

ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Pragmatism as Ontology, Not (Just) Epistemology: Exploring the Full Horizon of Pragmatism as an Approach to IR Theory

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This article is in many ways a pragmatist's critique of pragmatism in international relations (IR), focusing on what practices scholars have engaged in by drawing upon pragmatism and how to resolve problems that become apparent in considering them. Scholars of IR have used pragmatism largely (though not exclusively) to examine issues of an epistemological or methodological nature, focusing mainly on pragmatism as a philosophy of science. Often overlooked, however, is that pragmatism is not just a philosophy of science, but a distinctive and in some respects quite radical school of metaphysics, and it implies a particularly flexible form of social ontology. I, thus, argue for broader horizons in pragmatist theory in IR. I criticize the overly epistemological or methodological focus of the existing ways many IR scholars have used pragmatism and discuss of how pragmatist social theory fits within existing scholarship in the field. Finally, I suggest how pragmatist social theory can contribute to ongoing IR research programs by dissolving the dualisms of agent and structure, realism and idealism, and normative and strategic action. In other words, as a coherent set of principles, pragmatism offers the foundations for a new movement in the study of international politics—indeed, such a movement has already begun, and I suggest that its horizons are particularly broad.

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Introduction

Over the past decade-and-a-bit, numerous scholars of international relations (IR) have drawn upon the theories associated with the school of philosophy called *American Pragmatism* to examine issues of interest to the field. Though they have engaged questions of ethics and of social ontology, likely the most popular and successful employment of pragmatist philosophy has focused mainly on issues in the philosophy of science. One example of this is “analytical eclecticism,” and it well illustrates how pragmatist thought has been employed to enable methodological synthesis and to put an end to inter-paradigmatic *methodenstreit*. Often overlooked, however, is that pragmatism is not just a theory of knowledge, but a distinctive and in some respects quite radical school of metaphysics. While pragmatism is a fairly diverse philosophical school, one underlying thread knitting

together its thinkers is a commitment to collapsing epistemology and ontology. Nowhere is this clearer than in the works of those pragmatists most inclined to social theory, where the embodied, enacted character of cognition lies at the center of a constructivist, practical, and non-dualistic view of the world. It is unfortunate, therefore, that relatively few IR scholars have engaged in substantive pragmatist social theorizing, both because this neglects opportunities for new interventions into ongoing theoretical conversations, and also because in some cases—such as analytical eclecticism—this leads to inconsistent and incoherent uses of pragmatism.

I therefore, offer a call to broaden the horizons of pragmatist social theory in IR. It is both a critique of the primarily epistemological and methodological themes of the existing ways many IR scholars have used pragmatism and a discussion of how pragmatist social theory fits within the existing research in the field. I first discuss how IR scholars have up until now tended to focus mainly on the epistemological implications or methodological prescriptions of the pragmatist philosophy of science while paying comparatively little attention to the ontological premises that accompany them. I also trace some of the problems that have resulted from this failure to recognize the distinct way pragmatist social theory merges knowing and being into a single view of creative action—namely, that it has produced some points of philosophical incoherence and a needlessly narrow horizon of enquiry. I then re-assert the fundamentally ontological character of pragmatism, the acceptance of which is a *condition* for adopting a pragmatist view of knowledge, by outlining those deeper premises on the nature of action, cognition, and experience. I continue this discussion by situating pragmatism within several extant IR theory traditions, by showing how its themes are both already present in the literature in some important ways, and how easily IR scholars might “make the jump” should they desire. Finally, I show the promise of pragmatist ontology—of a fully pragmatist social theory—by explaining how it can help dissolve the dualisms of agent and structure, of realism and idealism, and of normative and strategic action. These dualisms continue to define, and vex, IR scholars even as the field strives to be “post-paradigmatic.” As I argue, by offering a way past them, or at least to navigate them, pragmatism stands out as an especially promising conceptual architecture for future theorizing.

Pragmatism as an Epistemology

The bulk of IR scholars, it would appear, have mainly engaged with “pragmatism” as an epistemological or methodological approach—specifically, as an approach that allows researchers to focus on empirical problems and get on with the process of producing scholarship, without having to spend ages debating first principles or meta-theoretical standpoints. This is not universally the case, and the ontological aspects of pragmatism that I re-assert as fundamental, which interweave its epistemological aspects, have received attention from a number of people. However, as I will show with a brief review of the literature, most scholars writing on the subject are primarily interested in finding in pragmatism a solution to methodological or epistemological problems that have otherwise bogged down IR research in the past.

The earliest systematic effort to generate a pragmatist movement in IR is found in a 2002 special issue of *Millennium* devoted to exploring the potential of pragmatist scholarship to transcend the IR “paradigm wars” of the 1990s. As the editorial preface to the issue states, “Looking beyond the epistemological stalemate opposing positivism and post-positivism, Pragmatism invokes a methodological pluralism and disciplinary tolerance [and] encourages a multi-perspectival style of inquiry that privileges practice and benefits from the complementarity, rather

than opposition, of different understandings of world politics” (Bauer and Brighi 2002, 111). Most contributors echo this line. Cochran focuses on its contingent and perspectival character. Pragmatist knowledge claims, she states, are axiological rather than nomological, “illuminat[ing] the logical relationships between events or actions, and the consequences that follow from particular principles and understandings” (Cochran 2002, 537). Hass and Hass argue that pragmatist epistemology offers a strong foundation for constructivist “middle-range” theorizing by permitting the essential separation of “brute facts,” as facets of reality amenable to consensus knowledge, “social facts,” as statements about social life that derive largely from the thoughts of observers, and “hybrid facts,” as the implications of some “brute facts” upon society (2002, 590). Festenstein (2002) identifies four tenets as central to pragmatist epistemology: holism, fallibilism, anti-skepticism, and the ontological centrality of practices. While other contributors to this issue, such as Iver Neumann, do pay more attention to ontology—and I will discuss their work presently—this attention is secondary to an examination of pragmatism as it relates to the status of knowledge-claims.

