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The question of truth: how facts, space and time shape conversations in IR

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Abstract
Truth is as regularly invoked in International Relations (IR) as it is contested. Due to increased plurality, truth is no longer taken for granted, with some suggesting that relativism is on its way. At the same time, despite uncertainty as to the meaning of truth, research and factual verification persists, as findings remain hotly debated in IR, sometimes leading to entrenched, almost irreconcilable debates among scholars. This essay suggests that one way in which to bridge truth claims in the face of potential, albeit unwarranted, relativism is to distinguish between meaningful and factual truth. Factual truth is about assessing whether (raw) data qualifies as data at all, while meaningful truth – upon which most debates in IR are based – grounds our interpretation; it reveals reality's various facets according to specific spatial and temporal concepts. Viewing conversations in IR as concerned with meaningful as opposed to factual truth allows scholars to lay relativism to rest. The essay also claims that conversations that confuse meaningfulness for factual verification – as in the debates between liberal institutionalists and structural realists in the 1990s – lead to scholarly entrenchment with no resolution in sight. Distinct temporal and spatial assumptions are often incompatible. As a result, such meaningful conversations are less about factual verifiability than about containing reification and enlarging the perspectives with which to exercise political judgement.

Keywords
Temporality, interpretivism, spatiality, theory and practice, foundational theory, metatheory

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Some of International Relations' (IR) classic debates have so far proven irresolvable and will likely remain so. The dispute between realists and neoliberal institutionalists is one such case. Where once E.H. Carr berated international liberals for unfounded utopianism, John Mearsheimer echoed that all too familiar charge when he asserted that Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea – the precursor to the full-scale invasion 8 years later – was the 'West's fault', not least the fault of liberal institutionalist theory (Carr, 2001; Mearsheimer, 2014). As liberal institutionalists spread their values, coupled with their organisations, to strengthen peace in the aftermath of the Cold War, Mearsheimer (2014, 2018) argued that it was precisely the proliferation of those values that caused war in the first place. Besides matters of moral imputation or causation, the debate revolved around the issue of theoretical refutation. Whereas Joseph Grieco (1988: 487) contended that liberal institutionalism's 'optimism about international cooperation is likely to be proven wrong', Robert Keohane and Lisa Martin (1995) argued otherwise. At any rate, it is questionable whether temporal concepts, like pessimism and optimism, can be 'proven' to be incorrect in the same way facts can be shown to be either right or wrong. A liberal may well argue that the end of the Cold War culminated in the spread of liberal democracy (e.g. Fukuyama, 1992), while a realist insists that the spread, if one were even to exist, did little to change the fundamental (temporal and spatial) conditions of international politics, allegedly consisting of fearful states and cyclical power politics. Temporality and spatiality are not empirical phenomena themselves, prone to empirical verification, but grounds from which phenomena are subsequently interpreted. Grieco (1988) was thus right on the mark when he pointed to liberal institutionalism's optimism in contraposition to realism's pessimism, but unclear as to what can be refuted. Temporal grounds are themselves difficult to disprove. After all, even amid the 2022 war in Ukraine, Francis Fukuyama (2022) claimed that the liberal side of history was in no way rebutted. On the contrary, authoritarianism allegedly sowed the seeds for its own demise.

In any case, if debates remain or are likely to remain inconclusive, the alternative might be to avoid them all together. Besides this lack of resolution, or perhaps because of it, IR has become an increasingly fragmented field of inquiry, insofar as scholars typically discuss their works within the confines of their theoretical niches (Jackson, 2019; Kristensen, 2018; Lake, 2011, 2013; Michelsen, 2018; Van Der Ree, 2014; Wight, 2019). Although inconclusive debates have also fostered a sort of truce in IR, otherwise known as the 'paradigm peace', IR has apparently resigned itself to a lack of resolution; no meaningful claim can ultimately disprove another (Berenskoetter, 2018; Dunne et al., 2013; Wight, 2019). Moreover, in the absence of inter-theoretical dialogue and of the seemingly spirited debates that have previously characterised IR, apprehension over the stature of truth and relativism has increased (Jackson, 2015; Wallace, 1996; Wight, 1996) – apprehension which has only deepened with the surge of 'post-truth' in international politics (Jackson, 2019; Michelsen and Tallis, 2018; Schiller, 2020; Wight, 2018).

A 'peace' based on scholarly fragmentation is scarcely better than its 'warring' alternative. IR theorists have in effect argued in favour of integrative pluralism, pleading not only for intra-disciplinary engagement, but also for epistemological mediation to speak the truth in the face of relativism (Dunne et al., 2013; Wight, 2019). And yet, integration

begs the question as to whether theoretical approaches can engage with one another in the first place. Are prominent differences between liberals and realists liable to being proven true or false? If not, is conversation still worthwhile?

Bearing those questions in mind, this essay grapples with how to deal with scholarly engagement, fragmentation and relativism in IR. It does so by disentangling meaningful from factual truth. The former organises facts with recourse to distinctive spatialities and temporalities that potentially have no overlap. As a result, talking about meaningful truth is less about definitively settling a dispute than expanding our understanding of a 'reality' that can rarely be reduced to a single spatial or temporal construct. A conversation on factual truth, by contrast, is about verifying raw data – what makes a fact a fact – or assessing explanations according to analogous spatial-temporal conditions. As a result, conversations around fact, unlike meaningfulness, can be (epistemologically) resolved – and thus refuted – at least in principle.

