

# Reflexivity and Autobiography within International Relations Theory

Written by Joseph Jarnecki

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JOSEPH JARNECKI, DEC 20 2019

'Cogito ergo sum ("I am thinking, therefore I exist").'[1] Seventeenth-century philosopher Descartes in these words grounded western science on the foundational concept of subjectivity. Three centuries later, the emergence of positivism in the twentieth century once again brought a focus to the question of human subjectivity within so-called objective sciences. Husserl's response to this, what he identified as a European crisis, was the reaffirmation of the transcendental ego as the condition *sine qua none* for any science.[2] One conclusion we might draw is that any human thought always depends on the subject, therefore it is always subjective. From this understanding social scientists have questioned more thoroughly the impact of their subjectivity in their work, beginning what is referred to now as reflexivity.

As a field born from a concern with war, conflict, and an aspiration to delimit world systems, International Relations (IR) is particularly in need of an acknowledgement that these ideas partly rely on subjective (conscious or otherwise) world views. In the absence of substantive concern for reflexivity, the risk is to claim the objectivity of one perspective on the world – which can be (and has been) damaging to groups which are labelled "savage," "underdeveloped," "dangerous," "problematic," and so on. For those reasons, theorists within IR since the 1990s have looked to reflexivity as a counter-force to positivism within the field.[3] One particularly interesting way of employing reflexivity is Autobiographical IR, which seeks 'to move the field of International Relations towards greater candidness about how personal narratives influences theoretical articulations.'[4] It usually takes the form of a personal account by an author who discusses the 'facticities'[5] and experiences that define, to a certain extent, their perceptions and their work.

In this essay, I intend to show that reflexivity is at the heart of Autobiographical IR and that it effectively contributes to the discussion of subjectivity within IR theory. However, its usefulness in theorizing international relations has been seen as problematic. How can Autobiographical IR avoid solipsism? It is, after all, a self-centred enquiry. Furthermore, how can it resolve any empirical concerns if it is trapped in meta-theory? And presuming it could, to what extent can the conscious acknowledgement of unconscious biases be successful? I will argue that those critiques are missing the point of autobiographical IR. It is not an attempt at completely solving the subjectivity/objectivity problem, neither does it try to revolutionise empirical IR theory; rather it creates a space for discussion and a broadening of those perspectives without claiming objective resolutions.

In a first part, I will provide an overview of reflexivity within IR and its manifestation within Autobiographical IR. I will then look more closely into the latter, addressing its limitations, whilst throughout stressing its relevance and importance for IR theory more widely.

### Reflexivity within IR

The much-repeated mantra of reflexivity in IR is that '[t]heory is always for someone and for some purpose.'[6] Within the formerly predominant IR theoretical traditions – (neo)realism and (neo)liberalism – positivist objectivity and neutrality impeded engagement with these questions. The move then towards answering which 'someone' and what 'purpose,' has relied on a post-positivist reintroduction of subjectivity, within constructivist, feminist, poststructuralist,

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and other thought. Through these schools, reflexivity within IR has evolved into a 'structural phenomenon...a generally philosophical category of IR...a sociological viewpoint on IR...or an ethical practice for IR.' [7] Moreover, each of these approaches employs divergent methods of doing reflexivity, from individual accounts to institutionalist as well as more collectivist concerns. In this section I will discuss four styles of reflexivity in IR, analysing the rigour of their arguments and their connection to individual – specifically autobiographical – methods.

## *Meta-Theory*

The first kind of reflexivity I shall consider here is meta-theoretical. Meta-theory, which concerns the 'building blocks' of theory, namely ontology, epistemology, and methodology, breaks from positivism in a focus on the process of theorising. [8] 'International meta-theory, then, is that sub-field of International Relations which seeks an answer to the question: 'what constitutes good theory?'. [9] As Neufeld defines it IR meta-theory entails, 'self-awareness regarding underlying premises,' a 'recognition of the inherently politico-normative dimension of paradigms and the normal science tradition they sustain,' and the 'affirmation that reasoned judgements about the merits of contending paradigms are possible in the absence of a neutral observation language.' [10] He posits this position as a way to debase the positivist assumption of one universal knowledge or '*episteme*', the fixation with which is a product of the Cartesian anxiety. [11] Meta-theoretical reflexivists instead accept that fields despite being incommensurable, because they are each a product of unique socio-political normative agendas, are still comparable. In approaching such comparison meta-theorists seek to open a dialogue distinctly removed from positivism's 'truth as correspondence.' [12] To achieve this, meta-theory is predicated on: a recognition of perspective/bias, an inclusion of theoretical perspectives coded as diverse ideologies within the field, and an attention to socio-political normative choices. [13] Meta-theoretical reflexivism, due to its abstract nature, has attracted criticism for having 'alienated IR from the world of practice.' [14] Even presuming that an adequate distinction can be drawn between theory and practice – essentially missing the point of reflexivity – this critique is still false. Any accusation that meta-theory, which by definition is derived from theory, is completely unlinked from practice also assumes then that any individual theory be detached from practice. Which even if possible, would subsequently reduce any approach that observes practice to mere relativism, as people superimpose their own perspectives devoid of an institutional apparatus.