As noted earlier, the best-known attempt to apply pragmatist epistemology to IR likely is “analytical eclecticism” (Katzenstein and Sil 2008; Sil and Katzenstein 2010). Katzenstein and Sil locate pragmatist theories of knowledge in a middle-ground between objectivism and subjectivism, and draw upon Dewey, James, Peirce, and Mead to argue that IR scholarship should not be bound into particular schools of thought. Analytical eclecticism “proceeds at least implicitly on the basis of a pragmatist ethos, manifested concretely in the search for middle range theoretical arguments . . . in contrast to more narrowly parsed research puzzles designed to test theories or fill in gaps within research traditions” (Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 412). They draw extensively upon the pragmatist philosopher of science Larry Laudan’s concept of the “research tradition” (1978) to describe the current state of the field and propose to dis-embed scholarship from such traditions in favor of the search for causal mechanisms:

By focusing only on certain kinds of mechanisms and ignoring or defining away others, adherents of research traditions risk missing the complex processes through which diverse mechanisms relate to one another. To offset this risk, analytic eclecticism is predicated on a definition of mechanism . . . as all entities—whether individual actions or choices, social relations or networks, environmental or institutional characteristics, specific events or contextual factors, individual cognitive dispositions or collectively shared ideas and worldviews—that generate immediate effects through processes that may or may not recur across contexts and that may be, but often are not, directly observable. Such a definition . . . permit[s] traveling across diverse theoretical terrain to enable consideration of multiple causal forces operating in different domains of reality and across levels of generality. (Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 421)

As they explain,

The benefits of embedding scholarship within research traditions . . . need to be sacrificed for the purpose of recognizing and framing problems in ways that more closely approximate the complexity of the social world and that can be explored through different permutations of concepts, data, methods, and interpretative logics taken from separate research traditions (Katzenstein and Sil 2008, 117).

While their desire to focus on matters of methodology and practical enquiry is well received, Katzenstein and Sil have not offered a particularly coherent set of claims. Moreover, their use of pragmatist philosophy is not consistent with its own premises and appears to stem from a highly selective reading of it. First, their suggestion that scholars can voluntarily dis-embed themselves from research

traditions is problematic. Laudan, whose book *Progress and its Problems* (1978) provides a pragmatist alternative to the meta-methodologies of Kuhn and Lakatos, maintains as a central argument that it is impossible to engage in scholarship outside of a research tradition. Like both Lakatos and Kuhn, Laudan argues with reference to both logic and to the history of science that all enquiry takes place within a methodological package: “A set of beliefs about what sorts of entities and processes make up the domain of inquiry [and a set of epistemic and methodological norms about how the domain is to be investigated, how theories are to be tested, how data are to be collected, etc” (Laudan 1978, 151). Laudan’s work demonstrates how research traditions are the methodological conditions of possibility for science. Hence, on the surface of it, Katzenstein and Sil are deviating significantly from the literature they are drawing on, using it to argue for views that this literature explicitly rejects as nonsensical, but provide none of the philosophical discussion necessary to justify this idiosyncratic move. Second, it would appear Katzenstein and Sil have defined as a causal mechanism any object, phenomenon, or property that influences another object, phenomenon, or property. In fact, it is unclear what *wouldn’t* count as a causal mechanism based upon the definition they have offered, as their definition encompasses social structures, events, dispositions, processes, interactions, ideas, mental states, and the physical environment. What else exists but does not fall under one of these categories? Third, by including reference to unobservables in their definition of mechanism, Katzenstein and Sil bring in realist ontology. This is not a minor thing. Pragmatist epistemology, as I maintain throughout this article, works in concert with pragmatist ontology, and thus an enormous amount of philosophical work would be necessary to make this coherent. Moreover, by doing so, they undermine their own stated desire to embrace methodological pluralism, by introducing a single concept—that of the mechanism—as a point of explanatory convergence.

That said, these problems are particular to the “analytical eclecticism” project and not shared by other scholars who go articulate a clear set of pragmatist methodological precepts that could underpin a discrete program of research. Friedrichs and Kratochwil argue for “the recognition of knowledge generation as a social and discursive activity, and the orientation of research around the generation of useful knowledge” (2009, 701) and describe a research methodology based around “abductive” reasoning—a form of inference to the best explanation first proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce.¹ Franke and Weber (2011) also focus on abductive reasoning and argue through a close reading of William James that pragmatism offers a unifying strand according to which the military metaphor of “paradigm wars” might be replaced by one of a hotel, where theoretical rooms branch off from a pragmatist corridor. In a 2009 *Forum* on pragmatism in *International Studies Review*, Rytovuori-Apunen argues that abductive reasoning unlocks an “existential, objectivist, and community-based knowing and offers us a means to analyze the relative weight of each in our disciplinary practices” (2009, 643). Both Friedrichs and Sil, in the same *Forum*, raise many of the same points of discussion covered in their aforementioned articles. Friedrichs (2009) adds to his earlier remarks by juxtaposing his abductive methodology with Moravcsik’s “theory synthesis,” which he sees as adhering to many pragmatist principles. Meanwhile, Sil further offers a concise re-definition of “analytical eclecticism” as “a problem-driven approach featuring the extraction, adaptation, and integration (but not synthesis) of discrete concepts, mechanisms, logical principles, and interpretive moves” (2009, 649). A more recent edited volume titled *Philosophical Pragmatism and International Relations* (Ralston 2013) features further examples of this trend, such as claims that pragmatism is both a form of empiricism and instrumentalism

¹For an extended discussion of the history and philosophical discussion surrounding the concept of abduction, see Douven (2011).

(Weber 2013, 25–26).² Again, while these scholars do not completely neglect ontological matters,³ their focus is on the epistemological and the methodological.

Perhaps the most concise illustration of this trend may be found in the concluding chapter of *Pragmatism in International Relations*, an edited volume emerging out of the *Millennium* issue. In it, Bauer and Brighi (2009) draw a number of conclusions on pragmatism in IR. They see two primary benefits to a pragmatist perspective for future IR scholarship: first, it encourages a view of academia not only as an activity but as a community of practitioners embedded within a society, and second, these practitioners are treated also as actors who themselves constitute a political force in society. In considering the preceding chapters, they conclude that pragmatism ultimately offers a manifesto for a democratic field: “this implies that a greater awareness of the set of duties, rights and procedures of the scholarship community would be encouraged among its members [and] that IR academia should be wary of intellectual gatekeepers and avoid division into theoretical feuds, but should rather provide a forum for honest and fair intellectual exchange” (Bauer and Brighi 2009, 165). In other words, pragmatism is about pluralistic social science, in which scholars forgo debates about matters of social theory in favor of applied research and about reflexive awareness of the position of the enquirer as a socially situated and politically empowered subject.