Distinguishing factual from meaningful truth provides a heuristic with which to gauge concerns over relativism, fragmentation and the nature of scholarly debate in IR. In the case of the realist versus liberal institutional dispute, the debate proceeded as if it were about factual refutation despite the lack of spatial and temporal cross over. In other words, the conversation was unlikely to be settled with recourse to epistemology. The further the debate progressed, yet more differences concerning the 'reality' of cooperation were disclosed, to the effect that neither side could disprove what the other had to say. Instead of refuting each other, the conversation could have proceeded on the basis of a distinct understanding of truth, by underscoring meaningfulness over factuality, acknowledging the limits of what each theory could claim and the consequences of reification.

All the same, to make sense of the distinction between factual and meaningful truth, the essay begins by addressing ongoing scholarly conversations on the nature of fragmentation in IR and its relationship to truth. It takes heed of growing academic specialisation by assessing the arguments in favour of a type of pluralism that integrates competing theoretical stances. Some sort of integration or conversation between alternative approaches is considered a relevant, perhaps essential, undertaking, but on the understanding that it takes ontological incompatibility seriously. The question, though, is what drives that incompatibility. IR scholars have invoked several reasons for the lack of cross-over. I argue that it derives mainly from distinctive meaningful truths, that is, from potentially mutually exclusive spatialities and temporalities. The essay builds thereafter on Hannah Arendt's (1988, 2006) understanding of factual truth, Martin Heidegger (1993a, 1993b) notion of unconcealed truth (henceforth meaningful truth), and IR's growing engagement with temporality and spatiality to show how meaningful truth is constituted. I subsequently demonstrate that some debates are likely to remain unresolvable, such as the realist versus liberal institutionalist dispute, although scholars proceed as if they were indeed susceptible to being (epistemologically) settled. This should not, however, impede conversation. The goal instead is to discuss meaningful viewpoints from which to interpret politics, not least judgement and the ramifications of reification. I conclude thereafter with a few remarks on both the advantages and limitations of separating meaningful from factual truth.

Fragmentation, relativism and truth

IR's 'paradigm peace' suggests that the field is now rich in theoretical pluralism, but seemingly poor in inter-theoretical dialogue. Fragmentation has increased – between realists, feminists, liberals, Marxists, and so forth – as have concerns over the prospects of relativism (Berenskoetter, 2018; Corry, 2022; Dunne et al., 2013; Jackson, 2015, 2016, 2019; Jackson and Nexon, 2013; Karkour and Giese, 2020; Lake, 2011, 2013; Michelsen and Tallis, 2018; Rengger, 2000; Schiller, 2020; Sylvester, 2007; Waever, 1996; Wallace, 1996; Wight, 1996, 2018, 2019). Although it is certainly questionable whether IR is more partitioned now than it has been before (Kristensen, 2016), the overarching concern persists: does pluralism in conjunction with fragmentation compromise the attainment of truth?

To take stock of such issues, it is first important to gauge what is being said by any theoretical approach. As Patrick Jackson (2015) rightly contended, one must ascertain whether the statements being propounded among all said theories are indeed 'contradictory, or whether they are instead saying two different things' (p. 17). For relativism to be around the corner, scholars must be delivering mutually exclusive claims about a given phenomenon, more so than disclosing an alternative aspect of that phenomenon across space and time. Indeed, IR scholars have often brushed relativism aside by claiming, and rightly so, that their arguments rest on something akin to a different world. Kenneth Waltz (2004), for example, lauded Immanuel Wallerstein for his comprehensive account of world political economy, but distinguished it from his approach, which, in his own words, addressed distinctive phenomena:

> An international-political theory serves primarily to explain international-political outcomes. It also tells us something about the foreign policies of states and about their economic and other interactions. But saying that a theory about international economics tells us something about politics, and that a theory about international politics tells us something about economics, does not mean that one such theory can substitute for the other. In telling us something about living beings, chemistry does not displace biology. (p. 38)

That said, concerns over a lack of disciplinary engagement persist, coupled with the fear of relativism. Some scholars have thus called on the need to engage with – if not integrate in some manner – the sundry truths that IR has brought to the fore (Dunne et al., 2013; Wight, 2019). In this regard, Colin Wight has remained one of the most outspoken critics of a form of pluralism that fosters fragmentation. An 'anything goes pluralism' contributes to partitioning the field, effectively precluding conversations from the outset:

> No claim or viewpoint would seem to be invalid, and theorists are free to pursue their own agenda with little or no contact with alternative views. This is a disengaged pluralism because there is no attempt to specify the relationships between theories or to examine one's own theoretical position in the light of alternative views. (Wight, 2019: 68)

Wight's point also rests on the sense that relativism lurks around the corner. As each theory constructs non-transferrable vocabulary, Wight (1996) claims that it leads 'to a

denial that there is anything to be wrong about' (p. 302). Should no criteria for conversation be provided, theoretical frameworks 'must logically presuppose that they alone hold the truth of the world they have created' (Wight 1996: 314). This would not only reflect incompatibility, but potentially relativism as well, since 'the idea of perspectivism can easily drift into a relativist morass, where each perspective has its truth rather than functioning as one perspective among many on the objective truth' (Wight, 2018: 24).

While pluralism has apparently fostered scholarly fragmentation, it is unclear whether speaking 'the truth of the world they have created' reflects relativism. Once a world barely, if at all, overlaps with another, relativism is no longer required: each reveals *a* truth about or within that world. Be that as it may, it still begs the question as to what constitutes those worlds, especially their differences. Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon (2013) tackled that question by way of ontology. Both argue that 'IR theory is centrally involved with scientific ontology, which is to say, a catalog – or map – of the basic substances and processes that constitute world politics'. Not all those substances overlap, nor do other processual notions, as many have come to demonstrate (Jackson, 2016; Jackson and Nexon, 2013; Lake, 2011).

