

THE FORUM

PRAGMATISM IN IR: THE PROSPECTS FOR SUBSTANTIVE THEORIZING

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The contributors to this forum all draw significantly from pragmatist philosophy and social theory for making sense of international politics. Collectively, we affirm the value of pragmatist work beyond metatheory and methodology, both politically and epistemically—that is, as both a moral project and an explanatory one. Indeed, we are especially united on the notion that pragmatism “bridges” the divide between these things, and several contributors focus their discussion on how. However, we differ in what exactly it means to offer a distinctly pragmatist explanation or a “substantive” pragmatist theory, as well as in how pragmatism allows us to navigate the analytical and ethical challenges of the field. Over ten years ago, an earlier forum in this journal helped establish that pragmatism had something to offer; with over a decade of scholarship and reflection since, we revisit and expand on the question of how to deliver on it.

Todos los colaboradores de este foro sacan ideas de manera significativa de la filosofía pragmatista y la teoría social a fin de encontrarle sentido a la política internacional. De manera colectiva, afirmamos el valor de la obra pragmatista más allá de la metateoría y la metodología, tanto política como epistémicamente, es decir, como un proyecto moral y uno explicativo. En efecto, nos une especialmente la noción de que el pragmatismo “acorta” la división entre estos conceptos, y varios colaboradores centran su debate en cómo. Pero diferimos en lo que significa exactamente ofrecer una explicación claramente pragmatista o una teoría pragmatista “sustancial,” así como en de qué manera el pragmatismo nos permite enfrentar los desafíos analíticos y éticos del campo. Hace más de diez años, un foro anterior de esta revista ayudó a establecer que el pragmatismo tenía algo que ofrecer; con más de una década de estudios y reflexión desde entonces, repasamos y ampliamos la cuestión de cómo cumplirlo.

Les contributeurs à cette tribune s’inspirent tous de la philosophie pragmatiste et de la théorie sociale pour comprendre la politique internationale. Nous affirmons collectivement que la valeur du travail pragmatiste va au-delà de la métathéorie et de la méthodologie, que ce soit d’un point de vue politique ou épistémique, c’est-à-dire à la fois en tant que projet moral et que projet explicatif. Nous sommes particulièrement unis sur l’idée que le pragmatisme « comble » le fossé entre ces as-

pects, et plusieurs des contributeurs axent leur discussion sur la manière dont il le fait. Mais nos opinions diffèrent sur ce que signifie exactement proposer une explication distinctement pragmatiste ou une théorie « substantiellement » pragmatiste, ainsi que sur la manière dont le pragmatisme nous permet de naviguer dans les défis analytiques et éthiques du domaine. Il y a plus de dix ans, une tribune précédente de cette revue avait contribué à établir que le pragmatisme avait quelque chose à offrir ; après plus d'une décennie de recherches et de réflexions, nous revisitons et développons la question en cherchant à savoir comment il pourrait le faire.

Keywords: pragmatism, international relations theory, explanation

Palabras clave: pragmatismo, teoría de relaciones internacionales, explicación

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To Be a Pragmatist in Explaining International Politics

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Over ten years after an earlier forum (Hellmann 2009b) addressed the insights pragmatist philosophy may offer to the study of international politics, the field has come to an interesting, if somewhat contradictory point. On the one hand, numerous pragmatist perspectives on metatheory and methodology have gained significant attention (see, e.g., Sil and Katzenstein 2010; Pratt 2016). On the other hand, only a small number of scholars have published explanations for specific episodes or outcomes that offer an explicitly “pragmatist” account of why or how (Schmidt 2014; Avant 2016; Pratt 2020). This raises questions that we hope to address in this forum, as we consider the last decade and confront the upcoming one: what would it mean to develop a pragmatist perspective on international politics? Is there a distinctly pragmatist way to conceive of what society is made of and how it works—what is often called “substantive” social theory or social ontology?

Pragmatism to me implies a set of dispositions for making sense of the social world, but a “pragmatist theory of society” does not sit the heart of my work. “Relational sociology” or “practice theory” are more coherent labels for what I do, because they denote a class of relatively comprehensive and systematic theories about the constituents of “the social,” of historical process and change, and of what it means to offer an explanation of those things. Yet beneath (some of) this relational sociology, which is increasingly popular among scholars of international politics (McCourt 2016), lies implicit and explicit commitments to philosophical pragmatism—explicit in the case of the work of Emirbayer (1997) and implicit in the case of Tilly (Gross 2010) or Goffman. Beyond them, social theorists without obvious pragmatist commitments, such as Bourdieu or Elias, are “pragmatist-adjacent,” and their insights on institutions and social arrangements can add breadth and scale to the broad claims about action and experience that make pragmatist philosophy relevant to sociological explanation in the first place.

The key pragmatist insight for me is that action is transactive: it is the unfolding entanglement of organisms adjusting their habits to the contingencies of

experience (see especially Dewey and Bentley 1949). In simpler terms, it means that action is what produces both *actors* and the *situations in which they act*. This is in notable contrast to the popular “structurationist” view, which some (Price 2008) claim is fundamental to constructivism, according to which actors and their situations are co-constituting but have some independent and basic qualities. For pragmatists, action is generative or “creative” (Joas 1996). Creativity in this sense is not something an actor possesses, in greater or lesser measure, but a general orientation toward creation—the constant production new formations of people and environments. This implies that human beings are not individuals, cognitively or even bodily, and that structures are not, as Schmidt explains in this forum, distinct entities. Put differently, action has structure, but not structures. Behavior does not (fully) originate in singular, self-aware minds, divisions between people and between things emerge out of living processes, and environment and person are not easily distinguished. Instead, these terms describe ways that action can take certain forms or encompass certain relations.

This may sound very abstract, and indeed, pragmatism operates at a higher level of abstraction than social or sociological theory. This has presented a persistent problem for scholars seeking to develop “pragmatist” explanations of specific historical events: the inability to go beyond the theory of action, and thus remaining restricted to explaining all social change via the same general model of inhibition and revision of habit (See, e.g., Gross 2009; Schmidt 2014; Pratt 2016). The approach they have taken has been to focus on interactions that can easily be construed as discrete problem-solving encounters with identifiable inputs and outputs (see, e.g., Avant 2016). Their work still has validity, but it does not offer a very sensitive set of methodological or conceptual tools. Hence, my opening claims that pragmatism implies a set of dispositions; it makes us sympathetic to some theories and unsympathetic to others, but it is not in itself social science.

However, the pragmatist view of action shows some social theories to be especially consistent with the way experience, mind, habit, and environment all co-evolve. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define agency as the outcome of unfolding relations rather than a property of individuals, while the “meso-level” approach to social mechanisms and social movements proposed by Tilly and Tarrow (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) seeks to avoid the sins of both individualism and structural or functional theory. The interplay of sociogenesis and psychogenesis in Elias (2000) is another attempt at this, albeit spanning more extreme spatial and temporal scales of world history to immediate effect. Goffman’s focus on performance and the “interaction frame” is sympathetic to pragmatism. While these names may be unfamiliar to most scholars of international politics, a growing number of relational and practice theorists in the field are drawing on them (Adler-Nissen 2013; Pouliot 2016; Adler 2019; Pratt 2020) to provide accounts of specific episodes, causal mechanisms, or domains of interest.

What these theories and models have in common is not (excepting Emirbayer and Mische 1998) an explicit commitment to the pragmatist view of action,¹ but rather to a vision of society consistent with it. In a sense, they pass the plausibility test, and this means they are suitable for explanation beyond the general observation that social change must be the result of problem-solving because all change is the result of problem-solving.

Where does this leave the positive contributions of pragmatism to social enquiry, particularly in the study of international politics? One is easy to identify: an empir-

¹ Giddens (1984) does provide a theory of action taken from Mead and very similar in form to Dewey’s, and his term “structuration” is familiar to scholars of international politics due to the influence of Wendt (1987). However, what Wendt calls “structuration” is primarily based on a reading of Bhaskar’s (1979) critical realism and does not actually draw much from Giddens’ approach. In any case, as Giddens goes on to position Mead’s theory of action within a duality of structure and agency, he deprives it of much of what makes the pragmatist view distinct.

ical sensitivity to problem solving and its self-revising role. Simply by accepting the pragmatist view of action, researchers are more likely to pay attention to the ways actors grapple with challenges and recreate both themselves and their worlds through discovering new ways of doing things. This matters a great deal to a field typically preoccupied with structures and recurrent patterns of interaction, where scholars still struggle to provide accounts of change that foreground agency. As Avant observes in this forum, it also uncovers the hidden gendered normativity at play in the epistemic values of the field. Being a pragmatist in explaining the outcomes of international affairs means, in this sense, focusing on human experiences and encounters in particular cases.

