Introduction: the problem of causation and the divided discipline of International Relations

The guiding aim of the discipline of International Relations (IR) at its inception in the aftermath of the First World War was the study of the causes of war. Scholars engaged in the new field of International Relations sought to uncover the causes of the Great War, and of wars in general, in the hope of thereby being able to avoid disastrous conflicts in the years to come.1 In the course of the twentieth century the causal questions that have been of interest to IR scholars have proliferated widely beyond those pertaining to the causes of interstate war: scholars in the discipline of IR have studied subjects ranging from the causes of democratic peace and the causes of globalisation, to the causes of global terrorism and the causes of global inequalities. Although studying causal relations has been fundamental to IR research from the start and continues to occupy scholars in the discipline, debates over causation have also been highly controversial.

During the past century it has become clear that theorists from different schools of thought have tended to disagree sharply over their substantive causal accounts of international politics. For example, the causes of war are still as contested as ever: just compare the variety of accounts given for the war in Iraq. While some believe that the war was initiated because the USA, and the coalition states, had a national interest in securing themselves against a threat posed by weapons of mass destruction and ‘rogue states’, others insist that it had more to do with long-standing economic interests in the oil in the region, or a wish to ensure access to markets in the area. Others yet emphasise the relative importance of more idealistic reasons for engagement in the region, such as the wish to promote human rights and democratic norms. Heated disagreements also characterise debates over other key world political trends: causes of global poverty, for example, are deeply contested between different actors and theoretical positions, as are

1 Dickinson (1917: v).
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the causes of global terrorism. Contestation between different causal interpretations has been not only theoretically important in gaining an understanding of the key forces that shape international politics, but in many cases also consequential for how political actors or actions have been morally and politically judged.

As if these debates over the causes of global political trends were not enough, the contestation surrounding the concept of cause has increased significantly in the discipline of IR during the past two decades. This is because many IR theorists have come to question, not just the scope and the plausibility of each other’s causal accounts of world politics, but also the very legitimacy of the notion of cause in analysing world politics. Deep philosophical rifts have come to divide the discipline of IR between causal and non-causal forms of theorising.

The advocates of a scientific study of international relations, often termed ‘positivist’ or ‘rationalist’ scholars in the discipline, have called for the study of international politics through systematic methods of causal analysis. These scholars have argued that the standards of a ‘scientific’ model of causal analysis should be upheld throughout IR scholarship in order for the discipline to generate useful and reliable empirical knowledge about causes and consequences in international politics.3 The scientific approach to causal analysis has entailed that we study general patterns in international relations: for example, regular patterns of state behaviour. One example of a general pattern that has been identified in international relations is that democracies do not tend to fight other democracies. In trying to decipher whether democracy can really be said to ‘cause’ peace, rationalist causal analysts in IR have formulated many specific hypotheses regarding the relationship between democracy and peace, which they have then tested against

2 Rationalism is a term famously used by Robert Keohane to describe approaches that believe in the validity of the ‘scientific’ approach to international relations inquiry as well as in the utility of rational choice models. Keohane (1988). Positivism can be seen as a term that is in many ways interchangeable with the term rationalism, although the former suffers from many prejudicial historical connotations, from which most theorists like to distance themselves. Thus, most scientifically inclined theorists in contemporary IR prefer to refer to their work as rationalist rather than as positivist. Because of its less prejudicial and more precise connotations the term ‘rationalism’ will be preferred here, although it is seen as interchangeable with what some theorists would classify as positivism. Positivism will be discussed in more detail in following chapters.

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patterns in large-scale data gathered about state behaviour. Some scholars have concluded that certain causal hypotheses, for example one suggesting a link between democratic norms within a state and peaceful state behaviour, can be considered ‘robust’ in reference to the data, hence providing an indication of the causal significance of democracy for peace.\(^4\) Differing interpretations have also been advanced: some scholars have rejected the significance of the link between democracy and war in the data, and other causal factors, such as the level of wealth, or alliance structures, have been measured and tested as possible causal variables that explain peace between Western democratic states.\(^5\)

Regardless of their differing conclusions, many rationalist social scientists have accepted that the study of causal connections between observable variables in such a manner constitutes the key task of IR scholarship. These kinds of causal studies can provide grounds for progressive accumulation of knowledge in the study of international relations.\(^6\)

However, since the 1980s, a variety of ‘critical approaches’ – critical theory, poststructuralism, feminism, and constructivism – have challenged the mainstream approaches to the study of world politics.\(^7\) Importantly, many of the so-called ‘reflectivist’ approaches\(^8\) have rejected the mainstream ‘positivist’ methods and many of them also the idea of causal analysis: they have sought to carve out room for a ‘postpositivist’ form of inquiry centred on examining how world politics is socially, normatively or discursively ‘constituted’. This idea of constitutive analysis has been applied in analysis of ‘traditional’ IR matters, such as interstate war and democratic peace, but also in new subject areas, such as the study of global gender relations.\(^9\)

