International Relations and International Political Theory

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Abstract and Keywords

During its formative years, the discipline of International Relations (IR) combined explanatory, normative, descriptive, and interpretative understandings of international relations, but over the last few decades the mainstream discipline has focused on explanation, relegating normative and interpretive issues to a secondary status within the field. International Political Theory (IPT) has developed as a response to this neo-positivist turn; the ultimate aim of IPT is to reshape the discourse and return to a discipline where explanatory and normative issues are not separated. IPT draws on the history of international thought, theories produced by modern analytical political theorists and critical theorists, and the contribution of IR theorists who have maintained an interest in normative issues.

Keywords: neo-positivism, normative theory, International Relations Theory, Critical Theory, English School

THE modern idea that International Relations Theory (IR Theory) could be, and should be, distinguished from International Political Theory (IPT) would have been confusing to most of the founders of the discipline or field of International Relations, and indeed to their pre-disciplinary forebears. Insofar as they recognized the terms at all, they would have assumed them to be synonymous or, perhaps, that the latter, IPT, was simply a subset of the former. Most of the founders believed that theorizing about international relations ought to be explanatory, normative, and prescriptive, and would have resisted the idea that one or more of varieties of theory should be privileged over the others, or isolated from them. Now, however, things have changed. Since the 1980s the term “IR Theory” has been mostly understood as designating explanatory theory, and as a result, IPT has come to refer more specifically to normative and prescriptive theorizing. The purpose of this chapter is to explain how this state of affairs came to be, and to criticize the thinking that lies behind such a division of labour. If IPT is to develop its engagement with “real politics” and to provide fruitful avenues for empirical research, an artificial divide be-

tween explanatory and normative theory cannot be allowed to persist—the goal must be to return to the more comprehensive account of theory espoused by the founders.

Before "International Relations" and the Early History of the Discipline

Books on "International Relations" or "International Politics" begin to appear in the quarter-century before 1914, along with a small number of university courses similarly (p. 49) titled, mostly in Political Science departments and almost exclusively in the United States (Schmidt 1997)—but the emergence of International Relations as an academic discipline (or at least a separate field of study) is a product of the two World Wars. The First World War and the formation of the League of Nations stimulated systematic study of international relations, centred around a number of research institutes (e.g. the Council for Foreign Relations in New York and the (later Royal) Institute for International Affairs, Chatham House, in London) and university chairs; the Second World War, the United Nations, and the Cold War produced a reboot of the field and substantial expansion. As a result, what we think of today as "International Relations" is a product of the period from *c*. 1918 to *c*.1955; but many of the ideas that it worked with had been first proposed in the three centuries before 1914, before "International Relations," by a mix of lawyers, philosophers, and historians as well as political scientists (see Chapter 2). Most of the individuals concerned—a small sample of whose work will next be examined—did not think of themselves as International Relations theorists, but together they laid the basis for the later study, and did so without clearly demarcating separate roles for explanation, normative analysis, and prescription.

One obvious group of past thinkers who contributed to the new discipline comprises theorists of Natural Law and the Law of Nations, thinkers who between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries developed the notion that the emerging system of states in Europe constituted a norm-governed international society. Numerous individuals contributed to this notion, from Vitoria in the sixteenth century, via Grotius and Pufendorf in the seventeenth, to Emerich Vattel in the early eighteenth. The latter was in some respects the least intellectually interesting of this galaxy of stars, yet his text *The Law of Nations or Principles of International Law* (1758) gives the fullest account of the principles of international society, and, crucially, is grounded not just in the principles of natural law, but also in the practices of international society (Brown, Nardin, and Rengger 2002). Accordingly, his account of the law of nations describes the condition of the European states system, but it also explains how that condition is arrived at—through the operation of the balance of power—and why the resultant international society is normatively desirable. A stable balance of power allows independent, legally equal but materially unequal states to maintain their liberty, which is a key aim of statecraft.

