Morgenthau and Waltz:  
From Interpretation to Science?

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International relations theory in the 20th century represents in microcosm many of the fundamental features of social science knowledge, and its trajectory as “theory” is similar to the social sciences as a whole. Thinking about international relations begins with normative theory, in natural law thinking, and in narrative history, as in Thucydides, and was developed through historical study, and by the systematic replacement of normative concepts with neutral concepts, usually in the face of new and obdurate realities. The twentieth century contributed the notion that the area can be better understood in terms of systematic conceptions on the model—though which model is a question—of “science,” to produce “theories” or conceptual schemes which are not primarily normative but rather explanatory. This novel metatheoretical conception allows for a fundamental break with the past, creating international relations as a systematic field of inquiry.

In the case of international relations, the central figure in this transformation was Hans J. Morgenthau. The transformation occurred a half century after analogous transformations elsewhere in social science, which corresponded with the development, at the turn of the twentieth century, of the modern scheme of social science disciplines, each of which constructed a methodological identity. In international relations thinking, as with other first attempts at constructing theoretical disciplines out of social material, the initial attempts were revised, contested, and replaced. Morgenthau’s work was thus followed by an attempt to place it on a different and more rigorously scientific basis, influenced, as many similar attempts were during the behavioral science revolution of the late forties, by logical positivism, the idea of unified science, and a particular model of theoretical explanation.

In international relations, this occurred in writings of Kenneth Waltz in the 1970s, following a period in which the social sciences generally were engaged in methodological reflection. The results of these discussions were inconclusive. Attempts at rigor created more questions about the nature of the enterprises they were involved in and purported to make rigorous then they solved. The legacy of this moment in the history of the social sciences is thus ambiguous at best. No generally accepted metatheoretical understanding of the nature of social science as a form of theoretical knowledge succeeded in replacing the received ideas about theories. And the social sciences generally found themselves in the peculiar situation of containing a large number of thriving enterprises, from rational choice modeling to empirical policy science based on structure equation modeling to qualitative research and so on, which coexisted but which could not be integrated with one another, and indeed conflicted with one another with respect to the way in which they constructed the basic issues they dealt with.
The success of the attempt to supplant the normative and historical traditions came under question in these new circumstances, and the question of the mutual significance of the various new “paradigms,” as they came after Kuhn to be called, became a nagging concern.

Reconsidering this transition and history in the microcosm of international relations theory amounts to an opportunity to say something of perhaps more general significance about the nature of theoretical knowledge of the social realm as a whole. In this paper, we propose to reconstruct Morgenthau’s original argument and assess the claim that his model of theoretical understanding has been supplanted by Waltz. The paper is historical and interpretive. But issues which arise in connection with this particular dispute, we shall argue, tell us something significant about the nature of social science theory more broadly. We shall argue, the sources of Morgenthau’s metatheoretical understanding are to be found in Weber, particularly in his discussion of ideal types and their uses. We will then argue that Waltz only appears to transcend the limitations that Weber believed ideal types had, and to argue more generally that this is the condition both of theoretical social science generally and of social science relevant to policy.

Morgenthau and Weber

The basic facts about Morgenthau’s intellectual debt to Weber are well known and attested to by Morgenthau himself. Morgenthau, who was trained as a lawyer and later wrote a dissertation in legal theory about international law, took a class as a student which greatly impressed him. The course was seminar organized about the recently published Politische Schriften of Max Weber. These writings of Weber, as a large literature now attests, were the source of Morgenthau’s realism. They will be only a secondary concern in what follows. A more interesting influence for our purposes are the texts which were collected as Weber’s methodological writings or Wissenschaftslehre. Morgenthau knew and cited these texts as well, and indeed cited other works in the Weberian corpus, including the politically significant text known in English as “Religious Rejections of the World and their direction, as well as Weber’s discussion of charisma. Weber’s methodological views are largely encapsulated in two key essays, one of which is related to the concept of value freedom or ethical neutrality, the other to the nature of objectivity. The essay on objectivity, intriguingly entitled “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy,” is the text in which Weber describes the distinctive features of conceptualization in the “historical sciences,” and interprets methodological issues in the social sciences, notably the claims of Marxism, in terms of the concept of ideal-types.

In Politics among Nations, Morgenthau makes a revealing methodological comment that has not been followed up in the now extensive literature on Morgenthau and Weber. The comment is central to any understanding of the relationship between Morgenthau and later “positivist” conceptions of international relations theory such as the one most famously elaborated by Waltz.