A more significant contribution is the possibility of theorizing the “genesis of values” (Joas 2000). The pragmatist view embeds changes in values, norms, and moral commitments within the action process, allowing them to evolve as part of the process of navigating the world and co-existing within it. For pragmatists (and as Cochran discusses in this forum), “valuation” is everywhere, making it possible to order the environment and find orientation within it. Pragmatism is perhaps unique among social theories for treating action, fundamentally, as teleological and for treating ends themselves as continually changing.² There is no contradiction to establishing both as simultaneously true, because on the pragmatist view, means and ends are reciprocal; the inhibition of habit (*qua* means) can be resolved both through changes in what we do and in what we want, to put it simply, and part of the process of action is reflecting on the possibility of (un)available ends. Hence, it is worth the conceptual labor of hybridizing other relational approaches with pragmatism—connecting it to better-known approaches and social theorists in the field, such as network theory, Bourdieu, or even Foucault and Butler, despite the problems of consistency and focus this raises.

However, by embedding value within the evolving action process, pragmatism makes the just, right, and good ontologically no different from any trivial value or end, because they all orient action in the same way. By contrast, treating the normative as transcendent as Kant does, or at least establishing value-oriented action as categorically different from ends-oriented action as Weber and Habermas do maintains value as something metaphysically or theologically special. This mitigates what Jackson (2015) has called the “fear of relativism.” I am not so sure this fear is unwarranted, however, as pragmatism may have relativistic implications, and this may be a good reason to look to other social and political theories. While one might respond that social scientists need not worry about moral philosophy and political theory, and should just develop the most compelling explanations of social outcomes, I question the value of explanations that preclude the possibility of judgment—it is not the scientists’ job to judge, but it is the scientists’ job to help others to usefully orient themselves toward the world, which includes moral and political evaluation. Regardless, maintaining the distinctiveness of values is deeply embedded within how scholars of international politics position the role of social science in moral and political thought, preserving value even as it is given historical context.

However, there are distinct normative arguments that pragmatists can make about ethics and international politics. Fears of relativism seem needlessly scholastic when by Cochran (1999; this forum) and Abraham and Abramson (2017) offer extensive reflections on the needs, relationships, and commitments of publics, and as Cochran, Jackson, and Farrell all argue in this forum, pragmatists have historically been active in the democratization of knowledge, working with activists and

² Other approaches attempt to approximate this, such as in the case of evolutionary game theory. However, pragmatism accomplishes this through philosophical definition rather than through breaking action down into smaller encounters and then iterating it.

policymakers to develop practical intellectual frameworks to assist them. Pragmatic critique offers a path forward from the frozen opposition of cosmopolitan and communitarian international ethics, through the production of publics, conceived of along Deweyan lines, as a substantive good. Simply put, the best pragmatist answer to concerns over the metaphysics of value is just to produce helpful ethics of care, education, inclusion, and deliberation. These ethics may be historicized and ontologized within particular attempts at problem-solving, but they do not really need to be defended as transcendent for us to discuss them.

What all of the above says is that while pragmatism may not be a complete “social theory,” it is a tremendously important and useful source of insight into how social life is possible and how social scientists can matter to politics—how social science can link up to ethical criticism and moral problem-solving. As a starting point, it empowers scholars to pursue a range of goods, from more experience-sensitive explanations to more practical engagements with political action. But, as Hellmann cautions here, it should not become another paradigmatic international relations (IR) “ism.”

Creativity and Its Consequences

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An important contribution of pragmatism to social scientific explanation is its emphasis on the creativity of action. While useful in and of itself, this concern with creativity has consequences that subvert much of the social theory that IR implicitly mobilizes. A deeper appreciation both of the role of creativity and the fact that it is not well accounted for by current approaches in IR could help spur a broader theoretical reorientation. Taking creativity seriously leads us to question the role of structure, emphasize close empirical work, and temper our expectations of theory.

Creativity is not high on the list of topics of analytical interest in IR. In historical terms, we are of course aware that things change: new technologies emerge, new strategies arise in conjunction with them, new institutions and norms replace older ones, and so on. Yet more often than not, the fact of the novel is taken for granted as the starting point for further analysis. For example, much more attention has been paid to the socialization of actors to norms or the diffusion of norms than theoretical explanations of how new norms arise in the first place.³ In an important work that is gaining traction in IR, the contemporary pragmatist Hans Joas (1996) argues that action is inherently creative: goals do not precede action but emerge in a contingent process as individuals recombine received habits and come to terms with concrete situations.⁴ This assertion that action is inherently creative has wide-ranging implications that go beyond understanding the development of new norms or practices in a more narrow sense. Specifically, it raises questions about the status of structure, a concept which scholars use to explain continuity in social and political life.

Despite continued critique, structure persists as an organizing principle of theorization in IR. This is likely due not only to the traditional prevalence of structural theorizing in the fields that IR draws on, such as sociology and economics, but also because of the particular way in which debate in the field evolved. The importance of structure for theorization, a central concern since the publication of Kenneth

³ Carpenter (2007) and Barnett (2009) are welcome exceptions.

⁴ In IR, see, for example, Avant (2020), Schmidt (2014), and Pratt (2016). Gadinger (2016) discusses the importance of creativity in Luc Boltanski's sociology.

Waltz's landmark *Theory of International Politics*. (Waltz 1979), was reinforced by the critique offered in Alexander Wendt's particular understanding of constructivism. The imprint of the debates that followed is still visible in terms of the broadly shared emphasis on structure.⁵

Scholars usually understand structures as functioning either as direct constraints on action or as defining the horizon of action through the various identities, orientations, dispositions, and resources that are available to agents. In contrast, as Pratt notes in this forum, pragmatism understands action as transactive, with actors embedded in and deeply constituted by a web of ongoing transactions with other actors and objects (Dewey 1988). Actors do not transact with broad, depersonalized structures that have uniform or determined effects, but with other actors, and these transactions "are always more or less creative" (Dépelteau 2015, 61). The key point in a relational perspective is that we simply *do not know* how actors will respond to one another in their multifarious, continuous, and creative transactions, a stance which questions structural explanations of continuity. Pragmatism therefore seeks to not so much reinterpret the relationship between agency and structure, but to move beyond this dualism altogether (Pratt 2016).

Frustration with the framing of action as taking place within "structures" or under "structural constraints" naturally goes beyond self-identified pragmatists.⁶ Practice theorists, who generally emphasize the continuously evolving nature and contestability of practices, have been primary movers on this point and would be natural allies in this endeavor. One obstacle to this in IR specifically, however, is the strongly Bourdieuan cast of the practice turn in the field.⁷ It is true that there are resources in Bourdieu for a very practically minded theory of action that is attentive to the improvisational virtuosity of practitioners—that is, readings that emphasize the power of agency. At the same time, however, there are substantial resources for a very structuralist reading of Bourdieu in which agency is severely constrained (King 2000). These divergent interpretations of Bourdieu have been faithfully replicated in IR scholarship (Hopf 2010; Cornut 2018). This effectively continues the structure–agency debate in IR using new vocabulary. According to King (2000), this treatment of Bourdieu is inevitable because these two parts of his theory are incompatible with one another. The relationally situated creativity evident in discussions of virtuosity, which maps nicely onto how pragmatists understand creativity, is simply incompatible with understandings of an objectified structure. In this sense, pragmatism is arguably closer to actor–network theory than other relational approaches on offer in IR given its strong concern with transactions.⁸

Pragmatism overcomes the apparent difficulty in the relationship between the individual and society through the multivalent nature of its central concept, habit (Dewey 1988). On the one hand, the concept of habit draws our attention to the commonsensical and unthought aspect of much human action—a common point in practice theoretical approaches. On the other hand, however, habits free up cognitive capacities for reflection and the opportunity to reconstitute action in novel and unpredictable ways. This understanding of action combines notions of stability and change rather than setting them in opposition to each other in

⁵Pratt (this forum), McCourt (2016). Wendt's (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics* was of course a tailored reply to Waltz's earlier work.