Meta-theory, furthermore, has been lacklustre in incorporating autobiographical and other narrative modes of analysis. [15] Arguably the account offered by Jenny Edkins, in Inayatullah's *Autobiographical International Relations*, which criss-crosses political, pictorial, and philosophical concerns presents a tacit engagement with meta-theory. [16] Indeed, the questions that I perceive she leaves open focus on how objectification can be a cross-disciplinary and so a multi-theoretical concern. However, her wider engagement with reflexivity and the ambiguity she leaves in her account makes this an uncertain conclusion. Nonetheless, its apparent meta-theory would benefit from increased use of 'meta-narrative' praxis's to better ground the 'underpinning[s]...[of] theory construction'. [17]

## *Sociological Reflexivity*

A more dominant approach to reflexivity in IR is drawn from sociology, particularly the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In adopting a Bordieuan stance theorists focus on participant observation, 'how the subject is viewed as imbricated within the social environment.' [18] Using this focus they seek to refine their own research through a process of learning reflexivity: destabilising their own biases, improving their research, and thereby denaturalising the 'existing order'. [19] Sociological IR then, relies on a 'philosophical ontological wager' which places reflexivity alongside neopositivism, critical realism, and, analyticism. [20] This perspective thereby representing a 'pluralist sense of IR' which holds conscious reflexivity to be completely possible. [21] In Bourdieu's own words reflexivity objectivises 'the subjective relation to the object, which, far from leading to a relativistic and more-or-less anti-scientific subjectivism, is one of genuine scientific objectivity.' [22]

The hypocrisy therein – the claim to objectivity regarding one's own subjectivity – will be addressed with reference to "strong reflexivity" imminently. Before this however, I will briefly address autobiographical IR within sociological reflexivity. This context, though more hospitable to autobiography as a bias locator than meta-theory, remains largely hostile to any use beyond this. Indeed, sociological reflexivity questions both, how you would delimit an autobiographical account and whether it is not inherently narcissistic. As to the latter, this is clearly a widely shared

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concern which I will discuss at some length later, it is, however, an essentially self-defeating belief.[23] The former point regarding boundaries only becomes an issue because Bourdieu's reflexivity believes true objectivity to be achievable and limitable, thereby undermining subjectivity as an end in itself.[24] Subjectivity through relegation to a "means" is therefore depreciated and the reflexive project is damaged overall. Though sociological reflexivity has made great strides, its deemphasising of subjectivity is concerning.

## *Strong Reflexivity*

As aforementioned, "strong reflexivity" theorists provide a critique of the sociological perspective, to do so they take a 'post-objectivist' approach built upon the 'ontological fact of the social situatedness of knowledge,' as their core principle.[25] Three key critiques of Bordieuan reflexivity, which I will discuss, are put forward by Samuel Knafo.[26] Firstly, Bourdieu's position which seeks to objectify 'the objectifying subject, is an open invitation for further reification of the self,' the consequence being false or empty subjectivity. [27] Scholars, who do honestly disclose compromising biases risk 'undermining their position,' and so are incentivised to conceal their truth; whilst academics who in spite of this remain consciously honest are limited by their ability to determine unconscious biases.[28] The latter point being that, it is impossible to consciously identify all unconscious biases. Essentially, 'Bourdieu – like most reflexive scholars – largely overestimated his ability to grasp his own subject position.'[29] Another point against sociological reflexivity is that '[t]he pretension to be able to locate from where one speaks, or to objectify the objectifying subject, sets up asymmetric forms of communication which are fraught with ethical problems.'[30] This links to the problem of narcissism – previously mentioned – though it runs deeper in that any monopoly over reflexivity necessarily undermines cross-disciplinary discussion on equal terms. Preventing a shared conversation means an exclusion of some identity-categories, reducing the capacity for accurate reflexivity. Finally, Bordieuan reflexive agendas focus on ontology rather than the 'epistemological problem of reification which initially motivated the turn to reflexivity.'[31] Sociological reflexivity has taken the original concern with subjectivity and has instead repurposed that exploration as the process by which to locate its object of study. Reaffirming again a worrying trend in sociological reflexivity to objectify the subject and reify the self.

