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'Third Generation' Constructivism and the Rhetoric of Inquiry in International Relations

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Abstract

This article argues that third generation constructivism can make a central and overdue contribution to the practice of meta-theorising in IR. Meta-theory has so far restricted itself to exercises of observational reflection and/or definitional sedimentation of content, or in Patrick Jackson's words, to an elaboration of the 'conduct of inquiry'. It has thereby failed, to its detriment, to reflect on and recognise the central importance of the deep and intricate relation between the *content* of meta-theory and the very *form(s)* in which it is practiced.

Taking its cue from Kratochwil's reflection on the deliberative nature of legal reasoning this article puts forward a case for a shift towards a 'rhetoric of inquiry' of meta-theory. Such an approach opens the path to conceive of meta-theory as an argumentative-persuasive practice whose content is deeply interwoven with forms of presentation on the one hand and normative commitments on the other.

Keywords: meta-theory, rhetoric, reflexivity

Constructivism is one of the success stories within IR. From its early beginnings in the 1980s it has developed into a conceptually rich and empirically diverse set of contributions. At the same time, constructivism is also a telling example of the dangers and pitfalls new approaches in International Relations face when coming in contact with already dominant voices of the discipline. Admittedly, constructivism's breadth has, to a considerable degree, developed out of original and innovative research agendas but at the same time it also seems clear that it has partly diversified as a consequence of external expectations and demands of how constructivism needs to 'prove its worth' within International Relations. Patrick Jackson¹ is right in pointing out that the moves towards specific forms of inquiry were presented as initiation rituals through which constructivism needed to demonstrate its validity and legitimacy among already established theoretical perspectives. That such expectations in many ways lead to procrustean efforts at conformity and also stifle, to a certain extent, the scope for originality is one of the biggest problems that has befallen constructivism. Additionally, we have also seen quite specific forms of constructivist thought assuming

dominant positions, leading to an association of constructivism with quite specific debates and problems. Here the work of Alexander Wendt² in the early to mid 1990s and attempts to see constructivism as some form of 'middle-ground'³ proved specifically influential as representing 'constructivism'. Voices that raised much subtler and, for want of a better word, 'radical' challenges that could not easily be assimilated into the existing conceptual and theoretical categorisations of the discipline received comparatively scant attention. For me and for the purposes of this article, third generation constructivism should mean a more thorough engagement with these voices. The third generation, in my view, is therefore on one level concerned with the neglected insights and elements of the initial founding texts and contributors, what could be dubbed 'the first generation'. As indicated above, the success story of 'constructivism' in IR developed a number of hot spots around which the debates so far have developed; it has, however, at the same time – and as a consequence of this trajectory – neglected strands of thought and thematic, theoretical and conceptual impulses. It is this 'ad fontes' call that informs my view of the place and contribution within the 'third generation'. Naturally, I am not arguing that this is the only way to understand third generation constructivism; even more importantly, though, this perspective must not be misunderstood as an exercise in the history of thought in IR by providing an archaeology of early constructivist thought. Rather, so far neglected impulses from the early contributions of constructivism in IR should be understood as a resource, as points of departure that respond and help us address the challenges we (still) face. They should be taken as a chance to provide new roads to theoretical and empirical innovation in an ever more complex discipline. As a consequence, it is not sufficient to just 'rediscover' earlier work but rather pick up the spirit and trajectory inherent in it and think through its implications and suggest further paths of constructivist development.

Naturally, provided the space at our disposal here, such engagements can only provide initial indications of new and, hopefully, fruitful directions for constructivist scholarship. The particular focus I would like to sketch out in a bit more detail concerns the contribution to meta-theoretical scholarship 'third generation' constructivism could make. Constructivism entered an arena of thought that was dominated by approaches with very specific views on ontological, epistemological and methodological matters as it has already provided important impulses for new theoretical and conceptual directions. In many instances, however, it still oriented itself on the prevailing theoretical order and its demands.

Publications that directly and fundamentally challenged this order on a grand theoretical scale found it difficult, despite their sophistication, to exert influence across the discipline – that they still managed to shape substantial parts of constructivist research attests to their intellectual forcefulness and erudition.