In considering the foregoing literature, a consistent view of pragmatism begins to emerge. It is a view that focuses primarily if not exclusively on the epistemological and methodological implications of pragmatist thought. Theories are meant to be instruments and enquiry is meant to be problem-driven. Theories may be modular, and an analytically promiscuous eclecticism is preferable to more systematic and methodologically immanent procedures of investigation. Fundamental ontological questions of social theory, such as the nature of action, experience, agency, structure, or mind, are too abstract and do not need to be answered anyway to permit fruitful enquiry. Scholars should be more aware of how their theories influence their discipline and their societies, and should shift to a more fallibilistic and humble approach to methods and results than is typical of conventional neo-positivism in the social sciences. Theories should be treated more as ideal types than inductive representations of real causal linkages. Or, to invoke the common trope of the “middle-ground,” pragmatism is a *via media* between a positivist and realist interest in the way a mind-independent world shapes cause and effect, and a relativist interest in how theories constitute discrete and incommensurable world-constructs.

These various engagements with pragmatism represent a significant body of reflection and intervention, and include work by some of the field’s most prominent scholars. However, taken as a general trend, they also have the potential to mislead. That is, they run the risk of obscuring the ontological commitments that necessarily accompany pragmatist views of knowledge, method, and the process of scientific enquiry. There is value, therefore, in clearly stating what those commitments are and what they mean for IR theorizing, so that scholars may decide for themselves whether they want to be pragmatist when it comes to epistemology and methodology, and so that pragmatism in IR comes to encompass more than just those things.⁴

Pragmatism as Ontology

Pragmatism is a rich philosophical tradition and is famous for its distinct approach to truth, method, and meaning. It originates in the early work of notable

²Though other chapters in this volume better exemplify the sort of substantive use of pragmatist social theory that I advocate (see, e.g., Goldman 2013).

³Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009), for example, identify a number of reasons to embrace pragmatism, and while most of them pertain to matters of epistemology and method, they also note the affinity between pragmatism and practice theory.

⁴Though as I will discuss presently, some excellent examples of pragmatist IR theory already do this.

“classical pragmatists” such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, but its influence reaches widely and deeply within more contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, making its presence known not only in the form of self-identified pragmatists such as Richard Rorty, Larry Laudan, Susan Haack, and Joseph Margolis, but in the direction of philosophy of language and of science more generally. It is unsurprising that IR scholars have found within it a rich repository of commentary on the epistemological and methodological conversations that have vexed the field for so long. But, when it comes to locating a pragmatist social theory, the most relevant pragmatist literature is mercifully much smaller. The first pragmatist to truly offer a social theory was John Dewey (Hildebrand 2008), and it is Dewey’s holistic metaphysics of action, process, cognition, and evolution that Mead and his sociological descendants (such as Erving Goffman and Harold Blumer) continued. In this section, comprising the main body of the article, I outline these features of Deweyan pragmatism in greater detail, propose them as one of the better candidates for doing pragmatist IR, and relate them to existing theoretical conversations and research programs extant in the field today. This should make clear just what it is that being a pragmatist involves, and how it is that a pragmatist point of view actually has the epistemological and methodological implications that offer the myriad goods that IR scholars have commonly associated with them. The purpose of this discussion is not so much to show that IR scholars *must* incorporate pragmatist views within their substantive theories if they hope to take a pragmatist epistemological or methodological perspective, but rather that by engaging with pragmatist philosophy as a substantive social theory, a number of theoretical doors open up, and neglected pathways become illuminated.

Pragmatism Is a Social Theory

Pragmatism has an ineluctably social character, and while it reaches beyond the typical boundaries of social theory as a philosophical tradition, it may nevertheless be productively understood as offering a concrete set of social-theoretical standpoints. John Dewey—likely the most prominent of the classical pragmatists—developed, throughout his six-decade-long career, a sophisticated view of the relationships between experience, action, cognition, knowledge, and social reality itself. While Dewey owed much of his inspiration to the work of his predecessors, Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, it is fair to say he was the first pragmatist social theorist (Hildebrand 2008). His student, George Herbert Mead, developed some of Dewey’s theories further and in the process began the symbolic interaction tradition in sociological theory. However, with the notable addition of a few more recent contributions to the pragmatist tradition, and in particular those of Hans Joas, Dewey’s writings constitute the port of first call for a pragmatist social ontology.

Central to Dewey’s philosophy is the theory of the act. Acts are transactions between the body and its environment, stimulated by anthropic impulses (Dewey 1983, 117–18), and, by grounding human behavior and perception, establish human experience as an “organized context of meanings and activities” (Alexander 1987, 133). The qualities of the world as experienced are also transactional: Perception is the result of an interaction between phenomena and our reactions to them, which are based upon past experience and habit. Mind and world are co-constituting (Hildebrand 2008, 21). Habit in the pragmatist view is not simply repetitive, ingrained behavior, but the source of the human mind; a habit is “an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response,” which (contingently) manifests in similar though not identical acts across social time and space (Dewey 1983, 32). Like Bourdieu would argue over half a century later, habits are what constitute social reality: they are “in and of [the situation], not, so far as it is concerned, something outside of it” (Dewey 1978, 120). Habits, in the pragmatist

view, “primarily refer to the organizing abilities of the organism to reconstruct its environment . . . [They are] situational structures rather than individual reflexes, psychic associations, or repeated actions” (Alexander 1987, 142). For Dewey, the habit has “causal efficacy” as a kind of world-generating process of relation and adjustment to the contingencies of experience (1983, 32). Habits, then, are a sort of ontological currency and acts are its units.