Maintaining independence in this way could sometimes involve war, and for that reason Vattel and his colleagues were described as "sorry comforters" by Immanuel Kant, the philosopher who at the end of the eighteenth century produced the most elaborate and

sophisticated account of the conditions of peace of his age. Kant's primary goal in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795) was prescriptive—his tract takes the form of a "peace project," a popular literary genre of the eighteenth century—but his prescriptions are firmly based in an account of how the current order worked and what would be needed to change it (Kant 1983). Although Kant did not describe his work in the terms of today's social science, Michael Doyle was able to use his account of the preconditions for a perpetual peace to produce a highly influential version of "democratic peace theory," the notion that stable democracies do not fight each other (Doyle 1983). Kant would have been surprised, and rather shocked, by the idea that his desired "republican" (p. 50) states could be described as democratic, but would surely have approved of the idea that explanatory theory and normative theory are inevitably intertwined.

Lawyers and philosophers approached international relations with a focus on norms and values, with explanatory theory a necessary but secondary feature of their work; proponents of *raison d'état* or realpolitik reversed this order, beginning with power and its operation and then moving to normative prescription. Machiavelli is the paradigm figure here, the inspiration for a clutch of Machiavellians (Meinecke 1924/1997; 1962). His handbook for rulers, *The Prince* (1532), is for the most part a work about the nuts and bolts of power, how to achieve it, how to hang on to it, how to extend it (Machiavelli 1988). But even in this short work the final chapter ("Exhortation to Seize Italy and Free Her from the Barbarians") is clearly prescriptive, and in his longer work *The Discourses* (1531) values and norms come to the fore—this is a passionate defence of republican principles (Machiavelli 1996). This combination of the explanatory and the normative is common to later Machiavellians and "realists," writers on the balance of power such as Friedrich von Gentz, or theorists of the rational state such as G. F. W. Hegel (Brown, Nardin, and Rengger 2002).

None of the writers discussed above would think of themselves as contributing to the discipline of International Relations—indeed, their writings precede the late nineteenth-century subdivision of social thought into separate academic discourses—but when, after 1918, such a discipline emerged it took over the aspiration, common to its predecessors, of creating theory that was normative as well as explanatory and that engaged with the real politics of its era. The thinkers of the "twenty years' crisis" were later accused by realist thinkers of neglecting the explanatory and the engagement with real politics in favour of utopian thinking, but an examination of their work refutes this characterization (Long and Wilson 1995). Conversely, realist critics such as E. H. Carr and, a little later, Hans J. Morgenthau were accused of neglecting the role of values and norms and overemphasizing pure power politics, but again the charge does not stick. A closer reading of Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis* (1939) makes it clear that, although he rightly criticized "utopians" for substituting their hopes and fears for a rigorous analysis of the reality of the politics of the 1930s, it was not his intention to exclude utopian thought altogether from the study of world politics—rather, he believed that an International Relations that did not incorporate normative thinking would be sterile and impotent (Carr 2001 [1939]; Booth 1991). The most important British postwar realist, Martin Wight, took a similar position; he was very clear that in titling his pamphlet/book *Power Politics* he was not en-

dorsing a crude realpolitik but sketching the politics of the powers—although in his case the relationship between his own Christian pacifism and his normative prescriptions was not as clear as one might have hoped (Wight 1978 [1946]; Bull 1976; Hall 2006).

Again, although Morgenthau believed that interest defined in terms of power was, or should be, at the centre of the study of International Relations, he was very much aware of the importance of the moral dimension of political life. Two of his famous "Six Principles of Political Realism" concerned this dimension; the Fourth notes that political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action, and accompanying tensions between "moral command and the requirements of successful political action," (p. 51) while the Fifth insists that "Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe" (Morgenthau 1954). This latter point is of particular interest in the context of the relationship between American realists and US foreign policy over the last fifty years. In the 1960s Morgenthau was a leading critic of America's war in Vietnam, while in the 2000s, figures such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, using new social media, were very effective realist critics of neo-conservative thought on international relations (Morgenthau 1970; Mearsheimer and Walt 2003).