A theory of international relations performs the function any theory performs, that is, to bring order and meaning into a mass of unconnected material and to increase
knowledge through the logical development of certain propositions empirically established. (1962a, 72)

The two step phrasing of this account of the function of theory, beginning with “order and meaning and continuing to empirical propositions, is suggestive of Weber’s model of verstehende Soziologie, and in the following paragraph Morgenthau expanded on this hint in a striking way:

While this theoretical function of a theory of international relations is no different from the function any social theory performs, its practical function is peculiar to itself. The practical function of a theory of international relations has this in common with all political theory that it depends very much on the political environment in which it operates. In other words, political thinking is, as German sociology puts it, “standortgebunden,” that is to say, it is tied to a particular social situation (1962a, 72-73).

This gives international relations theory a very specific identity: it is a subspecies of the species social theory which in turn falls under the genera of disciplines concerned with meaning (and therefore with “understanding”). Morgenthau nowhere elaborates a general philosophy of social science, nor does he bother to elaborate on this remark. Yet Morgenthau was educated as an attorney, trained as a lawyer in the classificatory Roman or continental legal tradition and would have understood precisely what the implications of classifying his theory in this way were, and his silence on “methodological” questions indicates that he considered this to be a sufficient statement. As readers, however, we are obliged to reconstruct its meaning ourselves.

Key articles from Weber’s Wissenschaftslehre, which contain his methodological writings, are translated in Edward Shils collection, The Methodology of the Social Sciences (1949). The date and context are historically relevant. Shils, Morgenthau, and Frank Knight, as well as the lawyer Max Rhinestein were admirers of Weber at the University of Chicago who had close relations to Morgenthau and were important as sponsors of Morgenthau’s career. Shils is thanked in the acknowledgments to Politics among Nations, which was written contemporaneously with the publication of Shils’ translation of Weber’s methodological essays. This suggests that there is nothing inadvertent about this remark. It appears in a very specific intellectual context, namely the Chicago appreciation of Weber, of which Morgenthau was a beneficiary in many ways, including his sponsorship by Frank Knight, who served as a reader for the University Press, endorsing his breakthrough book, Scientific Man and Power Politics. The appeal to Weber’s text provides the natural solution to the historical question of what Morgenthau understood himself to be doing in writing Politics among Nations. It should perhaps be added that Morgenthau’s relatively junior status in this circle of Weber’s admirers indicates also that Morgenthau would not have intended to invent his own distinctive interpretation of Weber or merely have appealed to some other interpretation of Weber, perhaps to be found elsewhere in the literature. This suggests that our problem is to understand what Morgenthau and his circle would have thought was meant by classifying international relations theory as a subordinate branch of social theory of the kind that was concerned with meaning, or in Weber’s terms verstehende Soziologie.
Weber uses this terminology in two closely related texts. One is the extended essay “On the categories of interpretive sociology,” which deals primarily with the question of the status of collective entities, such as the state or the family, in relation to the intellectual category that Weber takes to be fundamental, namely individual intentional action. Understood in terms of the problem of the classification of the sciences, Weber more generally operates in terms of a distinction between sciences whose subject matter preconstituted in, as Weber puts it, “the language of life,” that is to say topics which have “meaning,” and therefore involve the category of understanding, and sciences concerned with that which is not so constituted, those sciences for which we typically are concerned only to produce classifications which enable us to predict.

Weber’s reasoning is this. The world itself is a meaningless chaos. The world of interest to the historical sciences of which understanding sociology is one, is the world preconstituted for us by our cultural interests, and understandable to us because of the fact that our interest in these objects are interests for us understood in terms of this cultural preconstitution. This contrasts with, for example, chemical classifications. The subject matter of chemistry may well be preconstituted for us by our culture, for example by our interest in the precious metal gold. But as chemists we are always prepared to discard and replace such a folk classification.

It may noted also that the classification “understanding sociology,” falling under the general category of “the historical sciences,” contrasts to other categories of “science”, such as legal science, which are concerned with questions of validity, normative questions, rather than historical ones. Legal science, in this scheme of classification, presupposes, rather than explains, notions of legal validity. And one could imagine a subcategory of legal science involving, for example, international law, that either presupposed the cultural constituted objects of international law, such as nations, or derived them, in their normative status, from presupposed notions of legal validity. This sort of thing is precisely what an understanding sociology does not presuppose. It attempts to explain objects such as the state that have preconstituted its subject matter for us using a particular set of preconstituted explainers, in the case the meaning that are characteristic of intentional action and intentional agency. The notion of legal validity enters into such explanations not so to speak in propria persona as a legal concept but solely as a feature of the meaning which an agent gives to her action.

