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# Knowing and judging in International Relations theory: realism and the reflexive challenge

INANNA HAMATI-ATAYA\*

**Abstract.** This article addresses the notion of reflexivity in international theory through an attempt to transcend the dichotomy between knowledge and judgement. It intends to demonstrate that neither ‘philosophical’ nor ‘scientific’ approaches to world politics can reconcile cognitive and evaluative claims, but that such an endeavour may be envisaged within a certain conception of knowledge, science and facts. A comparison of Morton Kaplan’s approach with Hans Morgenthau’s and Kenneth Waltz’s suggests what kind of theoretical alternatives can bring together these two seemingly incommensurable orders of discourse under a unified, foundationally reflexive epistemology.

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## Introduction

### *The reflexive challenge*

The distinction between *knowing* and *judging*, or *cognitive* and *evaluative* discourse, has impressed International Relations (IR) theory for several decades, along with other related dichotomies such as *facts* vs. *values* and *science* vs. *philosophy*. These dichotomies have become signposts announcing a parting of the ways leading to what appears to be different – if not opposite – intellectual investigations, whereby different *purposes* are sought, different *questions* asked, and altogether different *realities* examined. While disagreements over issues of purpose, epistemology, and ontology still fuel much of disciplinary debates, it is reasonable to consider that the growth of (various forms of) Constructivism has made some assertions less controversial or marginal than they once were. Today, indeed, more than a minority of scholars acknowledge the part individual and collective judgments, valuations, and perceptions play in the construction of at least some aspects of reality. What still needs to be addressed conclusively, however, is the properly epistemological question resulting from the impact such ‘facts’ have on the

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production of theory itself. In light of the general disenchantment with ‘value-freedom’, how, for instance, can political and international theory successfully transcend its dual relation to *the political* as a reality that it needs to objectify according to the ethos of ‘ethical neutrality’,<sup>1</sup> while it is itself partly the product of internalised political, economic, and cultural relations of power?<sup>2</sup> By definition, this and other similar questions put the subject in a *reflexive* posture that aims at questioning the necessarily *reflective* nature of thought and action.<sup>3</sup> For if evaluation is part of the construction and formulation of knowledge, then the distinction between cognitive and evaluative discourse can no longer hold, just as the positivist separation between the knowing subject and the object-to-be-known becomes illusory.

The underlying principle of this article is that reflexivity is not and should not be considered a marginal or independent theoretical concern, but should rather be viewed as a foundational intellectual and epistemic posture made necessary by the acknowledgement of the ontological unity of *subject* and *object*, that elevates the *problematique* of knowledge to a new level of questioning, best described by Pierre Bourdieu as the ‘objectification of the objectifying subject’.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, it is suggested here that the reflexive endeavour can only be successful if reflexivity is an intrinsic quality of theory, not a *post hoc* or parallel concern running alongside it: the reflexive voice is one by definition, and should therefore bring together the reflective subject with his hypothetical or real critic. For this reason, reflexivity cannot be born out of the confrontation between objectivist and critical theorists, since the latter unambiguously consider and treat the former’s discourse as their subject-matter, and can therefore logically neither grant nor be granted by them an equal degree of legitimacy. In the absence of such a *mutual epistemic recognition*, there can be no intersubjective agreement, without which deconstruction remains a unilateral, and therefore sterile, endeavour. The challenge, then, is to formulate a theory of international politics that can effectively reconcile these two *orders of discourse* under a common epistemology that is capable of addressing both positivist theorists’ concern for *explanation* and critical theorists’ concern for *meta-explanation*, by transcending the dichotomy between ‘problem-solving’ and ‘critical’<sup>5</sup> or ‘explanatory’ and ‘constitutive’ theory.<sup>6</sup>

Within the general preoccupations raised by some critical theorists,<sup>7</sup> and more specific ones that were recently voiced by scholars of different orientations,<sup>8</sup> this

<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, ‘The Meaning of “Ethical Neutrality” in Sociology and Economics’ and “Objectivity” in Social Science and Social Policy’, in E. A. Shils and H. A. Finch (eds), *Max Weber on The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1949), pp. 1–47, 49–112.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 2005); Louis Althusser, *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> I use the terms ‘reflective’ and ‘reflexive’ to convey the two meanings of ‘reflection’: the subject is *reflective* of external structures (like a mirror is of light) and is *reflexive* when she *reflects on* her own thought.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, ‘l’objectivation du sujet de l’objectivation’, *Science de la science et réflexivité* (Paris: Raisons d’Agir, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Cox, ‘Social Forces, States, and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10:2 (1981), pp. 126–55.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Smith, ‘The Self-Images of a Discipline: A Genealogy of International Relations Theory’, in Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds), *International Relations Theory Today* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 1–37.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Neufeld, ‘The Reflexive Turn in International Relations Theory’, CISS Working Papers # 4 (1991); Nicholas Onuf, ‘Worlds of our Making: The Strange Career of Constructivism in

article attempts to identify possible features of such a reflexive theory that would allow scholarship to efficiently objectify its own production as an integral part of IR's subject-matter, and eventually 'delineate [...] a research program' that would make post-positivist theorists not merely more 'visible' to the 'preponderance of empirical researchers' in the field,<sup>9</sup> but likely to impose themselves as efficient intellectual alternatives. The purpose is to show that we can envisage theoretical frameworks that can reconcile cognitive and evaluative discourse in a way that is neither illusory as to the pretence of science or the scholar's interested position – whether cultural, ethical or normative<sup>10</sup> – nor impervious to ideological manipulation,<sup>11</sup> and to demonstrate that what makes a theory of IR successful in bridging the gap between objectivist and critical theory is its ability to address values and valuations as facts, and to make them a part of its ontology.

### Three Realisms

Since the purpose of the following meta-theoretical demonstration is, firstly, to illustrate the dichotomous relationship between the ideal-types of cognitive and evaluative discourse and their equal failure to achieve reflexive thought, and secondly, to illustrate how they can come together under one reflexive epistemology, it is necessary to refer to specific theoretical frameworks. The three theories here considered, namely, Morgenthau's, Waltz's, and Kaplan's, offer a good material for the present endeavour, for they share enough common denominators to sustain a meaningful comparison of their differences: the commitment to an objective understanding of international behaviour; a conceptualisation of the 'international system' as the common environment of international actors; the acceptance of states as the most significant, unit-actors of the system; the crystallisation of power as the central reality/concept of IR, in addition to an equal interest in the balance-of-power as the most prevalent, actual mechanism of state interaction. If one is willing, for the purpose at hand, to ignore the contending

International Relations', in Donald J. Puchala (ed.), *Visions of International Relations: Assessing an Academic Field* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 119–41; Robert Cox, 'Social Forces'; Steve Smith, 'Self-Images'.

<sup>8</sup> Steve Smith, 'The US and the Discipline of International Relations: "Hegemonic Country, Hegemonic Discipline"', *International Studies Review*, 4:2 (2002), pp. 67–85; Daniel S. Geller and John A. Vasquez, 'The Construction and Cumulation of Knowledge in International Relations: Introduction', *International Studies Review*, 6 (2004), pp. 1–6; Wesley W. Widmaier, 'Theory as a Factor and the Theorist as an Actor: The "Pragmatist Constructivist" Lessons of John Dewey and John Kenneth Galbraith', *International Studies Review*, 6 (2004), pp. 427–45; John Agnew, 'Know-Where: Geographies of Knowledge of World Politics', *International Political Sociology*, 1 (2007), pp. 130–48; Vincent Pouliot, "'Subjectivism": Toward a Constructivist Methodology', *International Studies Quarterly*, 51 (2007), pp. 359–84.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches', *International Studies Quarterly*, 32:4 (1988), pp. 379–96.