Unlike Bourdieu, however, Dewey claimed that habits could be the objects of reflection and conscious modification. This is where emotion becomes relevant: emotion is a response to the inhibition of habit and to the wide range of incompatible responses possible in situations where habit is interrupted. The ambivalence of an indeterminate situation produces a reflective self-awareness, and its resolution comes from the consideration and selection of alternatives (Hildebrand 2008, 28–30). In Dewey’s own words:

[Mind] denotes all the ways in which we deal consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves It never denotes anything self-contained, isolated from the world of persons and things, but is always used with respect to situations, events, objects, persons and groups *Mind is primarily a verb* [emphasis mine]. (1988, 268)

Dewey’s theory of action thus escapes the confines of Cartesian dualism by offering an anthropologically and practically grounded constructivist social ontology, in which consciousness, reality, experience, and innovation interact continuously and recursively.

This implies that agency and its ontological fellow travelers (such as subjectivity and power) emerge out of human action. Accordingly, to study the role of agency is, therefore, to theorize how action leads to change. However, rather than locate the capacity for action within a set of structured relations of enablement and constraint, as critical realists do, pragmatists find it in an inherent human capacity for continual innovation:

At the beginning of an action process goals are frequently unspecific and only vaguely understood. They become clearer once the actor has a better understanding of the possible means to achieve the ends; even new goals will arise on the basis of newly available means. The more concrete understanding of goals or their change makes in turn a new perspective on available means possible. This reciprocal process between means and ends structures action. It anchors the notion of goals firmly in the action process itself and argues against the external setting of goals as advocated in teleological theories of action. This allows one to perceive perception and cognition not as acts preceding action but as part of the action process that is inherently connected to the situational context. Goal-setting does not take place as a cognitive act prior to action but is based on prereflective aspirations that are operative in the action situation. (Joas and Beckert 2001, 273)

The foundation of a pragmatist theory of action is neither instrumentality nor the “causal powers” of objective structures, therefore, but organism–environment transactions and social transformation comes from reflexive innovation in habit. In a pragmatist view of action, then, the focus is on how these transactions and innovations generate change and stability alike, and how the creative process grants subjects the capacity to alter their worlds.

Pragmatism as IR Theory

Rather than offer further summary of pragmatist thought in isolation from IR theory, however, it may be more helpful to instead explicate it by way of putting it

into dialog with existing theoretical traditions in the field. First and foremost, pragmatism in IR falls firmly into the broader constructivist tent. As implied by the title of Onuf's (1989) seminal book, *A World of Our Making* and by Adler's (2005) discussion of a constructivist "middle-ground" between positivism and linguistic anti-realism,⁵ constructivism in IR is mainly premised on the view that "the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world" (Adler 2005, 90). However, while this broad definition encompasses pragmatism, it does not provide the clearest picture of what has actually happened with constructivism in IR. As Wendt (1999) alludes to in his distinction between "thick" and "thin" constructivism, the latter being his preferred approach, constructivism in IR has broadly taken two forms. Wendt's "thin constructivism" is, in fact, a barely operationalized form of scientific realism and has been most dominant up until now.⁶ Meanwhile, the "constructivism that wasn't," of the thicker variety, has taken somewhat of a back seat.⁷ Yet, it is into this latter category that pragmatism mainly falls, as it eschews the dualisms of scientific realism in favor of a monistic, immanent view of mind and world, and of the status of theoretical objects (Jackson 2010). This is a crucial fact to consider for those interested in the myriad epistemological benefits that pragmatism appears to offer: Those benefits are only obtained within a pragmatist ontological framework and remaining within such a framework may leave IR theorists with a thicker constructivism than they had anticipated or desired.

Pragmatism also fits well within the "practice turn" that has taken shape in IR. As Adler and Pouliot (2011) put it, a focus on practices in IR means treating "skillful performances" as the basic material out of which things like agents, structures, and social orders are constituted. The role of practice is paramount in pragmatism, in that a practical form of action (habituated and reflexive) is ontologically prior to both actors and the structured settings in which action takes place, serving to generate. There is a considerable affinity between some practice-oriented approaches to social enquiry and pragmatist social theory,⁸ and IR has followed a broader practice turn that has taken shape in sociology, in which scholars have recognized that a diverse array of practice-centered approaches:

are joined in the belief that such phenomena as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions, and historical transformation occur within and are aspects or components of the field of practices ... [conceiving] of practices as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding In social theory, consequently, practice approaches promulgate a distinct social ontology: the social is a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings. This conception contrasts with accounts that privilege individuals, (inter)actions, language, signifying systems, the life world, institutions/roles, structures, or systems in defining the social. (Schatzki 2001, 11–12)

⁵While Adler refers to these two methodological poles as rationalism and interpretivism, respectively, I view this terminological choice more as a response to the idiosyncratic way in which these two terms have been understood in IR, and that the real dichotomy he seeks to escape is a forced choice between a detached treatment of the world as a deterministic series of events and a "post-modern" restriction of theory to the immanent description of discourses. After all, interpretive historical sociology, which dates back to Max Weber, was well explored by many of the sociologists with whom Adler was in intellectual conversation, and this approach relies on both interpretation and instrumental rationality in equal measure.

⁶This is most apparent in Wendt's earliest constructivist intervention (1987), in which he applies Bhaskar's "critical realism" (1975) to the agent-structure problem in IR.

⁷The title of an extended lament penned by Jackson (2009), originally intended as an ISA conference paper but instead published as a blog post.

⁸For a survey of practice theory showing its pragmatist affinities, see Schatzki's (2001) edited volume on the practice turn.

Pragmatists, by locating their particular understanding of action at the heart of their account of mind, experience, and the construction of the world, fall more or less within this general definition.

I say “more or less” because there are some small but significant ways in which pragmatism departs both from the way the practice turn has taken shape in sociology and in particular, how it has developed in IR.⁹ For pragmatists, the field of practice is as material as it is social, and the transactional relationships which constitute it may incorporate the sorts of things not typically thought of as “social,” such as physical terrain.¹⁰ Moreover, while practice theory is largely designed to be an alternative to those approaches, which focus on actions and interactions (Schatzki 2001, 12), both of these are central in pragmatism, albeit on a somewhat unusual understanding. While social theorists have typically conceived of action as intentional, aligned toward instrumental or normative interventions into the world (Joas 1996), pragmatists, as previously discussed, also view sub-intentional and habituated, “phronetic” behaviors within the category as well. It is not that pragmatism conceives of all action as devoid of meta-cognition or reflection, as some other approaches to practice do, but rather these things comprise one dimension of action, and vary in salience during any given moment. Moreover, pragmatists also see the transactional components of action as working ultimately beyond the level of the social, working to generate arrangements between organisms and their environments, even as social worlds *become* part of such arrangements. These distinctions are not merely pedantic, but show that for all of the epistemological and methodological goods that pragmatism provides, it also involves some heterodox social metaphysics.

