

What the Philosophy of Science is Not Good For

Written by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson

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PATRICK THADDEUS JACKSON, FEB 23 2009

The field of International Relations (IR) has been concerned about its scientific status for decades. This concern has led to a number of efforts to make the field “truly scientific” by adopting one or another philosophical and methodological stance: behaviorism in the 1950s, neopositivism in the 1970s and 1980s, and most recently critical realism in the 1990s and into the present day. Despite the substantive differences between these efforts, the overall gesture remains the same in all three cases: if we can just get IR placed on the properly scientific footing provided to us by the philosophers of science, then beneficent consequences will follow.

These foundational gestures (on foundationalism in IR, see the lead article in the most recent issue of *International Theory*) are, however, flawed in at least two major respects. First, they overstate the coherence of the philosophy of science as an intellectual endeavor, often leading readers to believe that the position on offer represents an overarching consensus among philosophers of science when no such consensus actually exists. Second, they regularly and routinely background claims about how minds are connected to the world in order to focus on claims about what kinds of things exist in the world—and do so in ways that suggest that these two kinds of claims do not enjoy co-equal importance. In so doing, these foundational gestures obscure what may be the most important potential benefit of the philosophy of science for the practical production of systematic empirical knowledge: the philosophy of science can provide an abstract depiction of the implications of adopting different ontological presuppositions, and as such can help to systematize and strengthen our arguments regardless of their specific perspective or content.

I emphasize ontology here because what the philosophy of science deals with involves fundamental issues of existence—ontology in its broadest sense. The ontological issues treated in the philosophy of science fall into two main categories: issues of scientific ontology, which concern the nature of objects in the world, and issues of philosophical ontology, which concern the connection between the mind and the world. These are all ontological issues because they all deal with what and how things are. Issues of philosophical ontology concern ourselves as observers. For instance, are we relatively passive recipients of information about objects in the world, or are we somehow more intimately involved in the production and reproduction of what we observe? Do we know things by experiencing them, or by using reason or intuition to get beyond experience to grasp something more fundamental such as general laws or generative dispositions? By contrast, issues of scientific ontology concern the character of the objects that we observe: are those objects composed of variable attributes, or dynamic processes? Are objects—actors like states, firms, and NGOs, and social arrangements like globalization, legalization, or hegemony—the kinds of things that scholars can and should identify from a detached point of view, or do they exist only in the consciousness and intentional activity of concrete historical actors?

I also emphasize the ontological character of these considerations because both of the last two waves of philosophy of science importation into IR have, for similar reasons, attempted to reclassify questions about the relationship between the mind and the world as epistemological questions, and hence sought to deprive these questions of their rightful co-equal place as fundamental conceptual issues with which we ought to be wrestling. Both the neopositivism of the 1970s and 1980s—“positivist” inasmuch as it sought scientific legitimacy through the application of putatively “correct” research methods, and “neo” inasmuch as it embraced the notions of falsification and hypothesis-testing, which had originally been criticisms of positivism, as the master key to inducing scientific progress—and the critical realism of the last few years have a philosophical stake in separating questions about the world from questions about

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how we are connected to the world. This stake concerns a fundamental point on which they agree, despite their other differences: neopositivism and critical realism are both ontologically dualist, resting on a separation of mind and world into separate realms and setting up the problem of knowledge as a problem of crossing the gap between the realms through appropriate procedures. For neopositivists, the unknown world can be best grasped by the production of a conceptual picture that represents or corresponds to it; researchers pose hypothetical questions that are tested against the world to see whether they are accurate. For scientific realists, the world comes before our speculations about it, and researchers can “abduce” explanations for observed facts by asking what must logically be the case in order for those facts to obtain. In both cases, the fundamental gap between the observer and the world is set by fiat, and attention is then devoted to the mechanics of gap-crossing or to the character of a world that would give rise to what we perceive.

In other words, both critical realism and neopositivism place philosophical ontology in the background in order to focus on scientific ontology. When critical realists charge that neopositivists are “putting epistemology before ontology,” they are expressing skepticism about the idea that we can construct a scientific ontology purely by systematizing empirical observations in the way that neopositivists do; simply correlating variables across cases, critical realists argue, does not yield any solid knowledge of causal processes or of objects more generally. On the other hand, when neopositivists charge critical realists with propounding an unfalsifiable metaphysics, they are expressing skepticism about the results of critical realist reflection on empirical observations; critical realists, they charge, have not given sufficient attention to the inherent problems of constructing an accurate picture of the mind-independent world, but are too quick to assume that their pictures are actually rooted in the way that things are. And both sides of this tempest in a teacup use the term “ontology” to refer to an account of the things that exist in the mind-independent world, and the term “epistemology” to refer to the mechanics of crossing the gap between the mind and the world.

The major cost of this terminological concord is that it makes it almost impossible to discuss the implications for IR of starting from a different position on the connection between the mind and the world: a monistic position wherein the mind and the world are in important ways constitutively continuous with one another. Philosophical monism—which is at the heart of what most other fields know as a “constructivist” position—looks to neopositivists and critical realists alike as if it were some form of idealism, since from their dualistic perspective a claim that knowing subjects are complicit in the production of their objects of knowledge looks like a claim that researchers, by thinking about the world, make it so. But there is a vast difference between a monistic position that claims an irreducibly perspectival character to knowledge (a staple of interpretivist and post-structuralist scholarship) and a dualistic position that thoughts determine things. By backgrounding philosophical ontology, and by forcing the debate about knowledge within IR almost exclusively onto a dualistic stage, rules out a monistic position of the sort that arguably informs not one but two of the major schools of thought in the contemporary philosophy of science before it ever has a chance to demonstrate its worth.

This brings up the other major flaw in the foundational gestures common to uses of the philosophy of science in IR: they presume a consensus about fundamental matters among philosophers of science where no such consensus exists. There are at a minimum three vibrant and active traditions in the contemporary philosophy of science: instrumentalism, which treats knowledge as a useful set of abstractions; realism, which treats knowledge as an inference to the best explanation of observed phenomena; and pragmatism, which treats knowledge as emergent from experience. Of these traditions, only realism is clearly dualist; the others incline in a monistic direction. So the notion that philosophers of science have reached consensus is at best misleading and at worst a deliberate and strategic mis-statement by advocates of one or another approach to science—in either case, the effect is to yoke the authority and prestige of “science” to a specific point of view about the production of knowledge within IR. Instead of drawing on the philosophy of science to show us the logical implications of adopting one or another perspective, such uses and gestures are efforts to foreclose debates. This means that IR commentators are reaching into a set of ongoing controversies, taking a position within them (often based on an incomplete grasp of the debates, perfectly understandable since IR scholars are not, by and large, trained as philosophers of science), and then presenting that contestable position as though it were a near-universal consensus.

We should stop abusing the philosophy of science in this way. If we mean to be faithful to debates in the philosophy

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of science, we have to acknowledge differences and controversies among philosophers. And if we don't want to become philosophers of science ourselves so that we can try to resolve philosophical debates—after all, we are IR scholars, interested in generating empirical knowledge about world politics—we should look to the philosophy of science to give us a clarification of various ontological positions, and give up the vain hope of finding in the philosophy of science a magic key to empirical progress in IR.

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