<sup>10</sup> Mervyn Frost, *Ethics in International Relations: A Constitutive Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Molly Cochrane, *Normative Theory in International Relations: A Pragmatic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 255–300; Robert Cox, (1985) 'Realism, Positivism and Historicism', in Robert Cox with Timothy Sinclair (eds), *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 49–59.

definitions and interpretations of what Realism is, these common features, as well as the paradigmatic importance of Realism, should be sufficient grounds to justify the *a priori* significance and feasibility of the comparison. As for its relevance, it is justified by the fact that as far as the relationship between cognitive and evaluative discourse is concerned, these theories represent three different theoretical models, that will be termed respectively the ‘philosophical’, the ‘scientific’, and the ‘sociological’. Since any typology emanates from a specific classificatory purpose, these terms are meant to illustrate the differences that are specifically relevant to the question this article poses. Therefore, and for want of a better classification that would convey with clarity and comprehensiveness the relationships among these different approaches, as well as their internal complexities and richness, this typology will be used here despite the simplifications it implies.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, the philosophy vs. science dichotomy is not meant to grant Waltz’s theory and deny Morgenthau’s a certain cognitive legitimacy, nor imply that they are not equally committed to ‘science’. Because the present focus is on the articulation of knowledge and judgment, this dichotomy is more appropriate to qualify the following contrast: while in the ‘philosophical’ model evaluation precedes, informs, and shapes knowledge-claims about social reality, the cognitive discourse produced by the ‘scientific’ model reflects a self-sustained, value-independent mode of inquiry. Against these dichotomous approaches, Kaplan’s systems theory is qualified as ‘sociological’ because of its concern with *process*, not merely at the ontological level (*process* as opposed to *being* or *structure*), but more importantly at the epistemological level. By acknowledging the impact of valuations on the construction of scientific knowledge, Kaplan’s approach introduces a *dynamic, self-corrective* understanding of theory and theory-building, whereby cognitive and evaluative discourse can be viewed as mutually informing and reassessing each other.

As these theories represent three different articulations of cognition and judgment, the comparison of their respective epistemologies is informative and useful to understand the conditions under which an alignment of these two orders of discourse is possible – and it incidentally highlights the fact that it is not the *content* of Realist claims that is impervious to reflexivity, but the *epistemic assumptions* of specific Realist theories (and hence, of some non-Realist theories as well). Each of these contributions will therefore be addressed with a specific focus on its philosophy of knowledge, the status it assigns to values, and whether/how it makes room for reflexivity. The comparison of Morgenthau’s and Waltz’s approaches shows that neither philosophical nor scientific models can successfully or consistently produce a reflexive discourse in IR, and makes it possible to reassess Kaplan’s attempt at formulating a comprehensive theory of the social: one that is capable of objectifying judgment as both a subject-matter of science *and* a factor shaping scientific production, and in which *world politics* and the *discourse on world politics* can be simultaneously addressed as interdependent, and hence equally significant, objects of IR.

<sup>12</sup> The author is aware of at least the following simplifications: that the opposition between *science* and *philosophy* cannot be asserted outside of a given *philosophy of knowledge* whereby these terms are defined; that the relationship between *philosophy* and *sociology* needs a similar epistemic qualification; that each discipline is characterised by a plethora of contending paradigms that prevents these naked terms from being self-explanatory; and that consequently these oppositions need a whole different inquiry, and another article, to be fully addressed.

### Theory as moral practice: Hans Morgenthau and the political

Morgenthau's contribution to IR theory has been so important in the institution of the field and its main 'paradigm' that it still constitutes a major reference for IR students. It is, however, symptomatic of the discipline's own evolution that such a pioneer should first be hailed for the 'scientific' value of his approach, and be later on criticised by the inheritors of a more acute scientific awareness, that was meant to 'transcend the error and confusion born of an early (and thus imperfect) apprehension of [the] evolving science'<sup>13</sup> of IR. A contextual reading of the disciplinary value of Morgenthau's realism reveals its changing status in the field.<sup>14</sup> First considered the founder of a scientific study of international politics, his work then becomes ambiguous in light of new conceptions of scientific validity, appearing to be both 'philosophical and empirical',<sup>15</sup> until the latter qualification is used by some proponents of positivism<sup>16</sup> to disqualify it, thereby rejecting it outside of 'legitimate' scientific discourse altogether. These diverse interpretations obviously result from profoundly divergent assumptions regarding science itself, as well as the many struggles for academic legitimacy that are naturally served by such debates. It is nonetheless true that Morgenthau's work can be assessed in different ways. The 'philosophical' model proposed here is not meant to reduce it to a single dimension, but to signify that as far as the articulation between knowledge and judgment is concerned, Morgenthau's cognitive discourse is informed and shaped by an evaluative one. In other words, judgment, values and valuation precede knowledge, facts and explanation in the logical and intellectual construction of his theory.

#### *Epistemic scepticism: Morgenthau's critique of apolitical knowledge*

That evaluation comes first in Morgenthau's Realist appraisal of social reality is obvious in the author's perception of *power* and *the political* in general. Judgment precedes knowledge logically in the reader's appreciation of his account, just as it precedes it in his own intellectual development. And just as it is misleading to read *Politics Among Nations*<sup>17</sup> before – or without – reading *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*,<sup>18</sup> it is misleading to assess Morgenthau's conception of knowledge, science, and theory without first discussing his conception of human nature, power, and the political. The fact that the political is defined in reference to an immutable and universal human *instinct* he calls the 'will to power'<sup>19</sup> is a foundational element

<sup>13</sup> Robert M. A. Crawford, *Idealism and Realism in International Relations: Beyond the Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Michael C. Williams, 'Introduction', in Michael C. Williams (ed.), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1–17.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Hoffmann, 'Theory and International Relations', in Stanley Hoffmann (ed.), *The State of War: Essays on the Theory and Practice of International Relations* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison Wesley, 1979).

<sup>17</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: MacGraw Hill, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, 5th edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

<sup>19</sup> Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*.



of Morgenthau's epistemology, one that also shapes his understanding of human action and his assessment of its potential outcomes. The political is thus defined in such a way that it encompasses all dimensions of social life, and power is found in everything that involves man's thought and action, including knowledge and science as such, which suggests that the production of scientific truths is considered as a truly *political* phenomenon. It follows from Morgenthau's perspective that any epistemology that rests on an *a priori* separation of the faculties of *thought*, *judgment*, and the *will* is self-deceptive, as it creates the illusion that objective knowledge is a built-in feature of mankind that allows the *subject* to address his *object* of inquiry independently of his own nature and existence. Against the propositions of liberal-rationalism, Morgenthau's Realism rests on a fundamental cognitive *scepticism* that views human knowledge as an inherent *moral* and *political problem* that cannot be reduced to, or equated with, the logical or material limitations of scientific investigation. By embracing this view, Morgenthau does not only express his scepticism towards a value-free science of politics, but also acknowledges the *contextual* nature and significance of any cognitive endeavour. In other words, political theory is not simply dedicated to the study of *power* in general, but is committed to revealing the manifestations of power where and when they are least visible. This specifically moral stand that denotes an ethics of social responsibility<sup>20</sup> clearly shows that Morgenthau's objectification of the social world is intrinsically committed to reflexivity, or, as Murielle Cozette recently argued, that his Realism can be viewed as essentially 'critical'.<sup>21</sup>

It is, then, Morgenthau's philosophical, *a priori* assumptions about human nature that inform his conception of the nature – and role – of scientific knowledge, and his epistemology is thus inevitably directed against the legitimacy and realism of scientist and positivist theories of the social. In order to embrace 'science' as a cautious rationalisation of human behaviour that is conscious of the epistemic and moral limitations of thought, one has to abandon the illusory faith in pure, absolute reason, and accept the fact that reason is always 'irrationally' and 'socially determined'<sup>22</sup> by both 'natural' and 'social forces' that shape our behaviour and cognitive relation to the world. This 'determination' makes all science conditioned, limited, unable to extend its reign to all cognitive realms, and thereby forced to eternally coexist with other forms of knowledge, such as 'religion, philosophy and art'.<sup>23</sup> While Morgenthau's rejection of scientism is based on a rejection of the analogy between *nature* and *society*, his position is asserted with regards to natural and social science alike, for he considers that nature itself, 'as the object of human knowledge, is [...] somehow the product of human action'.<sup>24</sup> This quasi-constructivist stand, however, finds its deeper significance in the realm of social science, where 'the social scientist as such stands in the stream of social causation as an acting and reacting agent', for 'what he sees and what he does not see are determined by his position in those streams', and therefore, 'by revealing what he sees in terms of his science he directly intervenes in the social

<sup>20</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Dilemmas of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>21</sup> Murielle Cozette, 'Reclaiming the Critical Dimension of Realism: Hans J. Morgenthau and the Ethics of Scholarship', *Review of International Studies*, 34 (2008), pp. 5–27.

