Written by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson

Fear of Relativism

https://www.e-ir.info/2012/07/03/fear-of-relativism/

PATRICK THADDEUS JACKSON, JUL 3 2012

The dominant methodological position in the field of IR—neopositivism[1]—has almost certainly attained its dominance as a result of sociological factors, particularly the role that its emphasis on covering-law explanations and the practical activity of hypothesis-testing using sophisticated techniques of cross-case comparison plays in legitimating IR as a science within the United States. Perhaps as a result of this dominance, neopositivists do not generally engage alternative methodologies on their own terms, but instead extend an apparent olive branch of tolerance and pluralism that, on closer inspection, turns out to be a poisoned pill. The logic of the argument goes something like this: because good social-scientific research is neopositivist, which means that it involves the evaluation of hypothetical statements about the cross-case covariation of variables of interest with the ultimate intent of approximating nomothetic generalizations, any approach to the study of world politics that wants to make a meaningful contribution is welcome to propose variables and hypotheses for testing. In other words, anyone can play—a good neopositivist heartily agrees with Karl Popper that the *source* of a hypothesis matters not at all to its *validity*—as long as they agree to play the same game.

Lest I be thought of as exaggerating, let me give two examples from the work of the person perhaps most responsible for setting the agenda of Anglophone IR in the past two decades: Robert O. Keohane. The first is from his 1989 *Millennium* commentary "International Relations Theory: Contributions of a Feminist Standpoint":

I object to the notion that because social science cannot attain any perfectly reliable knowledge, it is justified for students of society to "obliterate the validity of reality". I also object to the notion that we should happily accept the existence of multiple incommensurable epistemologies, each equally valid. Such a view seems to me to lead away from our knowledge of the external world, and ultimately to a sort of nihilism.…agreement on epistemological essentials constitutes a valuable scientific asset that should not be discarded lightly. With such agreement, people with different substantive views or intuitions can talk to each other in commensurable terms can perhaps come to an agreement with the aid of evidence.…The very difficulty of achieving social scientific knowledge is an argument for cherishing rather than discarding social science and the aspiration for a more or less unified epistemology (pp. 249-250).

The second is from Keohane's 2009 essay "Political Science as a Vocation":

In our particular investigations we need to seek objectivity—a goal that is never realized but that we should strive for—because otherwise people with other preferences, or who do not know what our values are, will have no reason to take our findings seriously. In the absence of a serious culture of objectivity, no cumulative increases in knowledge can take place. But the overall enterprise should never be value-neutral. We should choose normatively important problems because we care about improving human behavior, we should explain these choices to our students and readers, and we should not apologize for making value-laden choices even as we seek to search unflinchingly for the truth, as unpleasant or unpopular as that may be (p. 5).

To Keohane's credit, here and elsewhere he actually *makes the claim* that IR requires a single set of methodological standards and procedures, some unified way for the field as a whole to adjudicate claims and discard those that are found wanting. Many neopositivists merely assume this, and don't bother to explicitly state it. Additionally, like the good neopositivist that he is, Keohane is willing to accept *any* value-commitment as a source of hypotheses and

Fear of Relativism
Written by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson

topics, just so long as that commitment only affects the things one chooses to study and not the way in which one chooses to study them. Hence, a pluralism that isn't so pluralist: a firm insistence on agreement on "fundamentals" underpins the openness to novel lines of inquiry, and the open hand of friendship can quickly turn to a iron fist if the methodological parameters of neopositivism itself are questioned.

For all of his admirable explicitness on the claim of methodological homogeneity, Keohane, like virtually every neopositivist methodologist in and around the field, doesn't ever actually spell out an *argument* for methodological homogeneity. Hence, engaging with his position first requires a bit of argumentative reconstruction. There are at least three distinct, but related, reasons for insisting that a field of study should elevate a single methodological standard to such overwhelming dominance that it becomes virtually synonymous with "good research" per se. The first, *philosophical*, reason would be that there actually is one and only one way to produce valid knowledge of the object(s) of study. The second, *hopeful*, reason would be that the use of one class of procedures has generated such impressive results thus far that it makes good sense to stick with it in the future. The third, *fearful*, reason would be a dire forecast of the consequences for the field of study if there were not one single accepted and acceptable way to adjudicate claims.