Nevertheless, constructivist scholarship has so far struggled with developing coherent and consolidated positions in matters meta-theoretical. The particular perspective from which this struggle is approached here concerns the very nature of the practice of meta-theorising. It is the central argument of this piece that contributions to meta-theory in IR, be they positive or negative, have so far only focussed on the content of meta-theory but they have failed to recognise the deep and intricate relation between this *content* and the very *form(s)* in which it is presented. Taking this perspective, this contribution is in many ways linked to recent literature in International Relations that focusses on the role of ‘practice’ and the notion and central importance of reflexivity.⁴ As David McCourt⁵ points out in his contribution to this special issue, the notion of reflexivity is as much a challenge as it is an opportunity for constructivist scholarship. The “insufficient reflexivity towards the social construction of knowledge itself [...] requires adding a second moment to all constructivist research, one that addresses the structural relationship between the object of study ... and the various sites in which legitimate knowledge about it is produced, including, if appropriate, the academy”⁶. The object of study in question here is meta-theory itself, seemingly a rather abstract, self-contained subject area within the academic realm. The ways in which meta-theory has been approached so far, however, reveals the same lack of reflexive attention that characterises the wider field of International Relations. As will be further elaborated below, the different ways in which meta-theory in IR has been addressed so far, both in terms of its locus and focus, suffer from a lack of reflexivity towards their very own practices. Meta-theory, as the object of engagement, is in each instance still caught in the logic of representation.⁷ Similar to the various political practices that have often been only looked at and represented from the outside, contributions to meta-theory represent its subject matter *as something* to be discussed but the very ways of representation are themselves not subjected to any further reflection. As a consequence, the practice of meta-theorising has so far restricted itself to exercises of observational reflection and/or definitional sedimentation of content, or in Patrick Jackson’s⁸ words, to an elaboration of the ‘conduct of inquiry’. In contrast, a shift towards a ‘rhetoric of inquiry’, as it is suggested here, opens the path to conceive of meta-

theory as an argumentative-persuasive practice whose content is deeply interwoven with forms of presentation on the one hand and normative commitments on the other. Centrally, and in line with the comments made above, such a reflexive exercise seeks to unearth a crucial dimension of the practice of meta-theorising that points beyond and at the same time illuminates and contextualises the ways in which substantive meta-theoretical content becomes represented. Exploring how form, content and ethics coalesce in the rhetorical practice of meta-theorising shines new light on the relation between theory and practice and invites deeper insights into the very basics and scholarly practices that constitute International Relations scholarship more generally.

My particular point of departure here is a central aspect in Kratochwil's classic 'Rules, Norms, and Decisions'⁹ which most clearly appears in chapter 8. In this chapter, Kratochwil develops the connection between practical reasoning and rhetoric in relation to legal arguments. Taking the cue from this treatment of the central role of rhetoric in deliberative endeavours, the remainder of this article makes a case for conceptualising the realm and practice of meta-theorising as intrinsically rhetorical to provide a unique and new contribution to constructivist scholarship.

THE CHALLENGE OF META-THEORY

IR has never been afraid to raise and discuss questions of a meta-theoretical nature, be it either in the exchange about methodology between 'scientific' vs 'traditionalist' positions in IR in the 1960s¹⁰, in the epistemological quarrels surrounding 'positivism' since the 1980s¹¹ or, indeed, in the emerging focus on ontology since the late 1990s.¹² Yet, at the same time meta-theorising has also always been seen as a distracting exercise, becoming dangerously abstract when pursued for too long. As Chris Reus-Smit has recently pointed out, "[t]he argument most commonly heard today, however, is that theory's main purpose is the generation of practically relevant knowledge and that metatheoretical reflections and debates are an unhelpful distraction."¹³