<sup>22</sup> Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, pp. 154, 162.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.



process'.<sup>25</sup> From this perspective, scientism and positivism are rejected on the basis of two natural and intrinsic flaws: the first one concerns reason itself, which cannot be detached from man's 'biological and spiritual' impulses, and can therefore never constitute an absolute tool whereby the external world can be universally assessed and measured; the second one concerns science in general, and social science in particular, which cannot be detached from the overall processes of existence that determine its very *raison d'être*. It follows that,

since there exists a necessary correlation between the quality of the human mind, on the one hand, and the quality of the physical and social world, as we know it, on the other, the irrationality of human action cannot but be reflected in nature and society *and in our knowledge of them*<sup>26</sup>

and that 'socially useful reason is socially determined reason'.<sup>27</sup> Undeniably, these propositions imply a genuine awareness of the need for reflexive thought. Morgenthau's reflexive commitment is, however, only achieved at the individual, intimate level of the private ethics of the observer and interpreter of social reality. While it expresses a genuine dedication to the 'ethos of reflexivity', his critical stand does not offer a foundation for an actual reflexive epistemology.

*Reflexivity as an ethos: the inconclusiveness of Morgenthau's critical stand*

Morgenthau's philosophical contribution to the post-war critique of liberal political thought was in bringing back the 'tragic' as an intrinsic feature of the human condition, one that concerns man as a social *and* knowing agent. In this sense, his definition and assessment of the scope of the political establishes a strong, reflexive ethos for the scholar whose task is to objectify political reality. The nature of human thought and action as qualified by Morgenthau defines the scholar's subject-matter *and* his science together at once. This is so because the political scientist shares with his object of study the same 'corrupt' essence and is, like any other man, 'a political animal by nature', driven by the same 'evil' that manifests itself in all social action, of which political action is the 'prototype':<sup>28</sup> the impulse for power that moves all men to use other men as means to their ends. The other common characteristic between 'scientific' and 'political' man is that both of them are 'moral beings' who 'reflect and render judgments on [the] nature and value [of the social world] and on the nature and value of [their] social actions and of [their] existence in society'.<sup>29</sup> The political scientist's cognitive relation to politics is therefore fundamentally based on this common and universal nature that makes it impossible for scientific knowledge to be either natural or spontaneous, purely objective or absolute: *power* is therefore the central concept that shapes both the political *and* the scientific realm.

What distinguishes, then, the scholar from his subject-matter is a motivation for 'truth' rather than 'power', a Weberian distinction<sup>30</sup> that Morgenthau poses as the

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 142–3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 144 (emphasis added).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>30</sup> Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures* (edited by David Owen and Tracy Strong) (London: Hackett, 2004).

essence of political science, as an existential choice that is meant to help it face its necessarily political nature. ‘Scientific man’ is not merely concerned with the search for truth, but committed to saying truth *against* power – against its manifestations and ideological appearances. This commitment springs from Morgenthau’s belief that all political action is a ‘struggle for power’ having the tendency to hide the true nature of its motives and objectives behind moral claims. While the fact that ‘morality serves interest and power as their ideological justification’ is true for all politics, ‘this ideological function [...] has become morality’s main function’ in *international politics*,<sup>31</sup> and this fundamental characteristic of the political world determines the role of political theory in general, that of international theory in particular. The commitment to truth that defines the scholar’s intellectual activity is therefore manifested as a properly social role, which explains why ‘the ultimate decisions which confront the scientific mind are not intellectual but moral in nature’.<sup>32</sup>

Morgenthau’s political theory is undoubtedly rooted in an axiological conception of science and the social world. It is, then, not surprising to find in his theory of international politics a treatment of values and norms.<sup>33</sup> This is possible because his central, unifying concept of ‘power’ is not defined in a purely materialist way, even when it comes to state relations. Within his own epistemic perspective, the treatment of social values and norms can never be eliminated from political and international theory, not only because values and norms are ontologically part of its subject-matter, but also because they constitute the basis on which theory defines itself *against* – that is, as discriminated from – its subject-matter. What remains, then, is an eternal existential commitment that can never completely achieve itself and has to be dealt with, over and again, by the individual scholar, in his own ‘personal equation’<sup>34</sup> where his dedication to science and truth must constantly be asserted, and where the effort to ‘reconcile his political nature with his moral destiny’ can never be abandoned. Insofar as ‘one of the main purposes of society is to conceal [the] truths [about power] from its members’, a political science ‘which is faithful to its commitment of telling the truth about the political world’ can never gain social respectability, and it is therefore in its own unpopularity that it finds the indicator of its success.<sup>35</sup>

The ‘philosophical’ dimension and value-laden assumptions that are the *raison d’être* of Morgenthau’s intellectual engagement were challenged by the ‘scientific’ turn in IR. His concept of *the political* and his definition of *power* have been the main targets of his critics since the 1960s. What remains of these criticisms can be assessed in light of the general divide that segregates *philosophy* from *science* in the investigation of world politics. It is indeed difficult to embrace the rigorous standards of scientific conceptualisation and validity, which are thought to guarantee the establishment of a ‘value-free’ science of politics, *and* to accept the idea that

<sup>31</sup> Morgenthau, *Dilemmas*, pp. 51–2.

<sup>32</sup> Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, p. 165.

<sup>33</sup> In *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau develops the notion of ‘ideology’ to account for the axiological, moral, and normative discourse that accompanies, serves, and sustains national foreign policies. He also considers ‘normative systems’ such as ‘morality, mores, and law’ as sociologically important manifestations of ‘restraints on power’, similar in function to the state-led mechanism of the ‘balance of power’. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 104–5.

<sup>34</sup> Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, p. 163.

<sup>35</sup> Morgenthau, *Dilemmas*, pp. 27–8.

'Morgenthau's conception of "politics" is not [...] just an analytic device', but 'a moral and political project'.<sup>36</sup> Even those most willing to acknowledge that 'all social life is [...] power' have argued against the analytical relevance of this concept, on the basis that it makes Morgenthau's propositions unfalsifiable, thereby disqualifying them as 'scientific hypotheses'.<sup>37</sup> More generally, the reliance on an ambiguous concept of power posed as both the means of political action and its end, and on an obscure, *a priori* notion of an immutable 'human nature' that is meant to explain everything, is said to empty explanation of its purpose, according to a formally 'rigorous' – Popperian – conception of scientific demonstration.

Although I do not share all of these criticisms – most of which are grounded in epistemic assumptions that are incompatible with Morgenthau's original concern – I believe nonetheless that while Morgenthau's approach is successful in identifying Realism's reflexive challenge – because it *acknowledges* its political nature and its relevance to scholarship – it, however, fails to answer it conclusively. Firstly, because it does not offer any empirical framework to evaluate and test the scholar's relation to power. Morgenthau's reflexive discourse is limited to the *a priori* identification of (the role of) valuations and these are not actually or systematically treated as empirical, testable variables involved in social and cognitive *processes*. As a result of their non-empirical status, Morgenthau's assertions about the role of scholarship also reduce social and moral accountability to the scholar's own individual *subjectivity*, whereby she is ultimately free to determine whether she achieved her moral commitment, and to justify her actions from her individual perspective. Epistemic reflexivity, on the other hand, requires an instrument of measure that is more substantial than the scholar's own 'conscience', which Morgenthau himself would not trust: it requires, more specifically, the empirical objectification of valuations as both causes and effects of social interaction. Morgenthau's 'philosophical' approach can therefore not offer a *sociological assessment* of the impact of values on theory, because it addresses the problem as an *individual*, not a *collective* phenomenon, that is left to accompany and 'contain' the objectification of world politics, instead of being an integral part of it. For these reasons, and unless men can be magically made to agree over the content of some universal *a priori* principles, the 'philosophical' model cannot produce a truly reflexive epistemology. It can, at most, produce the kind of reflexive ethos of which Morgenthau himself was a sincere – and perhaps misunderstood – representative.