While I agree that distinct theories rest on alternative ontologies, the conditions of incompatibility warrant further elaboration, or else, resemblance is potentially assumed when the underlying spatialities and temporalities suggest otherwise. To take an example, liberal institutionalists have often agreed with structural realism's core assumptions (anarchy, fear, scientific realism), thereby suggesting enough conceptual overlap as to warrant inter-theoretical comparison, especially a comparison that would allow one theory to disprove another (Grieco, 1988; Keohane and Martin, 1995). Keohane and Martin (1995) contended that they could account for realist criticism 'by building on existing empirical work to provide more convincing evidence of institutional effects' (p. 55). In other words, they could allegedly reach a more robust and epistemologically truthful account in order to disprove their rivals' claim. And yet, as I show below, neoliberal institutionalism and structural realism rest on different spatialities and temporalities; they are grounded differently, to the effect that they cannot be assessed like raw, factual data. Conceptualising those 'substances' or underlying ontological conditions thereby provides a means by which to demarcate boundaries between approaches in order to make sense of what can or cannot be truthfully said in each conversation.

In any case, before addressing facts and the conditions for incompatibility, it is worth visiting another argument that – like Wight's, albeit for different reasons – is sceptical of ontological boundaries. Building on post-structuralism, Ole Waever (1996) contested IR's neat demarcations on account of language's flexibility to change meaning: 'post-structuralism shows how all meaning systems are precarious, self-defeating and only strive for closure without ever succeeding' (p. 171). Language, in short, unsettles boundaries.

Bearing that claim in mind, it is certainly the case that an ontological investigation, as I seek to perform herein, requires an engagement with language, among other things. Precisely because truth claims have the potential to reveal different things, language takes centre stage. To that effect, I draw from the linguistic backgrounds according to which distinctive ontologies are constructed: what Heidegger called the 'fore-conception' (Heidegger, 2008: 274–275). But an ontological investigation need hark back to

more than language. For instance, in the case of international politics, an ontological approach looks as much at the meaning of the 'state' as it does to the practices and purposes that it has traditionally engendered. Put differently, it also looks at the state within a broader space, such as within a domestic or international sphere, including the times by which it is delimited: both its origin and potential end. As a result, an ontological investigation requires an engagement with spatiality and temporality, both of which ground the way in which phenomena, especially facts, are subsequently interpreted and spoken about. Spatiality and temporality thus encompass Felix Berenskoetter's (2018) appeal for 'deep' theorising in IR, namely for unpacking the ontological conditions according to which phenomena are subsequently researched and addressed:

> Yet the world that humans – as individuals or collectives – relate to, and within and towards which they act is not just social but also temporal and spatial. And, in fact, most theories of world politics do offer accounts of how political relations are intertwined with and shaped by particular conceptions of space and time – through geography, borders and bridges, and readings of past, present and future. (p. 824)

The remainder of this essay conceptualises the constituent conditions for ontological incompatibility by distinguishing meaningful from factual truth and how they relate to the problem of relativism. In doing so, I provide an idea of whether different theoretical approaches can be evaluated against each other, including the types of conversations they tend to foster. In the conclusion, I somewhat unsettle the analytical distinction between meaningful and factual truth to underscore the situations in which this argument applies and those where it does not.

Meaningful and factual truth

Meaningful truth is grounded in spatiality and temporality. For Martin Heidegger (1993a, 1993b), a key exponent of philosophical hermeneutics, truth is analogous to *aletheia* or 'unconcealment', an approach which allows one to 'rethink the ordinary concept of truth in the sense of correctness of statements and to think it back to that still uncomprehended disclosedness and disclosure of being' (Heidegger, 1993a: 125). Heidegger (1993b) elaborates on this point when deliberating upon art, a form of human expression potentially detached from empirical verification. Poetry, for example, propounds a (meaningful) truth by way of 'ground-laying grounding' (Heidegger, 1993b: 200). It provides a basis upon which to make sense of our surroundings. Likewise, for Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, truth is hardly restricted to locating the correspondence between what was once observed and its subsequent representation. Other human endeavours, such as art, are also truthful in their own way, regardless of whether they extend beyond empirical verification: 'the fact that through a work of art a truth is experienced that we cannot attain in any other way constitutes the philosophic importance of art, which asserts itself against all attempts to rationalise it away' (Gadamer, 2013: xxi).

In the absence of a revelatory ground, facts mean little. Questions of meaning and meaningfulness are thus about 'what it means for it to be', as suggested by Arendt (1988: 57), who was also influenced by Heidegger. Meaningfulness is about grounding and

subsequently disclosing purpose, which is precisely what it 'means for it to be'. Within the context of IR, upon locating phenomena, scholars apply spatial-temporal concepts to answer questions about purposes and their significance, about why they might be important to someone or a group of people. Robert Cox (1981) echoed a similar claim when referring to theory as being 'always *for* someone and *for* some purpose. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically social and political time and space' (p. 128).

