set of causal powers, properties and liabilities independent of structure, which result

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[188] Wendt (1987: 359–360).   [189] Wendt (1987: 360).
[190] Wendt (1987: 357).   [191] Wendt (1987: 357).

from the internal structure of the organism. The idea of an entity having a set of intrinsic properties is certainly acceptable under a realist ontology. Humans, for example, do not have a natural set of powers that enable them to fly, whereas birds do. Birds, on the other hand, do not possess the powers that humans do; thus we can say that objects have certain intrinsic properties owing to the kind of object they are.

Individualist social theories tend to deny the existence of internal relations, seeing the individual as an atomistic entity, constituted solely in terms of its individual intrinsic properties and with all relations external to the individual. Structuralist theories, on the other hand, tend to view all relations as internal, with the identity of agents definable only in relation to their place in the structure. It is a simple matter to see how this way of thinking has structured responses to the agent–structure problem. For if all relations are internal, then the social relations within which agents are embedded constitute that agent; in effect, the structuralist solution. Alternatively, if all relations are external, then the powers agents possess are derived solely from their intrinsic properties, and the external universe is a mere environment in which interaction takes place; in effect, the individualist solution. Bhaskar, on the other hand, maintains that both internal and external relations constitute the social world and that each form of relation, as entities in the social world, has differing powers, properties and liabilities.[192]

In short, not only do the intrinsic properties of social agents never manifest themselves independently of social context, but the social context, in large part, constitutes what properties an agent has. A context, that is, that itself allows certain agents to utilise their intrinsic properties whilst at the same time denying this ability to other agents. The position of a state leader, for example, affords any individual entering that position a set of properties, liabilities and causal powers not available to persons not occupying that social position. President Truman, for example, had the power to order a nuclear strike in virtue of occupying the social position, American president.[193] This power was not available to Emperor Hirohito, the Japanese leader, who occupied a similar social

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[192] Philosophers have likewise tended to view the situation in either/or terms. The doctrine that all relations are external is implicit in the Humean account of causality, where it is enshrined in the notion of the contingency of the causal connection. 'Things are conjoined but never connected.' This formulation has been widely accepted throughout the empiricist tradition in the philosophy of science. See Hume (1962). Conversely, rationalists, absolute idealists and Hegelian acolytes have usually subscribed to the equally erroneous view that all relations are internal. See, for example, Hegel (1971).
[193] Allen and Polmar (1995).

position as leader of his nation state. The structures that constituted the United States of America as a state in August 1945 were not the same structures that constituted Japan as a state at that point in time, although there were clearly areas of overlap. Nor is this power available to Nicaraguan peasants who occupy an altogether differing set of social relations. The point is that some of the 'power to do' is derived from the social relations in which agents are embedded and that some of these relations are internal to the exercise of agency. Again, both agents and structures are integral parts of any social explanation.

Dessler has argued that Wendt's treatment of this issue places him firmly in the structuralist camp: 'Wendt tilts towards a structural determinism in his analysis of the relation between state and system, conceptualising the state as an effect of the internally related elements comprising structure . . . '[194] Given Wendt's reading of the distinction between internal and external relations detailed above, however, I think Dessler has misunderstood Wendt's position. Admittedly, Wendt does overstate his case in arguing that 'structures generate agents',[195] but what I take Wendt to mean by this is that what it means to be an agent is not solely dependent upon the internal organisational structures, but is also a function of social structure(s). The point that Wendt is attempting to elaborate is that the powers, properties and liabilities of agents are a function of both their intrinsic properties and their extrinsic positioning in the prevailing social structures. Necessitating, of course, that any adequate social theory takes cognisance of both dimensions.

The nature and role of internal and external relations is a crucial one in any complex social ontology that hopes to grasp the relations between agents and structures. According to Bhaskar, an external relation can be defined such that either A or B can exist without the other. The relations between a mountain and a person, for example, are such that either object can exist without the other. It is, in other words, a contingent relation; it is neither necessary nor impossible that mountains and persons stand in any particular relation. Although a relation may be external, non-necessary and contingent, it may still have significant social effects. People clearly interact with the environment and their actions may affect and destroy the eco-structure of any given environment.[196] But it is not the case that the activities must affect the environment in this way, hence the relationship between people and environmental damage

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[194] Dessler (1989: 452, fn. 45).   [195] Wendt (1987: 357).
[196] Brown (1996); Michaels (1992); Moss and University of London Centre for Defence Studies (1991); Paterson (1996).

is external. Equally, if environmental damage does occur as a result of human activity, then the environment may react back on people in ways that significantly alter their life chances and/or social practices.

In contrast to this notion of external relations, Bhaskar defines an internal relation as: 'relation R_{ab} may be defined as internal if and only if A would not be what it essentially is unless B is related to it in the way that it is'.[197] (A and B here, it should be noted, may refer to particulars, universals, concepts or things, including relations themselves.) Thus, an internal relation refers to a relation where the elements of that relation are dependent upon each other for their identity. A slave, for example, cannot be a slave without a master and vice versa. This form of social relation, then, is an internal relation. Another example is that of the relation between a husband and wife: the existence of one necessarily presupposes the other. These basic distinctions, however, require several important qualifications.[198]

First, even if the internal relation is part of the definition of, and hence constitutive of, either of the objects comprising the relation, this does not mean that it is impossible to identify the relata independently of the relation. A slave, for example, requires a master, yet, although we cannot conceptualise slaves independently of their masters, we can identify which entity in such a relation owns the other. Although each part of the relation cannot exist without the other, there is no problem in identifying them separately, nor in identifying the relation that constitutes one as a master and one as a slave. Nor, of course, are the husband–wife and master–slave relationships dependent upon specific individuals inhabiting the positions designated by the relation; hence we can differentiate between the relation and the relata.

Second, although internally related phenomena are dependent upon each other, and thus strongly co-dependent, this does not mean that they cannot change. Change in one part of the relation, however, is tied to change in the other. The changes in relations of dependency as a result of decolonisation are a good example here, as are those between husband and wife which have changed as a result of legislation and greater gender awareness.

Third, the internal/external distinction does not imply a hierarchical ordering for social theorising; it has nothing to do with issues of importance or interest – either kind of relation may be insignificant or important, interesting or uninteresting. The relation between Iraqi

[197] Bhaskar (1979: 54).   [198] Sayer (1992).

governments and oil prices, for example, is an external and thus contingent relation, in the sense that each could exist without the other. But the effect of revenues derived from oil production on the relative position of Iraqi governments is of considerable importance.

Fourth, distinctions can also be drawn between differing types of internal and external relations. For example, some internal relations can be considered asymmetric in that one object in the relationship may well be able to exist without the other, but not vice versa. Examples here might be the relation between the United Nations and states and that between states and state health care. The UN is not necessary in order for states to exist, but for the UN to exist states must. Likewise with state health care: it is certainly conceivable for a state to exist that provided no health care, but for state health care to exist states must. Even when the internal relations are symmetrical this does not mean that such relations are always evenly balanced or harmonious; on the contrary, many internal relations combine mutual dependence with one-sided domination.

Many social practices are embedded in internal relations. In fact, social practices not framed within the context of social relations seem unthinkable. Insofar as many actions are context-dependent they involve internal relations, though perhaps asymmetric ones in many instances. For example, to engage in a diplomatic exchange or to ask/answer a question at the United Nations General Assembly is to presuppose other prior and expected actions, events and surroundings, often in particular spatio-temporal sequences. In the absence of their particular contexts these actions – diplomatic exchanges, questions in the United Nations – would simply not count as actions of this sort. To say that a social act is context-dependent is to acknowledge that it is internally related to particular contexts.

In any concrete social situation there will usually be a complex combination and configuration of various types of relations, and important questions are raised in attempting to unpack these. What are the conditions of possibility for this object to exist in this form? What does the existence of this object presuppose? Is it possible for this object to exist on its own in this form? If not, what else must exist and/or be present? What is it about this object which makes/enables it to do such and such? Such questions may seem simple and perhaps even banal at some level, but the answers are often complex and many errors of conceptualisation and abstraction can be avoided if they are adequately addressed.

For example, consider the relations between Britain and Argentina prior to the Falklands/Malvinas war. The Argentine relationship with Britain, in terms of diplomatic negotiations vis-à-vis the Falkland Islands/Malvinas, may well have been internal: that of diplomatic negotiators, mutual claimants that is, demanding sovereignty over one and the same piece of territory. And in this respect they were internally related. In terms of other areas such as religion, cultural beliefs or recreational attitudes, however, they may have been either externally or internally related, and the particular form of the relation can only be determined through research of the particular issue area. In other words, unless we make clear what aspect of Argentina and Britain we are considering, the attempt to distinguish certain attributes or practices, internal from external relations, or necessary from contingent relations, is liable to result in confusion.

A more complex example that demonstrates the necessity for a clear delineation of differing forms of relations might be that of war and gender and the question of whether or not they might be considered interdependent. At the level of, perhaps, the most basic relation of war – the soldier/soldier, or combatant/combatant relation – the relationship between war and gender is an external one: it is contingent whether soldiers are male or female. At this level, war, we might say, is 'gender-blind'. However, in its concrete forms, instances of the relation between combatant and combatant might be affected by gender, and less basic structures of particular states at war, such as Nazi Germany for example, may include practices determined by, and reproductive of, patriarchal/gender structures and which interlock patriarchal and militaristic structures together.[199] Thus, even though in virtually every instance, social relations in war are gendered in some way, and even though patriarchy and war take advantage of one another, it is possible to argue that the relation between patriarchy and war is contingent. For not only has patriarchy existed without war, but there seems to be nothing about the relation between combatants that would make them dependent for their status as combatants upon the survival of patriarchy.

It is important here to recognise that the example given here, of the relationship between war and gender, is an abstraction. Once real concrete combatants are considered, the issue becomes more complicated. For example, differing soldiers in a combatant/combatant relation can each have a variety of characteristics, some of them constituted through

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[199] Anderson (1981).

other internal relations. Relations can therefore be said to be 'invariant under certain transformations',[200] that is, they can continue to exist while their constituents undergo changes in attributes that are not relevant to the reproduction of those relations. A soldier, for example, may become a parent without this necessarily affecting his/her ability to soldier, and the combatant/combatant relation can survive a continual turnover of members during which their age, sex, race, religion, politics, occupations, etc. may change.

Equally, just as relations can be said to be 'invariant under certain transformations', people and institutions can and do endure through changes in structural relations. People and institutions invariably exist within several relations, of differing forms. A state, for example, may be at war with one state, yet conducting diplomatic negotiations with others, with both war and diplomatic negotiations presupposing prior structural relations that constitute certain kinds of state conduct as war or diplomatic negotiations. Social relations not only co-exist and articulate but endure. The most durable social structures are those that lock their occupants into situations that they cannot unilaterally change. If a member of the business community gives up his/her job, for example, a replacement is easily found and the structures of capitalism continue to be reproduced. The complex articulation and mutual reinforcement of structural relations typical of social life create some of the most difficult and pressing problems for any social science. Since we cannot isolate these structural relations one by one, or bring about a form of experimental closure in the social world, it is always possible that we may attribute to one relation what is in reality the effect of another.

The Marxian account of structure, then, seems to be a strong contender for binding agents and structures together in one coherent account. Equally, once we understand and appropriately differentiate between the differing forms of relations, this account need not absent human agents from its analysis. We need to see agents as socially positioned in networks of social relations that provide interests, identities, motivations and materials that enable and constrain social activity. Hence these social relations can be constitutive of agency. As such, the kind of entities these relations tie together will be an important factor to consider, and constructing a social ontology able to incorporate all elements of the social field will not be a simple matter.

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[200] Harré (1979: 38).

Structure: some final comments

As it stands the Marxian account of structure views the relations as only holding between social positions, which are themselves derived from the specific modes of production pertaining to given societies. Although this is an important aspect of social structure the alternatives discussed above have all made additional substantial contributions to our understandings of social practice. The question remains as to whether it is possible to combine certain elements of them to form a more inclusive social ontology able to integrate the various aspects of social life into one account. Many of the accounts of social structure discussed above situate themselves in direct opposition to the prevailing alternatives. Wendt, for example, explicitly attempts to construct an idealist social ontology in an attempt to correct the supposed deficiencies embedded in Waltz's more materialist model. In doing so, however, he embraces an account of structure that is unable to incorporate the important dialectic between material and ideational factors. Much the same can be said of all accounts of structure insofar as they constitute attempts to develop alternatives to other models. Giddens, for example, developed his account of structure as a specific answer to a series of problems he perceived to exist in more objectivist accounts. The net effect of this approach is to prioritise one aspect of social existence at the expense of all others. We can illustrate the problem with this by briefly returning to social ontology.

According to Bhaskar, social life occurs on a terrain constituted by four interdependent dimensions or planes of activity.[201] He calls this the social cube. These four planes are:

1 material transactions with nature (resources, physical attributes, etc.);
2 inter-intra-subjective actions (rules, norms, beliefs, institutions, etc.);
3 social relations (class, identity, production, etc.);
4 subjectivity of the agent (subjectivity, identity, etc.).

The planes of social life all intersect and are subject to multiple determinations, and each of the planes has its own structural logic. All are mediated by language and embedded in temporal sequences that may be out of synch with one another. Hence it is certainly possible to think of a society engaging in a series of highly developed and technologically advanced material transactions whilst at the same time remaining

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[201] Bhaskar (1994: 96).

wedded to a more traditional set of social relations and intersubjective practices. The debates surrounding what structure is are, in many respects, attempts to privilege one or other of the planes of social activity. Hence, the neorealist definition of structure foregrounds the material aspects of social life, whereas constructivists privilege the intersubjective. Yet it seems clear that this is an unnecessary privileging of one plane of activity over another. My view is that the impact of differing planes of activity on social outcomes may vary across time and space, and hence all of these dimensions can play an important role in social explanation. As such we need a metatheory able to hold out the potential of integration across fields of activity.

I say metatheory quite deliberately. For when conceived as only substantive theories of the social the approaches to structure detailed above provide valuable simplifying devices for directing our attention to certain particular aspects of the social practices. More often than not, however, they quickly become not only substantive theories, but metatheories, and suggest that social structure can be understood only in the terms outlined by the chosen theory. This has the unfortunate effect of ensuring that the links between the various planes of social life remain hidden and that only one view of structure is deemed legitimate.

One way to get around this problem might be to see structure in relational terms, but contrary to the Marxist view of structure, these relations might be understood as relations linking together, not social positions and roles, but the various planes of social activity. Viewed this way the relations between the various planes of social activity are the structures of social life. In an important respect this highlights the fact that many of the accounts of structure discussed thus far focus their attention on the relata and not the actual relations. Thinking of social structure in this way allows us to concentrate our attention on the important structure (relations) between the material and ideational aspects of social life. Hence, brute material facts, the distribution of capabilities, for example, are not a structure but one element in a social field of activity that is structured. As structured it stands in a relation to the ideas held by agents about such a distribution as well as the relationship between the agents engaging in the activity.

Structure, then, binds the various planes of the social world together. As such it links them and provides a way to integrate agents and structures in one account. A more adequate treatment of this element of structure, certainly if power is to be theorised, would have to acknowledge that agents and social structure are neither contradictory nor

complementary terms, but rather represent two poles which stand in a relation of tension with one another. While social structure is reproduced and transformed through the actions of agents, it is also the case that the range of possibilities available to individuals and groups is differentially distributed and structurally circumscribed. Social power, then, resides in social structures, and hence Foucault is correct: power is everywhere and comes in myriad forms.

5   **Agency**

Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked that the 'first step is the one that altogether escapes notice' and that this unacknowledged first step 'commits us to a particular way of looking at things'.[1] The first step for IR theory, and one upon which its identity might be said to depend, is the construction of the 'state-as-agent'.[2] As Tony Skillen notes, 'even to talk of the "international-level" could mislead one into seeing nation states as *the* units of global political currents'.[3] Indeed, any denial of the 'state-as-agent' thesis might seem to presage the end of IR as an academic discipline. There are good reasons, then – reasons related to the division of academic labour – for the widespread acceptance of the 'state-as-agent' thesis within the IR academic community. For without the notion of the 'state-as-agent', IR appears to be little other than a macro-sociological exercise in political theory or history. Devoid of the notion of the 'state-as-agent' the answer to Martin Wight's[4] search for international theory is clear: if the state is not an agent, then international theory just is political theory – although perhaps with a wider spatial remit. Without a notion of the 'state-as-agent' the distinction between political theory and international theory collapses.[5]

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[1] Wittgenstein (1953: para. 308).
[2] Ashley (1986: 268) calls this the 'state-as-actor' model.
[3] Skillen (1985: 27).   [4] Wight (1966).
[5] Giddens likewise argues that the idea of IR as a distinct discipline is an aberration. Giddens locates this disciplinary ghettoisation in the practices of social theorists, not IR scholars: 'This unfortunate and indefensible division also rests to some degree upon the proclivity of social theorists – in contrast to theorists of international relations – to adopt evolutionary or endogenous models of social development. If it is supposed that the most important influences upon social change derive from factors inside "societies", and if it is held in addition that these factors are primarily economic, then it is hardly surprising that sociologists are content to hive off the study of the political relations between states to a separate field of investigation.' Giddens (1985: 30–31).

That the identity of the discipline depends upon this assumption goes part of the way towards explaining why IR has not grappled, in a systematic manner, with the concept of agency. After all, for IR to ask if the state really is an agent is akin to asking Descartes to doubt his own existence. This lack of systematic analysis, however, has consequences far beyond its mere absence. Actors and agents are treated synonymously and attributions of agency can change, not only within theories, but also within the space of a sentence. Rarely is it clear what agency is, what it means to exercise agency, or who and what might do so. Consider the following excerpt from Robert Keohane: 'the way in which leaders of states conceptualise their situations is strongly affected by the institutions of international relations: states not only form the international system they are shaped by its conventions, particularly by its practices'.[6] Here, Keohane has slipped effortlessly from 'leaders of states' as the agents to the 'state-as-agent' thesis.

This position is repeated regularly throughout International Relations texts and is endemic to the discipline. It is a curious form of science that admits of such theoretical slippage. After all, if references to key entities can change so easily, it becomes difficult to assess both the meaning and validity of the claims. Of course, a thoroughgoing individualist would simply state that all references to collectives were really references to individuals anyway;[7] hence Keohane's confusing usage simply demonstrates the truth of individualism. Those of a more structuralist persuasion would reject this; but, thus far, their claims in relation to structural agency have rested on little other than the fact that there must be more to social life than individuals acting together. Certainly, in terms of structure, there has been substantial theoretical debate concerning what else there might be and how it might be theorised. But in relation to agency, how much more, and what this 'more' is, has been poorly articulated.[8]

This chapter will examine the issue of agency as inscribed in the agent–structure debate and from this discussion draw out the prevailing models of agency that circulate within the discipline. Once again, if scientific realist philosophy is to be applied rigorously, as opposed to forming a protective shield around theoretical constructs, ontological posits will require scrupulous and critical examination. Just as was the case with structure, scientific realist philosophy requires that theoretical entities

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[6] Keohane (1989: 6).   [7] Gilpin (1986: 318).
[8] Although, for exceptions, see Cederman (1989); Ringmar (1996); Wolfers (1965).

are postulated with extreme caution and are subject to legitimating criteria other than 'as if' or through recourse to conventionalist defences.

Having embedded his approach within a broadly conceived scientific realism, Wendt stands as a notable exception to this theoretical blind spot within the discipline. Initially he had argued that the analogy between states and individuals is a productive one because it is an 'accepted practice in mainstream international relations discourse'.[9] This conventionalist defence always sat uneasily with his rejection of 'as if' approaches to theorising.[10] Clearly, if Wendt was to fulfil his promise that an analysis of the agent–structure problem would lead IR to reconceptualise agents, structures and their relationship,[11] he would need either to defend or to reject this 'accepted practice'. Ultimately Wendt defends it. States, he argues, 'are people too'.[12] I disagree, and in this chapter I aim to show why, as well as open up a series of vistas on the notion of agency. It is important to stress that in denying that states are in fact people I do not mean to suggest that states are not real, or that they do not possess causal power. The state is real enough; it is simply not a person, and it is arguable as to whether it is theoretically legitimate, or fruitful, to treat it as an agent. Notice that I have introduced a distinction between 'persons' and 'agents'. For there are two questions here, one relating to what we mean by agency, the other relating to what we mean by a person; and, of course, from these questions a range of other possibilities, questions and solutions arise.

The chapter proceeds by examining the theory of state agency embedded within recent attempts to transcend the agent–structure problem. In effect, an examination of the promised reconceptualisation of the properties of agents. The aim will be to locate the aporia that emerge when the notion of agency is inadequately theorised or taken as unproblematic. The next section deals with differing conceptualisations of social action and attempts to introduce some important theoretical distinctions between differing types of social actors. Following this, I will explicate a theory of agency so that it might be possible more accurately to locate sources of agency in International Relations. This section will be primarily philosophical in focus, although I will connect this philosophical account of agency to issues of political agency. I will then show how a theory of agency can help to 'underlabour' for theories of international relations and attempt to arrive at a theory of the state that is grounded in

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[9] Wendt (1992: 397, fn. 21).   [10] Wendt (1987: 343).
[11] Wendt (1987: 339).   [12] Wendt (1999: 194).

the theory of agency developed here. The following section applies this discussion of agency to the issues of the state. The aim is not to deny, a priori, that the 'state-as-agent' thesis is flawed, but simply to problematise it in the hope of illuminating a more adequate conceptualisation of transformative agency in IR.

Agential stories

What are we to make of the state? According to Hegel, it was the 'Divine Idea on Earth'.[13] For Hobbes it was an 'Artificiall Man'.[14] Nietzsche declared it the 'coldest of all cold monsters'.[15] And for Alexander Wendt it is a 'person'. Wendt is absolutely serious about this: it is not that the state 'is like' a person; it literally is a person: 'states are people too'.[16] Wendt's literalist take on the state marks a watershed within that broad category of scholars committed to a scientific International Relations. Previous generations of scientifically orientated IR scholars, many of a positivist persuasion, have been happy to personify the state only insofar as this is understood as an instrumental device aimed at facilitating explanation. Talk of a state acting was admissible only as long as it was understood that this implied no ontological commitment to the state possessing any of the properties assigned to it. It may seem 'as if' the state acted; it may even seem 'as if' states existed. But as David Easton knew only too well, the state was only a 'ghost in the machine'.[17] A necessary ghost, of course, but a spectral apparition nonetheless. Wendt, whatever one thinks of his treatment of the state, has at least reopened the question of state ontology and state agency.

Wendt believes the state is a person. Although not explicitly stated, he also seems to suggest that agency is a category that applies only to persons. Only this explains why he treats the state as a person: agency is dependent upon the properties people possess and if the state is to have agency it must have personhood. Methodological individualists have always challenged this attempt to breathe life into collective social forms. It may seem 'as if' collective social forms act; it may even be expedient at times to talk of collective social entities as being *like* people. But ultimately they neither act nor are people. The correct and complete explanation of social practices ultimately rests with individuals. The relationship between methodological individualism and the 'as if' and

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[13] Hegel (1956: 39).   [14] Hobbes (1962).   [15] Nietzsche (1976: 160).
[16] Wendt (1999: 215).   [17] Easton (1953).

metaphorical treatment of theoretical terms is close. Empiricists tend to be methodological individualists and vice versa.

It is possible to treat the state as having agency without claiming it is a person. In such instances agency is a category broader (or narrower) than that applied to persons. Depending upon how we define agency, it may be possible to argue that anything can have agency. This approach has been gaining ground in actor–network theory, which surprisingly has not yet made a major impact on IR.[18] However, Ole Waever has argued that 'the concept of agent should be freed of its anthropomorphist connotations'[19] and Patrick Jackson suggests a similar position.[20] Whether this is a legitimate move depends upon how we define agency and whether or not we find the ethico-political consequences of such a definition desirable.[21]

Apart from his conventionalist defence of the 'state-as-agent' thesis, Wendt does provide a set of theoretical arguments that defend the assumption. Initially, Wendt's defence is based upon his view that the structures that constitute agents are of two distinct kinds: external, or social structures, and internal, or organisational structures.[22] Each type of structure, he argues, explains a distinct set of the causal powers and interests of agents, social and intrinsic ones respectively. The powers and identities that agents have in virtue of their internal organisational structures, or anatomy, argues Wendt, are '1) to have a theoretical understanding (however inaccurate) of its activities, in the sense that it could supply reasons for its behaviour; 2) to reflexively monitor and potentially adapt its behaviour; and 3) to make decisions'.[23] For Wendt, these intrinsic properties differentiate agents from the 'non-sapient elements that comprise natural structures'.[24] It is important to note that this is really (in part) an account of what Wendt means by agency. For Wendt, all agents, if they are agents, have at least these powers; we can call these powers and capacities A_i. Certainly, they have other powers that they accrue as a result of their position in an extrinsic environment, but A_i are the powers agents have in virtue of their intrinsic make-up. Hence if the state is to be considered an agent it too must possess A_i. Wendt makes this explicit, arguing that, insofar as 'states can be considered goal-directed units of action, they can be considered agents by

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[18] Latour (1987); Law and Hassard (1999).   [19] Waever (1994).   [20] Jackson (2004: 286).
[21] For a critical commentary on the anti-humanism of actor–network theory see Amsterdamska (1990).
[22] Wendt (1987: 359).   [23] Wendt (1987: 359).   [24] Wendt (1987: 359).

this definition'.[25] Hence in his *Anarchy* article he suggests that 'states are collectivities of individuals that through their practices constitute each other as "persons" having interests, fears and so on'.[26] Wendt suggests that states are individuals writ large. States simply are 'persons'. As such, he is committed to the view that states: (1) have a theoretical understanding of their activities; (2) can supply reasons for their behaviour; (3) monitor and adapt their behaviour; and (4) make decisions. This places Wendt firmly in line with 'organicist' or 'collectivist' theories of the state, such as those developed by Bosanquet and Hegel, and in agreement with much of the academic discipline of International Relations, and in particular, realist theories.[27] To his credit Wendt has acknowledged all of these affinities, although, of course, he rightly insists on adding careful caveats and amendments.[28]

In fact, not only does Wendt acknowledge the affinities, he outlines a detailed set of theoretical arguments to defend them and to show why, although anthropomorphising the state is problematic, it is still valid. First he outlines a working definition of the state in which he defends a limited version of essentialism.[29] On this issue I have few objections and I will return to the state later in this chapter. What is important is not that Wendt comes up with the correct definition of the state, but that he outlines a particular view of agency that is applicable to the state premised upon scientific realist principles. The challenge for scientific realists, he argues, 'is to show that state action is anything more than the sum of . . . individual governmental actions'.[30] This is a valid concern. The reduction of the state to nothing more than the sum of individual government actions is explicit, for example, in the work of David Easton. According to Easton, the 'metaphysical' connotations of the concept of the state must be rejected. Either the state is the empirical behaviours of government officials 'or it is some kind of undefined and undefinable essence, a "ghost in the machine", knowable only through its variable manifestations'.[31] It is not surprising that government and state should appear as synonymous. As Ralph Miliband notes, 'it is the government which speaks on the state's behalf . . . It is these [governmental] institutions in which state power lies and it is through them that this power is wielded in its different manifestations by the people who occupy the leading positions in each of these institutions'.[32]

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[25] Wendt (1987: 359). [26] Wendt (1992a: 397, fn. 21).
[27] On these distinctions see Weldon (1962). [28] Wendt (1999: 193–245).
[29] Wendt (1999: 198–214). [30] Wendt (1999: 216).
[31] Easton (1953: 316). [32] Miliband (1970: 50, 54).

Activity embedded within the structural context of the state cannot and should not be reduced to the actions of state officials. Yet treating the state as a person is not the only way to halt this incipient reductionism. Moreover, since Wendt accepts that state action is dependent upon individuals it is difficult to see why he feels it necessary to make this move. What does seem clear is that he achieves it largely through treating his individuals as little more than nodal points through which structural agency is exerted.

Wendt accepts that the state is a structure.[33] But importantly, the state is a particular kind of structure that emerges into a corporate agent. Not all structures are capable of this move. But in terms of the emergence of a state into a corporate agent, Wendt argues that two factors are important: these are 'an "Idea" of corporate agency and a decision structure'.[34] In both instances Wendt relates the emergence of these features to collectives of individuals. The 'Idea' of corporate agency emerges when 'individuals' shared knowledge reproduces an Idea of the state as a corporate "person" or "group Self"'.[35] This collective 'Idea' is an important aspect of the state, but it is not clear how, or why, it helps legitimate talk of the state acquiring personhood. After all, this is still a collective of individuals, accepting and/or constituting this belief.

As Wendt admits, what matters is that 'individuals accept the obligation to act jointly on behalf of collective beliefs, whether or not they subscribe to them personally'.[36] Again, it is not clear – since it is accepted that it is actually the individuals who do the acting – why we need accept the argument that it is the state doing the thinking, the state doing the reasoning, the state doing the reflecting, and the state then acting, except perhaps as a form of linguistic shorthand. Moreover, this way of putting matters portrays the individuals actually doing the acting as 'cultural dopes': perhaps disagreeing with the collective decision but following its diktats nonetheless. This seems to be little different from previous forms of structuralism that essentially write out individuals and treat them as ciphers for structural forces. It also seems to leave little space for individuals to reflect on their collectively ascribed roles, voice their disagreement, act against the collective will, and, in general, distort and change the nature of the prevailing collective beliefs.

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[33] Wendt (1999: 216–217).
[34] Wendt (1999: 218). Wendt claims that three factors are important. He only cites two, yet disaggregates the second into two further dimensions.
[35] Wendt (1999: 218).   [36] Wendt (1999: 219).

If so, we gain little – but lose a lot – by placing this reflective process into the state as a person. This is not to say that individuals have total freedom to reflect and act as they please, but it does relocate the question of how differing forms of state structure might either negate or facilitate rejection and questioning of collective beliefs. Hence, whilst I do not accept the argument that officials in the Third Reich were simply following the diktats of state, it is surely the case that the argument holds more water in that particular structural context than it does in terms of US treatment of prisoners in Guantànamo Bay or Abu Ghraib.[37]

The situation is much the same in Wendt's idea of an 'internal decision structure', which he claims has two main elements: institutionalisation and authorisation. By institutionalisation he means the manner in which collective action takes place when individuals take it for granted that they will co-operate.[38] The collective action problem is solved because individuals expect co-operation; it is institutionalised. There is a superficial and a deep sense to this. The superficial sense is derived from the notion of centralisation and here collective action is explained through self-interest. For Wendt this is not sufficient since collective action based on self-interest is inherently fragile.[39] What is needed is a deeper sense of collective action based on a loyalty and identification with collective norms. Wendt views this as a process of internalisation of collective norms.[40] Again, however, it is important to see that even here, individuals are crucial and collective action predicated on the basis of the institutionalised corporate norms is always subject to negotiation, reflection and reproduction or transformations. Unless we are happy to see our individual political actors meekly following their prescribed roles in accordance with corporate norms, we still need a theoretical way to integrate the individuals at this stage of the process.

Paradoxically, Wendt's notion of the authorising element of an internal decision structure provides potentially the strongest argument in favour of the 'state-as-agent' argument (when agency is understood in the limited sense of 'power-to-do'), but also highlights the potential problems of stretching this claim to cover agency as personhood. It is potentially the strongest argument since it foregrounds the manner in which 'rules specify the relations of authority, dependency, and accountability among a group's members and transfer the responsibility for individual actions to the collective, so that individuals act as

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[37] Best (1984); Marrus (1997); Maser (1979); Ratner and Abrams (2001).
[38] Wendt (1999: 219).   [39] Wendt (1999: 220).   [40] Wendt (1999).

representatives or on behalf of the latter'.[41] This is correct, but again, unless all responsibility and causal power is located in the rule structure, the individuals still have some say in how the rules are implemented, if at all. This fact underlies notions of democracy, revolution, promotion and all concepts where a potential change in individuals is intended to bring about change in social practices, even if these practices emerge in structured social contexts. So whilst we may try to bring about change through a change in individuals, this change can only occur in a context of continuity.[42] Moreover, the idea of a rule structure that authorises some agents to act in certain ways does not require that we then assign intentionality and personhood to the structure. The state functions well enough in this role as a structure whilst leaving room for human agency.