⁶Indeed, this can be traced back to Giddens (1984) and Onuf (1989); I would like to thank Patrick Thaddeus Jackson for pointing this out.

⁷On Bourdieu in IR, see Adler-Nissen (2013). For a discussion of practice in IR that emphasizes inspirations besides Bourdieu, see Bueger and Gadinger (2015).

⁸See McCourt (2016) for an overview of relationalism in IR; for more on actor–network theory in IR, see the 2013 forum in *International Political Sociology* 7(3): 332–49.

dualistic fashion as is the case when cast in terms of agency and structure (Jabko and Sheingate 2018). The relative stability of habitual action is not distinct from the processes that creatively recombine action through the ongoing transactions of actors. Habit therefore does not have a particular valence in determining action that is somehow constant across different contexts.

This multivalence of habit and its focus on transactions is unsettling to most IR scholars: what use is a concept that, as the saying goes, explains everything and therefore nothing? How do we explain “macro” phenomena in light of the decidedly “micro” focus of habit? That is, in addition to the substantive problem we have when we confront structures with creativity, there is a broader methodological one. The problem is with how we understand explanation and the relation of the scholar to the world. For pragmatists, a habit is not a thing that has determinate effects, but a way of talking about how human activity is organized at the level of the individual. Starting on the foundation of activity and transactions, the purpose of scholarly investigation is to trace the transactions between different actors and to reconstruct a contextualized understanding of a specific event or phenomenon. These explanations will necessarily be post hoc, partial, and perspective-laden (Jackson 2008), characteristics which place them firmly on the margins of mainstream theorizing and which help explain the relative scarcity of pragmatist work in IR today. The point is not to develop a time-invariant and historically transposable relation or to ascribe inherent potentialities to either agents or structures rooted in the notion of an observer-independent world. Among other problems, this would impose arbitrary limits on the creative potentialities of action *ex ante* that are then naturalized as objective. Even the notion of “field” in the practice literature, which a number of IR theorists have found useful, must be approached with caution. Fields as objects of analysis are not given but constructed in the act of inquiry in transactions between scholars and the world they are investigating (Dépelteau 2015).

The only way to proceed is cautiously through close empirical work: it is in investigating transactions among actors that we can develop understandings of phenomena, regardless of their scale. In contrast, the “macro” or structural is relatively uninteresting. If we look for broader patterns, we will find them, but actors do not transact with broad patterns, which in any case are reducible to individual transactions (Dépelteau 2015). The scale of a phenomenon we investigate is merely contingent on the relevant set of transactions under study and the question being asked. Following creativity analytically moves our attention to the scale of the individual and particularistic and so represents a fundamental challenge to structural explanations, mainstream or otherwise.

Insights like these on creativity have taken root in other subfields, including comparative political economy, American and comparative politics, public administration, and organization studies.⁹ These works are either unconcerned with structure or develop critiques of how it is usually understood. The irony here of course is that these fields are much more densely institutionalized than anything we confront as IR scholars. Yet despite this dense institutionalization, which in traditional parlance carries with it a whole set of structural constraints, these works highlight the capability of actors to creatively recombine and reconstitute action in a variety of specific contexts. If we dare take creativity seriously in IR as these scholars have in their respective fields, the consequence may be to leave behind much of what we think we know about international politics and how to think about it.

⁹ See, for example, Ansell and Boin (2019), Herrigel (2008), Berk, Galvan, and Hattam (2013), and Jabko and Sheingate (2018).

Mainstream Allergy to Pragmatism's Femininities?

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Pragmatic elements pervade IR arguments but are rarely their focus. As Friedrichs (2009, 645) noted ten years ago, “in science there is a paradoxical divide between positivist pretense and pragmatic practice.” Hellmann (2009b) argued that this, in part, results from the kinds of science that the field has come to value. I suggest here that there is a gender dimension to this story. Particularly, attributes reflecting stereotypes associated with masculinities: prioritizing autonomy, objectivity, parsimony, anti-sentimentality, and certainty hold prominence in social science arguments and are often deployed to degrade key pragmatic arguments that highlight human elements seen as more associated with femininities: connection, attention to context, the importance of meaning, and comfort with uncertainty (Duran 1993, 164). While pragmatism is attentive to orientations across the array of gendered experiences, its critics have often aimed at normatively feminine elements to dismiss its importance. Below I briefly review analyses sketching pragmatic attention to femininities. I then outline mainstream and critical challenges to pragmatic analyses that are rooted in socially constructed hierarchies associated with masculinities. I end by identifying different ways pragmatic attention to femininities may influence future thinking on global politics.

Femininities in Pragmatism

Although not gender exclusive or biologically determined, distinctions between femininities and masculinities shape perception of and responses to the world (Marks 2020; Wibben 2020), animate a wide swath of research on gender's implications (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982; Tickner 1997), and discipline men and women alike (Hooper 1999; R. W. Connell 2005). Pragmatic thought resists association with either gender stereotypes.¹⁰ Examples of its attention to femininities include its anti-Cartesian stance, which embraces the embodiment of human experience and mentality. It also establishes “the priority of human relations and actual experiences over abstract conceptual distinctions” (Seigfried in Duran 1993, 165) and sees humans as both shaped by meaningful relationships and interactions (Mead 1962(1934)) and exercising agency and creativity (via language and action) over how their selves develop (Duran 1993; Joas 1996, 161).

Generating meaning via shared understanding—what Epstein-Corbin calls feminine sentimental subjectivity—is also behind important pragmatic commitments. Sympathy, or “cultivated imagination for what men have in common and a rebellion at whatever unnecessarily divides them” (Dewey in Epstein-Corbin 2014) was key to Dewey's idea of “futurity”—whereby scholars avoid a clinical detachment dangerous to democracy and, instead, engage with those they study in a shared project of understanding aimed toward future circumstances. And, Addams' embrace of “the personal is social—the social personal” (Epstein-Corbin 2014, 229) generated her conception of democratic ethics. James refused arbitrary distinctions between reason and feeling, claiming that what one knows in one's heart interacts with one's conceptual knowledge to guide action toward a desired future (James 1909, 1920; Epstein-Corbin 2014).

¹⁰ This is less the case with Charles Pierce's writings and more with John Dewey's and Jane Addams (see also Cochran, this forum).

Pragmatists see inconsistencies in social situations as sources of both tragedy and creativity—and this leads them to be skeptical of simplification (which can impede creativity) and see uncertainty as ubiquitous. Assuming no objective reality to serve as an anchor, pragmatists such as Dewey and Addams judge knowledge by its practical consequences, shy away from grand theory, and reject the certainty that many social scientists crave (see also Cochran, this forum). A concern with instrumental knowledge commits pragmatists to experimentation as their primary way of knowing and leads them to be more comfortable with contingency—what some call “situated interference,” rather than universal knowledge statements (Aradau et al. 2015). The focus on human elements can push scholars to more productive engagement with politics (Farrell, this forum). These human elements include femininities as well as masculinities.

Allergies to Pragmatism’s Femininities

As Tickner (1997) argued decades ago, tropes associated with masculinity infuse standards of inference in IR: an emphasis on universal rules and parsimony; a preference for abstract reasoning; assumptions that humans have essential, autonomous, cores; equating power with domination; and an aversion to sentimentality. Social scientists have dismissed pragmatic arguments for failing to accord with these standards. Bertrand Russell, for instance, argued with Dewey that science requires “hard data,” broken into categories and scrutinized in more detail by trained scientists. Against this he contrasted what he called the “archaistic” pragmatists’ belief in a faculty of “intuition” possessed by “peasant women, dogs, and ichneumon wasps...” (Russell 1919, 10). In another volley, Russell dismissed the concept of “working” in pragmatic analysis as emotional and normative rather than clear and objective (Duran 1993).

Mainstream narratives of IR’s development have also overlooked pragmatic contributions. Despite focusing on international concerns, for instance, neither William James nor John Dewey feature in the development of IR theory (Schmidt 1998; Cochran 2012); nor do other pragmatists including Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Jane Addams—all of whom debated immigration, race, social equity (Addams 1912, Vitalis 2015; Collins 2011), and paths toward peace (Tickner and True 2018).