\(^4\) See Maoz and Russett (1993).
\(^5\) See, for example, Layne (1994) and Spiro (1994). For a more detailed discussion see chapters 3 and 7.
\(^6\) See, for example, Chernoff (2004).
\(^7\) See, for example, Cox (1981); Ashley (1989); Walker (1993); Onuf (1989); Enloe (1990).
\(^8\) Reflectivism is also a term coined by Keohane to refer to those IR scholars who reject the scientific approach to social science of the mainstream rationalists and the utility of rational choice methods, preferring instead historical and sociological study of world politics. Keohane (1988: 384). For a more detailed discussion of the term see chapter 4.
\(^9\) More traditional territory has been intervened in, for example, by Campbell (1998a, 1998b); Fierke (2005); Zehfuss (2002); Barkawi and Laffey (2001b); Cox (1987). New aspects, such as gender relations, have been explored, for example, by Sylvester (1994); Weber (1999); Zalewski and Parpart (1998).
David Campbell’s insightful analysis of US foreign policy provides one example of a ‘reflectivist’ analysis that rejects the classical methods and terminology of IR scholarship. Campbell studies not general observational patterns that characterise US foreign policy behaviour, but rather how US foreign policy has been discursively constituted by the so-called ‘discourse of danger’. He traces how the discursive constitution of enemies has been entangled with the discursive construction of the United States itself.10 This kind of analysis has gone against the grain of traditional social scientific IR scholarship in explicitly refusing to analyse the ‘underlying causes’ of US foreign policy in accordance with traditional theoretical frameworks, such as realism and liberalism, and in rejecting the methods of social scientific causal analysis. In fact, Campbell has fiercely attacked the idea that a social scientific causal model should be enforced in analysis of the ways in which global political dynamics are constituted.11

A significant divide has appeared in the discipline between those interested in scientific analysis of causes in world politics, and those vehemently opposed to the very idea of causal analysis. What has given rise to this dichotomy? In their influential book *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* Martin Hollis and Steve Smith sought to give a philosophical grounding for the emerging divisions between the rationalist ‘causal’ and reflectivist ‘non-causal’ forms of theorising in IR.12 Hollis and Smith aimed to explain the theoretical divisions in IR by drawing on the terms of debate between the ‘positivist’ and the ‘hermeneutic’ theorists in the philosophy of social science. They argued that there are always ‘two stories to tell’ in IR, as there are in other social sciences: one can attempt either to ‘explain’ international politics through causal analysis that seeks general patterns in world political processes, or to ‘understand’ world politics through inquiring into the constitution of meaning and the ‘reasons for’ particular actions. They also contended that, while ‘explanation’ was about finding causes, ‘understanding’, or the inquiry into the meaningful context of action, was essentially a non-causal form of inquiry.13 These two approaches to the social world, they claimed, have different aims but

10 For reflectivist interventions in more classical IR territory see, for example, Campbell (1998a, 1998b).
12 Hollis and Smith (1990).
13 Hollis and Smith (1990: 3).
are both legitimate in their own ways. Crucially, it was argued that the two forms of theorising cannot be combined: they refer to fundamentally different forms of inquiry embedded in fundamentally different views on the nature of the social world.\textsuperscript{14}

Hollis and Smith’s philosophical justification for the separation of the two forms of social inquiry seems to have made sense to many IR theorists – across the theoretical divides. During the past decade, the postpositivist approaches, although widely divergent in their specific theoretical claims, have largely accepted the common assumption that it is possible and legitimate to study world politics without conducting causal analysis or using causal terminology. Many of them reject the possibility of ‘cataloging, calculating and specifying the “real causes”’, as David Campbell puts it.\textsuperscript{15} On the other hand, while the rationalists have seen their own scientific approach as the most reliable and systematic form of research in IR, they have also come to accept the existence of ‘reflectivist’ non-causal theorising and the division of IR into two distinct theoretical camps.\textsuperscript{16} Both the rationalist and the reflectivist theoretical ‘camps’ see themselves as engaging in different, largely incommensurable, forms of inquiry, utilising different methods, epistemological criteria and theoretical assumptions in dealing with world politics. Some constructivist theorists have tried to mitigate the implications of this division, but even their ‘synthesising’ efforts have tended to accept the underlying separation of the two forms of inquiry.\textsuperscript{17} The division between causal and constitutive theorising has, then, come to shape the contemporary disciplinary ‘self-image’ in IR in important ways: it has become embedded within the discursive frameworks through which theorists position themselves in relation to others and justify their own theoretical stances.\textsuperscript{18}