Finally, in his discussion of the 'state-as-agent', Wendt elides the difference between corporate agency and collective agency. This is an important distinction that we should maintain in relation to institutional social forms. The idea of collective agency seems unproblematic, at least where this is understood as a collective of individuals acting in a certain manner; another term for this form of human collective might be a group. The state, however, is not just a collection of individuals. In *Capital*, Marx argues that the state is a 'real-concrete' object, formed through 'the concrete synthesis of multiple determinations'; it is a 'structured institutional ensemble'.[43] The fact that the state is a 'complex institutional ensemble', constituted in and through material resources, state practices and discourses and differing structural configurations, and is endowed with political responsibility and recognised as a juridical subject, does not entail that it is a moral or psychological subject capable of independent action. And arguments based on collectives being bound by a rule structure and commitments to collective ideas do not help in this respect. For the state is not simply a collection of individuals. If it were methodological individualism would be correct.

Methodological individualism is most visible when corporate agency is theorised solely as groups of individuals, i.e. as instances of collective agency. Bull, for example, argues that 'states are simply groupings of men [*sic*]'.[44] Wendt recognises the potential problem here, but despite insisting on the differences between collective and corporate agency, still treats corporate agency as a collection of individuals.[45] This is clearest when he makes a valiant attempt to show how group intentionality

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[41] Wendt (1999: 220–221).   [42] Wight (2001).   [43] Marx (1966: 100).
[44] Bull (1977: 19).   [45] Wendt (2004: 298).

emerges out of the structured interaction of individual intentionality, whilst not being reducible to it. His first claim is that any attempt to reduce group intentions to individual intentions must already presuppose the group. In which case, the set of individuals that constitute state personhood would have to be reduced to a group themselves. In short, individuality presupposes the group.

I think this is correct, but it is not clear how it helps establish collective intentionality, corporate intentionality independent of individual intention, or ontological claims regarding collective consciousness.[46] The simple point is that the state is not simply a group of individuals, nor is it composed of only a collection of groups. Groups are not the issue in relation to state agency unless the state is nothing other than a group of individuals. His second argument is that groups can intend things that none of their members intends.[47] Once again, this is only relevant if the state is treated as a group; since it is clearly not just a group of individuals, the arguments need developing in terms of a stronger account of the state. Equally, it is not clear how groups can intend X if none of the group members intends X. It is possible for X to happen even if none of the group members intended X, but this falls under the rubric of unintended consequences.[48] Moreover, the ethical consequences of accepting that a group might intend X whilst none of its individual members did so seem to be greater than we should be prepared to accept.

Wendt's third argument is based on the claim that groups' intentions can persist over time despite a 100 per cent turnover in their membership.[49] Again this is correct, but it does not help establish the corporate intentionality of the state, since again the state is not simply a group of individuals. Moreover, this argument does not even help establish group intentionality (even though I accept the possibility of it), since members outside of a group can have the same intention as members inside it. Hence the continuity of intentionality, in either groups or corporations, can be explained despite a 100 per cent change in membership and without recourse to some mystical group intention that exists independent of individual group members' intentions, and which might be said to inhabit/infect those individuals when they take up their allotted roles as members of the group.

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[46] It seems clear that although Wendt distinguishes intentionality from consciousness, the former is dependent upon the latter. The two concepts although related are distinct. Wendt (2004: 299).
[47] Wendt (2004: 299).   [48] Wendt (2004).   [49] Wendt (2004).

Wendt suggests his fourth argument might be decisive.[50] Once again, however, it deals with groups, not a complex social form such as the state, but even in terms of groups the argument is problematic. According to Wendt, since groups can do things individuals cannot do, group intentions are indivisible. From this he argues that this allows groups to do things those individuals cannot. It is obviously true that groups can do things individuals cannot, but it is not clear how a notion of collective intention independent of individual intention is required to accept this. Again, this relates to the issue of whether groups, let alone corporations, can intend something that none of the individual members intends. Wendt builds on this and suggests that individuals 'cannot control the actions of a group'.[51] This seems to be obviously false and one can think of many counter-examples where individuals have controlled groups. Wars, for example, are a very pertinent and timely example, and armies, when considered as groups (a mistake), are clearly dependent upon individuals controlling the larger group. The problem in all of these arguments, however, is the treatment of the state as a group. The state is clearly more than the sum of individuals in the state system, whether considered domestically or internationally.

Just as problematic are the theoretical consequences that emerge from the 'state-as agent' thesis in terms of the agent–structure problem. Wendt first introduced the notion of the agent–structure problem to IR in an effort to elaborate a structurationist theory of international relations. According to structuration theory, the dichotomy between individualism and structuralism is to be rejected and replaced with notions such as the 'duality of structure' and the 'duality of praxis', wherein both agents and structures are both the mode and the means of the reproduction of social objects. Thus, social structures and agents are never simply given and only exist insofar as they are reproduced and/or transformed in, and through, the practices of agents who are always structurally embedded.

Wendt's adherence to the 'state-as-agent' thesis, however, is an endorsement of structuralism at the level of the state. As Bhaskar puts it, 'nothing happens in society save in virtue of something human beings do or have done'.[52] What this means in relation to theories of the state is captured nicely by Bob Jessop, who argues, '[i]t is not the state which acts: it is always specific sets of politicians and state officials located in

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[50] Wendt (2004).   [51] Wendt (2004).   [52] Bhaskar (1979: 174).

specific parts of the state system'.[53] In Wendt's theory states not only take the place of persons, but actually are persons. That is, states play the role of human beings for Wendt. But states, even if they are agents, are not persons. On the contrary, states are institutional structures constructed *by* human beings.[54]

Put simply, Wendt advocates a structurationist solution to the agent–structure problem at the level of the state and the state system, and a structuralist solution at the level of the individual and state. What is lacking in Wendt's theory of international politics is an articulation of the way states are themselves constructed entities, dependent for their every act on embodied human agents. In effect, Wendt's theory of the state rests on the classic error of methodological structuralism: the attribution of the agential powers and attributes of human agents to a collective social form. It is important to note that this charge only refers to his specific theory of international politics and not his general theory of the state, or his social ontology.[55] In terms of more his general theories Wendt has a very clear account of how states are internally constructed; this is his account of 'corporate agency'. However, in his specific theory of international politics he sets this realm aside in order to consider how international structures constitute state identity.

But the state, as a constructed social form, can only act in and through individual action.[56] State activity is always the activity of particular individuals acting within particular social forms. There is an ontological wall here that collectivities do not cross (or cross only on the backs of individuals). None of this is to deny the reality of a common intention, or collective action, which individuals try to realise in their practices. Nor is this to deny the reality of social structures that enable common action. Nor does the denial of the 'state-as-agent' thesis entail that there can be no common and co-ordinated action that is a bearer of causal

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[53] Jessop (1990: 367).   [54] Searle (1995).   [55] Wendt (1999: 4–7).

[56] One possible strong criticism of my argument here might be that it implies a strong form of reductionism. After all, the agency of any given individual itself can only work through the activities and elements of their brains, but does that mean that human agents are nothing but or reducible to brains or their elements? Presumably not, so why can't states have autonomous agentic capacities of their own, even though these supervene on the agency of their members? However, the key issue is one of emergence. The power of consciousness is embedded within the chemical interactions of the brain, but importantly, as an emergent property 'mind', or agency, is not solely explainable in terms of those chemical interactions. The state, on the other hand, despite also being made up of parts, does not have the same properties of its constituent parts, any more than the mind has the same power of the atoms which constitute it. To argue that the state does have the same powers as the parts out of which it is composed actually implies a strong form of reductionism.

powers greater than these possessed by individuals acting individually. The causal power that does emerge as a result of the co-operative practices of collectives can only be accessed by individuals acting in co-operation with others. If the state has agency it can only be accessed through the agency of individuals. This might be considered to be a vicarious form of agency, performed by one person as a substitute for another or to the benefit or advantage of another. As such, this type of activity is always the activity of each individual taken in his or her concrete singularity as the agent that acts, even if the action is carried out on behalf of another entity. Common intention, to be realised, must always be mediated by individual interpretation. State action, then, is only as good as the individual action it mobilises and a common decision is only as good as the individual action it mobilises. Wendt's 'personification' of the state neglects these points and there is no room in his conceptual framework for conscious human agency. That such an absence is problematic is evinced when Wendt applies his framework to a concrete social situation.

Towards the end of *Anarchy is What States Make of it*, for example, Wendt discusses how the 'evolution of co-operation' might be continued in post-Cold War Europe.[57] In his discussion of this issue Wendt moves from a discussion of states – such as the Soviet Union and the European states – which seemingly have the power to think and act in accord with their understanding of their circumstances, to a discussion of the role of a particular state leader, Gorbachev. Admittedly, Wendt's language has changed here somewhat, and his chosen term now is 'actors' as opposed to 'agents'. Nevertheless, the introduction of this new term only serves to muddy the theoretical waters. Are actors different from agents? If so, what are the differences? How do actors relate to agents and vice versa?[58] Wendt never theoretically explains this 'actorial' turn and hence the reader is left in a conceptual void.

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[57] Wendt (1992a: 418).

[58] Wendt does provide some clues for these questions in a chapter co-authored with Raymond Duvall. See Wendt and Duvall (1989: 51–73). In this piece Wendt and Duvall argue that, '[i]n our view "state actors" should be conceptualised as the governmental agents that are constituted by the "state," which should be seen as a structure of authority, governance and rule.' This seems to present a much more fruitful avenue to explore in terms of the agent–structure problem. However, Wendt never develops this point and by the time of his seminal article 'Anarchy' seems to reject this position completely to the point where he now argues that in the medium run sovereign states will remain the dominant political actors in the international system. So for Wendt, at least apart from Duvall, the term 'actors' really does refer to states.

This confusion regarding the terms actors and agents is certainly not unique to Wendt and would seem to be endemic to the agent–structure debate and the discipline in general. Dessler, for example, seems to use both terms synonymously. 'An actor can act socially only because there exists a social structure to draw upon, and it is only through the actions of agents that structure is reproduced (and potentially transformed).'[59] Again this confusion is surprising given Dessler's claim that a 'complete explanation must appeal not only to the material but also the efficient causes of action, which can be located only within a theory of the agents'.[60]

Dessler never makes his commitment to the 'state-as-agent' thesis explicit. At times, he does treat states as conscious agents able to bring their powers and capabilities to bear on the world in accordance with their wants and beliefs.[61] For example, in his discussion of structure, Dessler argues that 'nations must have available rules, the media through which they communicate with one another and co-ordinate their actions'.[62] This seems to imply that nations display a level of consciousness, and perhaps even possess a faculty that enables a form of communication. Dessler's agents/actors – nations or states – are also rational. Dessler argues that 'a nation in a position of declining power may act rationally by allying itself with other powers'.[63] Dessler's agent, then, much like Wendt's, is a rational thinking 'person' with a set of powers and capabilities which allow it rationally to consider its wants, beliefs and dispositions and act in a manner orientated to achieving them. This also implies that the state is a singularity, a unity with a coherent set of wants, beliefs and dispositions. Wendt, of course, implies just this with his notion of corporate identity that refers to the 'intrinsic qualities that constitute actor identity'.[64]

This notion of corporate identity is related to Wendt's idea of the internal or organisational structures that are inherent characteristics of individuality. Thus, the internal organisational structures could be said to create a corporate identity. For people, Wendt argues, corporate identity refers to 'the body and personal experience of consciousness; for organisations it means their constituent individuals and the shared beliefs and institutions in virtue of which those individuals can act as a "we"'.[65] This

[59] Dessler (1989: 452).   [60] Dessler (1989: 453).
[61] Dessler does not distinguish the state from the nation. For the purposes of the argument I shall ignore this problem and read Dessler to mean state when he writes nation.
[62] Dessler (1989: 454).   [63] Dessler (1989: 459).
[64] Wendt (1996: 50).   [65] Wendt (1996: 50–51).

is an explicit recognition of the need to incorporate the 'constituent individuals' into a theory of state agency. Moreover, Wendt acknowledges that for states this corporate identity has its roots in domestic politics.[66] But this notion of the state as a unified corporate singularity bears little relation to the empirical realities of domestic politics. It underplays the amount of conflict and fragmentation that occurs in domestic politics and assumes a unified identity that looks out onto a potentially hostile international realm.[67] It also serves to place a sharp dividing line between domestic and international politics, with the domestic 'we' seemingly cohering into the singular 'I' at the boundaries of the international realm.[68]

It is possible that Wendt and Dessler, in common with much of the discipline, might argue that when talking of states and nations they are really using these terms as a form of shorthand for state leaders, governments, or perhaps elites within states. There are two problems with this defence. First, if this is the case then it is an instrumentalist/positivist treatment of theoretical terms as opposed to one consistent with a professed commitment to scientific realism. Second, if the terms state and nation are really shorthand terms for individual leaders, governments, or perhaps elites, then the practical effect of this theoretical move would be to empty the state as a theoretical construct of any content. In effect, if the terms state and nation do 'really' refer to individual human beings, then the state itself does not exist as such, has no causal powers and plays no role in these theories.

Surprising as this might sound for a discipline that has tended to treat the state as its central unit of analysis, this is exactly the approach taken by many IR theorists. For example, Bruce Russett and Harvey Starr argue that the 'state has no concrete existence; it is a legal abstraction. Through its government and the representatives of that government, the state undertakes legal commitments.'[69] And for Karl Deutsch, a 'State is an organization for the enforcement of decisions or commands, made practicable by the existing habits of compliance among the population. Such organized enforcement is an all-purpose instrument.'[70] Such accounts, common in many IR textbooks, reduce the state to 'its government' or 'organisation for the enforcement of decisions'. Where the state does appear in the vocabulary of such approaches its ontological

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[66] Wendt (1996: 51).   [67] Allison (1971).
[68] Wendt explicitly acknowledges the influence of Mead here. See Wendt (1996: 50–51). See also Mead (1967).
[69] Russett and Starr (1981: 46–47).   [70] Deutsch (1978: 79).

status is unclear. This instrumentalist reductionism serves to legitimate talk of states as actors, whilst ensuring no ontological commitments are made. Moreover, since any reference to the state is actually a reference to state leaders, what we really have here is a Derridean 'ghost' of a state, where the state as an institutional structure is denied any causal purchase because of its use as a marker for state leaders.[71] This provides an illusion of having incorporated the state into our analyses when no such integration has occurred.

The issue of whether the state is an actor or structure also emerges in Carlsnaes' treatment of the agent–structure problem. Carlsnaes begins by elaborating his understanding of the agent–structure problem: 'At the heart of this problem lies an increasingly widespread recognition that, instead of being antagonistic partners in a zero-sum relationship, human agents and social structures are in a fundamental sense inter-related entities, and hence that we cannot account fully for the one without invoking the other'.[72] This is a rejection of Waltz's view that structures can be isolated from agents in order to ascertain their inherent properties, as well as recognition that the agent–structure problem expresses a concern with the relationship between human agents and social structures. Carlsnaes, however, never articulates a consistent or coherent view of agency and tends to fluctuate between viewing the state as a structure and as an agent. For example, in elaborating his view of the central issue of the agent–structure problem, Carlsnaes argues that it is a question of the 'relationship between actors or agents (either individual or collective, but most often the former) and social structures (such as bureaucracies, institutions, or the state)'.[73] This ambiguous formulation leaves the door open for Carlsnaes to view the state as a form of collective agent, or as a structure. Ultimately, however, Carlsnaes never demonstrates how we might theoretically make the distinction in any particular instance.

In fact, Carlsnaes, in keeping with Wendt, Dessler and the vast majority of the academic discipline of IR, seems to fall into the trap noted by Skillen, wherein the move from the national to the international level seems to legitimate the theoretical articulation of the 'state-as-agent'. Carlsnaes does recognise the need to take seriously the conceptual issues surrounding the issue of agency, arguing that 'we need an approach that posits *agency* as an analytical category in its own right'.[74] But he never

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[71] Derrida (1994).   [72] Carlsnaes (1992: 246).
[73] Carlsnaes (1992: 246).   [74] Carlsnaes (1992: 263).

elaborates on this valuable insight and consequently mixes actors with agents and with both terms seeming to refer to human agents and/or collective agents with no theoretical justification for moving from one to the other. Without this theoretical signpost, confusion occurs and it becomes impossible to chart the causal patterns that Carlsnaes deems essential to good research, since it is theoretically unclear what the terms agent and structure refer to.

Carlsnaes provides little theoretical guidance on this issue, but it is clear that he veers towards treating the state as a structure not as an agent. 'Both domestic and international institutions are, if anything, structures constraining and enabling foreign policy actions; and they are certainly the outcome of human agency.'[75] This is also the view put forward by Benjamin and Duvall, who argue that 'the state is not an actor'[76] and 'does not act or do; rather it is a structure'.[77]

However, given the prevalence of the 'personification theory' of the state, is there a way in which we might legitimately utilise such talk? Andrew Vincent argues that there are three senses that might be applied to the term person:[78] one, that I think is unobjectionable when applied to the state, or any other form of social collective, and two, which Wendt, Dessler and Carlsnaes appear to endorse, that are not. First, there is the psychological notion of a person, which is generally identified by certain qualities: the power and capacity of self-consciousness; the ability to form intentions; the ability to articulate these intentions, usually in language; the ability to determine their own behaviour according to their own interests; and the capacity of unified continuous reasoning and volition. Second is the ethical person, which can be taken to refer to the capacity for rationality and responsibility or the ability to determine one's own action by moral categories or principles. Third is the idea of a legal personality, which indicates a power or capacity for legal action and being a subject of rights and duties. This latter notion of a person is generally taken to be a fictional person, conferred so that particular groups could be legally identified.

Ultimately, the distinction between a psychological person and a moral person is practically problematic, although perhaps defendable in theory. As Kant put it, 'a person is the subject whose actions are susceptible to imputation. Accordingly, moral personality is nothing but the freedom of a rational being under moral law.'[79] Clearly moral

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[75] Carlsnaes (1992: 267).   [76] Benjamin and Duvall (1985: 27).
[77] Benjamin and Duvall (1985: 24).   [78] Vincent (1989). See also Wendt (2004).
[79] Kant (1965: 24).

personhood is reliant upon psychological personhood, although the reverse may not be true.[80] Without psychological personhood, it would be difficult to see how notions of moral responsibility could apply. We do not apply notions of morality to non-sapient elements of the world. There would be no sense that could be made of the statement 'it was morally wrong for it to rain today'. Morality, as we understand it, applies only to those entities able to make intelligent choices and act responsibly. If a state leader declares an illegal war it would make no sense to talk of the state being morally wrong if it fails to disobey the orders of that state leader.

Here another crucial point about personhood is raised, for as Locke put it, 'I presume it is not the idea of a thinking or rational being alone that makes the idea of a man . . . but of a body, so and so shaped, joined to it.'[81] This is a reiteration of the oft-cited 'ought implies can' epigram, the point being that the state has no physical means of disobeying the orders of state leaders. It is such insights as this that have led methodological individualists to argue that all social process are governed by principles which can only be deduced from the behaviour of individuals. Thus, statements about collective social forms, such as the state, are seen to be as reducible as statements about individuals.

There is a grain of truth in this, but we must be careful not to neglect the structural features of the social world, which make such actions possible. As Peter French has argued, 'corporate actions cannot be identified with the actions of individuals, so it will not always be just to blame a human being for a corporate moral or legal offence'.[82] This seems intuitively correct, and any attempt to change individuals and leave structural features intact in our efforts to change the social field would be doomed to failure. Yet, we also have to avoid the opposite error that tends to reduce individual elements of the social world to structural features. Hence, we must reject any notion of the state as a psychological person and *inter alia* any ascription of moral personhood to the state. This is not to say that the state cannot be held causally, or legally accountable, but it is in its status as a structural entity that this accountability occurs.

The notion of psychological personhood is generally taken to refer to the capacity for self-consciousness, the ability to form intentions and determine our behaviour according to our own interests, and the

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[80] It is possible that a foetus, new-born child or even someone suffering from mental illness constitutes a psychological person but not necessarily a moral person. This is a distinction recognised in law.
[81] Locke (1969: 211).   [82] French (1984).

capacity for unified continuous reasoning and volition which belong to a sentient being.[83] This set of capacities is strikingly similar to Wendt's notion of an 'internal organisational structure', which, to restate, is: (1) to have a theoretical understanding (however inaccurate) of its activities, in the sense that it could supply reasons for its behaviour; (2) reflexively to monitor and potentially adapt its behaviour; and (3) to make decisions.[84] The question remains, however, as to the validity of Wendt's theoretical extension of these properties to a collective, in this case the state.

It is common practice to extend the usage of psychological personality to collectives. The social psychologist Gustav Le Bon, for example, argued that a crowd could be considered a single being with a will of its own, which was distinct from that of its constituent elements.[85] Following Vincent I find this notion unconvincing. Viewed from the perspective of the agent–structure debate it seems to suggest that the will of a crowd is not dependent, in some way, on the predispositions and behaviour of the individuals comprising it. Equally, as Vincent suggests, Le Bon (as with Wendt) is guilty of conflating the distinction between groups of individuals and complexly structured social forms. 'A crowd', argues Vincent, 'can be resolved into individuals. A change in crowd membership will change the nature of that collectivity. Such a notion does not apply to business groups, football clubs and states.'[86]

Vincent is correct to highlight this difference but mistaken in his claim that a change in personnel of complex social forms, such as business groups, football clubs and the state, does not also engender change in those entities.[87] Vincent argues that the 'identity of these latter groups is not dependent upon a particular membership. BP (British Petroleum) is still BP even if half of its directors resigned.'[88] Now certainly, a form of collective identity does endure over time and through changes in personnel, and we can assume that BP would still be a company manufacturing and selling petroleum products regardless of the specific make-up of its board of directors. What we cannot assume, however, is that BP would continue to produce and sell those products in the same manner irrespective of the personnel responsible for making decisions. We

[83] Bhaskar (1979: 44).   [84] Wendt (1987: 359).
[85] Le Bon (1979: 58–59).   [86] Vincent (1989: 704).
[87] Bhaskar makes a similar point about the propensity of 'methodological individualists' to conflate the social with the crowd and in so doing reduce the social to the sum of individuals comprising the crowd. See Bhaskar (1979: 35).
[88] Vincent (1989: 704). The use of the word 'group' in this context is unfortunate.

would not assume, for example, that were BP to appoint an environmentally friendly chairman that BP would continue to engage in practices detrimental to the environment. Nor, of course, can we assume that a change in individual leaders will automatically bring about a change in policy. The interesting questions are those revolving around the conditions under which a change in individuals might bring about a change in policy. If indeed policy change is our goal.

Equally, football clubs spend vast sums of money on both players and managers precisely because a change in personnel does make a difference. And for many states, the idea that a change in leadership makes a difference underpins the idea of democracy. Without it the notion of elections makes no sense. Elections are about who runs the state, since the state patently cannot run itself. Devoid of the notion that a change in personnel makes a difference, we can make no sense of the attempt to unseat totalitarian leaders, engage in revolution, take part in diplomatic exchanges, or affect any kind of change at all.

This indicates a crucial ontological distinction that must be observed between the notion of a human individual and complex social collectives. Although it makes sense to talk of changing the elements that comprise collectives, e.g. the board of BP, it makes no sense at all to talk of changing the cell structure or substance of a particular body, or for that matter the consciousness or otherwise of a given individual. Individuals, notwithstanding arguments about split personalities, are indivisible in a way that collectives are not. It may be possible in the realms of science fiction to transport the centre of consciousness (the brain) from one body to another, but, as Douglas Porpora has argued, even in such instances the body becomes a different person.[89] And Derek Parfitt suggests that our personhood is nothing more than our psychological continuity over time.[90]

This notion of the state as a legal person is, I think, unobjectionable. In fact, when viewed from a concern with the agent–structure problem it provides a necessary corrective to any form of legal individualism. As such, it provides a means by which structures can be identified as being responsible for some element of agential outcomes. But equally, structural responsibility cannot deflect individual responsibility. It seems clear that we would wish to hold on to the notion of certain forms of collectivity being held to account. If structures are a necessary

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[89] Porpora (1997).   [90] Parfitt (1984).

component for any social act then those same structures must, in part, be held causally responsible for some element of outcomes.

It is important to be clear about the use of the term responsible in this context. For in this context the word responsible involves no sense of intentionality, but rather alludes to the more basic sense of 'being a cause of'. This way of using the word responsible is commonplace in ordinary and scientific language use. Thus we talk of the 'lightning bolt being responsible for the burnt tree', or 'the hurricane being responsible for millions of pounds worth of damage'. Such uses of the word responsible imply no conscious intent, but simply highlight factors causally implicated in outcomes.

Equally, it makes no sense to attribute a moral, or psychological, content to such statements. Human structures, however, as constructed entities, do sustain a moral content. Thus, it seems perfectly correct that Union Carbide, as a structure, be held responsible for its neglect of adequate safety procedures in Bhopal in 1984.[91] Yet Union Carbide as a structural entity should not be held solely responsible for the disaster since it is a fact of social life that human agents must have played some role in the unfortunate outcome. And indeed, initially the Indian government did try to hold both the company and the company chairman to account. Despite this, however, and as a result of various pressures, in 1989, after years of litigation, the US owners of the plant agreed to pay the Indian government $470 million and, in return, the government agreed to drop criminal charges against the company and its former chairman. In effect, the Indian government was 'bought off'. Whatever the outcome, the Indian government originally tried to punish both the company and specific individuals. The Nuremberg trials provide another graphic example of the way in which both individuals and structures can be held causally responsible, although arguably not enough attention was paid to the wider structural factors, owing to the understandable wish to locate blame at the feet of 'evil individuals'.[92]

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[91] In December 1984, deadly methyl isocyanate gas leaked from a chemical plant in Bhopal, causing the deaths of at least 3,300 people. See Piasecki (1995); Shrivastava (1992).

[92] These trials were defining moments in international law. Among the accused were the Nationalist Socialist leaders Hermann Göring and Rudolf Hess, the diplomat Joachim von Ribbentrop, the munitions maker Gustav Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, and eighteen other military leaders and civilian officials. Seven organisations that formed part of the basic structure of the Nazi government were also charged as criminal. These organisations included the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, 'Defence Corps'), the Gestapo (*Geheime Staatspolizei*, 'Secret State Police'), the SA (*Sturmabteilung*, 'Storm Troops'), and the General Staff and High Command of

Thus, I think it both correct and necessary that structures, as causally implicated in outcomes, be held responsible; we cannot change the world for the better (assuming this is our goal) simply by focusing on individuals, but equally no such change will come about simply by focusing on structures, and to assume as much is fundamentally to misunderstand the relationship between agents and structures. Moreover, the moral dimension of complex social forms arises, in part, out of the constructed nature of such forms. Some human structures are consciously built and have a deleterious effect on others that may have had no say in their construction. The economic order constructed by the victorious superpowers post-1945 has a certain structure that tends to impact on nations and states not immediately responsible for its construction. In this sense we can hold such a structure responsible and identify ways it might be changed.[93] Likewise, structures cannot change themselves and change in the social world can only be the result of embodied human agency. As Manning has put it: 'One does not affect the position of a shadow by doing things to the shadow. Neither does one affect the attitude of a state simply by addressing arguments to the state. As well might one address arguments to a statue! Only if one's arguments are overheard by human beings can they expect to produce any effect.'[94] In the final analysis any form of a 'personification theory' of the state is unsatisfactory when considered from the perspective of the agent–structure problem. Contemporary approaches to the agent–structure problem have been attempts to mediate between competing conceptualisations of social phenomena in the hope of finding a 'third way' wherein one or other element of the social world is not reduced to the other. When viewed from this perspective, any adherence to the 'personification theory' of the state seems to present no solution at all. Acceptance of the 'personification theory' of the state accords human *agency* no role, because the state now takes on the properties of human agency and the real human agents that act in the world are theoretically redundant. If the agent–structure problem is resolved by acceding agential status to the state, then the concern to navigate between individualism and structuralism is not addressed but simply displaced. That

the German armed forces. The tribunal rejected the defence argument that they were not legally responsible for their acts because they performed the acts under the orders of superior authority, stating that 'the true test . . . is not the existence of the order but whether moral choice (in executing it) was in fact possible'. See, Wells (1993).

[93] We may even want to say that such a structure is immoral, although this is a much harder claim to sustain.

[94] Manning (1975: 7).

is to say, that if agency is located in the state then no thematisation of human agency is deemed necessary.

If adherence to the 'personification theory' of the state is unsatisfactory it might be reasonable to turn to alternative theories of the state within International Relations in order to ground the 'state-as-agent' thesis. Unfortunately, and perhaps owing to an unthematised solution to the agent–structure problem, the only alternative to the 'personification theory' of the state falls into a rampant individualism vis-à-vis the individual–society connection.

The dominant alternative view is what I shall call the 'instrumental theory' of the state, which neatly maps onto individualist theories of society. The basic distinction between the 'personification theory' of the state and the 'instrumental theory' of the state, which mirrors the debate between individualist or structuralist theories of society, is quite simple to articulate. Either the state is real and the individual is only an abstract element in it, or the individual is real and the state some kind of abstract device which individuals produce and which depends upon them for its creation and subsequent existence. On an 'instrumental theory' of the state, the state appears as an instrument of some of these individuals within the state. It bends to their will and its status is purely epiphenomenal. I think it a simple matter to see the incipient individualism (and reductionism) in this approach.

The above discussion highlights the necessity of accounting for both human agents and structures in our investigation, as well as illuminating some of the problems that arise as a result of an uncritical acceptance of the 'state-as-agent' thesis. The social world does not just happen but is made to happen by active human agents, and what goes on in the heads of these agents makes a difference (which is not to say that it is all that matters). The ascription of moral and psychological personhood to complexly structured collective social forms is apt to forget this. But is there a way we might reject the 'personification theory' of the state whilst at the same time accepting some form of the 'state-as-agent' thesis? The answer to this question lies in a more adequate account of agency, which itself needs to be embedded within a theory of social action.

Social action

According to Ernst Haas, actors in international relations are those entities capable of putting forward effective demands. But equally, who, or what, are the important entities in specific outcomes cannot be answered

a priori.[95] Taken as an empirical problem the latter point is correct. Theoretically, however, we can, and must, reach decisions concerning what entities might be agents prior to addressing the empirical question. In addressing this question it is important to consider the issue of differing types of social action.

Individual action, however improbable it may seem, can be considered to be intentional action on behalf of an individual where no other humans are involved.[96] Examples of such action might be the taking of a walk down the road, the solitary drinking of a glass of wine for pleasure, or the taking of a shower. This form of action is not always, or necessarily, action in co-operation with, or directed towards, other individuals. I say this form of action is improbable since in order to carry out these actions a wide range of socially constructed resources needs to be in place. So walking on a road requires roads, the drinking of wine requires wine and the taking of a shower requires showers. These are all social resources that are necessary in order for the activity described to take place. And in all societies what makes these practices possible is often a whole realm of activity that to all intents and purposes is opaque to those individuals engaging in the activity.[97] This is particularly the case in complex industrial societies where many of the resources necessary for a given action are constructed, and constituted, elsewhere. So-called individual action is enabled and constrained (structured) by a complex range of resources; hence the idea of individual action is problematic. Whilst accepting this, I still think it important theoretically to distinguish individual activity from social action, because it is this distinction that allows us to differentiate between differing forms of social action. In effect, we are dealing here not with only two forms of action (individual and social), but with a continuum of action that goes from the individual to the group, to the collective, to the corporate. The fact of differentiated social forms may require a differentiated account of agency.

