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Rethinking Realism and Constructivism Through the Lenses of *Themes* and *Ontological Primacy*

Joseph Jon Kaminski
International University of Sarajevo
jkaminski@ius.edu.ba
ORCID: 0000-0001-5551-1383

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Abstract

If integrative pluralism in international relations theorising is the way forward, how can we still maintain some type of demarcation between pre-existing paradigms in order to not throw the baby out with the bath water? The notions of themes and ontological primacy provide a useful intervention in this regard. They both link realism and constructivism yet at the same time differentiate between the two enough to allow for the original free-standing paradigm to maintain its veracity and usefulness as an explanatory tool to explain the international order. This article promotes the idea that realism and constructivism engage with many similar themes; it is their ontologies and methodologies that are the key points of departure and are worth being further explored. The article concludes that taking the notion of ontological primacy seriously allows for much needed theoretical pluralism, while effectively maintaining the foundational moorings of longstanding international relations theories.

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Introduction— Integrative Pluralism and 21st Century International Relations Theorising

The European Journal of International Relations (EJIR) released a special issue in September 2013 (Vol. 19, Issue 3) titled, 'The End of International Relations Theory?' The individual articles that appeared in this highly touted volume generally argued that it was time for scholars to move beyond the old paradigm wars and instead embrace some type of integrative pluralism between competing paradigms. On the detrimental effect of the paradigm wars that dominated international relations (IR) theorising during the 1990's and early part of the 2000's, David Lake commented that these intellectual squabbles "perverted the discipline and turned inquiry into contests of a quasi-religious belief in the power of one or more 'ism'" (2013: 568). Dunne, et al.'s opening article set the tone for the volume arguing for integrative pluralism, an approach to IR theorising which "accepts and preserves the validity of a wide range of theoretical perspectives and embraces theoretical diversity as a means of providing more comprehensive and multi-dimensional accounts of complex phenomena" (2013: 416). Integrative pluralism allows for scholars to incorporate concepts from multiple paradigms, ultimately creating new theories that can compensate for weaknesses in older theories. Meaningful IR theorising in the future will require a more complex understanding of reality which necessitates greater research on ontology, and most importantly— an idea that will be later explained in greater detail— the notion of *ontological primacy*.

Thomas Kuhn (1962) argued that paradigms in the hard sciences are incommensurable; when one scientific theory comes into fashion, the old theory is promptly relegated into the annals of history. However, Kuhn's theory about paradigm shifts was specifically aimed at the hard sciences and not necessarily the social sciences. Unlike physical scientists who completely abandon previous theories deemed inadequate, social scientists build on previous work. Andrew Bennett's reading of Kuhn suggests that paradigmatic exclusivity should not be the way social science research operates. Instead, Bennett calls for his own version of pluralism within IR theorising, *structural pluralism,* arguing that "it conveys the sense that IR scholars can borrow the best ideas from different theoretical traditions and

social science disciplines in ways that allow both intelligible discourse and cumulative progress" (2013: 461). Structural pluralism's strongest point is that it allows for cumulative research findings within a discourse whose structure remains intact.

Theoretical eclecticism has long been a staple in some of the other sub-fields in political science. For example, some of the leading Marxist scholars in comparative politics often incorporate elements of liberalism and even conservatism in their understanding of politics. Sheri Berman's, *Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* (2006), is an excellent contemporary example of a work that utilises elements of liberalism and Marxism to explain the development of social democracy in Europe during following WWII. Similar efforts at transcending hard paradigmatic boundaries have occurred more recently in foreign policy analysis as well. Hans Mouritzen argues that 'compatibilism' is the road forward in foreign policy analysis which he argues

> *...holds that perspectives should — for explanatory purposes — be made compatible by the conscious effort of the analyst 'Compatible' means that they should be mutually competitive, possibly offering contradictory real-world predictions, but (in some cases) ultimately supplementing one another in a specific explanation. Even if forces are contradictory, they may both be at work in a given situation and thus 'push' actors and developments in opposite directions — the net result thus being a compromise. Therefore, the perspectives or theories should be allowed to supplement one another for explanatory purposes. (2017: 3)*

Asle Toje's work on strategic culture in relation to EU actorness also embodies the integrative pluralist spirit. His work nicely weaves together realist concerns with hard power and constructivist interests in soft power and non-coercive persuasion noting that

> *...instruments of foreign policy are usually grouped under the broad headings of diplomatic bargaining, persuasion, economic rewards and coercion, armed coercion and military intervention. Friendly states tend to interact at the lower end of this scale and adversaries tend towards the upper end" (2008: 12).*

The key point is that one cannot understand EU strategic culture without accounting for the interaction between power and identity.