The behavioral revolution enshrined the positivist logic visible in Russell’s critique. The dominant history of IR as a struggle for survival in anarchy then separated serious issues to be handled in “masculine” terms from those softer worries about how people get along or lead a good life in a tamer domestic arena (Wight 1966; Cochran 2012). By claiming a separate sphere for IR and demarcating it in abstract terms as the universal quest by nations to survive, scholars enshrined norms associated with masculinities in IR—leading to the sidelining of pragmatist arguments without even acknowledging them.

Cochran (2012, 3) notes that constructivist arguments, which grew after the Cold War’s unexpected end, are more open to pragmatism. This openness to challenging “the anarchy problematique and the aims of prediction and control” is also reflective of qualities associated with femininities. It is thus perhaps not surprising that the growth of constructivism, combined with a vibrant literature on feminist approaches in IR, has gone hand in hand with a revival of interest in the pragmatic tradition (Collins 2011; Cochran 2012).

Mainstream engagement with pragmatic empirical work remains limited, however, and even constructivist and critical scholarship often seeks to avoid feminine taints of naivety, idealism, and sentimentality. Consider a recent symposium on an article (Avant 2016) offering a pragmatic analysis of how governance grew around private military and security companies (Patomäki et al. 2016). Though the article argued against mainstream theorists of hegemonic order, only constructivist

and critical scholars participated in the symposium and these contributors couched their critique in terms associated with masculinities. Why did the article look at problem-solving rather than domination, conflict, and power? Was not the analysis overstating the importance of these “soft” instruments?

Two Paths toward Pragmatic Resurgence

Pragmatism can be seen at once as a contender with other theories and as a philosophy that sees all theories as tools that may be useful for managing the world (Frankle and Weber 2012). These two projects offer different avenues for the feminine side of pragmatic arguments moving forward.

As contenders with other approaches, pragmatists seek space for logics associated with femininities. Tickner and True (2018) make this explicit in their description of peace activists gaining support for a version of international peace and security consistent with feminine norms. In their articulation of *pragmatic critique*, Schindler and Wille (2019) also spell out an approach incorporating sensibilities in line with femininities—respect for practical knowledge, concern with mistrust, and an aim toward collective empowerment—as well as acknowledging the different insights one gains from (arguably more masculine) *social critique*. By offering alternative visions of common concerns and attention to masculine and feminine orientations, these pragmatist scholars join with broader arguments focused on gender, race, and their interaction to implore that social science should take account of the embodied nature of human experience. They suggest exploring links between the empirical and the normative as well as how inquiry can expand horizons and generate problem-solving potential (Seigfried 1996, 2002; Collins 2011; Cochran 2012; Cochran this forum).

As a philosophy, pragmatism’s attention to femininities poses less of an alternative—and is perhaps less prone to becoming what Hellmann (this forum) calls another “ism” or to fall prey to producing binary social categories rather than appreciating the fluidity of social life (Berry 2016). Instead, it highlights feminine insights in ways that can push existing theories to greater usefulness. This approach may generate more sympathy to theories that are open to different (or more fluid) causal logics as Pratt (this forum) suggests, such as network theory, behavioral economics, and complexity theory (Kavalski 2007; Montgomery 2016; Victor, Montgomery, and Lubell 2017). It also might generate attention to femininities implicit or hidden in mainstream accounts—for instance the role of sentimental subjectivities in national attachments (Yuval-Davis 1997) that underlie many classical realist arguments. Rather than fighting to make space for explanation rooted in stereotypes associated with femininities, this approach points out the quiet and varied influences already present in existing theory. Like Pitkin’s (1984, 324) observation of femininity in Machiavelli’s “fortune,” that, she claimed, demonstrated a need for an autonomy “that acknowledges our necessary interdependence,” pragmatic philosophical approaches point out the fluidity of the human experience and its role in providing ironic logic, accounting for inconvenient facts, and capturing imaginations. In so doing, they push IR to be more fully human.

Whose Pragmatism? Which IR?

MOLLY COCHRAN

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I would like to see pragmatist IR engage more with valuation: the process of making determinations about what values should serve as the basis for action. Arguably,

Jane Addams is our best exemplar of how this can be done. Addams's method of pragmatic inquiry was forged in the practical work she performed in the Settlement House Movement as co-founder of Hull House and as International President of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and is distinctive for its relational epistemology and radical social ethics (Cochran 2017). Over the life of the League of Nation's minorities regime, concern for the sovereign integrity of the new and enlarged states of Central and Eastern Europe took precedence over minorities protection, a principle at the heart of the Minorities Treaties and entrusted to the League Council. At the center of WILPF's minorities activism was a will to test what consequences might follow for interwar indeterminacy from a re-balancing of these values away from the dominance of the culture of sovereign discourse and toward minority protection within international practice. WILPF was performing valuation in a moment when the practice of sovereignty was being renegotiated, identifying emergent principles of international practice—ethnic-national self-determination and a nascent transnational public interest in minority protection—and testing their fit with the empirical realities of minorities issues of the day. Yet what makes Addams an exemplar has detracted from her reputation as a philosopher and contributor to international thought to date: her activism.¹¹

As Addams (1907, 7) wrote, we are changed through the relational process as we seek “diversified human experience and resultant sympathy.” Addams believed that sympathetic knowledge acquired through mutual interaction among diverse groups in experimental settings like Hull House and WILPF's International Congresses and *Maison Internationale* was critical to *motivating* individuals to engage cooperative inquiry into social ills: that is, *helping publics find themselves*.¹² Both Addams and John Dewey theorized a prospective integrative value for international society—the idea of democracy as a “way of life,” a cultural process for releasing human capacity, requiring constant experimentation—to assist in adaptation to the turbulent international politics of the early twentieth century. In contrast to Dewey, however, Addams *lived* this experimental attitude through her activism both at Hull House and within WILPF, lending the social intelligence generated from it an immediate relational quality tested in experience.

In this contribution to the forum, I explore how Addams' activism and experimentalism connects to a broader pragmatist understanding of valuation and what pragmatists in IR can learn from her example—and what this means for substantive pragmatist theorizing.¹³ To do so, we must begin by asking how we understand what IR's substantive concerns are, and in relation to what variety of pragmatism.¹⁴

Initially, IR's pragmatist turn grew from scholarship largely concerned with methodological issues. Charles Peirce and his concept of abduction were important to these early contributions. American pragmatism coheres around a belief-doubt model of truth that is linked to human practices and an understanding of knowledge production as social, discursive activity. However, only Peirce tied this model of truth to a concept of reality: that “there are real things whose characters are both independent of our beliefs about them” and can be revealed through empirical inquiry (Peirce in Misak 2013, 51). Peirce prioritized the search for objectivity, and the regulative assumptions of abduction facilitated the generation and empirical

¹¹ In Misak's (2013, 142–43) intellectual history of American pragmatism, consideration of Addams's contribution is limited to four paragraphs. In a survey of sixty histories of international thought by Patricia Owens (2018, 477), Addams receives two mentions. Finding women in this field will require that we look in a “variety of locations,” including their practical work in the international arena says Owens (2018, 479). As Avant (this forum) suggests, Addams's work on social justice is also likely sidelined in IR by the “masculinist” inclination of mainstream scholarship in its concern for conflict under anarchy.

¹² On the role of publics in problem definition, see Jackson and Knight and Farrell in this volume.

¹³ See also Tickner and True (2018) on the emergence of women's peace pragmatism.