### **Kenneth Waltz: Realism as axiological scepticism**

At the other end of Realist IR's spectrum stands a contribution that belongs to another intellectual/historical/institutional moment, manifested by the reformulation of Realism's *objectivity* on the basis of the new epistemological divide between *understanding* and *explaining*. As an inheritor of the 'scientific' orientation, Waltz

<sup>36</sup> Michael C. Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 124.

<sup>37</sup> Raymond Aron, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une théorie des relations internationales?', *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 27:5 (1967), pp. 837–61.

appropriated the terms of IR's 'second debate' and pursued the search for value-freedom into the heart of the 1970s, when new challenges forced Realism to reassert and re-demonstrate its intellectual and institutional legitimacy. *Explanation* became a priority, and Waltz's 'Copernican Revolution'<sup>38</sup> intended to achieve it at the necessary price. By qualifying his contribution as 'scientific', this article acknowledges Waltz's success in producing a value-free theory of world politics that satisfies the requirements of a positivistic analysis of a specific social realm. The point is precisely to show that positivism and reflexivity are incommensurable epistemic attitudes. In opposition to Morgenthau's intellectual posture in which evaluation precedes, and therefore, shapes explanation, Waltz's posture starts with a concern for explanation, and any evaluation that might appear in his cognitive discourse is both secondary to it *and* detached from it.

*Explanation and the standards of science: Waltz's positivist stand*

Moving from the epistemological to the ontological level, Waltz's theoretical framework can best be summarised in the following three main premises, which together illustrate the author's commitment to science-as-explanation. The first is that the true function of *theory* is to explain 'observed', factual correlations or 'laws'; a theory is therefore neither true nor false, and should be judged, not by its *realism*, but its *utility*,<sup>39</sup> which lies in its 'explanatory power', that is, its ability to say why given causes will produce given effects. Secondly, Waltz rejects the idea that international phenomena can be reduced to state properties and interactions, and his project is based on the informed opinion that the *analytical method* is deficient in the study of international politics.<sup>40</sup> What is needed, then, is a *systems* theory that singles out the causes that are external to the system's units. Theory should therefore distinguish between, on the one hand, states and their interactions, and on the other, the way wherein they are organised – the *structure* of their environment, the 'international-political system'. It follows that causation cannot be reduced to factors that are specific to the system's constituent parts or to their relations, such as psychological, economic, institutional, or ideological factors. Finally, since the structure of the system is the 'locus of explanation', the study of the 'international-political system' cannot be moulded on the study of any other system whose structure does not share the same characteristics: in particular, 'national-political systems', which are *hierarchical*, not *anarchical*.

Important consequences follow from these basic points. Waltz's first commitment to producing a truly scientific theory of international politics, similar in quality and legitimacy to those of the natural and economic sciences, sets his project against that of traditional political theory, which is 'concerned more with philosophic interpretation than with theoretical explanation'.<sup>41</sup> Like Morgenthau's, traditional theory offers 'reductionist' explanations where causation is reduced to

<sup>38</sup> Waltz, *Theory*, p. 69.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

<sup>41</sup> Waltz, *Theory*, p. 6.

a single *psychological* dimension,<sup>42</sup> and theory made incapable of dealing with 'regularities and repetitions', which is its true role.<sup>43</sup> Keeping in mind the need to protect IR's autonomy as well as its status among other social sciences, Waltz's contribution avoided the danger of *scientism* by rejecting the simplistic analogy with the natural world. It did not, however, prevent him from being viewed as a 'positivist' who is less concerned with the nature and implications of power politics than with formulating an elegant and value-free assessment of international constraints. When Richard Ashley criticised the 'scientifically inscrutable ideological connotations' of neo-realism's central concepts,<sup>44</sup> Waltz declared his critic to be incomprehensible, rejecting the criticism altogether as irrelevant. 'Critical theory' and 'problem-solving theory', he claimed, are two separate endeavours guided by different objectives: while critical theory 'seeks to interpret the world historically and philosophically', problem-solving theory 'seeks to understand and explain it'. Insofar as Waltz is interested in *explaining* international politics, there is, in Ashley's criticism, 'no clue about how to write an improved theory of the latter sort'.<sup>45</sup>

Ashley and Waltz's impossible dialogue embodies the symptomatic evolution of IR and its complex identity, and can hardly be qualified as a 'debate'. Ashley's assumptions are external to Waltz's cognitive project, and there is no mutual ground for them to meet. As far as Waltz is concerned, the political, philosophical, social or properly ethical aspects of science are independent of the actual cognitive process, and the question of the scholar's position or role is one that can be dealt with as a separate cognitive endeavour. Whatever the results of such an endeavour, it also does not challenge her scientific production as such, because the standards by which a theory is to be judged, evaluated, appreciated or depreciated, are those of utility and adequacy. Waltz's epistemological stand thus leads him to rule out any simultaneous inquiry into the social and moral dimensions of either science or politics.

#### *From value-freedom to value-blindness: the price of positivism*

The fact that Waltz is not *concerned* with reflexivity does not mean that his theory is not capable of achieving it. To determine whether Ashley's criticisms can be extended beyond Waltz's intellectual posture, one needs to look further into his explanative scheme. This brings us to his principle concerning the 'locus of explanation'. A recurrent question in IR literature concerns the accurate qualification of Waltz's theory: is it truly 'systemic' as he claims, or is it rather purely 'structuralist'?<sup>46</sup> In other words, does Waltz really offer us a theory that

<sup>42</sup> Waltz, *Man*.

<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Waltz, 'The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18:4 (1988), pp. 615–28.

<sup>44</sup> Ashley, 'Poverty'.

<sup>45</sup> Kenneth Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics*', in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism*, pp. 322–45.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Wendt, 'The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory', *International Organization*, 41:7 (1987), pp. 338–43; Martin Griffiths, *Realism, Idealism and International Politics: A Reinterpretation* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 115–6; Stefano Guzzini, 'A Reconstruction of

incorporates systemic and sub-systemic factors into one single causal sequence, or does he rather avoid the level of the units to fall in the opposite trap, by reducing all explanation to the effects of structure? While Waltz himself progressively stopped accentuating the 'systemic' dimension of his contribution in favour of a structuralist explanation,<sup>47</sup> the question remains. Indeed, the very conceptual relevance and *raison d'être* of 'structure' cannot be maintained without the existence of a given sub-systemic level having some properties, which, in the overall explanative scheme, are considered as 'primary causes'.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the main proposition according to which structure is meant to explain why, given primary causes, final effects are to be expected that are 'disjoined' from these causes, implies with logical necessity that something factual can be said about both causes and effects, something regarding their nature that can be observed objectively and measured. And it simultaneously implies that there is an objective way of determining and measuring whether they are indeed 'disjoined' or not.