Strong reflexivity's position is centred around a meta-epistemic rebuttal of the sociological and positivist alternatives, paired with an attempt to refocus on subjectivity, whilst still allowing for 'strong objectivity'. [32] In moving towards methodological processes and away from ethical reflexivity it focuses on the more general issue of the nature of subjectivity and the socially situated nature of knowledge; doing so by employing a phenomenological 'concern with particularism'. [33] Through this, strong reflexivity attempts to synthesise 'strong objectivity,' which simultaneously skirts the dangers of the relativity of subjectivism whilst reclaiming social science from neopositivism.[34] By following this track strong reflexivity abandons the idea that a suspension of bias can be achieved. Instead, an assumption should be made of inherent epistemological biases and a corrective lens should be constructed to 'compensate for them.' [35]

Despite the importance of strong reflexivity as a coherent position which offers an effective response to Bourdieu, it's perpetuation of an achievable objectivity, even in a strong sense, damages its engagement with subjectivity. By seeking to 'critique objectivism from within' in order to 'deploy critique as a political praxis' it has adopted too many of its values.[36] In assessing the worthiness of autobiographical accounts, for instance, Hamati-Ataya presumes that such an account would be based upon taking 'the subject of knowledge as it finds it.' [37] Taking an almost positivist assumption that the only way to express an autobiographical narrative would be to present an ontologically fixed unit, excluding a multi-layered self. This is odd given her argument that autoethnographic methodologies constitute the contrary.[38] The explanation she offers is that autoethnography has a systematic capability, whereas autobiography remains too epistemically complicated and contextually variable to be of methodological use.[39] Hamati-Ataya does, however, acknowledge the possibility for autobiographies development, such that 'introspection becomes the path to knowing the world.' [40] Therefore, though preferring a more systematic autoethnographic approach, strong reflexivity leaves room for autobiography as a means beyond quantifiable methods to develop introspection.

## *Synthesised Reflexivity*

The last mode of reflexivity I will consider represents a synthesis of the arguments of Dauphinee, Ravecca, Edkins

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and to a lesser extent the recent work of Hamati-Ataya. The underlying thread which links all their conceptions – bar Hamati-Ataya's 'historical positivism' – is a true refocus on subjectivity, twinned with an appreciation of the need for, and limits of, any expression by said subject. Dauphinee, in cautioning of the violence inherent to the academic gaze/voice highlights that there is a 'narrow line between fieldwork and tourism, between scholarship and voyeurism.'<sup>[41]</sup> Contingent to this statement is that by erasing the self we necessarily commit violence because objective knowledge 'is always and necessarily about others.'<sup>[42]</sup> Naturally, subjectivity is the means to avoid this possibility, however, how does an academic achieve reflexivity sufficient to present their totality, including those unconscious aspects of themselves? Edkins believes this inability to determine a united self is a product of our linear notion of time, yet this does not limit our ability to write our own diverse subjectivity.<sup>[43]</sup> She purports narrative – particularly autobiographical – accounts are a means of understanding subjectivity/objectivity interactions, in turn deconstructing false objectifications.<sup>[44]</sup> The problem of not representing the multiplicity of the self is avoided by circumventing the expectation that any new objectivity will be reached. Narrative here 'does not pretend to objectify the objectifying subject but to navigate the impossibility of objectifying the subjects in the first place...narrative itself becomes the subject of political dialogue rather than a commentary on an external world.'<sup>[45]</sup> What then firmly grounds these narratives is Hamati-Ataya's emphasis that the root of our normative reflections must necessarily come from 'an empirical understanding of our socio-historical condition as knowledge producers and transmitters.'<sup>[46]</sup> Guaranteeing that the process of reflexivity then must be honestly engaged with 'out of the open-ended, contentious, messy, and potentially paralysing consequences of incomplete, permeated, historically situated (self-)knowledge', not merely thought on in abstract non-personal and 'complacent satisfaction.'<sup>[47]</sup>

The product of this reflexivity then, is a clear determination that the self is able to articulate its own subjectivity sufficiently to open politico-normative conversations and to problematise various supposed objectivities. Narrative then, as the expression of this offers the 'possibility of reading the story in other terms, narratives show how partial the "truths" that we encounter actually are.'<sup>[48]</sup>By picking at the most basic assumptions of "what is" narrative fulfils the central emancipatory desire of reflexivity.

In assessing and providing an overview of various interpretations of reflexivity in IR I have demonstrated their conflicting views on the respective virtues of abstraction and practice, and the methodologies inherent to these. With reference to practice I have demonstrated how reflexivity needs the means to access subjectivity, and that academic narratives – autobiographical in nature – are key to this aspiration. In tracking reflexivity, I have shown the value of the recent trend reiterating a continual exploration of subjectivity as an end in itself, and have outlined many of the justifications for autobiography.