Social action can be considered to be human actions involving, or orientated towards, other humans and performed in accordance with social forms such as conventions, social norms, rules, institutions, social groups and organisations. Hence the raising of an issue at a meeting and the passing of a football are forms of social action. This is a fairly

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[95] Haas (1964: 84).
[96] Miller (2001) sees individual action as necessary and prior to social action. For other accounts of individual action see Kennett (2001); Pietroski (2000); Schick (1991).
[97] See Searle (1995).

standard account of social action that inevitably leads to a discussion of Weber. According to Weber there were four kinds of social action: Affective action; *Wertrational* action; Traditional action; and *Zweckrational* action. *Zweckrational* can be translated as 'technocratic thinking'. It can be understood as action orientated towards the achievement of rationally defined goals. *Wertrational*, or value-oriented rationality, denotes activity aimed at the achievement of a specific goal. This goal may itself not be considered rational in terms of the precepts governing Zweckrationality, but is pursued through means defined within ethical or religious contexts. Affective action is embedded within the emotional state of the individual rather than in the rational calculation of means and ends. Traditional action is driven by routine habits of thought, or by what Weber called 'the eternal yesterday'.[98] This classification of social action provides the basis for Weber's account of western historical development, as well as his theory of the continued evolution of human societies. But importantly, and as one would expect with Weber, it is embedded within his general account of sociology as an interpretative exercise concerned with trying to understand the meaning of a social action from the viewpoint of actors and therefore understanding the real causes of action. Weber's commitment to individualism meant that these causes of social action could never be located in complexly structured social entities. Wendt, of course, takes a different view. In this he follows the thinking of Peter French and Margaret Gilbert in arguing that social entities can themselves be agents that possess mental states and perform actions.[99] I do not agree with that view, and have already indicated that the problem here concerns the treatment of all complex social forms as groups of individuals. Hence it is now time to address the ontological differences between social entities that might be considered agents without falling into the methodological individualist trap of treating all of these entities as nothing other than collections of individuals.

I suggest that we need to distinguish, at a minimum, between social groups, institutions and organisations.[100] A social group consists of a set of individuals who participate in a number of spheres, or fields, of activity governed by a common structure. The defining elements of a social group are particular individuals standing in certain relations. These relations can be very formally structured, which gives the group

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[98] Weber (1965).   [99] French (1984); Gilbert (1989).
[100] This account draws heavily on Miller (2001). However, I do not mean to suggest that these are the only distinctions that might be made. I do, however, insist that these are the minimum necessary.

a high degree of coherence, or informal, which makes the group fragmented. Some social groups can also be organisations, but not all are. Organisations consist of an embodied formal structure of interlocking positions, roles and relations. Hence the defining element of an organisation is the structure of interlocking positions/roles standing in relation to one another. By embodied I mean that specific individuals occupy the roles. However, the identity of the particular agents occupying any given role is not constitutive of the organisation, whereas for social groups it clearly may be. Organisations, that is, are identified in terms of the structure they embody, kind of activity they undertake, and functions (and ends) they serve. Understood as a complex of positions, roles and relations, organisations have no normative dimension. However, in practice it is clear that empirically most organisations do indeed have a normative dimension. This normative dimension emerges as a result of the fact that once embodied (occupied by individuals) the constitutive roles and functions a given organisation serves are given a moral character. Once moral agents occupy these positions, roles and relations, organisations pursue moral ends and undertake moral activities to secure these ends.

An institution is a wider concept, although it is clear that the term is often used as a synonym for an organisation in common usage. For the purposes of social analysis, however, we need to distinguish between an institution and an organisation. Bull provides perhaps the most comprehensive account of institutions in international politics, and does, at times, treat organisations and institutions as one and the same. Hence he refers to the 'government' as an institution of the modern state.[101] Yet, Bull also argues that by an institution he does not necessarily mean an 'organisation or administrative machinery, but rather a set of habits and practices shaped towards the realisation of common goals'.[102] My account of institutions is similar to Bull's, although I do not make the realisation of common goals a necessary element, since human actors can construct institutions without requiring a common goal that binds them to the institution. Bull's inclusion of common goals in his definition of institutions is yet another indicator of his commitment to individualism.

By institution, I mean a custom, practice, relationship or behavioural pattern of importance in social life: the institutions of marriage and the family, for instance. Capitalism, for example, is a particular kind

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[101] Bull (1977: 55).   [102] Bull (1977: 71).

of economic institution, which in the contemporary world consists of a range of organisations, one of which, of course is the multi-national corporation. Although some organisations can become institutions, it is often complexes of organisations that constitute an institution. However, not all institutions are composed of organisations. The English language is an institution, but not an organisation.

The relationship between individuals, social groups, organisations and institutions is important to understanding the issue of social agency, and these distinctions are crucial in correcting a range of misunderstandings concerning the 'state-as-agent' thesis. First, when an organisation is understood as a set of embodied positions, roles and structures, it is easy to appreciate how organisations have a temporal existence beyond that of the individuals who occupy the roles. Oxford University, for example, is, to all intents and purposes, the same organisation it was fifty years ago, even though few, if any, of the individuals occupying the roles are the same as fifty years ago. When considered as a set of particular individuals standing in certain relations – a social group – however, it is clear that Oxford University is not the same as it was fifty years ago. Other examples of organisations are governments, business corporations, armies and so on and these all have this same dual existence.

If organisations could function without embodiment then the possibility of treating an organisation as a person (agent) might be feasible. However, organisations cannot function without human individuals, or social groups, occupying the positions and roles. Since these positions and roles in any given organisation stand in complex relations they are structured. Hence an organisation can itself be considered a structured structure. The structure of organisations varies enormously. Some are extremely hierarchical with an emphasis on controlling the behaviour of the individuals occupying the roles. Military organisations, for example, are structured in such a way to ensure behavioural compliance. The relations (structures) of organisations are governed by a range of differing mechanisms. These range from clearly formulated and regulated rules to informal rules and social norms. Moreover, the structure of organisations is also governed by sets of rules, regulations and laws that are external to the organisation. Hence, whilst a multi-national corporation has its own internal set of rules and norms, it is also governed by a set of rules and norms originating in the wider field of activity of which it is a part: contract law, for example, and legislation relating to employment rights. This means that no organisation can be considered wholly

autonomous and independent of external structural influences. When applied to the state, this fact alone should lead us to treat with suspicion artificial boundaries separating inside from outside, or dividing the world into artificial levels.[103]

As structured entities organisations also have a *habitus*. Another term for this might be an organisational culture. The *habitus*, although an informal controlling mechanism, is nonetheless a powerful one. An organisational culture might be considered to be the ethos, or spirit, that pervades an organisation. The *habitus* can be a powerful determinant of how individuals carry out their roles within organisations. In extreme instances the organisational culture may actually work against the organisation achieving some, or all, of its functional ends. The British Metropolitan Police Force, for example, has the aim of ensuring justice is served. In order to help achieve this end it also has a set of regulations relating to behavioural patterns concerning racist behaviour. The MacPherson report, however, shows how the culture of the Metropolitan Police was racist even though the organisation expressly forbids such behaviour.[104]

The conflation of social groups and organisations underpins many of the attempts to ascribe agency, and responsibility, to organisations, and even at times to institutions. But can organisations have intentions? Wendt clearly believes they can, as does much of the discipline even in its more instrumental mode. If an organisation is said to have intentions, as Wendt claims, it must have a complex web of attitudes about the world. These attitudes are not rudimentary beliefs, but rather only exist as components in complex networks of belief. Thus, for example, in order for an entity to hold a series of beliefs about engaging in war requires that the same entity also hold beliefs about what war is, as well as beliefs about strategy, enemies, destruction, death, conquest and a whole range of other complex phenomena. And the relationship between these beliefs is complex and understandable only through reflective reasoning. This requires that an entity with such interrelated beliefs would be capable of high-level thought and would also be in possession of a language in which to do this thinking. Moreover, such an entity's thought process would also include planning for its future on the basis of its past. Hence memory is also an integral aspect of social activity. All of this seems to be integral to the 'state-as-agent' thesis. However, when placed within the distinction between social groups and organisations we can see just

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[103] Walker (1993).   [104] Wight (2004).

how this error occurs, and how to correct it. For even French, perhaps the most sophisticated advocate of corporate intentions, accepts that 'the corporation's only method of achieving its goals is the activation of the personnel who occupy its various positions'.[105]

This is a telling admission. It highlights the fact that organisational action is dependent upon individuals within that organisation. Unless we are prepared to treat these individuals as determined by the structural configurations they inhabit, we must view the locus of intention as residing in the individuals or social group, not the organisation. Certainly, given the fact that changes in social groups within organisations are almost always gradual, then the organisational culture of an organisation, when allied to a highly formal and rigid rule structure that governs the organisation, might present an almost insurmountable barrier to anyone attempting to effect change in the organisation, or to resist a policy already implemented. From this, however, it would be wrong to conclude that role incumbents can be understood as simply playing out their allotted roles. For to accept this would be to accept a rampant and deterministic structuralism. It would also license individual role incumbents to hide behind state, or company, policy and procedures, and thus avoid responsibility for their actions.[106]

It is important to note that holding an entity, the state, morally responsible is not the same as holding a social group within the organisation morally responsible. It is also important to note that holding a state morally responsible is not the same as holding it legally responsible. Ascribing legal responsibility to organisations is an effective control mechanism to ensure measures are put in place by role incumbents (human agents) aimed at curtailing individual wrongdoing within that organisation. It seems that human agency refuses to be written out of any coherent story.

Rethinking agency

Part of the rationale for the preceding section was derived from an important Bhaskarian insight: human agents have different properties to those of structures and we should be careful to distinguish between them.[107] Thus, the structures that constitute the international system have their emergent powers; states as structures within that system have

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[105] French (1984: 165).
[106] Fisse and Braithwaite (1993); Wells (1993).   [107] Bhaskar (1979: 62).

their own emergent powers; and human agents have a set of different emergent powers. Human individuals are, of course, structured entities, but this does not mean that the analogy between humans-as-agents and structures-as-agents is a productive one. For the ways in which each entity is structured endow it with properties not possessed by entities with differing structures. This point becomes crucial when we attempt to uncover what it is to talk of agency in the social world.

Barry Buzan, utilising a standard dictionary definition of agency, argues that what is particularly agential about agents is the 'faculty or state of acting or exerting power'.[108] This form of language is certainly common within the natural sciences where the common meaning ascribed to such usage is that of the natural force or effect on matter, an oxidising agent perhaps. It is also, perhaps, the dominant view of agency in the IR discipline with agency generally theorised as the exercise of power. But in transposing such talk into the social realm, I think Buzan is guilty of underplaying the specifics of that realm. For what sets the limits of the boundaries between the social world and the natural world are the dual notions of meaning and intentionality, and both, I would argue, are properties best reserved for human agents. On the other hand, if we accept Buzan's definition we are forced to conclude that structures must at the same time be agents since they too possess the 'faculty or state of acting or exerting power'. Given this, the agent–structure problem dissolves into a quagmire where no distinction can be drawn between agents and structures. Given the specific nature of the social world, how might we reconsider the notion of agency so that we might continue to distinguish between the properties possessed by geo-historically located agents and those possessed by geo-historically located structures? Gayatri Spivak argues that: 'Agency relates to accountable reason. The idea of agency comes from the principle of accountable reason, that one acts with responsibility, that one has to assume the possibility of intention, one has to assume even the freedom of subjectivity in order to be responsible. That's where agency is located.'[109] According to Spivak, then, there are three main elements to a theory of agency in the social world: accountability, intentionality and subjectivity. Of the three, the most fundamental is subjectivity, not least because, as Spivak correctly points out, it is in the 'freedom of subjectivity' that agency is located. Without some level of 'freedom of subjectivity' notions of accountability

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[108] Buzan et al. (1993: 103).   [109] Spivak (1996: 294).

and intentionality become redundant. Yet the notion of the 'freedom of subjectivity' has been the subject of serious attack by all manner of philosophical positions.[110] Indeed, the denial of the 'freedom of subjectivity' has become something of a leitmotif of our postmodern times. It is ironic that a leading figure of this movement, such as Spivak, should be alluding to such a seemingly archaic Kantian notion as the 'freedom of subjectivity' whilst many, if not all, of the acolytes of the movement are rejoicing in the 'death of the subject'.[111]

According to many postmodern theorists, the 'subject' *qua* 'self' is in dire difficulty, often declared a 'fiction' by a mixture of theories, which are themselves, one supposes, more fictional than the 'subject' *qua* 'self' itself. Judith Butler, for example, rejects the notion that identity can be established through recourse to an 'I' that pre-exists signification.[112] 'The enabling conditions for an assertion of "I" are provided by the structure of signification, the rules that regulate the legitimate and illegitimate invocation of that pronoun, the practices that establish the terms of intelligibility by which that pronoun can circulate.'[113] Butler's structuralist argument parallels that of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, who argue that 'the classification of things reproduces the classification of men', with one of these 'things', of course, being the self.[114]

The obvious riposte in both cases is the all-too-obvious point that both formulations still presuppose 'someone' to do the classification and/or signification. Equally, one can agree with the general thrust of Butler's, Durkheim's and Mauss' argument without resorting to the view that the individual is simply a blank slate upon which are inscribed the codes of culture – a kind of 'Lockean tabula rasa in a Foucaultian garb'.[115] Such assertions occur with such frequency, however, that one might be tempted to suggest that the 'death of the subject' has now assumed the status of a postmodern mantra, an article of faith, and that one only has to state it for its truth to be accepted. That the 'subject is dead' requires no argument and no proof. It is simply and self-evidently axiomatic. But what, exactly, does this attack entail?

The thesis of 'the death of the subject' contains and encompasses the deaths of the 'author' and 'man', and, as such, the attack on the 'subject' can be seen to have emerged from two distinct, although

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[110] Žižek (1999).
[111] On this see, for example, Copjec (1994); Faber (1994); Farrell (1996); Flax (1990).
[112] Butler (1990).   [113] Butler (1990: 143).
[114] Durkheim and Mauss (1963).   [115] Benhabib (1994: 82).

complementary, directions.[116] On the one hand, what is being objected to is the 'idea that we can invoke any universal subjectivity in speaking about the human condition'.[117] But also, the thesis of the 'death of the subject' can be read as an attack on the notion of an individualistic self, a self that is intensely aware of itself, its autonomy, its uniqueness, sense of direction, purpose and volition. In effect, any notion of a rational, unified, autonomous thinking self is rejected. This latter line of attack represents a denial of Spivak's notion of the 'freedom of subjectivity'. Taken literally and expressed in simplistic mathematical terms: subtract the universal term 'human' and the particularist term 'individual' from the composite 'human individual' and we are left with a void: a 'subject', that is, 'stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse'.[118]

Yet, the 'death of the subject' thesis is far from being new, as Joan Copjec notes: '[w]e have, in fact, for a long time now – since the beginnings of modern science – been dwelling in the graveyard of the subject'.[119] And this is a graveyard littered with varying degrees of forensic evidence of long-gone assassins.[120] Modernity, however one defines it, was ambivalent about the subject of the 'subject'. Behaviourism preached its (the 'subject's') death, as did Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, although never explicitly.[121] Positivist philosophy enacts perhaps the most comprehensive destruction of this concept. David Hume looked inside himself and somewhat paradoxically found nothing there.[122] Auguste Comte believed that the enigmatic core of psychic life, the initial monad or 'I', conscious of itself, was nothing but a remnant of theological ideas about the soul, itself a metaphysical fiction, which must be eliminated from 'positive' knowledge.[123] However, the mortal

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[116] Heartfield (2002). [117] Soper (1990: 11).
[118] Foucault (1977: 138). [119] Copjec (1994: xi).
[120] See Balibar (1994). Balibar notes that a fundamental error of 'modern' philosophy is its assertion that the genesis of 'Man' and the 'subject' can be traced to Descartes. 'In fact, nowhere in Descartes is there any mention of an autonomous self-consciousness, a reflexive centre of the world and therefore a concentrate of the essence of man.'
[121] As Kolakowski puts it: 'Wittgenstein, at least in his early phase, believed that what solipsism asserts is right, but that it cannot be expressed. To express it, a category such as the "I" would have to be invoked, and there is no such thing among the atomic facts: on close scrutiny the "I" shrinks to the size of a dot. The so-called "subject" is ungraspable, not just as an alleged inside of things different from them, but even as an inner world object. Within the boundaries of experience I can speak about myself in reference to individual facts, but when I try to go beyond their contents to ask about some indivisible core or permanent substratum of subjectivity unifying those data in an identical self, my questions become as meaningless as any other metaphysical question.' See Kolakowski (1969: 176).
[122] Hume (1967). [123] Andreski (1974).

blow to any notion of the 'subject' comes from the radical positivist Richard Avenarius, who held that any notion of an 'inner existence' was itself a metaphysical notion: 'Such a inner existence, such a division of the single homogeneous world into inner and outer, subject and object – all this is a purely man made introjection . . . By the same token, every dualism or psychophysical parallelism is disclosed as a similarly smuggled-in prejudice.'[124] Underpinning positivist attacks on the 'subject' is an unbridled empiricism, where such unobservable entities as the self are dismissed as metaphysical.[125] Contemporary attacks on the subject, on the other hand, derive from a rampant structuralism. Most graphically revealed in the work of Louis Althusser:

> The structure of the relations of production determines the places and functions occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are the supports (Träger) of these functions. The true 'subjects' (in the sense of constitutive subjects of the process) are therefore not these occupants or functionaries, are not despite all appearances, the 'obviousness' of the given of naive anthropology, 'concrete individuals', 'real men' – but the definition and distribution of those places and functions.[126]

But what of the subject? Is there anything left of the concept we would wish to preserve? Now, I am clear 'I' am a discursively constructed subject. As Seyla Benhabib puts it, 'a subjectivity that would not be structured by language, by narrative and by the symbolic codes of narrative available in a culture is unthinkable'.[127] I am also aware that I am not an autonomous subject, but relate to my social world, and decide how to act in it, only through a set of praxiological formations and a complex web of discourses, which I have not created. Yet, there is still a 'self' who is thinking about the relationship between the discourse and that same fragmented 'subject'. Even as I recognise that I have no choice but to live within some culturally constructed codes, I am engaged

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[124] Kolakowski ([1969](javascript:): 108). Avenarius (1843–1896) is a much-neglected philosopher, who although a positivist, prefigured much postmodern thinking, particularly concerning epistemology. Stanislaw Brzozowski, commenting on Avenarius' *Ideas*, pictured it as an 'ideology of despair, a dramatic confession by the philosopher that the true, the good, and the beautiful are not "elements" of experience but "characters". Unlinked to experience in any one to one correspondence, they are rooted in socially conditioned modifications of experience, and in every case are someone's truth, good or beauty.' Quoted in Kolakowski ([1969](javascript:): 204).

[125] The irony here, of course, is that although no one can claim to have seen, touched, heard, tasted or smelled subjectivity, everyone 'experiences' it.

[126] Althusser and Balibar ([1970](javascript:): 180).   [127] Benhabib ([1994](javascript:): 79–80).

in reflection on my current position and future potentials, which alter the decision-making discourses through which future practices will be constructed.

This recognition of 'self', however, does not mean a denial of the role played by social and cultural factors in determining behaviour. But it does require acceptance of a 'self' that is never automatically or deterministically instituted, that there is a 'self' which is in relationship to the world by which it is constructed, and that even as I acknowledge my own dependency on a social universe which always presents itself in conceptualised form, this conceptualisation is dependent on a subject capable of reflecting upon, and constantly renegotiating, the forces of construction. And thus, the construction could have been otherwise. The human agent is neither the origin of social relations nor the passive product of an externally imposed system of social constraint: there is a mutual dependence of structure and agency. The activities of social agents are necessarily situated and constrained, although the determinants of activity are multiple and contradictory and cannot be subsumed under the logic of a single monolithic system. At the same time as social structures are reproduced or transformed by human agency, they are also the very medium of this reproduction. This relationship, then, must be grasped as dynamic, not static, and hence not reductionist in either direction.[128]

A sense of balance to the agent–structure relationship requires a multi-layered view of agency, wherein agency refers to both individual and social predicates. For as Rom Harré has argued, for moral judgements to be possible, and whilst accepting that some human actions are socially caused, people must nevertheless be understood as relatively autonomous beings who are responsible for many of their own actions.[129] What we must be careful to avoid is any form of subject that has an existence independent of social and cultural conditioning, for this would imply individualism. Equally, from the standpoint of the agent–structure problem, the rampant structuralism of much contemporary theorising must likewise be rejected. For as Harré notes, '[t]he task for discursive theories is . . . to reinsert the agent into the story, the one who, in some way is significant in giving meaning to what he or she does and who they are.' And moreover, 'the image of people

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[128] In essence this position is commensurate with Bhaskar's TMSA outlined in chapter 3; see Bhaskar (1979).
[129] Harré (1993).

as complex automata must be abandoned, with social constructionism differentiated from social determinism'.[130]

A corollary of the argument for the 'freedom of subjectivity' is that our embodied nature as a 'species being' has direct implications for social science.[131] Thus when talking of what the human person can do, we are also talking about the human animal since the characteristic capacities of *Homo sapiens* cannot be reduced to society, even if they can only be exercised within it. On the contrary, human beings must have a particular physical constitution for them to be consistently socially influenced, such as when learning a language, arithmetic or tool making. Even in those cases where the biological is, in almost every instance, socially mediated, this does not mean that the mediated is not biological nor that the physical becomes epiphenomenal.[132] Recognition of the notion of 'species being', although perhaps passé and unfashionable within the social sciences, is, I think, a necessary component for any critically orientated social theory.

For it is only this which allows us to determine whether social conditions are dehumanising or not. Without this reference point, grounded in our 'species being', any and all political arrangements can be justified. Although we begin with this 'species being', however, any act by this being can only occur in a social context and it is here that further differentiations can be drawn. Here we are dealing, not with an individual as such, but with a 'social person', someone, that is, who has a set of socially derived powers, properties and liabilities, which make up a 'social identity' and allow them to 'do' certain things, but also place barriers to them 'doing' other things.

Thus, if Spivak's notion of the 'freedom of subjectivity' is necessary for any coherent theory of agency, it is not sufficient. Here it is useful to introduce Bhaskar's account of agency. In his early book, *A Realist Theory of Science*, Bhaskar provides an account of agency similar to that of Buzan.[133] Thus, for Bhaskar, '[a]gents are particulars which are the centres of powers', and, '[b]y an agent I mean simply anything which is capable of bringing about a change in something (including itself.)'[134] As already noted, in the natural world, such formulations are prima facie acceptable, chemical agents, for example. However, given the specifics of the social world we would expect to reconsider the notion of agency in that realm. Indeed, Bhaskar does exactly this, arguing that in the

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[130] Harré (1993: 3).   [131] Archer (2000).   [132] Sayer (1992: 121).
[133] Bhaskar (1978).   [134] Bhaskar (1978: 109).

social world agency refers to 'intentional transformative praxis'.[135] He elaborates and expands upon this notion, noting that in order to actualise this praxis agents must also be embodied. 'It is embodied intentionality which earths social life,' and, 'without this concept structure would float free, in a nuomenal or virtual cloud, of agency'.[136] We can summarise Bhaskar's account of agency in the social world, then, as referring to 'embodied, intentional causality, or praxis':[137] In effect Spivak's notion of agency wedded to embodiment; the ability/power to act in accord with intention.

To recap the argument thus far: we have begun with Spivak's account of agency as the 'freedom of subjectivity'. Although a necessary element of any coherent account of agency in the social world it is not sufficient and we have extended this analysis to include Bhaskar's more inclusive definition of 'embodied, intentional causality, or praxis'. But in virtue of what, we might ask, are such powers derived? Clearly, at some level, such powers are simply a result of the intrinsic properties of our 'species being' as outlined above, but this is not sufficient, since agents in the social world are differentially located and many of their powers are a direct result of their social positioning.

Now the term agent actually has two senses. One is that alluded to by Buzan, which refers to the 'capacity to do'. This meaning was rejected since it allowed no means of differentiating between entities in the social world, each with differing properties, but each able to do. The second sense of the term agent relates to the status of an entity as an 'agent of something'. This second sense appears to be of more value to social science than the former since it allows us to link the account of agency developed thus far to the power agents accumulate by virtue of their positioning in a social context.

Part of the problem when discussing this issue is that prevailing linguistic categories, such as the notion of an agent, clamp us in a conceptual vice that precludes any way of thinking of this issue except in these terms. We are tempted, under the force of this vice, to think of agential power as residing in a 'thing' that possesses this power in virtue of it being a thing of that kind. In order to break this vice-like grip I follow Margaret Archer and suggest that we supplement this notion of the 'embodied, intentional causality, or praxis' with two further levels

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[135] Bhaskar (1993b: 393).   [136] Bhaskar (1993b: 164).   [137] Bhaskar (1994: 100).

of agency.[138] Agency now appears as layered and differentiated and inextricably linked to social contexts through the relations in which it is embedded. If we call the level of agency that relates to the 'freedom of subjectivity', agency$_1$, the second level, agency$_2$, refers to the way in which agency$_1$ becomes an agent of something and this something refers to the socio-cultural system into which persons are born and develop. In a sense agency$_2$ precedes agency$_1$. However, although 'our' persons are born into a socio-cultural system, they are not agents of all parts of it. Thus, they become agents of the collectives and groups with which they identify. It should be clear that this is not to be interpreted as a static category, since individuals move between and through such groups and collectives throughout their life span. Hence, they reproduce and/or transform their individual and collective identities as part of maintaining or transforming the socio-cultural structures they inherited at birth.

On this reading, then, everyone is always an agent, but not all agents are equally placed. The social groups and collectives that one is born into crucially affect the potential of agency$_1$ to mobilise the resources embedded in the social field. That is, agents$_2$ are embedded in structures and are always differentially placed. This point is graphically illustrated by Steven Lukes who demonstrates that many collectives and groups are denied an effective say through the use of non-decision-making which serves to keep their concerns off the agenda, and denied any say at all when the social organisation serves to repress potential issues and thus impedes even the possibility of stating related concerns.[139] Agency$_2$, then, plays a crucial role in the development of agency$_1$, without completely determining it. But equally, it plays an important role in setting the conditions of possibility for the next level of agency, that of agency$_3$.

If agency$_1$ is always employed in the singular and agency$_2$ always in the plural, agency$_3$ reverts to the singular. Agency$_3$ refers to those 'positioned-practice places' which agents$_1$ inhabit. Agency$_3$ refers to the social actor. Examples here might be diplomats, prime ministers, soldiers, generals and so on. One way to think of this is that agency$_3$ refers to those 'roles' that agents$_1$ play for agency$_2$. However, I have used the term 'role' here only to facilitate understanding. My preference is

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[138] Archer (1995). This is not to say that the 'freedom of subjectivity' itself cannot be further differentiated. But since my concern here is with a social science and not a psychological science this is not an issue that requires elaboration. See Bhaskar (1994: 98).

[139] Lukes (1974).

to use Bhaskar's notion of 'positioned-practice-place' since this implies no normative content or potential script which $agents_1$ simply must follow.[140] In this sense it is not a pre-scripted role that our agents enact on the social stage, but a 'positioned-place' in which practices take place. Equally important is to disambiguate these 'positioned-practice-places' from the agents that occupy them. The 'positioned-practices' are structural properties that endure irrespective of the agents that occupy them and as such cannot be reduced to the properties of the $agents_1$ that occupy them.

An example of the way in which these three levels of agency are complexly related to each other can be drawn from an examination of the nature of a diplomat. Douglas, our putative diplomat, is an $agent_1$, he has a unique personality that is itself a consequence of his unique personal make-up and the many forms of $agency_2$ and $agency_3$ that have shaped and formed Douglas throughout his life. Nonetheless, at a given point in time Douglas assumes a specific 'positioned-practice-place' within *one* of the realms of $agency_2$ (the diplomatic service) that Douglas inhabits. This 'positioned-practice-place' delineates the function that Douglas now plays in this particular form of $agency_2$. Yet Douglas, because of his potential as an $agent_1$ and his participation in differing forms of $agency_2$, is never an automaton simply practising in accordance with his place in the positioning. Nor is Jane, who is likewise an $agent_1$, and also a member of the same $agency_2$ (the diplomatic service). However, the manner in which Jane carries out her functions as an $agent_3$ differ not only in virtue of the differences between her $agency_1$ and that of Douglas', but also because Jane's life experience of $agency_2$ differs from that of Douglas. With one crucial difference, of course, being that part of Jane's $agency_2$ is to be a woman.

Agency, then, has a tripartite character.[141] Invocations of agency necessarily involve all three dimensions and in my opinion this theory is consistent with the attempted resolution of the agent–structure problem explicated in Bhaskar's TMSA. Transposed into the terms of the agent–structure debate we can see the benefits of this theory. Keen to refute a deterministic structuralism, individualist theories strive to develop

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[140] Bhaskar (1979: 51).

[141] This complex theory of agency outlined above is consistent with Bhaskar's notion of a 'concrete singularity' although Bhaskar adds a fourth dimension – 'various process of rhythmic formation'. See Bhaskar (1994: 78). I have not included this element in my theory of agency since I consider it to constitute an element of the totality of the social field and not specific to agency per se.

an idea of 'autonomous wo/man'. This requires a model of the 'social actor' who is neither a passive puppet of social forces, nor a pre-social Cartesian self. But the effort to present the 'social actor' as his or her own 'sovereign artificer'[142] hits a major problem when one considers how such a model can account for the ability of this actor to play social games. Either we allow our actor freedom to write his or her own scripts, or we accept that our scripts determine the uttered lines.

The introduction of agency$_2$ allows us to address this issue by permitting us to link issues of agency with those of identity.[143] For on this account we become agents$_2$ before we become agents$_1$ and agents$_3$.[144] We are born inhabiting various positions in the social field and belong to particular collectivities and/or groups sharing their privileges or lack of them: as males/females; blacks/whites; foreigners/indigenous; middle class/working class. In short, we are born into a structurally ordered social system in which relational properties, such as privileged and underprivileged, are acquired involuntaristically by our agents$_1$. The relational properties that define us as agents of a certain kind are not 'roles' that we occupy through choice, or follow according to some or other social script. Rather agents are relationally positioned in the social field, not acting on the social stage. In this respect agency$_3$ cannot be understood without reference to agency$_2$ and agency$_1$ and vice versa. Equally, these distinctions do not refer to different people, but are ontologically different aspects of the same person. In other words, agency$_3$ is not reducible to agency$_1$ but nonetheless has to be embedded within it in order to bring to any position they occupy the human qualities of reflexivity and creativity. These are precisely those elements that are missing, although necessary in order to remain consistent, from Wendt's adherence to the 'state-as-agent' thesis.

Rethinking state agency

Ultimately, reference to collectives as agents at the level of everyday discourse may be unavoidable as a result of the limits of language. But science should aim to go beyond the language of everyday discourse and explain what lies behind it. And as theorists of international relations we should always expose the tricks of language as tricks when we uncover

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[142] Hollis (1988).

[143] Thus, it might be possible to examine the inability of the Kurds to exercise effective agency and achieve self-determination as a result of the lack of a coherent sense of identity.

[144] Archer (1995).

them as such. The theory of agency detailed above allows us to begin to rethink the notion of the state within IR theory. It allows space for the possibility of ascribing some form of agential status to the state without committing logical absurdities, or necessitating the claim that our chosen referents are merely fictions, or that a reference to one entity is actually a reference to another. Equally, since every reference to agency is seen to involve this tripartite entity, we can avoid the errors of the 'personification theory' of the state. That is, we can avoid attributing to the state a set of powers that are actually located in a different entity. As Bull put it, states are 'very unlike human individuals'.[145]

But what, then, is the state? This is a question that has troubled political philosophers for some time, but which IR scholars seemed collectively to have resolved not to address.[146] It is commonplace among positivists or methodological individualists to treat the state as a synonym for the government. Easton, as already indicated, takes this view. Insofar as we can refer to the state, either it is the officials that comprise it, or it is little other than a metaphor. Easton is here drawing on empiricism's characteristic denial that there are relatively enduring causal mechanisms and/or structures.

From a totally differing theoretical perspective, Erik Ringmar suggests that although the state 'may consist of all kinds of bureaucratic structures, institutional mechanisms and other body-like organs' these need not concern us.[147] For the only reality of the state we can have contact with is a succession of metaphors that are then constructed into a 'narrative concept of the state'.[148] As Ringmar puts it, 'we as subjects are nothing more and nothing less than the stories we tell and that are told about us'.[149] Thus the state, for Ringmar, appears to be nothing other than a story which we tell ourselves and through which we live our lives. Cynthia Weber takes a similar view, arguing, in a phrase reminiscent of Easton's, that '[t]he state is a sign without a referent'.[150]

Underpinning Weber and Ringmar's account, and despite forty-four years of theoretical development, is a form of empiricism similar to that espoused by Easton. The only difference is that Weber and Ringmar's empiricism takes a more contemporary linguistic form. The end result, however, is strikingly similar. As Ringmar puts it when discussing how difficult it is to say that something exists, '[i]f by real existence we mean what substance a certain object is composed of, we will often be at a loss

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[145] Bull (1977: 47). [146] Bosanquet (1899); Willoughby (1896).
[147] Ringmar (1996: 452). [148] Ringmar (1996: 441).
[149] Ringmar (1996: 452). [150] Weber (1995: 123).

for an answer.'[151] Faced with this dilemma, Ringmar suggests a retreat to a form of linguistic empiricism. Given this empiricism it should come as no surprise that Ringmar accepts the analogy between the state and the person, arguing that what we need 'is a "narrative concept of the person" that can correspond to a "narrative concept of the state"'.[152] Empiricism is the handmaiden of methodological individualism.