It is worth considering the ramifications of this notion of truth. By viewing it as related to meaningfulness, truth provides a spatial and temporal ground through which to make sense of socio-political reality. Yet that ground is not reality itself. Rather as distinct spaces and times are conceptualised with a view to highlighting certain phenomena, *a* reality is underscored instead of all that has happened, is happening or might happen. To that effect, temporality, for Heidegger (2008), is 'a phenomenon that has the unity of a future which makes present in the process of having been' (p. 374). It is the open-ended experience according to which a being connects itself to a past, present and future. Time or timing, as a result, is the specific way in which humans actualise temporality intersubjectively by way of standardising clocks, dates, and so on. To make his point more clearly, Heidegger (2008) points to the construction of linear time, which tends to address past, present and future as a succession of 'nows'. While this may be appropriate for standardising communication, allowing humans to translate their experiences through a common reference point, they remain an approximation of temporality. Humans have a sense of the past not because they result from a past succession of events, as linearity would maintain, but because of an awareness of a future that awaits them, mainly of death. Put differently, a linear succession captures only one facet of temporality, which remains an open-ended unity of past, present and future. A linear succession is thus a form of 'timing' or gauging that temporality with a view to disclosing a given reality. It is also an assumption which allows phenomena to be subsequently interpreted.

Some of Heidegger's insights relate to ongoing discussions on temporality in IR. Andrew Hom (2018, 2020) – not unlike other contributors (Hutchings, 2008; McIntosh, 2015; Solomon, 2014; Teles Fazendeiro, 2019) – has touched upon the importance of timing in IR theorising. Building on Norbert Elias's processual sociology, he demonstrates how timing allows human communities to measure and compare change and continuity with one another (Hom, 2020). But 'no timing mode is ever complete in the sense of providing an ironclad way of establishing relations successfully and usefully in perpetuity' (Hom, 2020: 37). Timing is but a representation of an open-ended unity, that is, of 'temporality'. As a construction, timing closes off a particular way of uniting the past, present and future, but it is hardly the only way of doing so.

Besides the temporal unity to which Heidegger refers, there is the matter of spatiality and space, the ideas of which, 'like those of time, express many of the greatest mysteries of human existence' (Walker, 1993: 127). Spatiality refers to the open-ended process of 'making room' by way of 'directionality and de-severance' (Heidegger, 2008: 420). By directionality, Heidegger (2008) means that 'room is made' by virtue of there being a 'region', to use his terminology, whose purpose is already panned out. That 'region' could be a map, a street, and an international as opposed to domestic point of view – benchmarks according to which experience is gauged. 'De-severance', by contrast, is the

manner in which items are rendered close in the sense of being there to be handled so that 'estimating and measurement of distances' is rendered possible in the first place.

For the sake of avoiding Heidegger's complex wording, I suggest that spatiality's 'directionality' may be seen as the *overarching whole* according to which one is positioning oneself within a surrounding, open-ended context, while de-severance refers to how the *elements* of that whole are objectified to the point of allowing the whole to be studied, conceptualised, and even standardised. Neither the overarching whole nor the elements are ontologically prior to one another, as both are means by which spaces are mutually constituted. To make sense of how they weave together, take the 'modern state'. It is a space by virtue of positioning humans within an *overarching whole* – the sovereign, territorial system – as well as being objectified by distinctive elements, namely demarcated borders and a centralised power system, often with reference to capital cities. Such is the way in which modern political maps are constructed: a whole consisting of homogeneous, mathematically delineated states, split by lines and dots referring to borders and capitals (Branch, 2013). In any case, spaces, much like the maps by which they are depicted, disclose facets of a reality; not all of it. The modern state, based on revolutionary France's idea of a homogeneous, mathematically delimited territory, meant that political authority was no longer interpreted in a heterogeneous manner as it had been prior to the Enlightenment. In other words, states were no longer regarded 'as a succession of unique places, each with particular (and perhaps incomparable) characteristics' (Branch, 2013: 21). The modern representation of statehood thus conceals the extent to which it can also be regarded as a succession of idiosyncratic places, with different climates, habits and even languages. A homogeneous state says something about how authority was centralised regardless of internal difference, thereby disclosing a feature of contemporary 'political' reality, but hardly all of it. It is nevertheless this understanding of space, among other things, that constitutes the way in which realists interpret international politics. It allows for some phenomena to be disclosed, while others remain concealed.

All in all, space, not unlike time, is a construct that can be standardised, allowing for experiences to be positioned according to 'shape, area, distance, and direction' (Kern, 2003: 3). To that end, IR scholars have routinely created spaces on the basis of metaphors 'in large part because they help contextualize the geographic space of world affairs' (Marks, 2011: 56). Indeed, some of IR's more prevalent debates, particularly those related to war and peace, were intricately connected to how space is constituted. J David Singer (1961) captured the essence of said discussions, which he coined the 'level-of-analysis' problem, by arguing that scholars faced nothing short of a difficult choice when opting for one space over another. Whatever the level or space, each reveals a distinctive characteristic of how humans are positioned in relation to given elements and an overarching whole.

