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.

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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

[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).

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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).

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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 implica-
tions. 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 out-
come. 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 inves-
tigation 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 indi-
viduals. 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, responsi-
bility 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 polit-
ical 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

[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

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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).