IR and the Pursuit of Knowledge: Endless Theoretical Questions?

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/09/16/international-relations-and-the-pursuit-of-knowledge-endless-theoretical-questions/

A.C. MCKEIL, SEP 16 2013

'Whoever it was that first hit on the notion of a university and proposed that a public institution of this kind be established, it was not a bad idea to handle the entire content of learning (really, the thinkers devoted to it) by mass production, so to speak –by a division of labor …'

Kant, The Conflict of the Faculties[i]

'The clashing point of two subjects, two disciplines, two cultures –of two galaxies, so far as that goes, ought to produce creative chances. In the history of mental activity that is where some of the break-throughs came.'

C.P. Snow, 'The Two Cultures'[ii]

In the literature of International Relations, theoretical and epistemological controversies between so-called positivist advocates and the rest, have been, on the whole, fruitful.[iii] From this controversy, the dimensions of IR's methodological questions have been brought into greater relief and beyond this it has enriched and expanded the literature, by enabling various new kinds of questions and knowledge pursuits. While researching this blooming of a thousand theoretical flowers (as K.J. Holsti once phrased it) for an essay, a significant new source came to my attention and quickly came to preoccupy my thinking. Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen, and Collin Wight's special issue, 'The End of International Relations Theory?' and its companion symposium, richly deliberate, once again, the road from IR's pluralistic garden today.[iv] The question throughout is how to and not to cohere our diverse and diverging inquiries. This question strikes me as vital, in an ongoing way, since the purposes (the ends or functions), of both disciplinary pluralism and coherence, are equally the pursuit of knowledge. The question is said to be vital and ongoing, however, since pluralism and coherence are attained from the investigation of different kinds and at times conflicting, questions, which either draw research together or apart. This brief essay is largely an exploration of this tension in the pursuit of international knowledge.

IR and the Function of Knowledge

Yet, before we set out, the question, surrounding epistemological issues and residing behind or beside our theoretical debates and deliberations, is: What is the function of the pursuit of knowledge itself? Although this meta-academic question is archetypically philosophical and possibly irresolvable, with respect to IR its consideration is intellectually helpful for the new student and discipline at large, since it draws some of our deeper divisions up to the surface and illuminates some underlying questions. Is the function of the pursuit of international knowledge the virtue of diplomatic wisdom or is it the powerful Enlightenment dream of a peaceful order? Is it the ambition of transcending blame from our understanding of the causes of war or is it the opposite? Is the function what Cox famously described as critical or is it problem-solving, or both?[v] Alternatively, is the function of knowledge determined by the cognitive interest behind its generation, as Habermas distinguished practical, technical, and emancipatory intellectual forms?[vi] Or, does the answer depend on the specific kind of knowledge under question, say, as Aristotle distinguished them?[vii] On the other hand, is the function only apparent once knowledge is attained? Or, regardless of its implications, is the

IR and the Pursuit of Knowledge: Endless Theoretical Questions?
Written by A.C. McKeil

function of knowledge simply the discernment or possession of the truth?[viii]

Without falling into the question of what knowledge is, the question of the function of knowledge, in a sociological sense, depends on whom one asks. There are autobiographical answers scholars, practitioners, and philosophers may have, personal journeys, values, and political agendas. There are also, public answers, comprising the vast collective goals and ambitions of succeeding generations, peoples, and civilizations, in their contributions to humanity. Moreover, privilege and influence are unevenly distributed between the advocates of these various, often conflicting, positions on the function of knowledge.[ix]

Since it is a philosophical, personal, public and political question, the arguably most sensible and intellectually fecund position is ambiguously located, so to sceptically ensure continuing and increasingly sophisticated debate in the pursuit of knowledge. In other words, providing reasons and space for intellectual plurality, by denying both relativism and monism, we not only clear the various roadways of knowledge, but also illuminate the paths between them, and so deepen and promote further learning for future benefit. From this position and spirit of inquisitive scepticism, intellectual pluralism and cooperation are coequal in the pursuit of knowledge.