Heterodox though it may be, however, pragmatism offers a few things that other dominant approaches in practice theory may not. Most salient here is the comparison with Bourdieu, whose approach to conceptualizing practice sits at the forefront of the practice turn in IR (Pouliot 2008; Adler and Pouliot 2011). Bourdieu’s theory holds that actions follow the sub-intentional imperatives to which people are disposed by their *habitus*, as a package of socialized dispositions toward particular practices, within the context of a (power-laden) *field* of social relations (Bourdieu 1977, 1993). These practices serve to maintain and constitute the social structures that dispose actors to engage in them in the first place. The Bourdieusian approach in particular looks very much like a pragmatic theory of practice, but it contains one significant deviation: it does not permit the sort of reflexivity that is essential to the pragmatist understanding of the creativity of action, and which allows pragmatist social theory to avoid the sort of structuralism that characterizes Bourdieu’s *habitus*. Bourdieu’s agents do not normally reflect on their relationship to the field, or engage in meta-cognition about their habits; they engage in tactical maneuvering only. This difference cannot be understated; the generative, evolutionary dimensions of action, according to pragmatists, derive from the way reflection functions within the action process. The determinism

⁹While one of the primary figures in the practice turn in IR, Hopf (2010), has engaged extensively with Dewey, he has done so in a way that bears little resemblance to how Dewey is read by major figures in pragmatist social theory, and in some cases appears to contradict Dewey’s explicit views. For example, Hopf claims that habits “short circuit any need to think about what we are doing” (2010, 541), despite Dewey’s view that thought *is in the doing* (Dewey 1988). In fact, Hopf’s essential premise is that “habits and emotions are close associates; they are both automatic, not reflective” (2010, 541), and that they should be treated as psychological heuristics such as stereotypes, thus preserving “mind” as a distinct category from action. Not only does this contradict Dewey’s views of mind as quoted earlier, this also appears to be in tension with the central role played by the reflexive potential in habit, in Dewey’s work, whereby habit supplies the context for its own revision (see Dewey 1983, 32; Alexander 1987, 142; Hildebrand 2008, 28–30) (see also Joas 1996; Gross 2009). None of this is to say that Hopf is wrong in his approach to habit in IR, but rather that Hopf is not himself pragmatist, or at least not one whose thought bears much resemblance to that of Dewey.

¹⁰In this sense, pragmatists share the willingness of actor-network theorists to expand the domain of agency to incorporate tools and other such objects (see Latour 2005).

of Bourdieu's particular understanding of mind is notably at odds with this view (see numerous chapters in Shusterman's (1999) *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, including those by Joseph Margolis and James Bohman), Herein lies the benefit of pragmatism. Without needing to completely renounce the concept of *field*, which provides a compelling view of the action environment,¹¹ pragmatists are able to better account for the process of reflexivity and variable awareness that subjects may have of their own subjectivity, of the relationship between their ends and means, and of the possibilities open to them for revising their body-world transactions.

Pragmatism Is Proven

At the outset of this article, I claimed to mainly be offering a pragmatist criticism of how IR scholars have used pragmatism. The other side of the coin is that, by pragmatist standards of theory evaluation, all one has to do to prove the value of an approach is to show that it can be productively employed. A number of IR scholars have supplied such proof by engaging and utilizing pragmatist ontology in exemplary ways. In the 2002 *Millennium* special issue, Isacoff discusses the role of experience in the formation of knowledge: "Dewey's solution . . . was to obliterate the distinction between the world of mind and the independent world and to replace it with a world of experience in which mind and environment are locked into a permanent relationship of interaction" (Isacoff 2002, 613). While Isacoff is still to some extent framing pragmatism in relation to epistemology, Neumann argues that scholars associated with the linguistic turn should pay close attention to the focus on discursive practices contained in the work of Wittgenstein and Foucault. Neumann states "The analysis of discourse understood as the study of the preconditions for social actions must include the analysis of practices understood as the study of social action itself" (2002, 627). A number of chapters of *Pragmatism and International Relations* also hone in on ontology. Kratochwil identifies practices as the lens by which action and agency, and even the nature of knowledge itself, may be interrogated, and states that action rather than objects or phenomena is ontologically primitive. He concludes by reiterating that "a pragmatic turn . . . ties in with and feeds into the linguistic, constructivist and 'historical' turns that preceded it" (2009, 24).¹² Gould and Onuf claim that "some constructivists are beginning to realize that they have been pragmatists all along—if by pragmatism we mean an anti-formalist sensibility emphasizing complexity, intersubjectivity and contingency in social relations" (2009, 27). Hellmann (2014), in addition to his contributions to the 2009 *ISR Forum*, has applied pragmatism to the relationship between foreign policy analysis and explanations of systemic change, while Schmidt (2014) has published a pragmatist analysis of the transformation of sovereignty in no less an outlet than the *American Journal of Political Science*. The simple fact that such a body of work exists is ample evidence that pragmatist ontology offers something to IR scholars, even if it does not yet show the limits or full horizons of that possible contribution.

Moreover, though not specifically devoted to establishing the premises of a pragmatist social theory of IR, there has been a small yet noteworthy engagement by some IR scholars with pragmatist ethics as well. Foremost among these is Cochran's (1999) *Normative Theory in International Relations*, in which she pitches

¹¹See, for two perspectives, Schatzki (2001) and Fligstein and McAdam (2012).

¹²Indeed, Kratochwil, along with other scholars such as Iver Neumann and Emanuel Adler, have been attending to the role of practices for decades, in ways that are broadly congenial to pragmatist social theory. That said, a shift toward an explicitly pragmatist approach reflects a change in the field, as it entails a more coherent research program built upon more systematically explicated social theoretical premises.