To summarize the argument so far, the academic discipline of International Relations which finally came to a kind of maturity in the 1950s and 1960s was committed to what one might call a full-spectrum approach to theorizing international relations. IR Theory was expected to be explanatory and prescriptive, causal and normative. The main theory of the post-1945 world was, in broad terms, realist, informed and shaped by figures such as Carr, Morgenthau, and Wight—and, in France, Raymond Aron, in America, George Kennan and Reinhold Niebuhr—but this was a version of realism that was unafraid to address norms. And, in any event, there were other, non-realist theories on offer, such as that associated with the "world peace through world law" movement promoted by Grenville Clark and Louis B. Sohn, along with other UN-oriented ideas (Clark and Sohn 1958). It would be a mistake to overstate the pluralism of the discipline of International Relations in this period—for example, the contribution of classical political theory to an understanding of International Relations was seriously underplayed as the new discipline asserted the *sui generis* nature of its subject matter (Wight 1960)—but at least the separation of IPT from IR Theory, characteristic of a later period, was not a feature of the 1950s and 1960s. So, what happened?

The "Scientific Study of IR" and the Marginalization of Normative Theory

In the 1930s, Carr was clear that International Relations ought to be studied "scientifically"; in the 1940s Morgenthau wrote of laws of politics, concerning, for example, the balance of power, in such a way that a casual observer might imagine that he too aspired to promoting the scientific study of international relations. So, indeed, he did—but the model of science that he and Carr adhered to was very different from that of the "natural sci-

ences." In Anglo-American usage the term "science" immediately conjures up the disciplines of Physics, Chemistry, and Biology, whereas in Morgenthau's native German the nearest corresponding word is *Wissenschaft*, which does not have such connotations—*Wissenschaft* essentially designates systematic and rigorous study. *Geisteswissenschaft* designates philosophy, history, and the social sciences, and there is no implication here that these subjects are to be studied in the same way that one might study Physics or (p. 52) Chemistry. In one of his best books, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, Morgenthau explicitly confronts those who aspire to study the social sciences in the same way that the natural sciences are studied (Morgenthau 1947). Such an aspiration was, however, a feature of what began as a minority movement within American Political Science in the 1940s and 1950s and gradually came to achieve the status of an orthodoxy.

In International Relations the move towards the scientific study of the subject was led by the comparatively large number of ex-natural scientists who were attracted to the field. These people were sometimes former physicists with a guilty conscience over nuclear weapons, or systems analysts employed by bodies such as the RAND Corporation to improve the quality of United States policy-making in the area of defence. They were joined by imports from the behavioural sciences, who were attuned to a version of the social sciences that involved an attempt to study the actual behaviour of actors rather than the meanings they assigned to this behaviour. The aim of these "behaviouralists" (as the movement came to be called) was to replace what they called the "wisdom literature" and "anecdotal" use of history represented by Morgenthau and other traditional realists with rigorous, systematic scientific concepts and reasoning. There were various dimensions to this. It might involve casting old theories in new, rigorous forms—as with Morton Kaplan's "balance of power" models (Kaplan 1957). Or it might involve generating new historical databases and time-series to replace the alleged anecdotalism of traditional diplomatic history—as in the "Correlates of War" project directed by J. D. Singer and associates at Ann Arbor, Michigan (Singer et al. 1979), or the use of formal mathematical models for the study of decisions—as in game-theoretic work and early rational choice theory in the hands of people such as Thomas Schelling at Harvard (Schelling 1960).