There seem to have developed three basic positions on matters meta-theoretical that warrant some reflection: the first equates meta-theorising with scholasticism, the second charges meta-theory with standing in the way of a fruitful eclecticism and the third reduces meta-theory to definitional discussions about ontology, epistemology and methodology. I

argue that all three to a larger or smaller degree miss a central challenge meta-theorising poses for scholars of all persuasions. In particular, and contrary to the representations inherent in these perspectives, the specific views on what 'meta-theory' is and does are not something present or observable in an existing, external meta-theoretical realm that can simply be represented objectively; these views are themselves constructed out of specific scholarly practices that always already predispose particular views on the alleged content, strengths and weaknesses of 'meta-theory'. What is lacking in these accounts is a properly reflexive understanding that explicitly illuminates that meta-theorising is as much constructing a specific view on meta-theory as it itself is constructed out of specific scholarly practices that establish its particular being. One way to grasp this challenge of reflexivity and grapple with it is by breaking open the relation between the form and content of meta-theorising via a rhetoric of inquiry. Before we, however, can outline what such an approach would entail it is necessary to briefly engage with the abovementioned three positions on meta-theorising in order to develop a clear sense of what this article is concerned with.

The first position that sees meta-theory as scholasticism is aptly summarised in the now famous article by William Wallace¹⁴ following his address at BISA in 1994. While acknowledging a certain degree of 'theory' as part of academic endeavours, Wallace criticises IR's theoretical overindulgence and argues that "International Relations [...] has become *too* detached from the world of practice, too fond of theory (and meta-theory) as opposed to empirical research, too self-indulgent, and in some cases too self-righteous."¹⁵ The danger meta-theory poses to 'proper' IR scholarship is a retreat into abstraction, devoid of empirical relevance and incapable of providing insights into political processes. In such a view, IR must continue to engage with 'real world problems' and stand clear of the danger "to take refuge in increasing abstractions, theories and meta-theories: to move from scholarship to scholasticism."¹⁶ Whereas this scaremongering about the (meta-)theoretical disease undermining the healthy (empirical) parts of the discipline has somewhat subsided since the mid 1990s, the general suspicions connected to meta-theoretical reflection are never far away (for a more recent instantiation see for instance Smith' and Jones'¹⁷ position on the rise of Critical Terrorism Studies).

While it is easy to agree that "we should *not* [...] allow academics to use theoretical uncertainty as an excuse to abandon empirical research"¹⁸, one is left to wonder who really

has committed this 'crime' of abandoning empirical research. The growing literature in post-positivist scholarship includes a considerable amount of empirical studies – maybe not of the kind some critics deem 'proper' but that is then more a matter of form rather than theoretical vs empirical content. In any case, it is simply not enough to dismiss large quantities of scholarship as being conducted by self-righteous and self-absorbed 'theorists' that threaten to undermine the validity and legitimacy of IR research. The portent of the self-destruction of IR due to an improper theoretical focus in many cases seems to be based more on prejudice and unwillingness to engage than an actual looming decline of IR. Maintaining this intellectual scare-mongering seems dubious at best and dangerously myopic at worst.

The second position of meta-theorising in IR offers a more nuanced and sophisticated criticism. Rather than dismissing meta-theory as self-indulgent scholasticism, it locates the danger in its tendency towards paradigmaticism and the incommensurability of diverging positions. "What most consistently divides [...] schools of thought are [...] their meta-theoretical assumptions [...]. Although such foundational assumptions typically cannot be subjected to empirical tests, they influence many research tasks [...]"¹⁹ Worse still, these assumptions have often been consolidated into paradigmatic positions that "[obscure] both the compatibilities among different approaches, and the complex ways in which they interrelate."²⁰ Due to its 'ideological' character paradigmaticism is deeply divisive and in many cases leads to encrusted and fenced off positions that cause researchers to stick to their flag and defend their camp against all criticisms²¹, thereby forfeiting opportunities to explore complementary elements and assumptions across their approaches.²² As a consequence, this group of scholars suggest to bury the deep seated ideological, paradigmatic (i.e. meta-theoretical) cleavages and move from the antagonistic battleground of meta-theory to the cooperative shores of eclectic mid-level theory.²³ Proponents of this line of argument such as David Lake²⁴, Sil and Katzenstein²⁵ or Barkin²⁶ base their view on a specific reading of the 'great debates' or the 'paradigm wars' and welcome the waning of both. Whereas this position presents a much more substantial criticism of meta-theory, it has its own shortcomings. It might very well be the case that the paradigmaticism in some parts of IR has led to seemingly mutually exclusive and ideologically fenced of positions portrayed as monolithic and incompatible sets of meta-theoretical and theoretical assumptions. It remains, however, highly questionable if this view ever was actually representative of the divisions between them. The reason why eclecticism can be successful has probably less to

do with the fact that 'meta-theoretical' debates are phased out, thereby opening the door to cross-theory endeavours. At closer inspection it rather seems that the existing theoretical frameworks (for example in the work of Barkin²⁷) always already shared certain meta-theoretical commitments and assumptions which allowed this complementary eclecticism to emerge.