Methodological discussion in IR virtually since the founding of the field a century or so ago has featured all three of these reasons in various admixtures. Philosophical arguments for the dominance of neopositivism rest on the claim that neopositivism is uniquely scientific; hopeful arguments for the dominance of neopositivism proudly uphold correlations between wealth and democracy, or democracy and peace; and fearful arguments hint at the horrors that would ensue if we did not have a firm and uniform standard for rejecting false and invalid claims. I have addressed the first set of arguments in some detail elsewhere. As for the second set, given that the successes of neopositivist IR are not exactly on the level of flying airplanes and functioning solid-state electronics, it is unclear just how much hope for the future can be derived from some empirical findings that do not command anything like universal assent—and in any event such arguments don't actually support the dominance of neopositivism as much as they support the right of neopositivist research to be a part of the ongoing conversation alongside other methodological approaches that might or might not pan out.

It is the third set of arguments that concerns me in this essay, because—like other arguments that depend on fear—they can be remarkably effective if the audience has no sound basis on which to dispel them. And the fears that are raised, involving "nihilism," "incommensurability," and the collapse of the whole scholarly enterprise through an inability to discard invalid claims and progressively accumulate valid ones, sound quite terrifying indeed, particularly to an audience that thinks of itself as in some sense engaged in social science. All of these fears, I think, fit nicely under the heading of "relativism," and it is against the specter of relativism that fearful neopositivist arguments are directed. But the relativism against which neopositivists rail and for fear of which they barricade their methodological doors turns out, on closer inspection, to be almost wholly imaginary. Fear of relativism is based on a profound misunderstanding of the actual consequences of methodological diversity; a closer look at what methodological diversity actually entails will hopefully suffice to dispel that fear.

I. From A Certain Point of View

There are many IR examples I could use to illustrate the complexity of the issues surrounding methodological homogeneity and diversity, but starting off with any of those examples might obscure the issues as readers get too wrapped up with the nuances of the argument about world politics. So although I will introduce IR examples later on, for the moment I'm going to pursue an illustration through an example drawn from a different field entirely. In the film *Return of the Jedi*, Luke Skywalker confronts his old mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi[2] over the identity of the galactic villain Darth Vader:

Luke: Obi-Wan! Why didn't you tell me? You told me Vader betrayed and murdered my father.

Obi-Wan: Your father was seduced by the dark side of the Force. He ceased to be Anakin Skywalker and became Darth Vader. When that happened, the good man who was your father was destroyed. So what I told you was true, from a certain point of view.

Fear of Relativism

Written by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson

Luke: A certain point of view?

Obi-Wan: Luke, you're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view. Anakin was a good friend. When I first knew him, your father was already a great pilot. But I was amazed how strongly the Force was with him. I took it upon myself to train him as a Jedi. I thought that I could instruct him just as well as Yoda. I was wrong.

Luke: There is still good in him.

Obi-Wan: He's more machine now than man. Twisted and evil.

Luke's anger and frustration in this scene stems from the fact that three years (and two films) before this conversation, Obi-Wan had told Luke that Darth Vader had "betrayed and murdered" Luke's father, but a few months (and one film) before this conversation, when Luke and Vader fought an epic duel, Vader had told Luke that he, Vader, was Luke's father. Luke therefore feels that he has been lied to, and that Obi-Wan should have told him what had *truly* happened to his father. Obi-Wan's response—that truth depends on one's point of view—seems a dramatic illustration of the kind of relativism so feared by neopositivists, inasmuch as it appears to posit that truth has no meaning outside of its local context, and by implication to affirm that the same statement could be both true and false depending on how one looked at it: Luke's father could, in effect, be both dead and alive at the same time.

