Signature Pedagogies and International Relations Theory

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To think about signature pedagogies in the teaching of International Relations (IR) is to ask, who are the students we are teaching, and for what professional roles are we preparing them? We often think about future diplomats, politicians, and public servants, and these roles fill the pages of glossy brochures on programs, and then "alumni stories." This is certainly not wrong, but it is also the case that the scale of teaching IR at many universities, when compared to the fewer number of jobs available in these professions, suggests that we cannot be satisfied with simply training our students for professional roles they may never occupy. In this chapter, I discuss how I try to prepare students in my International Relations Theory (IRT) course to perform the role of "citizen." This need not supplant other professions and pedagogies, but is intended to be beneficial to all students who pass through the course (this framing of professions and performance comes from Shulman 2005b, 57).[1]

My particular concern is to reflect on the *implicit structure* of my teaching—that is, the beliefs about "attitudes, values, and dispositions" as they relate to thinking about citizenship if not necessarily as a profession, then at least as something that our students are going to be called to do (Shulman 2005b, 55). Ultimately, I am interested in promoting thoughtfulness here as understood by Hannah Arendt, who framed it not as universal knowledge or the unproblematic and easy occupation of "the right." The quintessence of thinking, as Arendt notes, "can only lie in the actual thinking process and not in any solid results or specific thoughts" (Arendt 1981, 191). The benefit of this thoughtfulness for Arendt is twofold. First, being thoughtful inoculates the thinker from the perils of thoughtlessness—an inability to reflect on the world and one's place in it, which leads to acceptance of the immoral actions of others not simply procedurally, but through the redefinition of one's own understanding of moral and political order. It was this redefinition that she saw in Adolf Eichmann at his trial in 1961, and it was his thoughtlessness that enabled the perpetration of Nazi evils. Second, to be thoughtful is to consummate your humanity. Thinking distinguishes us from "sleepwalkers" (Arendt 1981, 191). It enables us to transcend the physical world and, in doing so, explore the "world's realness and their own." In essence, thoughtfulness means to think about the ways we think and how we live and act in the world around us, and is intimately related to the necessities of citizenship—how we live and act in political and social groups. Arendt's ideas have, I now realize after some 15 years of teaching, pre-empted in a more sophisticated and coherent form some of the ways I have come to think about teaching, why I value it, and how I conduct it. In this chapter, I explain how generating some degree of thoughtfulness can be achieved in the classroom, and specifically how teaching IRT may be particularly well suited to this goal.

My signature pedagogy hopes to enable thoughtfulness through two stages. The first stage rests on destabilizing the factors that may lead to thoughtlessness—complacency, surety, and detachment—and how these issues are introduced by discussing both the incommensurability of perspectives within a theoretical field and one's own hypocritical response to the values that different theories proffer as significant (some values you will disdain but enact, others you will acclaim but not live up to). Here, I identify two particular approaches that help in this process—teaching incommensurability and hypocrisy (the surface structure in Shulman's account). The second stage involves helping students think through the consequences of incommensurability and hypocrisy in meaningful, rigorous, and honest ways. The values of humility, bravery, and agency come to the fore, and they balance the importance of thoughtfulness as a personal and internal characteristic of a mature thinker with the necessities placed

upon us through a citizenship that is embedded in the physical world, characterized as it is by failure and injustice, but also by the role of our own hope within it and about it.

Before turning to the substantive discussion, it is important to note that these discussions can be discomforting. Students should not be required to think in these ways or be put under any pressure to publicly respond to these issues—the process at all times has to be supportive, personal, and ultimately voluntary. I my "destination" outline to students at the start of the course so they can reflect on the course and their learning within it in active ways. Whilst the discussion below outlines paths to thinking about thoughtfulness, they are options, not requirements. The course remains accessible and meaningful to students who want to get different things from it.