It seems to me that rather than growing out of an abandonment of 'irresolvable meta-theoretical quarrels' eclecticism emerges out of an abandonment of a specific portrayal of a paradigmatically divided discipline that never was quite accurate to begin with. In other words, the culprit that prevented eclecticism to emerge earlier were not irresolvable 'meta-theoretical' debates but a discipline that was held captive by an image that pitched apparently incommensurable 'paradigms' against each other. In fact, to fully understand and capitalise on the potential of theoretical eclecticism meta-theoretical inquiry seems necessary.

Finally, the third position of meta-theory in IR understands the inevitable impact of meta-theoretical assumptions on theoretical and empirical aspects of IR scholarship. The task here is to clearly define and defend the substantive content of meta-theoretical concepts on the basis of which theoretical frameworks are developed and empirical research is carried out. Although the most sympathetic position, the role of meta-theorising is here understood as a purely definitional exercise in which the notions of 'ontology', 'epistemology' and 'methodology' are settled for further use. While such a conception of the practice of meta-theorising may seem intuitively appropriate (after all what is meta-theorising if not a conceptual clarification of the most basic building blocks of theoretical endeavours), one cannot help but be struck by the vastly diverging ways in which this task is carried out. Even a cursory glance across the meta-theoretical literature in current International Relations exemplifies that the definitional exercises rely on vastly different forms of presentation. This aspect of meta-theorising has so far been ignored in the sense that the form of meta-theorising has not been connected in any meaningful or sustained manner to the content that is presented. It is the central concern of this contribution to argue that this is a costly oversight, not only because it misperceives the practice of meta-theorising due to a lack of reflexivity but also because it prolongs and reproduces a distorted picture of the place and function of meta-theory in International Relations. It is further contended that constructivism is very well placed to provide a much more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the

practice of meta-theorising and its role within and impact on theoretical and empirical endeavours in International Relations by reflexively engaging with the very forms in which this practice becomes instantiated.

THE PROMISES OF A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO META-THEORY

The puzzle of why the content of meta-theory is presented in so vastly diverging ways starts with an observation that is hardly contentious. As we have already seen above, meta-theoretical arguments and positions are often seen as irresolvable, mostly because they concern claims which escape logical proof or direct empirical validation. To use Stephen Toulmin's formulation, the debates taking place at this level of scholarship are of a basically *conceptual nature* and *strategic character*. They are conceptual as they refer to and are concerned with "the skills, traditions, the activities, procedures, or instruments of Man's [sic] intellectual life and imagination."²⁸ Czubaroff highlights the central concern of conceptual questions quite well:

Unlike empirical questions which presuppose agreement about the concepts in terms of which they are stated and which have specific, replicable answers, and unlike formal questions which concern the structure and organization of an already accepted symbolism, conceptual questions are frames with a view toward constructing 'better' terminologies, nomenclatures, or explanations.²⁹

The very nature of these conceptual debates, as opposed to empirical or formal discussions, makes them strategic in character as what is at stake are the very basic forms of thinking and acting with which a subject matter should be apprehended rather than the formulation of theoretical approaches already relying upon the existence of such forms.