Yet, to reconcile theoretical pluralism with cooperation, theoretical diversity with coherence, so the argument will be made, questions of consilience (the interlocking of explanations across questions concerning different phenomena) and meta-theory need clarification and ongoing examination. That is not to say, however, that there should be rules or a meta-method established for pursuing inter-theoretical coherence, since that would actually limit our stock of questions. Rather, the point is that the pursuit of knowledge requires only the lucid and thorough engagement of our questions, all of them, including how these questions relate, since how all this research adds up, how it all hangs together, is a live question, of significance and fruitfulness, so long as IR's body of knowledge continues to grow.

Intellectual Pluralism and Cooperation

In the history of IR, the various contributions of the scholarly generations, positivist and post, have expanded and complicated IR theory. Today, incoming generations of IR scholars find a discipline of theoretical pluralism, as a fact, if not everywhere a fashionable trend. Yet, the pluralism of IR today can also be characterized by increasing entropy, declining isomorphism and understanding, growing disinterest between scholars, and a widening dearth of relevance between the data generated by IR's different theoretical directions. While introductory textbooks are keeping pace with pluralization, often ingeniously so, scholarly communities within IR are arguably more engaged in critical indifference than fruitful controversy. That is, while debate has produced progress on epistemological questions, intellectual cooperation may be, on balance, in decline, though some empirical work into the sociology of IR knowledge is necessary to confirm this.

In 1989, considering IR's diverging directions of inquiry, K.J. Holsti raised the question: What is the function of pluralism?[x] He argued that pluralism (intellectual freedom and equality) is based, most importantly, on the Socratic idea that intellectual progress is achieved via the conceptual and logical interrogation of beliefs. On this basis, Holsti argued that progress in IR is not best measured by the crowning of paradigms, or even the accumulation of theories, but rather, the accumulation of knowledge. In this he was exactly right. He argued, academic progress is best measured by the increasingly lucid statement of our explanatory theories and the continual gathering and ordering of relevant facts. This is a helpful and compelling contribution, so long as we recognize that there are different kinds of theory and facts. Nonetheless, the question of how these theories and facts hang together, wander apart, and what questions reside between them, is still unresolved in the pluralizing literature of IR today.

In considering IR's historical pluralism, one may come to the notion that the values of intellectual freedom and equality, opposed to the value and goal of intellectual cooperation, in the academic pursuit of IR and the social sciences generally, are, at the surface, incompatible and conflicting. That is, while freedom and equality enable us to drift apart, they produce new variety of fruits. And, conversely, while cooperation draws us together, it tends to focus research upon specific, even singular, questions. While, in IR's current state of affairs, intellectual freedom (if not equality) is arguably alive and well, conflict with the goal and value or ideal of intellectual cooperation may be an ongoing challenge.

IR and the Pursuit of Knowledge: Endless Theoretical Questions?
Written by A.C. McKeil

The contented pluralist, celebrating the achievement of IR's pluralism, may object to this above notion of conflict.[xi] It is arguable that there is today, a body of IR theory and exegesis, albeit of a pluralistic character, and that this literature, despite the variety of conflicting and divergent positions within it, is cohered by a distinct basket of questions, reaching into the broadest and deepest intellectual spaces of history and political philosophy.[xii] Furthermore, the learning, teaching, and growth of this literature, as an undergraduate programme and post-graduate pursuit, may be argued to constitute the academic grounds on which to consider IR a distinct and flourishing discipline, regardless of the degree of cooperation and dialogue between international schools of thought. This is true, in so far as these are collective achievements of the scholarly generations of IR academics in the 20th century. However, the question remains whether there is sufficient cooperation between the diverse and divergent literatures of IR, despite their broadest or deepest intellectual affinities and academic semblance of coherence.

Plurality and Consilience

Sufficiency of cooperation hinges on the counter-question to Holsti's: What is the function of intellectual cooperation? The purpose of cooperation is the pursuit of certain benefits, chiefly, the cross-fertilization of ideas, in IR particularly, the diplomatic benefits of international cooperation, but furthermore, a special pursuit of cooperation is the broader kind of knowledge provided by consilience. Consilience, the concord or coherence between explanations of different questions or subject-matters, is, in IR, arguably worth pursuing because it throws light on questions which otherwise remain dumbly unarticulated and unexamined. That is, the pursuit of disciplinary coherence is not for its own sake, but, like pluralism, is also for the pursuit of knowledge.