Dewey's views on ethical enquiry as a solution to an impasse between communitarians and cosmopolitans—and echoes, in a later article (2012), in an attempt to draw pragmatists from outside of IR into the conversation. Kaag and Kreps (2012) also offer up pragmatist thought as a source of normative theory, pointing to discussions of international politics in the work of Peirce and Royce. These may not be employments of pragmatist social theory to IR puzzles, but they are also further examples of how pragmatism offers promise beyond its methodological dimensions.

What all this demonstrates is that pragmatism has passed muster as a legitimate approach in IR scholarship not simply as an epistemological outlook or meta-methodological bridge, but as a substantial theory of life, the universe, and everything—or at least, of action, cognition, and the constitution of agents and structures alike. The body of literature on the subject is currently still small enough for a near-comprehensive review to be offered in these few foregoing pages, but it nevertheless suggests that pragmatism is here to stay, and worthy of sustained attention and application. That said, pragmatism is not a true “theory of everything,” and involves a specific, anti-realist vision of agents, structures, and the like. This may limit its appeal to some, even as it offers new avenues of productive thought to others.

Pragmatist Solutions to IR Problems

My purpose in this article is precautionary and critical. I am reasserting the ontological premises of pragmatism not so much to persuade others to adopt them, but to explain just what philosophical commitments one must make in order to coherently claim the various epistemological and methodological benefits of pragmatist philosophy of science. But as other scholars have already offered extended (Hellmann 2009; Jackson 2009; Franke and Weber 2011) and in some cases itemized discussions of pragmatist methodological principles (Kratochwil 2009), it is surely redundant to offer further instructions on *how* to be a pragmatist in IR. Instead—and in good pragmatist form—I offer some suggestions on *what* to be a pragmatist *is about*. While a philosophical pragmatist need not necessarily build the transactional, processual ontology distinct to pragmatist social theory into all of their substantive work, there are several substantive subjects or programs of interest to IR scholars in which a thoroughly pragmatist intervention may offer considerable added value. That is, there are some discussions where just such an ontological framework can bring additional clarity or open up new avenues of thought.

In this final section, I bring pragmatist social theory to bear on three such discussions, all related to certain persistent dualisms in the field. These dualisms do not define the field, and IR scholars have often transcended or avoided them, but they nevertheless shape the way IR theory is framed, synthesized, and contended by those engaged in producing it. By being a pragmatist about them, in the ontological sense, we can avoid their constraining effects, recognize their problematic elements, and more easily find and apply alternatives to them when considering the empirical puzzles at hand.

The Dualisms of IR

Much of the past several decades of IR theory is arranged around dualisms or dichotomies. Perhaps the clearest example of this is in the contrasting of a “logic of consequences” and a “logic of appropriateness” (March and Olsen 1998). The dualism here is between instrumental and moral action; either the behavior of international actors is driven by the search for optimal means to ends, or it is driven by the desire to conform to a moral norm, typically associated with a particular

identity or role (see, e.g., Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Moreover, the development of this dualism in IR is closely related to another major dualism of the field: that of realism and idealism (cf. Carr 1946) or, as the case may be, of liberal idealism. The debate between “neo-realists” and “neo-liberals” revolved around the implications of anarchy for state interests and for the possibility of instrumental benefits to cooperation. But the growing constructivist response to it shifted its terms beyond a narrow disagreement over preferences. Empirical studies of cases in which actors adhered to moral principles without regard for strategic costs challenge the focus on instrumentality (Price 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998), while sophisticated new theoretical architectures arose to explore the norm-conforming elements action, such as those discussed extensively in the literature on ontological security (Mitzen 2006). Finally, the “agent-structure problem” (Wendt 1987) continues to be relevant, decades beyond that particular attempt to resolve it (Wight 2006). The search for agency within social environments of structural constraint is a common explanatory theme across a number of IR research arcs, ranging from diplomacy (Pouliot 2008) to global governance (Hoffman 2011). That IR scholars continue to employ new analytic frameworks¹³ beyond the co-deterministic dualism of structuration theory—despite recent assertions that a “basic structurationist ontological insight... grounds all constructivism” (Price 2008, 204)—suggests a continued tension.¹⁴

These dualisms bring with them certain problems. First, as charged by “realist constructivists,” “Constructivism as a methodology in the study of IR need not be idealist [in the liberal sense], but that in practice in the United States it tends to be” (Barkin 2003, 336). In other words, the dualism of contrasting logics of consequences and appropriateness and the dualism of realism versus idealism have been historically conflated, at least in the practice of IR theorizing. Second, these dualisms constrain the extent of the so-called “sociological turn” in IR: Scholars are incentivized to remain within dualistic frameworks in order to better speak to existing literatures, rather than to engage with a broader variety of social theory (Joas and Knöbl 2013). Third, these dualisms sustain conceptual incoherencies, such as in considering the simultaneous normative and strategic dimensions to norm “entrepreneurship.” It is here that a thoroughly pragmatist social ontology may be of the greatest benefit to IR scholars.

First, with regards to the dualism of structure and agency, pragmatism ignores both categories in favor of a configuration of unfolding relations. To recall, transactions lie at the heart of a pragmatist social ontology and constitute individuals and the environments in which action takes place, which include other individuals. Thus, while society has a structured character, in the form of an (ever-changing) arrangement of transactions, it does not feature entities that can be called “structures.” Rather than the stratified ontology of structures and agents, locked in a co-deterministic embrace of mutual-constitution,¹⁵ a pragmatist view implies a flat ontology of configurations (see Elias 1978), such as networks, fields, “actor-networks,”¹⁶ or other such bundles of relations (Emirbayer 1997). The continually unfolding and dynamic nature of these transactions contains wide-reaching transformative possibilities, with the creativity of action (as conceived along a pragmatist view) explaining how change occurs in concert. The dualism of structure and agency does not exist in this view. Transactional processes account for both constraining and enabling effects,

¹³The “practice turn” may be mainly taken as one such new approach, as can the interest in complexity theory as an explanation for the structured appearance of a social world that nevertheless may be significantly transformed (Jervis 1998; Harrison 2012).

¹⁴This has not escaped the notice of numerous sociological theorists (Loyal 2003).

¹⁵See Dépelteau (2013) for an extended discussion of co-deterministic social theory.