For the purpose of this discussion, the key point about the movement to create what its proponents saw as a genuine science of international politics was the way in which normative and prescriptive work in the field was increasingly marginalized by the "scientists." Interestingly the aforementioned natural scientists were actually stimulated to enter the field by normative considerations, and were resistant to this marginalization; it was the behavioural scientists and, especially, economists who were more influential in putting normative work to one side. A key figure here was the American monetarist Milton Friedman, whose 1953 essay on "The Methodology of Positive Economics" was enormously influential (Friedman 1966). Friedman draws on the distinction between "is" and "ought" statements probably best set out by the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume in the eighteenth century (Hume 1985). He distinguishes *positive* economics, which he believes tells us how things actually are, from *normative* economics, which purports to tell us how things should be. Thus, to take a famous example, the Phillips Curve was an exercise in positive economics which attempted to explain the relationship between the

rate of inflation and the level of unemployment in a society—essentially, lower unemployment was associated with higher inflation. If the curve is accurately described, it should be possible to predict the level of employment associated with any particular inflation rate—this is positive economics, but what it cannot tell us is which particular combination of the two variables is desirable; that, according to (p. 53) Friedman's distinction, is a matter for normative economics. It is not something that can be decided by a fact-based calculation, because whatever combination is chosen there will be winners and losers, and deciding whether to punish savers with high levels of inflation or disadvantage jobseekers with low levels of employment is a policy decision that reflects values, not analysis.

On the face of it, the distinction between positive and normative theory seems sensible, and has been adopted by some writers who describe themselves as normative theorists (see Chapter 50). Still, this adoption is a tactical mistake, because although according to Friedman both positive and normative theory are in principle seen as legitimate activities, for most social scientists nowadays the former is regarded as more serious, in a sense more real, than the latter. Majority opinion has come to think that "real" theory is explanatory theory—this is where the rigorous work is done, and normative theory is a decidedly second-rate activity. In any event, the distinction between the two is not as clear cut as Friedman would have it. Friedman's account of a positive social science is clearly based on the model of the natural sciences, yet there are important ways in which the natural and social sciences differ. In the natural sciences, non-reflexivity is the rule—to put it crudely, the subject matter of a natural science theory is not conscious of the fact that its behaviour or nature is being theorized, and is not capable of reflecting on the implications of this fact. Human beings are so capable; they can adapt consciously in ways that the objects of natural science cannot. Neo-positivist theorists of international relations are, of course, conscious of this difficulty and do their best to adapt their theories to take it into account, and with some success—but it remains the case that the distinction between normative and positive theory is always blurred. Norms and values permeate human behaviour and the behaviour of states, and while it is not necessary to go as far as those who argue that as a result *all* theory is normative, it is clearly a mistake to think that there is a clear dividing line between the normative and the positive (Frost 1996).

Mistaken as this belief may be, the aspiration to create positive theory has been very influential in Political Science and in International Relations, especially in the United States, which in quantitative terms (number of scholars, quantity of work produced) is the home of the discipline. As an aside, in the UK, where International Relations emerged not out of Political Science but out of Law, Philosophy, and History, there has been greater resistance to the siren call of positivist social science, but even here the trend is in that direction (Brown 2011). The drive to push the American social science of International Relations in the direction of marginalizing normative considerations was reinforced by the success of Kenneth Waltz's 1979 book *Theory of International Politics*—somewhat ironically, because Waltz himself was by no means a positivist social scientist (Waltz 1979; Booth 2011). Waltz's book was instrumental in establishing the centrality of economic reasoning, i.e. rational choice theorizing, neo-utilitarianism, and analogies from neoclassical

economics, for the study of International Relations. Although he described his work as "structural realism," he is in fact offering a "rational choice" version of the balance of power in which states are assumed to be self-interested egoists existing under anarchy, who can be treated as though they were determining their strategies by (p. 54) choosing that which maximizes their welfare. From this basic position can be derived a distinction between "defensive realists" such as Stephen Van Evera, who look simply for states to maintain their position within the system, and "offensive realists" such as John Mearsheimer, who assume that states attempt to achieve as much power as possible, via at least regional hegemony (Van Evera 1999; Mearsheimer 2001). Equally importantly, some liberal thinkers accepted the two basic assumptions of international anarchy and the rational egoism of states; the aim of their analysis was to show that it was possible for rational egoists to cooperate even in an anarchical system, given a sufficiently high level of institutionalization (Keohane 1984; Axelrod and Keohane 1985).