But on closer examination, Obi-Wan's position looks less relativist than it first appears. Obi-Wan's reply to Luke effectively *redefines* "death," making it less about the termination of a person's biological functions and more about the end of a person's identity: Obi-Wan claims that Luke's father is "dead" in the sense of no longer being the same person. By that definition, Obi-Wan's claim that Luke's father is dead, and Luke's claim that his father is alive and living under the name (and the armor and breathing apparatus of) "Darth Vader," are not even contradictory. They are instead parallel claims, such that the truth or falsity of one doesn't affect the truth or falsity of the other—and Luke's father can easily be dead in Obi-Wan's sense while remaining alive in Luke's. Both parties have reasons supporting their claims, so each one is justified in believing their claim true; indeed, both claims can be true *at the same time*, without any special philosophical problems arising.

The other fascinating thing about this confrontation is that Luke does not continue trying to attack Obi-Wan once he hears Obi-Wan's explanation. Instead, Luke provisionally adopts Obi-Wan's definitions and attempts to engage on the basis of those definitions: Vader, Luke claims, still has "good in him," a contention that Obi-Wan denies. This shifts their dispute from the realm of anything-goes nihilism (where contradictory claims might be true at the same time) to the realm of intellectual inquiry, first by more precisely defining Obi-Wan's position, and then by evaluating the basis for that position. Either Vader has good in him or he does not, and if he does, then Obi-Wan is wrong that Luke's father is dead, *according to Obi-Wan's own definitions*.

In this way, Obi-Wan's claim that truth depends on point of view appears less to be a categorical assertion that there are no universally true claims, and more to be an acknowledgement of the fact that the truth of a claim depends on two things: a set of definitions, and a procedure for evaluating how well-supported a claim is—in this instance, by the relevant evidence. Luke's response, once he realizes that Obi-Wan is not defining and using certain terms in the same was as Luke is, is not to keep insisting on his own definitions, but to learn what Obi-Wan's definitions are and then to try to ascertain whether Obi-Wan's claim is justified. Rather than something to be feared, relativism appears in this example as an opportunity for Luke to learn something new by entering a different world of definitions and procedures—and perhaps, for Obi-Wan to change his mind when presented with new evidence that disrupts his earlier certainty.

II. The Appearance of Contradiction

From this brief example we can draw a few lessons:

1) When confronted by two apparently contradictory statements, first try to ascertain whether the statements are in

Fear of Relativism

Written by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson

fact contradictory, or whether they are actually saying two different things.

2) If the statements are actually contradictory, use evidence to ascertain which is true. There is no "relativism" here as long as both statements come from traditions of inquiry that privilege *warranted assertions*, that is to say, claims supported by a judicious combination of argument and evidence. Instead, there is a more or less straightforward empirical question with a more or less straightforward answer.

3) If the statements are not actually contradictory, use evidence to ascertain whether either (or both) of them is true. There is no "relativism" here since the truth of each statement is *independent* of the truth of the other; either, neither, or both could be warranted assertions.

In this way, a little perspicacious logical analysis dispels fears of relativism before they have a chance to really take root. The basic fear seems to be that statements could be simultaneously true *and* contradictory, but as long as both statements are evaluated as potentially warranted assertions, that mythical situation simply does not arise. If the claim I make is well-supported by argument and evidence—objects drop to the ground when released, Darth Vader is my father, even the old IR chestnut that democracies don't go to war with one another—it can, if challenged by an *actually* contrary claim, be put to the test alongside the challenger, and this test can resolve the controversy. On the other hand, if confronted with an apparently contradictory but actually independent statement, my warranted assertion remains intact.