Understanding meta-theorising as strategic, conceptual argumentation already hints at a crucial communicative dimension as the existing, and well known, disagreements about central meta-theoretical questions do not allow for a simple and purely demonstrative, representational approach. Communication about meta-theory, i.e. the very ways in which practitioners of meta-theory go about relating their claims to an audience, cannot *a priori* rely on an already existing common framework in reference to which these questions can be settled; there is no single agreed-upon symbolic order that could be referred to.³⁰ Neither can these questions simply be settled with reference to empirical observation as "[t]he resolution of such disputes is complicated because an indefinite number of theoretical [better:

conceptual] explanations are logically possible due to the underdetermination of theory by empirical data."³¹ Rather, due to their strategic nature, the practice of meta-theorising requires deliberative reflection about basic conceptual frameworks on the basis of which theoretical refinement can emerge. Mere definitional, assertive statements cannot settle the debates, arguments and discussions which ensue in response to meta-theoretical concerns, and which always entail the possibility of fundamentally divergent answers. Doing so would place an undue burden on language in securing apodictic meta-theoretical positions.

The understanding of meta-theory as a basically strategic and conceptual enterprise in pursuit of a symbolic order introduces a strong sense of contingency as the claims connected to the substantiation of answers to meta-theoretical questions exceed the possibility of cognitive proof or logical necessity. Contingency, however, tasks the scholar who answers these questions not just with providing substantive content but also (and probably more importantly) to argumentatively provide *reasons* for why this content should be accepted as valid and appropriate. In other words meta-theorising as a scholarly practice is intrinsically *deliberative* and not just *demonstrative* in its argumentative practice. The linguistic excess in which a defence of the relevance and appropriateness of the conceptual content is given forms a trans-substantive framework without which a meta-theoretical position would not be tenable. This deliberative structure of meta-theorising highlights the importance of reflexively engaging not only with *what* is said but also *how* it is said and *by whom*.

This challenge of reflexivity is also the reason why it is not enough to rest here and link directly to existing themes within constructivist scholarship that highlight the central role of language in the emergence of meanings. Doing so would mean simply turning to the ways in which different meanings of core meta-theoretical terms are constructed and reproduced. However, looking at how language is used in meta-theory and how competing meanings of core terms evolve does not get us very far in terms of understanding the practice of meta-theorising in relation to the intersection of its content (what is said) and form (how it is said). Tracing the evolution of meanings and the linguistic processes behind it would still very much be a representational exercise concerned with the substantive delineation of central elements (even if their understanding of language would appreciate the contingency of meanings). Admittedly, it would raise valid questions about the often assumed neutrality and universality of core terms but in terms of overcoming the representational bias in critically

investigating the modes of argumentation and deliberation, focusing on the emergence of meaning in linguistic use alone would fall short of the necessary depth and nuance.

Instead, it would be central to assume a perspective that takes the deliberative elements in the practice of meta-theorising not only serious but also addresses it as a central feature of discourse. In order to do so, the approach needed should open avenues to explore and unveil the intricate relationship between what is said (content) and how it is said (form). In other words, if we want to gain a fuller picture of what constitutes the practice and process of meta-theorising in IR we need to understand first of all how *persuasion* is achieved (or at least what argumentative strategies are chosen to achieve it) given the contentious and contingent nature of its substantive concerns. The art of persuasion through deliberation points us clearly in the direction of one of the most long-standing but also very contentious practices in Western thought, a practice that, as I have mentioned above, also featured in seminal, early contributions to constructivist scholarship – the art of rhetoric.³² Despite all the meta-theoretical work in IR, however, there is so far no sustained attempt to think through or even acknowledge the consequences that arise out of the central insight that *the practice of meta-theorising is fundamentally rhetorical*.

THE RHETORIC OF INQUIRY – THE FORM, CONTENT AND ETHICS OF META-THEORISING

Invoking the notion of rhetoric as the art of persuasion in relation to meta-theory in International Relations is bound to elicit a variety of reactions – positive and negative. On the one hand, linking rhetoric as the art of persuasion to the political realm broadly conceived hardly sparks any controversial reactions.³³

Yet, although the role of rhetoric in public affairs, the realm in which it has been placed since its inception in ancient Greece, is widely acknowledged, its invocation also always carries some clearly negative undertones.³⁴ Especially “[w]hen ‘rhetoric’ is used in reference to scientists, textbook writers, reporters, and the like, it is frequently a term of derision, a way of suggesting that they have violated principles held high in their professions.”³⁵ Introducing the art of persuasion into the realms of academic and scientific discourse often invokes suspicion. “Indeed, more often than not these days the term is associated with speech oriented primarily towards deception, superficiality or manipulation. ‘Rhetoric’ is routinely contrasted with speech that adheres to ‘reality’ or with the ‘truth’ that can be found ‘behind’

words, the truth of the real 'interests' or intentions that are deliberately obscured by language."³⁶