Contra this, however, a scientific realist ontology allows us to escape the empirical, linguistic and conceptual ontology to which Weber, Ringmar and Easton are wedded and incorporate non-observable entities into our theories. In fact, while we can only know of the state by its effects and through the observation and interpretation of the concrete practices and organisations of government and the processes that constitute what Easton calls the political system, the theoretical concept of the state is necessary in order to *explain* these phenomena. The concept of the state thus refers to an underlying social structure that is real but not empirical, nor merely linguistic, or conceptual. We cannot observe it, though we can experience its power through the activities of its officials.

Perhaps, as suggested at the beginning of this chapter, to throw doubt on the status of the state is to throw doubt on the validity of IR as an academic discipline. Wendt seems to suggest as much when he argues that his decision to focus on the state is purely an analytical move.[153] This is, on one level, a reasonable defence. Everyone, from laypersons to scientists, is obliged to carve up the world in certain ways relevant to the task at hand. As Hollis and Smith put it, '[t]he question is not about abstraction as such, since every science needs to abstract from the variety of the real world in order to theorise'.[154] Without this ability, and given the inchoate mass of data that confronts humans at any point in time, it is difficult to see how science might begin. Feyerabend has even suggested that abstraction is a condition of our very being.[155] Yet according to scientific realism such abstractions cannot be arbitrary and always come at a cost. The best scientific abstractions are those that allow us to capture most of the attributes and ways of being of the object under scrutiny. Wendt's abstraction vis-à-vis state agency has serious consequences and leaves him unable to account for many phenomena he claims his theory can explain, since the powers that he ascribes to the state reside elsewhere in the social field.

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[151] Ringmar (1996: 450). [152] Ringmar (1996: 441).
[153] Wendt (1995: 71–78). [154] Hollis and Smith (1990: 128).
[155] See, for example, Feyerabend's comments in Parascandalo and Hosle (1995: 115–148).

Recent attempts to rethink the state within IR theory have been a direct consequence of the intrusion by sociologists into the sovereign territory of IR.[156] Although this burgeoning literature is important, it ultimately fails to address the ontological status of the state, and more specifically, whether or not the state can legitimately be considered an agent. In this section I want to outline what a scientific realist theory of the state might look like. The following comments are not intended to be an exhaustive account of the state. Rather, they are merely suggestive, in that they provide a necessary starting point for a reconceptualisation of the state more in keeping with scientific realist philosophy than that offered by Wendt, Dessler or Carlsnaes. Where possible I will link this account of the state to the theory of agency outlined above. In order to proceed, however, it will be necessary to move back from concerns with agency to those of structure.

I want to identify two differing ways we use the term structure. First, we speak of the structure of a building: a society or molecule, a structure, that is, between two or more elements. Used in this manner structure refers to a relationship between two or more entities. Second, we call these structured entities themselves structures, including the parts (elements, components, relata) whose relations constitute the structure in the first sense of the word. Thus, for example, we might ask of a particular building: 'what is that structure over there?' To differentiate these two uses I will follow Andrew Collier and use the neologism 'structuratum' to refer to the second use of structure, and reserve the use of the word 'structure' to refer to the relations between the parts, or components, of a structuratum.[157] Thus states, for example, can be considered as structurata that are structured in various ways.

It was for reasons related to this distinction that I rejected Giddens' account of structure as 'rules and resources' in chapter 4, since I argued that these constituted some of the elements which go to make up structure and should not themselves be considered social structures. Thus a given state (or entity), owing to its structuring in a certain way, would, on this reading, constitute a structuratum with a certain set of powers derived from its constituent elements and its structure. Structure, then, refers to the relations between the constituent elements that make up a structuratum. A structuratum, we might say, emerges out of the various structures that make it up, and it has a concrete existence, whilst a

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[156] See, for example, Evans et al. (1985); Giddens (1985); Halliday (1987).
[157] Collier (1989: 85).

structure, as a set of relations, is abstract. We need, however, to be cautious here, for structure, as an abstract entity, does not refer merely to a concept, or to a mere theoretical entity. As argued in chapter 4, relations really exist, independently of our concept of them.[158] They are abstract only in the sense that they exist as relations between their relata. They still, however, possess causal power.[159]

A state can be considered a structuratum constituted of many structured organisational entities and institutions, which are themselves structured in certain ways. That is to say that the organisations and institutions which (in part) constitute the state stand in complex relations, hence are structured into a certain form. The entities that stand in these relations are ontologically varied and encompass both material and social aspects of existence. Hence one could identify economic organisations and institutions, political organisations and institutions, ideological organisations and institutions, cultural organisations and institutions, and so on. In part, these organisations and institutions, as well as the social groups, and individuals, that inhabit them, will have different components, but in large measure the same components related differently. And it is the totality of this structured ensemble that is the state.

Thus, Tony Blair, for example, may relate to: (1) his local shopkeeper as a consumer; (2) the cabinet as political leader; (3) the leader of the opposition as ideological *and* political opponent; (4) ethnic minorities in Britain as political leader from within an overlapping cultural system; and (5) his wife as an economic provider (perhaps) and husband. These differing sets of relations generate differing structural tendencies and these tendencies co-determine the development of history, thus making a mockery of both Waltz's structural monism and any attempt to maintain sharp distinctions between differing aspects of social activity. Equally, the brief sketch of Mr Blair's placement in the social field shows the value of understanding his actions through the account of agency detailed above. For on the multi-layered account developed here, Mr Blair never appears as a coherent, singular, unified agent with easily identifiable goals, but instead is driven through multiple social complexes.

This distinction between a structure and a structuratum, although useful, does not circumvent the plethora of questions that arise when one raises the issue of the ontological status of the state. Is the state a

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[158] Ossorio (1996).   [159] Harré and Madden (1975).

political subject, an organism or a machine? Is it a social relation that reflects divisions within society, or a forum for the negation of political conflict? Should we define the state in terms of its legal form, that is, as a 'legal person'? Does the state have moral responsibilities? What are the most important aspects of the state, its coercive capacities, its institutional and/or organisational composition and boundaries, or its place within the international system, or society of states? How are we to understand the relationships between the state and law, the state and politics, the state and civil society? Can the state be studied on its own, in isolation from both the domestic and international conditions of its possibility? To what extent is state power autonomous from the flows of power within the wider social field? What are the sources and limits of state power? Clearly, answers to these questions are important, although equally clearly, they are beyond the scope of this book. However, it is possible to suggest some ways in which to begin to rethink the state using the account of agency developed here.

As a structuratum, that is a 'structured organisational and institutional ensemble', the state does not and cannot exercise power. It is not a unified subject that possesses the capacity to exercise power. Rather than talk of the power of the state we should refer to the various state capacities inscribed in it as an institutional and organisational ensemble.[160] How far and in what way such powers are actualised will depend upon the action, reaction and interaction of specific agents, understood here in their tripartite form, located within and beyond this complex ensemble. In short, the state does not exercise power, but facilitates the exercise of power by agents. The powers of the state are only ever activated through the agency of structurally located political actors located in specific structural conjunctures. It is only these agents$_1$ who bring into play specific powers and state capacities that are inscribed in particular state institutions that act.

Marx argues that the state is a 'real-concrete' object, formed through 'the concrete synthesis of multiple determinations'.[161] However, insofar as these complex multiple determinations will necessarily consist of organisations and institutions, they will also be dependent upon the practices and discourses of those agents whose practices constitute those same organisations and institutions through which the state is constituted as a 'concrete object'. This is the 'duality of practice'. It means that the state is also to some extent constituted as a changing discursive

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[160] Jessop (1990).   [161] Marx (1966: 100).

object of discourse and is best considered, not only as a 'real-concrete' object, but also as a 'product-in-process'. Hence, in common with most social objects, the state has a dual existence: it has both its concrete form and its discursive form. Hence, there will never be a moment when we achieve a full account of the identity of the state.

The sheer complexity of the state is derived, in part, from its placement and function in society. That is, the state is only one of many institutional practices in any given social field. But modern states also play a major role in the legitimacy and maintenance of social order, which provides the structural framework in which non-state institutions function.[162] Hence, the state guarantees the legitimacy of social order, which in turn guarantees the legitimacy of the state. Thus, although the state plays a unique role in a given society it is not simply one among equals. The state is the pre-eminent institutional structure. But there are significant areas of overlap between state activities and other institutional orders. Equally, differing institutional orders have differing structures and they each have their own mechanisms and organisations through which they maintain their own status and influence others. Thus, although playing a role in all of these domains, the state may not enjoy direct and unmediated access to them. However, where elite membership of various practices overlaps to a significant extent, then state officials may be able to play a direct role in non-state institutional orders, and managers of non-state fields of activity may be able to exert a greater influence on state projects.[163]

The fact that the state is a 'complex institutional and organisational ensemble', constituted in and through material resources, state practices and discourses and differing structural configurations, and is endowed with political responsibility and recognised as a juridical subject, does not entail that it is a moral or psychological subject capable of independent action.[164] It may be possible to argue that the 'reason of state' becomes so deeply internalised by state officials that they orientate their actions totally in accord with this 'reason of state', such that it forms an essential part of their identity. In such circumstances, one might begin to talk of the state as a collective subject, or individual. I would reject this, not only in virtue of the sheer complexity of the state as a complex institutional and organisational ensemble, and thus to talk of this collective subject is really a reference to only part of it (the state officials), but

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[162] Held (1989); Holsti (1996); Krasner (1984); Mann (1990); Morris (1998); Poggi (1978, 1990); Porter (1994).
[163] Useem (1984).   [164] Jessop (1990).

also because this portrays state officials as mere throughputs, machines, that is, whose actions are totally determined by this 'reason of state'.

Thus, and to reiterate, the state, as a complex institutional and organisational ensemble, can only exercise power insofar as its structural imperatives are realised in the practices and modes of thought of state officials. The state cannot exercise power independent of those agents that act on its behalf. How far and in what way such powers are realised will depend upon the action, reaction and interaction of specific social forces located within and beyond the complex ensemble. In short, the state does not exercise power, but constrains and/or enables embodied agents to act. It is these agents who activate the specific powers and capacities of the state inscribed in particular institutions and organisations.

Because of this, it follows that these structural powers and capacities and the manifold ways in which they are activated cannot be understood by focusing solely on the state. For considered as a structuratum, rather than as a real or fictive subject, the state appears as a complex ensemble of competing forces which offer unequal chances to groups within and outside the state to act for differing political purposes. Jessop is correct to highlight the manner in which the state displays an element of 'strategic selectivity', wherein some groups benefit from the particular form of a given state to the detriment of other groups. In this sense the state is 'strategically selective'.[165] Equally, although the state does have its own distinctive resources and powers, and although these are never activated in the absence of agency$_1$ and agency$_3$, it also has distinctive liabilities that emerge as a result of its need for resources that are produced elsewhere in the social field.

Thus, for example, a democratic state requires agents$_1$ and agents$_3$ committed, at some level, to democratic norms and principles. If such agents were no longer to be found, then such a state would encounter severe difficulty in remaining democratic. Hence the powers of the state are always dependent upon the agents which act for it. Moreover, the realisation of these state powers depends not only upon specific agents located in time and space, but also on the structural ties between the state system and its encompassing political system, the strategic links among state officials and other political forces, as well as the complex web of interdependencies and social networks linking the state system to its wider environment.

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[165] Jessop (1990: 367).

From this latter point emerges a realisation that the state cannot be examined in isolation from the domestic and international system, or society, in which it is constituted. The state must be related not only to the broader political system but also to its wider social and cultural environment. This should not be taken to imply that the state has no distinctive properties and can therefore be derived from, or reduced to, and explained independent of, other factors and forces in the social field. For as an emergent entity and structuratum the state is still characterised by its distinctive structural make-up that endows it with a unique set of powers, properties and liabilities. In this very limited sense it may be possible to talk of state rationale, or 'reason of state' to use Foucault's term.[166] However, this 'reason of state' should not blind us to the fact that the state remains only one part of a complex social field and therefore must be related to this wider social locale. For on the theory of agency advanced here, the state can only be understood by examining the emergence of individual initiatives to develop and/or safeguard collective projects. Agents, after all, are agents of something. This also means that the attempt to explain international phenomena in terms of isolated levels of analysis is flawed. The international emerges out of the social, not the domestic; hence the analytical dividing lines drawn around the state provide an illusory picture of simplicity in a complex world.

Late modern societies, in particular, are incredibly complex and differentiated such that no element or structural principle could be said to be 'determinate in the last instance'.[167] Nor could any one structuratum form the apex of a singular hierarchy of command whose rule extends everywhere. If there is a global system its logical form would be heterarchical, even if this was not the actual form in which it manifested itself. Heterarchical here appears not as a Waltzian political ordering principle but as an ontological principle blocking the a priori designation of a dominant element of the social field that determines all others.[168] That is, no one element can be said to dominate at all times, and theories that attempt to reduce all social outcomes to one structural principle must be rejected. This highlights an important limit to the role of theory in social research.

In this respect the 'structural monism' advocated by Waltz, the 'cultural reductionism' of contemporary postmodern theory and the

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[166] Foucault (1991).   [167] Luhmann (1982). See also Albert and Hilkermeier (2003).
[168] Kontopoulos (1993: 211–242).

'biological reductionism' of socio-biology are all to be rejected. Instead, in today's increasingly globalised world there are many differing sub-systems and centres of power which display varying degrees of autonomy, existing, to a certain extent, beyond the control of other forces, including the state. Each of these differing sub-systems is none the less involved in a complex web of interactions with other sub-systems and faces the problem of the inability of its agents directly to control the actions of other agents in its environment. Thus, a paradox emerges in which the modern state is seen to exist in an environment that displays a growing independence and interdependence among it parts.

Finally, it is clear that the state must be analysed in terms of the three levels of agency detailed above, allied to a relational account of structure suggested in chapter 4. The state only functions insofar as embodied agents feel predisposed to carry out those functions. This is agency$_1$ in action. But also, given that the state appears as a complex institutional ensemble – a structuratum – and given also that the particular form of its structure endows it with its own rationale and operational procedures, and given also that persons are born into it and identify with it, then the state might be considered a form of agency$_2$.[169] Equally, the state is also a site of political practices that seek to deploy its various institutions, organisations and capacities for specific purposes, and this invokes agency$_3$. Rather than attempt to define the core of the state in a priori terms we need to explore how its boundaries are established through specific practices within and beyond the state. As such, one is claiming neither that this exhausts the state nor that it is a unified, unitary, coherent ensemble or agent.

What the above discussion implies is that states are emergent tendential phenomena that are subject to various and conflicting structural principles. This suggests that the contingent structure of the state cannot, *pace* state-centred approaches, be defined independently of the state projects that happen to be particularly hegemonic or dominant at any given moment. There is never a point when the state project is completed within a given territory and thereafter operates according to its own fixed and inevitable logic. Nor is there ever a moment when a single state project, even war, becomes so hegemonic that all state officials will simply follow universal rules that define their duties and interests as members of a distinct governing class. For, no matter how often

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[169] This need not always be the case, however. Individuals may feel no allegiance to particular states into which they are born.

constitutions and international law declare and attest to the unity and sovereignty of the state as a juridical subject, there are always conflicting patterns of relationships within states.[170]

Nor do national boundaries constitute a fixed horizon for emergent state projects; there is no more reason to rule out strategies aimed at building multi- and transnational networks and circuits of state power than there is to exclude local or regional state projects. These considerations suggest that state actions should not be attributed to the state as an originating subject, but rather should be understood as the emergent, often unintended and complex result of what rival agents within states have done and are doing on a complex strategic terrain.

When combined with the account of agency developed above, this account of the state is suggestive of ways for research to proceed and provides for a more adequate synthesis of the material and ideational dimensions of international relations, and a more nuanced approach to the agent–structure relationship for IR theory. It allows theorists interested in the state as a unit of analysis to define their field of research as the state without adopting a reified concept of the state. Instead, it could mean that, within the general context of research concerned with the dialectic of structure, strategy and agency, their special field of interest is state power. Thus, state theorists could focus on the distinctive ways in which the specific institutional and organisational ensemble identified as the state materialises social power relations, as well as conducting an examination of the role of the political imagination, in which ideas about the state play a crucial orientating role in articulating and mobilising social forces around specific state projects (thus allowing scope for collective agency), and which finds expression both on the terrain and through the idea of the state.

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[170] It is for this reason that Cynthia Weber claims that the state is a sign without a referent. For Weber, what the state should represent is a unified coherent community. Since no such community exists, there can be no such thing as the state. See Weber (1995: 1–10).

6 **The agent–structure problem: epistemology**

If the ontological aspects of the agent–structure problem are the most fundamental, epistemological and methodological issues have nonetheless emerged. The core epistemological issue, at least as contemporary debates frame the matter, concerns the extent to which the social world might be studied in a manner consistent with the methods of the natural sciences and the extent to which any epistemological distinctions which do arise mark out the study of the social world as both qualitatively and quantitatively different in kind from the study of the natural world.[1] Wendt, Dessler and Carlsnaes argue that, although the ontological differences between objects in the social sciences and those in the natural sciences entail different methods and epistemic standards, these differences do not represent a set of fundamental distinctions such that the social and natural worlds are 'worlds apart'.[2] Hollis and Smith, Onuf and Kratochwil take a differing view, arguing that explanation and understanding are two fundamentally differing modes of social inquiry.[3]

This issue can legitimately be described as the key debate surrounding contemporary theoretical developments within the discipline.[4] The holy grail of this debate is the elusive *via media*, or a 'bridge' that could be built across differing research traditions. In general, those who argue against the possibility of such a *via media* frame their arguments in epistemological terms.[5] Epistemological differences, we are led to believe, 'militate against the emergence of a genuinely collaborative, truly integrated field' of study.[6] I consider this to be wrong.

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[1] Hollis (1996).   [2] Carlsnaes (1992, 1994); Dessler (1989); Wendt (1987, 1991, 1996).
[3] Hollis and Smith (1990, 1991, 1992); Kratochwil (1989); Onuf (1989).
[4] Adler (1997).   [5] Checkel (2004: 242).   [6] Sil (2000: 354).

It is wrong, because whilst they may be very real reasons why an integrated body of knowledge is not possible, these reasons are rarely, if ever, primarily, or only, epistemological. The view of the *via media* as an epistemological problem emerges as a result of two closely related factors. First is a very poor understanding of the scope and meaning of epistemological problems within the discipline. Second, and as a result of this lack of understanding, is the widespread use of the term epistemology to refer to general worldviews, theories or paradigms. Hence, the view that rationalism, constructivism, feminism and post-modernism, for example, are epistemological positions is widespread. Rarely, if ever, are we told why the differences between these theoretical positions are legitimately treated in epistemological terms. Never is it explained why epistemologies cannot be integrated and/or combined, apart, that is, from vague allusions to incommensurability. This is to misuse and abuse the term epistemology. It is a misuse and abuse of the term because epistemological positions do not operate as the discontinuous and discrete entities this view suggests. Within each of the various theoretical positions that currently circulate within social theory, for example, we can find a range of epistemological supports used to defend specific knowledge claims.

Foucault, for example, clearly placed great reliance on empiricism, whereas Derrida tends towards a more rationalist framework. But Foucault also bases many of his knowledge claims on rationalism just as Derrida employs empiricist techniques. The same can be demonstrated of any theoretical position within IR. Certainly, particular theoretical positions can tend to privilege some epistemological supports over others, but this does not mean that that whole theoretical tradition can be written off as epistemologically monistic. Moreover, even when theoretical positions do privilege one epistemological support, this is generally the result of a particular ontological, or methodological, set of commitments, not some a priori allegiance to that epistemology.

None of this should be taken to imply that epistemology is unimportant. Epistemology is a vital aspect of the research enterprise. Its value, however, is a posterior, and always in relation to specific knowledge claims, claims which are embedded with ontological considerations and/or derived from the application of particular methodological techniques. As such, a theorist, or researcher, has no chosen epistemological position prior to making a particular knowledge claim, and the particular epistemological support advanced for any given knowledge claim will vary depending on the content of that claim. Epistemological

debate in science never operates in an ontological void.[7] So there are no a priori epistemological reasons why the *via media* is not possible. But, as should be clear by the end of this chapter, if the epistemological *via media* is not an impossible project it is also not needed either.

There is one major way, however, in which epistemological problems do militate against an integrated body of social knowledge, but not the comparison of knowledge claims. In the social sciences we may never 'know' that any given account is correct. Hence, we may be unable decisively to decide, for example, between an account of the causes of international terrorism that privileges issues of language and identity over an account that foregrounds material factors and national interest. Notice that what differentiates these two accounts is their respective ontological claims regarding the causes of international terrorism, not a commitment to a cherished epistemological position. Of course, when confronted with these two accounts, we can, and do, compare them, and we reach personal and collective judgements about them. And we do so on the basis of a range of epistemological supports that the various accounts provide. What we are unable to say with absolute certainty is that one is right and the other wrong. In this respect, the social sciences are never going to have the same epistemological status as the natural sciences. We may, on the basis of the evidence, prefer one account to the other and in making this choice we will ultimately assess the arguments on either side. Moreover, the fact that we can never know that a given account is correct is an epistemological situation we would face even if we had only one account. Thus, there is no a priori epistemological reason why rationalists are unable to assess the arguments advanced by postmodern accounts and vice versa. They may not agree with them, of course, but this is a different matter and is hardly surprising.

In many respects the 'epistemological shield' argument serves as a defence mechanism to safeguard one's chosen theoretical approach, as well as providing a useful supporting argument against engaging with alternative views. As such, it is potentially the most damaging of positions since it stifles debate and fosters a form of gang mentality with little

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[7] Even when philosophers debate the relative merits of one or other epistemology they take these epistemologies as the ontological basis of their claims about epistemology. However, it is fair to say that philosophers of knowledge debate the strengths and weaknesses of various epistemological positions. Social scientists ought to be aware of these debates insofar as they may impact upon their own knowledge claims. Social scientists do not, however, need to wait until epistemologists have settled all their own disagreements, not least because no such agreement seems forthcoming.

or no need for members of particular epistemological sects to engage with alternative views.[8] The reason why this 'epistemological shield' argument has become accepted practice throughout the discipline can be located in the manner in which positivism attempted to delineate what could be counted as legitimate knowledge. Positivists claimed that only knowledge produced according to positivist principles could rightly be called knowledge. This explains why positivism came to be known as an epistemology. But we should no more accept this limited positivist account of epistemology than we need accept a positivist account of science. The fact that the discipline has yet to challenge this positivist appropriation of epistemology is evidence of how deeply embedded the positivist approach to science still remains within the discipline.

In this chapter, I demonstrate why this epistemological view of the *via media* is wrong. In short, my claim is not that the *via media* is impossible, but that it is not necessary. It is not necessary because there are simply no epistemological differences that provide insurmountable barriers to the testing of knowledge claims, and differing theoretical positions are not closed modes of thought, but rather are always already deeply integrated and constructed out of engagements with each other. As such, an epistemological *via media* is not necessary because there is nothing epistemologically fundamental to bridge. This should not be taken to imply that there are no important ontological differences between social and natural objects. Obviously there are, and these differences will require that we adapt our methodological strategies appropriately. Yet as Wendt has put it, methodologies are not epistemologies and we need to keep the two realms apart.

The scientific realist argument is that each science demarcates its own object domain, and as such, each object domain will entail its methodology apropos its study.[9] Thus, the study of atomic particles will require a different methodology to that required by the study of chemical reactions. This, scientific realists argue, allows us to see that the dividing line(s) is not between the natural and the social worlds, but that between

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[8] Scheff (1995).
[9] Thus, for example, biologists can, largely, be committed empiricists, whereas cosmologists, with limited access to empirical data, must embrace an epistemology more rationalist, or pragmatist in nature. This is not to claim that biologists do not, at times, utilise rationalism or some other epistemological position, or that cosmologists do not at times have access to empirical data to help in the validation of their theories. The point is simply that the object domain will be an influential factor in determining the most appropriate epistemology. This helps illuminate the point that epistemological considerations are derivative of ontological issues.

differing sciences. For scientific realism, then, the appropriate metaphor is not that of a sharp dividing line between natural and social science, but that of a series of distinct sciences with potential areas of overlapping methodological and/or epistemological concerns and techniques. What provides the conditions of possibility for such overlapping epistemological and methodological frameworks is the simple fact that these 'sciences' are social practices orientated towards the production of human knowledge by humans. And humans only have a limited number of ways by which they come to know the world.

The scientific realist account of naturalism, then, differs from that proposed by positivist philosophers. For scientific realism, there is no one scientific method, or epistemology, that is available to be rejected or accepted in relation to the study of the social world. In this respect Hollis and Smith's talk of a 'naturalist epistemology' or 'interpretative epistemology' commits a category error.[10] In what sense, then, might we say that scientific realism espouses a form of naturalism? Here we have reached 'bedrock' at a semantic quibble. Bhaskar has stated that he cares little whether his philosophy is labelled 'critical naturalism' or 'critical anti-naturalism'.[11] His concern is to illuminate and reject the dichotomous way in which debate between naturalists and anti-naturalists has been conducted thus far. In this respect, the aim is not to introduce a new orthodoxy,[12] a new metatheoretical position that obliterates all differences, but rather, to open up the possibility of an 'engaged pluralism' instead of the debilitating 'disengaged pluralism' that currently infects the discipline.

This chapter will place this epistemological issue at centre stage. The first section will be a brief, but important, discussion of epistemology drawn from philosophy. This understanding of epistemology is important since Hollis and Smith claim that the epistemological questions have been neglected and/or downplayed by the structurationist writers. I aim to show that this neglect of epistemology is acceptable since the agent–structure problem is primarily an ontological, not an epistemological issue. In this section I also hope to demonstrate how the discipline's treatment of epistemological issues is confused. In the second section, and armed with a more adequate understanding of what is, and what is not, an epistemological question, I will explicate the general contours of the epistemological arguments presented by Wendt, Dessler and Carlsnaes, and detail Hollis and Smith's objections. Particular

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[10] Hollis and Smith (1991).   [11] Bhaskar (1993a: 187).   [12] Kratochwil (2000).

attention will be paid to the issue of the relationship between episte-
mology and ontology in the research process. In addition, in this sec-
tion, I hope to show that all participants in the agent–structure debate
confuse epistemological issues with methodological ones and that this
confusion is itself the result of a relatively undifferentiated notion of
epistemology. In the next section I address the metaphysical underpin-
nings of the position(s) advanced by Hollis and Smith. Finally I conclude
by bringing the arguments together and suggest that Hollis and Smith's
position is, in fact, derived from ontological considerations. In short, the
'two stories thesis' is not an a priori epistemological position but rests
on an unthematised set of ontological claims.

Epistemology

Epistemology has a long and venerable tradition within philosophy. Ety-
mologically derived from the Greek 'episteme', meaning knowledge,
and 'logos' meaning theory, it is the branch of philosophy concerned
with the theory of knowledge. The main problems with which episte-
mology is concerned include the definition of knowledge and related
concepts; the sources and criteria of knowledge; the kinds of knowledge
possible and the degree to which each is certain; and the exact relation
between the one who knows and the object known. Thus, epistemo-
logical questions are those concerned with the nature and derivation
of knowledge, the scope of knowledge and the reliability of claims to
knowledge. Or, to put it even more simply, epistemological questions are
typically concerned with the grounds we have for accepting or reject-
ing beliefs.[13] It is important to stress that although it will be argued
that epistemology is primarily concerned with the grounds we have for
accepting and/or rejecting beliefs, this should not be taken to imply that
knowledge has no relationship to the objects of which it is knowledge.
On the contrary, more often than not the grounds for the acceptance
and/or rejection of a particular set of beliefs will be derived from the
relationship between the knowledge and the object of such knowledge.

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[13] Here I think we have to accept that the commonly accepted notion of a non-foundational
epistemology is a non sequitur. That is, the rejection of the idea that our epistemological
foundations are ahistorical and immutable does not entail that we have no foundations.
Even Rorty's 'poetic irony', for example, accepts 'poetic irony' as the grounds for knowl-
edge claims. Likewise, Nietzschean perspectivism 'grounds' knowledge claims in per-
spectives. Without these grounds, claims to knowledge could not 'get off the ground'. See
Rorty (1980); Nietzsche (1910). See Wight (1999) for a critique.

Hence ontology and epistemology, although analytically separable, are always linked.[14]

Present-day epistemological inquiry has a distinctive sceptical sheen, with many postmodern philosophers, in particular, taking an anti-epistemological stance.[15] This deep scepticism, although prevalent in much contemporary social theory, is not the only epistemological option and three other epistemological positions lay claim to our attention: rationalism, empiricism and pragmatism.[16] Each of these epistemological positions has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy and if we trace their history and development we can note not only the differences, but also the ways in which they borrow from and feed off each other in a manner that directly contradicts claims that epistemologies are mutually exclusive.[17]

The earliest recorded epistemological inquiries are those of the Greek Sophists, who, in the fifth century BC, questioned the possibility of reliable and objective knowledge. For the Sophists the real problem concerning knowledge was how we could ever know that we knew. Gorgias, a leading member of the school, articulated this view, arguing that nothing really exists, that if anything did exist it could not be known, and that if knowledge were possible, it could not be communicated. Another prominent Sophist, Protagoras, likewise maintained that no person's opinions can be said to be more correct than another's, because each is the sole judge of his or her own experience. These explorations laid out the terrain of philosophical scepticism.[18]

Plato tried to answer the Sophists by proposing the existence of a world of unchanging and invisible forms, or ideas, of which it is possible to have exact and certain knowledge, although not experiences. The things one sees and touches, Plato maintained, are imperfect copies of the pure forms studied in mathematics and philosophy. Accordingly, only the type of abstract reasoning associated with these disciplines yields genuine knowledge, whereas reliance on sense perception produces vague and inconsistent opinions. Plato concluded that

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[14] Hollis and Smith (1996: 112).

[15] See, for example, Alexander (1995); Ferrâe (1998); Plotnitsky (1994); Rorty (1980).

[16] These categories are not exhaustive and Popperian falsification, coherence, conventionalism and perhaps intuition are all epistemological candidates that are visible in virtue of their absence. However, the typology detailed here presents a valid one insofar as all other positions can be shown to have been derived from one or other of these categories. On this see, for example, Pollock (1987).

[17] The following discussion is taken from Wedberg (1982a, 1982b, 1984); Potter (1993).

[18] Rankin (1983); Rescher (1980); Unger (1975).

philosophical contemplation of the unseen world of forms is the highest goal of human life, thus setting the ground for rationalist theories of knowledge.[19]

Empiricism has its roots in Aristotle who followed Plato in regarding abstract knowledge as superior to any other, but disagreed as to the proper method of achieving it. Aristotle maintained that almost all knowledge is derived from experience: knowledge is gained either directly, by abstracting the defining traits of a species, or indirectly, by deducing new facts from those already known, in accordance with the rules of logic. Careful observation and strict adherence to the rules of logic, which were first set down in systematic form by Aristotle, would help guard against the pitfalls the Sophists had exposed.[20]

The roots of pragmatism, and its links to empiricism, can be traced to the Stoic and Epicurean schools who agreed with Aristotle that knowledge originates in sense perception, but against both Aristotle and Plato, maintained that knowledge is to be valued as a practical guide to life, rather than an end in itself. The validity of knowledge, on this reading, is merely pragmatic and can only be determined in practice.[21]

Although these epistemological positions form the backdrop against which all contemporary inquiries are framed, it should be remembered that they are not exhaustive of the possibilities, and indeed, another 'foundation' of knowledge, although much discredited in our present 'scientific age', once dominated. The Scholastic philosopher St Thomas Aquinas and other philosophers of the Middle Ages, for example, although keen to restore confidence in reason and experience after the Dark Ages, blended rational methods with faith into a unified system of beliefs. Aquinas followed Aristotle in regarding perception as the starting point, and logic as the intellectual procedure, for arriving at reliable knowledge of nature, but he considered faith in scriptural authority as the ultimate source of authority for knowledge claims. Hence, for Aquinas, religious faith provides the appropriate grounds for knowledge.[22]

From the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century, the main issue in epistemology concerned the debate between reasoning (rationalism) and sense perception (empiricism).[23] For the rationalists, of whom the

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[19] Plato (1956); Pereboom (1999); Shiner (1974); Stenmark (1995).
[20] Butler (1999); Charles (2000); McKeon (2001); McLeish (1999).
[21] Inwood (2003); Sambursky (1959); Sandbach (1985).
[22] Aquinas (1951); Aquinas and Hood (2002); Gilson (1929).
[23] Aune (1970); De Santillana and Zilsel (1941); Jarrett et al. (1978). For an excellent overview of this debate as it relates to the social sciences see Layder (1990).