Obviously, much of my argument here is borne by the notion of "warranted assertability." Originally developed by John Dewey in his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938) as a way of cashing out the notion of "truth" in a more pragmatic fashion, the basic idea is that a claim about some aspect of the world, be it an observation, an explanation, an evaluation, or whatever, is "true" if and only if it is supported by argument and evidence in some combination judged appropriate by the relevant community of practice. "If you have a UNIX-based operating system, repairing the permissions on your startup disk solves many common operational problems" is a true statement if and only if the relevant group of practitioners (computer support techs, in this case) deem it to be sufficiently supported. The community of practice both *understands* the claim by having a rough agreement on the meanings of the terms used in the statement, and *judges* it to be warranted by applying certain conventional procedures to check the claim against appropriate evidence. Note that this does *not* mean that the community of practice arbitrarily designates a statement true or false on a whim; rather, the community determines whether the claim expressed in the statement is true or false by ascertaining whether or not it is a warranted assertion. Unwarranted assertions are false; warranted assertions are true.

Dewey's formulation neatly captures, I think, what we usually *mean* when we say that some statement is true or false, and its deliberate open-endedness means that it can be profitably used with any number of communities of practice, each of which has different conventional procedures for checking claims against appropriate evidence and different rough agreements about the meanings of terms.[3] What a computer technician does when evaluating a piece of troubleshooting advice is not fundamentally different from what a social scientist does when evaluating a scholarly article—and neither is fundamentally different from what Luke does when confronting Obi-Wan about the identity of Darth Vader. Yes, the community of practice is different in each case, and the specific procedures applied are not quite the same across different communities. What we might call the *density* of the community of practice varies considerably as well, ranging from a tightly-knit group of virtuosos to the extremely diffuse group of speakers of a natural language like English. But the basic activity is the same, and the status of a true statement is the same in each case: judged, by members of the community participating in the truth-seeking activity of evaluating claims, to be sufficiently warranted.

I've obviously glossed over several important variants of how a controversy over the truth of a claim might play out. Luke might have decided that Obi-Wan was simply not a member of the same community of practice, because Obi-Wan's definitions were just too far away from Luke's own. Either Luke or Obi-Wan might not have been involved in a tradition of inquiry that esteemed truth, giving the statements in question very different statuses: assertions of fidelity, perhaps, or expressions of an ideological commitment. And obviously, as we scholars know only too well, questions of what constitutes appropriate evidence or a definitive warrant for a claim sometimes lead to seemingly endless

Fear of Relativism

Written by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson

controversies even though—and perhaps even because!—all parties to the dispute agree on the meanings of terms and the procedures for judging whether claims are actually warranted. But I think we can ignore these complications for the moment because none of them bear on the question of "relativism": speakers playing very different language-games can't very well contradict one another, and speakers attempting to draw out the implications of some piece of evidence or line of argument are all already committed to the notion that there *is* a single uniform answer that will put the controversy to rest (virtually everyone arguing about the "democratic peace" presumes that it either is or is not true that democracies don't fight one another, and the disagreement is over which claim is better warranted). Neither separate worlds nor specialist debates pose any threat of relativism.

Instead, relativism only looms if each of a set of contradictory statements is regarded as true—sufficiently warranted—by different communities of practice.[4] In IR we appear to have this situation quite a bit, with IR realists maintaining that states seek power and security while IR liberals maintain that states seek wealth and predictability, but this is actually a prime example of an apparent contradiction that dissolves with the application of a little logical analysis. For some IR realists and some IR liberals, these statements are not *themselves* warranted claims about the world, but presuppositions that structure subsequent empirical investigations—and those investigations are more about clarifying why in a specific case an expected outcome did *not* occur, why states did *not* seek to maximize power or wealth or whatever. For example, in structural realism, expected changes in the balance of power may not occur because of domestic political constraints or because of the strange strategic distortions introduced by nuclear weapons (which is an important part of Waltz's (1990) explanation for the uncanny stability of a bipolar world). If "states maximize power and security" and "states maximize wealth and predictability" are not thought of as expressing empirical claims about the world but are instead regarded as ideal-typical baselines for analyzing the world, then there is as little contradiction between them as there is between statements like "people act according their interests" and "people act according to their beliefs"—and, in consequence, no relativism. There can be debates about the relative merits of each statement and the claim it expresses, with that merit tied to the claim's usefulness as an explanatory instrument, but it makes no sense to try to *directly* contrast ideal-typical statements to one another and to look for a contradiction.[5]