Meanings or intentions are not accessible directly. Actions become understandable to us or meaningful to us in terms of a typification, and here Weber is characteristically thinking of the paradigm case of legal concepts which must be applied to fit complex and non-standard situation. Understanding takes the form of applying a typification, which is already understood in terms of its meaning, to the world, and in the case of understanding sociology to behavior that the typification will treat or constitute as action. Typifications can be self-conscious constructions, or simply available within the culture itself, and they can be primary typifications that apply directly to action or second order typifications that relate and make more meaningful or intelligible actions which are themselves already categorized or typified at the primary level, that is to say already constituted as actions of a particular kind.

Typification in Weber
Typifications understood in this way differ from the descriptions of science, which are a distinct subcategory of the larger category of classifications of typifications at least some of the time because especially in the case of complex typifications, their application is not straightforward and unproblematic. Like the categories of the law, it may require what Weber calls, using legal terminology, casuistic, in order to enable a given case to be seen as an example of a particular type of action, just as casuistic reasoning may be necessary to identify a particular act as falling under a legal category, such as a particular crime. The distinction between the normative or the dogmatic sciences the historical sciences proper can be seen in such considerations as these. Suppose we are considering the question of the historical consequences of the so called donation of Constantine. For a normative or as Weber would say, “dogmatic” point of view, one can ask legal questions about the status of such a donation, whether the donation, in fact, in a legal sense had ever occurred, the question of recognition of the legitimacy of a claim that had been treated for a long time as legitimate and so forth. These are dogmatic questions because to answer them requires some sort of commitment to the notion of validity in a real sense since the inquiries are designed to answer the question of the validity or legal meaning of the act in question. From an historical point of view, however, the actual question of validity is in itself of no significance. What is significant instead is the question of how the agent in the various historical situations in which the donation was treated as a justification for actions or beliefs was understood, including a thing understood to be valid, by the agents in question. The “truth” of the legal fact of its validity otherwise has nothing to contribute to such questions.

Once one understands the agents, there is no more explanation to be had, expect perhaps for an explanation of the same type, that is to say one which contributes further understanding, perhaps by locating this action in a larger set of actions which can be additionally understood as they relate to one another, for example as one understands a market in terms of the rational actions of a number of rational agents dealing with one another. The paradigm of understanding and in a sense the case that represents the maxim of understanding is the case in which the act in question fully conforms to the most fully understandable ideal type, the case of fully rational instrumental action, a case which in this unmixed and pure sense Weber thought was very rare.

The possibility of understanding action through typifications was for Weber however not limited to this type, however, and this contrasts Weber to rational-choice theorists and to contemporaries like von Mises. When we recognize an act as being done out of anger, for example, we also typify and for Weber such typifications stood on an equal footing with the case of rational action with respect to their adequacy as a means of understanding and as a point which requires no further understanding. The case of rational action, however, is more powerful, in that we can use it for such purposes as identifying what would have been a rational action, for example in a military strategic choice situation, because our knowledge of what would have been rational enables us to identify errors and to then begin to account for them out of other considerations, such as evidence that some action was done out anger, which enables us to construct more complicated and complete accounts of an action episode. Where Weber contrasts to some forms of rational choice explanation, and historically was in conflict with Austrian economics, was in the fact that unlike Austrian economics, Weber regarded pure rationality as merely a model for the purpose of understanding with no special a priori
necessity, and which was potentially historically replaceable if it was to prove no longer applicable in some future historical period.

“Understanding sociology” works on material composed of actions which can be understood in this way, through meanings and typifications. But as I have indicated in relation to the notion of the market, it is not limited to constructing typifications whose purpose is the explanation of single individual actions. The market is only one model of this, and Weber also himself constructed ideal types of historical processes, for example the ideal type of the early Protestant capitalist in “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,” and discussed types at the level of political forms, such as his model of the ancient city state, and forms of legitimate rule. He interpreted many similar models in his methodological writings.

As with action explanations themselves, these second order models are applied by casuistic considerations to new material that they do not perfectly fit. But the employment of ideal types at this second level serves the same cognitive purposes as typifications of individual acts, namely to account for something that is at first not readily intelligible or understandable by reference to something that is already intelligible or understandable and has been constructed to be so, namely the ideal type.