Even prior to the 2013 EJIR special edition, IR theorists had already begun to move away from strict paradigm demarcations. Solomon Barkin for example argued that the strict paradigm approach towards constructing theories of international relations should be avoided; rather *concepts* should be the key focus— "Paradigms stand in opposition to each other; to believe in one is to reject others. Concepts interact in more complicated ways" (2010: 6). Theories like constructivism, realism, and neorealism should not be viewed in all or nothing terms; they should instead be viewed as theories that place primacy on certain concepts or themes. While at times they truly are diametrically opposed, often there are points of convergence.

This paper focuses on constructivism and realism and argues that both approaches often deal with the many of the same themes. Ted Hopf argued that "neorealism and constructivism share fundamental concerns with the role of structure in world politics, the effects of anarchy on state behavior, the definition of state interests, the nature of power, and the prospects for change" (1998: 181). However, these themes are engaged with from very different ontological perspectives. It is important to recognise that while neorealism and constructivism may share similar 'fundamental concerns' with these aforementioned themes, they do not necessarily share the same understanding of how to actually approach them, nor do they give the same level of explanatory power given to each of them. Similar to Hopf, Barkin has also advocated for the compatibility between constructivist and realist approaches to international relations—

> *An examination of constructivist epistemology and classical realist theory suggests that they are, in fact, compatible. Not, of course, that good constructivism is necessarily realist, or that good realism is necessarily constructivist. But rather that constructivist research is as compatible with a realist worldview as with any other as (and more compatible with realism than some), and that the realist worldview in turn can benefit from constructivist research methods. (2010: 3)*

One ought not to force explanations that incorporate realism

and constructivism into their work. Barkin's main point throughout his work is that future IR research should occupy a middle ground between rigid paradigms and overly loose concepts.

This resonates with the pioneering work of Giovanni Sartori (1970) who contended that good concepts find a balance between precision and extensibility. Sartori famously argued that future concept formation and theorisation ought "to maneuver, both up-wards and downwards, along a ladder of abstraction in such a way as to bring together assimilation and differentiation, a relatively high explanatory power and a relatively precise descriptive content, macro-theory and empirical testing" (1970: 1053). In essence, Sartori sought to define concepts in ways that would maximise Pareto optimality between precision and extensibility. Barkin applies this general basic logic to an IR context, arguing that "somewhere between a rigidly paradigmatic approach and an unordered conceptual free-for-all is a level of categorisation that is amenable to productive communication among approaches" (2010: 6). To engage in productive communication, one must begin by looking at where the different methods share a similar discourse.

As integrative pluralism gains further traction in IR theorising, the next question that must be addressed is: how can we move forward in theorising in a manner than allows for some flexibility between previously believed to be incommensurable paradigms (such as realism and constructivism), while at the same time, maintaining at least some boundaries to avoid annihilating the earlier paradigms altogether? This article will contend that themes and ontological primacy help to address this question. Future IR theorising ought to: 1) articulate the different themes they engage with, and; 2) articulate which matters are ontologically primary in their analyses. If this can be done, meaningful integrative pluralism that does not denigrate into a type of 'theoryless theorising' can transpire thus moving the discourse on IR theory forward. The next few sections of this article contend that the disagreement between realists and constructivists is primarily related to the *degree* in which one theory prioritises a particular concept or idea over another more than anything else.

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Defining Ontological Primacy

Jackson and Nexon argue that disagreements between the various approaches to international relations theory ought to be understood in terms of 'gradations of disagreement' rather than 'absolute, categorical distinctions'—

> *...we believe that the state of theorizing might be improved if we focused more on the agreements and disagreements among choice-theoretic, experience-near, and social-relational approaches. Such an understanding of the field reconstructs existing terms of debate, deals with broad concerns in scientific ontology, and involves gradations of disagreement rather than absolute, categorical distinctions. (2013: 560)*

This article supports this general position. Before looking at similar themes covered by constructivism and realism in greater detail, the notions of *themes* and *ontological primacy* need to first be more clearly defined.

The word 'theme' has its origins in Greek, *théma* (μ) and originally meant: "a proposition" or "subject." Its Latin equivalent, *thema*, similarly means: "a subject" or "thesis." A 'theme' in contemporary IR theory scholarship can be understood as a specific subject or topic studied within IR's broader various competing discursive theoretical frameworks. There are many themes readily discussed in IR theory such as the anarchic international order, self-help behaviour, balance of power and balance of threat, the role of international norms, the role of language, and the role of domestic politics. Realism and constructivism both regularly engage with these themes. Exploring a particular theme in international relations however does not necessarily imply that the aforementioned theme is rudimentary, or has *ontological primacy*, in the broader discursive framework of any particular theoretical approach.

Ontological primacy within IR theorising can be conceived of as a foundational understanding of what is considered indispensable or constitutive of a particular international relations theoretical discursive framework. The root of the word 'ontology' derives from the Greek word *on* ( ) which means: "being; that which is", and the word 'primacy' derives from the

Latin word *prīmātus* which means: 'of the first rank.' Therefore, ontological primacy can be understood as *a study of that which is of the first rank*. One salient example of how constructivism and realism are ontologically different is in regard to their more general methodological approaches to international relations theorising. Realist/positivist approaches are often primarily interested in *how power is exercised*, whereas constructivist/post-positivist theories usually tend to focus on *how power is experienced*.

While there are always exceptions to the rule, realist theories tend to focus on the impact of material forces in a scientifically objective, value free way; they are generally positivist theories. John Mearsheimer's, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) is an example of a work that is situated within a positivist-realist methodology. Such works do not make normative claims as to what ought to be done; they seek to simply explain the world as it is. Positivist theories often are critical of normative theories because these theories often blur the lines between facts and morality (Nicholson 1996). Positive theories are primarily interested in facts, not ethics.

Constructivist theories on the other hand often tend to engage in post-positivist methodological frameworks that focus on ideational forces and socially constructed realities. Often such theories are normative and reject efforts to provide meta-narratives that claim to explain the entire international system. Works like Kathryn Sikkink's, *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions Are Changing World Politics* (2011), embody this normative constructivist spirit. The methodological and epistemological divide between the two approaches is real. Post-positivist constructivist theories are not studied in the same way as positivist realist theories.

> *In many ways, the positivist—post-positivist divide overlaps with the epistemological and ontological differences of the second and final debates, respectively. Indeed, it reflects two different paradigms — not in the usual, loose International Relations sense that I have been using so far, but in the Kuhnian (Kuhn, 1970) definition of a single, hegemonic theoretical approach — in which 'facts' in one paradigm are sometimes simply unintelligible in the other. (Lake 2013: 578)*

Part of the earlier difficulties in creating a genuine dialogue between realism and constructivism could be traced back to the methodology and epistemology of each approach. Despite these genuine differences, each approach does not have to be so rigid that it cannot account for certain overlapping thematic concerns in its analysis such as power politics, anarchy, and ideas.

There are major differences in the specific themes each approach posits as ontologically primary. For example, the role of anarchy and self-help is constructed as an independent reality in neorealist discourses. Regardless of social realities, anarchy and self-help behaviour have their own independent mode of action and impact on the international order. Anarchy and self-help behaviour are *always* ontologically primary themes in realism. This does not mean realism cannot also account for social and ideational factors in its analysis. It does mean that such themes will ultimately be secondary in explanatory power to anarchy and self-help behaviour. An anarchic world order is the cause of the various ideational forces that shape international relations. On the other hand, within constructivism, ideational forces and norms are the most ontologically primary variable to consider. Ideational forces account for why the international order is anarchic. The causal chain between anarchy and ideational forces within realism is turned around within constructivism; ideational forces are the *cause* and one of the *effects* is the anarchic international order. As such, anarchy cannot simply be studied as a given with no conditions attached to it. The next sections will look in greater detail at some of the *themes* that are shared by realism and constructivism and how both approach these same themes.

Theme 1: The Role of Identities and Power Politics

Realist and constructivist research have both addressed the role of identities and pure power politics. While each school's approach to power politics and intersubjectivity at an ontological level are vastly different, this does not mean there is an irreconcilable gap between these two concepts at a thematic level. Terms such as 'rules', 'norms', and 'discourses' often immediately raise the constructivist flag. Barkin (2010) argues that while constructivism looks specifically at rules,

norms, and discourses, none of these are *only* applicable to constructivism; any effective realist critique must at some level take these particular things into consideration as well. Identities are shared and constructed amongst actors. There are multiple 'ideational factors' that constantly shape and reshape these identities. According to Ruggie, "In contrast to neo-utilitarianism, constructivists contend that not only are identities and interests of actors socially constructed, but they also must share the stage with a whole host of ideational factors that emanate from the human capacity and will which Weber wrote about" (1998: 856). Ideational factors include, but are not limited to identities, threats, fears, general aspirations, and other rudiments of perceived reality (Lakitsch 2019). The interactions of these elements influence both state and non-state actors within the broader international system.

Questions about human nature, which are ultimately connected to identities, have always been relevant in realist thought going all the way back to Thucydides. For Thucydides, "with the ordinary conventions of civilized life thrown into confusion, human nature, always ready to offend even where law exists, showed itself in its true colours, as something incapable of controlling passion, insubordinate to the idea of justice, the enemy to anything superior to itself..." (Thucydides—cited in Sekine 1999: 136). The idea that specific identities shape international relations have been incorporated into realist approaches as well. Bennett for example comments that

> *...scientific realism is open to theories on the kinds of mechanisms that constructivists emphasize, including theories of persuasion, intersubjective meanings, discursive communication, learning, naming and shaming, framing, legitimacy, and norms of appropriateness. (2013: 468)*

While issues of intersubjectivity might not be ontologically primary in realism, this does not mean intersubjectivity is an 'out-of-bounds' theme to consider within a realist theoretical framework. Critical constructivism understands social relations much like Foucault who saw hierarchy, subordination and domination as inextricable from all social interactions. This is quite similar to important assumptions held by realists and neorealists in regard to global politics (Hopf 1998). Realism and critical theory are intimately connected in many fundamental ways. The differentiating issue is degree, or ontological primacy,

rather than actual content of the ideas being debated.

In the 1940's, E.H. Carr noted the interaction between power politics and intersubjectivity. He argued that the basis of international morality being founded on some type of 'harmony of interests' was wrong and that in the years following WWI, "every country struggled to maintain its expanded production; and an enhanced and inflamed national consciousness was invoked to justify the struggle" (1949: 61). He goes on to explicitly claim that the vindictiveness of the Treaty of Versailles directly facilitated in Hitler's rise to power. This argument lacks any explanatory power without actually understanding the unique subjective conditions that lead to the rise of fascism. By Carr's own admission, the draconian conditions set forth by the Treaty of Versailles set the table for Hitler's rise. Its stipulations bankrupted Germany, thus putting Hitler in a position to spread his nationalist ideology to an already disenfranchised German public in the 1920's. The treaty itself formalised the power structure between state actors in Europe following the *Great War*. A different treaty would have most likely meant a completely different international world order. Carr's analysis is a great concrete example of thematic overlap between realism and constructivism. Carr's assessment is dependent upon understanding how constructed identities were impacted by this treaty. Despite the overlap, Carr's ontological assessment of international relations is still driven by power politics. While power politics is the ontologically primary concept in his overall analysis, nonetheless, intersubjectivity cannot be completely divorced from his analysis.

When trying to actually understand what 'power politics' means, Barkin argues that it is meaningless unless placed into the context of other states and the behaviours and actions of states at some level contending that "it makes no sense to speak of the power of a state without the context of the object with respect to which of whom that power may be used" (2010: 18). When states grapple for power in the anarchic sea of international relations the ways the actual grappling occurs varies from state to state. Treaties, economic relationships, and cultural connections all impact and affect the way states actually struggle with each other for power. The response of the United States to a perceived violation of international law by a state like Iran or North Korea would obviously be substantially different than if a similar violation was carried out by a close

ally like Canada or Israel. Understanding power is meaningless without having some idea of who the players in the actual game are and what their agendas are.

Other realists have also discussed the importance of ideas and actors. Robert Gilpin recognised the dangers of ignoring individuals and individual interests when trying to understand the international order— "There is certainly the danger in this practice of coming to think of the state as an actor in its own right, which has interests separate from those of its constituent members" (1984: 318). Each state is at some level going to act differently in accord to prevailing historical circumstances. The specific people who are actually in power impact state behaviour at both the domestic and international level. Contemporary realists recognise that multiple factors influence state behaviour. The structure itself does have an impact on state behaviour. Realists differ from constructivists in the belief that state behaviour's *most* important factor is security: this is an ontological distinction between realism and constructivism, not just a thematic one. However, both realists and constructivists posit that attitudes and personalities impact the international order. "Identities are necessary in international politics and domestic society alike, in order to ensure at least some minimal level of predictability and order" (Hopf 1998: 174). Gilpin and Hopf both recognise that without considering the importance of identities, making reasonable predictions on behaviour is impossible.

Theme 2: Anarchy and Self-Help Behaviour

Another thematic similarity and ontological difference between realism and constructivism is the role of the anarchic world order, largely driven by self-help behaviour. Both theories address the question of anarchy in the international order. They both also have something to say about the nature of individual states self-help behaviour. As mentioned in my earlier discussion on realism, anarchy is an ontologically primary classical realist proposition (Carr 1949; Waltz 1979; Waltz 1986; Waltz 1986a). According to Morgenthau, "The state has become indeed a "mortal God," and for an age that believes no longer in an immortal God, the state becomes the only God there is" (1965: 197). Even the United Nations' (UN) power is limited. According to Article 1, section 2 of the June 1945 Charter

of the United Nations, the purpose of the UN is only "To develop friendly relations amongst nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples and to take appropriate measures to promote universal peace" (cited in Weston, et al. 1997: 11). Its mission is to promote world peace, but its original charter by no means gives this loosely configured body of member states *carte blanche* to impose its will on other states even if this is not exactly the case today in practice.

Carr also believed that the system of international relations was and always will be anarchic: "Countries which are struggling to force their way into the dominant group naturally tend to invoke nationalism against the internationalism of the controlling powers" (1949: 86). Here one can see the beginnings of what later realists would discuss as balance of power theory. To understand international politics is not to understand harmonious relations between actors, rather it is to understand the driving forces of what account for the clashes of interests between actors.

Since the international order is anarchic, neorealists have argued that the primary motivating factor of states in the international order is their own existential security. This is the ontological break between the role of an anarchic world order and constructivism. "Each unit's incentive is to put itself in a position to take care of itself since nobody else can be counted on to do so" (Waltz 1979: 107). For neorealists, regardless of social circumstances, existential security will always be the primary motivating factor of states. This means that it is unlikely that the future will see any real paradigm shift in terms of the functioning of international life. This means that the prognosis for any major shift in the way the international order operates is rather unlikely.

While the notion of the international order as being anarchic is an obvious staple to realism, it also has applicability in constructivist thought. As discussed, constructivism's ontological basis is steeped in the notion of identities being constructed in international relations. Barkin's argument that constructivism centres on intersubjectivity instead of pure power politics is important when further exploring this point. In the words of Alexander Wendt, "Despite important differences, cognitivists, poststructuralists, standpoint and

postmodern feminists, rule theorists, and structurationists share a concern with the basic 'sociological' issue bracketed by rationalists-namely, the issue of identity- and interest-formation" (1992: 393). Wendt's constructivism which is deeply rooted in Waltz's structural realism does not deny that international relations are anarchic nor that power is important. What he does deny is that the 'self-help world' of international politics derives tautologically from anarchy and power like classical or neorealists; "self-help and power politics do not follow either logically or causally from anarchy and that if today we find ourselves in a self-help world, this is due to process, not structure" and that, "[a]narchy is what states make of it" (Wendt 1992: 394—95). Other constructivist scholars echo a similar sentiment. Cameron Thies claims that "Anarchy, while appearing as a constant structure determining the environment of world politics, is actually always in process" (2004: 164). This differs fundamentally from the view of realists on the relationship between self-help behaviour and anarchy.

While constructivists and realists may have a different view on the *ontological primacy* of 'self-help' behaviour as being a necessary condition of an international order that is anarchic, this does not mean both realism and constructivism disagree in any fundamental way about the notion of anarchy as an important *theme* to consider. As argued above, Wendt makes it clear that constructivism is amenable to the idea of a largely anarchic world order; rather it is the *inevitability* of self-help behaviour that is the point of real departure between realist and constructivist theories (Bennett 2013). They also disagree with whether or not states are always driven by fear and existential threats. For example, would it be appropriate to assume the expansion of the British Empire was driven by fear of foreign conquest at a time when they were far and away the global hegemonic power, and not living in the age of global terrorism?

Constructivists would argue that one cannot automatically assume each state will always be driven by fears of existential threats to their security when crafting their foreign policy; structures within states themselves play a major role in whether or not a state behaves primarily out of fear or for some other reason. The extent to which the structures impact these behaviours is what really differentiates realists from constructivists in this particular sense. Anarchy is caused by

state interactions (Thies 2004). If state interactions are properly understood in their proper social and psychological contexts, and the way states actually interact, enter into alliances, and engage in foreign trade were different, the situation of anarchy may differ. This does not mean anarchy will disappear, but it could mean a different type of anarchy could exist.

Theme 3: Balance of Power and Balance of Threat

In the late 1970's Kenneth Waltz offered a theory of international behaviour that suggested states will either seek to balance the power of a stronger actor or bandwagon with that actor. Stephen Walt defined *balancing* as siding with others against a prevailing threat, while he defines *bandwagoning* as siding "with the source of danger" (1987: 17). Walt held that balancing is more common than bandwagoning in international politics noting that "joining the weaker side increases the new members influence within the alliance because the weaker side has a greater need for assistance" (1987: 18). When balancing, the aligning state may not have any other prior engagements with a particular state, but nonetheless joins forces with that state in order to stand firm against a larger threat. Stronger states generally prefer to engage in balancing behaviours and that when available, these states will seek other states to balance with against the threatening state or entity. However, when there is no real other option, bandwagoning is more common. Bandwagoning implies the old saying, *if you can't beat them, join them*. A state facing a direct threat with no other feasible alternative is more likely to bandwagon with that potential threat. Walt believes that most states do not wish to act this way because it mitigates their own capacities as autonomous actors. A state that bandwagons with a stronger power is likely to lose a great deal of autonomy.

Balance of threat theory is an upgrade from the implausible balance of power theory which has been criticised by a litany of scholars for its empirical shortcomings (Nexon 2009; Ikenberry 2002; Wolforth 1999; Cederman 1994; Schroeder 1994). Following the end of the Cold War, states did not immediately rush to balance the hegemonic power of the United States as balance of power theory would suggest. Walt questioned Waltz's balance of power claim "and argued instead [that] states balance against the greatest threats to their interests, defining threats as a

product of perceived intentions, ideology, and distance as well as capabilities" (Levy 2003: 129). According to balance of threat theory, states seek to balance in terms of the level of *threat* a particular state presents to itself, rather than based solely on power. If an actor is not considered a threat to a particular state, then that state will not necessarily balance against it. Balance of threat theorists argue that states are more concerned with perceived threats to their existence, rather than simply being driven by fears of raw power alone. State identities obviously become important when sizing up another state's intentions.

Balance of threat approaches to international relations can also be explored using constructivist methods. Petr Kratochvil notes that; "One of the oft-cited exceptions on one side of the cleft is Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, which shows how close the starting point of realist thinking is to constructivist theories. Indeed, the questions Walt asks are virtually identical to those posed by constructivist scholars" (2004: 3). The issues Kratochvil are alluding to are those of constructed identities and identity formation.

Levy (2003) points out that there is not one particular universal balance of power theory. Instead, there are numerous balance of power approaches that share similar realist theoretical assumptions. An entire calculus of variables goes into a state's assessment of whether another particular state is a threat or not. Threats to the state or national security are generally discovered via social interactions with other individuals or state actors (Kratochvil 2004). Understanding a state's 'perceived intentions' is not an exact science by any means. A states geographic proximity also factors into whether a state is viewed as a potential threat. Despite the tensions between Iran and the United States, it is obvious that these tensions would be much higher if these two nations were not literally on the opposite side of the world. The problem in properly assessing a threat lies in the difficulties of quantifying the 'level of threat' based on any one particular variable, such as relative proximity or ideology. This type of approach to international relations easily falls within the epistemological approach offered by constructivists.

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The Case of Thucydides— An Empirical Example Articulating Differences in Ontological Primacy between Realists and Constructivists

The best way to illustrate the point this article is making is to look at the ontological differences between realists and constructivists on a specific historical and literary topic that each school of thought has in the past explored in detail; the case of Thucydides. Both realists and constructivists have traced the origins of international relations and their respective approaches all the way back to Thucydides' classic work, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Thucydides method for gathering his information was uniquely modern; he used strict standards for evidence gathering and based his explanations on cause and effect rather than metaphysical explanations related to supernatural phenomena or 'gods' (Cochrane 1929). While realists and constructivists both trace their roots back to Thucydides, they both offer different interpretations of meaning and what was ontologically primary in his work.

Traditionally, realists have claimed Thucydides as one of their own. Jonathan Monten argues that the *Athenian Thesis* embodies what would later become the basis of political realism in international relations.

> *The Athenian thesis is the clearest representation of realist thought in The Peloponnesian War, and in portraying the history of a system of independent city-states interacting in the absence of an overarching political authority; Thucydides through actors such as the Corcyrans, the Mytelineans, and most consistently the Athenians introduces elements of what would become known as the realpolitik tradition. (2006: 5)*

The Athenian thesis in many ways parallels the notion of anarchy that is posited as given in both realism and often unavoidable in constructivism. The Athenian city-state was not organised in the same manner as modern independent sovereign nations. The varying competing city-states in the ancient Greek world were much smaller in population and land possession than modern nation-states. Nonetheless, these city-states behaved much like modern nation states; both modern nation states and ancient city states emphasised security in an anarchic world of international relations. Like modern nation states, international justice and altruism are

largely rhetorical devices used by the Athenians. In the words of Clifford Orwin, "The Athenians…can live neither with piety nor without it. Without caring to observe its restrictions except where convenient, neither have they purged their souls of the hopes and fears that piety nurtures" (1989: 237). This is very similar to the way modern realists would argue that states follow the rules of piety or fairness; when and *only* when it suits their needs.

Another critical element of the work of Thucydides that realists argue corresponds with realism is the idea of the primacy of state actors in the international order. Keohane argues that, "1) states (or city-states) are the key units of action; 2) they seek power either as an end in itself or as a means to other ends; and 3) they behave in ways that are, by and large, rational, therefore comprehensible to outsiders in rational terms" (1986: 7). Thucydides' work embodies all three of these elements that are essential to realism. It assumes the primacy of state actors in "as a simplifying device, referring, for example, to Athenians, Melians, or Spartans as coherent, unitary actors in the international system" (Monten 2006: 8). For Thucydides, the key to understanding conflicts lies within understanding the motivations behind each independent state's behaviour. In the end, states are constructed by social actors who make decisions based on their own needs and interests. Despite the fact that states are constructed by individual social actors, the state remains the primary unit of analysis in Thucydides account of the international order.

While it is obvious that realism can trace many parts of its roots back to Ancient Greece (Frankel 1996; Keohane 1986; Walt 2002; Waltz 1979), constructivists also have compelling arguments that show their respective paradigm's roots can be traced back to the same source. Peter Ahrensdorf (1997) went as far as to contest whether the Hellenic international system was even anarchic since many Ancients believed that there exists a divinely enforced moral order, in which there was an agent that governed the international order. Altheide and Johnson (1994) argued that writers like Thucydides highlighted the prominence of individuals in their narratives and actually challenged realist assumptions of state centricity. Ahrensdorf's argument is quite speculative, as it is impossible to adequately quantify how seriously the Ancient Greeks took their own myths. However, the prominence of individuals and the role of

the narrative are quite relevant and reasonable ways in which constructivists have read Thucydides.

Altheide and Johnson (1994) claim that the social world is actually an interpreted world. It is through writing and discourse that history is constructed. Writers are always at some level shaped by factors such as gender, social class, and ideology when constructing any narrative. Understanding this fact makes understanding Ned Lebow's interpretation of Thucydides much easier to understand.

While Lebow recognises that realism and Thucydides have undeniable connections, he nonetheless argues that "Thucydides is a founding father of constructivism" and that his history was meant "to explore the relationship between *nomos* (convention, custom, [and] law) and *phusis* (nature) and its implications for the development and preservation of civilization" (2001: 547). Similar to other constructivist arguments, Lebow's discourse is steeped heavily in recognising the importance of language and literary style. Understanding the role gender, class, and ideology played in Thucydides' writing is essential to understanding the actual intent of his narrative. The work of Thucydides "shows not only how language and convention establish identities and enable power to be translated into influence but also how the exercise of power can undermine language and convention" (Lebow 2001: 547). One of Lebow's broader claims is that once the Athenians were no longer able to use the *language of justification* to promote their foreign policy, their power is all but vanquished. Regardless of their military might and rich history, they no longer were capable of winning the war of ideas. "By the time of the Sicilian debate, the Athenians can no longer speak and act coherently, and this failure is the underlying reason for their empire's decline" (Lebow 2001: 548). This emphasis on the importance of language and rhetoric is largely ignored by realists who argue that the structure of the international order shapes behaviours and outcomes. Language and rhetoric are internal to the individual state and are not related to the 'given' anarchic order that realists posit as inherent in all international relations.

Lebow's argument is powerful; it suggests actors with greater military capabilities are not immune from losing their power. Public opinion and internal policy cohesion cannot be ignored. Short sightedness and internal incompetence and corruption

played a critical role in the failure of the Athenian's. Internal discord and a loss of civic virtue all facilitated in the fall of the Roman Empire a few centuries later as well (Gibbon 2001). If Lebow is correct about the extent that language and winning the 'war of ideas' is important, powerful state actors should be aware that simply having the strongest army does not safeguard a regime from collapse. While recognising the role of military capabilities and state power, Lebow nonetheless gives ontological primacy to language in his interpretation of Thucydides; this is why Lebow's account of Thucydides is fundamentally a constructivist one.