Of course, if one *did* try to treat these statements as appropriate objects of a judgment about whether they were well supported by evidence and argument—as some other IR scholars do—there would be no relativism involved either, because one could simply propose appropriate operationalizations of the relevant concepts, collect data, and determine which claim (if either) was correct. Thus, when scholars set out to ascertain whether a bipolar or a multipolar international system was characterized by more wars, the resounding answer was that it did not make a difference (as in Vasquez 2012), and there are few if any grounds for continuing to believe that the number of poles in the system definitely and unambiguously determines conflict frequency. To continue to maintain that it does is not relativism, but bad science—or a continued category-confusion between empirically warranted assertions about the world and ideal-typical presuppositions that are not even in principle directly testable (their value, instead, lies in their practical contributions to an explanatory account, exactly the way that the abstract and idealized equations of modern physics mirror nothing but serve as the foundation for a plethora of efficacious explanations). There are obvious technical difficulties here, as with a book like Andrew Moravcsik's *The Choice for Europe* (1998), which sets out to evaluate claims about the motivations of state leaders but ends up constructing an account that only illustrates the plausibility of a liberal-rationalist account rather than definitively refuting alternate readings of the historical evidence; but once again, relativism is not involved.

Hence: if two claims are actually contradictory, they can be submitted to empirical evaluation; if they are not actually contradictory, then they can be evaluated independently. In either case, relativism vanishes. Luke's father cannot be both alive and dead for the same meanings of "dead," "alive," and "Luke's father"; the fact that he can be alive in one sense but dead in another is no contradiction, but instead a pleasingly ambiguous opportunity to expand our horizons.

III. The Task of Translation

In the preceding discussion I have assumed, albeit tacitly, that contradictory statements emanating from different communities of practice and different traditions of inquiry are translatable into one another's terms.[6] Translation is

Fear of Relativism

Written by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson

required for contradiction to have any sense or meaning: "objects fall to the ground when dropped" is contradicted by "objects rise into the sky when dropped," and not by "cuisinart artichoke hobgoblin." By the same token, translation of this sort must involve not just the meanings of terms, but also the relevant procedures of judging whether a claim is warranted; if when I say "democracies do not go to war with one another" I *mean* "democracies are not involved in wars with other democracies to any statistically significant degree," then the proper translation of a statement that potentially contradicts this one must likewise be a statement expressible in the language of statistical significance. If when someone else says "democracies do so go to war with one another" I mean not that they do so a statistically significant number of times, but that one democracy has fought with one other democracy, the statement is technically not a contradiction of my initial statement, as both could be true—well warranted—at the same time.

But the translations challenges facing IR scholarship are considerably more profound than simply those involving relative frequencies. The IR constructivist claim that identity matters to the explanation of events in world politics does *not*—at least, does not *always*—mean that identity exercises a *greater impact on outcomes than other factors do*. Rather, for many IR constructivists it means that an explanation that does not incorporate identity is *incomplete, even if one can achieve statistically significant results without adding identity as an independent variable* . Some of this distinction is unfortunately and misleadingly buried in discussions about case-specific vs. general explanations (this is unfortunate and misleading because the number of cases is not methodologically significant in and of itself, but is a consequence of more basic methodological commitments), but the grain of truth here is that at least some IR constructivists are not making claims about the general and cross-case measurable independent impact of norms and ideas and rhetoric, but are instead analyzing world politics—and warranting claims about world politics—in different, non-nomothetic ways. Such claims could not even in principle contradict or be contradicted by the potential nomothetic generalizations (even well-verified nomothetic generalizations!) advanced by neopositivists, because they are almost literally formulated in a different language.