As constructs, spaces and times are combined, thereby propounding a distinctive 'world'. But those constructions are not always compatible with one another. For instance, John Agnew (1999) once pointed to four spatial typologies in IR: 'ensemble of worlds', 'field of forces', 'hierarchical network' and 'integrated world society'. Each typology discloses a reality associated with international politics. An 'ensemble of worlds' positions oneself within an *overarching whole* based on cultural compartmentalisation, the *elements* of which are language and practices that lead to limited

interaction. A 'field of forces', on the other hand, places another within an *overarching whole* based on power, more so than culture, whose *elements* are analogous to physics, whereby social forces either attract or repel political or economic entities. Despite the focus on space, time also seeps into the analysis. To speak of a separate, albeit delineated, cultural world is to suggest the absence of progress, insofar as time repeats itself by way of endless cultural difference. To refer to a field of forces, by contrast, is to argue that time is rationally ordered, in that one cause prompts a timely effect, a change that could be linearly measured and even predicted (Agnew 1999). The two typologies do not overlap. One cannot be progressive and cyclical at the same time, stagnant and also flowingly interconnected. A cyclical, almost circular, temporality cannot be fully translated into a progressively linear time. That said, different spaces may then help to reveal how progress and cyclical times vary within different levels of analysis, but those spatial constructs will still reveal something different as well. They also provide a basis for subsequent interpretation – optimism, pessimism, teleology, the state system, transnational transactions, among many others – that cannot be fully disproved. Spatialities and temporalities may complement each other, but they cannot be fully reduced to one another. And yet, meaningful truths in IR also rely on facts.

Factual truth

As spaces and times are human constructs, IR lacks – or so it would seem – a solid anchor from which to prevent truth from straying afar. And yet, IR deals primarily with facts. How then is meaningfulness related to factuality?

Aware that human constructs are permeable to fraud and lying, Arendt (1988, 2006) sought over the course of her work to distinguish between philosophical (academic) experience and political life, including their relationship to truth. For Arendt (2006), factual truth has a 'despotic character' (p. 236).[1] It is despised by tyrants because it cannot easily be manipulated (which is not to say that it can never be manipulated). A despot may claim to be a god but cannot disprove their own eventual death. Facts are subsequently more despotic than the despot because they 'are as compelling for anybody witnessing them with his eyes as the proposition that two and two make four is for anybody in his right mind' (Arendt, 1988: 59). To make her case, Arendt (2006) invoked a conversation between Georges Clemenceau and a representative of the Weimar Republic:

> During the twenties, so a story goes, Clemenceau, shortly before his death, found himself engaged in a friendly talk with a representative of the Weimar Republic on the question of guilt for the outbreak of the First World War. 'What, in your opinion', Clemenceau was asked, 'will future historians think of this troublesome and controversial issue?' He replied, 'This I don't know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany'. We are concerned here with brutally elementary data of this kind, whose indestructibility has been taken for granted even by the most extreme and most sophisticated believers in historicism (pp. 234–235).

The raw or 'brutally elementary data' to which Arendt refers are almost impossible to refute. Hence, factual truth is mainly about revealing the compelling evidence which the

senses would not deny nor would logic fault, such as ‘two and two make four’. They are subsequently a matter of epistemology. And yet, this is not to say that alternative, meaningful accounts of World War I are precluded, merely that no such account would be factually true were it to suggest that Belgium had invaded Germany between 1914 and 1915. Distinctive accounts ground factual phenomena across alternative spatialities and temporalities, but are far from being coercive by themselves.

In any case, it is worth bearing in mind that factual truths are never wholly independent of meaning. Scholars speak of happenings with recourse to labels that disclose actions in a certain way. Labelling someone responsible for an attack as ‘belligerent’, ‘terrorist’, ‘combatant’, ‘criminal’ and so on, says something of the individual’s motives, intent and responsibility. That said, all those roles spring from a particular meaningful interpretation of what happened across time and space, not necessarily from the ‘facts’ themselves. As a result, a factual truth is less concerned with the label per se than with the ‘brutally elementary data’ to which Arendt refers. Hence, for all factual truth’s irrefutability, it remains a weak, albeit relevant, starting point from which to interpret the world around us. As Charles Taylor (1996) once claimed, ‘if this were all there is to political science, the debate would end there’ (p. 61). The fact that Germany invaded Belgium says little of who was to blame, why or how it happened. Moreover, the fact that violence can be an object of epistemology – verified empirically by way of testimony, body count, material destruction and so on – says little about how to frame it across time and space, as in whether it was an act of terror, liberation, or even both. In any case, the distinction between verifying facts and grounding their meaning across space and time might be less stark than I otherwise suggest herein. I return to this point in the concluding remarks so as not to fully separate ontology from epistemology. Having said that, it is worth noting that a potentially ‘coercive’ discussion on disproving ‘brutally elementary data’ – facts – is not analogous to one that seeks to ground – and thus to disclose – a world.

Conversations over meaningful truth: beyond relativism and fragmentation

Given the distinction between meaningful and factual truth, concerns over relativism and fragmentation are easier to broach, as well as to separate from each other. Starting with relativism, distinctive ontological temporalities and spatialities reveal alternative ‘worlds’ that need not overlap with one another. Those worlds rest on verifiable facts, but they disclose different aspects of said facts. Hence, they are potentially irresolvable conversations, insofar as they rely on ontological conditions that cannot be fully compared against one another. As per the introduction, it is difficult to refute optimism and pessimism, including other temporal grounds according to which facts are interpreted.

Conversations over factual truth, however, can ultimately be resolved, at least in principle. In other words, they are an object of epistemology, as Wight (2019) claimed. For instance, the fact of one plus one equals two, as Arendt mentioned, is settled on the basis of rationalism. Similarly, the fact that a battle happened, or someone said something can be empirically verified, triangulated and cross-checked, as the senses originally had. In any case, the means by which epistemology is theorised and subsequently applied are

evidently more complex than I mean to develop in this essay. I only claim that they are resolvable in principle. The same goes for approaches that rest on analogous spatialities and temporalities. In such cases, explanations are liable to being assessed against each other since they are grounded in a similar ontology. To that end, when novelty challenges existing frameworks, facts may otherwise be retrofitted or revised within an existing temporal (and spatial) framework, what Andrew Hom (2020) otherwise labelled the 'problem of time' (pp. 38–40). In this sense, a theoretical approach becomes more convincing than others for the reason that it accommodates facts that remained once under-explained within that spatial-temporal world. And yet, that same exercise is severely hindered, if possible at all, once other spatial and temporal conditions are brought to the fore. Due to potential ontological incompatibility, the same object or event is likely to be viewed in a distinct way. Though this may well contribute to a pluralism that fosters scholarly fragmentation, it need not give rise to relativism, for different as opposed to contradictory things are being said by each framework. The underlying spatial and temporal conditions reveal distinctive aspects of 'reality', and are thus more a source of initial interpretation than subsequent refutation.