¹⁴ Misak (2013) traces two strains of pragmatism: analytic, of which Charles Peirce is a pioneer, and “non-analytic,” the progenitors of which are William James, Dewey, and Richard Rorty.

testing of hypotheses for discerning correct truths. Peirce's version of pragmatism thus has ready points of access for mainstream IR (Rytövuori-Apunen 2009, 644) as well as for those IR scholars who are attentive to social co-constitution and less theory-driven, but want to maintain a middle-ground scientific dialogue with neo-positivists.¹⁵

By contrast, while the pragmatism of Dewey and Addams has social scientific aspirations, their idea of social science lacks equivalent access points for neo-positivists. Social scientific inquiry is, first and foremost, inquiry into the context of a problematic situation characterized by indeterminacy such that usual habits of a social practice have come unmoored. Dewey's theory of inquiry, which Addams adopted, takes the best from a general method of science—problem definition, hypothesis generation and testing, and the idea of fallibilism—and puts it to work in human experience. He also holds a deep appreciation for the method's democratic features, i.e., openness, inclusivity, and freedom to critically engage in the scientific enterprise. However, rather than seek generalizable, objective truths, the orientation of this lineage of pragmatism is toward cultural criticism, transformation, and activism with corresponding methodological and ethical implications. Methodologically, experimentation with prospective adaptations to changing environments, needs, and interests must connect with human purposes. Dewey once complained that the social facts collected by social scientists “are not social facts at all” independent of the ends attached to human action. Thus, studying social values in conflict requires joining normative and empirical inquiry in a process that implies intervention. Ethically, in going about their research, inquirers bear a responsibility to engage societal problems and seek their melioration with a commitment to the democratic virtues of scientific method such that the chances for “collective intelligence operating in cooperative action” is optimized (Dewey 1939, 188).

An emerging IR scholarship draws upon a Deweyan lineage of pragmatism. Pragmatic constructivist ethics have been invoked in examining global problematic situations such as atrocity crimes or considering global change and its direction (Hoffman 2009; Ralph 2018). Schindler and Wille (2019) have set out a typology of two types of critical practice theory, which opposes “pragmatic” and Bourdieusian forms of critique.¹⁶ What sets this pragmatist IR apart is its concern for human action in the context of transnational problematic situations and the *value of the beliefs acted upon* to resolve indeterminacy. “Value” for Dewey is understood to be a “function of experience”¹⁷, suffused with both the empirical conditions of a lived environment and normative aspirations.

However, a second methodological implication for Dewey and Addams has yet to receive focused attention. In drawing upon this variety of pragmatism, Matthew Hoffmann comes close when he asks: “[w]hat does it mean to follow an ethics of good process? Are constructivists ultimately doomed to moral relativism because their theory lacks a substantive moral core” (Hoffmann 2009, 245)? Hoffmann concludes that all pragmatic constructivism should provide are “empirically informed accounts of social process” that assist in making judgments, but with nothing more substantive behind the belief of the inquirer than the epistemic values of humility and self-reflection. Yes, the method of pragmatic inquiry assists in the kind of empirical science Hoffmann describes; but for Addams and Dewey, it cannot rest here. A method of valuation must be part and parcel of pragmatic inquiry. Valuation is the process of discovering what makes for a unified or re-unified situation in which doubt is resolved within a practice. Valuation is what is on offer when neither relativism nor moral absolutes will do.

¹⁵ One difference between this forum and the 2009 *ISR* forum on pragmatism is that the authors contributing here are in the main situated in the lineage of pragmatism described below.

¹⁶ See also Abraham and Abramson (2017) and Dancy (2016) on the pragmatic critique of practices.

¹⁷ Gouinlock (1972, 125).

Valuation is Dewey's answer to a question posed by Kant that all pragmatists have grappled with, according to Misak (2013, xi): what standards of truth and value are available in relation to human practices such that we would have grounds to continue in them? Peirce's response was to accept Kant's regulative assumptions, asserting that the true belief is one that would still be true after all possible evidence and argument were considered (Misak 2013, 133). For Dewey (1911, 66), however, "the tests of social use" within a culture is the nearest measure of objective truth; the status of any hypothesis is a matter of interpretation and "socially determined." Any working hypothesis for transforming a stuck social practice has both practical and ethical dimensions, because responses to a problem context involve human choice and action. Thus, pragmatic inquiry, in its effort to "direct [humanity's] own fate by use of its best tool—intelligence as a method of action" (Dewey 1911, 66)—examines the circumstances in which social values are constructed as facts with cultural use and discerns the relative value of those habits and their associated meanings.

Valuation examines our reasoning about value conflicts when human practices become intractable. Dewey extends the general method of science to discernments about the authority of beliefs acted upon within a practice. Thus, valuation too is an experimental process of generating working hypotheses in relation to a social value, exploring its empirical and normative implications as a way of living within a social practice, and putting the working hypothesis out there into experience, to see if it performs as expected or not. For Misak (2013, 135), one of Dewey's most important contributions to philosophy is his insistence that it is only through inquiry that we come to know what we value and what is valuable within that. Where impasses are especially acute or "wicked" (Cochran 2013, 172–75)—where even shared problem definition has become impossible and publics are effectively eclipsed—valuation may become speculative and creative, positing a new integrative concept to be tried and judged by its capacity to expand value horizons such that cooperative problem-solving can resume again. Either way, the validity of a belief is derived through inquiry that tests its practical *and normative* implications for our social institutions.

All this returns us to my example above. Jane Addams and the women of WILPF are standard-bearers for a new and enlarged appreciation of the role of activism within social intelligence as it is applied to valuation. From its Geneva headquarters, and across a wide set of issues, WILPF asked what might result if publicness was invoked as a principle of global governance, testing if there was value to be found in an idea of the League as guardian of a transnational public interest as well as state interest. My research into WILPF's lobbying of the League shows that the substance of pragmatist activism is, largely, a process of valuation. Perhaps unique among social science theories, pragmatism offers both the vocabulary to recognize this and to use it as a basis for public action. As such, pragmatism may help realize the frequently avowed interest of IR to have a positive impact on human relations, a goal hamstrung by the positivist pretense of a strict normative/empirical divide.

Pragmatism and Academic Responsibility

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For pragmatists, the process of systematic inquiry—"science" in a broad sense (Dewey (1991 (1938))¹⁸)—cannot be ultimately separated from the concrete ends-in-view that call for inquiry in the first place. Even if it takes place in a scholarly,

¹⁸The pragmatist account of "scientific inquiry" is considerably broader than the narrowly neopositivist construal often on display in Anglophone IR discussions, and is in many ways reminiscent of how Max Weber (1994) discusses "science" (*Wissenschaft*) in his celebrated "vocation" lectures.

academic setting, what goes on in scientific pursuits is not different in kind from what goes on in everyday life, as people struggle to make sense of their situations and solve practical problems. John Dewey (1985a, 251, emphasis added) comments that “[s]cientific method represents *the same sort of thing* carried on with greater elaborateness, by means especially of instruments and apparatus devised for the purpose and of mathematical calculations.” The key feature of science, for pragmatists, is thus a fallibilist, reflective attitude that can be found both among professional academic researchers and among successful practitioners.

This continuity of scientific thinking with thinking in general might be taken to suggest that we should “include others outside the academy in the process of knowledge production” (Abraham and Abramson 2017, 41) in order to produce the best knowledge that we can. Certainly pragmatists like Jane Addams took this approach, seeking to learn from those with whom she worked in ways that radically democratized the process of knowledge production.¹⁹ Dewey himself even appears to say as much in an oft-quoted observation about expertise: “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied” (Dewey 1985b, 364). But it would be too hasty to conclude from Dewey’s analysis that the boundaries between the academy—a distinct space dedicated to fostering systematic, scientific inquiry—and everyday practical life should be weakened or abolished. Indeed, the very terms of Dewey’s analogy require a separation between the “expert shoemaker” and the shoe wearer; eliminate the difference and the person with knowledge of how to fix the problem is merely another voice in a cacophony of opinions.

This presents a challenge. Pragmatists have demonstrated that any attempt to assert a single, universal set of epistemic standards is foredoomed to failure, given the actual variety of ways that people produce knowledge. However, in an era in which the actuality of climate change and the efficacy of mask-wearing for preventing the spread of airborne viruses (to name only two examples) have become, at least in some countries, partisan political footballs rather than a factual input to politics, we need to carefully consider how academics should respond. Without the distinction between knowledge that has been evaluated according to a relatively detached set of epistemic standards—knowledge that is some sense *valid*—and the working, concrete knowledge operative in everyday activities, it is easy to slip into the epistemic anarchy of a “post-truth” world (Sismondo 2017). Here, Dewey can be a helpful guide, as for him, involving people outside of the academy in the process of knowledge production cannot erode the distinctive role that scholars play in that process.