Morgenthau’s “Theory” as Typification

When we ask the question “what sort of theory is Morgenthau’s theory of international relation in Politics among Nations?”, the answer that Morgenthau indicates by his language in this passage is that it is an ideal type of the Weberian kind, that is to say an intellectual construction which clarifies or brings order and meaning to a partly understood domain for a particular historical audience. Unfortunately the character of the “theory,” to the extent that it is appropriate to think of it as a theory or even a collection of theories at all, is obscured by the way in which Morgenthau presents the basic ideas of realism, which mix what we might think of as the fundamental considerations or simplifying assumptions that go into what Weber would have called “ideal typification” of the recurrent patterns of international politics constructed by Morgenthau, methodological maxims about the study of politics, and perhaps some casuistic considerations about the applicability of the relevant models of international politics to actual historical situations. One can see why Morgenthau, who used “idealism” to contrast to “realism,” would not have wanted to tempt confusion by introducing the language of “ideal-types,” and to use the term “theory” in a way that was congenial to his audience in American academic social science. But these usages obscure his deeper meaning and conflict with his frank recognition of the audience-relative character of his project.

Morgenthau was not himself writing a methodological or metatheoretical treatise, but rather explaining some basic guidelines for thinking about international relations realistically. He did not need to use all of the machinery Weber constructed in his methodological writings. He had no intention of pressing such issues as the reality of the state and the reality of the interstate system of conflict and rivalry. He intended to take these things as givens, presuppositions, which, following Weber’s admonitions, needed to have their status as assumptions respected. Nor did his audience require lessons in
sociological hermeneutics. What they did need was a particular kind of intellectual prophylaxis if they were to understand how to think about the considerations that Morgenthau was going to treat as primary.

What Does International Relations Theory Do?

There is a pervasive ambiguity in international relations theory about the actual cognitive purposes and practical value of international relations theory. This can be illustrated nicely by a series of assertions made by John Mearscheimer about international relations theory, to the effect that it is predictive, that it tells you how to behave, and is therefore normative for a strategist, that ignoring its principles will lead to disaster, and so forth and so on. These considerations rather strongly resemble the ambiguities of conventional economic theory, which is usually discussed more sharply in terms of its normative and positive senses, and in rational choice modeling itself, in which the normative meaning in the strict and most understandable formal sense is contrasted to the way in which actors actually do make choices, which can be understood either in terms of its deviations from the normative model or potentially, in theory at least, by some sort of alternative model of decision making that would be more successful predictively.

The highly developed but inconclusive discussion of the status of the normative model of rationality cannot easily be compressed, but a few considerations are central. One is the question of whether, if the rational choice model is “normative,” it is uniquely normative? Why this model rather than some other model? And the answers to this question often come in the form of different kinds of considerations, such as the consideration that the person who deviates least from this model will be most likely to prevail in a competition or a struggle, or in the market. Predictive power is often invoked a virtue of these models, as it is by Mearscheimer, but it is also acknowledged that these are not predictive theories in the sense that scientists have predictive theories, so that false predictions or deviations between what actually happens and what is predicted do not lead us to abandon the theory, but rather at most to seek explanations of a more *ad hoc* kind for the failure of the prediction. Even the notion that in the long run or the last analysis conformity to the normative theory is necessary or necessary for success are considerations that implicitly concede that a precise or short term prediction is not what the model does or is not the primary standard against which the model is meant to be held.

From a philosophical point of view, the existence of conflicting *desiderata* or purposes for a theory is a sign of the trouble because, in certain famous cases in the history of science, notably the controversy over the wave hypothesis in the 1830's, there have been alternative theories, each of which might fulfill different of these *desiderata*, leaving the question of which was the true or correct theory unresolved. In addition, there is in social science theory generally an aspect of competition between theories in which the conflict between theories is a matter of differences in the explanatory objects of the theory. Typically the explanatory objects of a theory are not, so to speak, given but are constructed along with the theory, so that, for example, Keohane can speak of the interstate system as an object to be explained and which one can have a theory about only once he has made it persuasive that there is such a thing as the interstate system in the first place. In international relations theory, many of the conflicts appear to be disputes
over what phenomena there are to be explained rather than over, for example, the facts that are deduced in support of these explanations, or over general characterizations of the relations between space as orderly or systematic. This should be no surprise. The situation mimics that of the social sciences as a whole.

Yet like rational choice models of the market, international relations theory has a striking stability with respect to the basic model of analysis it employs, namely the model of balance of power between rival states. The model that long predates academic theorizing and contains within the usual understanding the kinds of ambiguities which remain and are made explicit in Mearscheimer’s characterization. Thus what we have in international relations is a reasonably stable model with variant interpretations at a metatheoretical level. These ambiguities are characteristic of ideal types in general. Ideal types are from the point of view of the construction of ideal types extractions, that is to say models whose virtue is a clarity rather than close approximations to the detail and distance between the ideal type of reality is something that needs to be understood by the user of the ideal type, so that as Weber repeatedly put it, the user does not mistake the ideal type for the reality.