¹⁶See Latour (2005) for an outline of “Actor Network Theory,” which differs from the pragmatist ontology discussed here in numerous ways, but shares a commitment to a configurational and transactional view of the social world.

given that they are constituted by effective habits that provide a discrete repertoire of available acts. Meanwhile, agency is nothing more (and nothing less) than the “a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its “iterational” or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future . . . and toward the present” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 962). In other words, agency is just a name for the reflexive creativity of socially situated action.

To be a pragmatist about agents and structures in IR requires approaching neither as a category of being, but instead as a question of framing: what is it that gives international actors the appearance of agency, or international environments the appearance of structure? The perseverance of anarchy, for example, may give the appearance of an enduring structure, but in ascribing it such a status, IR scholars grant agents an almost mystical capacity to somehow develop the capacity to generate or transform the conditions of their own constitution if the genesis of anarchy and the possibility of its end are to be coherently theorized. The pragmatist response would be to de-reify anarchy, and see it as one possible transactional configuration, neither constituted by nor constitutive of international actors. As transactions perform all the causal work in pragmatist social ontology, significant transformation is as close as the right change in habit, just as the maintenance of anarchy is also a matter of settled (and effective) habits. In other words, structure exists as a property of social relations, but *structures* do not.

This sort of relational approach to IR theory already has its adherents, and in practice, many IR scholars are already focused on relational configurations. Rationalist literature focusing on strategic interaction or institutions, for example, try to explain the structured appearance of international arrangements without reifying them, while much of the norms literature offers explanations in terms of suasive interactions.¹⁷ But this literature often reifies agents instead, which is something pragmatists reject, or tacitly lapses into co-determinism by reifying identities or norms as well. A relational approach that avoids doing this has received thorough attention in Jackson and Nexon’s article *Relations before States: Substance, Process, and the Study of World Politics* (1999)—which, not coincidentally, contains notable engagement with pragmatist thought—and has been featured in scholarship on the strategic dimensions of communicative action (Krebs and Jackson 2007), of discursive context and norm entrepreneurship (Walldorf 2010), and of role-playing in state activity (McCourt 2012), to name some examples. It holds further potential for exploring the transformative possibility of other subjects of interest in IR where actors might appear significantly constrained under structure-agent co-determinist view, but which display considerable dynamicity, such as diaspora identities (Shain and Barth 2003). In other words, among the alternatives to the dualism of structure and agency that already exist, pragmatist social theory has both an existing presence and future potential.

Second, pragmatist social theory also offers a possible resolution to the dualism of realism and idealism. In E. H. Carr’s own formulation, realism and idealism are dialectically arranged, with idealists offering an orienting set of values and transformative goals, and realism delineating the boundaries of the possible (Carr 1946). But while the attention that Carr and other classical realists gave to moral factors lends strength to calls for a realist constructivism (Barkin 2003; Jackson and Nexon 2004), Carr’s dialectic also reveals a certain tension: if constructivism is about attending to the variable constitution of society, then it is far closer to idealism than to realism, as the latter captures the deterministic limits of the status quo while the former embraces its malleability. IR scholars have offered a number of possible responses to this tension, most notably suggesting that a realist constructivism should treat “power politics” as a fixed parameter of IR (Jackson 2009) or otherwise involve a focus on power as a constitutive force (Bially Mattern

¹⁷Discussed presently in greater detail.

2004). But while this is certainly in line with a range of constructivist thought, spanning Foucault to critical realism, it seems to sidestep both the cognitive role that realism plays for Carr, and the inherent affinity between a constructivist view of the social world and an idealist view of the social world as fundamentally plastic. At the very least, for this approach to provide a solution, it would need a view of power that manages to be both non-deterministic and deterministic at once; it would need to simultaneously embrace and circumscribe the mutability of society. This may sound like a contradiction in terms, but pragmatism can provide IR scholars with something that fits the bill.

The key to this pragmatist view of power lies in the origin of values and ends as understood in the pragmatist theory of action. Pragmatism provides a theory of how ends and means co-constitute, of examining how key actors change their goals over time, learning to desire new things as a result of new means to attaining those things becoming available, or refining their goals as they develop a better sense of what is possible. To quote Joas,

[Goals] become clearer once the actor has a better understanding of the possible means to achieve the ends; even new goals will arise on the basis of newly available means . . . This reciprocal process between means and ends structures action [and] allows one to perceive perception and cognition not as acts preceding action but as part of the action process that is inherently connected to the situational context. (Joas and Beckett 2001, 273)

This is enormously relevant to understanding power. Power is a causal concept: it refers to the generative dispositions of things or relations (Harré and Madden 1975; Elder-Vass 2010; see also Guzzini 2013). Moreover, power is also an action concept, at least in social theory, as power cannot function except through behaviors, interactions, relationships, and similar media of influence, regardless of whether one assigns powers to social structures (Dahl 1957; Giddens 1985). This may sound consistent with the realist focus on domination, instrumental manipulation, and deterministic limits on the possibility of transformation. But for pragmatists, the creative potential of action is accompanied by the genesis of values (Joas 2000); acting in and on the world changes the ends of action in unpredictable ways. Read through the lens of “power politics,” state action is simultaneously both the deployment of power and the transformation of identity. In other words, a pragmatist view of power in IR preserves the constructivist commitment to the plasticity of social worlds, and therefore, the idealist commitment to the possibility of progress to some moral end, but also retains the realist commitment to circumscribing action within a world of inescapable environmental conditions (albeit dynamic ones). Like structure-agency dualism, then, the dualism of realism and idealism becomes a matter of initial framing, rather than a mutually distinct set of empirical views or ontological commitments.