French philosopher René Descartes, the Dutch philosopher Benedictus de Spinoza, and the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz were the leaders, the main source of knowledge was deductive reasoning based on self-evident principles, or axioms.[24] For the empiricists, such as the English philosophers Francis Bacon and John Locke, the main source and final test of knowledge was sense perception.[25] Bacon outlined the era of modern science by criticising the medieval reliance on tradition and authority and also by setting down new rules of scientific method, including the first set of rules of inductive logic ever formulated.[26] Locke attacked the rationalist belief that the principles of knowledge are intuitively self-evident, arguing that all knowledge is derived from experience, either from experience of the external world, which stamps sensations on the mind, or from internal experience, which involves the mind reflecting on its own activities.[27] Human knowledge of external physical objects, he claimed, is always subject to the errors of the senses, and hence one could not have absolutely certain knowledge of the physical world.[28]

The idealist George Berkeley agreed with Locke that knowledge comes through ideas, but he denied Locke's claim that a distinction can be made between ideas and objects.[29] Berkeley radicalised this insight and declared that all objects were in fact ideas. That is, for Berkeley there was no material substance and all matter, such as stones and tables, is revealed to be collections of ideas or sensations that exist only in minds for so long as they are perceived.[30] Berkeley can be seen as a successor of the Greek Sophists. Recognising that solipsism beckoned, however (since there was no way to account for the persistence of things over time, or for the fact that we seem to observe the same thing at the same time), Berkeley welded his rationalism to religion in order to ground knowledge and claimed that God produces the appropriate sensations in us when in the presence of material objects. Thus, Berkeley's epistemology can be seen to be a blend of scepticism, rationalism and theism.[31]

David Hume, on the other hand, and driven by a rampant scepticism, continued the empiricist tradition, and rejected Berkeley's conclusion that knowledge was of ideas only.[32] He divided all knowledge into two

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[24] Cottingham (1992); Descartes (1968); Jolley (1995); Leibniz (1953); Spinoza (1909).
[25] Bacon (1905, 1974); Locke (1969).   [26] Bacon (1905); Vickers (1987); Weinberger (1985).
[27] Locke (1969); Ayers (1993).   [28] Locke (1969); Thiel (2002).
[29] Berkeley and Fraser (1901, 1988); Grayling (1986); Tipton (1974).
[30] Tipton (1974).   [31] Sillem (1957).   [32] Hume (1948, 1962, 1967).

kinds. First was knowledge of relations of ideas, that is, the knowledge found in mathematics and logic, which is exact and certain but provides no information about the world. Second was knowledge of matters of fact, that is, the knowledge derived from sense perception. Hume argued that most knowledge of matters of fact depends upon cause and effect, and since no logical connection exists between any given cause and its effect, one cannot hope to know any future matter of fact with certainty.[33] Thus the most reliable laws of science might not remain true, a conclusion that was to have a revolutionary impact on philosophy and has since become known as the 'problem of induction'.[34]

Immanuel Kant tried to solve the crisis precipitated by Locke and brought to a climax by Hume, and his proposed solution combined elements of rationalism with elements of empiricism.[35] He agreed with the rationalists that one can have exact and certain knowledge, but he followed the empiricists in holding that such knowledge is more informative about the structure of thought than about the world outside of thought. He distinguished three kinds of knowledge: analytical a priori, which is exact and certain but uninformative, because it makes clear only what is contained in definitions; synthetic a posteriori, which conveys information about the world learned from experience, but is subject to the errors of the senses; and synthetic a priori, which is discovered by pure intuition and is both exact and certain, for it expresses the necessary conditions that the mind imposes on all objects of experience.[36] Mathematics and philosophy, according to Kant, provide this latter form of knowledge. Since Kant, one of the most frequently argued questions in epistemology has been whether such a thing as synthetic a priori knowledge really exists.[37]

In the nineteenth century, G. W. F. Hegel revived the rationalist claim that absolutely certain knowledge of reality can be obtained by equating the processes of thought, nature and history.[38] Hegel inspired an interest in history and a historical approach to knowledge that was further emphasised by Herbert Spencer in Great Britain. Spencer and the French philosopher Auguste Comte brought attention to the importance of sociology as an object of study, and both extended the principles of empiricism to the study of society.[39]

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[33] Hume (1948).
[34] On this, see, for example, Chalmers (1992); Eintalu (2001); Howson (2000); Wright (1957).
[35] Kant (1934).   [36] Kant (1934); Parrini (1994).
[37] See Aune (1970); Parrini (1994).   [38] Hegel (1931, 1971, 1977a, 1977b).
[39] Andreski (1974); Comte (1983); Evans-Pritchard (1970).

In the early twentieth century, epistemological problems were thoroughly discussed, and subtle shades of difference grew into rival schools. Special attention was given to the process of perception: the relation between the act of perceiving something, and the thing said to be known as a result of the perception. A method for dealing with the problem of clarifying the relation between the act of knowing and the object known was developed by Edmund Husserl.[40] He outlined an elaborate procedure that he called phenomenology, by which one is said to be able to distinguish the way things appear to be from the way one thinks they really are, thus supposedly gaining a more precise understanding of the conceptual foundations of knowledge. The phenomenalists maintained that the objects of knowledge are the same as the objects perceived.

The American school of pragmatism, founded by the philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey at the turn of the twentieth century, carried empiricism further by maintaining that knowledge is an instrument of action and that all beliefs should be judged by their usefulness as rules for predicting experiences.[41]

During the second quarter of the twentieth century, two schools of thought emerged, each indebted to the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.[42] The first of these schools, logical empiricism or logical positivism, had its origins in Vienna, but it soon spread to England and the United States.[43] The logical empiricists insisted that there is only one kind of knowledge – scientific knowledge – and that any valid knowledge claim must be verifiable in experience and hence, that much that had passed for philosophy was neither true nor false but literally meaningless. This so-called verifiability criterion of meaning has undergone changes as a result of discussions among the logical empiricists

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[40] Adorno (1983); Dreyfus and Hall (1982); Hill and Haddolk (2000); Husserl (1982); Husserl and Welton (1999); Keller (1999); Murphy (1980); Soffer (1991); Welton (2000, 2003).

[41] Peirce (1940, 1997); James (1956); Dewey (1958); Ayer (1968); Chiasson (2001); Cormier (2001); Hookway (2000); Margolis (1986); Menand (1997, 2002); Mounce (1997); Murphy and Rorty (1990); Rescher (2000); Stewart (1997); Will and Westphal (1997).

[42] These two schools differ in that they draw their inspiration from differing, and arguably contradictory, elements of Wittgenstein's thought. The logical positivists take their inspiration from Wittgenstein's early work. See Wittgenstein (1922). Wittgenstein's later work inspired much of contemporary philosophy's infatuation with linguistics. See Wittgenstein (1953). See Canfield (1981); Cavell (1979); Morawetz (1978); Phillips (1977).

[43] Achinstein and Barker (1969); Ayer (1959); Carnap (1937, 2003); Carnap and Kazemier (1962); Cornforth (1955); Friedman (1999); Hanfling (1981); Janik (2001); Kraft (1953); Neurath and McGuinness (1987); Rescher (1985); Stadler (2003); Von Mises (1951); Waismann et al. (1979).

themselves, as well as their critics, but has not been totally discarded. Finally, and following Hume and Kant, the positivists argued that a clear distinction must be maintained between analytic and synthetic statements. More recently the sharp distinction between the analytic and the synthetic has been attacked by a number of philosophers, chief among them W. V. O. Quine, whose overall approach is in the pragmatic tradition.[44]

Recent epistemology, as represented by the second school of thought indebted to Wittgenstein, has taken a 'linguistic turn'.[45] These linguistic analysts undertake to examine the way key epistemological terms are used, terms such as knowledge, perception and probability, and to formulate definitive rules for their use in order to avoid verbal confusion. John Austin, for example, argued that to say a statement was true added nothing to the statement except a promise by the speaker or writer.[46] Austin did not consider truth a quality or property attaching to statements or utterances. Allied to this linguistic thesis a strong neo-pragmatist strand has emerged within the philosophy of science that owes much to the work of Henri Poincaré.[47] According to this 'conventionalism', and under the influence of Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, objectivity, and thus knowledge, is said to derive from a general agreement over the conventions adopted.[48] That is, knowledge is claimed to be disguised conventions that are themselves reflections of prior decisions to adopt one of various possible descriptions.

A strong type of philosophical scepticism has also been revived in the form of what has been called postmodern epistemology.[49] However, insofar as some advocates of this position follow the Greek Sophists and deny that anything really exists, repudiate the very idea of truth, claim that if anything did exist it could not be known, and claim that if knowledge were possible, it could not be communicated, then this position is, in fact, a de facto denial of the possibility of epistemology rather than an examination of the grounds we have for accepting or rejecting beliefs. Yet, the epistemologist need not despair, for she can always ask of the sceptic, whether in an ancient or postmodern guise, how the sceptic *knows* these things, and hence even the sceptic must enter into epistemological dialogue.

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[44] Quine (1961, 1969a, 1969b).   [45] Lafont (1999); Rorty (1967).
[46] Austin (1962, 1975).   [47] Poincaré (1903, 1958).
[48] Kuhn (1970b); Feyerabend (1975).
[49] For overviews of these approaches, see Best and Kellner (1991); Dews (1987).

The point of this brief historical overview of the development of epistemology is to demonstrate the manner in which differing epistemological traditions are always situated in relation to each other. All epistemological traditions are obliged to deal with scepticism and can be viewed as reactions to it.[50] Likewise, as David Oldroyd has argued, there is a direct line of descent from scepticism, to empiricism, to positivism, through pragmatism and on to contemporary conventionalism.[51] The point I wish to emphasise is that these differing epistemological positions have always intermingled and drawn upon resources developed in other traditions, in a way that directly contradicts contemporary IR accounts of epistemological exclusivity.[52]

Since this intermingling of epistemological positions is an accepted fact within philosophy we need to begin to find a way in which to show our IR 'fly' how to get 'out of the bottle' of epistemological exclusivity.[53] Now in one sense, all epistemology is ultimately rationalist at heart. Even empiricism rests on a rational belief that there are such things as 'experiences'. And this argument can be extended to pragmatism and conventionalism. As Derek Layder puts it, '[i]n this sense all philosophy is rationalist.'[54] Put this way, of course, the effect is to trivialise all epistemological debates and this is not the intention.

Perhaps a better way of thinking of epistemological positions is to consider them on a continuum with rationalism at one end and empiricism at the other.[55] Viewed this way we can see that all epistemological positions differ only in how they combine the extremities – rationalism and empiricism – of the continuum. All epistemologies, then, with the exception of radical scepticism, which constitutes a denial of epistemology,[56] are admixtures of rationalism and empiricism.

This point can be reinforced when one considers that epistemology refers to an act of human knowing. Humans only have a limited number of ways of knowing as a result of their cognitive faculties. Peter Strawson has suggested that: 'There is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history . . . there are categories and concepts which, in

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[50] Quine disputed this and argued that epistemology does not need to deal with radical scepticism. See Quine (1990: 19).
[51] Oldroyd (1986). On this point see also Kolakowski (1969).
[52] McKinlay and Little (1986: 15) argue this, declaring '[s]ince differing patterns are a function of different epistemologies, there is little constructive debate that can take place between them.' See also Hollis and Smith (1991: 409).
[53] Wittgenstein (1953: para. 309).   [54] Layder (1990: 45).   [55] Layder (1990: 27–42).
[56] In fact, even scepticism can be construed as a form of rationalism, since what is being claimed is that there are no 'rational' grounds for the belief in an external world.

their most fundamental character change not at all . . . They are commonplaces of the least refined thinking; and are the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings.'[57] This is what Hollis has called the 'epistemological unity of mankind'.[58] Quine has even gone so far as to suggest that epistemology is, at bottom, simply cognitive psychology.

> Whatever evidence there is for science is sensory evidence . . . But why all this [Carnap's] creative reconstruction, all this make-believe? The stimulation of his sensory receptors is all the evidence anyone has to go on, in arriving at his picture of the world. Why not just see how this construction really proceeds? Why not settle for psychology?[59]

It is important not to confuse Quine's position with a naive form of empiricism. There is a difference between 'empiricism' as an epistemology and the recognition that the 'empirical' must play some role in all coherent epistemologies. Once this distinction is made it is clear that knowledge of the empirical world can be empiricist or non-empiricist.[60] Quine's point should be taken to mean only that for humans the evidence of our senses cannot be ignored even if we then must place it within a rational framework of beliefs that explains it.

How far we might wish to concur with Strawson, Hollis and Quine, and what constitutes the core, and what does not, is an important question but not one that can be addressed within the confines of this book. The point, however, is that epistemology is concerned with ways of human knowing and not abstract ways of knowing pertaining to other beings, no matter how philosophically interesting such questions are.[61]

Viewing epistemology as a continuum helps us to go beyond debates about the ultimate validity of forms of knowledge conceived of as an opposition between truth and untruth, as in the debate between scientific or metaphysical forms of knowledge, or rationalist versus empiricist explanations. These dichotomous ways of framing the issue, which surface regularly in the social sciences, do not do justice to the complexity and subtlety of the issues involved.

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[57] Strawson (1959: 10).   [58] Hollis (1979: 225–232).
[59] Quine (1969a: 75).   [60] Layder (1990: 42).
[61] I am not denying the validity of thought experiments concerning how communication might be possible with other species or aliens in testing the limits of human knowing, but it is difficult to see how these abstract questions bear on matters related to epistemology in the social world. To show the difficulties we might encounter in talking to Martians is not a fair test of the difficulties we face in adjudicating knowledge claims among ourselves. See Hanley (1997) for an interesting attempt to use examples drawn from *Star Trek* for epistemological discussion.

Humans have many ways of knowing (the possibilities are limited, however) and these should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Thus, for example, we experience a bent stick in the water, but we do not assume that the stick is really bent in the water but straight when out. Rationalism and empiricism are both required in order to arrive at an adequate explanation of this phenomenon. Equally, this interplay of rationalism and empiricism is not restricted to western scientific discourses, and pre-Enlightenment peoples reliant for their livelihood on fishing quickly developed a rational explanation for the experience of sticks bending in water, even if such explanations would not be considered scientific by western standards. Nor should this be seen as a subsumption of empiricism under rationalism; rather our experiences only make sense when rationally ordered. Thus as Feyerabend puts it: 'Things have to be done in concrete circumstances and not according to a general recipe. I regard the philosophical position of relativism as silly because it assumes what never happens, namely no exchange. I also regard the philosophical position of objectivism to be silly. They are two sides of the same coin.'[62]

Here Feyerabend is pointing out the futility of attempting to address epistemological questions in black and white terms, and in advance of ontological considerations. He is advocating that we should be epistemologically pragmatic and reject all attempts to outline an a priori account of what constitutes knowledge. Often in IR we find scholars tightly wedded to what I have elsewhere called the 'foundational fallacy'.[63] According to this dogma, if we cannot have absolute untarnished access to knowledge, there can be no knowledge. This position, as Feyerabend makes clear, is untenable and unnecessary. As William James has argued, 'when we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself'.[64]

According to Susan Haack, what we really do when addressing epistemological questions is something much less ambitious than hope to attain certain infallible knowledge, but something altogether more optimistic than the epistemological nihilism of deep scepticism.[65] For Haack, epistemological justification is really a matter of 'A is more/less justified

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[62] See Feyerabend in Parascandalo and Hosle (1995: 137).
[63] Wight (1996). Bernstein (1983) calls this 'Cartesian anxiety'.   [64] James (1956: 17).
[65] Haack (1993). Interestingly, Quine sees Kuhn and Hanson as advocating a form of epistemological nihilism and is at pains to disassociate himself from this position. See, for example, Quine (1969b: 87–88).

in believing' something.[66] All human knowledge is potentially fallible, but this does not mean that all knowledge claims are equally valid. Rejecting the idea that knowledge is an all-or-nothing affair, then, and following Roderick Chisholm, I suggest that we conceive of an epistemic hierarchy:

   6 Certain
   5 Obvious
   4 Evident
   3 Beyond reasonable doubt
   2 Epistemically in the clear
   1 Probable
   0 Counterbalanced
−1 Probably false
−2 In the clear to disbelieve
−3 Reasonable to disbelieve
−4 Evidently false
−5 Obviously false
−6 Certainly false.[67]

Such an approach is not without its problems, not least because the meaning of all of the above 'levels of knowledge' would be susceptible to multiple interpretations. However, the epistemic hierarchy does allow us to follow Norbert Elias and reject static polarities such as 'true' and 'false'. Contrary to a dichotomous view of knowledge claims, Elias argues that 'theoretical and empirical knowledge becomes more extensive, more correct, and more adequate'.[68]

In fact, as far as the actual practices of scientists are concerned, as opposed to philosophical descriptions of them, their activities tend to lend support to the view of epistemological eclecticism advanced here. That is, they appear to operate with epistemological positions functioning as 'rules of thumb' rather than all-or-nothing positions.[69] The process is one where the scientist begins by using one rule of thumb, but if it fails to work, they introduce another. These rules of thumb, argues Feyerabend, constitute a 'toolbox':

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[66] Haack (1993: 2).   [67] Chisholm (1989: 16).
[68] Elias (1978: 53). This does not mean that this is always the case. Regression in knowledge acquisition does occur. Yet, when progression does occur it is always a relative phenomenon, not absolute. We may well be in possession of true knowledge, but lack a self-evident way to know that our knowledge is true.
[69] Brush (1988); Carey (1995); Goodman et al. (1987); Porter (2003).

> I mean, it's just like rules of thumb: shall I use this rule now, shall I use that rule? Popper introduced into the toolbox the rule of falsification. His fault was to assume this is the only useful instrument, the only useful tool to apply to theories, instead of saying, 'Well, we have increased our tool box.' Never throw away the tool box, never declare the tool box itself to be the one right thing or one tool in it, but use it, extend it, disregard it sometimes, according to the case with which you are dealing, because you never know what you will run into.[70]

This account demonstrates the linking of epistemology to ontology as well as presenting scientists as little more than epistemological opportunists whose actual practices bear little or no relation to the dogmatic accounts produced by philosophers of science. Einstein makes this opportunism explicit: '[c]ompare a scientist with an epistemologist; a scientist faces a complicated situation. So in order to get some value in this situation he cannot use a simple rule, he has to be an opportunist.'[71]

To summarise this discussion of epistemology: first, I have given a very narrow definition of epistemology, so that epistemological questions now revolve around the extent to which we might say beliefs are justified. Second, I have rejected the view that epistemologies are mutually exclusive. There are no firm grounds for embracing this form of incommensurability.[72] Indeed, from the very brief account of the development of epistemology we can see that differing epistemological positions have developed through the utilisation and adaptation of conflicting epistemological positions and not in isolation from one another. Equally, the necessity of epistemological opportunism to scientific progress suggests that epistemological exclusivity is not a practice that scientists could, should, or do, adhere to.

Third, I have rejected the notion that knowledge is an all-or-nothing affair. Knowledge claims are always potentially fallible and hence revisable. This does not mean that we should embrace epistemological nihilism. We can know that some claims are more justified than others even if we cannot know that such claims are epistemologically 'certain'. The situation we face in the social sciences is very rarely, if ever, that of complete and utter certainty of our knowledge, or that of complete and utter uncertainty. Moreover, the setting of our epistemic baseline at absolute certainty presents us with an insurmountable barrier to knowledge

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[70] Feyerabend in Parascandalo and Hosle (1995: 123).
[71] Einstein quoted in Feyerabend in Parascandalo and Hosle (1995: 117).
[72] Chang (1997); D'Agostino (2003); Heidlebaugh (2001); Sankey (1994, 1997); Wight (1996).

acquisition. As such, what we have to accept is something altogether less ambitious, since as fallible beings absolute certainty is conceivably not even something we should aspire to.

Fourth, the inherent fallibility of all knowledge claims points to the fact that epistemology is crucially concerned with ways of human knowing. As humans, we only have a limited number of ways of knowing, but as members of a common species, this provides us with a starting point for epistemological exchange. This is what Pierre Bourdieu has called the 'psychic unity of mankind'.[73] Or as Hollis puts, 'if the natives reason logically at all then they reason as we do'.[74]

The agent–structure debate: the epistemological thicket

Wendt argues that the manner in which social theories address ontological issues has a direct bearing upon epistemological matters.[75] Wendt also claims that two epistemological issues arise from the ontological claim that both agents and structures are necessary components of any adequate social analysis. The first is the 'choice of the form of explanation corresponding respectively to agents and structures'.[76] The second 'concerns the relative importance of agent-explanations and structure-explanations, of whatever type, in social theory'.[77]

Neither of these issues strikes me as epistemological. The second issue, in particular, that of the relative importance of either agential and/or structural explanations, is an empirical, not a theoretical, question. The question of whether or not particular social outcomes were the result of agential or structural forces cannot be raised unless one has first attempted to resolve the agent–structure problem and hence cannot be integral to it. As such, the empirical, and important, question of whether agents or structures determined a particular outcome and/or how influential each factor was in a particular outcome, cannot be addressed in

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[73] Bourdieu quoted in Jenkins (1992: 50).
[74] Hollis (1978: 43). It is important to be clear about what Hollis is claiming here and he does not deny that differing societies might understand their social being through a radically differing set of concepts from those 'we' utilise. The point is more correctly understood as a logical one, which stresses the difference between concepts, and reason, which connects those concepts. Thus, if a group of people can be said to have beliefs at all, it must be that they distinguish between things actually being as their beliefs represent them and things not being so; thus allowing for the possibility of alien words such as 'is', 'is not', 'and', 'all', and 'because', which form the staple of all forms of logic.
[75] Wendt (1987: 339).   [76] Wendt (1987: 339).   [77] Wendt (1987: 340).

advance of empirical research of the prevailing structures, and consideration of the particular agents present in any given social situation. This is an important point in relation to the agent–structure problem, for it implies that 'no general, transhistorical or purely philosophical resolution of these problems is possible'.[78]

Wendt's first epistemological issue, that of the form of explanation pertaining to agents and structures respectively, is also not a genuine epistemological issue, but a methodological one. For, as noted above, epistemological questions are typically concerned with the grounds we have for accepting or rejecting beliefs. Wendt's first epistemological issue is concerned with how we set about generating beliefs about given phenomena. At the level of abstraction at which Wendt has posed the question, there are simply no beliefs available to justify or reject. Hence, Wendt's first epistemological issue is a question about the appropriate method pertaining to agents and structures, not about the epistemological questions of what we should, or should not, believe as a result of our inquiries. In effect, Wendt has posed the methodological aspect of the question of naturalism.

The question of naturalism, as Hollis notes, is essentially a series of ontological and methodological questions about the unity of the scientific method.[79] Admittedly, epistemological questions do arise, but only insofar as varying methods *may* require differing modes of validation. On the other hand, why should some combination of rationalism and empiricism not be applicable to the study of both agents and structures? In posing the question in the manner he does, Wendt concedes too much to the scientific dualists and epistemological exclusivists.

Wendt argues that from the ontological considerations of the agent–structure problem, two major consequences follow: (1) both agents and structures are necessary for any adequate social analysis; and (2) structural and agent-based analyses have distinct and irreducible functions in the explanation of social action.[80] This requires, he argues, recognition of the limits of 'structural' and 'historical' explanation and an examination of their possible integration in 'structural-historical analysis'.[81]

Broadly put, Wendt argues that structural questions are concerned with 'how is action X possible?'; whereas historical questions are primarily of the form 'why did X happen rather than Y?'[82] He acknowledges

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[78] Bhaskar (1983: 87).   [79] Hollis (1994: 254).   [80] Wendt (1987: 362).
[81] Wendt (1987). On this form of analysis see Lloyd (1993).
[82] Wendt (1987: 362).

that since the domains of these two questions differ, then so we would expect the kinds of answers to differ. 'To remain clear on the nature and limits of structural explanation, an explicit epistemological and methodological distinction must be maintained between the logic of these questions: "structural" analysis explains the possible, while "historical" analysis explains the actual.'[83] But in what sense might we say that the difference between a 'how' and a 'why' question, or the possible or the actual, is epistemological?

Now as Wendt makes clear, the recognition of the necessity for these differing forms of inquiry is derived from ontological considerations, from which are drawn methodological conclusions. But what Wendt fails to note is that, although epistemological issues are emerging, no decision needs to be taken vis-à-vis these issues. To understand this issue, consider a hypothetical research situation.

A given society has observed that babies are dying whilst in their cots, at all times of the day and night, with no explanation available. These deaths are labelled 'cot deaths'.[84] A group of scientists is charged with determining the cause of death and provided with adequate funds. One scientist within the group suggests that the deaths may be the result of a gas that emerges from cot mattresses under certain conditions.[85] The group agrees to pursue this line of thought and designs a research methodology based on this 'ontological speculation'.

Since the postulated mechanism, the gas, is unobservable, procedures are devised to detect it: autopsies, controlled laboratory experiments, and so on. Although at this planning stage of the research epistemological questions appear on the horizon – that is, the scientists are beginning to wonder 'how they will know' whether the gas is both present and the cause of the deaths – the scientists do not need to commit themselves to any particular epistemological position at this stage of the research process. In fact, to do so would be decidedly unscientific. For it would imply that epistemologies could be determinant in the last instance of what is. That is, even if the postulated mechanism did exist, but did not

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[83] Wendt (1987: 364).   [84] Camps et al. (1972).
[85] According to one theory of 'cot deaths' the gases concerned are phosphines, arsines and stibines, which are all extremely toxic nerve gases. They are produced in a baby's cot (or any other bed where the baby sleeps) by the action of common household fungus on compounds of phosphorus, arsenic and antimony present in the mattress. See Cot Life (2000). The theory has also been thoroughly rejected. One influential report (Limerick, 1998) stated that '[o]ur main conclusion is that there is no evidence to suggest that antimony- or phosphorus-containing compounds used as fire retardants in PVC and other cot mattress materials are a cause of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.'

fit within the chosen epistemological frame, it would be deemed non-existent. This would be a paradigmatic case of the epistemic fallacy, and thankfully, scientists do not proceed in this manner, although positivists have at times come close to arguing that they should.

For even if there is overwhelming empirical evidence, derived from controlled experiments on cot mattresses, that the gas is present, no scientist would be so rash as to declare that this 'proves' the theory correct. For this empirical evidence would still have to be subject to a rational explanation in an open system, devoid of laboratory closure. Equally, if the gas is found to be absent this may simply be the result of an inadequately controlled experimental situation or some other unknown intervening variable, hence strict Popperian falsification criteria can never be applied. But if scientists in their everyday practices refuse epistemological dogmatism, why does Wendt seem to suggest that social scientists must accept it? It seems that Wendt is guilty of two errors.

First, he seems to be overstretching the use of the term epistemology and/or confusing epistemological issues with methodological ones. Second is that underpinning Wendt's posing of the question in this manner can only be a set of unthematised assumptions, first, that differing ontological object domains require differing methodologies (which is a prima facie acceptable assumption), and second, that differing methodologies necessitate differing epistemologies (which is an unwarranted assumption).

In tying epistemological positions so closely to specific methodologies, Wendt seems to have neglected the epistemological opportunism that practising scientists engage in, and to be making an a priori decision about the appropriateness of certain epistemologies to certain object domains. Both of these run counter to Wendt's assertions that scientific realism assumes that scientists, not philosophers, are the final arbiters of what is 'scientific'[86] and that research should be question- rather than method-driven.[87]

The issue of the role of epistemology in the research process is explicitly raised by Hollis and Smith in their critique of Giddens, who, they argue, can make the claim about 'the ontological footing of agents and structures only because he is working within a specific epistemology of interpretivism. In this sense, his epistemology privileges his ontological claim despite his explicit argument to the contrary.'[88] But in what sense might we talk of *a* 'specific epistemology of interpretivism'? This implies

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[86] Wendt (1987: 351).　　[87] Wendt (1991: 392).　　[88] Hollis and Smith (1994: 247).

that interpretivism has but one unified epistemological position and trivialises the many heated epistemological debates that have shaped interpretivist approaches to the social world.[89] Moreover, interpretivism is more accurately described as a methodology not an epistemology, if, that is, we take epistemology to mean a concern with the grounds we have for preferring one belief to another. And indeed, this is the account of epistemology accepted by Hollis and Smith, who argue that an 'epistemology is, or includes, an account of what makes X a relevant reason for believing Y'.[90] Given this, what are we to make of the claim that:

> Giddens' claims are only possible precisely because he has already made an epistemological choice . . . Giddens explicitly rejects structural sociology, seeing the focus of social theory as being on the actors and their interpretations of situations. In this crucially important way he has already dealt with epistemology! Far from downplaying the role of epistemology in favour of ontology, his stress on ontology can only be made because he has already decided what kinds of criteria allow us to judge what kinds of things exist in the social world.[91]

It should be clear that what Hollis and Smith claim is an 'epistemological choice' made by Giddens is actually an ontological argument. As Hollis and Smith themselves put it, Giddens thinks the focus of social theory should be on the 'actors and their interpretations'. This is a straightforward ontological claim, not an epistemological choice. However, Hollis and Smith consider this to be a decisive epistemological argument against scientific realism, arguing that nothing 'in scientific realism, in our view, disarms the old Platonic teaser that besets the search for hidden truth: if we know what we are looking for, we have already found it; if we do not know, we cannot recognise it when we do'.[92] Or, to put it another way, epistemological considerations must necessarily precede ontological matters. Derek Layder adopts a similar position, arguing that 'unlike the orthodox realist position, I shall treat epistemological questions as prior to, or more basic than ontological questions, since descriptions of reality are, in some measure, the result of the application of specific epistemological premises'.[93]

This Platonic teaser, more correctly known as the Meno paradox,[94] whilst constituting a valuable means of illuminating the manner in which 'inquiry never starts from scratch', and that 'it always has

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[89] On this see, for example, Bauman (1978); Outhwaite (1975).
[90] Hollis and Smith (1996: 112).   [91] Hollis and Smith (1996: 113).
[92] Hollis and Smith (1991: 408).   [93] Layder (1990: 29).   [94] Pirocacos (1998).

presuppositions, mostly pre-existing beliefs or knowledge',[95] does not constitute a genuine paradox. For to know what one is looking for is not the same as having found it. Indeed, one could never find a needle in a haystack unless one first knew what a needle was. Equally, knowing that one is looking for a needle in a haystack will not guarantee that one will find one.

The ambiguities here are obvious, and we need to be systematic in order to understand them. First, Layder, Hollis and Smith clearly have a point, but this need not commit us to assent to the conclusions drawn by these writers. Scientific realism takes the question of knowledge production seriously. Rejecting empirical realism's claim that the objects of the world are directly given in sense experience, scientific realists argue that the world also consists of relatively enduring structures and mechanisms that exist independently of their being identified. Given this, how does our knowledge of them arise? If knowledge is not merely given in experience, and rejecting the idea that it is created out of nothing, it must, then, come about through the transformation of pre-existing knowledge-like materials. In other words, it is necessary to recognise a transitive dimension to knowledge (or epistemology) to complement the intransitive dimension already established. It is, as Tony Lawson notes, necessary to recognise a 'Dimension of transitive objects of knowledge, including facts, observations, theories, hypotheses, guesses, hunches, intuitions, speculations, anomalies, and so on, which condition all further knowledge, and in particular, facilitate, and come to be actively transformed through, the laborious social practice of science.'[96]

In short, knowledge must be recognised as a produced means of production and science as an ongoing transformative social activity. Knowledge is a social product, actively produced by means of antecedent social products. This is the residual truth of Layder's and Hollis and Smith's position. Where Layder and Hollis and Smith err, however, is in arguing that the transitive objects that provide the materials for further inquiry are all derived from one, and only one, epistemology. On the contrary, however, a moment's reflection would reveal that our present-day stock of knowledge is derived from various epistemological positions that complement rather than compete with one another. To draw on this stock of knowledge in order to further inquiry no more commits a researcher to one epistemology than would a physicist's rational belief in unobservable atomic particles require her to reject the evidence of her senses

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[95] Bhaskar (1994: 7).   [96] Lawson (1997: 25).

as she peers over the side of a cliff. Layder and Hollis and Smith have misconstrued the role of epistemology and are in danger of repeating the errors of empiricism in their effort to put the epistemological cart before the ontological horse.