The issue can be focused by considering the most explicit discussion of these issues in the international relations theory literature, Kenneth Waltz’s 1979 claim to have replaced traditional realism with a more genuinely scientific predictive theory. There is a long and contentious literature on the topic of whether the theory has the status claimed for it, based in part on considerations from the philosophy of science. The present discussion will take a different approach, reflective of the interpretation of Morgenthau in terms of Weber presented earlier. On question this raises is whether Waltz’s theoretical constructions are better understood in terms of the concept of an ideal type, and more generally, whether the balance of power model, which is sufficiently powerful to have remained informative for many situations, and is therefore, as the statisticians say, robust, is also better understood as an ideal type. To consider this question fairly one must examine the question of what sort of alternative interpretations are available and how credible these are.

Waltz wrote his famous text in a period after the absorption of logical positivism by social science enthusiasts, many of whom wrote similar texts instructing thinkers in their own fields on “theory construction” and more generally on how to be scientific. Many of these texts were published, as was Waltz, as primers or textbooks directed at junior practitioners who were assumed to need versions of the logical positivist’s view of scientific theory tailored to the specifics of their own field. All of them aspired to greater rigor than the theories of the past and all of them took the view that theory of this more rigorous type was superior. Waltz asks and answers the relevant questions as follows:

How can a theory of international politics be constructed? Just as any theory must be?...first one must conceive of international politics as a bounded realm or domain; second, one must discover some law-like regularities within it; and third, one must develop a way of explaining the observed regularities (1979, 116).

His specific claim is that his own version of international relations theory is predictive in ways that Morgenthau’s realism was not predictive, prediction being the traditional mark of success for scientific theory in the positivist tradition, which is invoked by the term
law-like regularities.” In addition, Waltz rejects certain kind of criticism as erroneous. Criticism of the assumptions as false is misguided, he argues, because “assumptions are neither true nor false and that they are essential for the construction of a theory” (1979, 119).

It may be noted that in the account I have given of Morgenthau in terms of Weber’s theory of understanding sociology there has been no mention of prediction or law-like regularities, and prediction is not explicitly a part of Weber’s own account of understanding sociology. Nevertheless predictive considerations enter in quite different ways for understanding sociology. Weber famously qualified the notion of understanding an action in terms of its meaning by saying that inadequate explanation of human action needed to adequate both causally and in terms of meaning. The precise significance of what he meant in relation to individual action by adequate at the level of cause is somewhat obscure, for some reasons that can be explained on the basis of Weber’s own writings on causality. Recall that prediction was the criteria which discipline choices of classification and the natural sciences. In the social sciences, since we cannot eliminate the descriptions of our objects of interest in favor of new descriptive categories without changing the subject and failing to answer the questions we are interested in which come preconstituted for us in a particular classificatory form.

If a theory was in fact fully predictive, there would be no role for a normative or prudential use of the theory. If agents were actually determined in predictable ways, indeed, they would not be agents at all. This is a generic problem of social science theorizing, but also an important one. Waltz expresses it by quoting S. F. Nadel to the effect that “an orderliness abstracted from behavior cannot guide behavior” (1979, 121). If behavioral theory is largely correct or largely predictive, or alternatively predictive in the last instance, it would of course be imprudent to bet against it or act in ways which represent a bet against it, just as it would be imprudent to bet that a coin would float on the top of a glass of water. So some sense can be given to the idea of a model that largely true in the sense of being largely predictive and at the same time practice informing. But once we concede the fact of the imperfections, we raise the possibility that the model is not best understood in terms of its predictive powers in the strong sense of the Nadel quote.

Since in this case an alternative understanding that squares with the partial predictivity of the model, namely Morgenthau’s hypothesis that agents conform with the model because they understand their actions and the strategies of others in terms of the model, is available. It may even be that the fact that Morgenthau’s account is roughly correct as an account of international relations is the explanation of why agents act in terms of it: the fact that agents in international relations have learned the theory and applied it successful in practice, in short, may explain the fact that they act in accordance with it. This is a possibility Waltz dismisses as part of a more general attack on the idea that outcomes are the result of intentions to produce the outcomes.