The various disciplines of natural sciences have, as Edward O. Wilson somewhat famously pointed out, developed vast connections between diverse questions, concepts, and theories, linking Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Geology. These connections reach across coherent levels of explanation, from the subatomic to the ecosystem level of analysis and beyond.[xiii] Significantly, these connections have produced incredible achievements in the old discipline of Medicine. In addition, they have also produced the immense literatures and applications of the unique interdisciplinary questions of Biochemistry and Neuroscience, amongst many others. There are the traces of consilience in the social sciences, via the broadest social theories and ideas that bestride the disciplines.[xiv] However, the social sciences are certainly less connected than the natural sciences and less connected to the natural sciences than Wilson argues we may wish them to be. Finding consilient connections, where they may reside, their nature and implications, is, while not central in the pursuit of knowledge, potentially fruitful and equally worthwhile.

However, within IR itself, let alone academia at large, there is a discernable lack of attention paid to those peculiar bridge questions that link IR's various realms of theory and analysis in new fruitful ways. Instead, synthesis or paradigmatic dominance has often been the objective in IR, the pursuit of a perfect theory, which may be interesting, even worthwhile, but is neglectful of questions of how theories relate and are distinguished, how they apply to different subject-matters, and how they confirm or contradict one another, which is the pursuit of coherence between theories, not their liquidation in a synthetic melting pot. Furthermore, advocates of subordinating, even abandoning, meta-theoretical questions to the demands of policy relevance, advocates of theoretical pragmatism or eclecticism, impoverish our pursuit of knowledge and moreover, as Christian Reus-Smit rightly argues, jeopardize the quality of policy relevant literature.[xv] Overall, the point is that expanding thinking space implies illuminating the links and breaks between new insights, it implies exploring the peculiar but important questions that bridge intellectual spaces, not only the pursuit of knew avenues of questions.[xvi]

Plurality and Meta-Theory

Distinguishing and ordering the various theories in IR and the social sciences generally for that matter, is partly a task of meta-theory or the philosophy of science. In IR, much progress has been made in this area, significantly following Martin Hollis and Steve Smith's *Explaining and Understanding International Relations,* King, Keohane and Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry,* P.T. Jackson's *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations,* and the growing surrounding literature, amongst which is the important call for 'integrative pluralism' by Dunne, Hansen, and Wight that is most significant and encouraging for the subject of this essay.[xvii]

IR and the Pursuit of Knowledge: Endless Theoretical Questions?
Written by A.C. McKeil

However, the question of how to integrate is somewhat still unclear and developing an integrated plurality is a substantial undertaking. A challenge is how the pluralization in methodological approaches to IR has been parallel to a proliferation of social questions treated in the literature, ranging today from traditional questions of the implications of anarchy, the causes of war and peace, and the principles of diplomacy, to the sources, perpetuations, and implications of gender inequality, the implications of global economics and class, the processes and forms of governmentality, as well as the legacy of colonialism, amongst seemingly endless other vast and important questions. This, on the whole, is an immense growth of knowledge. However, while there may be some discernable patterns of debate and change in the history of IR, IR's growth seems to have produced a multi-paradigmatic era today where IR's subject-matter has been immensely expanded to various realms of social phenomena.[xviii] In this respect, alongside the levels-of-analysis problem, IR is faced with what can be called the subjects-of-analysis problem, the question of the relations of IR's plural subject-matters. How this kind of plurality is to be squared with methodological or theoretical plurality is a tricky and big question.

Despite this challenge, the present point is that, while there may be a limited degree of meta-theoretical and political controversy, there is, nevertheless, in this plurality, a dearth of coherence between theories, or, at least, a dearth of the consideration of coherence via bridge questions. There is, in place of these kind of questions, a trend Mearsheimer and Walt describe as simplistic hypothesis testing, or what Guzzini refers to as practical and unreflective empirical research.[xix] While, in principle, there is nothing objectionable about pursuing these kinds of questions, so-called middle-range theorizing and practical concerns, the point is that, on balance, there is a deficiency of other kinds of broader and intellectually potent questions treated in the literature.