The value of epistemology in research is twofold. On the one hand, a scientist can always be called to account for their findings. 'How do you know this?' and 'Which epistemology did you use?' are always legitimate questions. They enable other researchers to check the findings and confirm or deny them using the same epistemological techniques. But to confirm or deny using the same epistemology is not to prove or disprove a theory, but merely to confirm or reject such results using procedures X to Y. It is still open to rational debate as to whether the epistemology used was adequate to the object domain, and as to whether it will require supplementing with other epistemological techniques. If we were to follow Layder and Hollis and Smith, on the other hand, and address epistemological issues in an ontological vacuum, then there would be much of the world beyond our particular epistemological horizon which would have to be dogmatically denied 'reality' status if it failed to meet our epistemological strictures. Thankfully, the history of science does not seem to lend credence to the epistemological priority thesis advanced by Layder and Hollis and Smith. In their actual practices scientists are epistemological opportunists and utilise many differing epistemologies.

Thus, although there is a sense in which Layder and Hollis and Smith are correct, the import of this point is not as suggested. It is always possible to question the philosophical grounds on which a social theory rests, that is, to raise the question of how one knows anything at all. Yet it hardly seems reasonable to ask this at every point in an inquiry, and moreover, differing answers could be given differing epistemological supports, with no contradiction in the overall coherence of the set of beliefs. Certainly, such questions are legitimate, but not at the level of reality at which Giddens is working. Without taking some things as given, no research would ever get off the ground. Hollis acknowledges this, arguing that 'The proper conclusion is that epistemology has to go the long way round, visiting arguments about the historical particularity of all ways of searching into and discovering truth but then returning with renewed determination to transcendental questions of how knowledge is possible.'[97]

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[97] Hollis (1994: 259).

Hence any discussion about the scope of knowledge in a transcendental sense has to emerge out of the particular knowledge claims made within the context of specific practices. Given this, Giddens' claim about the focus of the social world consisting primarily of actors and their interpretations, although not strictly speaking a straightforward ontological claim devoid of any epistemological content, does not commit him to any particular epistemology. Admittedly, this claim leads on to discussions about the appropriate methodology required to study such entities, and these will require epistemic justification. Nonetheless, no particular epistemological commitments are necessarily entailed at this point in the research process. For Giddens might claim that his postulated entities are merely that, posits, and if there are such things in the world then certain methods (understanding, perhaps) are implied to study them. That is, that in claiming that the social world consists of 'actors and their interpretations', Giddens need not claim that he 'knows' the social world consists of such things, but rather that he is merely making a perfectly valid assumption in order to proceed with research and such epistemological claims that are being advanced are of a very tentative nature. That is, that at this point in the research process Giddens is clearly operating at the lower end of the epistemological hierarchy detailed above.

Hollis and Smith seem to be guilty of confusing a philosophical ontology with a scientific one. It is certainly permissible to ask Giddens how he knows things in general exist, but this is a philosophical question about generic orders of being, not a question about how he knows specific entities exist. Moreover, only the extreme sceptic seems to deny any existence at all, apart from perhaps his/her own, and once radical scepticism is rejected, inquiry must proceed by putting postulated entities to the test. Equally, if Giddens accepts a realist position, then his reply need not be based on a monistic epistemology; from a realist position the ascription of reality is predicated on empirical and rationalist criteria, that is, both ends of our epistemological spectrum.

Thus, a rationalist at one end of our epistemological spectrum and an empiricist at the other could both accept the view that the social world consists of 'actors and their interpretations'. Indeed, it would be hard to find a social theorist who denied that these were the stuff of the social world, although there may well be substantial disagreement about whether or not they were exhaustive of it, and of the specific role they should play in explanations. Even hard-core rational choice theorists do not deny the reality of 'actors and their interpretations', but

rather place analytical limits on them in the research process in order methodologically to simplify the research process.[98] Indeed, given that Giddens' ontological assertion that the social world consists of 'actors and their interpretations' would meet with almost universal assent, it is difficult to see how Hollis and Smith can sustain the claim that it implies a commitment to *one* epistemology. It may be that it commits Giddens to a particular methodology, but even this is open to question.

Hollis and Smith are using 'Understanding' as an epistemology when in fact it is best described as a methodology, and even then not a unified one.[99] As a corollary of this it is also important to recognise that it is also possible to be committed to 'Understanding' as the appropriate method for the study of the social world, but at the level of epistemology, to be a Rortyian pragmatist, a Popperian falsificationist, a Hayekian rationalist or a Skinnerian empiricist, or any other epistemological position for that matter.

I think it clear that what drives successive chapters in the Hollis and Smith book is a deep dissatisfaction with the ontological postulates in each chapter. Each of the ontologies in the four quadrants is deemed incomplete. If this implies that we should broaden the ontological frame of the social world, then we need to grasp this insight rather than curtailing our ontological horizons by predetermined epistemological or methodological boundaries. We should not allow our epistemological presuppositions to curtail our inquiries. This is exactly what Feyerabend meant with his 'anything goes' thesis (he was not advocating epistemological nihilism).[100] Hollis and Smith, however, do seem to suggest that we should allow epistemology to set our ontological horizons: 'We agree that ontology crucially affects what can be accepted epistemologically, but contra Carlsnaes, we also believe that the reverse is also true. Epistemology cannot be relegated to a second-order or less fundamental status. Otherwise, things can be asserted dogmatically without proof.'[101]

To deal with the charge of dogmatism first: this charge is routinely levelled at realism and rests on a basic misunderstanding concerning the precise nature of realist arguments. The realist readily accepts,

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[98] Brown (2000); Bruce (1999); Coleman and Fararo (1992); Dowding and King (1995); Elster (1986); Gould (2001); Lichbach (2003); Schmidtz (1995).

[99] On this see, for example, Gordon (1991: 411). That the distinction between understanding and explanation is methodological rather than epistemological is accepted by Smith who, in putting forward the basis of the 'two stories' thesis, argues '[e]ach of these disputes occurs within each method of analysis, so that you can use "Explaining" and "Understanding" at each level.' See Hollis and Smith (1990: 211).

[100] Feyerabend (1975).   [101] Hollis and Smith (1994: 251).

indeed insists, that all theoretical posits will require epistemological justification. Wendt, for example, argues that the positing of unobservable entities to explain the behaviour of observables is a perfectly legitimate scientific practice and need not imply a dogmatic commitment to one's proposed entities/mechanisms. As he puts it, '[a]cceptance of this practice does not imply that any posit is a good one; scientists must still adduce direct or indirect evidence for the validity of their ontological claims, and this evidence is always revisable.'[102]

The issue for the realist is not to be epistemologically dogmatic. According to realists, if you settle epistemological questions in advance of ontological considerations, you have effectively limited 'what is, to what can be known, given X epistemology', and this is clearly a form of philosophical idealism. That Hollis and Smith subscribe to this view is clear from their claim that epistemology crucially affects what can be. Taken literally this is an idealist absurdity. It would mean, for example, that the planets once really did revolve around the earth; that the earth was indeed once flat; and that global warming did not exist prior to our knowledge of it. Epistemology cannot affect what is, only what is known. Such a reading makes existence contingent upon human awareness of it and constitutes a conflation of 'what is' with 'what is known', in effect, a paradigmatic instance of the epistemic fallacy. In arguing that the question of our access to reality takes precedence over – and indeed determines – the question of the nature of reality, Hollis and Smith are articulating an untenable idealism.

Neither Hollis nor Smith would wish to accept that his position is idealist in the philosophical sense. For a philosophical realist the claim that what is is dependent upon what is known is untenable. For a philosophical idealist, on the other hand, the proposition that 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world' is prima facie acceptable.[103] More important, in terms of the study of the social world, is the manner in which idealism tendentially neglects the material dimensions to human social existence.[104] That both Hollis and Smith think this neglect is a serious problem is evinced by Smith's concern that Hollis has 'no way of explaining the material world', and Hollis' jibe that Smith seems at times to be suggesting that we could 'keep dry in a storm by all agreeing to amend our theories about what is real'.[105] These comments both

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[102] Wendt (1987: 353).   [103] Wittgenstein (1922: para. 5.6).
[104] For critiques of this tendency see Marx (1966); Norris (1990, 1992, 1996); Porpora (1993); Thomas (1979).
[105] Hollis and Smith (1990: 207, 208).

amount to the same thing. At times, Hollis and Smith seem to have no way of integrating the material plane of social interactions into their analyses.

Ultimately, Hollis and Smith's argument over the issue of the chronological relationship between ontology, epistemology and methodology is curious when viewed in light of the claim that

> [T]o make sense of the world one needs an ontology (a general theoretically charged account of what there is and how it works), a methodology (for revealing, and explaining or understanding, that picture of the world), and an epistemology (which shows how we can know (or reasonably believe) that the methodology gives us the picture).[106]

Hollis and Smith seem to be suggesting that the circle of inquiry begins with ontology. This does not seem to be consistent with their claim that epistemological questions must be settled in advance of ontology. To do so, however, as Hollis and Smith recognise, would be to repeat one of the errors of empiricism.[107] Equally, implicit in the above quote is a tacit recognition that 'Understanding' and 'Explaining' constitute two differing methodologies not epistemologies. The distinction between Explanation and Understanding, then, is based firmly on ontological considerations about the nature of the entities in the social world. Ultimately, Hollis and Smith endorse this view, arguing 'that ontology is what counts in the end' and that the two stories 'stem from conflicting ontologies'.[108] In this way the ontological question of the nature of agents and structures and their interrelationships is prior to the epistemological questions surrounding the issue.

What the above discussion reveals is that epistemological difficulties need not impede the research process unduly. Certainly, theoretical ontological posits will require epistemological supports. Nevertheless, these supports need not be dogmatic or one-dimensional. This much is clear from the epistemological opportunism that characterises the practices of actual scientists. Nor should we expect researchers to put the research process on hold until epistemologists settle their own disagreements. Not least, because current philosophical wisdom has it that such an epistemological 'bedrock' is a chimera.

When one considers the amount of knowledge individuals require simply to go about their daily lives, one is struck by how much is actually known rather than how little, even if, as yet, we do not know how

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[106] Hollis and Smith (1996: 112). [107] Hollis and Smith (1991: 394, 397).
[108] Hollis and Smith (1991: 410).

we know. Of course, the situation for scientists is somewhat more complicated and they are in the business of legitimating and justifying their pronouncements and findings. But the basic point remains: we should not expect our scientists to provide grounds for every belief they hold. Such strictures would only serve to make science impossible, as well as putting philosophers out of work.

7 The agent–structure problem: methodology

Given that the methodological issues surrounding the agent–structure relationship are of most interest to the majority of practising IR researchers, it is surprising that they have been accorded so little attention. Gil Friedman and Harvey Starr attempt to illuminate the methodological consequences of the agent–structure problem, but ultimately their account is very one-dimensional owing to the lack of attention paid to metatheoretical matters.[1] This means that the ontological issues at the heart of the agent–structure problem are not adequately addressed, and as a result the methodology they propose, methodological individualism, is limited and has been the subject of a sustained critique. The two theorists who have addressed the methodological difficulties – Martin Hollis and Steve Smith – have consistently argued that 'there are always two stories to tell, one explanatory and the other interpretative, and that they cannot finally be combined'.[2] In chapter 6 I presented their arguments, correctly in my opinion, since this is how Hollis and Smith themselves depict them, as epistemological in nature. As they put it, '[e]pistemologically, however, compromises seem to us far less problematic on the vertical axis than on the horizontal.'[3]

As it transpired, however, (1) these epistemological arguments, were more accurately described as methodological problems embedded within ontological assumptions; and (2), where genuinely epistemological, the conclusions drawn by Hollis and Smith did not follow from the premises. Moreover, that the distinction between 'Understanding' and 'Explanation' is methodological rather than epistemological is accepted by Smith, who argues that '[e]ach of these disputes occurs within each

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[1] Friedman and Starr (1997).
[2] Hollis and Smith (1994: 244). [3] Hollis and Smith (1991: 409).

method of analysis, so that you can use "Explaining" and "Understanding" at each level'[4] (emphasis added).

Ultimately, and irrespective of whether the distinction drawn between 'Explaining' and 'Understanding' is epistemological or methodological, what is undeniable is that it is based on ontological considerations about the social world. Hollis and Smith endorse this, arguing 'that ontology is what counts in the end' and that the two stories 'stem from conflicting ontologies'.[5] These are significant admissions, for they open up the possibility that the ontologies embedded within 'Explanation' or 'Understanding' are incomplete and fail to represent, in an adequate manner, the complexity of the social world. In fact, the value of the Hollis and Smith position lies in the way it exposes the ontologies embedded in each of the quadrants to be representative of only one facet of what is necessary for adequate social analysis. This allows us to highlight a significant limit to social theorising and, by extension, IR theory. In short, no general theory of international relations is possible. The role of theory in understanding international processes is important, but limited; and many of the problems typically portrayed by the discipline as theoretical can only be answered empirically. By necessity, all theories of international relations give partial views of the realm under study. Theories of international relations allow the researcher to isolate (if only in thought) a particular realm, but in doing so they distort the understandings of the totality of that realm. This is a necessary consequence of all social theorising.

In the first section of this chapter I briefly examine the nature of methodology and attempt to substantiate my claim that the distinction between 'Explaining' and 'Understanding' is methodological not epistemological. In the second section, I outline the ontological presuppositions that underpin Hollis and Smith's 'two stories thesis'. Here, and to avoid confusion, it should be remembered that it is my argument that 'Explanation' and 'Understanding' constitute two differing methodological, not epistemological, positions. An understanding of these ontologies is logically prior to understanding the possibility of a methodological account that can incorporate both 'Explaining' and 'Understanding'. In this section, I pay particular attention to the relationship between lay accounts necessary for social action, and theoretical explanations of such action. It is the relationship between lay accounts of social action and theoretical attempts to explain that action, and its

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[4] Hollis and Smith (1990: 211).   [5] Hollis and Smith (1991: 410).

impact on the subject–object relationship, which is often claimed to make social science impossible. In the next section, I examine the claim that the social world is not amenable to causal analysis in the same manner as the natural world. Finally, in the last section, I will elaborate the methodological implications that arise from the above discussion for IR theory.

Methodology

Put simply, methodology refers to the critical examination and evaluation of research procedures and techniques (methods) as to their ability to provide us with more or less reliable knowledge for the research problem at hand. This general definition contains within it an inherent ambiguity. As such, two differing uses of the term are currently employed. First, methodology is often characterised as the 'systematic and logical study of the principles guiding scientific investigation'.[6] The second meaning relates to the research procedures, general modes of investigation and techniques pertaining to particular disciplines, research programmes or individual research projects. The failure to distinguish between the two accounts of methodology is the cause of much confusion surrounding methodological matters. It will be useful to contrast the two meanings in order to understand the limits of methodological inquiry and also to throw some light on the confusing manner in which contributors to methodological aspects of the agent–structure problem have tended to conflate epistemological and methodological issues.

For Raymond Boudon, it is important that the difference between the two senses of the term is made clear.[7] The second meaning of the term refers to technology, that is, the activity of dealing with the techniques, devices and recipes used by scientific research.[8] For Boudon, methodology, as distinct from technology, refers to 'critical activity directed towards the procedures, theories, concepts and/or findings produced by scientific research'.[9] Likewise, for Talcott Parsons, methodology does not refer primarily to methods of empirical research such as statistics, case studies, interviews and the like. On the contrary, for Parsons, it is preferable to refer to these as research techniques.[10] Methodology, according to Parsons, is correctly understood as the consideration of the general grounds for the validity of scientific procedures and systems of

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[6] Holzner (1964: 425). See also Harmon (1972); Landau (1972).   [7] Boudon (1993: 379).
[8] Boudon (1993).   [9] Boudon (1993).   [10] Parsons (1949: 23–24).

them.[11] Traditionally methodology was seen as a branch of philosophy, or perhaps in an even narrower sense, a branch of logic.[12] However, since philosophical inquiries into methodology failed to answer many of the practical concerns of importance to social scientists, they were forced to become methodologists themselves. This highlights the manner in which all social scientists must, at some level, engage in philosophical speculation.[13] For Peter Winch, of course, the relationship between philosophy and social science was not simply close, but isomorphic.[14] There are good grounds for rejecting this reduction of social science to philosophy. J. C. McKinney, for example, argues that '[t]he methodologist makes certain necessary assumptions about the world and then proceeds to structure the inquiry concerning it. On the other hand, the philosopher, the logician, and the epistemologist focus upon and wrestle with the assumptions themselves.'[15]

McKinney is rejecting the more inclusive definition of methodology advanced by Parsons and Boudon in favour of a less expansive notion. On Parsons' and Boudon's understanding there can be little, or no, difference between methodology and the philosophy of science, at least insofar as they wish to maintain that methodology refers to the 'consideration of the general grounds for the validity of scientific procedures'. For this would seem to suggest that methodology is an exercise in the legitimisation of science itself, and indeed that there is, or can be, such a thing as the scientific method. The problem is that the very attempt to arrive at an account of the 'scientific method' forms a potential barrier to methodological innovation and pluralism. For if we could delineate the 'general grounds for the validity of scientific procedures' we could, in principle, identify what counts as good science. As we have seen, however, there is not one scientific method, but many. Certainly, all of the sciences share some very common characteristics that legitimate the application of the label science to them. However, they also have many differences between them and the similarities are so few and so vague as to provide only minimal guidance as to how any particular science should be conducted.

On Parsons' and Boudon's account it would be possible to conceive of methodological inquiry independent of ontological commitments. Contrary to this, I suggest that methodological inquiry is inextricably

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[11] Parsons (1949: 24). [12] Wedberg (1984). [13] Bunge (1996).
[14] Winch (1958). [15] McKinney (1957: 187).

bound up with ontological specifications. Methodology is directly and intimately concerned with the validity of scientific techniques and procedures as they relate to the object under study.[16] Methodologies are always, or at least should be, ontologically specific, although, of course, differing methodologies may well be appropriate to many object domains. To put this more simply, the attempt to assess the validity of particular methods cannot be made in an ontological vacuum: the methods required to study atomic particles, for example, would be wholly inappropriate when applied to the study of social processes.[17] Hence there is no prospect of a general scientific methodology in the sense Parsons understands it.

Thus, methodology, for the practising IR researcher, is best understood as the study of the differing methods of gaining knowledge relative to the object of inquiry. Methodologists, that is, systematically examine and evaluate the aptness of research procedures and techniques in terms of the object under consideration. All IR researchers have to undertake methodology in this sense of the term. Moreover, methodology understood in this sense of the term is a normative exercise, since it stipulates that given certain ontological posits, certain methods should be employed rather than others. The tying of methodological (and epistemological) questions so closely to ontological concerns differentiates realist approaches to the social world from their competitors and demonstrates why realism is genuinely methodologically pluralist. This is clear when one considers the methodological strictures that have been developed by competing schools of social thought independent of ontological considerations. Thus many poststructuralist scholars, for example, view deconstruction as a methodological tool applicable to any segment of the social, and sometimes the natural, world.[18] Empiricists and behaviouralists, on the other hand, view observation as a methodological edict without which research could not be said to be 'scientific'.[19] Likewise, the Chicago School of symbolic interactionism and ethno-methodologists stressed first-hand observation as the necessary

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[16] In general, this is the approach adopted in texts dealing with social science research methods. See, for example, Bernstein and Dyer (1979); Bryman (2001); Burns (2000); Garson (1976); Johnson et al. (2001); King et al. (1994); May (1993); Van Evera (1997).

[17] Wendt (1999: 372).

[18] Cordle (2000); Dickens and Fontana (1994); Santos (1995); Scheurich (1997); Ward (1996).

[19] Deutsch (1953, 1966); Guetzkow (1950); A. Kaplan (1964); M. Kaplan (1957, 1969); Knorr and Rosenau (1969); Schelling (1960); Snyder et al. (1954, 1962); Vasquez (1998).

methodological prerequisite.[20] Scientific realists, on the other hand, view these a priori methodological strictures with deep suspicion.

All such methodological strictures are based on unthematised ontological considerations; or, even worse, the methodological commitments are allowed to determine the appropriate ontology. For poststructuralists the ontological referent becomes the text because the favoured methodology is linguistic or semiotic analysis.[21] Likewise, for behaviouralists the ontology is limited to what can be experienced, because only that which can be experienced can be an object of study. Now it is doubtful whether even the most radical poststructuralist would wish to argue that the world really is a text. On the contrary, sophisticated poststructuralist scholars explicitly acknowledge that the social world is best understood as text.[22] Put this way, this is a statement about our way of understanding the social world, not a statement about that social world. But this methodological commitment can have unwarranted ontological conclusions when the domain of methodology breaches its legitimate horizons.[23] If the social world is complex and differentiated, why reduce it to one factor and delude ourselves that one methodological principle will suffice to study it? Similar arguments can be advanced against constructivists, neorealists, behaviouralists and symbolic interactionists. After all, if there are such things as meanings, intentions, identities and structures in the social world, why ignore them on the basis of prior methodological commitments about what 'good' science is? The correct scientific attitude, certainly in respect of methodology, is surely to engage in methodological speculation as to the appropriate method for the study of specific object domains, rather than deny the causal powers and status of these domains simply as a result of the inability of prevailing methodological procedures to incorporate them.

The confusion between epistemology and methodology that has characterised the agent–structure debate is understandable when one considers a basic question regarding knowledge: how does one come to know? Is this a methodological or epistemological question? It is easy

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[20] Anderson and Sharrock (1986); Blumer (1969); Lauer and Handel (1977); Rock (1979); Stryker (1980).
[21] Dickens and Fontana (1994).   [22] See, for example, Derrida (1988b: 108–124).
[23] It is for this reason that Derrida denies that deconstruction is simply a method. In fact, for Derrida deconstruction is ontological. 'I would say the same about method. Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one . . . Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity.' Derrida (1988a: 3–4).

to see how misunderstandings might arise. After all, if one 'knows' the social world interpretatively, then it might be reasonable to view this as an epistemological question. But closer examination reveals that this question is, in fact, methodological, for it already presupposes an account of what it means to 'know'. That is, the epistemological issue has already been addressed, and what the question 'How does one come to know?' really asks is: 'Given a chosen epistemological standpoint, how do we come to know?' That is, what is the correct *method*? Thus the question 'How do you know?' already assumes an account of what it means to 'know', and strives to make sure that a given fact or proposition has been properly checked, rather than imagined. As such the question 'How does one get to know?' is best considered as a methodological not an epistemological question.

Methodology, then, is the critical study of methods; substantive research *uses* methods, not methodologies; and the appropriateness of any given set of methods stands in a relationship to the object domain under study. Moreover, the linking of methodological issues to ontologies requires a methodological pluralism predicated on the rejection of any notion of a 'scientific method' or 'logic of discovery'. Differing object domains will require differing methods and any attempt to specify methodological strictures in advance of ontological considerations can only be arbitrary.[24]

Linking social methodology to social ontology

In *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*, Hollis and Smith base the distinction between 'Understanding and 'Explanation' firmly on ontological grounds. In the ending dialogue Smith argues that, although some form of compromise between himself and Hollis may seem attractive, neither he nor Hollis can accept this, because:

> At the end of the day I think we have two very different views of social action . . . These different views entail fundamentally distinct (and mutually exclusive) views of the individual and of the social

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[24] None of this is to deny the possibility of heuristic guidelines for researchers, such as: start by reviewing the relevant literature; place the issue under consideration in its context or system; distinguish the various aspects of the problem but do not separate them; look for similar solved problems; identify the premises and unknowns; analyse the key concepts and underlying assumptions; begin with simple ideas and methods and complicate them only as necessary; always reckon with the unforeseeable; and revise the research plan as often as necessary.

world . . . In fact, of course, even when it comes to the individual we still disagree, and the reason why we cannot finally reconcile our differences is that we actually see a different individual.[25]

These are undoubtedly ontological concerns: 'two very differing views of social action'; 'distinct views of the individual and of the social world'; and 'we actually see a different individual'. Moreover, and despite elsewhere declaring that compromises between 'Explaining' and 'Understanding' would not be forthcoming on epistemological grounds, they now state that 'ultimately, they ["Explaining" and "Understanding"] stem from conflicting ontologies'.[26] Each of the ontological posits that Hollis and Smith place in their four-plane matrix – (top left) structures, external and determinant, (bottom left) mechanical rational choice individuals, (bottom right) hermeneutic-meaning-producing actors, (top right) intersubjective rules and meanings – is successively revealed by Hollis and Smith to be unable to accommodate the complexity of the social world.[27] In effect, what Hollis and Smith illuminate is that each of the quadrants in the matrix shows but one aspect of the necessary components for adequate social explanation.

For example, consider the distinction Hollis and Smith draw between agents and actors.[28] According to Hollis and Smith, agents are simply rational throughputs navigating their environments according to predetermined institutional roles, or perhaps driven by some biological determinants. Actors, on the other hand, are said to be creative interpreters of the social world dealing imaginatively with the constitutive rules of social life. Rational agents, however, could only be said to be rational if they act in accordance with their perception of the situation and this will require some interpretation of that situation. Our rational game player needs to understand a particular 'event' as a move in a game or else in what sense might we say that she were 'playing the game'? The prisoner in the 'prisoner's dilemma' needs to 'understand' they are in an interview situation and what options are being offered in order to choose the most rational option. It is difficult to understand how we might say a specific act was rational without recourse to the 'actor's' understanding of the situation. That is, our agents are also actors and theories that attempt to portray them as merely agents are missing more than half of the story.

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[25] Hollis and Smith (1990: 210–211).   [26] Hollis and Smith (1991: 410).
[27] For an account of these different ontologies see Hollis and Smith (1991: 409–410).
[28] Hollis and Smith (1990).

The same can be said about the concept of actor, which is dependent upon the properties of agent. As Hollis puts it, understanding 'proceeds on the assumption that actors are rational'.[29] In effect, Hollis' 'Homo economicus' needs to understand and interpret a specific situation as an instance of economic exchange in order to act as 'Homo economicus'. 'Homo economicus', then, requires 'Homo sociologicus' to make meaningful social action happen.[30] Human beings are simply not divisible, not even theoretically, in the manner Hollis and Smith seem to suggest. More importantly, rationalist models of human beings do not suggest that this is actually how humans behave. Rational human beings are a consciously simplified model of humans that enables research to proceed.[31] As such, the rationalist research agenda is primarily driven by a methodological concern to reduce the complexity of the social world to manageable proportions, not a series of ontological claims about the nature of humans.

There are, however, good ontological grounds for accepting that the study of social objects can never be conducted according to the same principles and methods that govern the natural sciences. Grounds, that is, derived from a careful consideration of the specific ontological nature of the object domain we call the social world. Ultimately, Hollis and Smith's arguments that take this form are based on post-Wittgensteinian arguments filtered heavily through a Winchian lens.[32]

Hollis notes a fundamental difference between social objects and natural objects. 'Natural science is happy to take a spectator's view of the workings of nature . . . But the most obvious fact about the social world is that what happens in it has meaning for the inhabitants.'[33] Here Hollis follows Wilhelm Dilthey who argued, '[i]n contrast to the natural sciences there arise *Geisteswissenschaften* because we are obliged to endow human and animal organisms with mental activity.'[34] Hollis expands on this idea by noting four ways in which meaning separates the study of the social from that of the natural world.

First, human actions are carried out intentionally, they express emotions, are done for reasons and are highly influenced by notions of value. The human agent means something by their actions. This is a crucial point, for it means that we cannot simply observe the social world in the same way we can the natural world; we need to know what those

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[29] Hollis and Smith (1990: 204).   [30] Hollis (1977, 1994).
[31] Keohane (1988).   [32] Winch (1958).   [33] Hollis and Smith (1990: 68).
[34] Dilthey (1937: 249). For an excellent discussion of this, see Outhwaite (1975: 25). See also Bambach (1995); Makkreel (1975); Owensby (1994); Rickman (1979, 1988).

engaged in social practices mean by their actions. Second, language is crucial in human activity. Words have public meanings, and the people who use them have intentions and motives in using them. This introduces an element of indeterminacy in meaning to the study of the social, where words mean differing things to differing people. There is no similar problem in the natural world, although the fact that it is possible to argue that some animals have a primitive form of language does demonstrate that the sciences exist on a continuum, not a binary divide. Still, atoms, as far as we know, do not communicate with one another.

Third, humans also act on normative expectations. They value things in ways that objects in the natural world do not. The idea of atoms valuing their existence seems far-fetched. But human life and action exemplifies ideas about what one is entitled to and how one is to be treated, as well as ideas of how one is to act towards others. Moreover, human emotions such as guilt and shame obviously play a major role in the social world yet are completely absent in the natural world. Fourth, theory is already in the social world and hence social theory cannot be conceptualised as totally external to the object domain it studies. We already hold a number of theories about human beings that are influenced by the social sciences. Humans are selfish, or humans are altruistic, for example. And we already have theories of the family, theories of race, theories of nationalism, theories of war, before we begin to study these phenomena. The meaning of many actions in the social world depends upon the model of the social world that is already in the heads of social actors.[35] Importantly, however, Hollis concedes that 'nothing follows at once from the presence of these various kinds of meaning . . . '[36]

But if nothing necessarily follows from these factors, we still need to explore the potential methodological consequences that might emerge. Hollis and Smith argue that Wendt's version of constructivism, in attempting to construct the *via media*, neglects some of the most important methodological consequences and hence ends up advocating a form of reductionism.[37] Kratochwil has also suggested that Wendt's commitment to the *via media* risks introducing a new orthodoxy.[38] According to Hollis and Smith, Wendt claims that the model of scientific explanation outlined by Bhaskar is directly applicable to the social sciences.[39] This misrepresents Wendt's and Bhaskar's case. For this would seem to imply that there is simply one mode of analysis that is applicable to

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[35] Hollis and Smith (1990: 68–70).
[36] Hollis and Smith (1990: 71).   [37] Hollis and Smith (1991: 397).
[38] Kratochwil (2000).   [39] Hollis and Smith (1991: 397).

all object domains. However, what Bhaskar argues is that 'insider' and 'outsider' accounts are both relevant to a naturalistic social science. As such, it would simply be wrong to see Wendt, or Bhaskar, as arguing that the 'scientific model of explanation' is applicable to the social sciences. Indeed, given Bhaskar's commitment to the differentiated yet structured form of reality, the notion of a single scientific model of explanation is suspect.

Yet, Hollis and Smith seem committed to the view that Bhaskar must in the end privilege one form of inquiry over the other, arguing that, according to Bhaskar, 'Human self-understanding can be a complex and relevant process but it too must fit a single, causal story in the last analysis. Hermeneutics can have a role, but, finally, one subordinate to the unitary canon of scientific explanation.'[40] Once again, I think this is a straightforward misreading of the scientific realist argument. The words 'single causal story', 'subordinate' and a 'unitary canon of scientific explanation' all do violence to Bhaskar's careful examination of the ontological, epistemological and methodological differences that mark out the study of natural from social phenomena and which necessitate a hermeneutic starting point for the social sciences.[41] Indeed, it could be argued that Bhaskar's commitment to a hermeneutic starting point for social analysis privileges understanding over explanation. How we read his position depends upon whether we prioritise beginnings over endings. What is clear is that, for Bhaskar, there is no sense that can be given to the notion of understanding being subordinate. For the agents' own hermeneutic accounts of their action are precisely what must be explained and any explanation of them must relate back to them in a way that could never be described as subordinate. Moreover, in the natural, as well as the social, world 'Understanding' and 'Explaining' are on a par and both are equally necessary for adequate analysis.