Waltz’s remarks on “motives” and intentions raise a number of questions. In the first place, there is a deep methodological issue. As Weber saw, and as contemporary philosophers such as Donald Davidson have stressed, intentional explanations, that is to say the explanations relevant to explananda described as actions, do not come in a form that can be made into what Davidson calls “serious science.” And this difficult extends, according to this now standard view, to any of the topics in which belief, choice, value
and the like are relevant. But what about topics that are in effect made up of actions, such as economics or international politics? One might argue that there are patterns which occur in law-like regular ways despite being made up of actions. But this is not what Waltz argues, and indeed, it would be difficult, if there were such patterns, to associate them with the subject matter of international politics and answer questions about international politics by reference to them. But what does Waltz say that is relevant to the fact that the patterns he discusses are made up of actions? And how might what he says be understood in the light of the larger problems of social science methodology.

Closure and Complexity

Waltz makes a point that theory construction requires a domain. He constructs a distinctive domain: international politics. And he repeatedly distinguishes this domain from the domain of foreign policy studies, which is concerned with the explanation of the formation of foreign policy. How might we understand this distinction? Given Waltz’s preference for the language of law-like regularities and economic reasoning, together with his recognition that the domain of international politics is not closed, that is to say that outcomes in this domain are on occasion influenced by causes external to it, such as features of the process of foreign policy formation, one might look at some past thinkers with similar commitments who have addressed the same kinds of problem.

The classic study of the history of social science methodology is John Stuart Mill’s system of logic. Mill understood causal relations to be unconditioned successions, a concept similar to the logical positivist notion of law. Nevertheless he recognized the actual questions of the social sciences, such as the question of the causes of the wealth of nations, were questions which, far from approximating the closure of classical mechanics were in fact the result of the admixture of a great many causes, and that entangling these causal influences was practically speaking impossible. We can call this the problem of complexity and understand Waltz as attempting to respond, as indeed the social scientists he cites and admires, such as Durkheim, also attempted to respond to. It may be noted that Durkheim’s solution to this problem was to claim that despite complexity, there were exceptional circumstances which provide the underlying laws of social life to appear more or less directly. They were, as he understood it, recognizable by the distinctive orderliness that they presented. This is not Waltz’s argument.

Waltz argues that a particular kind of international relations theory can be understood as true and explanatory in something like the sense of the standard model of scientific theory if certain conditions of theorizing which obtain widely if not universally in the social sciences are properly acknowledged. One of these has already been mentioned, namely that theories ordinarily require assumptions. In Waltz’s case, these assumptions include the assumed unit of analysis, and one central feature of the unit of analysis. The unit is the state, the assumption is that the state seeks to survive.

In a sense this is already an attempt to deal with the problem of complexity. Out of all the possible units of analysis and the possible features of these units, Waltz has selected these two. Whether or not a theory based on this selection can be constructed, that is informative, is an empirical question. But it is not an empirical question of the same kind that arises in a closed system. Because there are other variables that influence the behavior of the state, we can reasonably anticipate that a theory which considered
only in this feature of these units would not yield a genuinely predictive theory of any accuracy. Too many other, “external,” causes “mixed” with these causes would lead to deviations from the results that could be predicted from consideration of these properties alone. Waltz speaks about this problem in terms of selection, and argues that any theory is necessarily selective. And in his discussion of the verification of such a theory, this consideration is highly relevant as well. Because the theory is not closed, in short, it makes no closed predictions, and it is inappropriate to expect it to do so.

This is an important restriction, in part because it parallels a similar restriction in Morgenthau’s conception. As noted, in one sense the use of “theory” by Morgenthau was a misnomer (most certainly) and a concession to academic fashion. It was not a term that Weber would have used, and indeed Weber was on occasion accused of having no theory, but having only a system of categories. The basis of this accusation was in the fact that Weber claimed that his system of categories, which was composed for the most part of ideal types, was designed only to be useful for interpretation rather than final and in some sense certain. It was part of the neo-Kantian conception of science prevalent at the time he wrote that conceptual systems were supposed, again on the model of classical mechanics, to be in some sense final, that is to say not only complete and comprising the entire subject matter of the science but also to be uniquely superior or comprehensive, something that was typically achieved by instructing an abstract hierarchy of concepts which was governed by highly general conceptual distinctions. Weber did provide a system of categories of this sort, but he declined to claim that they were uniquely valid and asserted their completeness only in a limited way since the categories were typically defined by ideal types between which many intermediate cases were assumed to fall. Selection is thus driven by the purpose of providing further intelligibility to a historically specific audience already armed with its own means of making the subject matter intelligible.