Destabilizing Thoughtlessness and Teaching Incommensurability and Hypocrisy

Facilitating thoughtfulness is best done indirectly—destabilizing *thoughtlessness* is key. This approach to teaching IRT has evolved piecemeal for quite some time as IRT has grappled with how to demonstrate its value. One response can be found in Reus-Smit and Snidal (2008). Their argument rests on the claim that all theories inevitably contain both empirical and normative dimensions—they outline how the world is (or at least the theoretician's claims about the nature of the actors and processes in the world), and how the world should be. At the confluence of these two inevitable modes of theorizing emerges an argument about the value of knowing about theory—that individual theories are ethical inasmuch as they are responses to the question, how should we act? Whilst individual theories may or may not provide answers that are appealing or emancipatory, they are all practical—the world is like this, and so you should do this as a result. There is considerable value, both in terms of appreciating the benefit of IRT and of thinking through the personal consequences of it. When teaching diplomats, I have used this approach to help explain how theories, whether individually or collectively, can be used to interrogate the motivations of interlocutors, and to frame how they may view the world and what they respond to. For students, the approach suggests a bridge between the arcane world of thinking and the more exciting world going on outside the classroom—these theories are not simply cloistered academics saying silly things (well, not *only* that), but are somehow related to the big questions of war, peace, diplomacy, and statecraft.

These arguments have helped move the teaching of IRT away from the unreflexive approaches that have long characterized teaching, and towards thoughtfulness. The issue is that whilst the "ethics of theories" approach opens up new ways to think about what IRT is and how to teach it, it ultimately does not destabilize thoughtlessness because it does not challenge the things that support thoughtlessness (at least in the way I have defined it above—complacency, surety, and detachment). Whilst the "ethics of theories" approach advances how we think about theories, it does not address how we think about our thinking about theories, and this "double move" is necessary. Let me explain. The biggest reason for thoughtlessness is the student's desire to choose right answers—let's call it the "I am" approach, as in "I am a realist." Students tend to love the "I am" approach for three reasons. First, it fits the need for easy characterization of an abstract subject—there are distinct entities called theories that stand for different things. Second, once the theories are distinguished from one another, it enables choices to be made between them on some absolute basis (theories identify sets of cause-action relations, which vary in accuracy).[2] Third, it enables students to conflate their individual choice of perspective with being right in some way. For some, the results are a sense of complacency (theories are discrete and knowable), surety (easy choices can be made), and detachment (these choices can be made independently of an assessment of ourselves).

Along with the ethics of individual theories and arguments about IRT as a practical discourse stands the ethics of a theoretical discipline such as IRT, and the thoughtfulness that this can promote. There are two surface structures—operational acts of teaching (Shulman 2005b, 54)—particular to this signature pedagogy that now become important—revealing the incommensurability of theories and the role of hypocrisy, both of which go towards destabilizing complacency, surety, and detachment. Incommensurability is introduced in two ways almost immediately to students in the opening class as part of the process of "assessing a theoretical discipline." The first involves a discussion of the origins and demise (or lack thereof) of IRT positions. Theories emerge for a range of interlocking reasons—changes in the real world, instability within the "received wisdoms" of the academy, importation of ideas from outside IR (either from other disciplines or because of shifts in the philosophy of science), and the incentives of individuals within bureaucratized institutions and disciplines (PhDs require innovation, for

example, so there is always a motor of new thinking in the replication of the discipline). Conversely, once hatched, theories rarely, if ever, die (there are realists today, just as there were in the 1950s, for example, who continue to produce important insights, despite significant innovation and change in the discipline). There is a fair degree of cynicism in this, which is not intended to devalue the work of theorists or their creations. Instead, it introduces students to the personal, political, and institutional contexts in which new knowledge is demanded and created, humanizing an otherwise abstract discipline and those who constitute it.

The generation of theories, and their open-ended life cycles and continuing value despite subsequent changes, problematizes simple and linear visions or progress, and disabuses students of particularly lazy ways of assessing the quality of theories (newer must be better than older, or the inverse, that older must be better as "realism has been around since Thucydides," whereupon we all sigh deeply). This suggests that there is something more than simple "improvement" (or debasement) in IRT over time, and so we have no easy option to distinguish between good and bad theories. From there, I introduce students to how we may adjudicate between theories (saying "it doesn't matter they are all the same" is a sure-fire path to assessment failure if nothing else).