The fact that Bhaskar insists, contra Winch, that we need not consider our agents' accounts of their actions incorrigible, does not imply that these accounts are subordinate (in the sense of being insignificant). Yet, in terms of methodology it suggests that interviews, for example, will never supply the whole story, a claim that seems intuitively correct and one that is supported by the methodological advice given to prospective interviewees. Bhaskar insists that hermeneutics must be the necessary starting point for any social analysis but not, necessarily, the

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[40] Hollis and Smith (1991: 407).
[41] These are most carefully elaborated in Bhaskar (1979).

final resting place. One reason why this must be the case is given by Ernest Gellner who argues: 'It is not true to say that to understand the concepts of a society (in the way its members do) is to understand the society. Concepts are as liable to mask reality as to reveal it, and masking some of it may be part of their function.'[42] This point can be elaborated by examining the relationship between 'lay' and 'social scientific' language. It is commonplace within the social sciences today, and IR is no exception, to find claims that theories of the social world are wholly constitutive of that world.[43] Taken as a temporal suggestion such claims are prima facie acceptable and few theorists would deny their validity: Marxism, for example, certainly helped shaped the course of twentieth-century history. Or as Bhaskar puts it, 'social theory and social reality are causally interdependent . . . social theory is conditioned by and has consequences for society'.[44] However, constitutive theorists seem to be claiming more than this. For, on a strong reading of constitutive theory, social reality is nothing more than people interpreting the meaning of the cultural rules that constitute 'forms of life' and these interpretations simply are exhaustive of theory.

This claim can take many forms. The Chicago School of symbolic interactionism, for example, view knowledge of the social world as an ongoing practical activity and argue that 'authentic knowledge is not furnished by scientific method but by immediate experience'.[45] A contemporary example in IR can be found in Marysia Zalewski's notion of 'theorising'.[46] According to Zalewski, theorising is a 'form of life, something we all do, every day, all of the time'.[47] Thus, for Zalewski everyday activities, such as making a cup of tea, washing clothes, driving cars, are all examples of theorising.[48] These strong constitutive approaches are primarily concerned with the immediate, given, visible and observable world, and view notions of deep structures, systems or orders behind the surface sheen of reality as reified constructs that possess no verifiable reality. Immediate experience, or perhaps language, is the only and verifiable reality. Theory is simply 'theorising' and each and every one of us does it every day and every moment of our lives. In terms of social science research methods, these claims would suggest a very limited range of appropriate research techniques. Indeed, insofar as such approaches

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[42] Gellner (1970: 148).
[43] See, for example, Burchill and Linklater (1996: especially the introduction). See also Smith (1995).
[44] Bhaskar (1989: 5).   [45] Rock (1979: 183).
[46] Zalewski (1996: 340–353).   [47] Zalewski (1996: 346).   [48] Zalewski (1996: 346).

deny the existence of social structure they also deny the validity of research methods aimed at uncovering the powers, potentialities and tendencies of such structures.

There are three major problems to these ontologically reductionist views of the social world. First, they seem to represent yet another version of an empiricist ontology and inter alia the reduction of reality to known reality. As Rock puts it, in a statement replete with positivist overtones, '[t]he structures of everyday meaning are held to represent the only reality which the sociologist can describe . . . Compared with them, all other kinds of knowledge are ultimately metaphysical and vacuous.'[49] And for Hollis and Smith, 'meanings . . . do not call for explanation in terms of anything else'.[50] The methodological implication of this is that if meanings exhaust the social world we should expend all our energies on constructing research techniques that can uncover meanings and nothing else. It should be clear how this ontological claim has the effect of producing a drive for methodological conformity. If meanings are what ultimately matters, then methodologically speaking only those approaches that seek to explain meanings can be considered legitimate social science.

Second, the reduction of the social world to actors' interpretations elides the distinction between actors' concepts and sociological theories that attempt to explain those concepts. This distinction is crucial to the practising social scientist since it legitimates their very existence. After all, if the agents engaged in their activities and the concepts they have of those activities are exhaustive of the social world, it is difficult to see what role social scientists might play, other than to mystify, through a technical language, that which social agents already know. This relates to the third point, for it is incumbent upon social scientists to go beyond the everyday concepts and meanings through which agents understand their actions and explain the role of such concepts in the wider social field.

The problem for all approaches that reduce the task of theory to the mere redescribing of agents' own accounts is that they fail to take seriously the possibility of a second-order discourse (or theory) which locates the agents' own accounts in a wider context that explains and illuminates parts of the social field opaque to agents' understandings of their doings. Although the concepts held by agents form a necessary starting point for social theories, the point of social theories is to explain

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[49] Rock (1979: 194).   [50] Hollis and Smith (1994: 246).

these concepts as opposed to being reduced to them, or providing mere redescriptions of them in a more technical language. One can, however, understand the impulse that drives such attempts, for as Rock puts it, 'The sociologist who looks to immediate understanding will shed "scientism". He [*sic*] seeks to explain the common-sense world of his fellows in the language which most nearly approximates its forms. Rather than invoke the alien logic of science he centres his description around common sense.'[51] However, the only alternative to 'scientism' need not be reductionism. Agents' understandings must play a vital first step in any social science, but, and contra the more radical version of constructivism, society has an objective existence and does not simply exist 'all in the mind(s)'. On a radical interpretative reading of social theory, social structures, such as 'class' and 'bureaucracy', can only exist in actors' experiences and the meanings they give them. Thus, social theory and research methods must confine themselves to a concern with actors' common-sense understandings and meanings. Moreover, since meaning is primarily a linguistic phenomenon, this has the effect of limiting our methodological horizons to those linguistic methods our agents use in achieving successful everyday interaction.

For all radical constructivist theorising, any distinction between the language and form of social scientific knowledge and the language and form of lay or common-sense knowledge is to be rejected. Indeed, in the more radical variants of poststructuralist theorising, and some outposts of post-Wittgensteinian derived sociology, social reality simply is language. There is simply nothing but language. 'There is nothing', as Derrida puts it, 'outside the text.'[52] Giddens also comes close to this position.

Giddens endorses Winch's general view of the relationship between social science and social practice. As such, he argues that there is an inextricable link between ordinary language and the specialised language of the social sciences.[53] However, whereas for Winch the link exists because the concepts invented by the social scientist presuppose mastery of the concepts applied by social actors necessary for social practice,[54] Giddens adds a further dimension, arguing that there is a mutual relationship between lay language and social scientific language because 'of the reciprocal "absorption" of social scientific concepts into

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[51] Rock ([1979](#): 195).   [52] Derrida ([1976](#): 158).
[53] See Giddens ([1979](#)); Winch ([1958](#)).   [54] Giddens ([1979](#): 247).

the social world they are coined to analyse'.[55] Thus, Giddens claims that the 'best and most original ideas in the social sciences, if they have any purchase on the reality it is their business to capture, tend to become appropriated and utilised by social actors themselves'.[56] Furthermore, 'the concepts of the social sciences are not produced about an independently constituted subject matter, which continues regardless of what these concepts are. The findings of the social sciences very often enter constitutively the world they determine.'[57]

This formulation is ambiguous. The phrase 'very often' is evidently not intended to imply that social science discourses 'always' constitute the world they purport to describe. Yet, the use of the word 'determine' does seem to suggest that when social scientific concepts do enter into lay language they are determinant of that reality. For example, Giddens argues that '[m]odern states could not exist at all were not concepts such as "citizen", "sovereignty", and "government" itself, mastered by those who administer them and those subject to their rule.'[58] But how are we to understand what 'mastered' means in this context? Is Giddens suggesting that all social actors, not only customs officials, educated elites and perhaps politicians, but also people with little or no education, have mastered concepts such as sovereignty? Surely these various social actors cannot all have 'mastered' these concepts in the same way?

It is certainly reasonable to suggest that those who manage modern states, staff border controls, and administer immigration procedures will have some mastery of concepts that are integral to their daily lives; although given the misuse of the term sovereignty in debates over Britain's membership of the European Union it is equally possible to deny it. But even so, this is a very special case in which we are talking about a minority of the educated middle classes whose professional life is dependent upon these concepts. Even in this instance, these state officials have often undergone lengthy periods of training and education in order to grasp the use of such concepts even at a practical level. Indeed, if such concepts were as easily mastered and absorbed to the extent that Giddens seems to suggest, then there would be no reason to offer university courses in Politics or International Relations.

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[55] Giddens and Turner (1987: 70).   [56] Giddens and Turner (1987: 19).
[57] Giddens and Turner (1987: 20).   [58] Giddens and Turner (1987).

Giddens suggests that '[e]very time I use a passport to travel abroad I demonstrate my practical grasp of the concept of sovereignty.'[59] But, of course, Giddens, as an intelligent and well-educated member of society, would be expected to demonstrate his practical grasp of the concept of sovereignty. Moreover, as a social scientist he can also be expected to understand the wider conceptual context this concept inhabits. After all, part of Giddens' role in society is to teach such concepts to university students. However, the practical grasp of the concept of sovereignty is not dependent on knowledge of the larger conceptual context surrounding the concept of sovereignty; and I doubt that even Giddens routinely connects the abstract connotations of the concept to his practical grasp every time he uses his passport. I suspect that for the majority of people using a passport demonstrates only the necessity of producing a stamped official document as a requirement for transboundary travel.

To accept the argument that concepts such as 'sovereignty', 'class' and 'bureaucracy' are actors' constructs as well as technical concepts of social science is not to presuppose some necessary identity between them. Such concepts may exist in actors' minds but this does not mean that technical uses of such terms do not have quite different semantic properties. In effect, what we have here are two quite different 'language-games'.[60] Moreover, even these technical uses may in themselves vary as a result of their placement in a wider network of discursive concepts that give them meaning. This is clear when one considers the differing meanings attributed to the same terms across differing academic disciplines. Thus, the use and meaning of the term 'state', for example, will be, in part, determined by its placement in some wider theoretical framework. The practical, everyday use of such concepts, on the other hand, is not dependent on a web of formally defined concepts, but rather will gain its meaning and utility from its place in the practice as well as commonsense ideas and the shared knowledge of those also participating in that practice.

Equally, although concepts such as 'state', 'class', 'sovereignty' and 'bureaucracy' are conceptually dependent, this does not, and cannot, negate the intransitivity of such concepts. Thus, if someone refuses to believe in the objective existence of the tax-raising bureaucracy of the state, this will not prevent such bureaucracies from putting in place

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[59] Giddens and Turner (1987: 21).   [60] Wittgenstein (1953).

various legally backed, and sometimes disciplinary, measures against such an individual should they fail to pay their taxes. In this sense, social objects, despite their concept-dependent status, are as real as natural objects. Many social objects are as potentially impervious to the wishes of individuals as are objects in the natural world. Social objects, that is, possess an existence beyond the disbelief or (un)warranted doubts of individuals or even groups.[61] Hence, it is misleading to think that the importance of such objects depends solely upon whether they enter the minds of lay actors.

Thus, whilst it is certainly true that agents' understandings play a role in explanation, the two forms of social analysis are not methodologically reducible to one another. 'Understanding' and 'Explanation' are necessarily complementary forms of knowledge production, but the balance between the two differs in relation to differing object domains.[62] 'Understanding' and 'Explaining' constitute two complementary modes of attaining knowledge which supplement one another within the broad framework of human knowledge and they exclude each other only insofar as they are orientated to differing object domains with the intention of asking differing questions. Ironically, the necessity of both forms of analysis to studies of the social world, and the fact that adequate social analysis must always situate actors' self-understanding within the wider social field, is graphically illustrated by Hollis himself: 'The power of group over group is a social fact and depends on what people have in their heads. But it depends also on threats and fears being materially enforceable – an aspect which is both "social" and "material".'[63] As H. P. Dreitzel has put it, 'the limitations of the human capacity to create intersubjective worlds can only be studied when the reductionism of interpretivism is avoided; the social world is not only structured by language but also by the modes and forces of material production and by the system of domination'.[64] Adequate social explanation, then, requires both material and social aspects, although Hollis and Smith, despite broadly accepting this point, a priori reject that it is achievable in practice. This rejection is firmly based on ontological considerations, a major concern of which is whether or not reasons can be construed as causes, which is again another important issue that has methodological consequences.

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[61] Hacking (1999); Searle (1995).
[62] On this particular issue, see also Apel (1979a; 1979b: 3–50).
[63] Hollis and Smith (1990: 208).   [64] Dreitzel (1970: xvii).

Social causation as an ontologically grounded methodological problem

The arguments about meaning forming an unbridgeable ontological barrier between the natural and social worlds are all related to the claim that social 'action must always be understood from within'.[65] This insight, argue Hollis and Smith, has two implications. First is that any investigator needs to know the context, rules and conventions governing the behaviour. The second is that a researcher would need to know why the agent played this particular move in the game.[66] Crucially, it clear that Hollis and Smith, in adhering to the 'two stories thesis', are not able to address the second, and important, question of why a particular agent plays one move rather than another, since this would involve an account of motivating causes, and such an account, at least according to Hollis and Smith, belongs firmly in the realm of explanation. Hence, according to Hollis and Smith, '[p]ractices show themselves in the actions whose meanings relate to the practices. However this relation is analysed hermeneutically, it is not the relation of cause and effect.'[67] Hence, the rules of the social world 'are, from a hermeneutic point of view, importantly different from causal laws'.[68] This issue of causation relates directly to one of the reasons Winch argues for a sharp divide between the study of the natural and social worlds.[69]

The problem of causation is of critical concern to any science.[70] Hollis and Smith do not rule out causal talk in terms of social science, and argue that 'an interpretative framework can indeed speak of causes, but that these are very different things to causes of an explanatory framework'.[71] This means that Hollis and Smith must, in some sense, know what these differences between these accounts of cause are. As such, Hollis and Smith must be assuming an account of what constitutes an explanatory causal law, such that it is not applicable to social scientific accounts. In Winch's case, the answer to this question is indisputable: Winch accepts

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[65] Hollis and Smith (1990: 72).   [66] Hollis and Smith (1990).
[67] Hollis and Smith (1991: 410).   [68] Hollis and Smith (1990: 72).
[69] Winch (1958: 134–136).
[70] Bransen and Cuypers (1998); Fetzer (1981); Hart and Honorâe (1985); Heil and Mele (1993); Hermann and Lebow (2004); Kim (1995); Koons (2000); Mackie (1974); Mellor (1995); Nicholson (1996); Psillos (2002); Sankey (1999); Suganami (1996); Taube (1936); Tooley (1987); Wisdom (1946).
[71] Hollis and Smith (1994: 248).

the Humean account of causation.[72] This raises the question of whether Hollis and Smith are likewise committed to this account.

Hollis and Smith are well aware that the notion of causation is contested. Equally, they see the issue of cause as tied to epistemological positions. Thus, they argue that 'epistemology is only secondary if you are unpuzzled by what is a cause' and 'if you are in any way unclear as to what is a cause . . . then it follows that your position on epistemology will be unclear'.[73] Nevertheless, Hollis and Smith must know what they mean by cause in both stories, at least insofar as they maintain that differing types of cause are not combinable.[74]

Since Hollis and Smith see epistemologies (methodologies?) as mutually exclusive and adhere to the idea that there is one pertaining to the natural world and one pertaining to the social, it is hardly surprising that they should claim that what is a cause in both worlds differs, and that the two accounts of cause are not combinable. In many respects this position mirrors that articulated by Kant.[75] Within this general context, however, what account of cause do Hollis and Smith adhere to? Whilst they never advance a clear position on this issue, I think it reasonable to conclude that Hollis and Smith do indeed follow Winch and accept a positivist/Humean account of causation. Hollis and Smith argue that '[s]ystemic or structural causes are very different animals to the kind of cause involved in notions of shared norms or forms of life', and they also refuse to countenance any form of 'causal determination' in the social world and reject the view that an interpretative account of cause can be used in the manner of 'cause and effect'.[76] All of these claims have potential implications for social scientific methodology.

The use of 'cause and effect' and the belief that the social world is not 'determined' in the same manner as the natural world implies that Hollis and Smith adhere to the positivist account of causation. Evidence in support of this interpretation of their position can be found in their critique of Bhaskar:

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[72] See, for example, Winch (1958: 17, 124, 134). In the preface to the second edition Winch (1990) admits that he had in mind Hume's account of cause. He also admits this may have been an error and claims that we 'do use causal language when we are exploring people's motives . . . And there is of course absolutely nothing wrong with this way of talking; it cannot be said to be merely metaphorical. It follows that causal notions do apply to human behaviour.' Winch (1990: xii).
[73] Hollis and Smith (1994: 251).   [74] Hollis and Smith (1994: 249).
[75] Kant (1934: 221–224).   [76] Hollis and Smith (1994: 248, 249, 250).

> Insider accounts present a social world constituted and regulated by rules and meanings in its intersubjective character, and trace its events through or to self-reflexive interventions by persons. Scientific realism, being geared to an ontology of mechanisms, makes such accounts relevant by treating them as describing crucial stages in the mechanical processes which make the world go round. Yet, as with Durkheim's injunction to treat social facts as things, this involves conflict with the actors' unmechanical story of their interactions.[77]

Hollis and Smith construe causation in mechanistic terms. But as Bhaskar has argued, even in the natural sciences causal mechanisms should not be interpreted 'mechanistically'.[78] Moreover, whilst accepting that multiple causes were involved in, for example, ending the Cold War, Hollis and Smith argue that '[o]ne may add causes, even of differing sorts, *within* one perspective (or one story in our language), but one may not add causes *across* perspectives or stories.'[79] It is difficult to see what grounds might be advanced to sustain this argument. On the one hand, the argument already presumes what is at question, namely the 'two stories thesis'. After all, if you begin from the assumption that 'Explaining' and 'Understanding' constitute two differing and incommensurable stories, you are likely to conclude that they constitute two differing and incommensurable stories! That is, Hollis and Smith's argument already presupposes that the 'two stories thesis' is correct. Equally, if differing kinds of causes might be combined, as Hollis and Smith seem now to accept, and if the 'two stories thesis' is rejected, as contemporary philosophy of science seems to suggest, then differing kinds of cause are simply combinable. That is, there are no logical, or philosophical, grounds for the claim that differing causes are not combinable if you have already accepted that differing causes are indeed combinable, unless, that is, one has already taken up a dualistic position vis-à-vis 'Explaining' and 'Understanding'.

In effect, the 'two stories thesis' is sustaining the argument that causes cannot be combined. Yet the 'two stories thesis' is itself supposedly based on the argument that causes cannot be combined. How are we to explain this dilemma? The only logical grounds for Hollis and Smith's argument that causes differ in the natural and social world, then, must be a commitment to a positivist account of cause, which is clearly not applicable to the social world. As Hollis and Smith note, the universal

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[77] Hollis and Smith (1991: 407).
[78] Bhaskar (1993a: 185–187).   [79] Hollis and Smith (1994: 249).

principles of structural-functionalism, or causal/nomological generalisations, do not blend easily with intentional accounts of action, insofar as those accounts essentially invoke interpreted rules and reasons for social action. Rules, after all, are violable in a way that law-like regularities are not.[80] But if causes are not understood as law-like regularities, then this objection carries no import. In essence, Hollis and Smith's rejection of causation in the social world is predicated on a positivist account of cause. Contrary to this account of causation, Hollis argues that according to a hermeneutic account actions are best understood as:

> moves in a game, motivated by their meaning. Whatever quite this comes to as a proposition in the philosophy of mind, it stops us construing action as physical behaviour caused by mental states. On the contrary, by reconstructing the rules followed and thus discovering the meanings of the action, we learn all there is to know about what the agent is doing and why.[81]

If we focus on the latter part of this excerpt and compare it to the first sentence, we can see that simply to reconstruct the rules and uncover the meanings of action does not tell us all there is to know about social behaviour; in particular, an answer to the 'why' aspect of social explanation is crucially missing. What does explain the 'why' is very term Hollis at first includes, motivation. And motivation is related to cause. For a cause, as defined by *Chambers Concise Dictionary*, is 'that which produces an effect: that by or through which anything happens: a motive'.[82] In this sense, a motive is a cause.

Hollis' position is a restatement of that advanced by A. R. Louch, who argues that 'to know that a priest is celebrating mass is, in general, to know why he is doing it'.[83] This is another way of saying that to know that a priest is celebrating mass is to know what he is doing in talking and gesturing in a particular fashion. This seems intuitively correct. How, after all, can the social scientist claim to account for anyone's beliefs and actions without establishing in the course of his/her investigation what those beliefs and action were? However, even if this is granted it is no reason for claiming that it is then unnecessary, let alone meaningless, to ask why the priest is celebrating mass. Hence in order to understand the actions of the priest and to explain why she/he is engaging in them at this time will require a set of methods able to integrate both dimensions.

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[80] Hollis and Smith (1990: 143–170). [81] Hollis (1994: 196).
[82] *Chambers Concise Dictionary* (1988). [83] Louch (1966: 163).

The error is to suppose that our inquiries end once we have established what it is a person, or group of people, is doing. Moreover, it is not simply that an inquiry derived from these hermeneutic premises must, as Weber requires, be tested against evidence that is intersubjectively accessible to any competent observer.[84] On the contrary, the investigator must ask him/herself how his/her subjects came to have the identified beliefs and perform the actions which occur as a result of those beliefs. If Hollis' account were to be taken seriously it would lead to the bizarre conclusion that the only answer a social scientist could give to the question 'Why is the president declaring war?' would be 'Don't you see? He is declaring war!'

Thus we do not know all there is to know simply through a recon-struction of the rules of the game, for in any game there will be multiple moves (multiple meanings) available to any player at any given time, and although knowing the rules of the game will be a crucial element in any explanation, we will still want to know why a particular move is made as opposed to others. That is, we will want to know what moti-vated (caused) a certain move. Thus to use the chess example much favoured by Wittgensteinians: to know the constitutive rules of chess will not tell us why (what motivated, what caused) white to make a particular move at the time she did. Knowing the meaning of an act will not tell us why that particular act was chosen out of the totality of possible acts on offer in the social field at any given time, and we will need to broaden the horizon of our analysis in order to ascertain the motives and reasons (the causes) underlying the behaviour.

According to Winch, the rule-governed character of social action shows that ideas are constitutive of the relations between persons in which they are expressed. Thus for Winch, '[i]f social relations between men exist only in and through ideas, then, since relations between ideas are internal relations, social relations must be a species of internal rela-tion.'[85] This implies that all social relations are ideas. But why did these particular relations (ideas) come about? No explanation is offered and Winch simply assumes what requires explanation, namely, that there is some determinate connection between rules and the course of everyday activities. But what is the connection, how is it governed and how did it come about? Moreover, Winch's approach leaves social theory unable to analyse how these already existing rules, concepts and internal rela-tions have come into being and perhaps dominate and shape the social

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[84] Weber (1949: 50–112).   [85] Winch (1958: 123).

field in particular ways. That is, what caused them, and what maintains them?

Equally, since rules are reflective and subject to interpretation by agents, it is difficult to say whether an action was performed according to the rule; that is, was a given action performed in accordance with the rules, or was it a mistake? Rules are simply not determinate enough to be predictive; all agents do not follow them in the same way, and many often are not followed at all. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to say when we are applying one rule or another. For example, consider a society in which a rule exists where visiting diplomats are expected to comment on the grandeur of the setting of a diplomatic exchange: the imperial palace perhaps. A visiting diplomat, whilst unaware of the existence of such a rule, nonetheless does comment on the grandeur of the imperial palace. In this instance, it would simply be incorrect to say that the compliment occurred as a result of the rule. Alasdair MacIntyre provides another telling example: suppose I make a move in chess, one that follows the rules and may even be the best move on the board at the time. It could still be only a signal to someone in the crowd to begin a robbery. In such cases, 'conformity to the rules of chess is of course what makes my actions instances of playing chess, but it is not what makes them an action'.[86]

The indeterminacy of social action makes it more complex than simple rule-governed behaviour. Even granted that an action can be described as rule following, that may not be what makes it an action or what explains it. If rules are to have any explanatory importance, it must be in some larger context of a theory of social action that explains a whole complex set of interrelationships between differing forces in the social field. The relations between rules and actions, rules and practices, rules and the violation and exceptions, and rules and agents' beliefs and knowledge require causal analysis. The attempt to impose an artificial barrier between 'Understanding' and 'Explanation' ends up in unwarranted scepticism about some of these explanations, and ultimately in the failure to find any logical structure in the explanation of diverse and indeterminate social phenomena. Rules and reasons, then, are themselves susceptible to causal explanation if only because, as MacIntyre

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[86] MacIntyre (1986: 78–79). Nor can this example be redescribed under the rule of signalling. For it is not a rule of signalling that a colleague begins a robbery. The only way to make sense of such examples is as 'contingently arrived at agreements'.

has noted, 'to ask whether it was the agent's reason that roused him to act is to ask a causal question'.[87]

In the final analysis a non-causal interpretative approach to social analysis has difficulty taking into account the coercive influences on human life:

> If Winch were correct, and rule governed behaviour was not to be understood as causal behaviour, then the contrast could not be drawn between those cases in which the relation of social structure to individuals may be correctly characterised in terms of control and constraint and those in which it may not.[88]

This is a fundamental point. The totality of the social field is not exhausted nor confined to the dimension of intersubjectively intended and symbolically transmitted meaning. The linguistic structure of social life is but *one* element in the social field and any reduction of the totality of this field to this one, or any other, element should be rejected. That is, despite the fact that social fields are constituted linguistically, they are also constituted by the constraints of reality, whether social or natural. And the constraints of external nature, for example, limited resources, feed into the social field and have real causal effects. IR, then, cannot allow itself to be reduced to being merely interpretative.

Ultimately, the construal of reasons as causes is a necessary component of interpretative accounts, and we need a methodology that can deal with causal analysis. For if the actor's reason for an act is not part of the causal complex that helps explain the act, then the contrast drawn between an act and a bodily movement, upon which hermeneutic accounts insist – such as that between signalling to a friend and

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[87] MacIntyre (1973: 20). I think here we come up against the limit of the Wittgensteinian-based approach of Winch. Clearly, for Hollis and Smith, 'Explaining' and 'Understanding' constitute two distinct and incommensurable language games. The dilemma, however, is the same as it was for Wittgenstein. Language games are related to 'forms of life', although quite what Wittgenstein means by this is extremely difficult to pin down. Now, either every 'form of life' is shut off from every other, as Hollis and Smith seem to suggest (which, given Wittgenstein's arguments against 'private language games', seems implausible), or one must postulate 'a metalanguage to mediate the analysed language-games'. On this see Wellmer (1971: 71). This option, however, is the same kind of objectivist illusion we find in positivist science. As Habermas has put it in relation to Winch, '[f]rom his free-floating position the language analyst can slip at will into the grammar of all language games, without himself being tied to the dogma of his own language game which would impose conditions on linguistic analysis as such.' See Habermas (1988: 243). Hollis is acutely aware of this problem and argues, '[w]ithout assumptions about reality and rationality we cannot translate anything and no translation could show the assumptions to be wrong.' Hollis (1973: 46).

[88] MacIntyre (1973: 22–23).

scratching one's head – is negated. That is, the very notion of meaning upon which hermeneutic accounts insist depends upon an agent doing something as a result of possessing a reason. The difference between a waving arm and signalling to a friend depends upon the possession, by an agent, of a reason to wave his or her arm in that manner, viz., the desire to signal to a friend. In this respect, the desire to wave to one's friend can rightly be considered as part of the causal complex responsible for the waving of the arm in the appropriate manner.

In the final analysis, Hollis accepts that if 'actors' perceptions and beliefs are caused' then some form of naturalism may be possible.[89] It is difficult to overstate the importance of this admission. For, if beliefs are not caused, then where do they originate from? And if we are unable to explain the existence of beliefs, all social science seems impossible. Ultimately, both Hollis and Smith accept that beliefs are caused.[90] As such, questions concerning how they are caused and how they are causally implicated in outcomes become important. And if important, we need to think carefully about appropriate methods aimed at uncovering the complex causal role they play.

Methodology and the agent–structure relationship

Are there any specific methodological implications that flow from competing accounts of the agent–structure relationship? It seems clear that there are. Indeed, the logic of this book suggests that, given the differing ontologies that underpin these positions, there must be methodological implications. Methodological individualism and methodological structuralism are well-documented modes of analysis.[91] Less developed are the methodological implications of adopting a model of the agent–structure relationship that rejects reductionism. Wendt, Dessler and Carlsnaes, all to varying degrees, argue that 'Explanation' and 'Understanding' constitute two important, but ultimately combinable, moments of the research process. Wendt calls such a synthesis 'structural-historical' or 'dialectical' analysis,[92] and Carlsnaes terms it 'morphogenesis'.[93] Dessler never labels his approach in a formal manner, but his commitment to some form of synthesis is implicit in his claim

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[89] Hollis and Smith (1990: 75).   [90] Hollis and Smith (1990: 68–91, 204, 205–206, 208).
[91] Bhargava (1992); Dosse (1997); Katz (1976); Scribner (1966); Sturrock (1979); Tilley (1990); Udehn (2001); Williams (1999).
[92] Wendt (1987: 364).   [93] Carlsnaes (1992: 245–270).

that his 'transformational approach can draw explicit links between structural and unit-level theories'.[94]

The reformulation of the agent–structure relationship highlights the fact that both agents and structures are indispensable to any adequate social explanation. If both agents and structures are necessarily causally, and constitutively, implicated in social outcomes, then the question of how important individual actors were to the social outcomes is a straightforward empirical question, and not one that can be settled theoretically. Hollis and Smith illustrate the necessity of greater methodological sophistication in relation to this issue: 'It is perfectly possible to explain US policy in the Gulf War by starting with Bush's choices and calculations and then fitting in external causes in a specific historical sequence, but it is just as possible to tell the whole story the other way round, starting with structures and fitting in choices.'[95] If we closely examine the proposed content of both stories, we can see Hollis and Smith are suggesting that both choices and structural causes are indeed integral to any analysis. That is, there is not a story of choices and one of structures, but two stories, one beginning with choices, the other beginning with structures. Note that in both stories, both choices and structures feature. The choice between the two stories comes down to which factor we deem of most importance in a given situation and it is difficult to see how this can be portrayed as a theoretical question, even if theory will play a role in determining how we approach the issue. In an open social field where both agents and structures are conditions of possibility for the other, and each has emergent powers irreducible to the other, then the interplay between the two could not possibly be determined in advance of the research process. Hence, if we accept a social ontology that insists on the importance of both agents and structures, we are faced with a methodological issue of how to research the interplay between them. Methodological individualists and methodological structuralists are not faced with a similar problem and attempt to claim that one or other element ultimately explains all outcomes.

If we start with the choices of our social agent – President Bush, for example – he cannot feature as a de-socialised individual. For the categories we use to define Bush in a particular situation, such as US president, chief of staff, UN delegate and leader-at-war, are themselves social predicates, not those pertaining to individuals. In this way, then, part of the structural context is already embedded within the notion of

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[94] Dessler (1989: 441–473). [95] Hollis and Smith (1994: 250).

President Bush making informed policy decisions. Moreover, Bush's decision to go to war must obviously have been influenced by the material conditions of possibility that enabled the USA to go to war. As Wendt puts it, '[a]gents are inseparable from social structures in the sense that their action is possible only in virtue of those structures . . . '[96]

Thus, an adequate account of any war makes no sense without at a minimum including all three levels of agency detailed in chapter 5, the material conditions of possibility for war (for without such conditions of possibility such an option could not even have been considered a possibility) and the intersubjective understandings of the agents involved. Strong agents may be able to circumvent weak structural forces,[97] but note, they can only do so insofar as they draw on other structural elements within the social field. The idea of an agent acting in a structural vacuum, or structures acting without agents, is logically impossible.

Hollis and Smith broadly accept this, arguing that: 'The end of the Cold War involves a variety of versions of causes, varying from the international effects of the collapse of the Soviet economy or the rational calculations of options by the Soviet leadership, via the personality of Gorbachev to the effects of heroic individuals in Eastern Europe.'[98] Indeed, it would be a very strange account of the end of the Cold War that did not refer, in some manner, to at least each of these and many more factors. Which factor was the dominant aspect is, of course, an important empirical question that is given form by theory. Indeed, we might rephrase the Hollis and Smith thesis to read that for any given social outcome there are 'many stories' to be told, not only two. But equally, and as Hollis and Smith themselves admit, '[t]his is not to say that both are always finally true or even always plausible for particular events.'[99] Thus, some accounts of the end of the Cold War would simply be too narrow and simplistic. For example, an account that dealt only with Gorbachev making freely determined choices in a structural vacuum would probably be rejected by all; just as would an account that neglected altogether the role of Gorbachev. The epistemological problem of determining which account best describes the outcome at hand should not be underplayed. But this problem alone puts no a priori limits on the possibility of integrating the material and ideational elements of the social field, or on developing methodological frameworks capable of integrating the ideographic with the nomothetic.