On this point, Waltz's propositions are somehow disappointing and in contradiction with his definitions, thereby possibly defeating his primary 'systemic' purpose. To put it simply, Waltz says that structure is conceptually needed to account for the discordance between causes that lie at the level of the states, and effects that appear at the international level. This discordance allegedly justifies why 'inside-out' or 'reductionist' explanations are deficient, and consequently, why a systems theory is needed. A proper theory is expected to explain observed laws, and laws are correlations between causes and effects, of the type 'if a, then b'.<sup>49</sup> To perform its task, a systems theory rests on the invention of a 'theoretical notion',<sup>50</sup> that is by definition non-factual and thus non-observable, while the independent and dependent variables of the correlation are observed, factual ones. Here, structural causation is said to explain an existing law, the formation of a balance of power in the international system, or rather, 'balancing' understood as a state behaviour. If 'structure' is needed, it is because of the discordance between the independent variables or causes – state motivations/intentions – and the observed effect – the balance of power; the constraints imposed on states by the structure of the international system resolve the contradiction. It appears then clear that both states' motivations/intentions *and* the balance of power have to be objective, factual realities that can be measured and determined. However, Waltz never produces any reliable and rigorous propositions concerning either the nature of these elements, or of their 'disjunction'. Drawing upon the microeconomic analogy, he thus '*assume[s]* that states seek to ensure their survival',<sup>51</sup> simply because it would be nonsense to envisage the opposite. It seems that Waltz does not really need to say more about state motivations, at least nothing more tangible that could be presented through some facts of observation. Of course, his whole theory aims to show that it does not really matter what states or rulers want and believe in, or how they promote their status on the international scene, since this does not

Constructivism in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6:2 (2000), pp. 147–82.

<sup>47</sup> Waltz, 'Reflections' and 'Origins'.

<sup>48</sup> Waltz, *Man*.

<sup>49</sup> Waltz, *Theory*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91 (emphasis added).



explain the outcome of their actions. As far as IR is concerned, states' and rulers' attributes are therefore not worth *knowing*, even those that mould perceptions and promotions of the 'national interest'. In fact, Waltz would probably argue that these objects do not belong to *international theory*, but rather to *political theory* (a different ontology) or international *philosophy* (a different epistemology).

Waltz's balance-of-power theory thus appears to be the product of many commitments that can be understood in light of IR's 'third debate', which was partly triggered by the emergence of new non-governmental international actors that challenged Realism's state-centred approach,<sup>52</sup> and by the return of economic and cultural approaches to international conflict and integration that challenged Realism's focus on military power and its 'balance-of-power' paradigm. The reassessment of the relevance of 'power' was also supported empirically by the 'great' powers' inability to achieve military success against actors that had hardly ever been taken seriously by IR theory.<sup>53</sup> Apart from the epistemological and ontological questions that were brought at the forefront of the discipline's pre-occupations, the debate also challenged the already weakened paradigmatic status of Realism and, by extension, the academic status of IR itself.<sup>54</sup> It is thus legitimate to ask whether Waltz's theory does not greatly reflect the need to preserve IR from *political* and *social theory*, in an attempt to save what seems to constitute its exclusive subject-matter, the 'international-political system' defined by its unique 'anarchical structure'. This could explain some of Waltz's theoretical choices. His theory borrows from Realism enough to justify that states should still be considered the major actors of the international system, but turns its back on their behaviour to embrace systemism from the angle of the actors' environment; while it denies the merits of scientism, it moulds itself on microeconomics, thereby denying the original and specific nature of its own subject-matter. And, in fact, this is probably where Waltz's endeavour is truly peculiar: it is so firmly dedicated to making IR an autonomous, as well as a legitimate field, that it has completely separated IR's object from the broader realm to which it belongs – politics. This is undoubtedly Waltz's most unique characteristic. Because it stresses on the 'analytical' function of theory, his systems approach does not offer a global or unified understanding of 'systems', not because it is exclusively *interested* in the international political system, but because it breaks – and hence practically denies – the *ontological* relation of such a system to any other social system, in particular, the 'national-political' one. The implicit consequence of this principle is Waltz's boldest proposition, that our knowledge of 'politics' is not relevant to our understanding of international affairs.

It is interesting enough that Waltz chooses to qualify the 'international-political system' as a 'pre-eminently political' one, where 'political' seems to refer to the illegitimate use of force, which, taken in its most simplistic sense, is the antithesis of domestic politics where law supposedly reigns supreme.<sup>55</sup> His conception of *the political* is thus completely opposed to Morgenthau's, because he is in search of a

<sup>52</sup> James Rosenau, 'International Studies in a Transnational World', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 5:1 (1976), pp. 1–20.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Viotti and Mark Kauppi, *International Relations Theory: Realism, Pluralism, Globalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 562; Chris Brown (with Kirsten Ainley), *Understanding International Relations*, 3rd edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 34.

<sup>54</sup> Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: the Continuing Story of a Death Foretold* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> Waltz, *Theory*, pp. 113–4.



discriminating factor that would separate the two realms and bring forth the specific quality of the international system. But by adopting a formal criterion in lieu of a definition, Waltz reduces both politics and power to their *material* manifestations, thereby ignoring all other forms of social conflict present in both types of realms. In particular, he denies the significance of struggles for legitimacy and the imposition of norms, social truths, or ideological orientations, and hence considers both systems from an exclusively static perspective, a view that has the unfortunate consequence of being historically inaccurate<sup>56</sup> and ‘depoliticised’,<sup>57</sup> and of accepting – or even legitimating – existing national or international orders.<sup>58</sup> This position is set against that of his predecessor: by avoiding the philosophical discourse that permeates so heavily Morgenthau’s Realism, Waltz embraces a complete denial of the axiological dimension of politics in general, international politics in particular. His theory is a perfect model of value-free and judgment-free objective discourse, which not only rejects the need for some critical evaluation of social science, but also rejects ideas, values, and norms outside of IR’s subject-matter. The reflexive task is thus made impossible by the epistemological negation of valuation as a *constitutive* factor in the production of theory, the ontological vacuum in which values are placed, and the resulting impossibility of subjecting these facts to equal standards of objectification.

The comparison of Morgenthau’s and Waltz’s approaches to international politics suggests that whenever theory gains in scientific rigour, it loses on the terrain of judgment and evaluation, and *vice versa*. *Historically*, American IR has constantly had to make a choice between evaluative and objectivist theory. That the debate never impressed IR in a similar manner in the UK, Canada, or France<sup>59</sup> should be enough to posit that some factors specific to American institutional, intellectual or political conditions are responsible for the orientation reached by IR’s central producers. Although this lies without the scope of this article, it is worth hinting at, since the assumed American identity of IR<sup>60</sup> suggests that no major epistemological ‘turn’ would efficiently impact the discipline’s self-image unless brought from within, and that paradigmatic changes occurring at the periphery of its ‘self-imposed ghetto’<sup>61</sup> will continue to be selectively ‘imported’<sup>62</sup> to serve the agendas and preoccupations specifically shaping American social

<sup>56</sup> Paul Schroeder, ‘Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Reality’, *International Security*, 19:1 (1994), pp. 108–48.

<sup>57</sup> Jim George, ‘Of Incarceration and Closure: Neo-Realism and the New/Old World Orders’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 22:2 (1993), pp. 197–234.

<sup>58</sup> Cox, ‘Realism’; Ashley, ‘Poverty’; Martin Griffiths, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>59</sup> Hedley Bull, ‘International Theory: the Case for a Classical Approach’, in Klaus Knorr and James Rosenau (eds), *Contending Approaches to International Politics*, 2nd edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 20–38; Robert M. A. Crawford, and D. S. L. Jarvis, *International Relations – Still an American Social Science? Toward Diversity in International Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Knud Erik Jørgensen, ‘Continental IR Theory: The Best Kept Secret’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 6:1 (2000), pp. 9–42; Dario Battistella, *Théories des relations internationales* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003).

<sup>60</sup> K. J. Holsti, *The Dividing Discipline: Hegemony and Diversity in International Theory* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985); Ole Wæver, ‘The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline: American and European Developments in International Relations’, *International Organization*, 52 (1998), pp. 687–727; Crawford and Jarvis, *International Relations*.

<sup>61</sup> Chris Brown, ‘Turtles All the Way Down: Anti-foundationalism, Critical Theory, and International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23:2 (1994), pp. 213–36.

<sup>62</sup> Crawford, *Idealism and Realism*, p. 28.

institutions. *Conceptually*, and more importantly, the full and meaningful elaboration of either theoretical orientation (philosophical or scientific) can only be achieved at the expense of the other's *purpose*, and from this ideal-typical opposition arises the question of how theory can simultaneously embrace these different modes, in such a way that the concerns of critical theory are integrated to – or even made to mould and orient – the objectification of IR's subject-matter. This article suggests that this can only be done if international theory considers the discourse on international politics as an integral part of its subject-matter, and is ready to drop the illusion that social science can ever be free from values and judgment, whether in its assumptions, its propositions, or the social significance of its discourse. We now turn to Kaplan's theoretical framework to illustrate the realism of such an endeavour.