At any rate, the problem of disciplinary fragmentation only exists if sundry meaningful truths are not taken seriously as an object of conversation. Although different worlds are being disclosed, it is not so much the conversation itself that is hampered, but the type of conversation. Should the talk of meaningful truth proceed as if it were about factual truth, that is, about refuting claims, then the exchange becomes counterproductive from the outset. Scholars are ultimately saying different things, even if what they mention appears to be comparable, as liberal institutionalists maintained when they juxtaposed their framework to structural realism. It is thus worth revisiting the neoliberal versus structural realist debate, precisely to showcase how it remains irresolvable.

The debate developed in the early to mid-1990s, when John Mearsheimer (1990) – with recourse to his version of structural realism – provided a less-than-optimistic account of Europe in the aftermath of the Cold War. Liberal institutionalist Robert Keohane (1990) claimed, by contrast, that institutions could curb Mearsheimer's vision of growing military escalation, so much so that it would be able to foster further cooperation. Both speak meaningfully about a different Europe, and the prospects of cooperation, partly because they are grounded in incompatible notions of space and time. After all, each school was propounding different worlds for European politics in the Cold War's aftermath.[2] What made the conversation increasingly entrenched was that it proceeded on the grounds that one's claims could be refuted against another, mainly with recourse to epistemology. Accordingly, Keohane claimed that 'our theory may therefore have less appeal to those who require simple "truths", but purportedly scientific theories should specify the conditions under which the theory is expected to hold *a priori*' (Keohane and Martin, 1995: 41). Epistemology would eventually mediate the debate as to reveal the better approach. But Mearsheimer (1990, 1995, 2001) also deployed facts to demonstrate how his theory was and remains vastly superior to liberal institutionalism, having few qualms in side-lining Keohane's scientific approach. He focused instead on the meaningful truth that he had and has persistently evinced: 'the sad truth is that might often makes right when great-power politics are at play' (Mearsheimer, 2014: 11).

To make sense of whether any of the claims regarding cooperation could be refuted, it is important to understand if they are grounded in a common world, particularly whether they reveal different things about cooperation or actually contradict each other. Engaging with spatialitity and temporality offers a heuristic to that effect, disclosing the potential for ontological overlap or not. In this sense, the two are based on distinct worlds, and thus the grounds for disproving the other's claim came to little or no avail. The debate could, however, have proceeded differently, less focused on refutation, had both sides accepted that the heart of the matter was meaningful truth, premised on distinct spatial and temporal readings. Mearsheimer (1995) admits at one point that 'international politics can be divided into two realms – security and political economy – and that liberal institutionalism applies mainly to the latter' (pp. 15–16). In doing so, he points to incompatibility, a claim with which Keohane disagreed since he hoped to extend institutionalism to the security domain. But neoliberal institutionalism overplayed the extent to which it can be transferred to the realist world. Although it can and has sought to discuss security, its spatial-temporal vision of security is scarcely analogous to realism. Keohane admits this when, in conjunction with Robert Axelrod, he noticed that 'the dimension of the shadow of the future seems to differentiate military from economic issues more sharply than does the payoffs' (Axelrod and Keohane, 1985: 232). To that end, the temporalities by which security issues are usually enveloped do not always overlap with those of political economy.

All the same, to make sense of this incompatibility, notions of space and time need to be brought to the fore. As such, it is worth recalling how spaces are constituted with recourse to the *overarching whole* and objectified *elements*. Likewise, with recourse to metaphors and concepts such as contingency, cyclical time, linear time, progress, and so forth, the unity of temporality is approximated. Mearsheimer positions the space of international politics by way of a whole dominated by interstate peace and war. That whole is made closer or objectified by elements such as borders and military capacity: 'the distribution and character of military power are the root causes of war and peace' (Mearsheimer, 1990: 6). Having laid out the overall purpose and entities which compose that setting, that is, the space of international politics, Mearsheimer detects an overriding pattern of almost cyclical continuity, insofar as past events – driven by military capacities – will remain as relevant in the future as they had been in the past: 'factors of military power have been most important in shaping past events, and will remain central in the future' (Mearsheimer, 1990: 7). By building on those temporal and spatial assumptions, Mearsheimer reveals a facet of international politics in Europe and elsewhere. He has subsequently continued to question the premises of international liberalism (Mearsheimer, 2014, 2018, 2019).

