

Constructivism is Concerned with Norms, but is it Normative Theory?

Written by Matthew Williams

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Constructivism as an approach to International Political Theory is not a homogeneous or unified entity, more so than many other approaches it has great rifts between its individual theorists – thus engaging with constructivism in terms of a paradigm wide critique and analysis is difficult. Especially with respect to the role of norms and the normative – which hold central place in the constructivism of Kratochwil, yet are a minor adjunct to Wendt's theory.

In light of the difficulty in establishing any sound basis for what constructivism *per se* is, this paper will focus mostly on the constructivism outlined throughout Wendt's work, as this is often forwarded as the seminal example of a constructivist approach to international relations, or as the best account of a constructivist theory of international relations[1]. Other writers will be tackled later – particularly Kratochwil as his constructivist approach is in marked contrast to that of Wendt – but in a less comprehensive manner.

The argument will move through five stages, first I wish to tackle what Wendt's approach to Constructivism is, this will be followed by an examination of what it is to study 'norms' in International Relations. Third, I will tackle what normative theory in international relations is, and what its concerns are, this will lead into an analysis of whether Wendt's social constructivism is compatible with normative theory as it is understood by scholars in the field. Finally, I will seek to problematize the argument made in the preceding sections by introducing the work of Kratochwil – this will primarily serve to highlight the difficulties of the label 'constructivism', but also, I believe will further highlight the extent to which constructivism in general is not, by most accounts, a normative theory of international politics. Further, the striking difference in the treatment of norms by Wendt and Kratochwil will illustrate that norms are not the central concern of any constructivist approach.

The Constructivism of Wendt

Fundamentally, Wendt's theory is set against that of Kenneth Waltz as outlined in *Theory of International Politics*. Wendt seeks to highlight that Waltz 'asked all the right questions but supplied the wrong answers'[2]. In essence his theory seeks to outline that much of what neo-realists and neo-liberals take as the causal factors of behaviour in international politics are 'empty vessels'[3] without knowledge of identity and the way in which this structures and constrains behaviour within the system which they otherwise describe adequately[4]. Crucially, Wendt draws a parallel between the behaviour of individual humans and that of the state – claiming that "people act towards objects including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them"[5]. This is problematic as it buys into the depiction by neo-realists of states as unitary actors, the anthropomorphism employed in this passage implies that the state is an entirely hegemonic actor in international affairs and is not shaped by domestic concerns. As Wendt puts it:

"the state is pre-social relative to other states in the same way that the human body is pre-social...we can theorise about the processes of social construction at the level of the states system only if such processes have exogenously given, relatively stable platforms."

As Steve Smith points out, this is problematic as it removes human agency from the issue of state behaviour[6] – by

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giving states a 'personality' in order to allow for identity to play a role in international affairs, Wendt removes the role of domestic constraints on behaviour and eliminates any potential of feedback into the international system.

Wendt seeks to establish a "sociological social psychology form of systemic theory"[7] this type of theory is regarded as the *via media* between the two axes of the fourth debate. In doing this he accepts a positivist epistemology and, he claims a post-positivist ontology[8] – positivist epistemology (and methodology) for Wendt is the only way of establishing viable forms of truth about the nature of world politics, however in contrast to neo-realists and neo-liberals, and other more 'traditional' proponents of a positivist approach, Wendt includes social relations as a valid category of research and investigation. His works still ascribes to the structural approach of Waltz *et al*, with the caveat that structure can only be understood in terms of social identity. In ascribing to a 'social structural' ontology of the system, Wendt treats the state, identity and norms as having existed prior to the entry of states into the international system – this eliminates any need for him to argue about where these elements of the system come from.

In short, Wendt seeks, in a series of articles and books to bring agency back into a structural analysis of international relations. This involves accounting for the role of identities, norms and values as forces which explain state behaviour within the logic of power outlined by neo-realists. This involves an acceptance of a degree of inter-subjectivity in the international system – states often misunderstand each other within the context of the established 'rules', and also that the identities of states are mutually constitutive. That states behaviour shapes their identity and the behaviours (but not necessarily identity) of other states.