Theoretically speaking, the diverse theoretical literature of IR (along with its diverging subject-matters of interest), has only tenuous consilience, if any, in the deepest reaches of the philosophy of science and history, which form underlying philosophies of sociality and social causation. For example, while many different IR theories explain different questions, it is at least worth exploring whether their underlying theories of sociality and social causation confirm or contradict one another. Also, how do underlying normative dispositions oppose and align different IR theories and, more importantly, why is this so? What is the relation between social causation and reflexivity? How do different theories conceive their units of analysis, are these conceptions in opposition, coherence, or irrelevant relation, and why so? In this thinking, the philosophy of social causation, as Andrew Bennett argues, is a significant, though not the singular, task for meta-theory to resolve or elucidate, possibly in pursuit of what he describes as a 'structured pluralism' wherein the structure of knowledge is clarified.[xx]

Mapping the variety and structure of the questions within IR's broader intellectual ambit is enriching and compels further learning. However, it is unlikely that building a set of rules for inquiring into, what I am referring to as bridge questions, or establishing a prearranged structure of bridge questions, will produce coherency and order from theoretical plurality. Rather, what is needed is simply the thoroughgoing pursuit of knowledge by all available roadways and cross streets. Establishing a meta-theoretical orthodoxy is undesirable if it is prearranged, as it puts the cart before the horse, so to say. Furthermore, there are, of course, different kinds of meta or bridge questions. Furthermore still, neither is the establishment of a prioritization of some bridge questions desirable (be they concerning social causation or otherwise), since that unduly limits our questions and thereby, the extent of knowledge. Besides, what is also not needed is a purely meta-theoretical orientation for IR theory. Rather a balance, or ongoing exchange and mutual growth, between our diverse kinds of questions is needed, since how all our research adds up, how it enfolds and disperses, is a question needing continual revisiting, so long as IR's body of knowledge grows. The notion of a closure or end to a significant kind of questioning is worrisome. New theories on old or new questions are welcome and worthwhile as are meta-theoretical pursuits that work on stringing it all together, so long as research is lucid and thorough.

Coherence and the Levels of Analysis Non-Problem

A quality or symptom of this lack of inquiry into coherence in IR's plurality is a dearth of isomorphism across IR literatures. The various theories of IR tend to produce their own terminology applicable to their particular questions and while having little interest in literatures besides their specialization, have, with possibly some exaggeration, limited understanding of them as well. While specialization has its costs and benefits, the issue of ignorant

IR and the Pursuit of Knowledge: Endless Theoretical Questions?
Written by A.C. McKeil

indifference is less pronounced in the natural sciences, generally speaking, since core terms and concepts are defined with the equivalent meanings across disciplines. The notion here is that by pursuing those peculiar questions which bridge theories, isomorphism may, in due course, arise of its own accord, from an emergent, though likely controversial, consilience of explanations.

While there are many interesting and important bridge questions at hand, one example of a potentially fruitful bridge question is the levels of analysis problem. That is, addressing the question of how these levels relate and are distinguishable conceptually, empirically, and causally has significant potential to promote theoretical consilience. There are, admittedly large challenges to this. For example, the individual, state, and states system levels are legal conventions turned into scientific categories, which begs the question of recasting our picture of levels altogether. Also, there are units which seem to cut across these levels, like corporations and NGO's and furthermore, there are relations between the various units of the various levels, with states battling and trialing individual terrorists and sub-state interest groups influencing international organizations. Note, the levels of analysis problem is distinct from the agent structure problem. An inference derived from one level is not necessarily relevant to another level, logically speaking, since each level has its own processes (if these levels are conceptually distinguishable that is) and each level has its own agent structure problem.[xxi] The levels of analysis problem is an issue of analyzing the processes of causation at each level and determining how the levels are distinguished and how they relate.

Singer, while favouring some questions over others, generally argued that the different levels of analysis are fit for different questions, which follow from different points of view, and that clarification of the level helps clarify the question and vice versa.[xxii] This, to some degree, is correct, depending on the focus and character of the question at hand. However, there are questions broad enough to be applicable to every level of analysis and on this broad basis, beg the consideration of consilience between levels. For example, the question of the origin of species, addressed by the theory of evolution, links a theory of genetic mutation at the sub-cellular level, to a theory of natural selection at the systemic level. In this way, one of the ways to pursue consilience in IR is to research these kinds of vast questions. From this perspective, the existence of logical and empirical levels of analysis is not a problem of picking a level for methodological or disciplinary reasons, so much as a theoretical challenge, demanding theoretical clarification of the nature and divisions of the levels and, importantly, of threading consilience between different causal theories residing in different levels.