### Outline for a reflexive theory: Morton Kaplan's cognitive project

Kaplan's *System and Process in International Politics*<sup>63</sup> was for a whole decade after its publication the most quoted piece of work in the field,<sup>64</sup> and its author was a major contributor to the heated 'second debate' that famously opposed IR's 'scientist' and 'traditionalist' theorists. While its status of 'classic' has recently been recognised,<sup>65</sup> the philosophy of knowledge that supports and gives meaning to the author's conceptualisation of international politics may just as easily be ignored today by his contemporary audience as it was by his earliest one.<sup>66</sup> A restatement of Kaplan's main epistemological assumptions may help readers who are unfamiliar with his work understand both the underlying principles of his systems theory and the meaning of his project, while those who are more familiar with his contribution are invited to reconsider it from a new perspective, away from the terms and context of IR's 'second debate'.

#### 'Systemic pragmatism': transcending the post-modern critique

Kaplan's theory of international politics is based on what he originally called 'systemic pragmatism',<sup>67</sup> a philosophy of knowledge that rejects the notion of absolute objectivity and the subsequent dichotomy between *knowledge* and *opinion*. Against the then-leading school of logical positivism, Kaplan applied the pragmatist (Peircean) understanding of 'meaning' to scientific 'truth', thereby rejecting the universality and univocality of empirical observations of both nature and society

<sup>63</sup> Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1957).

<sup>64</sup> John A. Vasquez, *The Power of Power Politics: A Critique* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

<sup>65</sup> As illustrated by the re-publication of the book by the ECPR Press in 2005.

<sup>66</sup> This could be explained by the combination of several factors: IR theorists' utilitarian focus on Kaplan's IR contribution, Kaplan's segregation of his philosophical writings from his IR publications, and the division of disciplinary labour in modern academia.

<sup>67</sup> Morton Kaplan, *Macropolitics: Essays on the Philosophy and Science of Politics* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), p. ix.

and embracing the situational and contextual nature of knowledge and scientific investigation.<sup>68</sup> While acknowledging early on the validity of ‘post-modern’ criticisms against the universal and objective status of science (scientism and positivism as assumed by most Behaviouralists), he nonetheless reached different conclusions, as he believed that science remains a significant intellectual and social activity, as long as one is ready to abandon the idea that there exists one world and one truth about it.

Kaplan indeed agrees that absolute statements about the world are not possible. According to him, this is so for three interrelated reasons. Firstly, there is no particular faculty that allows men to identify, among all possible statements, those that are ‘necessarily true’, and there is therefore no absolute standard whereby different propositions can be *a priori* differentiated from one another. Knowledge should consequently be founded on an *empirical* assessment of reality.<sup>69</sup> Secondly, this assessment is not universal, for observation is subjected to its own *contextuality*. The classical theory of truth as correspondence, which relies on the notion of absolute ‘fit’, is therefore misleading, as it is oblivious to the fact that the logic of discovery/interpretation is not separable from the contextual meaning of any given observation at the time it is made/interpreted. Finally, the nature of scientific activity is bound to reflect or share the nature of its main medium – language; and since language is *non-univocal*,<sup>70</sup> as well as historically and culturally determined, the validity of scientific statements can only be established in reference to the specific language-system in which they are conceived, formulated, and evaluated. The only way in which scientific ‘objectivity’ can therefore have any possible and realist meaning is if science is embraced as a ‘transactional’ activity, in which given sets of propositions about the world can successfully be publicly communicated across subjectivities and across referential cognitive systems.

Kaplan’s original concern was to salvage knowledge and science from the flaws of absolutism, while protecting them from the dangers of nihilism. His systems theory is then meant to serve just this purpose. To think in terms of systems is to avoid as much as possible essentialist definitions of man, society, or politics (Morgenthau) in favour of a *relational* one. What becomes an object of study are the interactions of units within a given system whose limits are conceptually set, and the mutual impact of environment and systems on each other based on the internal properties of both. The notion of *systems* is then meant to replace the triad of *man*, *nation*, and *state* by a unified conceptual framework allowing for uniform empirical testing. Kaplan’s systems approach also does not segregate the international system from other social systems (Waltz), because his classification of ‘social systems’ does not rest on their *structure*. Moreover, it includes the dynamic dimension of ‘process’: human and social systems in general, unlike ‘physical’ ones, are ‘ultrastable homeostatic systems’ that have the ability to adapt to changes occurring in them and in their environment; when faced with major external

<sup>68</sup> This stand is anti-positivist insofar as it denies the existence of naked ‘facts’ and acknowledges the role of consciousness/judgment in the production of truth and accumulation of knowledge, even with respect to natural science.

<sup>69</sup> Morton Kaplan, ‘Evolving Human Nature and Objective Moral and Political Obligation’, *International Journal on World Peace*, 19:4 (2002), pp. 63–88.

<sup>70</sup> Morton Kaplan, ‘My Post-postmodern Objective Account of Theory and Moral Analysis’, *The Review of Politics*, 62:4 (2000), pp. 675–706.

changes, they are capable of restructuring themselves from within, whether at the physiological, or the cognitive, emotional, and *moral* level, but also to transform their environment to make it more viable.<sup>71</sup> Actors have thus more options than ‘simple learning or behavioural adaptation’ as is the case in Waltz’s ‘self-help’ system.<sup>72</sup>

It is from the possibility of relating three different ‘multistable homeostatic systems’<sup>73</sup> that Kaplan’s approach emerges as one that can integrate values as objects of study *as well as* factors shaping cognition. These are the individual, social, and international systems. The following demonstration is based on an inquiry that was clearly identified by Kaplan, but remained secondary in his specific treatment of international politics. This inquiry is first concerned with values and their role in the functioning and regulation of human and social systems.

*Values as facts: Kaplan’s anti-positivist stand*

The first important proposition is that values in general – objectified as human ‘valuations’, or what is ‘valuable’ for actors – are part of the subject-matter of systemic science, which is concerned with the processes whereby systems regulate themselves. The second is that values and valuations can be studied objectively, and are therefore not restricted to a purely philosophical, speculative, or normative discourse on reality: values *can* be cognitively assessed. According to Kaplan’s definition of ‘objectivity’, it is indeed possible for different observers to reach a common evaluation of human valuations, since one can measure empirically the content of individual evaluative propositions, and thereby test human axiological claims, at least by measuring the *concordance* between valuations and actions, then possibly by establishing a hierarchy of valuations showing individual *preferences*. Therefore, insofar as values can be subjected to objective, empirical testing, they have an ‘objective status’, are ‘real’,<sup>74</sup> and a discourse on values is consequently possible, meaningful, and informative in the Popperian sense.

However, that values are ‘objective’ does not at all imply that they are universal, absolute, or immutable. On the contrary, human valuations are shaped by the processes human systems undergo just as they contribute to the regulatory operations of a given system. In that sense, values are both ‘objective’ – *objectifiable* – and ‘conditional’: they are not ‘relative in the sense of mere preferences’, but rather ‘related to the characteristics of man, his relationship to his environment, and his environment.’ ‘Moral analysis’ should therefore ‘respond to the nature of the subject matter’ and, insofar as ‘the subject matter is homeostatic’ in nature, such an analysis should be founded on an understanding of the processes whereby the human system functions, fulfils its needs, and regulates itself within its environment, but also an understanding of the nature, rules, and processes that

<sup>71</sup> Kaplan, *System and Process*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>72</sup> Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization*, 46:2 (1992), pp. 391–425.

<sup>73</sup> A ‘multistable system’ is composed of more than one ‘ultrastable system’.