Indeed, it would not be too much to say simply that we are presented with a stark choice when it comes to claims about world politics that appear to be in tension with one another. Either we can translate the claims into the same tradition of inquiry and standards of judging whether the claims are warranted, in which case evaluating them becomes a relatively straightforward matter; or we cannot translate them without doing undue interpretive violence to one of the claims, in which case the claims are simply saying different things and thus pose no problems for one another. Testing on one hand, complementarity on the other, but *no relativism*. If I claim that states balance against one another in anarchy and I intend this to be a well-warranted claim about world politics, then it can be evaluated against its rivals more or less directly, and perhaps fall to the better-warranted claim that states in anarchy seek to bandwagon and buck-pass. If I claim that states balance in anarchy and I intend this to be an ideal-typical baseline against which I can explain specific state actions, then I haven't contradicted the claim that states bandwagon and buck-pass; I have instead engaged in a different kind of explanatory endeavor. And I have only scratched the surface here, since many scholarly claims in word politics have *normative* content as well, which translates even more imperfectly into the idiom of systematic cross-case covariation esteemed by neopositivists…indeed, translation challenges lurk around every corner in IR scholarship, and we only ignore them by something approximating a willful act of blindness.

So what is the proper response? I have argued that translation problems are not relativism because two claims inhabiting different traditions of inquiry cannot possibly contradict one another unless they can be translated into the other tradition more or less perfectly, and if they can be translated then they can be more or less straightforwardly evaluated. Luke and Obi-Wan are speaking different and partially non-translatable languages when they have their confrontation about whether Luke's father is dead or alive, so they can't contradict one another. It is only when Luke realizes that Obi-Wan is using words in a different way that something like conversation becomes possible; Luke provisionally adopts Obi-Wan's definitions and the conversation proceeds, with each party expanding its grasp of the world in subtle, comprehensive ways. If this were to take place in IR, we would not have Keohane's back-handed faux tolerance—everyone can play if you play my game—but we would instead have an acknowledgement of the variety of warranted claims one might make about world politics. Feminist, post-colonial, and critical constructivist scholarship, to select just three examples, may simply *not be interested* in the question of whether some X is correlated with some Y; this does not detract from the potential validity of a claim about the relationship between X and Y, but it does suggest that perhaps there might be other important questions to ask that do not fit neatly into that

Fear of Relativism

Written by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson

neopositivist explanatory framework.

The point is that the existence of different traditions of inquiry that are each seeking to produce warranted assertions in their own way is in no way a threat to the integrity of each tradition. Over time perhaps some of these traditions will discover or negotiate a common language about validity that connects them to other traditions, and at that point we might be justified in calling those separate traditions a single tradition of inquiry, because there would be only one set of warranted assertions common to both. But perhaps not. We don't know, and arguably we *can't* know, what will happen as conditionally independent lines of broadly social-scientific research proceed and evolve. It would be the height of arrogance and hubris to legislate *in advance* the language in which potentially valid claims must be articulated, and to place a straightjacket over the precise definition of warranted assertability for all time. Instead, *any* tradition of inquiry that is concerned to produce warranted assertions about world politics should be allowed, even encouraged, to develop and flourish in IR. The danger is not relativism; the danger is the potential myopia produced by a methodological and theoretical monoculture. Complementary warranted assertions—multiple perspectives, each of which is internally coherent and demonstrably rigorous—can only improve our overall grasp of world politics. There is nothing here to fear, so we should stop barricading our doors against one another, step outside, and have a conversation.