A point to be made here is that Kenneth Waltz was misguided in the formulation of his research question in *Man, the State and War.* He asked in which level is the major cause of war is located, while ultimately muddling over the position that a combination of levels is needed, stating, "no single image is ever adequate."[xxiii] The better question is: What are the causes war in each image and how do the images relate, as levels of analysis or otherwise?[xxiv] However, answering this vast question will not bring consilience to IR's diverse and divergent plurality of questions and theories today. While it is an admirable pursuit, a broader, meta-IR question is needed, due to the subjects-of-analysis problem.

Underlying the question of the causes of war is the origins of social conflict, broadly defined. The question of the origins of social conflict may even be more useful than a theory of the origins or sources of politics, since politics is a rhetorically treacherous word, concept, or notion. To date, the most successful theory of conflict is the rational actor model, though it is highly criticized and several other theories exist.

Ultimately, there may inevitably be a plurality of conflict theories, but the point is that that pursuit of big consilient questions is nevertheless worthwhile and potentially bearing fresh fruits. The question of conflict, for example, is relevant to almost every theoretical literature of IR, and requires explanatory theories at every level of analysis as well as further explanations of their relations, leading inquiry beyond the relations of states up to global relations and down to individual psychological relations. Such vast questions may even, via questions at the sub-individual level, reach towards consilience with Biology and Neuroscience, though I suspect theoretical divisions reach all the way down, possibly due to their political implications. Yet, the point is to articulate these kinds of questions, clarify them, and cross-examine our various positions on them, in the pursuit of knowledge.

Consilience and Social Cosmology

IR and the Pursuit of Knowledge: Endless Theoretical Questions?
Written by A.C. McKeil

A related implication of pursuing the question of the origins of social conflict, or another socially fundamental question of breadth sufficient to demand consilience between the levels of analysis and the gambit of IR's theoretical interests generally, is that the range or scope of social relations relevant to IR theory is immensely expanded. While many IR theorists have taken theoretically broad fields of view, notably Keohane and Nye, such an expansion is, in my estimation, welcome, since IR theory quite often has been befuddled by mistaking the formal legal and diplomatic system of states for the actual system, where in actuality, the levels and units of the system and their relations are both formal and informal.[xxv] However, that is not to say that different levels do not require different theories and that focusing upon the formal level is (if it is distinguishable under examination) a worthwhile pursuit in its own respect. In any case, a broader framework of analysis, determining what social units relate at what social levels and more importantly, how levels relate, would be required to theorize the origins of social conflict, or some such immense kind of question, before such a theory could be applied to the relations between states.

Yet, in recognizing the formal or conventional nature of the international system, an important complication worth noting in the levels of analysis problem is that the levels are both distinguished as aggregate levels of individuals and as units of social convention. The post-positivist or critical point to recognize here is that the conventional nature of IR's subject-matter makes its theorization itself a political issue. That is, while a state is an aggregate of individuals and groups behaving en masse, it is also a social object created by those individuals in their minds and by their corresponding behavior in law, diplomacy, and foreign or world affairs generally. In this way, while there is, intuitively speaking, one world of aggregate behaviour, there are possibly innumerable social realities in what C.A.W. Manning classically referred to as the social cosmos.[xxvi] That is to say, besides the levels of analysis problem and the subjects of analysis problem, IR and the social sciences need to grapple with a social reality of analysis problem. In this problem, IR may have something to contribute, as IR is very much concerned with *relations,* which is the study of social cosmology, as Manning referred to IR. That is, while Sociology, Anthropology, and Political Science tend to elucidate and explore worlds and societies, IR tends to explore the relations between them.