I do this with a slide of two paintings of the Grand Canal in Venice—the *Entrance to the Grand Canal* by Canaletto and *The Grand Canal* by J. M. Turner. I use these paintings as an entry point to the consideration of theories, less as the science that some seek to portray it as, and more as an ultimately artistic endeavor (see the recent discussion in Ramel (2018) on the aesthetic turn in IR and teaching). I ask the students who painted these pictures. Sometimes they know, sometimes they do not. I ask them which they prefer, which elicits a range of answers that flow intuitively. I then ask which painting is correct, which brings silence and perplexity. This is the crucial moment of departure. Theories are aesthetic statements that emerge through the conversation between artist/theorist, the world they seek to depict, and us as active observers, and we can approach them through affective learning. We know, instinctively, that these paintings are not right or wrong, and we know, equally as automatically, that their "lack of rightness" does not mean they lack value or that we are powerless to choose between them. Instead, our acts of choice come down to personal preference, constructed out of a multitude of subjectivities and experiences of which we are only partially aware.

Theories are paintings of the world—they blend conformity to conventions with the innovations that set individual artists apart. The key lesson is that we cannot choose between theories except subjectively, and we cannot determine right and wrong in any absolute sense. Claims to objective scientific status and particular visions of progress are partial and political (though that does not denude them of value, insight, and beauty that we can appreciate). Whilst every theoretical position establishes its own way of measuring value and progress, these do not come together in some grand unified theory of world politics; they always remain fragmented and in tension. The incommensurability of theories as theories—introduced in the first class and then returned to throughout the course—are not simply presented. Instead, the reasons for the emergence and shaping are discussed, making students reflect on the limitations of their own choices about theories (and indeed, if so many intelligent women and men are unable to determine right and wrong, what is a theoretical discipline actually aiming for beyond simple correctness?).

If incommensurability is the entry point to progress towards some sort of thoughtfulness, then a second strategy helps drive forward that process—revealing our own (and others') hypocrisy. This is more personal, confronting, and delicate than the incommensurability of theories. Approaching hypocrisy must be done with care, because students should not be alienated from the process, even if they are hopefully confronted by it. Here, both pedagogies of uncertainty (not knowing the nature of the student response) are important (see Shulman 2005a).

To manage uncertainty, I turn the process of realizing and confronting hypocrisy on myself. Consider a class on theories of international distributive justice, where we discuss the work of people like John Rawls and Charles Beitz, and how they can map out in ideal theory different ways to think about the world. We can see visions of justice, of equality, of redistribution. Many, perhaps all, of the people in the room will claim some sort of allegiance to these values. The question is, why do we not live in this world? If we can think it, why can we not enact it? Well, the students say, it is too difficult, those evil politicians, there are just so many obstacles between us and the realization of these values, if only they were not in the way. Here is the moment. I am, I tell them, a well-educated and hopefully

smart person. I know that all these perspectives are desirable and morally defensible. Yet I continue to buy stupidly expensive things, using my personal resources to collect more shoes or another designer bag (at this point, I usually wave around something, a Prada briefcase that I bought for my birthday being a favorite teaching aide). I know these theories outline worlds that I find appealing, but I also know I do not live up to the consequences of that revelation. I live my life in a state of protracted hypocrisy, and perhaps, as I look around the room, perhaps you do as well. As such, the moment of vulnerability is centered on me, but the students are invited to share and reflect upon it in a space where they know I am the target of the criticism, not the bestower of critique. In this way, we problematize easy assumptions of our own goodness to force us to think about our position in the world and responses to the injustices that surround us, that we are aware of, and about which we do not do enough. Such approaches parallel the "pedagogy of discomfort" (Boler 1999) and the benefits that come from helping students to have an "ambiguous and flexible sense of self" (Boler 1999, 176). Ideal theory, then, is not only a critique of the world as it exists—it is a critique of me and of us for not realizing that world and instead being comfortable in a world of injustice. We are so quick to jump on the hypocrisy of others, but we must face and reckon with our own.

The consequences of incommensurability and hypocrisy are destabilizing and decentering. They remove easy certainties about progress, about choosing right answers, and about how we can engage with the world around us. We are decentered from our own metrics of right and wrong, and instead revealed to be as political, partisan, and partial as those with whom we engage and critique. Complacency, surety, and detachment are undermined, and new opportunities emerge to be considered about how we think about ourselves and others, both in terms of the world around us and in terms of how we see ourselves in that world.