—

Patrick Thaddeus Jackson *is Professor of World Politics and Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education in the School of International Service at the American University in Washington, DC. He previously taught at Columbia University and New York University. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Columbia University in 2001. In 2003-2004, he served as President of the International Studies Association-Northeast; in 2012-2013, he is doing so again. He is presently the Series Editor of the University of Michigan Press' book series Configurations: Critical Studies of World Politics. He has three times received university awards for the innovative use of technology in the classroom, and was the AU Honors Program's Faculty Member of the Year for 2004-5. He received the School of International Service's Scholar/Teacher of the Year award in 2011. He blogs at The Duck of Minerva and podcasts at http://www.kittenboo.com.*

References

Boghossian, Paul. 2007. *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davidson, Donald. 1973. "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme."*Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47: 5–20. doi:10.2307/3129898.

Dewey, John. 1938. *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus. 2011. *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*. London: Routledge.

King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kuhn, Thomas S. 2000. *The Road Since Structure: Philosophical Essays, 1970-1993*. Ed. James Conant and John Haugeland. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Moravcsik, Andrew. 1998. *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Fear of Relativism

Written by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson

Rescher, Nicholas. 1997. *Objectivity: The Obligations of Impersonal Reason*. Notre Dame, IN: University Of Notre Dame Press.

Shotter, John. 1993. *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Vasquez, John A., ed. 2012. *What Do We Know About War?* Second ed. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Waltz, Kenneth N. 1990. "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities." *The American Political Science Review* 84 (3): 731–745. doi:10.2307/1962764.

[1] Neopositivism, as distinct from the logical positivism and logical empiricism that preceded it, combines the exercise of hypothesis-testing with an emphasis on the logical form of nomothetic generalization. King, Keohane, and Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994) provides the clearest contemporary articulation. On neopositivism and its relationship to logical positivism, see (Jackson 2011), especially Chapter 3.

[2] Technically, Obi-Wan's ghost, preserved by the Force and somehow still able to interact with more conventionally alive beings.

[3] Note that I am confining this discussion to *phenomenal*, or what are colloquially known as "empirical," claims, because the charge of methodological relativism in IR is generally pitched at the level of descriptive inference and causal explanation rather than at the level of morality. It is an open question whether and how normative and ethical claims can be warranted by evidence, and hence an open question whether and how much one can adjudicate normative and ethical controversies by looking for the better-warranted claim. It is a further question how much those making normative and ethical claims would *want* their claims to be adjudicated or adjudicable by empirical evidence. Dewey himself was not keen on the distinction between phenomenal/empirical claims and normative/ethical claims; others, like Weber and Wittgenstein, would of course disagree.

[4] For this formulation of the problem of relativism I am indebted to Paul Boghossian's *Fear of Knowledge* (2007). Of course, my entire essay, from the title on, stands as something of a rebuttal to Boghossian's argument.

[5] Note that for the sake of simplicity I have only introduced *one* alternative to a warranted empirical claim about the world: ideal-types. There are at least two other classifications of statements that shouldn't be taken as simple empirical claims because they participate in very different methodologies (critical realism and reflexivity), but to introduce them at this point would I fear, muddy the waters too much for a brief essay.

[6] The importance of translation to these issues is underscored by Donald Davidson's brilliant demolition of the notion of a "conceptual scheme" (1973) and Nicholas Rescher's reformulation of "objectivity" as "impersonal reason" (1997). But Davidson and Rescher assumed that *every* claim was translatable into *every* language, an assumption I am less willing to make in part because I am convinced by Thomas Kuhn's later work on the topic (collected in Kuhn 2000). See also John Shotter's (1993) work on ambiguous commonplaces.

About the author:

Patrick Thaddeus Jackson is Professor of World Politics and Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education in the School of International Service at the American University in Washington, DC. He is presently the Series Editor of the University of Michigan Press' book series Configurations: Critical Studies of World Politics. He blogs at The Duck of Minerva and podcasts at http://www.kittenboo.com.