Worth remembering, however, is that autobiography must 'perform some purposeful theoretical or analytical operation to warrant discussion as scholarship.'<sup>[49]</sup> It is this concern with which I will now engage, addressing arguments against its use, utilising the reflexive perspectives I have already outlined.

## Autobiography in IR

The commonly cited arguments against autobiography in IR are that: it's too sensitive to the reader, inherently narcissistic, and too detached. Firstly, 'the ear of the reader' as a 'constitutive element of the writing of self-narratives,' supposedly undermines its scientific quality.<sup>[50]</sup> In that, the writer's ear being the first 'other,' will spur narrative adaptations as the 'self thinks and writes itself.'<sup>[51]</sup> This presumption, however, is easily undermined if we conceive of reflexivity not as dependent on a unitary subject but instead allowing a multi-layered self. Thus, meaning narrative provides an expression of a multi-identity or "holistic" subject, paving the way for transdisciplinary explorations of their mutual reflexivity.

The next criticism, that of narcissism, is an understandable risk of any autobiographical writing. Indeed, Naeem Inayatullah, in the volume he edited which collected autobiographical accounts, conceded how readily the form falls into self-obsessed 'triumphalism' or 'self-abnegation.'<sup>[52]</sup>Whilst even the most generous definition of reflexivity leaves no room for self-centrism, this essay maintains such solipsism does not disqualify autobiography for two reasons. The first is based on the problem inherent to any writer and reader relationship, that of intention and reception. The difference between these two means that, even the most well-intentioned texts can come across as

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'violently unreflexive,' meaning any accusation of narcissism is based on interpretation.[53] Therefore, though a useful self-evaluating watch-word, "narcissism," is theoretically ethereal. The second reason, similar though distinct from the first, is that accusations of "narcissism" rely on understanding the motivations or self-conceptions of autobiographers. To rely on this knowledge is also to objectify the subject who is expressing their subjectivity. Such objectification, I have made clear, has no place in reflexivity.

Finally, autobiography is also considered overly detached. One way this is manifest is in the cultural distance and suppressed memories necessary within any account. Indeed, an absence of a common social context of understanding opens autobiography to accusations of relativism, so that it's considered 'an unreliable genre.'[54] A key question then, relates to the value of autobiography for those exogenous to the 'author's social situation.'[55] Moreover, whether this value, if based only upon the 'life experiences of IR autobiographers' themselves, is less compelling than more socially located agents, who nonetheless may not be theorists.[56] A potential resolution, therefore, is that IR theorists must become the most compelling writers across a multiplicity of social environments. Such a goal, however, is quickly dismissed by advocates of the project who seek to 'guard against a generation of novelists.'[57] Regardless, a situation seems to become apparent wherein autobiographers, to cater to what they believe will be read, must detach their multi-layered "self" from the process, appealing only to widely held identities they share. Creating a situation whereby scholars are 'privileging one story over another, or presenting a single story only, [which] is an intensely political move, and a form of violence.'[58] Detachment then, if enabling a multi-layered subjectivity, must be maintained when doing autobiographical IR.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, autobiographical IR as a project rooted in a de-reification of subjectivity and a problematisation of objectivity clearly is a product of the "reflexivist turn." Its dual-purpose is to enable cross-disciplinary discussions on the nature of "truth" with relation to subjectivity and to continually highlight that there is no objective solution to theoretical or empirical problems. To assert that autobiographical IR fails in that it doesn't provide definite solutions to a non-unitary subjectivity or empirical uncertainty is to misunderstand its critical identity. Furthermore, to relegate its methods to relativism fails to acknowledge that a new objectivity, as desired by sociological or strong reflexivity, is not the aim. Autobiography transcends the requirement for an ontologically fixed subject and object, instead, deconstructing their nature and problematising their interactions.

To argue this position, I have outlined increasingly critical iterations of reflexivity and their relationship to autobiography. Attempting, through a synthesis of contemporary thought to provide an adequate framework by which to understand the role of autobiography. Moreover, I have responded to critiques of autobiography, acknowledging the role abstraction plays in its implementation. Throughout this process, I have emphasised the efficacy of autobiography, both to enable critical discussion and to connect academics with their own subjectivity.

My closing point comes from Rainer Hülse's autobiographical account and sums up his thoughts on writing autobiography. 'Many people have stories to tell in which the international has made a much greater impact on their lives than in my case – and often an infinitely more painful one. However, as I am particularly familiar with my own case this is probably where I should begin.'[59]

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[53] Hamati-Ataya, 'Transcending Objectivism, Subjectivism, and the Knowledge in-between: The Subject in/of "Strong Reflexivity"', cited in; Ravecca and Dauphinee, p. 131.

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[56] Ibid., p. 172.

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# **Reflexivity and Autobiography within International Relations Theory**

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