In this thinking, the classic metaphor of theoretical lenses, or thinking caps, may have some basis in social reality, not merely intellectual exercise. Moreover, the practice of theorizing is a social construct itself, as Inanna Hamati-Ataya argues. Fundamentally then, pursuing consilience between social theories may not only require a theory of social conflict or some such sweeping idea, but a theory of social reality generally, which may even require an operational theory of consciousness, which is, as yet, an unresolved question, far beyond the reaches of IR.[xxvii] Pluralism in IR, the social sciences, and humanities generally, due to the seemingly bottomless multiplicity of the social cosmos, is necessary and inevitable but also, not necessarily subject to mutual ignorance and relativism, if those peculiar in-between, underlying, and overarching bridge questions are investigated in the pursuit of the coherence of diverse knowledge.[xxviii]

Conclusions

Holsti described the history of IR as a "slow-motion explosion" of knowledge.[xxix] Following this metaphor into that of the big bang, the work of IR and academia at large has produced a vast explosion of knowledge. In this image, universities, organized with expanding complexity, cohere the disciplines like galaxies (albeit colliding and overlapping galaxies), which draw in vast data and thought upon immense and inescapable black hole questions. The study of IR may be born of colliding galaxies, or be one of its own, yet, regardless, there is no compelling reason or benefit to crafting a new meta-theoretical method or meta-theoretical orthodoxy. In the pursuit of knowledge, from the spirit of inquisitive scepticism, the simple and hopefully obvious point is that while heated and complex controversy between IR's theoretical and political perspectives is somewhat chaotic, even confusing, leaving the paths between our various questions and findings unexplored, makes for a cold and dim universe.

The function of pluralism and the function of cooperation are the same, overall, in the pursuit of knowledge. For this reason, their disciplinary combination, by encouraging intellectual freedom and equality, while also continuing dialogue and debate, in the pursuit of coherence, is an ongoing task so long as international knowledge grows. The contribution of this argument is admittedly limited in that this brief essay merely raises questions, rather than engaging them. Yet, the exploration of these questions, as is richly and encouragingly done in the 'End of International Relations Theory?' special issue and symposium, is worthwhile as it grounds our thought so to further

IR and the Pursuit of Knowledge: Endless Theoretical Questions?

Written by A.C. McKeil

our learning.

—

Aaron Charles McKeil *is Articles Editor of e-IR and Senior Commissioning Editor at the Journal of International Law and International Relations. He holds a BA Political Science from the University of British Columbia, a MScEcon International Relations (Distinction) from Aberystwyth University and is engaging an MPhil/PhD International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research interests involve international law, the philosophy of science and IR, IR pedagogy, the history of international ideas and the meaning of world society.*

[i] Immanuel Kant, 'The Conflict of the Faculties' Mary J. Gregor (trans.), (Abrias: New York, 1979), p.23.

[ii] C.P. Snow, 'The Two Cultures' *Leonardo,* 23 (1990), p.172.

[iii] For a rich collection of essays on this topic, see, Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[iv] Kalevi J. Holsti, 'Along the Road of International Theory in the Next Millennium: Four Travelogues' in Robert M.A. Crawford and Darryl S.L. Jarvis (eds.), *International Relations –Still an American Social Science? Toward Diversity in International Thought* (Albany: State of New York University Press, 2001), pp.73-100.

[v] Robert Cox, 'Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method', *Millennium, Journal of International Studies,* 12 (1983), pp. 162-175; for a classic essay on the function of IR theory, see, Charles A. McClelland, 'The Function of Theory in International Relations' *The Journal of Conflict Resolution,* 4 (1960), pp.303-336.

[vi] Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

[vii] For an important an interesting social science adaptation of Aristotle's approach to knowledge, see, Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[viii] The classic discussion of the value of knowledge is found in Plato's *Meno* and of the nature of knowledge in his *Theaetetus.*

[ix] For discussion of the politics of knowledge and pluralism, see, Arlene B. Tickner, 'Core, Periphery and (Neo)imperialist International Relations' *European Journal of International Relations,* 19 (2013), pp. 627-646.

[x] K.J. Holsti, 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Which Are the Fairest Theories of All?' *International Studies Quarterly,* 33 (1989), p.256.

[xi] See, for discussion, Jim George and David Campbell, 'Patterns of Dissent and the Celebration of Difference: Critical Social Theory and International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly,* 34 (1990), pp. 269-293; Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach, 'Between Celebration and Despair: Constructive Suggestions for Future International Theory', *International Studies Quarterly,* 35 (1991), pp. 363-386.

[xii] See, A.C. McKeil, 'International Relations as Historical Political Theory' *e-International Relations,* August, 2013.

[xiii] Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1998).