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[96] Wendt (1987: 365).　　[97] Waltz (1986: 343).
[98] Hollis and Smith (1994: 249).　　[99] Hollis and Smith (1991: 410).

Ultimately, Hollis and Smith's concession that both stories are not always true or plausible for particular events is exactly the same as Wendt's claim that '[s]ometimes one type of account makes more sense; sometimes another.'[100] Likewise, Bhaskar also argues that 'It should be noted that engagement in a social activity is itself a conscious human action which may, in general, be described either in terms of the agent's reason for engaging in it or in terms of its social function or role.'[101] The disagreements, then, seem to have melted away. As such, it is interesting to ask why the issue has been framed in the manner it has. The explanation for this resides in two main factors. First is confusion over the exact nature of the problem. Often the issue is described in terms of differing object domains – agents and structures – and sometimes differing forms of epistemology or methodology. Second are a number of misunderstandings concerning the role of structural theorising. For example, Hollis and Smith ask '[i]f structural theories of international relations can say nothing about an event as momentous as the collapse of the Cold War system, what can they say anything about?'[102] But is the role of structural theorising to explain events, or is it to examine the possibilities within a given structural context?

Wendt argues that structural research starts with actual events and then abstracts to the social and internal organisation structures that make those events possible.[103] In effect, structural theorising is an inquiry into the conditions of possibility for social events to occur. 'Structural explanations reveal the conditions of existence or "rules of the game" of social action.'[104] Moreover, Wendt argues that although structural theories are a necessary part of any complete explanation of actual events, they alone do not explain those events directly, since they only explain how such events are possible.[105]

Hollis and Smith, on the other hand, seem to have misunderstood the role of structural theorising and to have ignored Waltz's claim that a structural theory of international politics will, for example, 'explain why war recurs; but it will not predict the outcome of particular wars. Within

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[100] Wendt (1991: 391).   [101] Bhaskar (1989: 80).
[102] Hollis and Smith (1994: 241).   [103] Wendt (1987: 363).   [104] Wendt (1987: 363).
[105] Wendt (1987: 363). Interestingly, Wendt does not consider Waltz's theory to be a structural theory and argues that neorealism is best considered a form of historical analysis that abstracts from the structural context and then attempts to answer the question of '[W]hy did state X do Y rather than Z?' Wendt (1987: 364). Whilst this is a fair assessment of how Waltz puts his theory to use, it is an incorrect assessment of how Waltz arrives at his structural account. Waltz derives his structural theory from exactly the methodological procedure that Wendt explains is integral to structural theorising.

a system, a theory explains continuities . . . Within a system, a theory explains recurrences and repetitions, *not change* . . . Structural concepts, although they lack detailed content, help to explain some big, important, and enduring patterns'[106] (emphasis added). Thus, Waltz never intended his theory to explain such a momentous change as the end of the Cold War. Whatever the faults of Waltz's theory, and these are many, to criticise it for not achieving something it was never intended to, nor could, achieve, is akin to buying a car and then complaining because it will not fly. Structural theory alone can never explain individual events. This is not to say that structural theory will not play a role in historical, or event, explanations. For all explanations of specific events include within them the conditions of possibility for the outcomes under consideration. Structural inquiry in the social world is concerned with the conditions of possibility for any social act. Thus structural inquiry examines the limits to action: what can be done, what cannot be done, and in some circumstances what is likely to be done. Structural theorising enables us to get a grasp of things as complexes with powers, and when we grasp this we have a particular form of knowledge that we might label 'structural-understanding'.

The whole point of forcing students to do science in our schools and universities is to engender just such a form of 'structural-understanding'. Part of the strength of the successful sciences is that they give us 'structural-understanding' and that, at least as theoretical sciences, they make almost no effort to try to explain the particular events occurring in the world. Thus, for example, it is not the aim of nuclear physics to explain, or have predicted, the disaster at Chernobyl in 1986, although such 'structural-understanding' may well play a vital role in the analysis of such events after they have occurred, and perhaps be of use in the prevention of similar accidents.[107] To suggest otherwise is to suggest that events could be explained before being caused, or that we can predict the causal pattern of social events before they occur. In this respect, the natural sciences can be seen to be a great deal less ambitious, in respect of their predictive capabilities, than the social sciences attempt to be.

Within the social sciences such 'structural-understanding' is vital, but analytically different from 'historical-explanation'. Thus, for example, while the properties of a given structure may contain tendencies

[106] Waltz (1979: 70).
[107] Ebel and Centre for Strategic and International Studies (1994); Gale and Hauser (1988); Marples (1988); Mould (2000); Nesterenko (1997).

that motivate, enable and/or constrain the incumbents of positioned-practice systems, the properties of such a structure are not reducible to the properties of those particular individuals that are responsible for its reproduction and/or transformation. Social structure is an emergent reality that contains within it particular tendencies, but importantly, these tendencies are not reducible to the individual agents who reproduce or transform the structure in the course of their deeds. The activities and psychological make-up of the persons comprising a bureaucracy, for example, are wholly irrelevant to the 'structural-understanding' required in order to know the possibilities inherent in such a structure. Thus, in terms of 'structural-understanding' we speak of presidents, not George Bush, or of capitalists, not Bill Gates.

'Structural-understanding', however, is limited and is only part of what might be required to explain a given social event. In order to explain particular events, 'structural-understanding' needs to be complemented by 'historical-explanation'. 'Historical-explanation' has the logic of a narrative that connects events and processes in time.[108] Even some structuralists sometimes fail to keep these two forms of explanation distinct, and argue that 'structural-understanding' explains outcomes, or that structural analysis allows us to produce explanatory generalisations and thus the explanation of events.

Theda Skocpol's important work on revolutions demonstrates this slippage between 'structural-understanding' and 'historical-explanation'.[109] Skocpol attempts to explain social revolutions in France (1789), Russia (1917) and China (1911). She constructs her argument through a comparative-historical analysis of these three cases, as well as briefly considering three other cases in which there was no social revolution. Skocpol identifies two factors that she claims help explain those cases where revolutions did emerge. First, in each of the states where a social revolution did take place the state organisations were vulnerable to administrative or military collapse when pressures from more developed countries abroad intensified. Second, in those states that experienced social revolutions, agrarian socio-political structures facilitated extensive peasant revolts against landlords.[110] Skocpol draws the explanatory conclusion that 'if a state's organisation is susceptible to administrative and military collapse *and* is subjected to intensified pressures from developed countries, *and* there is widespread peasant

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[108] Porpora (1987: 94–103); Suganami (1999).
[109] Skocpol (1979).   [110] Lloyd (1993); Skocpol (1979: 154).

revolt facilitated by agrarian socio-political structures, then there will be a social revolution'. Taken together Skocpol concludes that these are 'the sufficient distinctive causes' of these revolutions.[111]

Consequently, if from an examination of any given state we conclude that that state was subjected to such pressures, and had an agrarian social structure which facilitated widespread peasant revolt, then we can explain why that state had a social revolution, or perhaps in other cases predict when a revolution might take place. The state in question does not need to be given any form or content and other factors are deemed irrelevant since the sufficient conditions for social revolution have been identified. As long as our chosen state meets the criteria of our 'explanatory generalisation', we can explain/predict their social revolutions. Something seems to be intuitively mistaken about this. There is something important missing, and it does not seem logical to move directly from the identification of structural tendencies to outcomes without a series of intermediate steps. We need to understand how these structural tendencies impact on the actions of our agents. Indeed, as Skocpol admits, to explain the French Revolution we still need to incorporate at least the specific actions of the king of France: 'as everyone knows, the summoning of the Estates-General [by the king] served not to solve the royal financial crisis but to launch the revolution'.[112] This is surely a form of 'historical-understanding' (causal) that goes beyond the sufficient causal conditions identified in the structural account.

'Structural-understanding', on the other hand, is not causal in the sense of a narrative linking events and processes in time. Structural theorising is causal only insofar as it attempts to identify the powers, liabilities and tendencies inherent in particular structural configurations. But these powers, liabilities and tendencies are always only ever manifested in particular contexts, and if we are to understand the role they play in social outcomes they need to be wedded to a narrative form of explanation that emerges out of 'historical-understanding'.[113] In fact, Skocpol has added a narrative to her 'structural-understanding', a narrative she later came to acknowledge was unnecessary.[114] The relationship between these two forms of understanding is important. Skocpol's comparative 'structural-understanding' account is illuminating because it gives us a better understanding of the structural conditions of possibility

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[111] Skocpol (1979: 154).   [112] Skocpol (1979: 65).
[113] Adams (1996); Polkinghorne (1988).   [114] Skocpol and Somers (1980).

pertaining to the revolutionary societies under consideration. The generalisations drawn from this 'structural-understanding' do not, however, necessarily illuminate specific instances of revolutions unless this 'structural-understanding' is brought within a narrative that links the various processes, structures and events together. On the other hand, the narrative that Skocpol does introduce is convincing precisely because it is set within this 'structural-understanding'.

Thus, and as most historians would argue, to explain the French Revolution one needs to incorporate the decisions of the king and other main actors into the analysis. But equally, such agential analysis, as most sociologists would insist, must also include the structural conditions of possibility that make possible acts by such agents.[115] 'Structural-understanding' can, and should, be coupled with causal, or 'historical-explanation'; hence the two forms of understanding are complementary. As Christopher Lloyd notes: '[a]ction, behaviour and structures are studied in an on-going structuring context. Intentional and unintentional actions are seen as causally conditioned and enabled by structures; and structures of rules, roles, and relations are seen as the consequence of prior collective action.'[116] Importantly, and contrary to Wendt, 'structural-understanding' is prior to 'historical-understanding' since the causal narratives we construct to explain events utilise claims about agents, structures and processes. In short, 'historical-understanding' is ontologically grounded in 'structural-understanding', even if this is not fully acknowledged. In acknowledging that agents always work with 'material at hand', a properly conceived causal account must incorporate both dimensions.

However, while particular acts and events can only be investigated for their causal patterns, signification and meaning from within a structural context, the distinction between 'structural-understanding' and 'historical-understanding' is still methodologically important. Hence there is a valid methodological division of labour between the explanation of particular acts and events, on the one hand, and the explanation of the properties of structures on the other. It needs to be noted that this distinction does not mark a radical disjunction between the natural and social sciences, since the distinction between 'structural-understanding' and 'historical-understanding' occurs in all the sciences, even if as a result of their particular object domains one form may come

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[115] Lloyd (1993).   [116] Lloyd (1993: 196).

to dominate.[117] Indeed, and as already noted, in some respects the natural sciences are a good deal more modest than the social sciences vis-à-vis their predictive capabilities. After all, we would not expect aerodynamics scientists to predict when, where and how the next air accident will occur. Nevertheless, at some level, all acts and events fall under general descriptions and into general patterns, and no particular event is the outcome of a truly unique set of mechanisms. These two kinds of analysis must be methodologically united at this deeper level and able to take account of the relationship between particular acts, events, and patterns of behaviour and structures over time.

Hence, the distinction between explanation in the natural sciences and explanation in the social sciences is not fundamentally one of differing modes of inquiry, but more correctly viewed as the difference between explanation in open systems and explanation where closure is possible.[118] In the social world closure is not possible and abstraction must take its place. This is hardly a contentious point, and is readily conceded by Hollis and Smith who argue that 'every science needs to abstract from the variety of the real world in order to theorize'.[119] In terms of studying the agent–structure relationship, this entails that any explanation of social phenomena requires that one or more aspects of agency and/or structure must be taken as given at some point in time. Hence, structural inquiry, for example, must at times 'bracket' out questions of agency.[120] Wendt agrees, arguing that 'structural-historical analysis may require "bracketing" first one and then the other explanatory mode. That is, taking social structures and agents in turn as temporarily given in order to examine the explanatory effects of one upon the other.'[121]

This notion of bracketing is built into Archer's morphogenetic approach. According to morphogenesis, 'structure logically predates the action(s) which transform it' and 'that structural elaboration logically postdates those actions'.[122] In other words, the rationale underlying morphogenesis is that structural factors logically pre-date and post-date any action affecting them and as such, at time T1 in any morphogenetic cycle agential properties have been bracketed out. This issue of bracketing is the crucial methodological point of the agent–structure problem. More importantly, as the social world is not susceptible to closure, it is unavoidable. Dessler highlights, however, the limits of such bracketing:

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[117] This is what Wendt (1998) highlights in his discussion of constitutive theory and causal theory.

[118] Bhaskar (1979: 12, 57, 110, 160, 163–165).   [119] Hollis and Smith (1990: 128).

[120] Bhaskar (1979: 75).   [121] Wendt (1987: 364–365).   [122] Archer (1985: 468).

> Not every specific explanation, of course, need give a complete analysis of both agential powers and the conditions in which those powers are deployed. But the explanations must make room for such completion: or, more accurately, the conceptual scheme or framework underpinning specific explanations must recognise and make appropriate allowance for the working of both agency and structure, even if each specific explanation does not exploit the allowance.[123]

In other words, any empirical study of the social world must abstract from the total social context, but theoretically we need to show how the abstracted elements can be reintegrated. What is crucial is that any complete explanation or large-scale research programme should explain, rather than assume, the nature of agency and structure, whereas any particular research endeavour must bracket out some of the attributes of these entities at some point in time. This is the unavoidable methodological limit to explanation in open systems.

This illuminates something important concerning the role of theory to the research process. All narratives connect agents, events, processes and structures together to form a whole. Often this whole implies a beginning and an end. The important factors, causal mechanisms and processes identified in the narrative are highlighted because they are deemed important to the explanation of the phenomena under consideration. They help explain the outcome through linking the elements of the narrative causally. An element in a narrative whose causal relevance was not clear would be said to be irrelevant. If relevant to the narrative we would want to know the specific role the factor played. If not relevant, why include it? Moreover, we also face decisions concerning differing levels of relevance. Not all factors contained in our narrative will be of equal significance.[124] How do we decide which factors to include in our narratives and which to exclude? Theory provides the answer. Theory is suggestive of the elements we deem important to the explanation of any given event. Different theories will explain the same events differently, but all theories include varying levels of structural understanding.

Structural and historical understanding cannot therefore be two distinct kinds of inquiry, one concerned with uniqueness and change and the other with generality and continuity. The sharp distinction between the studies of action and structure on the grounds of uniqueness versus generality is untenable because of the conditioning and constitutive role of structure. Any attempt to introduce a purely individualist

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[123] Dessler (1989: 443–444, fn. 12).   [124] Porpora (1987: 98).

account of action must inevitably introduce unthematised structural features; in any account of a social outcome, one element explains the other. We cannot allow the complexity of the social world to force us into artificial methodological retreats that manufacture elegant simplicity at the expense of explanatory power. If the social world is complex, and undoubtedly it is, then we should expect nothing less than complex, multi-dimensional, and at times contradictory, social theories as well as a wide range of complex methodological techniques.

8   **Conclusion**

Conceptual inquiry is a necessary prerequisite to empirical research. Before empirical research can proceed, researchers need to have some idea of what it is they are attempting to explain. In terms of the social world, and in order for social activity to be possible, there must, at a bare minimum, be agents and the media and materials out of which these agents fashion their social environment. In effect, agents are always contextually bound and do not act in social vacuums. All the major figures in the history of sociological thought have grappled, in one way or another, with this issue. Marx's dictum that people make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing, indicates a viewpoint that is generally shared by most theorists. However, they have produced very different ideas about how to conceptualise this insight. The importation of the agent–structure debate from social theory to IR has highlighted the necessity of placing ontology at the heart of our analysis. This means that IR theorists need to think carefully about the properties of both agents and structures and their interrelationship.

This is not the first book to argue that ontology should be at the forefront of our analyses; however, it is, in my opinion, the most comprehensive account available thus far. The book has sought to unpack the fundamental building blocks of IR theory and through these 'ontological investigations' to indicate some of the epistemological and/or methodological consequences. The overarching argument of the book is that IR theory has become fixated on epistemological and/or methodological matters at the expense of ontology. Ontology has been lost in the heat of these epistemological debates. This is a book about that lost ontology.

In this conclusion I do not propose to go over the arguments contained in individual chapters, but rather intend to indicate some of the wider

implications of the analysis contained within them. First, the agent–structure problem expresses an ontological concern with the question: how does human activity shape the very social circumstances in which it takes place? That is, the agent–structure problem focuses on the way in which the social context (structures, institutions and cultural resources) fashions and forms social activity, and the manner in which such activity fashions and forms the social context. In general terms, then, and as a theoretical problem, the agent–structure problem concentrates on the question of how creativity and constraint are related through social activity and how we can explain this co-existence.

This is clearly a set of deep political questions, and equally clearly, differing theories can be seen as competing attempts at answering this question. This means that there is probably no right answer to the problem and that all approaches have a valid contribution to make. This should not be misinterpreted. I am not suggesting that there are no epistemological or methodological standards to guide research. So I am not advocating an 'anything goes' approach to research practice. I am, however, suggesting that as a discipline we should be much more relaxed about epistemological and methodological matters and more rigorous about questions of ontology. Ultimately, theories only genuinely conflict at the level of ontology.

If IR were to take this seriously the contemporary landscape of the discipline would undergo a substantial transformation. I do not expect this to happen overnight. Much that I am suggesting runs counter to many of the deeply held beliefs of all theoretical positions. Thus, for example, how will poststructuralists and neorealists react to my implied claim that, at the level of ontology, they share more in common with each other than either party would like to admit? But there may be some hope for the future of the discipline.

The frameworks, or self-images, that currently dominate contemporary disciplinary discussion are not eternal modes of thought that have existed for all time. For example, the so-called postpositivist phase of disciplinary development is a relatively recent moment in disciplinary history. Moreover, and taking the agent–structure relationship seriously, this moment in the development of the discipline has been constructed by those participating in disciplinary discussion of the issue. As such, if we no longer wish to continue thinking in terms of positivism versus postpositivism, for example, then it is in our power to change it. IR has undergone something of a social constructivist turn in recent years and it is surely not asking too much for us to reflect on our own

complicity in the construction of the barriers that currently police IR theory. Thinking ontologically about the social world also highlights why, despite the constructed nature of these debates, they may be so difficult to transcend. For, constructed or not, the world of IR is structured by a relational field that is infused by power all the way through. Hence, contemporary 'self-images' of the discipline have their own logics irrespective of our complicity in their construction. Breaking out of the 'iron cage' may not be possible, but then again if we do not try we will never know.

Irrespective of how one assesses the claims of the agent–structure writers in IR, they have opened up a possibility of ontological debate that offers an alternative way forward. In particular, there is the heightened sense, and awareness, that structure and agency might mean different things to different theories. But there are also other contributions the debate has made to our understanding.

First, a valuable contribution of the debate concerning agents and structures has been the manner in which it highlights the impossibility of maintaining the disciplinary boundary between domestic and international politics. In fact, the agent–structure problem makes the breaching of disciplinary boundaries seem not only virtuous, but necessary. When viewed from an agent–structure perspective the distinction between domestic and international structures seems untenable and agents are seen to be located within a plurality of structural constraints and enablements, some domestic, some international. Accordingly, agential interests can be seen to vary according to the structural milieu of the agents, and since agents face differing structural contexts they acquire differing interests and identities. In this respect, artificial boundaries between politics and international politics represent real barriers to analytical progress. We are all 'global sociologists'.

Second has been the deficiency of attempting to adhere to structural monism. The agent–structure problem highlights the manner in which agents' activities take place in structural contexts that enable and constrain their practices. Simply put, the agent–structure debate has highlighted the manner in which agents are situated within a multiplicity of structures. International political agents are subject to systemic, regional, domestic, bureaucratic and micro-interactional structures. All of these various levels of structure impinge upon the identities, interests and options of agents and thus play an influential role in international politics.

Third is the way agency is not agent-specific. Agency, although only ever manifest through the practices of human agents, also resides in structural contexts. Hence, whilst system structures are constituted through, and by, the practices of agents, it is also true that those same agents are constituted through the structuring properties of structures. Anarchy, for example, has to be seen as part of what a state is, and what a state does. Likewise sovereignty, as a constitutive rule of international order, is both the medium, and outcome, of the internal and external practices of states. It provides the very meaning of what is internal and what is external and is constitutive of the identities and interests of the agents involved.

Fourth, there still remains the vexed methodological question of how to understand a research process orientated to building accounts that integrate agents and structures. In part, this requires that we rethink our understanding of differing types of theory. In particular, and contrary to many of the prevailing criticisms of structural theorising, we can see that this form of theorising deals with structures and mechanisms, and specific events are only considered as potential outcomes. That is, structural research inquires into the powers and tendencies of things, powers, that is, which they possess as a result of their inherent properties. Historical research, on the other hand, deals with actual events and objects, as they unfold through time, by treating them as phenomena that have been brought about by specific structural configurations (which will have to be identified by structural research). IR needs to keep the distinction between these types of research at the forefront of its research training.

While I have argued that particular acts and events can only be investigated for their causal patterns, significance and meaning within a structural context, I do not deny the merit in a division of labour between the explanation of particular events and that of structural understanding. Structural understanding, however, whilst necessary in order to proceed with the explanation of events, is not sufficient, since on one level, every act or event is different from every other and the precise mix of causal factors will vary with every case. Nevertheless, every social act is only possible within a structural context and no act is the outcome of a truly unique set of causal mechanisms.

We cannot decide which story we prefer, as an explanation for a given social outcome, unless we have carried out research to determine the structural conditions of possibility for that outcome and the interplay

of causal factors at the point of time in question. That is an empirical issue, not a theoretical one. Abstract (structural) theoretical research is necessary insofar as it identifies a number of potential causes and structural configurations that might account for a given outcome. Nevertheless, theoretical speculation alone cannot tell us which of the multiple causes in existence were actually responsible for a given outcome. In this respect, one of the real insights of the agent–structure problem is the manner in which it exposes a fundamental limit of theoretical speculation in the social world. The social world cannot be understood exclusively in terms of either ideas or material forces, but can only be explained in terms of the interplay between them. Since this interplay is entirely contingent and varies with particularities of the situation, IR theory needs to research this process.

Indeed, by drawing attention to the way in which differentiated agents exist in a varied structural context and demonstrating how both are implicated in social outcomes, the agent–structure problem has highlighted the way in which there is simply no theoretical substitute for empirical research. Man, to return to Marx, makes history, but not under conditions of his own choosing, and it is the interplay of these elements that requires integration into our theories, not the a priori epistemological, or methodological, privileging of one over the other.

Finally, I want to put some substantive theoretical meat on the analysis in the preceding chapters. I do not intend to outline a general theory of international relations, since, as should be clear, part of the argument of the book is that no such theory is possible. Hence Waltzian structural realism, world systems theory and Wendtian structural idealism, for example, are all impossible projects, at least insofar as they present themselves as overarching theories that attempt to explain the totality of interactions in the international system; or even when they limit their role to only the explanation of state behaviour. The problem is that the international political system is a complex, chaotic and essentially open system that is causally overdetermined. This means that the patterns we observe are not reducible to, or explainable by, any one theory. This does not make IR theory redundant, nor does it mean that the international system possesses no tendencies that might be described in terms of 'conditional-laws' or 'contingent-necessities'. But understanding these will require two things. First, that we move beyond a model of science that views simplicity, coherence and reduction as primary goods. We need models of science able to incorporate the chaotic complexity of the international system, not a view of science that takes science itself

as the primary good and then attempts to force the international system into it. This also means that we will probably have to forgo the epistemological certainty that previous models of science have seemed to promise.

Second, if IR theory cannot play an overarching explanatory role we need to move to a deeper critical appreciation of just what role it can play in the research process. All research is embedded within theory. A researcher interested in how ideas shape international outcomes would be well advised to consider looking at such an issue through a constructivist informed research model. Likewise, a researcher interested in how the power–knowledge nexus shapes/constitutes/forms international realities would benefit from framing their particular research project in terms of Foucaultian precepts. And a research project interested in the role of gender in shaping particular outcomes would seem naturally to gravitate towards feminist forms of theory. In practice, it is rare for the content of a particular research project to play a determining role in terms of which theory is to be deployed. As a result of the contemporary fascination with epistemology, students are encouraged to adopt a theory as they move through their intellectual career. These theories then become identities that determine what research is deemed important, and how it is to be conducted. At times, this is not a problem and often the best research is conducted by a researcher totally committed to, and immersed within, a particular theoretical perspective. The problem occurs when it is forgotten that this is only one way to look at the issue, or that only a minute part of a complex object has been examined. When this happens, the researcher is apt to think they have arrived at a complete and overarching account of the world that is applicable to all outcomes. Once this occurs, grand theory quickly follows and with it outlandish claims to universality, parsimony and overarching frameworks of explanation.

In part, this is why I am so sceptical of the current way of framing epistemological debate within the discipline. I am more interested in the development of theoretically informed accounts which are then put to the epistemological sword, as opposed to the development of seeming coherent, robust epistemological fortresses which a priori determine what counts as a good account.

In many respects the logic underpinning the structure of the book is that agents and structures are independent entities that can first be examined, then the relationships between them explored. The book has indeed attempted to look at agents and structures in isolation and then

to think through the implications of this for understanding the linkages between them. In part, this approach was unavoidable since I was keen to explore just how agents and structures were deployed in some of the major theories of IR, and this is how these theories conceptualise their basic units, even it this is often only implicit. However, as the chapters developed it should have become clear that the separation of agents from structures is highly problematic. In terms of structures, this is because some aspects of structures, rules for example, are dependent on agents for their existence. Equally, agency, on the three-level model I propose, is already dependent upon various levels of structure for its causal power. As such, agents always bring their structures with them, and structural causal power is only ever exercised through the practices of agents. Hence, in the ongoing flux of social practice agents and structures are never totally independent of one another. However, the interdependent nature of these ontological curiosities does not mean that there are no differences between them. Agents are not the same thing as social structures. Agential power in a social context is dependent upon structural positioning, but it is not reducible to it. And social structures have a mode of being and a set of causal powers that are not reducible to the individuals upon whose activity they depend. So although it might be difficult to do so, we can ontologically and analytically distinguish between agents and structures. And it is only once we accept this that we can then focus our attention on the important missing dimension in most theories of IR – relations.

My view of structure is thoroughly relational, although the way I understand this differs from relational accounts that currently circulate within IR. In order to explain this I need to recap a few points. All social practices have an action and a structural aspect that is integral to practice. All social practices take place within a set of conditions that enable certain actions and constrain others. These conditions come in various differentiated forms and encompass the four planes within which social activity takes place. These follow in no particular order of theoretical or practical importance.

The first plane of human existence is that of our material transactions with nature. The word nature here needs to be handled with care. The central point is that all social life has a material aspect, but there is no reason to suppose that this will always be with objects that are natural. Many material objects are socially constructed – weapons, buildings and technology, for example – and yet these objects clearly play a role in structuring social life. At its most fundamental level our biological

constitution means the material side of human affairs is never wholly absent, even if, as is probably the case with biology, it plays a minimal role. At times, however, the material aspect of social life can be the most pressing – poverty and war, for example. There are many social theoretic approaches that neglect, or ignore, this material aspect to social life and there are those that attempt to differentiate sharply between material structure and social structure. I reject these attempts to divide the social from the material and insist that all human activity takes place within material conditions, that are / might themselves be changed as a result of that activity. Environmental degradation as a result of industrialisation provides a good example of how social practices can have a major impact on the material world, which then forms one of the conditions out of which further activity will emerge.

The second plane of human existence is that of intra/intersubjective activity. This represents that aspect of social life that we share in common with other humans. This is not a territorial designation but rather delineates, at its most basic, the realm of meaning. It can be shared rules and norms, but it also importantly represents language, an important (to many the most important) aspect of social life. The third plane is that of social roles. These are the specific roles individuals play through their social lives. As such, any particular individual may be playing multiple roles at any one point in time and the types of roles they can be asked to play will vary across time and place. The realm of intersubjective phenomena governs social roles but they are not the same as it. Hence, for example, 'president' is one social role that is occupied by an individual at a given point in time. This social role gives the occupant certain forms of power not available to others in the same organisation, but not occupying that role. What governs the dynamic of this role is intersubjective understandings, but simply to possess these understandings does not mean that one occupies that role; hence the two, although related, are distinct. The fourth plane of social activity is that of personal subjectivity. How the role of president is undertaken depends upon the specific individual who occupies that role; hence neither the role, the intersubjective understandings that govern it, nor the material context in which the role is situated determines the practice of the role.

It would be possible to map the accounts of structure that I discuss in chapter 4 onto this view of the various planes of social activity. Competing versions of structure can be viewed as providing accounts of the structure of that realm. Hence, structural realism might be overly concentrated on the material plane of social activity. Constructivism, on the

other hand, concentrates its attention on the intersubjective. The issue has always been one of how to link the planes together. The answer, I believe, is to think in terms of the relations between the various planes. Since all four planes have an impact on social life, then structure can be considered to be the relations that hold between the planes; it is the relations between the conditions for activity that constitute the structures of the social world. Each plane of activity has its own structural logics, but equally, the planes stand in series of complex relations that change over time and place. This structural relationality has been missing from the majority of IR theory. This view of structure links the four planes of social activity together to form a totality. As the dynamic of social life unfolds, the interplay between the fours planes changes. Hence, at certain points in historical time the material plane could be said to be dominant. And in many less developed nations today the material circumstances of social activity clearly still play a major role. More developed societies, on the other hand, have, to a large extent, gained a large (although still relative) degree of autonomy from material factors. In these societies technological solutions to material problems have brought about the view that the ideational realm now dominates. In many respects, such societies are able to address the problems nature throws at them, whereas our ability to tackle large-scale social problems is poorly developed. Yet if we are to tackle social problem such as war, poverty and disease we need theoretical models that can articulate the differing structural logics at play in different parts of the world and the interconnectedness of them. Since all four planes are necessary for social life – indeed we could say they constitute it – all four need to be incorporated into our theoretical models.

At any particular moment in time, an individual may be implicated in all manner of relations, each exerting its own peculiar causal tendencies, and often individuals are unaware of the structure of relations within which they are embedded. This 'lattice-work' of relations can be said to constitute the structure of particular societies. As individuals move through practices in their everyday lives, the pattern and dynamic of structural relationality changes in fundamental ways. Importantly, seeing structure in terms of the relations that bind the planes of social activity together allows us theoretically to maintain material and ideational elements in one coherent account. It is not that ideas matter more than material factors, or vice versa; it is the ever-changing relations between the two realms that should be our concern. Equally, since human

activity is a non-redundant element in all social practice it cannot be written out of our theoretical accounts.

This means that the multi-level agents outlined in chapter 5 have to feature in every level of analysis: the family, the state and the international. Importantly this throws light on how structures enter into micro practices, since agential power is (in part) structurally enabled. We can call this model 'structural relationism', but it is a form of structuralism that insists on the need to include human agents at every level. So what image of international politics does this model suggest?

First, it is not a realm of independent states so much as a realm of intersecting and dynamic structural relational logics. Of course, states are still important factors, but given the fact of structural interplay they are not the self-contained actors that feature in many IR theories. States are only one structural formation among many and they are themselves criss-crossed by multiple structural logics. Each state structure, when considered as a totality, is composed out of the dynamic interplay of the structural logics of the planes of social activity. Since these planes of activity cross state borders, however, states cannot be considered a black box. Certainly, within any given state, material issues may have been so fundamentally addressed that the effect of the structural logic of the material plane is controllable to such a degree that it almost seems to play no role. Yet since the material plane of social activity does not stop at state borders, this seeming autonomy from the material plane can only be an illusion. In effect, under a structural relational account, we should think not of international relations, but of global social relations. The state system we currently exist within is, in many respects, a chimera. It is a powerful chimera, but it is nothing other than the result of a particular configuration of structural relationships that are constantly changing. The vision of IR as a realm with the state (as actor) at its core existing in a structural environment that can be usefully analytically separated from all other realms only serves to feed the chimera. Insofar as we do nothing but debate which structure (material or ideational) dominates that realm, we will remain unable to theorise the relationships between structures. Which structure does indeed dominate human practices at any given time or place is an empirical question. But it is a question we are unable to ask until we accept the fact, reality and causal power of structural relationality.

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Index

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS