

Methodological Dialogue in IR: How to develop fruitful interaction between (exclusive) methods of causal explanation and reasoning in the study of foreign policy¹

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Abstract

This article attempts to develop a better method of causal explanation and reasoning in the study of the state's foreign policy behaviour. To begin with, the article examines the explanatory tensions between structure-oriented theories and agent-centred theories in the field of International Relations. Then the article argues that IR researchers in quest of valid and fuller explanations of why-questions as to the state's external behaviour (i.e. foreign policy actions) must go for a multicausal analysis sensitive and attentive to the interrelated relationship between structures and agents in international relations, presenting the (meta-)theoretical rationales underlying its argument. Here the author suggests that the researchers shift their focus in the first place from epistemological and methodological grounds to ontological grounds. More importantly, the article elaborates detailed and explicit guidelines on how to traverse the bridge that connects the insights of ontology to the empirical research necessary to make claims about the real world of any one moment. In terms of proposing the methodological and epistemological positions and rules commensurable with complex multicausal analysis, the author emphasises that if one is to explain more fully and accurately why states behave as they do on the world scene, he or she must be in possession of the necessary ontological richness, and then combine it with epistemological and methodological openness. Ultimately, this article contends that such a multicausal and open-ended approach—both as a useful mode of explanation and as a progressive model of theory construction—can make important contributions to a better understanding of foreign policy and world politics discussing the role of theory for IR scholarship and the standards for judging theoretical contributions and progress in the field of IR.

¹ Draft version: Please do not quote without author's permission.

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Introduction

Why do states behave the way they do on the global scene? This is a crucial question in the field of IR. Just as in any field of scholarly inquiry in social science, most, if not all, IR scholars utilize theories—or, at least some sorts of analytical tools—in order to answer such a challenging causal question. And every theory in every field of study in social science has its own initial assumptions about the nature of the social and political reality to be investigated—assumptions about what exists, what it looks like, and what units make it up—and claims about the conditions of acquiring knowledge of that which exists and the relation of our knowledge to that reality. To put this in philosophical terminology, all theoretical positions are, even if implicitly, dependent upon particular assumptions about ontology (the philosophy of being) and epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge), which directly affect the theory of method—shaping the approaches that researchers take to their research. In Marsh and Furlong’s analogy, ontology and epistemology are like “a skin, not a sweater that can be put on when we are addressing philosophical issues and taken off when we are doing political research.”³ In short, ontology, epistemology, and methodology are closely related. Yet this by no means suggests that all theories in the same field of inquiry have to retain the same ontological or epistemological assumptions on which they are premised. Indeed, in social science there exist distinctive and even exclusive assumptions and theories that attempt to understand and explain the same phenomena. So it is with the discipline of IR. Clearly, different theoretical schools of thought compete against each other to understand and explain the same features of world politics within the discipline. Stated differently, there have been

³ David Marsh and Paul Furlong, ‘A Skin not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science’, in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, eds. David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002): 21.

divisive ontological and epistemological debates, or so-called “great debates,” in the history of the discipline.⁴ Not surprisingly, it follows that divergent theories—perhaps too many, as Stephen Walt comments—in the study of international relations and foreign policy have been formulated.⁵

However, this does not simply mean that all theoretical schools of thought have been valued equally in this field. In effect, the vast majority of IR scholars have employed realist and rationalist perspectives when it comes to the explanations and predictions of interactions among states in the international system. It appears that it was commonplace by the 1980s to speak of the three approaches—realism, liberalism, and Marxism—as constituting an “interparadigm debate” in IR scholarship, yet what actually happened, as Steve Smith has commented, was that “realism dominated the discipline of IR”⁶; it is “only in the last twenty years that it has become common to discuss more than rationalist accounts.” And, as will be discussed in detail below, realism and rationalism maintain structuralist tendencies which privilege structural or contextual factors and thus marginalize the autonomy of the state’s personnel (human agents) in world political analysis. It should therefore come as no surprise that throughout much of the twentieth century a whole generation of IR scholars became preoccupied with the question of how the structure of the international system affects the courses of action of the state.⁷ The recent challenges to realism from other theoretical

⁴ Ole Wæver, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Interparadigm Debate’, in *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, eds. Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁵ Stephen Walt, ‘International relations: One world, many theories’, *Foreign Policy* 110, no. 1 (1998): 29-46.

⁶ Steve Smith, ‘Diversity and Disciplinarity in International Relations Theory’, in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, eds. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith (Oxford University Press, 2007): 4-9. Note, however, that in Europe, when comparing with the US IR scholarship, English School, constructivism, International Political Economy flourished to a much greater extent than realism in the 1980s and 1990s.

⁷ See, for example, Robert Gilpin, *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation: The Political Economy of Foreign Direct Investment* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), Kenneth N. Waltz, ‘Structural Realism after the Cold War,’ *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 5-41; William C. Wohlforth, ‘The Stability of a Unipolar World’, *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 5-41; John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); Christopher Layne, ‘A New Grand Strategy’, *The Atlantic Monthly* 289, no. 1 (2002): 36-42. See also the 2009 special issue (no. 1) of *World Politics* in which nine authors explore the impact of the unipolar distribution of capabilities in the contemporary international system on the behaviour of the dominant state and

approaches in IR are also—to a greater or lesser degree—grounded in structuralism. For example, much of the analytical attention of neo-liberalism focuses on the social and political *context*, as that of neo-(structural) realism does: neo-liberals place explanatory weight upon such contextual or structural factors as international institutions⁸ or interdependence⁹ in examining international relations, assuming that states are rational actors.¹⁰ In this sense, though there are clear differences in emphasis between neo-realists and neo-liberals, it is now openly stated that successive rounds of the “interparadigm debate” have drawn the two approaches ever closer together such that it is “difficult to position clearly once prominent neo-realists or neo-liberals,” which has led to the identification of a “neo-neo synthesis.”¹¹ Scholars who work within the approach of constructivism also tend to accept a structure-weighted form of IR theorising: they draw attention to the intersubjective nature of structure. Alexander Wendt, for instance, uses Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism as a counterpoint to his own preferred “structuration theory.”¹² In Wendt’s own words, we need to “invoke the structure of shared understandings existing... in the wider society” to explain individual actions.¹³ Put otherwise, Wendt does not reject structural theorising. As Colin Wight rightly observes, “for Wendt... what is required is more... accurate structural accounts.”¹⁴ In this sense, Valerie Hudson has commented that IR theorists “currently provide much more insight into structure than agency.”¹⁵ In short, the majority of IR scholars have, even if implicitly,

on the reactions of other states.

⁸ See, for example, Marc A. Levy, Oran R. Young and Michael Zürn, ‘The study of international regimes’, *European Journal of International Relations* 1, no. 3 (1995): 267-331.

⁹ See, for example, Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977).

¹⁰ On this point, see Neta C. Crawford, ‘The Passion of World Politics Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships’, *International Security* 24, no. 4 (2000): 116-156.

¹¹ Colin Hay, *Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Palgrave, 2002): 19; Charles W. Kegley ed., *Controversies in International Relations Theory* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1995).

¹² See, e.g., Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹³ Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 113.

¹⁴ Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 92.

¹⁵ Valerie M. Hudson, ‘Foreign Policy Analysis: Actor-Specific Theory and the Ground of International

tended to accept a set of explanatory assumptions based on structuralism. Before proceeding further, then, it is important that we are first clear about the underlying assumptions of the mainstream realist and rationalist approaches and their tendencies toward structuralism in relation to causal explanations.

Structure-oriented IR Theories

Although realists do not constitute a homogeneous school, they agree that it is fruitful to conceptualize a state as a unitary actor behaving in a rational manner in pursuit of maximizing power or survival in the international system. Since states are assumed to be unified actors that have the same operating motivation—acquiring and securing the national interest—in international relations, what is within the state, say the individual decision-maker, is unimportant. Instead, the central analytical focus is on the structure of the international system. The state's external behaviour is explained as a function of its position vis-à-vis structures like geography or a distribution of material power. The image of the role of state leaders in conducting foreign policy comes close to being a mechanical image in which their choices are shaped by the international “structural constraints” that they face.¹⁶ The realist perspective is, in short, actor-general in its orientation: only if people are reacting regularly to external constraints or opportunities does it make sense to see external constraints or opportunities as explaining their actions. To be sure, classical realism considers individuals, but it is important to remember that the individual per se is not the subject of these perspectives. Hans Morgenthau, for instance, averred that “to search for the clue to foreign policy in the motives of statesmen is both futile and deceptive.”¹⁷ Instead, classical realists

Relations’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1, no. 1 (2005) : 9.

¹⁶ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 117.

¹⁷ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A.

claim that we can “consider all decision-makers to be alike”, because all leaders act in ways consistent with the national interest of the state. In Morgenthau’s words:

We assume that statesmen think and act in terms of [national] interests defined as power... [T]hat assumption allows us to retrace and anticipate... the steps a statesman—past, present or future—has taken or will take on the political scene... The concept of national interest defined as power... provides for rational discipline in [foreign policy] action... regardless of the different motives, preferences, and intellectual and moral qualities of successive statesmen.¹⁸

In short, the realist perspectives conflate leaders and countries, with the concept of the national interest and the notion of the rationality of the leader: the decisions taken by the leaders of the state are regarded as the decisions of the state; the national leader is motivated to make national interest-based foreign policy decisions. Since from the realist perspectives the national interest does not change and all leaders act rationally, changes in leadership have little consequence. As such, realist scholars turn their attention to the structure of the state and the international system, seeking for regularities in observed patterns of the behaviour of states in world politics. To put it another way, IR scholars who work according to realist approaches can be called methodological structuralists, since they attempt to account for the causal effect of structure on state behaviour by appeal to a systemic logic that operates as a whole. Explorations of foreign policy and world politics from this position are thus sought through emphasis on the structure at the system level rather than on a state’s internal variables at the unit level. In this vein, the realist vision of international relations is often

Knopf, 1948), 6.

¹⁸ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5.

referred to as the “billiard ball model” or “black-box” concept of state interactions.¹⁹ Like billiard balls, states are alike in the way that they are propelled by external forces. And, since all black boxes (countries/regimes/leaders) work the same way, whatever decision-making unit is involved, be it a human being or a group of humans, that unit can be modelled as a unitary rational actor and therefore be made equivalent to the state. Hence, there is, from this perspective, no need to delve into individual decision-makers or closely examine decision-making processes—these can be “minimized, ignored, or assumed away.”²⁰

Tensions between Structure-oriented Theories and Agent-oriented Theories

Yet could we accept the line of the structuralist arguments and their actor-general theoretical position? Not surprisingly, followers of the agent-oriented and actor-specific approaches, namely cognitive theories²¹ and decision-making models,²² answer in the negative. Their basic argument is that if one would like to lay out “a compelling explanation of foreign policy, he or she should not treat the [individual] decider exogenously.”²³ In their seminal book, *Decision-Making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics*, Richard Snyder and his colleagues noted:

It is difficult to see how we can account for specific actions and for continuities of [foreign] policies without trying to discover how the environment is perceived by those responsible for

¹⁹ Lane Ruth, ‘Concrete Theory: An Emerging Political Method’, *American Political Science Review*, 84, no 4 (1990): 927-940.

²⁰ Jerel A. Rosati, ‘The Power of Human Cognition in the study of World Politics’, *International Studies Review* 2, no. 3 (2000): 45.

²¹ They include cognitive consistency theory, schema theory and cognitive mapping.

²² They include the groupthink model and the bureaucratic politics model. In this article, I focus more on discerning the common denominators (i.e. the underlying assumptions/premises shared by these agent-oriented theories) rather than on identifying subtle differences among them. For the latter, see Hudson, ‘Foreign Policy Analysis,’ 1-30.

²³ Margaret G. Hermann and Charles W. Kegley, ‘Rethinking Democracy and International Peace: Perspectives from Political Psychology’, *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1995): 514.

choices... [W]e need to rid ourselves of the troublesome abstraction, 'state'”²⁴

In a related vein, Jerel Rosati, an adherent of cognitive theory has claimed that “the study of world politics should be situated in a cognitive approach, along with the study of foreign policymaking.”²⁵ In other words, IR researchers employing agent-oriented approaches reject the rationalist and realist assumption that national leaders regardless of individual differences would make the same national interest-based foreign policy choices. Instead they argue that “the key explanation of why the state behaves the way it does lies in the way its [idiosyncratic] decision-makers as actors define their situation.”²⁶ These scholars can be therefore described as methodological individualists in the sense that they attempt to construct explanations out of the direct intentions, motivations, and self-understandings of the individuals involved, and using explanatory concepts which the individuals themselves might use to account for their actions. The underlying assumption they rely on is that the source of all international politics is “specific human beings, using their agency and acting individually or in groups” in the name of the state.²⁷ Put differently, individualist approaches to the study of international relations rebut the actor-general and structure-centred “rational choice” and “billiard ball” models, and the “black box” concept of states, by holding that all events occurring between states and across states are by-products of individual decision-makers acting on behalf of nation-states, and that decision-makers are likely to view their environment differently and operate within their own “psychological environment.”²⁸ Based on such assumptions, their proponents have attempted to open the “black box” of decision-

²⁴ Richard C. Snyder, H.W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin eds. *Foreign Policy Decision-Making: An Approach to the Study of International Politics* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1962), 5.

²⁵ Rosati, ‘The Power of Human Cognition’, 75.

²⁶ Snyder et al., *Foreign Policy Decision-Making*, 65.

²⁷ Valerie M. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory* (Boulder, Colorado: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 6.

²⁸ Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *The Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965).

making processes and “get into the heads of leaders,”²⁹ in an effort to explain states’ behaviour in global politics arguing that the explanatory focal point must be decision-makers themselves and decision-making processes, not larger structural or systemic elements. For instance, in answering the question of why foreign policy occurs in the particular ways it does, cognitive theory and decision-making models hold that such decisions might be the result of bargaining and compromising among bureaucrats involved in the foreign-policy process³⁰, or they could be a product of a small elite “groupthink,”³¹ or they may reflect key policy-makers’ cognitions and personal beliefs.³²

The (Meta-)theoretical Rationales for a Multicausal Analysis Sensitive to Both Agential and Structural Sources of the State’s Foreign Behaviour

When taking into account the tensions between agent-weighted theories and structure-centered theories, to say ‘Analysts need to employ an integrated multicausal approach that emphasises the causal status of both agents and structures’ may sound naïve.’³³ However, I argue that a multicausal approach to the study of foreign policy and world politics has, indeed, the most appropriate grounds to be advocated not only in theoretical aspects, but also in deep ontological senses. Let me clarify this further.

²⁹ Michael D. Young and Mark Schafer, ‘Is There Method in Our Madness? Ways of Assessing Cognition in International Relations’, *Mershon International Studies Review* 42, no. 1 (1998): 64.

³⁰ For classic works, see e.g., Graham T. Allison and Morton H. Halperin, ‘Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implication’, *World Politics*, 24, no. 2 (1972): 40-79. See also, for more recent studies, Thomas Preston and Paul ‘t Hart, ‘Understanding and Evaluating Bureaucratic Politics: The Nexus between Political Leaders and Advisory Systems’, *Political Psychology* 20, no. 1 (1999): 49-98.

³¹ For classic works, see Janis 1972. See also, for more recent studies, Hart, Stern, and Sundelius 1997.

³² Ole R. Holsti, ‘The Belief System and National Images: A Case Study’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 6, no. 3 (1962): 608-617; Joseph de Rivera, *The Psychological Dimension of Foreign Policy* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1968); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton (N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976); Jerel A. Rosati, *The Carter Administration’s Quest for Global Community: Beliefs and Their Impact on Behavior* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1987); Gregory Marfleet, ‘The Operational Code of John F. Kennedy During the Cuban Missile Crisis: A Comparison of Public and Private Rhetoric’, *Political Psychology* 21, no. 3 (2000): 545-558.

³³ For a representative critique of an integrated epistemological position, see Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, ‘Two Stories about Structure and Agency’, *Review of International Studies* 20, no. 3 (1994): 241-51.

Thinking of the Sources of the States' External Actions in the Ontological Sense

The structured nature of international reality is indeed the product of the interaction of agents—individuals or human collectivities. Structure must logically have emerged out of the interactions of agents: indeed, one might ask, “if not from the interactions of agents, then from where? *Ex nihilo?*”³⁴ In Max Weber’s parlance, social structures are “the resultant and modes of organizations of the specific acts of individual men...”³⁵ Put simply, no agent, then no structure. But, equally important, we should not assume that the structure is simply reducible to human agents. Although the structured nature of world reality derives from the interaction of the agent, the former cannot be understood solely in terms of the latter—since the relationship between agents and their environment in the *social* world is not a mechanistic one, but an “organic” one which displays constant interaction and coalescence³⁶; and it is this that gives social structures what Margaret Archer terms “emergent properties.”³⁷ Stated differently, the structure is seen to have a set of properties that cannot be defined solely in terms of the properties of individual agents. In the simplest terms, the properties of the structure equal the properties of its parts plus the relations of the parts within the structure³⁸; and, once in place, structures exhibit a certain uniqueness of characteristics as wholes, which is irreducible to their individual parts. In short, the properties of structures are greater than the mere aggregations of individual wants, beliefs, and actions. Causal mechanisms for social actions must thus pass through individuals but may not be reduced to

³⁴ Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations*, 98.

³⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), 13.

³⁶ Hay, *Political Analysis*, 125.

³⁷ Margaret S. Archer, *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³⁸ See Ervin Laszlo, *The Systems View of the World: A Holistic Vision for Our Time* (Hampton Press, 1996): 31-37.

them. In this respect, the properties of agents and of structures are both relevant to explanations of individuals' social behaviour. In short, the properties of structures are greater than the mere aggregations of individual wants, beliefs, and actions. Causal mechanisms for human actions must thus pass through individuals but may not be reduced to them.³⁹ In this respect, the properties of agents and of structures are both relevant to explanations of individuals' social behaviour.

In addition, human decision-makers do not make decisions in a vacuum but in a certain structural or contextual setting. As such, the structure of the international system or the societal context provides frameworks for interpretation and conditions for action, and may thus constrain and/or facilitate (limit and/or enable) the decisions and choices of individual agents. To give a simple analogy, it is impossible to analyse a football game in purely individual terms: there are rules (e.g., players cannot use their hands while they play a game), conditions (e.g. what the weather is like on the day the game takes place; how supportive the spectators are of the game) and, above all, settings (i.e. any professional football game cannot take place without a football pitch) within all of which individual players find themselves, and which thereby constrain how they play and thus affect the outcome of the particular game that they play. Put otherwise, it is, after all, human agents who play a football game or make history: whatever the context, the outcome is not determined by the structure of the situation itself. Thus it is essential to consider human decision-makers' perceptions, beliefs, personal traits, and the like in the study of foreign policy and world politics. However, in a sense, if there were no external and situational sources, there would be no *foreign* policy or *international* relations. There must exist something—external and contextual factors and/or conditions—that can be perceived by human decision-makers in order to make foreign policy (actually, to interact with other actors

³⁹ See Craig Parsons, *How to Map Arguments in Political Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 23-25.

at all).

The key point is that in the social world both agents and structures are necessary for any act to be possible, since they are ontologically real objects (causes for actions) and interrelated, but not reducible to each other.⁴⁰ Anthony Giddens puts it “the structural properties of social systems are *both* the medium and outcome of the practices [of agents] which constitute those systems.”⁴¹ Human agents are “purposeful actors” whose actions lead to (re)production or transformation of the society which they inhabit; and society is made up of the agents’ social relationships which “structure” the interactions between these purposeful actors.⁴² Thus, in Roy Bhaskar’s words, our society is “not the unconditioned creation of human agents (voluntarism) but neither does it exist independently of it (reification). And individual action neither completely determines (individualism) nor is completely determined by (determinism) social forms.”⁴³

Let IR Approaches be Attentive to the Causal Capacities that Both External Structures and Human Agents Possess

Implications of the discussion thus far for international relations are, then, rather straightforward: causes of the state’s behaviour in world politics can be both structural and agential (material and ideational); the causation in world politics appears far beyond one-dimensional or unidirectional features. Ontologically speaking, states’ foreign policy actions

⁴⁰ Here I draw upon the insights of the “critical realist philosophy” of Roy Bhaskar (1978) and the “structuration theory” of Anthony Giddens (1979). Although these scholars draw different implications from the relationship between structure and agent, they share the common ontological core: structures and agents in the social world are internally related. See Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Macmillan, London, 1979); Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978).

⁴¹ Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, 69.

⁴² Alexander Wendt, ‘The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory’, *International Organization* 41, no. 3 (1987): 337-8.

⁴³ Roy Bhaskar, ‘Emergence, Explanation, and Emancipation’, in *Explaining Human Behavior*, ed. Paul Secord (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982), 286.

occur due to existence and gatherings of human policy-makers and the international structural conditions with which their nations are encountered. This means that manifold structural *and* several agential factors possess causal *influences* on foreign policy actions.⁴⁴ This point urges us to open up wide avenues in approaches to the study of the state's external behaviour suggesting the certain utility of seeking to combine the analysis of structure and agent and of recognizing the complex interplay between the two in any given situation. In other words, what this puts forward is that, in order to obtain a satisfactory answer to the question of why states behave as they do in global politics, one must dismiss accounts which privilege either structure or agent taking into account the ontologically interrelated relationship between them. Although we may have different hunches about which causal factors are most important, and thus tend to see structural and agential sources as oppositional, we should give the (potential) causal status to both of them on a *pari passu* basis. In short, IR researchers in quest of valid and fuller explanations of why-questions as to the state's foreign behaviour need to transcend the polarizing opposition of structure and agent, while instead considering both the structural constraints on individual policy-makers in realising their intentions and also the policy-makers' intentions and actions which give rise to such structural consequences. In this sense, theories or analytical schemes that can accommodate various types of causes associated with both agential elements and structural conditions, and the studies employing them are not only useful, but also necessary.

Unfortunately, however, IR scholarship still lacks holistic approaches and accounts finely attuned to such a complex and interrelated relationship between human policy-makers and the international environment.⁴⁵ As discussed earlier, the mainstream approaches

⁴⁴ I use the term 'influence' in the sense that does not have deterministic connotations. I will come back to this point later.

⁴⁵ To be sure, there have been integrated studies on foreign policy and attempts to develop integrated theoretical frameworks. See, for example, James N. Rosenau, 'Pre-theories and Theories of Foreign Policy', in *Approaches in Comparative and International Politics*, ed. Barry Farrell (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966);

employed by IR scholars, namely (neo-)realism, (neo-)liberalism, and constructivism, have structuralist tendencies which privilege external conditions in relation to causal explanations of the state's foreign policy actions. Furthermore, even the studies that illuminate internal and external factors often fail to posit a *human* agent as an analytical category in its own right—rather they concentrate on the common role/position that human agents (e.g., national leaders) occupy⁴⁶—or retain polarised views of international relations that express the agential and the structural, the domestic and the international, or the material and the ideational as two discrete or exclusive entities, or as “game tables” (in Robert Putnam's words).⁴⁷

In short, our moves towards multicausal analysis have not yet gone far enough in that the currently dominant approaches to causation in IR are not finely attuned to the complex interplay between human agents and international structures. Eugene Wittkopf and his colleagues comment that a single-cause or single-dimension explanation is still “the widespread impulse” in the field of IR because of its “simplicity that most of us intuitively find satisfying.”⁴⁸ Structuralist theories and individualist theories tend to be sensitive to

Michael Brecher, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel: Setting, Images, and Process* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972); Alex Mintz, ‘How Do Leaders Make Decisions?: A Poliheuristic Perspective’, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 48, no. 1 (2004): 3-13. Yet these studies are more in the nature of exceptional examples rather than representative cases in a generally accepted research method in the field of IR.

⁴⁶ For example, neo-classical realist researchers unanimously emphasise the role of policy-making executives - see, for example, Lobell and his colleagues' edited book, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) - but their emphasis is on the positions that policy-makers occupy rather than on individual characteristics of the policy-makers who hold the positions, and thus policy-makers as such have “been mostly missing” from neo-classical realist scholars' actual accounts of foreign policy (see Shiping Tang, ‘Taking Stock of Neoclassical Realism’, *International Studies Review*, 11, no. 4 (2009): 802. Much the same can be said about the works of a Realist-Liberal synthesis. See, e.g., Papayoanou's 1996 articles on economic interdependence, domestic institutions, and the balance of power. Paul A. Papayoanou, ‘Interdependence, Institutions, and the Balance of Power: Britain, Germany, and World War I’, *International Security*, 20, no. 2 (1996): 42-76.

⁴⁷ See, for studies of this kind, Robert D. Putnam, ‘Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games’, *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 427-60; Bruce Bueno De Mesquita and David Lalman, *War and Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); James D. Fearon, ‘Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes’, *American Political Science Review*, 88, no. 3 (1994): 577-92; Helen Milner, *Interests, Institutions, and Information* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); David Auerswald, *Disarmed Democracies: Domestic Institutions and the Use of Force* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

⁴⁸ Eugene R. Wittkopf, Christopher M Jones, Charles W. Kegley, *American Foreign Policy. Pattern and Process*

external factors and internal factors, respectively. Equally, however, they tend not to be sensitive to the fact that the reverse line of causation also holds. The consequence of this is to flatten out the rich and diverse textures of world reality: the world appears as far less interesting, more one-dimensional, than it should do.

What is more, those who admit and even emphasise the importance of a multicausal analysis that accommodates both (human) agential and structural (material and ideational) factors,⁴⁹ as well as scholars who attempt to broaden the concept of cause in an ontological sense as a solution to the structure-agent problem,⁵⁰ do not explicitly articulate how to formulate and utilize such a complex and broadened multicausal approach.⁵¹ In other words, although these scholars often agree that multileveled, multicausal explanations of international relations are preferable, they do not go beyond this statement of preference to indicate how one might (and should) conduct analyses that would lead to confirmation of this. Put simply, they tend to focus more on *why* we should go for a multicausal analysis rather than on *how* to go for it. I feel that this lack of attention to the latter (i.e. methodological and epistemological issues) may hinder our efforts to move forward. I believe that fruitful integrative theories of foreign policy behaviour can only begin to flourish when a nuanced and complex view of world politics and of the relationship between structure and agent in states' external behaviour—which might be referred to as 'a rich/bold ontology' regarding foreign policy behaviour—is matched by the development of detailed and explicit guidelines on how to traverse the bridge that connects the insights of that rich ontology to the empirical

(Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 19.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Lloyd Jensen, *Explaining Foreign Policy* (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982); Ole R. Holsti, 'Theories of International Relations and Foreign Policy: Realism and Its Challenges', in *Controversies in International Relations Theory*, ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York: St. Martin Press, 1995); Laura Neack, *The New Foreign Policy: U.S. and Comparative Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 189-90; Wittkopf et al. *American Foreign Policy*, 18-9.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Milja Kurki, *Causation in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations*.

⁵¹ For a similar critique, see Ian Hall, 'What Causes What: The Ontologies of Critical Realism', *International Studies Review* 11, no. 4 (2009): 629-30.

research necessary to make claims about the real world of any one moment.

Developing the Methodological and Epistemological Positions and Rules Commensurable with Multicausal Analysis

It needs to be emphasised at the outset of this section that my advocacy of multicausal analysis by no means indicates that one must (and can) observe all the possible variables and relevant evidence, considering all the cases, to establish an integrated multicausal theory and answer the question of why states behave the way they do in world politics. The real virtue of the multicausal approach put forward here has nothing to do with how many factors it has or examines. Furthermore, if one prefers to work with a rich and complex multicausal approach, she or he must combine the ontological boldness that the multicausal approach possesses with caution and openness in relation to epistemology and methodology. Let me clarify these points further.

Rejection of the Absolutism of Deductive and Inductive Logic

First of all, I argue that any analyst should reject the absolutism of both deductive and inductive logic. These extremists make similar but opposite types of mistakes when they analyse what they observe. Those who are at the deductive end of the spectrum are apt to see only theory-laden factors and confine their findings to post hoc rationalisation: the purely deductive logic of inference places its emphasis upon the process of logical (theoretical) deduction, while giving insufficient attention to the means by which theoretical propositions

are tested empirically.⁵² On the other hand, those who are at the opposite end of the spectrum tend to concentrate on what can be easily measured and readily observed phenomena rather than what might be theoretically important and the more subtle and deeper social and political forces: from the point of view of the purely inductive logic favoured by strict empiricists, any non-observation-based statements could be rejected as “meaningless”⁵³ or “mere fictions.”⁵⁴ These strict forms of logic are problematic in terms of epistemic range and nuances. Thus, we should avoid both these extremes of logic—one side that values the (supposedly) neutral assessment of all the cases and data without any theoretical assumptions, and the other that attempts to make prescriptive generalisations deduced from simple assumptions about the complex world. Instead, our causal analysis of foreign policy needs to commence by making rich (in other words, *less* parsimonious) theoretical or explanatory *assumptions* with a perceptive emphasis on the role of the *empirical investigation* in testing the consequences deduced by the assumptions.

If accepted, this position has significant methodological implications. As the reader may notice, what the researcher concerned with why-questions about the state’s external behaviour needs to attempt first, then—while bearing in mind that the causal relationship between explanan and explanandum in world political phenomena is multicausal—is to find potentially important factors that might impinge upon and affect the observed phenomena on the basis of having rich theoretical assumptions and explanatory expectations. And such a mental effort leads us to raise one critical question: how would one know if the chosen factors were really explanatory variables or not? This consequently leads the researcher to

⁵² Rob Stones notes that those engaged in a strict and formal form of deductive logic, known as “deductive-nomological” modelling tend to write in an all-knowing, somewhat “omnipotent” manner about events, but this implied knowledge is not matched by the levels of such confidence. See Stones, *Sociological Reasoning* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 83. Going a step further, Robert Jervis comments that even scholars who use large N clusters of data “often look at many cases to see if a proposed generalisation fits the data. [But] this is a form of confirmation, not the discovery of new facts.” See Jervis, ‘Pluralistic Rigor’, 146.

⁵³ Kurki, *Causation in International Relations*, 45.

⁵⁴ Heikki Patomäki and Colin Wight, ‘After Post-Positivism? The Promises of Critical Realism’, *International Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2000): 217.

discern the explanatory strength of each of the chosen factors and trace their causal links. The important point here is that such investigation should be made on the basis of *both* quantitative and qualitative forms of empirical analysis. Again, let us recall the fact that the nature of the ontological object has an important role in defining which ways of knowing are appropriate to it. As discussed, the way states behave as they do in world politics mirrors the complex and dynamic relationships between the (intentions and perceptions of) human decision-makers and the international environment. In this vein, causes of states' behaviour in the international system can be structural and agential in both material and ideational senses. As such, IR researchers must be open *pari passu* to both quantitative and qualitative methods using hard data—from government statistics, for example—and soft data—from interviews or speeches—so that they can examine the causal power of the material and ideological factors associated with the complex interplay between structures and agents.

Employing a Multicausal Approach in a Tentative and Flexible Manner

The logic here requires, then, that in analysing and theorising foreign policy or world politics, the researcher should employ a tentative and open-ended approach within which not only richness in an ontological sense, but also flexibility in an epistemological and methodological sense, can be preserved. More specifically, since the foreign behaviour of the state almost invariably results from multiple sources, given the complex reality underlying a nation's foreign policy and the ontologically interwoven relationship between agents and structures in international relations, the analyst must think about and analyse observed foreign policies or world events in multicausal terms—in other words, must employ a multicausal analytical approach. Yet, as analysts cannot survey impartially all the possible variables, and there are crucial factors that cannot be observed through “sense experience,” they must deductively

come up with and select out some major causal factors on the basis of their own explanatory assumptions. Surely, no one in “today’s post-behaviouralist world” would cavil unduly about this way of reasoning.⁵⁵ But in this process there are two very important—or unorthodox, if you like—points that, in my view, need to be fully accepted by analysts.

First, before and in the process of selecting from among the many, it is crucial not to see structural and agential (material and ideational) factors as oppositional or discrete, because the idea that explanations that emphasise different causal factors should be conceived as being in competition with each other leads us to settle on a truncated and impoverished view of the rich and complex textures of world reality or to impose unnecessary restrictions on the range of possible causes of social phenomena,⁵⁶ which in turn entails serious weaknesses in explanations of the dynamic relationship between agents and the external environment. Therefore, we need to retain, from the beginning, rich explanatory assumptions in which the potential causal status of both agential and structural, and material and ideational factors can be accepted.

A second (more important, in my view) point is that in this stage of picking and choosing, there is no reason a priori to reward extra credit to any particular factor. There can be no doubt that the actual causal influences and causal directions of variables—agential and structural, and material and ideational factors—constantly vary from situation to situation: although analytically autonomous, they, indeed, operate in combination to a varying extent. Furthermore, the idea that causal status ought to be given to both structural and agential factors does not imply that the causal capacities of the factors will necessarily be drawn upon

⁵⁵ Walter Carlsnaes, ‘The Agency-Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 36, no. 3 (1992): 256.

⁵⁶ As already noted, causes should be seen not only as “pushing and pulling” forces, but also as influences, or as constraining and enabling conditions. Indeed, such a broad conception of cause was already developed and supported more than two thousand years ago by some of the most influential philosophers of science. For example, Aristotle recognized four different types of causes: constitutive, ideational, (human agents’) intentional, (objects’) regular causes. More importantly, he saw these different types of causes as interrelated. See, for more detailed accounts of the Aristotelian notion of cause, Kenneth Clatterbaugh, *Causation Debate in Modern Philosophy 1637-1739* (London: Routledge, 1999).

or activated. As they exist in “open [social] systems” where the constant interactions with each other occur, even when a causal capacity that objects or agents possess is exercised, the intended consequence may not come out.⁵⁷ Put simply, they possess causal capacities as *potentials*; for this reason, the terms, such as causal ‘influences’ or ‘capacities’ are preferred here⁵⁸—in lieu of a term, such as causal ‘forces’ which has deterministic connotations. International relations and foreign policy are surely dynamic and full of contingencies. States, even when they are in the same situation, may behave extremely variedly because “states can have varied preferences in similar strategic situations.”⁵⁹ This calls for the analyst to have a flexible and pluralistic epistemological and methodological position. As Robert Jervis observes, rightly in my view, “the interactive and contingent nature of global politics limits the extent to which complete and deterministic theories are possible.”⁶⁰ Therefore, at the first step of causal inquiry into the state’s external behaviour, it is satisfying to have only the ingredients of an analytical approach—which will assist us to undertake certain mental processes in deciding what it is that should be observed—not give an a priori preference to one or the other type of causal source of the behaviour. The key point here is that our choice of such ingredients and their combinations should be made with a sensitivity to the intrinsically complex and contingent character of the reality of world politics.

What my arguments thus far suggest is, after all, that in order to fully answer why-questions as to the state’s external action, there is a need to employ a multicausal *and* open-ended approach in which while the causal status of both agential and structural, and material and ideational factors are accepted, the relative causal powers and the causal links of the

⁵⁷ See, for a fuller exposition of this point, Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), 105-11; Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 162-6.

⁵⁸ It is quite common for us to talk about someone exerting their influence but to no avail, so the concept of ‘influence’ does have a non-mechanistic meaning.

⁵⁹ Papayouanou, ‘Interdependence, Institutions, and the Balance of Power’, 44.

⁶⁰ Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 295.

concerned factors are not predetermined. This implies that we do not know if the factors chosen are actual explanatory variables of an observed phenomenon until after we have carried out empirical investigations into the explanatory strength of each of the several factors chosen and trace their causal links. Consequently, IR researchers who seek to obtain a plausible answer to the question of what really happened causally in the observed phenomenon—in other words, attempt to search for causation beyond correlation—must perforce examine if the causal capacities of the factors to which the potential causal status is conferred have been activated through quantitative and qualitative forms of empirical investigations into the explanatory weight of the factors; and then causally reconstruct the world of the observed phenomenon with the factors that receive empirical support concerning the explanatory power.

This may sound too complicated, but a multicausal and open-ended approach is not only preferable to a monocausal and complete approach given the reality of the sheer complexities and dynamics that pervade world politics, but is also manageable if a method of isolation and exclusion is invoked in conducting a multicausal analysis. For example, suppose that we are puzzled by why a particular nation (e.g., the United States) made a certain external action (e.g., go to war against Iraq), and that we choose the political beliefs of key policy-makers (e.g., George W. Bush) as one of the causal factors⁶¹ in searching for an answer to this why-question. While isolating or setting aside the other potential causal factors for the moment, what we should do is to examine the causal influence of the chosen factor—the subject's political beliefs. In order to do so, we need to first infer the subject's (Bush's) political beliefs through a close investigation of his public and/or private statements—e.g.,

⁶¹ Here no attempt is made to provide a comprehensive list of all possible causal variables of states' external behaviour; many possible causal factors have already been described in previous works (see, for example, Rosenau, *Pre-theories*; Brecher, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel*). There is no need to recount them here. As noted, my intention in this essay is to elaborate on how to utilize a multicausal approach and to make clear what ontological and epistemological assumptions and premises should be made before using it.

speeches, interviews, press conferences—which display his views on the nature of political and social life.⁶² Having inferred his political beliefs, we will be able to discern if the causal capacity of Bush’s political beliefs was activated—that is to say, we can determine the explanatory power of the subject’s political beliefs—by seeing whether the final decision made by him was consistent with his political beliefs: this is, in Alexander George’s terminology, the “congruence procedure.”⁶³ And if the test confirms the explanatory power, then the chosen factor (Bush’s political beliefs) becomes an indispensable *part* of the multiple causation of the observed phenomenon (i.e. the US war against Iraq). But if the investigation indicates that the political belief, as a potential explanatory factor, does not yield significant explanatory weight, then it is passed over and other potential factors, for instance states’ material interests, set aside in conceptual brackets are considered. Consequently, this way of reasoning enables the observer to discern the real causes of an observed phenomenon and reconstruct its causal processes in a systemic and clear manner. In turn, a more accurate and satisfying causal explanation (of why the US decided to go to war against Iraq) can be developed.

The crucial point here is that while we employ a multicausal approach, which emphasises the presence of several causal variables, we should not reward extra credit to any particular variable. To repeat, in world politics, agential and structural, and material and ideational factors operate in combination to a varying extent: they always come together in complex and non-predetermined ways. In this vein, a multicausal approach to the study of the state’s external behaviour needs to be premised on the starting assumption that none of the

⁶² For classic illustrations of this method, see Alexander L. George, ‘The “Operational Code”: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-making’, *International Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1969): 190-222.

⁶³ Alexander L. George, ‘The Causal Nexus between Cognitive Beliefs and Decision-Making Behavior: The Operational Code Belief System’, in *Psychological Models in International Politics* ed. L. S. Falkowski (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979): 95-124. See also Deborah Welch Larson, ‘The Role of Belief Systems and Schemas in Foreign Policy Decision-Making’, *Political Psychology*, 15, no. 1 (1994): 17-33.

explanatory factors chosen are more deterministic or mechanistic than others. In short, what we need to search for is a compound explanation, which must begin with the important premise that none of the chosen factors are privileged a priori.

Rethinking the Role of Theory for IR Scholars and the Mode of Construction of IR Theory

Admittedly, there are shortcomings to this open-ended multicausal approach: for instance, it appears to be an “inelegant” alternative as compared with the more parsimonious models; it has many loose ends as compared with conventional deductive approaches, and as such it hardly provides any prediction or generalisation about the future courses of the state’s foreign policy behaviour.

However, these limitations should not obscure the underlying contributions of the multicausal and open-ended approach to our understanding of world politics. Indeed, I believe that the limitations are not as serious as the mainstream realist, rationalist IR approach might consider. Going a step further I argue that a multicausal and open-ended approach—both as a useful mode of explanation and as a progressive model of theory construction—is well worth being given favourable attention.

Through a theory, we can present descriptions, explanations, and predictions relating to the phenomena under investigation. Structuralist and rationalist theorists claim that a good theory must generalise across cases, events, incidents and time frames pursuing parsimony in such a way as “to make them usable in the present as guides to the future.”⁶⁴ In effect, this

⁶⁴ For example, see Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry* (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger, 1982); Hugh Ward, ‘Rational Choice’, in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, ed. David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002); Stephen Walt, ‘The Relationship between Theory and Policy in International Relations’, *The Annual Review of Political Science* 8, (2005): 26-28.

view constitutes the today's mainstream standards for judging theoretical contributions and progress in the study of international politics. For example, the work of Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba—which has influenced the methods of study of many contemporary liberal, realist and even constructivist theorists in IR—makes clear that generality is the single most important measure of social science progress, stressing that “the question is less whether... a theory is false or not... than *how much of the world the theory can help us explain*.”⁶⁵ Yet, doubtless the generality of social and political phenomena is an open question. International relations are full of complexity and contingency; foreign policy does not occur in a static manner; there are many unobservable but important causal factors and conditions at work in world politics. Further, there is no escaping the fact that causes in international relations do not run in one direction: they vary across time and space; variation also exists across different kinds of policy-makers. All of this brings into question the notion of prediction and generalisation in the study of foreign policy and international relations, and thus of explanations based on the probabilistic symmetry between explanation and prediction. What this suggests to us is, then, an epistemologically cautious position, that is focusing more on the development of an accurate explanation of limited scope rather than on the development of law-like generalisations in which local differences and contingencies are intentionally or unintentionally swallowed up or ignored.

However, this is not to say that the analysis of foreign policy and world politics ought not to be pushed to a higher level of generalisation. Rather, what this indicates is that a multicausal and open-ended approach makes more sense now, because empirical data and logical conceptualization are as *yet* inadequate to support such a general theory. Put otherwise, as far as the present inquiry is concerned, the inclusive and tentative approach has more immediate profit—profit which in the end would provide the foundations for a general

⁶⁵ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1994), 101, their emphasis.

theory: I will come back to this point later. The task of identifying crucial explanatory variables which can be applied to a wide range of situations is unfinished. Until we have them—the components of such a general theory—it is probably best to speak of a theory *qua* a mere starting-point from which the researcher can manipulate a number of variables or of a provisional analytical framework in which several ingredients are loosely knit. To borrow Otto Neurath’s analogy, “We are like sailors who have to rebuild our ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle [and reconstruct] it in drydock.”⁶⁶ And I believe that continual rebuilding is necessary to increase the seaworthiness of our ship (theory), and increased seaworthiness is itself learned during the voyage on the *open sea*.

True, a multicausal analysis is taxing as against monocausal analysis, but it is not only preferable—if our goal is to arrive at fuller explanations of what we observe—but is also manageable, as discussed, if a method of isolation and exclusion is invoked. More importantly, to say “IR researchers need to go for a multicausal analysis” is not a suggestion that they must examine all possible variables of what they observe. Rather, my emphasis is placed on the idea that researchers should not give an a priori preference to one or the other type of causal source of the state’s foreign behaviour—at least in the early stage of the causal enquiry—because doing so may lead the researchers to be insensitive to multiple global relations and complex foreign policy. The multicausal approach I advocate should not be equated with an approach of ‘everything matters.’ The status of the multicausal approach put forward here has nothing to do with how many factors it has or examines. The real virtue of the multicausal and open-ended approach instead centres on its capability to assist us to avoid becoming preoccupied with a single particular factor or dimension and especially from seeing structural and agential (material and ideational) factors as oppositional or discrete. Stated differently, it enables and leads us to become sensitive and attentive to the complex reality

⁶⁶ Otto Neurath, *Philosophical Papers 1913-1946*, eds. and trans. R. S. Cohen and M. Neurath (Boston: Reidel, 1983), 92.

underlying a nation's foreign policy and to the interrelated relationship between structures and agents in international relations.

Certainly, theory is about simplifying such a complex nature of the world, but not as a means of modelling it, nor of drawing predictive inferences. Yes, all approaches are engaged in some simplification, yet this does not mean that parsimony should be prioritized in world political analysis. As noted, to place the highest priority on parsimony of explanatory apparatus leads us to settle on an impoverished view of the rich and complex textures of world reality; and though simplification may make prediction possible, it would seem that the greater the degree of abstraction and simplification the less useful that prediction is likely to prove. Indeed, parsimony itself "results from constant testing and refinement" of diverse factors and conditions.⁶⁷

The role of theory for IR scholars instead should be as a guide to empirical exploration and as a means towards the accurate explanation of the complex reality rather than as the simplification of it as a condition for the generation of predictive hypotheses. In short, IR theory should be able to sensitize the analyst to a wide range of ontological features of world politics and to multiple causation in which more than one cause is involved in the production of an effect, precisely because there is inherent complexity involved in states' foreign actions in world politics. And the multiple causes and causal processes elucidated can be fed back into the construction of a body of theoretical knowledge necessary to make valid claims about the real world in which complexity, intricacy, and variety are pervasive. In effect, until the evidence that shows causation more fully and deeply is sufficiently accumulated, there can be no real flourishing of theory. As discussed earlier, a multicausal and open-ended approach enables the observer to reconstruct the multiple causal processes of an observed phenomenon in a clear manner, which in turn leads to the establishment of evident causation

⁶⁷ Snyder et al. *Foreign Policy Decision-Making*, 227.

of it. Hence, it can serve as a useful tool for generating the knowledge sensitive to multiple global relations and the evidence closely associated with causation on which (general) theory can really flourish. Tolerance is therefore necessary in evaluating such a multicausal and open-ended approach that might appear to be “inelegant” or “incomplete.”

I am not claiming that the ontological position and the epistemological rules put forward here are beyond criticism—only that they are well worth criticism and development. Michael Brecher—in his Presidential Address to the International Studies Association in 1999—commented that “intolerance of competing paradigms and models... a closed-mind mentality... the low-value placed by most scholars on *accumulation of knowledge*” are the shortcomings in IR scholarship of the twentieth century.⁶⁸ I do believe that much the same can be said about IR scholarship of the twenty-first century. We still need a flexible mentality as an approach to knowledge, and an integrated path to theory, because they allow us to add fresh and complementary theoretical thought and complexity-sensitive empirical evidence to the existing IR literature, and in turn, to move one step closer towards resolutions of fundamental puzzles about world politics. Again, I am not saying that a multicausal and open-ended approach is the only way in this endeavour. Nor do I assert that it will solve at once all conceptual or empirical puzzles in the field of IR. However, I believe that because it leads researchers to become sensitive and attentive to the complex and contingent character of the reality of global politics, it may display what Tomas Kuhn called the “fertility” of a theory—a theory’s ability to expand collection of observation reports⁶⁹—or what Ernan McMullin termed, “potential fertility”—a conceptual schema’s ability to respond “creatively” to future

⁶⁸ Michael Brecher, ‘International Studies in the Twentieth Century and Beyond: Flawed Dichotomies, Synthesis, Accumulation, ISA Presidential Address’, *International Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1999): 213-215, emphasis added.

⁶⁹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977): 321-2.

or unexpected events.⁷⁰ Put otherwise, a multicausal and open-ended approach can surely be regarded as having the (potential) “fertility,” an important criterion of acceptability for scientific explanations and theories,⁷¹ in the sense that the approach is designed to undergo self-modifications in ways that improve the accuracy of the explanations of observed events or better accommodate anomalous (or a new type of) phenomena. In short, the multicausal and open-ended approach advocated here makes it relatively easier for us to have a greater degree of willingness to be surprised and learn in the study of foreign policy and world politics where anomalies—things that happen that do not fit our pre-existing theories and ideas—keep proliferating, probably faster than answers.

And, most importantly, because the multicausal approach enables IR researchers to ask about and study multiple causes simultaneously, it leads them to recognise and explore previously unrecognised sources of the state’s external behaviour, giving rise to the identification of previously unidentified or yet-to-be discovered sources and conditions. Correspondingly, the empirical evidence that shows causation more fully and deeply begins to be accumulated, which in turn provides a secure base on which more *specific* causal patterns can be identified or established. These specific patterns would initially consist of generalisations of quite limited scope. Such middle-range theory would initially consist of more general theory. In short, a multicausal and open-ended approach can be used as a critical building block for making more realistic generalisations and more precise predictions. Thus, to succeed partially is not to fail completely. Instead, it is the first and most essential step for the progressive accumulation of our knowledge about why states behave as they do on the world scene. With such progress, we are able to better comprehend, explain, predict,

⁷⁰ Ernan McMullin, ‘The Fertility of Theory and the Unit for Appraisal in Science’, *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 39, (1976): 400-17.

⁷¹ Indeed, including Kuhn and McMullin, many philosophers of science agree that “fertility” is a necessary criterion of acceptability of a theory. See John Losee’s historical overview of this point. John Losee, *Historical Introduction to The Philosophy of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

and thereby prepare for various eventualities in the international arena. A multicausal and open-ended approach—both as a useful mode of explanation and as a progressive model of theory construction—is, then, a challenge worth taking up.