<sup>74</sup> Kaplan, *Macropolitics*, p. 39.

govern the life of the environment itself.<sup>75</sup> Kaplan's main message here is that as long as we speak of 'human nature' to account for individual and collective behaviour, nothing truly informative can be said about social facts. In order to break the tautological discourse that is produced by *a priori* definitions of human nature, we need to address individual or collective ideas, beliefs, and norms from a relational, dynamic perspective that would also enable us to test – and possibly revise – IR's implicit views on how human biological needs shape social motivations and behaviour.<sup>76</sup> It is then nonsensical and illusory to treat values as objects endowed with a fixed, unchanging nature, and to address them without regard for what makes 'judgment' possible – the human 'system of perception'. By leaving the 'system of perception out of account', absolutist approaches to values and ethics have 'failed to understand that value-laden activity involves a relationship among a perceiving instrument, an experiment, and a setting'.<sup>77</sup> Kaplan's project is to re-establish the foundational, cognitive status of the contexts and processes that are necessarily involved in the production of valuations, and to relate the latter to the general processes of social life.

When addressing systemic regulation at the level of human systems, Kaplan's analysis rests on conceptual frameworks and empirical data provided by various disciplines concerned with human perception and behaviour, from psychoanalysis to the cognitive sciences. While he sketches his treatment of individual valuations in *System and Process*, it remains symptomatically marginal to that of political systems, and isolated from the text in an independent appendix (Appendix 2). One reason for the segregation of moral analysis from the analysis of international politics is the problem of transposing a methodology designed to address individual human systems and sub-systems to the level of social organisation. Another reason is related to the feasibility of such a general, empirical investigation, which is limited in two ways. First, the difficulty of implementing the test experiences which would objectively reveal the content and hierarchy of valuations. While it would be easy to test, say, whether an individual who claims to value the general interest more than his own really does, by observing his willingness to sacrifice the latter to the former, it would be much more complicated to measure all the valuations that account for individual behaviour, compare them, and follow changes affecting their *meaning* over time. Secondly, it is only by carrying out such experiences and assessing their results that Kaplan's approach can demonstrate its relevance *qua* moral analysis. In other words, it is by showing empirically that values are indeed legitimate variables that are also affected by others that Kaplan's assertions against essentialism can be established once and for all. A systems theory of international politics would therefore be dependent on the progress of other fields of inquiry, such as sociology, anthropology, or social psychology.

Conceptually, Kaplan offers what is needed to critically reflect on the impact of valuations on theory: the acknowledgment of the cognitive status of (a discourse on) values, the identification of a conceptual framework that can successfully address them as scientific objects, and some primary theoretical notions that permit the conceptualisation and implementation of test experiences. From here, two

<sup>75</sup> Kaplan, 'Post-postmodern'.

<sup>76</sup> Jennifer Sterling-Folker, 'Realism and the Constructivist Challenge: Rejecting, Reconstructing, or Rereading', *International Studies Review*, 4:1 (2002), pp. 73–97.

<sup>77</sup> Kaplan, *Macropolitics*, p. 36.

important orders of inquiry become possible and meaningful: through the study of social systems – in particular, national and international ones – it becomes possible to identify the place of values, valuations, perceptions, and evaluative claims of political actors, and to search for their status in the explanative scheme offered by systems theory; through the study of man taken both as a system and an actor in more complex social systems, it becomes possible to assess how valuations affect, and are affected by, *cognitive processes* understood as a form of interaction between the human individual system and the social – and natural – systems which represent simultaneously his objects of *study*, his objects of *judgment*, and his field of *action*.

*A question for social science: testing 'interdependent utilities'*

In an attempt to address values – justice in particular – from a systemic perspective, Kaplan offers one notion that deserves to be central in his analysis of social interaction and regulation, that of 'interdependent utility'. This concept aims to explain individual perceptions of, and preferences for, collective interests, against the propositions of classical utilitarian theory,<sup>78</sup> and therefore concerns the processes whereby collective interests become valuable for the individual. Starting from the empirical identification of basic human needs (biological and emotional), Kaplan posits that some inter-individual relations gain significance for the parties involved in them so as to become endowed with an intrinsic value that cannot be consciously reduced by individuals to their own personal interests, or else these relations would cease to exist (for example, marital love). One of the tasks of a systems theory is precisely to study – and test – 'interdependent utilities', by showing whether given collective institutions and interests indeed result from regulatory processes that serve individual stability and development. Such a test conceptually rests on the relation of variables specific respectively to the individual system and to those systems that constitute its environment. In particular, 'interdependent utilities' depend on the structure and functioning of the individuals' biological and personality systems – manifested by their *needs* – on those of the social systems to which individuals belong, and on the information that is processed by the latter in their interaction with their environment.<sup>79</sup> The 'multistable' nature of human beings thereby brings valuations into the dynamic dimension of systemic regulation, and forces us to take into account not the mere *nature* (Morgenthau) or *structure* (Waltz) of life, but the *processes* of existence as well. Another important sociological factor must then be considered, namely, the systemic *position* of a given agent, that is, the 'role' any individual occupies in a given system or, more realistically, in a multitude of different ones. According to Kaplan, it is this factor that ultimately accounts for differences in individual or collective valuations, since it is from a given position that any system assesses its needs, its environment, and its relation to the latter, while this position also determines the kind of information it receives, and how it processes them.

<sup>78</sup> Kaplan, *System and Process*, p. 218.

<sup>79</sup> Kaplan, *Macropolitics* pp. 43–44.



When we move from the human to the political system, such a framework allows us to address the question of political ‘interest’ in ways that promise to be less simplistic than what is traditionally proposed by Realist theories. By extending the ‘needs’ and regulatory processes of a system beyond the mere material dimension implied in such notions as ‘survival’ or ‘power’, and by including ‘interdependent utilities’ as a fundamental element of human and social regulation, Kaplan opens up the possibility of including objects such as norms and values in the empirical study of national and international systems, with a greater rigour than the discipline’s ‘Idealist’ precursors had envisaged. This study is not entirely achieved in *System and Process*, but can nonetheless be partially deduced from its main propositions and correlations, by artificially singling out valuations as part of the ‘variables’ and ‘parameters’ identified by the author in his study of the impact on the behaviour of given state-systems of five of the ‘six models’ of international system he envisaged.<sup>80</sup> Some conclusions of such a reading concur with classical Realist claims, while others need greater conceptual and empirical explorations. Among these is the assertion that ‘democratic’ regimes regulate themselves better in a politically and legally organised environment, while ‘autocratic’ ones only make it at the expense of their individuals’ stability and regulation. While this proposition was politically meaningful in the context of the Cold War, it also has a global significance for human development, and entails important *normative* claims as well.

More importantly, and at another level of analysis, the notion of ‘interdependent utility’ is also pertinent to assess the role cognitive activities have on the regulation of human and social systems, and to answer the ultimate reflexive question: ‘what systems of thought – in form and content – best satisfy individual and collective regulatory needs?’ Such an inquiry encompasses the philosophy and sociology of knowledge in its broadest scope, and includes the inquiry into not only the evolution of science *per se*, but also that of philosophy, art, and religion. Within Kaplan’s approach, it becomes feasible and meaningful to ask how given social systems have developed, and given preference for, given forms of knowledge; how individuals simultaneously adhere to different systems of thought, and how these multiple affiliations contribute to the regulation of their life and of their interaction with nature and society at the moral, emotional, and material levels. In other words, Kaplan’s systems approach rests on a reflexive epistemology that can lead to the formulation of some clear research programs, and can therefore contribute to an efficient objectification of individual and collective cognitive processes.

### *Objectifying the objectifying subject: a systemic alternative*

Unlike Morgenthau’s and Waltz’s, Kaplan’s theoretical framework embraces the epistemic view that knowledge and judgment are interdependent human faculties that inform and shape each other, and consequently, that a social theory needs to transcend both *a priori* and positivist discourses on social reality, even at the

<sup>80</sup> Those that include states as unit-actors.



expense of universality. In this epistemic posture lies the foundation of Kaplan's reflexive thought, which needs to be explained further here. While Kaplan offers a theory in which individual and social regulation can be objectified and assessed, he does not systematically pursue the study of the most fundamental epistemological principle he shares with contemporary critical theorists, namely, the acknowledgment of the contextual nature of objective knowledge and the incorporation of valuations in the cognitive and social activity of science itself. To conceptualise and carry out such a study, two particular 'multistable homeostatic systems' would need to be objectified: the social scientist and, beyond him, the system to which he functionally belongs – Science.