Structural Realism and Liberal Institutionalism have been the dominant IR theories of the last thirty years, and each has achieved this position by abstracting the normative and prescriptive dimensons from broader notions of realism and liberalism, dominant in the interwar and immediate post-1945 period. IR Theory came to be understood as positive theory—explanatory in nature. Norms were acknowledged by some as contributing to the causal account of the world that was sought, "accounting for a small part of the variance," as a causal theorist might put it, but normative analysis as such was given secondary status. IR Theory's loss, however, was to provide a stimulus to IPT.

Bringing Political Theory Back In

At the very point at which mainstream IR Theory was moving away from normative analysis, for the first time in the post-1945 world normative Political Theory was developing an interest in the international. The stimulus to this shift was the publication in 1970 of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*; Rawls's work was, by common consent, a masterpiece, the most important work of Anglo-American political theory of the century, radical in its implications for social policy—but it was also, in one respect, very conservative (Rawls 1970). Rawls's contract theory drew a sharp distinction between justice in domestic society and international justice; domestic societies were assumed to be self-contained cooperative schemes for mutual advantage in which principles of distributive justice were required—no such cooperative society existed internationally, so only the formal justice provided by international law was appropriate for relations between states. Social justice operated at the domestic level only. From the outset this position was regarded as unacceptable—perverse even. The refusal to theorize international inequalities seemed wrong even (perhaps especially) to those who accepted the basic model of justice proposed by Rawls, and soon writers who were, as it were, more Rawlsian than Rawls himself were providing readings of international society that made space for principles of redistribution and social justice. The most important of these readings was Charles Beitz's *Political Theory and*

International Relations, which appeared in 1979, coincidentally the same year as Waltz's masterpiece (Beitz 1979).

There is no space here to go into all the ins and outs of post-Rawlsian theories of international justice (on which see Brown 2006; 2015); the key point is that in the 1970s and (p. 55) 1980s political theorists began to focus on the international in a way that had not been seen since the time of Kant and Hegel. Post-Rawlsians were only part of this story, albeit an important part. Alternative readings of international society were provided by Terry Nardin, employing an Oakeshottian framework, and Mervyn Frost, whose "constitutive theory" had Hegelian roots (Nardin 1983; Frost 1986). Perhaps of greater long-run significance was the revival of Just War theory in the aftermath of the Vietnam war; here Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* is a landmark, the work that more than any other took Just War thinking out of theological colleges and into the mainstream of political theory (Walzer 2015). Walzer's defence of political communities in that book, from a perspective that owed much to John Stuart Mill, stimulated an engagement with more cosmopolitan liberals such as Beitz and David Luban, usefully collected in Beitz's edited collection *International Ethics* (Beitz, Alexander, and Scanlon 1985). Here was the origin of the cosmopolitan/communitarian debate in IPT (on which see Chapter 3 of this Handbook). Add to this the fact that in the 1970s human rights attracted more interest than they had for decades, partly as a result of their role in the East–West détente marked by the Helsinki Accords, partly because of the emergence of a non-communist discourse on economic rights (Moyn 2010; Shue 1980).

In summary, a discourse of IPT began to take shape in this period, not so much in opposition to mainstream IR theory as in parallel to it. In many respects writers in the post-Rawlsian wing of the new discourse were similar in their methodological assumptions to the rational-choice theorists who were taking over mainstream IR theory—they accepted the distinction between normative and positive theory and were content to provide the former. But more significant was the fact that the new discourse provided a home for many writers who would previously have been happy to think of themselves as IR theorists but who now felt marginalized by structural realism and liberal institutionalism. The most obvious group who fell into this category are the students of international society, who in 1981 were characterized by one of their fiercest critics as the "English School," a label they soon accepted as a badge of honour (Jones 1981). The leading figure of the English School of the time, the Australian Hedley Bull, had in 1977 produced an account of what he called *The Anarchical Society* that would have been recognizable to a figure such as Morgenthau as congruent with his own theoretical work—but Bull was also a fierce critic of what he regarded as American scientism, and had little time for the way the discipline was going in the United States (Bull 1966; 2012).