What is interesting about the contemporary rationalist–reflectivist, or positivist–postpositivist, divide in IR is that it has not entailed a detailed analysis of the concept that plays a central role in legitimating the division of the forms of social inquiry: the concept of cause. Despite

\textsuperscript{14} Hollis and Smith (1990: 1). \textsuperscript{15} Campbell (1998b: 4).
\textsuperscript{17} Ruggie (1999: 215–24); Onuf (1998b); Wendt (1999b). See also chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{18} See, for example, Steve Smith (1995). See also Wæver (1996). The acceptance of this division is also evident in recent IR textbooks. See, for example, Burchill (2001a).
the increasing controversy over causation in IR, what is meant by the concept of cause has not been explored in any detail – not by the self-proclaimed causal theorists, or by those who reject the legitimacy of the notion of cause.

This book seeks to remedy this important omission in contemporary IR theorising by subjecting the concept of cause to detailed scrutiny and by re-examining the theoretical divisions in IR in the light of such analysis. When the debates on causation in IR are analysed in detail, and positioned within wider discussions in the philosophy of science and social science, it emerges that these debates have been hindered by the fact that they have been deeply informed by the guiding assumptions of a dominant, yet by no means self-evident or unproblematic, discourse on causation, the key principles of which can be traced to the philosophical works of David Hume. The so-called Humean conception of causation, which has been deeply entwined with the empiricist tradition in modern philosophy, has entailed that

1 causal relations are tied to regular patterns of occurrences and causal analysis to the study of patterns of *regularities* in the world around us;
2 causal relations are regularity relations of patterns of *observables*;
3 causal relations are *regularity-deterministic*; it has been assumed that, given certain observed regularities, when A type of events take place, B type of events can be assumed to follow (at least probabilistically); and
4 beyond these strictly empiricist assumptions, it has also been assumed that causes refer to ‘moving’ causes, that is, that they are *efficient causes* that ‘push and pull’.

These assumptions about the concept of cause are deeply embedded in modern philosophy of science and social science and, owing to the lack of detailed attention that causation has received in IR, they have also come to inform IR theorists’ views on causation, even if often implicitly or inadvertently. The dominance of a Humean discourse of causation has given rise to various meta-theoretical and theoretical problems in IR, problems often not adequately understood in the
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discipline owing to scholars’ poor appreciation of the nature and role of the particular causal discourse at the centre of the disciplinary debates. For example, it is the dominance of the Humean discourse of causation that justifies the division of IR into two distinct camps – causal and non-causal. Also, as will be seen, this discourse has led IR approaches – on both sides of the division – to adopt certain (regularity-)deterministic and mechanistic assumptions about causation, to associate the idea of causal analysis solely with the ‘empiricist-positivist’ idea of science, and to accept certain reductionist tendencies in analysis of causal forces in the study of world politics.

While it is not a negative development that many rationalist social scientists have sought to develop increasingly sophisticated methods of causal analysis for the purposes of IR research, it is somewhat unfortunate that the self-avowed causal theorists in IR, and their critics, have failed to recognise the role that a Humean background discourse of causation has had in shaping and delimiting the very starting points for the development of models and methods of causal analysis in the discipline. I argue that the mainstream positivist or ‘rationalist’ IR theorising, as a result of the acceptance of Humean assumptions with regard to causation, is characterised by certain systematic limitations associated with the underlying philosophical approach to causal analysis. While the Humean model of causal analysis has its strengths in systematising empirical analysis of general patterns, it is methodologically, epistemologically and ontologically constrained in important ways: methodologically it does not give an adequate role to historical, qualitative, discursive and interpretive methods and approaches; epistemologically it provokes theorists to set overly objectivist aims for social knowledge; and ontologically it has a difficult time in dealing with unobservable causes, such as ideas and reasons, and the social construction of social life. Such weaknesses are not characteristic of causal approaches more widely conceived, but are typical of those approaches that accept a Humean background discourse on causation.

The reflectivist or postpositivist camp has noted that the rationalist Humean causal analyses of world political processes are problematic.
in their explanatory range and nuance. However, through a closer analysis of the reflectivist literature we can see that the reflectivists have also bought into the Humean assumptions concerning causation, and that this has given rise to various inconsistencies and confusions in their theorising. The reflectivists reject causation on the basis of accepting Humean causal analysis as their reference point. The reflectivist rejection of causal descriptions on these bases is problematic, not only because it has entailed inadequate engagement with non-Humean philosophies of causation and, therefore, reinforces Humeanism as the ‘only game in town’ with regard to causal analysis, but also because the rejection of Humeanism prevents the reflectivists from seeing that their own work advances certain causal (although non-Humean) claims, even if only, rather narrowly, concerning the role of ideas, norms, rules and discourses in social life.