Dewey’s discussion of the relationship between knowledge and politics in *The Public and its Problems* specifies how he conceptualizes that distinctive role. The challenges of politics are “a practical problem of human beings living in association with one another” (Dewey 1985b, 255) and Dewey’s emphasis is on the *public* nature of those problems. The public, for Dewey, “consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (Dewey 1985b, 245). Those indirect consequences are what call for regulation, by producing a public composed of people who are being affected by something they had no part in bringing about. For instance, Dewey suggests that solutions to problems like the indirect effects of railroads and roads can only be ascertained in practice, experimentally, as we see what works and what does not (Dewey 1985b, 273). There is no *ex ante* solution to an actual problem.

The issue, though, is that the factual *existence* of a public is not always enough to actually *produce* that public in a politically relevant way.

[T]he machine age has so enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified and complicated the scope of the indirect consequences, has formed such immense and consolidated unions in action, on an impersonal rather than a community basis, that the

¹⁹ On Addams, see Molly Cochran’s contribution to this Forum.

resultant public cannot identify and distinguish itself. And this discovery is obviously an antecedent condition of any effective organization on its part. (Dewey 1985b, 314)

This in turn sets up what Dewey calls the “prime difficulty ... of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests” (Dewey 1985b, 327). If a public is a constellation of people united by their commonly being subject to a set of effects, whether they realize it or not, then the common interest that they have is in regulating those effects, not in constituting themselves as a public. But to be effective, the relevant people need to recognize that they *do in fact constitute a public*.

Dewey has great confidence in the capacity of artists to bring about this recognition (Dewey 1985b, 350). Given the technical complexity of life in industrialized societies, however, he suggests a role for other kinds of detached observers who could trace out the complex consequences of various configurations of action, and thus generate awareness of a need to regulate them. Such observations would need a standard of validity that could not be reduced to solving a problem that *the observers* were facing; otherwise publics would be produced as a byproduct of other processes and as a solution to other problems, and not because the members of that public themselves were facing problems. Dewey’s answer to this conundrum presumes that people are engaged in “continuous inquiry” (Dewey 1985b, 346) so that they will recognize valid arguments about indirect consequences when they hear them, but even he admits that “[i]nquiry, indeed, is a work which devolves upon experts” (Dewey 1985b, 365) and not on every person equally, even in a democracy.

Here the distinctive role for scholars re-emerges. Dewey calls that role “abstraction,” which “means that something has been released from one experience for transfer to another... [T]he farther away it is from anything experienced in its concreteness, the better fitted it is to deal with any one of the indefinite variety of things that may later present themselves” (Dewey 1978, 166). While abstraction does not yield knowledge in any way *more valid* than that possessed by a practitioner, it is *more useful* for addressing certain kinds of problems, particularly problems involving “the novel and variable” (Dewey 1985a, 274). In particular, abstract knowledge can serve as a basis on which to demonstrate the existence of a novel public, showing that a group of people are affected by a set of consequences that had not previously been in evidence. For example, when climate scientists connect changing weather patterns and crop yields to alterations of the planetary climate, they show that climate change makes us all into one public with respect to this issue.

In order to ground a Deweyian public, we need knowledge connecting actions to outcomes that cannot be generated from *within* the sphere of politics, where the pursuit of power is the continual means. A politician who simply announced a cause or produced their own forecast of outcomes would, and quite rightly, be quickly accused of inventing something that served their own interests rather than the ends explicitly promulgated. To put this a little differently, knowledge claims cannot be *political claims*, lest they lose any of their potential influence in politics by becoming unable to ground a Deweyian public.

The politics of climate change provides a striking example. Precisely because climate science has participated in political controversies for decades (Hart and Victor 1993), it has not been able to play that outside-of-politics role that might lead politicians to enact policies intended to comprehensively address the ways that human action is affecting the planet on a geological scale. In principle these effects should point to a global public with an interest in addressing climate change; in practice, the hybrid IPCC (Compagnon and Bernstein 2017, 813) produces reports that lack the compelling urgency of a purely scholarly voice. The lack of separation between abstract academic knowledge and other considerations leads to a situation in which, so to speak, the shoemaker’s clients are debating among themselves and with the shoemaker about how to fix their shoes—and some frustrated individuals start to follow someone who claims that there is no shoe problem that requires any kind of sacrifice.

This is not to say that scholarly consensus *necessarily* brings about a Deweyian public! The scholarly demonstration that a public exists is far from the practical constitution of that public as a political force. Some kind of bridging of the scholarly and activist worlds is required. Dialogues between scholars and practitioners, and an increased emphasis on the “usefulness” of scholarship, might be part of the solution, as Henry Farrell argues in his contribution to this Forum. But given the imbalance of resources between the academic and practitioner worlds, I worry that academic scholarship that tries too hard to be “useful” will simply get sucked back into the partisan fray, taking sides where it should instead be providing the parametric basis on which political controversies can play out. This is a perennial challenge in international studies, perhaps especially in the United States, where the aspiration to be useful to policymakers has all too often resulted in scholarship that reproduces the operative assumptions of US foreign policy (Oren 2002).

The pragmatist justification for provisionally separating out the academy is the contribution to ongoing practical activity afforded by lifting one’s eyes away from immediate circumstances in order to articulate a more systematic view. Scholarly knowledge of this sort does not resolve political problems so much as *disclose* problems and *produce* the relevant public with an interest in addressing them. Political activity is thus indirectly shaped by science rather than controlled by it. When we work to produce knowledge that conforms to the standards of scholarly inquiry, separated out from the flow of politics, we are—knowingly or not—producing the abstract conceptual tools that future action might depend on. As *scholars*, this is our responsibility: to produce the best, most defensible knowledge-claims that we can produce. Part of doing that, in turn, means defending and preserving the autonomy of the academic space, precisely because the validity of scholarly claims depends on their *not* being reducible to political interests of various kinds.

In order for scholarly knowledge to play this role, it has to escape the bounds of the academy and actually function as an operative basis for constituting a public. We ourselves might encourage this by acting as the public mouthpieces for our own scholarly results, but comparatively few academics are actually good at playing that public intellectual role. But what we *can* do, and what most of us do much of the time, is to *teach*: to bring students into dialogical encounters with ideas and articulations that can help them become more reflective and systematic in the ways that they produce and evaluate knowledge-claims. Dewey argued that the whole purpose of education was to foster scientific inquiry in the broad sense. So perhaps our best contribution as academics is not as issue-area experts, or as scholar-activists, but as teachers. Consider public intellectuals like Greta Thunberg, who use climate science to constitute a public in ways that have thus far largely eluded scholars *per se*. In this way Thunberg might be thought of as a student of the scholarship we produce, taking our abstractions into the world and producing a movement.

Useful for What and Useful to Whom? IR and Its Public

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Even though pragmatism is primarily concerned with usefulness, it has not really engaged in broader debates about the usefulness of IR. We seek to remedy this,

arguing that behind the question of usefulness there lies a further pair of questions: useful how and useful to whom (Farrell and Finnemore 2009). This helps us see how current exchanges of polemics conceal a great deal of implicit agreement over how IR ought to be useful and whom it ought to be useful to, and foreclose other attractive understandings of usefulness.

The failure of pragmatists to engage with questions of how IR scholarship should be useful is a missed opportunity. Pragmatism, as developed by John Dewey, implies a radically democratic politics (Knight and Johnson 2011), which seeks to be useful to the public, through providing relevant knowledge about the complex aspects of international politics that create problems in their everyday lives.

Scholarly Disagreements over Usefulness

The last two decades have seen dueling polemics between scholars who believe that IR scholarship is valuable when it advises policymakers, and scholars who emphasize scientific rigor. Many—especially realists—complain of the growing gap between policymakers and IR scholars, arguing that much contemporary scholarship is of dubious value because it focuses on narrow hypothesis testing rather than grand theory building, using rebarbative statistical techniques that render their findings incomprehensible to policymakers (Lepgold 1998; Nye 2008; Mearsheimer and Walt 2013; Desch 2019). Others retort that making IR more policy relevant will require more rigorous theory and empirical work (Frieden and Lake 2005). They furthermore complain that traditional IR debates are less aimed at confronting graspable problems than perpetuating schisms between rival theoretical cults, each with its own zealous sectaries and obscurantist theology (Lake 2011, 2013).