The Consequences of Thoughtfulness: Humility, Bravery, and Agency in the Face of Failure

Revealing incommensurability and hypocrisy is deconstructive in that it breaks down barriers to thoughtfulness, laying the groundwork for considering what the response to thoughtfulness may be. Again, the signature pedagogy framework is useful as it focuses attention not simply on the detail of what we teach—the facts, theories, opinions, and debates—but the deeper processes that can underpin this conveying of information—the pedagogies of formation, and the way we can build identity and character, dispositions and values, through education. In this context, it is important to remember that part of our role as educators is to equip students with the skills necessary to exist and flourish in a world of doubt, injustice, impermanence, and complexity. It is not enough to simply tell them about the world, but how they may live in that world; whilst also noting it is not our place to denote any particular answer to that question so much as it is important that we provide a guide to how they can think of their own responses.[3] The aim is more modest than some sort of preparation for "transformative political action" (see discussion in Head 2020, 86) and instead focuses on the development of three themes that have particular value.

The first is humility—or, as I describe it—the importance of holding your ideas lightly. This is not the same as believing or caring about nothing, nor is it equivalent to arguing that all positions are of equal value. Instead, it is the recognition of the importance of not mistaking your subjective beliefs for universal and incontrovertible facts. This can be fostered through class discussions, a probing respect for positions expressed, and studiously ensuring that I as a teacher do not express preferences for positions either actively or in response to student comments and questions. It is also important to legitimate the range of reasons for the opinions that students express. Students often remark that they feel uncomfortable using their own life experiences and opinions to engage with theories, especially when those theories are written by the "big names" of the discipline. Showing how those big names are as subjective and partial as we are is an empowering act—that the reasons for the theories are as personal as the reasons for one's response to them, and that we are all equal thinkers in this regard. Ideally, the result is that humility leads to empathy for alternative perspectives and the basis of those perspectives. Empathy is not relativism, and it does not mean every approach should be agreed with equally, but it does mean a sense of awareness that the reasons we think and choose in the ways we do are similar to the reasons others think and choose in the ways they do.

The second value, emerging from the twin suggestions of humility and empathy, is that it takes bravery to think, in two respects. First, it requires the ability to hold simultaneously the benefit and discomfort of a belief in some sort of balance—the thesis and its negation—without falling victim to either the comfort of certainty or, comforting, perhaps in a different way, disinterest. Second, it suggests a constant restlessness, the requirement of uncertainty not only

about what we think, but the ways in which we think. Student feedback shows that this benefits them, especially when reassured that the discomfort they feel in "not choosing" but "continually thinking" was shown to be part of the point of the class.[4]

The third is the consequence of the previous two—remembering agency. What we all do, individually and collectively, in public and in private, is significant. From talking to students, I know the concerns that we share when we look to the future and think about the world and its crises and dangers. The agency of students is a response to that heaviness, and the recognition of this agency is the best vaccination we have against the fear of what surrounds us. This agency is less about specific programs of action, and more about helping students remember they have choices to face and that it is within their power to think about outcomes and make meaningful decisions. It is worth noting that student responses to this varies. Some have let me know that they struggled with this in the course because it seemed removed from IRT, whilst others told me that this was the most positive thing that they took away from the course because they found it relevant to their lives and experiences.[5]

Concluding Thoughts

What is the point of teaching IRT? We have answers in terms of how it reproduces the discipline through training future academics, how it shapes the thinking of practitioners, and how it can influence our students (the published, practiced, taught distinction that Ettinger (2020) talks of, and which I touch on in a different way, see Davies 2017). In each of these dimensions, there are opportunities to "do better," and here I have focused on what "doing better" means for me in terms of education in 2020. It is not the educators' place, at least in something as groundless as theories, to tell students what to think, but it is important to shape not only how they think, but how they think about thinking and how that "double thinking" impacts on their location in the embodied world. It seems suitable, given we have focused on what I do in the classroom, to end this chapter as I end both my opening session on IRT in week one, and the entire seminar series at the end of week 12.