Keohane grounded Europe in a different spatial-temporal spectrum. Not unlike other liberal institutionalists, his starting point is accepting the underlying premises of realism. He contends that 'realist assumptions about world politics are consistent with the formation of institutionalized arrangements, containing rules and principles, which promote cooperation' (Keohane, 1984: 67). Liberal institutionalism rests, as a result, on a state-centric understanding of international politics. But that is as far as realist and liberal spaces overlap. Keohane (1984) positions his ground-breaking research on market economics: 'my study focuses on relations among the advanced market-economy countries',

and that are subsequently 'engaged in extensive relationships of interdependence with one another' (p. 70). Most realists are not positioned within that *overarching whole.* Their states are militarily independent of one another rather than economically interdependent. In other words, for liberal institutionalists, the *overarching whole* is a set of relationships of interdependence. Furthermore, space consists of objectified elements, such as markets, whose workings are determined by specific rules that overcome political borders, contrary to realism. Besides space, liberal institutionalism scarcely, if ever, points to historical continuity. Rather, progressive change is possible, as Keohane (2012) later admitted:

> Gilpin was wrong to see just endless cycles, within a fundamentally unchanging reality, and Mearsheimer was wrong to forecast 'back to the future' in Europe. Progressive change, driven in part by new ideas both of ethics and feasibility, does occur. (p. 135)

It almost goes without saying that liberal institutionalists' assumptions regarding international organisations rest on progressive 'timing'. In other words, 'tit-for-tat' games, and other cooperation models, presume that actors can recognise the ongoing and accumulative benefits of cooperation in contrast to conflict (Axelrod and Keohane, 1985).

All in all, theoretical approaches are grounded in incompatible spatialities and temporalities. Their claims regarding the prospect of cooperation cannot entirely be refuted because each stems from distinct, albeit relevant, spatial and temporal conditions. These distinct approaches can thus complement, rather than disprove, each other. To take an example, China and India defy 'traditional IR approaches such as realism and liberalism as both rising powers seem to follow elements of the two approaches, but not either of them exclusively' (Paul, 2019: 58). Once both theories have been unpacked on the basis of spatiality and temporality, it is not too difficult to see why China and India have flouted the notion that 'reality' has to follow the elements of one over the other. Mearsheimer aptly claimed that realism was more in tune with military matters, as it captures the spaces – the distribution of hard power among states, for example – that are of greater interest to a general than they are to a trade minister. In this sense, the prospects of cooperation within a cyclical temporality among fearful sovereign units are not analogous within an interconnected, transnational economic space, characterised by progressive gains. Political actors may therefore be embedded within both those spaces. China and the United States, for instance, remain major commercial partners in several areas, but also geostrategic, territorial competitors in others. To that effect, 'despite increasing levels of contestation in the Security Council, China has continued either to vote for or to abstain on resolutions dealing with ongoing UN peace operations' (Coleman and Job, 2021: 1458). China has subsequently cooperated with the major tenets of liberal peacekeeping, as supported by other Permanent Council members such as the United States, but also contested it in others, such as Syria. In short, no one theoretical construct is able to capture the entirety of Chinese–American relations. In any case, if factual refutation is to remain unsettled, the broader question remains: is conversation even worthwhile or is a peace based on disciplinary fragmentation the only remaining alternative?

Conversations over meaningful truth

Behind the attempt to refute potentially incompatible claims between liberals and realists was also a concern with one approach becoming dominant. The problem of theoretical constructs coming to be reified, that is shaping the way we act towards others beyond academia, is an issue with which both critical and hermeneutical or interpretivist approaches have often grappled in IR (Amoureux and Steele, 2015; Guzzini, 2000, 2013; Ish-Shalom, 2009, 2011; Levine, 2012; Levine and Barder, 2014; Teles Fazendeiro, 2016, 2019). Inspired by Heidegger, Taylor and other contributions to philosophical hermeneutics, Jason Blakeley (2013) refers to this sort of conversation as being less about discussing facts than pondering what reality would become were it reduced to a theoretical construct: ‘theories of social science can be assessed not only in terms of how true they are but also of how true they can become’ (p. 405).

Blakeley’s reading of truth is especially relevant when interspersed with meaningfulness. Take the example of structural realism in the aftermath of the Cold War. Mearsheimer (1990) spoke in favour of armament and nuclear proliferation in Europe in the 1990s, based on the conditions with which he read space and time. Although his arguments were clear, based on verifiable facts, and the underlying spatial-temporal conditions difficult to refute, they still raised problems beyond the world to the which they speak, namely the world of great power politics. Rob Walker (1993) once mentioned that

> to ask how theories of international relations manage to constrain all intimations of a chronopolitics within the ontological determinations of a geopolitics, within the bounded geometric spaces of here and there, is to become increasingly clear about the rules under which it has been deemed possible to speak about politics at all. (p. 6)

In other words, systematically revealing political phenomena with recourse to a given spatial-temporal condition, such as geopolitics, forecloses other interpretations. It prompts reification, insofar as it reduces ‘reality’ to a specific social, theoretical approach. After a while, reality might only be interpreted in light of that theory alone.

Needless to say, no decision-maker deliberates or should deliberate according to a single spatial-temporal framework. On top of military-security affairs, other substantial issues are at stake – markets, gender, welfare, education and so on. Neo-liberal institutionalism therefore provides an important conceptual counterweight to realism and geopolitics, as do feminism, Marxism and many others. Likewise, recent arguments in favour of pluralism acknowledge how this mitigates the reduction ‘reality’ to a single spatial-temporal world (Levine and Mccourt, 2018). Of course, to account for reification – or event to contain it – requires a willingness to engage with other theoretical approaches, if only to highlight the limits of a theory, particularly the spatialities and temporalities that it otherwise conceals (Teles Fazendeiro, 2016).