The different appropriations of Thucydides serve as an excellent example of a difference in the operationalisation of ontological primacy between constructivist and realist interpretations of international relations. When evaluating where constructivists and realists differ on the interpretation of Thucydides, it becomes clear that the difference between them is in what Thucydides was *really* trying to convey to his readers. Barkin argues that what each approach centres on (i.e. gives ontological primacy to) is what ultimately differentiates the two theories commenting that constructivism "centers on intersubjectivity, whereas that of realism centers on power politics" (2010: 9). The key word in the above quote is on the word "centers." The operational definition offered by Barkin of realism and constructivism is an example of an ontological difference rather than a thematic one that can be applied to the Thucydides example. Realists view Thucydides primarily via a power politics lens; whereas constructivists view Thucydides via intersubjectivity and language.

Conclusion: Themes and Ontological Primacy the way Forward

Trine Flockhart argues that we are entering a "a new global order characterized by diversity in power, principles and institutions" (2016: 4) The old approaches to the international order simply will not suffice in an ever-changing world in which multipolarity, the decline of US power, and the rise of China along with ascendant mid-level powers seems almost undeniable. This article called for a re-thinking of rigid paradigmatic fealty and showed that constructivists and realists both engage with many of the same themes; it is what each approach gives ontological primacy to that truly differentiates them.

Integrating the notion of ontological primacy into the broader IR theoretical discussion allows for IR theories to better retain their distinctive character while at the same time allowing for necessary thematic overlap which is essential for the further development of both paradigms. Integrative and structural pluralism therefore should not be understood simply as the melding of constructivism and realism (or any other IR theories for that matter) into a cumbersome and watered-down metatheory, nor should they be understood as an effort to dissolve the lines between paradigms altogether. Rather, pluralistic approaches should be understood as those that allow for, and even encourage, active engagement with an eclectic variety of themes, while at the same time, allowing each paradigm to retain their core ontological assumptions.

Eclecticism within reason is a good way to develop theories and better understand the world (Sil and Katzenstein 2010). One can be a realist and accept the tangible role of domestic norms and structure, so long as they accept the primary ontological position of realism, that the anarchic international order, dominated by self-help behaviour is still the driving force behind the international order. The same goes for constructivists who address similar themes as realists; one can still be a constructivist who acknowledges the real impact of the anarchic/self-help international order, so long as they do not adhere to the ontological realist position that it is always the most essential and primary factor behind global political discourse between state actors.

The main representatives of the most prominent 'isms' in IR Theory waded into the waters of opposing discourses long ago. The people writing about these representatives of the most prominent 'isms' have made the mistake of compartmentalising these nodal IR theorists into rigid camps or paradigms.

> *Yet scholars have often presented their findings as if one 'paradigm,' focusing on just one of these sets of mechanisms, should displace another. This not only misapplies the notion of paradigms, it misreads the work of Kenneth Waltz, Robert Keohane, and Alex Wendt, the three iconic representatives of the main 'isms' in IR. In fact, none of these scholars has been wedded to using only one 'paradigm' to explain international politics. (Bennett 2013: 463)*

Legro and Moravscik also echo this point about the fluidity between paradigms pointing out that many realists have shifted their explanations into arenas more commonly seen as constructivist commenting that "while contemporary realists continue to speak of international 'power,' their midrange explanations of state behavior have subtly shifted the core emphasis from variation in objective power to variation in beliefs and perceptions of power" (1999: 34-35). Despite the thematic lines being blurred between realism and constructivism, it is safe to assume that at a deep ontological level, they are still quite different, and this will not be changing anytime soon. Too often the primary distinction between realism and constructivism is inappropriately reduced to a difference in thematic concerns; this is an oversimplification.

The longstanding criticisms of realism and constructivism still remain. Critics of realism contest that modern realism does not really explain anything and is too pessimistic about the possibility of meaningful change in state behaviour, whereas critics of constructivism argue that language games that overemphasise social identity leaves one overly optimistic, trapped within the musings a naïve liberal idealism. Efforts to synthesise both approaches also have weaknesses.

> *It is very much not the stuff of a new paradigm—being a hybrid, it suffers the limitations of both constructivism and realism, and as such is only applicable to a subset of questions in international relations, those that look at the social construction of public policy, particularly foreign policy, in international politics. (Barkin 2010: 8)*

Theories that seek to explain structure should never be ignored. Randall Schweller aptly comments that, "The cure for weak systemic theories is not to ignore the effects of structure on behavior and outcomes but rather to create better systemic theories" (1998: 184). Better systematic theories should make efforts to incorporate behaviour and the realities of power politics into their discourse. Brown, who borrows from Stephen White, comments that "the aspiration to produce Grand Theory should not be abandoned, but such theory must be action-guiding as well as world-revealing" (Brown 2013: 494). This seems to be the most reasonable way to move international relations theorising to a new level.

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