This book attempts to liberate IR theorising from the grip of the dominant Humean discourse of causation and to reclaim an alternative conception of causal analysis for the purposes of world political research. It is argued here that the Humean philosophy of causation represents only one of the potential ‘solutions’ to the problem of causation and a ‘solution’ that has certain important weaknesses despite its taken-for-granted status in the twentieth-century philosophy of science, social science and, indeed, in the discipline of IR. Through a philosophical and theoretical critique of the influence of Humeanism in IR, it seeks to open up avenues towards post-Humean thinking on causation in the discipline.

It should be noted that the approach adopted here is unashamedly theoretical and philosophical in nature. While philosophical, or meta-theoretical, discussions have often been subjected to criticism from the more empirically minded IR scholars, in my view philosophical reflection on the key concepts we use frequently, such as causation, is fundamental in the social sciences, IR among them. This is because, as Colin Wight puts it, ‘conceptual inquiry is a necessary prerequisite to empirical research’. Without an adequate understanding of the ways in which we apply concepts, appreciation of the reasons for our conceptual choices, and recognition of the strengths and the weaknesses

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20 See, for example, Cox (1981); Campbell (1998a, 1998b); Edkins (1999). See chapter 4 for a more specific discussion.
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that our use of key concepts entail, we run the risk of conducting empirical studies that we cannot justify or that amount to nothing more than aimless fact-finding. Also, we risk not being able to understand how and why our accounts might differ from those of others and, hence, are not able to engage in constructive debate with other perspectives. This book is motivated by the belief that IR has not become too theoretical or philosophical at the expense of empirical inquiry: rather it still remains inadequately reflective towards many fundamental concepts used in empirical analyses. While meta-theoretical, or philosophical, debate is clearly in and of itself not the sole or the central aim of International Relations scholarship, it should not be forgotten that the ways in which we ‘see’ and analyse the ‘facts’ of the world political environment around us are closely linked to the kinds of underlying assumptions we make about meta-theoretical issues, such as the nature of science and causation. Indeed, the analysis here is motivated by the belief that whenever we make factual, explanatory or normative judgements about world political environments, important meta-theoretical filters are at work in directing the ways in which we talk about the world around us, and these filters are theoretically, linguistically, methodologically, and also potentially politically consequential. It follows that philosophical investigation of key concepts such as causation should not be sidelined as ‘hair-splitting’ or ‘meta-babble’, but embraced – or at least engaged with – as one important aspect of the study of international relations.

Challenging Humeanism: a deeper and broader notion of cause

Reclaiming causal analysis from the Humean assumptions dominant among rationalist causal researchers and reflectivist constitutive theorists in IR, involves the development of a coherent and comprehensive alternative to the Humean conception of causation. This in turn necessitates in-depth engagement with philosophies of causation outside of the dominant Humean tradition. We will discover that there are some important philosophical alternatives to Humeanism in the fields of philosophy of science and philosophy of social science that

22 An accusation made for example by William Wallace (1996).
23 See Kurki and Wight (2007).
24 See also Hidemi Suganami’s reflections on this issue (1996: 2–3).
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we can draw on. It is seen that the pragmatist and the philosophically realist approaches specifically provide important philosophical insights that allow us to challenge the Humean assumptions concerning causation. It is seen that by drawing on these alternative philosophies of causation, a few IR theorists – Hidemi Suganami, Alexander Wendt, David Dessler, Colin Wight and Heikki Patomäki – have already taken important steps to avoid the Humean framing of causation, and the consequent theoretical dichotomisations in IR. The philosophical alternatives to Humeanism, and their IR applications, have opened important new avenues in framing issues of causation and causal analysis. However, some problems and gaps still characterise the existing attempts to overcome Humeanism – philosophically and in IR context – and hence a re-theorisation of the issue of causation is necessary in order for a consistent alternative to the Humean discourse of causation to be developed in IR. The argument advanced here aims to go beyond the previous attempts to confront Humeanism: it is proposed that we challenge Humeanism in two respects. First, we should *deepen* the meaning of the notion of cause by providing it with a ‘deep ontological’ grounding, something that the Humeans have avoided doing. Second, we should *broaden* the assumptions associated with the notion of cause by disentangling it from the notion of ‘efficient cause’.

In seeking to avoid ‘metaphysical questions’, modern philosophy has predominantly reduced the problem of causation to an *epistemological* problem (Can we know causes? How do we come to make knowledge claims about causes?) or a *methodological* one (What methods should we use for causal analysis? How do we justify a causal link and how do we test causal theories/hypotheses?). Here, the meaning of the concept of cause is ‘deepened’ by opening up the *ontological* aspect of the problem of causation. Drawing on philosophical realism, a school of philosophy that maintains that we must accept that the world exists independently of our efforts to understand it, I argue that ontological questions (What constitutes a cause and causation? Are causes ontologically real, and how? Are there different types of causes and what

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