That the scholar and his science should be addressed as 'systems of action' and not as generic 'types' representing a differentiated kind of social action is a very important condition for a successful reflexive analysis of academic production. This approach is indeed very different from the Weberian typology adopted by Morgenthau: insofar as systems theory rejects any essentialist definition of human activity or absolute notions such as 'man', 'truth', or 'science', no *a priori* values can be meaningfully superimposed on a given activity, and no given social activity can *a priori* be defined in terms of values. To separate 'scientific' from 'political man' is simply pointless here, for this distinction does not in any way tell us how the former constructs his notion of 'truth', nor does it help us understand the actual relationship between science and politics – and hence between cognition and action – through history, that is, the collective processes that govern or regulate the evolution of, and interaction between, these two fields of social production.

In opposition to the Weberian ideal-typical approach to scholarship, Kaplan's systems theory allows for a critical reflection on the axiological dimension of theory understood as both an intellectual and a social product. Firstly, because it acknowledges the plural nature of scholarship at both the individual and collective levels, this plurality being a result of systemic conceptualisation. Secondly, because it sets as the main source of this plurality the diversity of social environments, and the diversity of positions individual and collective systems of scholarship occupy in them. Once plurality and difference are recognised, it becomes meaningful, legitimate, but also necessary, to study the mutual impact of valuations and cognitive processes on each other, by addressing the scholar and the academic field *qua* systems, and taking into account the nature and structure of their respective sub-systems, those of their respective environments – such as the national and international ones – and the *positions* – or 'roles' – they hold in them. In other words, it becomes possible to pursue a sociology of academic production that is not independent or detached from *political and international theory*, and to incorporate this production in the ontology of a unified, reflexive theory of the social.

Kaplan's 'systems theory' is a possible candidate for such a unified reflexive framework because it is capable of identifying as cognitive problems those issues reflexivity is concerned with, and of defining these problems as equally 'political' as the issues political and international theory considers itself exclusively concerned with. In other words, *Kaplan's approach unifies the subject-matter of IR's objectivist theories with that of IR's critical theories*, which is precisely what reflexivity entails. Concretely, it is also capable of devising empirical means to assess both the regulatory role of cognitive discourse in the psychological, moral, and political

development of given social systems, and the regulatory role of political discourse and action in the development of (specific forms and fields of) knowledge. The notion of 'interdependent utility' thereby enables us to ask – and operationalise – some fundamental reflexive research questions, by addressing the relationship between specific modes of thinking or *cognitive ideologies* and given public policies or *political ideologies*. In this way, the three 'homeostatic multistable systems' that are the individual, the social, and the international system can be related so as to reveal how valuations inform cognition and how knowledge informs evaluation.

Because of his implicit idea that no meaningful 'philosophical truths' can be revealed independently of an empirical investigation of social reality, and his consequent rejection of *a priori* principles, Kaplan provides a theoretical framework that makes possible an 'objectification of the objectifying subject' that embraces interdisciplinarity at the epistemic level and embraces the unity of the human condition at the ontological one. Through its unification of *thought*, *judgment*, and *action*, his approach stands as conceptually antagonistic to Morgenthau and Weber's, for it denies the existence of a unique 'type' of scholar motivated by a unique value – truth – and unequivocally distinguished from the 'man of action'. It nonetheless serves both Morgenthau and Weber's original preoccupation – to protect scholarship from the ideological tensions of social activity – by enabling the empirical identification of the actual dangers that confront scholars in their real social setting, and the many real situations and contexts presiding over the production of an institutionalised knowledge of world politics. It therefore offers a satisfactory alternative for all the scholars who are particularly concerned with the moral dimension of scholarship, as it gives empirical grounding to the ethics of truth that they espouse. But more importantly, Kaplan's model in fact provides a way out of the Weberian dilemma mentioned earlier: since absolute, universal knowledge is impossible and since theory itself is bound to reflect and bear the weight of actual relations of power, 'scientific man' can never really achieve the segregation that is required for him to confront with 'truth' 'political' man's power-driven discourse, judgments, and actions; what scholarship *can* do is speak with a realistic reflexive voice that unites the scholar's 'ethics of truth' with her 'ethics of responsibility' while being aware of, and constantly striving to reduce, its own limitations. Kaplan shares with critical theorists an 'activist' approach to knowledge – albeit not a specifically Marxian one – embracing the principle that the world cannot be changed unless it is understood, and that it cannot be understood unless the impact of existential reality on knowledge is empirically revealed. His philosophical attitude therefore produces a serious and workable model for those of us who wish to uphold this principle, because it satisfies the fundamental condition for any theory to be reflexive: the conceptualisation of the epistemic interdependence between knowledge and judgment.

## Conclusion

Among the many reflexive questions scholars may ask, the ultimate interrogation that concerns IR is the following: *how is theory itself affected by the cultural,*

*normative, and material characteristics of the international system, and the position of IR theorists within it?* If empirical assessments of disciplinary production across cultural areas lead to the identification of structural factors that explain differences in *cognitive* assessments of world politics, then IR has to take these ‘geographies of knowledge of world politics’<sup>81</sup> into consideration and understand how they affect its own intellectual, social and moral status.

This article shows that Kaplan’s systems theory, among other possible ones, allows for such a conceptualisation of scientific production, for it attempts to objectify the processes governing mental and social regulation, which necessarily include the variables of time and space, and therefore makes room for *history* and *culture* as essential factors in the production of thought. It also shows that Kaplan’s model is successful because it satisfies three important conditions for the realisation of the reflexive task: the rejection of the epistemological dichotomy between *subject* and *object*, the rejection of the ontological dichotomy between *facts* and *values*, and the inclusion of values as empirical factors shaping both *behaviour* and *cognition*. For those theorists who are willing to ‘problematize’ the ‘relationship between the social world and the social construction of meaning’<sup>82</sup> and to address themselves as *products* as well as *producers* of a knowledge that is itself contextual, contextually purposeful, and political in essence, the ‘sociological’ model needs to be embraced at the expense of both ‘philosophical’, a-historical discourses on politics, and ‘scientific’, universalistic ones. As shown here, while the philosophical approach fails to unify its axiological and objectivist claims into a uniformly rigorous discourse on world affairs, the scientific position, in turn, fails to justify its axiological or normative claims because its epistemology is incapable of subjecting them to a common standard of validity.

Beyond the intellectual challenge addressed here, these conclusions may be completed by institutional considerations as well. Indeed, whenever the scientific approach is associated with the very identity – and survival – of IR,<sup>83</sup> reflexivity will remain marginal and contested where it is most needed. The question of IR’s *autonomy* arises again. Critical theory calls not for an autonomy that intellectually and institutionally segregates IR from *other social sciences*, but one that discriminates it from *other social fields*, especially political ones.<sup>84</sup> The concern for reflexivity thus challenges the meaning of many IR theories, by forcing us to reconsider the opposition between *theory* and *meta-theory*. For if it can be empirically established that the structure of international power relations causally affect IR theory as an intellectual and institutional production, then it necessarily follows that meta-theory, understood as the ‘discourse on IR theory’, becomes itself a ‘discourse on international politics’. Reflexivity would then be more than just a personal choice motivating research and occasionally challenging paradigmatic and discursive practices: it would have to be viewed as a necessary, built-in requirement of ‘normal science’.

<sup>81</sup> Agnew, ‘Know-Where’.

<sup>82</sup> Guzzini, ‘Reconstruction’.

<sup>83</sup> Smith, ‘Self-Images’.

<sup>84</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Les usages sociaux de la science: pour une sociologie clinique du champ scientifique* (Paris: INRA, 1997) and *Science*.