I usually start the final session with a simple question—what have you learned in this course? I then ask, what do you think I wanted you to learn in this course? Both questions bring out a range of entertaining answers. We end up, however, as follows. Inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi were at least two maxims, or at least we are told they were there. The first of these was "know thyself." Here is a restless injunction to subject the self to scrutiny, to contemplate the consequences of our thoughtlessness, our hypocrisy, and our embeddedness in the world. Like Arendt, knowing oneself is a process of reflection on our humanity, our moral imaginary, and our political nature. The second of these was "nothing to excess." Here we find a response to incommensurability, a lightness of perspective that does not require a lack of belief or action, but a recognition that belief and action are always based on subjectivities and incompleteness. The result of knowing yourself is not agnosticism or inaction; neither of those are brave. The result, instead, is the constant discomfort of knowing that your thoughts and actions are limited, wrong, and inescapably partisan, but that we must act despite these limitations, and our status as ethical agents comes not from surety, but from the absence of certainty coupled with the overwhelming necessity to do "something" in the face of a world where inaction is also morally wrong.

I return to Arendt to tie this together. If the call is for thoughtfulness, then we must overcome the smothering of thought caused by our own self-satisfaction. Critical thinking is no easy remedy, because Arendt focuses attention not on our engagement with the world, but on our engagement with ourselves *in* that world. To be thoughtful is to perceive and ponder the subjectivities that shape how we see and think about the world around us, and to be discomforted by those relationships; to ask questions not simply about why others are wrong, but to think about how we are wrong, and how that wrongness is the inescapable product of being a thinking moral agent in the world. We must perceive, encounter, and respond to the vulnerability of our thinking processes, the objects we think about, and the world in which we think (see discussion in Hobson 2017). For me, the response is a balance between decentering students from their own narratives and then developing within them the bravery to act in the face of this decentered status. The value of political science in general, and IRT as my own small field to both care about and care in, comes down to this—the creation of informed citizens who see the world with empathy, with humility, but with hope in their own agency. Instead of turning them into little proselytizers of partisan truths, it is incumbent upon us through our teaching to develop not only their critical faculties, but their human qualities. We have enough people in

the world who know they are right. My job boils down to ensuring that they know they are wrong, and yet helping them care enough—and be brave enough—to act, despite this profoundly uncomfortable realization.

Notes

[1] In this way, the chapter is compatible with, but ultimately separate from, recent arguments about ensuring pluralism in IR classes (Hagmann and Biersteker, 2014) and about articulating the values that should underpin political science—"*truthfulness … agency … inquiry …* and *autonomy*" (Flinders and Pal, 2020, 274). The benefit and need for pluralization of education in IR has become an area of keen interest. Ettinger (2020) gives an excellent recent overview and links well to existing literature on the subject. See also, from a different perspective, Goldgeier and Mezzera (2020). It is worth noting, however, that pluralism is insufficient to achieve the thoughtfulness that Hannah Arendt suggests is important. Knowing more about something, and knowing that thing from multiple perspectives, is not the same as actively reflecting on the self—although as I note it is not a barrier to this either. To achieve thoughtfulness, one needs more than simple pedagogical pluralism, as it is not reducible to knowing more. It is about knowing differently and so suggests that alternate approaches are necessary.

[2] This ties in with generalized assumptions of progress that students presume apply to the social sciences—new theories are better than old theories—which I discuss later. Interestingly, Katzenstein and Sil (2008) argue that analytical eclecticism is an escape from choosing. This is true, inasmuch as it advocates the use of multiple lenses, but it offers an escape from the need to think about how we choose, which is a dead-end in terms of the pedagogical approach being discussed.

[3] This is a response to the demand to "show the benefit" of education in such areas as the arts and social sciences that makes a lasting impression on me. Efforts to demonstrate the benefit of non-STEM degrees through quantitative measurement are vital, but they are not definitive. Universities do not simply explain the world; they prepare people to live in that world, a task that is not reducible to a mechanistic understanding of parts of that world or even bounded proficiencies in forms of action in it.

[4] Students have sometimes referred to this as a "real education" that they distinguish from simply learning more things. One personal communication noted that "you have given me through this course a real education—helping me to think not only about answers but how I think about getting to answers."

[5] I am grateful for conversations with Dr. Christopher Hobson on this point. He has talked about the importance of providing students with ways to think about being in the world and helping them to approach that world in constructive ways, especially in the context of COVID-19 and the disruptions to their education and life plans that the students are facing.

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