Sharp language conceals substantial agreement. All sides agree that IR ought to be useful. For example, Lake (2011, 2013) grounds his call for a more rigorous approach to IR theory in the argument that international politics is simply too important to get wrong. Fazal (2016) argues that scholars who use quantitative methods produce policy-relevant research. Scholars furthermore largely agree over whom IR ought to be useful to—elite decision-makers, especially in the United States.

Pragmatism and Usefulness

Questions of usefulness are at the heart of pragmatist approaches to social scientific inquiry. Classical pragmatists such as William James argued that concepts or ideas should be evaluated in terms of their “cash value,” or practical benefits. However, there has been no visible intersection between IR pragmatist scholarship and the broader disciplinary debate over whether IR is useful and how.

This is because pragmatist scholars have mostly focused on other questions than usefulness, enquiring into epistemology (Friedrichs 2009; Jackson 2009; Franke and Weber 2012) and methodology (Hellmann 2009b; Sil and Katzenstein 2010). Cochran (2012, 10) says that “[t]he majority of interventions on pragmatic themes, and the ones that resonate most in the discipline today, are those that aim to shed new light on the epistemological and methodological debates in which IR has been caught up since the 1970s.” In Sil’s (2009, 648) uncomplimentary description, “what pragmatists have to say rarely seems intelligible, let alone relevant, to most mainstream IR scholars.”

A more recent approach employs pragmatism as explanation, arguing that real-world actors seek to solve problems in a pragmatist fashion (Schmidt 2014; Avant 2016). This literature provides one answer to the question of usefulness, by demonstrating how a pragmatist logic animates real-world problem solving, but it does not explicitly draw out lessons for how IR scholars should think of themselves and their work.

These various approaches provide valuable insights; but they do not explicitly engage with the question of whom IR ought to be useful to, and how it ought to be useful. Either they are concerned with broad methodological or epistemological questions or with inquiring into how pragmatist logics of action might help make sense of specific empirical situations.

A Public-Oriented Pragmatism

Joining pragmatism to broader debates about the usefulness of IR would help both. Pragmatists need to think more clearly about the practical value of their own work, for other people in the discipline, and (far more importantly) for people in the world. Addressing the broader question of how IR can be useful, and whom it ought to be useful to would help to ground their own argument and practice, while helping reorient mainstream scholarship from using terms like “usefulness” and “relevance” as cudgels to belabor opponents in intradisciplinary disputes to investigating what they really involve and what kind of work would best achieve them.

Specifically, pragmatism provides a plausible alternative understanding of who IR scholarship ought to be helpful to, and how it may be helpful. Our bet, obviously, is that IR scholarship contains much useful knowledge but could stand to be pointed away from internal feuding and toward visible public needs.

Space constraints prevent us from fully setting out this alternative understanding (we sketch it in greater detail in [Farrell and Knight 2019a](#)). Like Jackson in this forum, we build on Dewey to suggest that social scientists have a specific vocation—of elucidating complex problems that are otherwise likely to evade the understanding of ordinary people, and using this research to inform publics. Social scientists can help bring publics into being—for Dewey, a democratic public is a self-aware group who understand that they have a problem in common and can work in concert to solve it. As state institutions can serve as instrumentalities for publics, policy advice is part of the vocation of the IR scholar, but it is not the whole.

This has consequences for IR that neither we elsewhere nor Jackson here specifically address. For example, pragmatist IR scholars might not begin by orienting themselves toward specific national entities. If publics form around problems, then as problems become cross-national (and in many cases global), so too does the public toward which scholars ought to orient themselves. Dewey says that the current nation state system may be democratically obsolescent—reflecting the needs of a previous era, and impeding the formation and successful action of publics rather than enabling them. A pragmatist IR would hence not be an American, or Chinese, or Nigerian IR, oriented toward policymakers or citizens in a particular state. Instead, it would start with the relevant problems, and work up from them to an analysis of the potential public implicated by the problem, and the best ways of resolving it, given available means. This would not be a utopian project that ignored the current importance of nation states and institutional arrangements. Nor, however, would it treat those states and arrangements as setting ineluctable bounds. Cochran’s description in this forum of Jane Addams’ work provides a practical example, while [Addams \(2007\)](#) herself argued that a “new internationalism” could be grounded in the experience of immigrants.

This understanding of pragmatism and IR builds on others. [Cochran \(2012\)](#) notes that IR was once less professionalized and more permeable to non-scholars. [Widmaier \(2004\)](#) urges “a more explicit engagement with public concerns,” offering both Dewey and John Kenneth Galbraith as examples of how pragmatic thinkers can engage with a broader audience, while Jonathan [Isacoff \(2015, 27\)](#) claims both that “most, if not all paradigms and models in IR have become academic exercises that are effectively irrelevant to the real world of human experience” and that Dewey orients IR scholarship toward the public good. [Abraham and Abramson \(2017\)](#) similarly build on Dewey to argue that the vocation of pragmatist

IR is tied “to a specific political project: helping to constitute the public in an age of planetary governance.” As [Isacoff \(2015\)](#) and [Abraham and Abramson \(2017\)](#) argue, IR pragmatism demands a clear orientation toward the “concrete human woes” of the public and a concerted systematic scholarly effort to uncover hidden interdependencies and hence help constitute informed international publics.

As Jackson suggests (in this forum), public-oriented pragmatist IR will have to speak—and more importantly listen—to a broader public. The discipline of IR was more publicly oriented in the past ([Bessner and Wertheim 2017](#)), with institutions intended to foster regular contact between scholars and ordinary citizens. New technologies also provide opportunities that scholars are taking advantage of. Developing better institutions for a public-oriented discipline present a crucial challenge.

Existing debates within IR focus on the question of usefulness or relevance—but systematically fail even to acknowledge pragmatism’s work on these concepts. Pragmatists do not typically concern themselves with debates about the usefulness of IR as a field. However, their arguments point to an important alternative understanding of IR as a public-oriented approach that starts with international problems rather than taking nation states as a given. We invite others to help develop this understanding.

Horizons of Pragmatist Theorizing in “Inter-national” Relations

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What does it mean to practice IR if one subscribes to pragmatism as a theory of thought and action? In an earlier “Forum” of this journal, I have proposed to conceive of pragmatism as a tradition of thought in these terms, highlighting pragmatism’s attractive “anti-istic” disposition” in an IR field that has a peculiar history of “ismerizing” fairly heterogeneous traditions of thought into tool boxes for IR-typical paradigmatic treatments ([Hellmann 2009a](#), 638–39 and [Hellmann 2020a](#), 1286–90 for illustrations). As this new “Forum” indicates views as to what pragmatism might entail in concrete IR research practice have evolved significantly over the past decade as pragmatism has received much wider attention in IR. Fortunately, IR’s past paradigmatic habits have not significantly infected pragmatist-inspired IR research—such as earlier calls from self-identifying “liberals” and “constructivists” that “realists” should more clearly specify “logically coherent” and “distinct” paradigmatic core assumptions, in order to render a more “rigorously defined” realist paradigm capable of being submitted to “testing” ([Legro and Moravcsik 1999](#), 9–25). Still, in many quarters, IR “theory” continues to be conceived not only as an antonym to “empirical,” but also as something that can be related to empirical data in a fashion that helps to verify the theory. Such research practices remind us of old paradigmatic battles in IR.

To be sure, “pragmatism” is an “ism.” But even the very history of how the concept was “invented” (by William James in 1898) and contested right from the start (by Charles Sanders Peirce, to whom James had explicitly credited its origins) shows that all such “isms” easily fall prey to misrepresentation via simplification.²⁰ Iver Neumann may be going a bit too far when he says that any “-ism” suffix turns an adjective into something approaching “an ideological phenomenon” ([Neumann 2019](#), 77). However, he points in the right direction because “isms” are meant to

²⁰ In 1905, Peirce coined the word “pragmaticism” in order to distance himself from James’ “pragmatism,” adding that it was “ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers” ([Peirce 1934\(1905\)](#), P 5.414).

simplify and concentrate on a few similarities of authors A, B, and C, which can be subsumed under a unifying label.