The Study of Norms

A norm is an accepted standard of behaviour among a group of actors. These can be rules regarding behaviour, such as the 'principle' of non-intervention established by the Westphalian Treaties of 1648, or more 'meta-ethical' issues of obligations to former colonies or the like.

Wendt's discussion of norms is cursory at best, they are treated as means of understanding the structure of international relations, and as explanations of why states do what they do – however in Wendt, the term 'norm' is a rather empty shell, a variable in an equation. Wendt does not reference to how norms are constructed, or attempt to determine why they occur. In this sense, I would contend that Wendt is not concerned with norms *per se* – just as neo-realists are not concerned with anarchy *per se*. Both take these features as a given, and build their theories around these features.

Further, Hopf contends that constructivism in general "does not specify the existence, let alone precise nature of its main causal/constitutive elements: identities, norms, values and social structure"[9]. The nature of Constructivism is that of a theory that provides an explanation of events and an outcome but no means of 'prediction'. Here, Hopf also illuminates the weakness of constructivist theory in dealing with what precisely norms are, and where they come from.

What is 'normative theory'?

Brown defines normative theory as:

"that body of work which addresses the moral dimension of international relations and the wider questions of meaning and interpretation by the discipline." [10]

This is a fairly broad working definition of what 'normative theory' is, in this definition it can be either that body of work which analyses how norms come to be in international relations, or that body of work which addresses what *ought* to be. This, definition, however is not as broad as it appears to be – much of the work on normative theory in international relations has been taking place in light of the third debate. Normative theory is thus, in the discussion of how things come to be, or how things ought to be, founded in analyses of change. Work in the field of 'normative theory' then, tackles issues of the legitimacy of war and aggression, or questions of social justice and obligations and seeks to illustrate how our conceptions of justice and morality have emerged throughout history.

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Normative theory was relegated by the prominence of theories based on positivist accounts of the discipline from the end of the Second World War until the late 1980s. Positivism holds that facts preclude values, and that explaining the facts is a more important pursuit than the exploration of normative concerns – this argues Brown was an attempt by a number of practitioners of the discipline to maintain that International Relations was a unique discipline with unique subjects of analysis[11]. The attempt to establish a ‘pure’ discipline led to the emergence and continued strength of the positivist position in International Relations, what Hedley Bull culled a bizarre scientific turn in the discipline when he argued for a ‘classical’ approach to the field[12].

Positivist approaches are intrinsically biased against normative theory in that it ‘demarcates between facts and morality’[13] and holds that knowledge of facts is the only valid knowledge, based on the natural science model of investigation. The scientific (positivist) approach, should in principle provide ‘explanatory theories based on facts’[14]. This has implications that theories based on ‘facts’ as observed in the ‘real’ world make the said theories objective, and not in need of interpretation – a good theory should be based on those things which all persons can observe. In this light, morality and ethics, the field of study for normative theorists are subjective and non-verifiable, a more damning description would be to ascribe the term ‘value judgements’ – morals and ethics are not intersubjectively verifiable[15] and are thus not accessible to all and ergo are not ‘informative’.

Since its re-emergence in International Relations, normative theory has mostly been concerned with issues regarding aggression in the international system – what are just wars? Is humanitarian intervention justified? In this sense, and especially in relation to the issue of humanitarian intervention, normative theorists have been engaged in establishing new norms of international behaviour, for a normative theorist, theory is constitutive of reality and helps shape it.

Is Wendt a ‘normative theorist’?