The relationship between English School writers and theorists of global justice was by no means always easy. Charles Beitz had directed some of his most trenchant criticisms of conventional IR theory in *Political Theory and International Relations* at English School writers, and from the point of view of the post-Rawlsians, John Rawls himself added insult to injury by restating his views on the distinctive nature of international society in a book

that owed much to the English School—*The Law of Peoples* (Rawls 1999; Brown 2002). Still, even though English School writers and post-Rawlsians disagreed about many matters of substance, they at least agreed that what they were disagreeing about was important. Thus, for example, most of the English School were very sceptical about violations of the norm of non-intervention for (p. 56) humanitarian reasons or to promote regime change (and were joined in this scepticism by Michael Walzer), whereas most post-Rawlsians regarded this norm as of little importance, to be violated in the interests of universal values whenever it seemed prudent to do so; but both camps agreed that intervention posed important normative and moral questions—questions which mainstream IR theory had become incapable of posing let alone answering.

A second category of theorists who now found IPT to be more hospitable than IR theory, overlapping somewhat with the English School, is made up of historians of international thought. In the 1950s and 1960s there was comparatively little work being done on the history of international thought, and what there was was not of the highest quality; Martin Wight's description of communists and Nazis as the children of Kant and Hegel is an extreme example of a dubious historical judgement from this period—extreme but not wholly uncharacteristic of the age (Wight 1960). By the 1980s, however, the quality of work on the history of international thought had risen quite dramatically—see for example Andrew Linklater's *Men and Citizens* (1982). Here Kant's cosmopolitanism is liberated from the charge of utopianism, Hegel's account of the rational state is no longer seen as a cover for German nationalism, and Marx's thought is studied in its own terms and not through Leninist lenses. But such work was little valued by mainstream IR theorists; as IR theory took over from Economics its conception of formal theory, and from econometrics its quantitative techniques, so it also took over the lack of interest in its own history that characterizes the modern discipline of Economics. If, as Waltz would have it, the "anarchy problematic" has the same characteristics in all non-hierarchical international orders, that is those where the units that compose the system are differentiated by capabilities not functions, then there is no advantage to the study of history save perhaps the collection of anecdotes for heuristic purposes. The new discourse of IPT at least provided a home for new high-quality historical work.

Less easy to fit within the new discourse was the work of critical theorists, post-modernists, and feminists (see e.g. Cox 1981; Der Derian and Shapiro 1989; Tickner 1992). It is difficult to generalize here, because these labels cover three very wide fields—some writers who self-identify as feminists or critical theorists are certainly engaged in IPT, as other chapters of this Handbook testify—but the main emphasis of work in these fields lies elsewhere, and this is almost exclusively the case for post-modernist and post-structuralist work. The reason for mentioning their work in this context is that these approaches have defined themselves in opposition to the IR mainstream in much the same way as IPT has—they are, if not companion, at least cognate discourses.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the origins of the separation between IR Theory and IPT, origins that still influence the shape of these discourses, even though some of the sharper edges of the distinction between them have been smoothed out. For example, the rise (p. 57) of constructivist IR Theory, albeit still a minority discourse, has improved the status of normative thinking within the mainstream, while internal critiques of theories of global justice such as that of Thomas Nagel have challenged the readiness of some International Political Theorists to disregard political realities (Nagel 2005). As the contents of this Handbook illustrates, International Political Theorists are now engaged with "real politics" at a number of different levels, and via empirical research; as a result, and more or less inevitably, the distinction between normative and positive theory, always dubious in principle, becomes more difficult to sustain in practice. Perhaps the long-term future involves a return to the situation in the early years of the discipline when "International Relations Theory" and "International Political Theory" were synonymous?

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