Waltz constructs his subject matter selectively in a somewhat different fashion. He distinguishes between aspects of the same behavior, that is to say the actions of states, by treating these actions as having both the aspect of foreign policy, that is to say, a product of the decision making and behavior of political actors, in a situation that is domestic and bureaucratic activity, and the same behavior understood as actions in the system of international politics. This conceptual distinction provides him with the main tool for criticizing other theorists, and especially Morgenthau. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the category of international politics thus conceived is as much an ideal conceptual construction as the ideal typical constructions of Weber or Morgenthau. Weber constantly warned against mistaking these conceptions for reality, by which he meant both that there was more complexity than could be contained with the construction and that the intellectually compelling aspects of the construction derive in part from what he calls the one-sided accentuation of reality which is an accentuation in the direction of greater intelligibility.

Waltz attacked “reification,” which is the same thing. Yet Waltz understands selectivity to be (so to speak) a necessary property of theories in the face of complexity but not in any sense a one-sided extenuation or distortion. The features of reality that are selected and thus made available for theorizing are rather aspects of what is already there but selectivity enables one to construct powerful theories which identify important underlying processes, processes which would simply have been obscured by the
nonselective inclusion of other aspects even when these aspects, such as the domestic political considerations that bear on foreign policy are invariably to be found, as Mill said, in the admixture of causes that produces a particular result.

One particular class of interfering causes is of particular concern for Waltz, primarily because he wishes to distinguish his theory from what in his view are erroneous theories that appeal to these causes. The causes are the individual motivations of participants. There are a variety of errors that arise from the inappropriate appeal to individual motivations. The most serious and pervasive one Waltz directly attributes to Morgenthau. It is, Waltz argues, the product of a basic logical error which seeks to find an intentional agent or an intention behind any significant outcome or result. The balance of power, which will be our focus in this section, is an example of such an error. Morgenthau, he points out, treats the balance of power not as some sort of determinate, law-governed fact in the conceptually distinct domain of international politics, but both agree that: If balance of power is not maintained than war shall ensue. Potential disproportions (of power) invite directly kinetic wars. For Morgenthau, however, it is a pattern of conduct that persists in large part because of the intentions of the relevant agents to act in accordance with it. As he quotes Morgenthau, if the agents do not act with certainty, the system will not be maintained and if agents choose to act contrary to the balance of power, the balance will collapse. Morgenthau is clearly thinking of cases such as the rise of Hitler, where the major agents, such as the leaders of Germany, England, and France, chose not to act in accordance with the principles of balance of power, for whatever reasons, and allowed war to occur.

For Morgenthau, this is a natural and uncomplicated result of his understanding of the balance of power as an ideal type which is a part of a verstehende sociology. The actions of foreign policy makers can be made intelligible by the concept of the balance of power. But making intelligible and predicting are not the same thing. Agents may have intentions, such as establishing a thousand year Reich, a German Empire, and so forth, which are not in accordance with and indeed conflict with the desire for peace and behave accordingly. This does not “refute” the concept of the balance of power because it is an idealization of a pattern of intentional actions in which agents understand one another and one another’s behavior in terms of considerations of balance and act to preserve the balance in order to preserve peace. This is something that at least arguably, the leaders of Germany, England, and France failed to do in World War II.

For Weber and Morgenthau, the lack of predictivity on the part of the model is not an issue. The issue is the gain in intelligibility it makes possible. Their failures are as much illuminated by the model of balance of power as their conformity to it would have been, because as with the concept of rationality itself, the idealization allows us to grasp central processes occurring in the situation and understand the consequences of error or deviation from the ideal model. In this case, Blum and Chamberlain all failed to counter Hitler, with the predictable consequence (that is to say predictable within the framework of the intelligibility making structure of the concept of balance of power) of producing an imbalance which in turn made Hitler’s invasion more rational, less risky, and therefore intelligible as “rational”.

For Waltz this reasoning is irretrievably confused. The correct concept of balance of power is one in which the explainers are “constraints”. The behavior of units seeking to survive in anarchic conditions is behavior in the face of constraints to which they can
respond by actions, such as rearmament, which then become constraints that balance and constrain other units. A theory which is genuinely explanatory rather than (as he says) merely an attempt at description, such as Morgenthau’s, is a theory about these real constraints.