IR and the Pursuit of Knowledge: Endless Theoretical Questions?
Written by A.C. McKeil

[xiv] For an interesting and divergent argument, see, John R. Searle's classic essay, 'Prospects for the Social Sciences' in *Minds, Brains and Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp.71-85.

[xv] Christian Reus-Smit, 'Beyond Metatheory?' *European Journal of International Relations,* 19 (2013), pp. 589-608.

[xvi] Jim George, 'International Relations and the Search for Thinking Space: Another View of the Third Debate', *International Studies Quarterly,* 33 (1989), pp. 269-279; for an early and interesting but undeveloped argument for coherent or integrated pluralism, see, R.H. Jackson's conclusion in, 'Pluralism in International Political Theory' *Review of International Studies,* 18 (1992), p.281.

[xvii] Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen, and Collin Wight, 'The End of International Relations Theory?' *The European Journal of International Relations,* 19 (2013), pp.405-425; see, also, Hidemi Suganami, 'Meta-Jackson: Rethinking Patrick Thadeus Jackson's Conduct of Inquiry' *Millennium Journal of International Studies,* 41 (2013), pp.248-69; and, P.T. Jackson, 'Fear of Relativism' *e-International Relations,* July, 2012.

[xviii] Arend Lijphart, 'The Structure of the Theoretical Revolution in International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly,* 18 (1974), pp. 41-74; William C. Olson, 'The Growth of a Discipline' in Brian Porter (ed.) *The Aberystwyth Papers: International Politics 1919-1969* (London: Oxford University Press), 1972.

[xix] John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, 'Leaving Theory Behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing is Bad for International Relations' *European Journal of International Relations,* 19 (2013), pp.427-457; Stefano Guzzini, 'The Ends of International Relations Theory: Stages of Reflexivity and Modes of Theorizing' *European Journal of International Relations,* 19 (2013), pp.521-541.

[xx] Andrew Bennett, 'The Mother of All Isms: Causal Mechanisms and Structured Pluralism in International Relations Theory' *European Journal of International Relations,* 19 (2013), pp.459-481.

[xxi] See, William B. Moul, 'The Level of Analysis Problem Revisited' *The Canadian Journal of Political Science,* 6 (1973), pp.494-513; As an aside, while the agent structure problem (as a question of the relation between agents and structures), may be one of those meta-theoretical bridge questions, it is also, like so many other problems, a matter of distinguishing and prioritizing questions. In this case, it is a matter of distinguishing the questions relevant to the agency of social units from those relevant to the social structure in which units are shaped. See Collin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.62, Conclusion.

[xxii] J. David Singer, 'The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations' *World Politics,* 14 (1961), pp.77-92.

[xxiii] Kenneth Waltz, *Man, The State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p.225.

[xxiv] Waltz's later argument, in *Theory of International Politics,* that the systemic level contains the only permissive cause does not stand up to logical scrutiny, since, as Suganami has pointed out, permissive causes are actually to be found in every level. See, Hidemi Suganami, *On the Causes of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.23.

[xxv] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1989).

[xxvi] C.A.W. Manning, *The Nature of International Society,* 2nd edition (London: MacMillan Press, 1975), p.7-9, 177, 201.

[xxvii] For an significant foray into the immense question of sociality and unity of social science, see, John R. Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); for a

discussion of the utility of a theory of social consciousness and social science, see, for example, John R. Searle, 'The Self as a Problem in Philosophy and Neurobiology' in *Philosophy in a New Century: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.137-151; as well as Searle, 'How to Study Consciousness Scientifically' *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London,* 353 (1998), pp.1935-1942.

[xxviii] For a discussion of interpretation and theoretical divisions, see, Chris Brown, 'Turtles All the Way Down: Anti-Foundationalism, Critical Theory and International Relations', *Millennium, Journal of International Studies,* vol. 23, pp. 213-236; see, also, R.M.A. Crawford, *Idealism and Realism in International Relations: Beyond the Discipline* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[xxix] Holsti, 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Which Are the Fairest Theories of All?' *International Studies Quarterly,* 33 (1989), p.257.

About the author:

A.C. McKeil is a PhD Candidate at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He previously served as a Articles Editor with E-IR and contributed editorial blog posts during his studies at Aberystwyth University.