However, communication and its linguistic practices, among them the art of argument and persuasion, provide a central element in any analysis of conceptual debates. Understanding concepts and the symbolic orders in which they emerge, develop and are substantiated as historically contingent artefacts means a shift in

attention away from the abstract and allegedly universal standards of Reason and toward the 'warrants' and 'backings' of particular reasonings. [This] means stressing the importance of the audience in humanistic and scientific speech: the warrants and backings must be shared with the audience if an argument is to have power. And it entails focusing on the figurative and even the mythic parts of inquiry.³⁷

Such a perspective recognises the "pluralism in which methods of inquiry and argument are adapted to the particular subject under investigation."³⁸ Acknowledging the specificity of symbolic orders and their concomitant conceptual content – temporally, spatially and in relation to a specific subject matter – allows the creation of "languages for talking about what we have in common and for understanding why we do not – and cannot – have everything in common. Rhetoric of inquiry is a way of conversing about intellectual conversation – and improving its quality."³⁹ If the development of concepts remains a social activity the substance of which is temporally, spatially and substantively contingent, the manners in which concepts gain acceptance and 'power' in scientific and intellectual discourse cannot be reduced to their substantive claims justified with reference to either logic or cognition. Rather, there is always a need to provide supporting arguments as to why *these* substantive claims, *these* conceptualisations and not others should be accepted. As a consequence "[r]hetoric of inquiry is needed precisely because facts themselves are mute. Whatever the fact, we do the speaking – whether through them or for them."⁴⁰ Speaking through or for facts that are never sufficient to carry the weight of conceptual claims by themselves, however, is not a descriptive, assertive practice but rather aims at convincing an audience through argumentation.

Against the persisting scare-mongering that the acceptance of rhetorical practice within academic discourse will dispense with truth and knowledge founded on rational principles of method, it is necessary to realise that "the underside of this claim is that the truth has been

transmitted in ways that are themselves evidently rhetorical.”⁴¹ The contingent nature of the substantive claims that form the content of prevalent conceptual frameworks makes argumentation and persuasion necessary and links conceptual and abstract thought to rhetorical practice. More importantly, though, this intersection between *what* conceptual substance is presented and *how* it is presented denies any possibility to separate the linguistic practice in which content is given from the substantive claims advanced in the process of argumentation. Rather, in each instance there is the necessity for the orator “to combine [...] knowledge with a command of language, and [...] to adapt both language and content in the specific act of making a persuasive message. Hence this task involve[s] *an obvious and practical union of form and content.*”⁴² This practical union must not be understood simply in terms of the interconnectivity between ‘form’ and ‘content’ but actually suggests a proper cross-contamination so that we need to speak, in an analytically correct manner, of the form of the content and the content of the form. Heuristically, we can separate these two elements; practically, however, they are not separable in a sustainable, non-reductionist fashion. We reach here the core elements within a rhetorical approach to concept formation and dissemination in IR meta-theory.

In light of this, the current instantiations of meta-theory in IR cannot simply be reduced to the delineation of substantive content but in this very development require and rely on argumentative structures aimed at persuading relevant audiences of the validity of their claims. As a result, we cannot be content in our quest for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of meta-theory and meta-theorising by reducing its practice to purely definitional exercises that establish content while remaining unreflective of the central importance of the argumentative forms that sustains it. Rather, we need to grasp and uncover the rhetorical elements that are used if we want to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the practice of meta-theorising in both its form *and* content. Our attention then widens from the question of how we conduct inquiry in IR in terms of substance to include a deliberation of the rhetoric that sustains such conduct – in other words we shift from a sole focus on the *conduct of inquiry* to the broader focus on the *rhetoric of inquiry* that combines form and content. Such a shift “reflects a renewed concern for the quality of speaking and writing in scholarship. It emphasizes the interaction of style and substance. [...] [R]hetoric of inquiry shows what we are really doing and how to criticise it. [...] Rhetoric of inquiry explores how reason is rhetorical.”⁴³