Smith contests that it seems difficult for Wendt’s theory to “account for change” in world politics[16] – this I feel is due to his [Wendt’s] conception that that states are ontologically prior to the state system[17], the identity of states appears to be established before their entry to the system – entry into the system of states only regulates the identity of the state and does not establish it. Furthermore, the establishing of state identity prior to entry into the state system is placed outside of Wendt’s scope of analysis – acceptance of this fact eliminates a large degree of normative inquiry from the scope of his analysis[18]. Without an ability to account for change, it is difficult for Wendt’s theory to claim any kind of normative stance – without accounting for change it becomes difficult, or perhaps impossible for the theory to make ethical judgements about what ought to be in the international system and how these would (or ought) to come about. Wendt also seems to regard, like most neo-realists and neo-liberals, the state as an autonomous actor[19], this is tied to his position that the state exists prior to the states-system, this seems to imply, within a wider scope that there is no intersubjective morality of states *as states*, states have a given morality before they enter the system, and it is best to seek to explain their behaviour *vis-as-vis* other states as autonomous actors with no reference to their morality – as this is not a universal variable.

Concerning more general questions of justice Wendt’s theory presents more difficulties, given it’s positivist epistemology the *Social Theory* and Wendt’s constructivism are difficult to consider as items of normative theory as outlined above.

“judgements [of morality/ethics] might be looked upon as conventional [by the positivist], i.e. as being in accordance with criteria which have been agreed upon within a given community...Yet there is nothing beyond the conventions which can be referred as final proof of the matter to somebody who reject the conventions”[20]

The above argument is illuminating of Wendt’s position in relation to normative theory, in taking many of the norms (when he refers to them) as *a priori* elements of the structure of international relations, Wendt’s theory implicitly contents that normative judgements are subjective to the degree that they are valueless as an aspect of international theory – one can only seek to *explain* how the system works and not make judgements over what is correct or incorrect in the system. Norms are in Wendt’s theory a method of explaining why events occur, not a means of understanding how they came to be.

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Wendt's theory in seeking to explain the international system as a given, albeit with limited potential for change: 'anarchy is what states make of it' after all, seeks to distance theory from practice, the subtext of Wendt's argument is that his theory simply illustrates how things work, and is not part and parcel of how they work – this is similar to neo-realist and neo-liberal traditions of thought in this area. This position sits uncomfortably with the normative conception of the role of theory in International Relations.

Other Constructivisms, a Contrast

None of the above conclusions are to say that constructivism as a general approach to International Relations *cannot* be concerned with norms. Kratochwil for instance, takes a far greater interest in the role of norms in international society than does Wendt and also expresses an interest in bringing the normative back in[21]. Like Wendt however, Kratochwil does adopt a positivist epistemology, but holds that various epistemological and methodological approaches have important things to say, whilst emphasising that the 'rational model' (positivism) has severe inadequacies in dealing with 'collective action'[22].

Kratochwil's focus on norms in comparison to Wendt's minor concern with their role emphasises that constructivism, as an approach/theory of international relations is not concerned with norms *per se*. It also highlights the inadequacies of the term constructivism to discuss such a disparate range of approaches.

Whilst Kratochwil is more concerned with norms than Wendt, his approach, like Wendt's is not normative, it remains an attempt to explain outcomes and the process of decision making in international relations, based on a dissatisfaction with the rational choice model employed by neo-realists and neo-liberals. As stated above, Kratochwil is a positivist, thus the problems concerning normative theory and positivist epistemology and methodology still hold. Much like Wendt, Kratochwil is engaged in seeking to explain why states behave in the way they do, and takes the system as a given. Normative (in the sense they are concerned with norms) theorists are more concerned with understanding how the system, and certain behaviours came to be and what implications these have for justice in international relations.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to first problematize the statement that constructivism is concerned with norms *per se*. The different positions of Wendt and Kratochwil in relation to norms I feel shows that norms, whilst a part of constructivism in International Relations, are not a key element of the approach across the board.

Secondly, it sought to show that constructivism is not a normative theory of international relations – for reasons primarily of epistemology and ontology within it. The essay has contended that positivist approaches, on which constructivism is in part based, have little to contribute to 'normative theory' due to their emphasis on observable fact as the only true basis of knowledge. To become a normative theorist it would be necessary for a positivist to step outside of their epistemology and methodology into what they may describe as 'value judgements'. Constructivism may be able to make important contributions to the understanding of normative theorists, but it is not, in and of itself, a normative theory.

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