To the extent that one accepts these drawbacks, I read the early pragmatists (Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead) as well as contemporary authors counting themselves in this tradition (such as Richard Rorty (1998) or Robert Brandom (2011)) as philosophers and social theorists who easily dispensed with the notion of “substantive theory” (see Pratt in this “Forum”) because they always thought that the concomitant correspondence theory of truth was misconstruing how we ought to think about social relations.²¹ Speaking of “substantive theory” mobilizes what Robert Brandom recently called “the vocabulary of causes” (in contrast to the “vocabulary of vocabularies” (Brandom 2020, 1–4)). “Being a pragmatist in explaining international politics” (to use Simon Frankel Pratt’s formulations) in this sense seems to assume that we need some “substantive theory” of “what society is made of and how it works” while expressing the disappointment that no such “theory” can be fashioned.

All pragmatists would accept this conclusion. Yet they would also insist that the very premise on which it is implicitly based is still the old misleading idea in the “metavocabulary of representation” that one can submit “the causal vocabulary of modern physics and the intentional vocabulary of everyday life” (Brandom 2020, 4) to the same type of “theoretical” treatment, i.e., “scientific generalization” via “simplification” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 42–46). In doing so the scientific generalizers in IR continue to miss one of the most attractive aspects of pragmatism as a theory of thought and action—i.e., the fact that pragmatism frees the mind from the representationalist strictures of “scientific inference” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 75–114).²² Antirepresentationalist pragmatists tell fellow citizens and fellow scholars that the purpose of social inquiry is badly framed if it is tasked to understand “social behavior via scientific methods” (Elman, Gerring, and Mahoney 2020, 7). Human beings do not “behave,” they act—or, more precisely, they *interact socially* where “the crucial ‘social’ element” highlights that “*actions of agents are meaningfully oriented toward each other*” (Kratochwil 2010, 447, emphasis in original). The “scientific methods” applied in the natural sciences must fail in capturing social interaction because the “intentional vocabulary” of social interaction and problem-solving centers on ends rather than causes. When we say that action is a teleological concept, this essentially means that human beings in acting are motivated by reasons and oriented toward some goal. We act “‘in order to’ reach a desired end” (Kratochwil 2019). The “factual” framed in the vocabulary of causes, therefore, has to be combined *by necessity* with the “normative” in the intentional vocabulary.

Dewey put it differently when he wrote that “(a)n empiricism which is content with repeating facts already past has no place for possibility and liberty.” In doing so he not only rejected “historical empiricism” (Dewey 1931, 24) as it became even radicalized shortly afterward in Carl Gustav Hempel’s plea to recognize “the theoretical function of general laws in scientific historical research” (Hempel 1942, 35). Dewey was also rejecting the very distinction between “empirical” and “normative,” i.e., a notion of “empirical” as somehow mirroring “closed” “facts” opposite to an understanding of “normative,” which emphasizes the openness of a thoroughly value-laden future. In contrast, in Dewey’s version of pragmatism “general ideas” (or

²¹To speak of “substantive theory” or “substantive social theory” in any systematic sense is not very common in philosophy. To the extent that it is, it is usually associated with correspondence theories of truth and epistemologies emphasizing a strong distinction between mind and reality, i.e., the opposite of what pragmatists traditionally stand for. See for instance Sher (2016) and Runciman (1989).

²²For an early summary of Rorty’s critique of representationalism, see Rorty (1991, 1–17). An excellent and timely summary his notion of “antirepresentationalism” as well as Brandom’s related notion of “global expressivism” is provided in Brandom’s (2020) online seminar “Two Forms of Contemporary Antirepresentationalism: Pragmatism and Expressivism.” [http://www.pitt.edu/~rbrandom/Courses/Antirepresentationalism%20\(2020\)/AR%202020%20a.html](http://www.pitt.edu/~rbrandom/Courses/Antirepresentationalism%20(2020)/AR%202020%20a.html).

concepts) do not simply serve the function of “reporting and registering past experiences,” but, more importantly, form “the bases for organizing future observations and experiences” (Dewey 1931, 24–25).

This is another way of saying that to speak of “empirical” work in opposition to normative, future-oriented theorizing draws a false (quite Un-Deweyan) distinction and remains one-sidedly fixated on a past that presumably needs to be dissected in terms of “systematicity” and “non-systematicity” in order to achieve “representativeness” for purposes of scientific generalization (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 43–55, 141–43). If we follow Dewey’s advice we would simply drop the misleading dualism of empiricism versus normativism. Similarly, we would erase the very notion of a “substantive theory” from our vocabulary because there is no meaningful distinction to be drawn to something possibly called “non-substantive” theory. To the extent that “substantive” means “of or relating to the real nature or essential elements of something,”²³ the formula of a “substantive theory” simply perpetuates the misleading representationalist idea “that human beings must humble themselves before something non-human, whether the Will of God or the Intrinsic Nature of Reality” (Rorty 1999, 7). Therefore, pragmatists do not lag behind in IR scholarship if they do not bother about substantive theory. If anything, they are “ahead” because they have long ago gotten rid of the misguided representationalist idea that “laws” or meaningful if-then regularities can be “discovered” in international politics as social interaction.

Since there is no representationalist telos to pursue the positive answer to what pragmatist theorizing entails remains what it has been from the early days of pragmatism. From Dewey onward all the way to the contemporary work of Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom theorizing for pragmatists has been “inquiry.” To the extent that the “ism” needed to be rephrased in terms of a “distinct” theory, the basic answer has always been that pragmatism is a “theory of action” and a “theory of thought” at the same time. Inquiry applies in similar fashion in daily life (when we solve what Dewey called everyday “problematic situations” (Dewey 1991(1938), 107–8)) as it does in scholarly research (when we solve “theoretical problems”).²⁴ Practical problems need to be solved in daily “praxis” *here and now* in order to enable us to “go on” (Kratochwil 2018, 416–17). Theoretical problems (for instance in the field of international politics) are not only *posed* at a temporal and spatial distance from international political “praxis.” They can also only be solved via “social inquiry” with the luxury of deadline-ignorant ivory-tower reflection (Dewey 1991(1938), 487–512).

To theorize IR, then, is a form of making sense. It is synonymous with describing (or, for that matter, explaining) how the things we observe in international politics may hang together²⁵ conceptually or causally. Describing or redescribing²⁶ what George Herbert Mead refers to as an “emergent” present (Mead 1962(1934)) is also based on two dimensions in time: backward-looking learning from experience and forward-looking projections or imaginations. In both temporal dimensions, rational if-then hypothesizing and abductive reasoning play as much of a role in the process of sense-making as do desires or emotions such as hope and fear.²⁷

²³ See the WordNet Search for “substantive” at <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=substantive&sub=Search+WordNet&o2=&o0=1&o8=1&o1=1&o7=&o5=&o9=&o6=&o3=&o4=&h=0000>.

²⁴ See Grimmel and Hellmann (2019, 205–10).

²⁵ On the notion of inquiry resulting in something “hanging together” (or not hanging together), see Dewey (1991(1938), 104–5). On philosophy’s overarching aim being “to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term,” see also Sellars (1963(1962)). On the connected “practical” “hanging-together” of social practices and the “hanging-together” of our “theoretical” ways of sense-making as “Zusammenhang,” see also Wittgenstein (2009(1953), PI § 122) and Schatzki (1996, 14).

²⁶ On Rorty’s notion of theorization as “redescription,” see Rorty (1989, 7–9, 39–42).

²⁷ This is explored in more detail in Hellmann (2020b).

This is why our descriptions of social “reality” are in constant flux and why we constantly come up with new descriptions. Whereas the Cartesian vocabulary of “substance” remains fixated on the “real nature” of things the political realities of today and tomorrow are constantly forcing practitioners and theoreticians to adjust their vocabularies in order to tackle novel problems. A recent example of such vocabulary adjustment is the paradigm shift in our way of reimagining the globe in terms of an “anthropocene”—a concept which wasn’t even *known* twenty years ago. To formulate sentences like “humanity is now a geological scale actor” (Dalby 2020, 15) are *distinctly theoretical* because they alert us to two things. At a minimum they force us to extend the classical agenda of “international” politics in order to more adequately address how politics and humanity-induced geological change may hang together. Second, to the extent that we accept the redescription as cogent the new Deweyan “ends” we might envision in such a world underline the enormous practical challenges and normative contestation in addressing these problems. Contributing to a proper framing of these challenges in terms of theoretical problems worth inquiring and actually contributing to their solution via redescription continues to be a worthy goal for pragmatism-inspired IR-scholarship to contribute to.

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