Importantly, the ways in which persuasion is sought cannot be reduced to a universal description of rhetoric; rather a rhetoric of inquiry must engage with the specific subject matter at hand – the content is as much part of the form as the form becomes part of the content. “[...] [P]ersuasion about theoretical issues becomes a kind of activity in its own right. The conditions for effecting persuasion [...] are typically different, and thus they generate specifically different models of rhetorical practice.”⁴⁴ Inquiring successfully into the interplay of form and content therefore “[...] requires the generation of a model that encompasses the unity of form and content, of perspective and action, in respect to some domain of practice.”⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

Excluding meta-theorising from the realm of IR does not ‘solve the problem’ of its undecidable, perennial questions steeped in ‘ideology’ and ‘mere opinion’; nor does it purify scholarship by purging ‘philosophical’ and ‘ideological’ (read contingent and irresolvable) debates from IR proper. In fact, it merely achieves a cover up of the inevitable, underlying deliberative practices that inform the development of concepts and theories in IR. Even the seemingly ‘rational’ position of sedimenting yet again the belief in the possibility to develop a purely demonstrative basis for research resting upon agreed upon fundamental principles is hard to maintain upon closer inspection. Given the underlying deliberative and rhetorical dimension in conceptual discourse, re-engaging with contemporary contributions to meta-theory in IR from a rhetorical perspective illuminates the fusion of form and content in all instances of conceptual deliberation. As such it promises a more nuanced, comprehensive and reflective understanding of what constitutes meta-theorising in International Relations in its various manifestations.

Although such an endeavour may seem far removed from the urgencies of crises in the political realm, reflexivity towards our most basic assumptions will show that spaces for human action are disclosed and concealed in relation to them. Responding to the wide array of political challenges at the beginning of the 21st century and taking the consequences of human action seriously does not only call for political and social action. It also demands an explicit and critical engagement with the assumptions we bring to the processes of decision-making that in turn inform the choices we make in response to these challenges. As such, meta-theory as the most fundamental level of reflection must assume an important role in

assessing and formulating the conditions according to which understanding is achieved and action becomes legitimised. We need to understand what it means to meta-theorise (form), what exactly the conceptualisations of core elements entail (content) and what consequences these two dimensions have for the evaluation of meta-theory both in assessing the relations between competing meta-theoretical systems and the consequences for informing the theoretical and empirical dimensions of the study of world politics (ethics). Ignoring the complexity of meta-theorising and assuming its supposed clarity and mono-dimensional purpose bears risks much beyond meta-theory itself. Reducing meta-theory to a mostly definitional exercise or, even worse, ignoring it altogether opens the door to exclusivist practices and ontological and epistemological blind spots with possibly dire consequences. After all, a tyranny of the word all too easily can become a tyranny of the deed. Third generation constructivism has an opportunity here to connect to its forebears and carry on their substantive insights into forms of reflection and intellectual openness that will serve International Relations as a whole.

Endnotes

¹ Patrick Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations. Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 31.

² Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what States Make of it: the Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1992), pp. 391-425 and Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³ Emmanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground. Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1997), pp. 319-363.

⁴ See for instance Inanna Hamati-Ataya, 'Reflectivity, reflexivity, and reflexivism: IR's 'reflective turn' – and beyond', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2012), pp. 669-694.

⁵ David McCourt, 'Constructivism's Contemporary Crisis and the Challenge of Reflexivity', *European Review of International Studies*, forthcoming.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Vincent Pouliot, 'The Logic of Practicality: A Theory of Practice of Security Communities', *International Organization*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (2008), pp. 260-265.

⁸ Jackson, *op. cit.*

⁹ Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions. On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 212-248.

¹⁰ see for instance Morton Kaplan, 'The New Great Debate: Traditionalism vs Science in International Relations', *World Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1966), pp. 1-20; Hedley Bull, 'International Theory: A Case for a Classical Approach', *World Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1966), pp. 361-377; David Singer, 'The Behavioral Science Approach to International Relations: Payoff and Prospect', *SAIS Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1966), pp. 12-20.

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