Wight (2019) thus raised an important point, as aforementioned, when he referred to integrative pluralism as necessary to IR. But conversation should be driven less by verifying or disproving explanations than broadening what they have to say about political ‘reality’. In other words, it is not so much about refuting whether a theory was excessively optimist, cyclical or state-based, but about disclosing the limits of that approach,

including what it can or cannot say. While specific occurrences, such as speeches, actions and physical events, can be verified in principle, and thus refuted should evidence point to the contrary, the underlying conditions according to which they are interpreted are difficult to (dis)prove. And yet, they are still worth discussing, precisely to showcase what each approach reveals and reproduces about 'reality' at large.

In conjunction with reification, once theoretical standpoints dialogue with one another, the ramifications of certain choices are easier to pin down. In other words, they assist the faculty of judgement, and political dialogue as well (Ish-Shalom, 2009; Karkour and Giese, 2020). According to Arendt (2006), judgement is not just about applying a *single* theory, historical analogy or metaphor. It is rather about placing those meaningful truths in conversation with one another in view of the situation at hand:

> The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (Arendt, 2006: 241)

IR scholars potentially enrich our understanding of reality, including the impact of certain choices. As a result, conversations over meaningful truth provide a broader prism with which to exercise judgement. This is not to say, however, that scholarship is reduced to politics (Rengger, 2017: 16). Council does not replace the politician. Political actors grapple with many worlds – international, domestic, local, patriarchal, bureaucratic, subaltern, wartime, postcolonial, and so on – none of which is fully captured by a single meaningful truth. But the attempt to disclose worlds presumes the ability to recognise the (spatial and temporal) limits of given approaches and to demonstrate what else is being propounded in relation to other meaningful truths.

Concluding remarks

While pluralism in IR has contributed to disclosing several relevant, meaningful truths, it has also led to disciplinary fragmentation. In addition to – or as a result of – those divisions, IR's relationship to relativism has also come under scrutiny. This essay provides an ontological heuristic as to why some theoretical approaches are unable to be fully assessed against each other, and thus fully refuted, in much the same way facts can be. In light of incompatible spatial and temporal conditions, theories say different things about a given phenomenon.

By disentangling meaningful from factual truth, the potential for relativism is easier to broach. Underlying spatialities and temporalities account for whether contradictory statements are being made. While statements x and y may appear to be similar, they may ultimately point to different aspects of a certain phenomenon given the spatial and temporal worlds on which they rest. Talking about factual truth is a different matter, related to verifying facts, the denial of which would be tantamount to lying. Facts are coercive precisely because they are difficult to disprove. Few dispute the 'brutally elementary data' that people were killed in Rwanda in 1994, that military jets bombarded Serbian territory in 1999, that drones have flown over Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2002, that

Bush labelled North Korea, Iran and Iraq an 'axis of evil' in 2002, or that people have persistently sought to cross the Mediterranean over the past few years. But facts are meaningless unless they are grounded in space and time.

That said, ontological incompatibility could still warrant, if not entrench, disciplinary fragmentation. If different things are being said, there may be little cause for conversation. And yet, I suggest the opposite. Scholarly exchanges remain relevant, precisely because distinctive meaningful truths about 'reality' are propounded. It is not so much about whether a conversation is possible as to what type of dialogue is sought. Meaningful exchange is an especially worthwhile endeavour, as it not only provides a glimpse into an otherwise complex 'reality', but also reveals what other perspectives are omitting on account of their spatial-temporal assumptions. Such conversations underscore the boundaries between those theories, what they can or cannot say about 'reality', and thus highlight the potential pitfalls of reification, particularly of presuming that one theoretical construct reflects 'reality' per se. Were that not enough, conversations over meaningful truth also enrich the faculty of judgement, as when actors expand their worldview when enacting policy within a contingent situation. By reaching out beyond the confines of a given approach, particularly by dialoguing with other points of view, phenomena acquire layers of complexity, such that the expanded ramifications of given decisions are underscored. Whereas one political action may seem optimal within a given spatial-temporal world, it could ultimately become pernicious in another.

To conclude, it is worth bearing in mind that the argument rests on a neat demarcation between epistemology and ontology. To my mind, the analytical distinction between meaningful and factual truth is helpful because it establishes the limits of what can or cannot be said about relevant, albeit different, issues of scholarly interest. And yet, the heuristic says little about how ontology is conceptualised in the first place, and how facts themselves are verified. Few would contest that as scholars seek to propose relevant ways of grounding phenomena, they do so on the basis of empirical or rational experience. The (spatial and temporal) worlds on which interpretations rest do not spring from thin air, but usually from verifiable epistemological criteria, namely from what can or cannot be known about politics and IR. Hence, ontology and epistemology weave together far more than this essay has otherwise come to suggest, although the degree of entanglement varies according to each intellectual endeavour. And yet, constructing a theory is scarcely analogous to conversing with other meaningful truths or even verifying data. Disentangling meaningful truth from factual truth not only provides a means by which to assess relativism, but also to determine what is at stake during a conversation, such as whether the debate is ultimately resolvable or not. As conversations over truth are central to scholarly interaction, making sense of the terms of that exchange, namely whether it is concerned with facts or meaningfulness, is essential to accounting for what can be said about any issue at all.

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Notes

1. Arendt (1988, 2006) also refers to rational truth in conjunction with factual truth. The former has to do with the 'rational' faculties with which humans are endowed, thereby allowing them to reason in such a way as to comprehend logic, namely that one plus one equals two. This type of truth is of lesser importance herein, not least because Arendt (1988) admits at one point that rational and factual truths are equivalent.
2. Jackson (2015) actually cites the differences between realists and liberals as a potential case for relativism, even if he disagrees with whether or not they are pointing to irreconcilable factual truths.

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