Finally, pragmatism offers the tools to resolve the dualism of opposed normative and strategic theories of action—to bring together the logics of consequences and appropriateness. There is a puzzle in the literature on norms: norms restrict and regulate what actors can do, but they also provide the arena in which strategic action takes place, so where does the morally principled end and the instrumental (i.e., the strategic) begin? This is an important question for IR scholars interested in examining the origins, limits, and effects of such things as taboos on certain kinds of state actions, or at the normative underpinnings of international orders more generally. While some IR scholars argue that this problem can be resolved by identifying moral concerns with preference formation, which takes place prior to strategic interaction (Legro 1996), this approach seems to elide the inherent normative aspects of discourse (Finnemore 1996; Risse 2000), which play an important institutional role (Hoffman 2010). Hence, the moral and cognitive features of norms render a purely

rationalist view inadequate for resolving the puzzle I previously outlined. Meanwhile, extant constructivist approaches are also limited. They identify a particular norm, defined as an instruction for “appropriate behavior for actors within a given community” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891), as a factor that spreads throughout the international system. But, these theories typically treat actors as more or less static entities that either possess or lack the properties associated with a particular norm. Actors do not change, but are merely persuaded to adopt one view or another. This approach elides key ways in which norms and strategy intersect, however. There is undeniably an instrumental aspect to the process by which actors contend and propagate new norms, and this aspect extends into discourse itself (Krebs and Jackson 2007). Meanwhile, an epidemiological view of norm-change, whereby norms serve as a sort of “meme” that is taken up through imitation, persuasion, opportunistic band-wagoning, and the like, obscures how new norms challenge not only existing worldviews, but also existing world-constructions—norms are merely viewed as “regulative” rather than “constitutive.”¹⁸ As a result, these approaches provide a poor framework for looking at how norms are not merely cognitive guides or moral commitments, but features of the action environment, and how changes in norms change both actors and their environments together. In other words, no conventional social ontology in IR can usefully treat norms both as moral constraints and as strategic instruments by their originators. And yet, norms clearly do both.

A pragmatist approach offers one possible solution to this puzzle, making up for the limits of existing approaches while retaining many of their insights. It does so in two ways. First, it suggests a way to view norms as playing a role in both deontic and instrumental action. On a pragmatist view, norms are not moral commitments held by some actor or another, in a mental sense, but bundles of practices. They may satisfy certain psychological impulses to altruism on the part of the organism, but they perform their regulative and constitutive functions by providing a material structure to social life, inhibiting some actions while enabling others, and therefore presenting actors with certain problems, ethical or otherwise, in need of overcoming.¹⁹ Viewed as such, norms establish an objective action environment of obstacles and resources, permitting such things as the instrumental use of arguments to talk opponents “into a corner” (Krebs and Jackson 2007) or granting access to collective action resources (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). Second, and as noted earlier, pragmatism has a distinct, reciprocal view of the relationship between means and ends, and therefore, proposes a dynamic interplay between the normative and the instrumental. In other words, pragmatism allows IR scholars to treat the mechanisms responsible for a change in the normative environment as chains of refinement and innovation in thought and action, and as a reciprocal process of change in norms-as-objective-structures and norms-as-moral-commitments.

This view of the interaction of norms and strategy has a number of empirical benefits. First, it provides an approach to examining the apparent deterioration or demise of particular norms, such as those prohibiting assassination or torture, which some IR scholars have attempted to understand via existing approaches, with their attendant limitations (McKeown 2009; Panke and Petersohn 2011). These cases often feature examples of intra-institutional politics wherein practitioners with different interests, ethical or otherwise, maneuver around or deploy as coercive instruments existing bureaucratic or legal conventions. A pragmatist analytical framework offers a means of describing the normative features of these

¹⁸The division of “regulative” and “constitutive,” originally proposed by Kant and addressed significantly by Searle, entered into parlance amongst constructivist scholars largely through Wendt’s (1999) use of it.

¹⁹This is not, it must be noted, a view unique to pragmatism. All practice theorists are likely to adopt a similar view. The particular benefits to a pragmatist solution to the norms-and-strategy puzzle come from a combination of this view and another, which I will discuss presently.

cases in terms of social fields and in terms of actors' ends, then of tracing how successive actions by actors served to transform both, with the ultimate, macro-level outcome being an apparent demise, but in fact a transformation, of the norm in question. Second, it locates a common thread linking constructivist discussions of norms and research on grand strategy. IR scholars studying grand strategy have certainly taken culture or ideology into account, but typically in static terms, as starting-points or sources of conflict (Posen and Ross 1996; Walt 2005) rather than as something implicated in the process of a changing relationship between means and ends (Neumann and Heikka 2005). Up until now, securitization theorists (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998) and other critical scholars (Der Derian 1989; Kratochwil 1991; Krebs and Jackson 2007) have comprised the bulk of those taking into account the dynamic and processual role of norms in constructing both the means and ends of national strategies. The pragmatist approach I discuss in this article offers a way to do this without explicitly taking on a critical agenda, while encouraging norms scholars to take better account of hegemonic orders and global systems—those grander things that many constructivists have, perhaps due to a liberal bias, been content to leave to neorealists and neoliberals.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, this article is in many ways a pragmatist critique of pragmatism in IR. IR scholars are *doing something* by focusing so much on the epistemological or methodological dimensions of pragmatism. The point I have tried to make is that there is a much broader horizon of pragmatist theory out there, and that engaging with that breadth will not only help clear up certain problematic misreadings and misapplications of pragmatist philosophy of science, but provide new possibilities for substantive theory. It is more than another middle ground, or worse yet, a grab-bag of conceptual “toolkits” justified by a misunderstood form of its own epistemology. The approach to pragmatist social theory I have proposed is based on the work of prominent contemporary pragmatists in sociology and social theory, most notably Hans Joas, and grounded in John Dewey's particular brand of thought. Other pragmatist thinkers provide alternatives. But, underlying them all is a commitment to an embodied, processual view of knowing and being. In other words, as a fairly coherent set of principles, pragmatism offers the foundations for a new movement in the study of international politics; indeed, such a movement has already begun.

Beyond simply tracing the contours of an existing pragmatist turn in the field, I have also proposed several new directions for substantive theory. As I have argued, pragmatist social theory provides a unique ontological framework well suited to getting past some of the dualisms that have characterized and constrained IR theory over the years. The co-determinism of agent and structure, the dialectic of realism and idealism, and the blurry borders between normative and instrumental action all dissolve, or at least become resolvable, in a pragmatist view. This offers IR scholars some promising new directions for theorizing, providing a vocabulary for talking about social construction, power, innovation, and transformation, without granting priority to one side of any of those three aforementioned dichotomies. It is surely not the only such vocabulary out there, but for a post-paradigmatic IR, it offers particularly flexible and distant horizons of conceptual possibility.

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