If “constraints” were all there was to the story, and if the system of international relations theory and the model of balance of power was closed, then disturbances to the system would all come from outside. The episode of the rise of Hitler would be described thus: 1) Germany created an imbalance (ignored the constraints), for reasons outside the theory; 2) England would have then restored the balance, if she were behaving in accordance with the assumptions of the theory, but failed to do so for reasons outside the theory, and 3) therefore, war ensued, in accordance with the theory. This should signal what a profound difference there is in subject matter or “domain” between Waltz and Morgenthau. For Morgenthau, as we have seen, failures to act in accordance with the theory are intelligible, and made more intelligible by understanding them in the light of their deviations from the theory. To understand these events is to understand the reasons the various agents had for ignoring the clear requirements of the balance of power. But clearly Waltz does not wish to have the theory understood in this manner. Morgenthau’s understanding, he argues, is erroneous on a variety of grounds. One ground is that it confuses what is properly the subject of the theory, namely constraints, with the actual actions of the agents, which is part of the subject matter of the study of foreign policy rather than international politics as such. The theory is about consequences, or as he puts it real constraints. And this gives us a different reason for not treating these events as a disconfirmation of the theory. Just because Chamberlain and Blum did not respond to the constraints created by Hitler’s policies correctly and consequently behaved as they did, is not a refutation of the theory of constraints.

It may be noted that this kind of answer assumes something like Mill’s basic picture of the admixture of causes, turned to the task of excusing the predictive weaknesses of the limitations of the theory of international politics. Waltz also argues that expecting the theory, which is highly general, to make particular predictions, such as predictions about the behavior of European politicians between 1935 and 1939, is also a mistake. This claim also requires some interpretation. He seems be saying that because the theory is quite “general” it cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed by any particular result, which is a somewhat puzzling claim. As a matter of logic, of course, highly general claims can indeed be disconfirmed by particular results. If he means “general” in a somewhat different sense, for example, in the sense that the relevant concepts are theoretical concepts and thus accessible only through complex inferences from observational data, or are abstract concepts which do not correspond directly to actual cases, it makes sense to say that the generalities do not imply particular results. And this way of thinking fits with his remarks on “assumptions” being neither true or false. However, in the case of theoretical terms, with suitable connecting rules, theoretical concepts do imply observable results, and abstract concepts meant to be empirically meaningful need to be logically connected to nonabstract concepts through such means as operational definition in order for them to claim to be empirically meaningfully, at least according to the standard view of scientific theories, which discuss this under the heading of connecting rules. Similarly for assumptions: assumptions themselves may not be directly determinable to be true or false, but they are used to produce conclusions that
are, and if the facts used with the assumptions to produce false conclusions are correct, we are bound to reject the assumptions. Waltz, however, seems to have something else in mind, which conjoins the notion of a conceptually separable topic, such as international politics, and the Millian notion of the admixture of causes.

For Waltz, the reason that the abstract relationships fail to predict precisely is because these abstract relationships are in a domain which is conceptually separable but not causally closed, and therefore invariably subject to admixtures of causes which can either produce outcomes contrary to the theory or delay or distort the basic operations that would have held if the constraints alone were operating consistently to produce expected behavior. This means that the “general” assertions of the theory are assertions about what would happen in the absence of interfering causes. The parallel distinction is central to Mill’s own definition of economics in terms of motives relating to the acquisition of wealth, a conception repudiated by his successors but which is peculiarly relevant for Waltz because it has the effect of defining the economy in a way that is similar to the way the Waltz defines international politics, which is to say, distinct conceptually but not causally.

The mixed character of this theory requires some explanation. Waltz insists that a theory requires assumptions, by which he means assumptions similar to the idealizing assumptions in classical economics about “economic man.” But the determinants of outcomes are concrete causal facts. So, while he explicitly rejects explanations that assume that an aggregate pattern, such as equilibrium, have to be the result of a specific intention to secure an equilibrium (a mistaken assumption he attributes to others, including apparently, Morgenthau himself), he does not exclude what have traditionally been understood as intentional explanations. The intention to survive is an intention. His point, rather, is that these intentions are sufficient to explain the facts in the relevant conceptual domain, namely international politics, a domain that itself must be understood in light of the qualification that in real cases there are always admixed causes.

Despite Waltz’s complaint about intentions as explanations, the theory that assumes as its basic units separate States motivated by the desire to survive amounts to the theory which is itself a theory of a domain which is defined conceptually by a feature which is an aspect of action. The parallel is between the construction of economics by Mill as defined by the pursuit of wealth (a motive or cause) and in Waltz’s case by survival (also a motive or cause). These in one sense represent an ideal world constituted by the selected motive and theorized about as if there were no other operative motives. This kind of abstraction of a subject matter contrasts with another familiar kind, that of closed conceptual systems such as marginal utility theory in which all possible additional causes are assimilated to the theory itself and the quantitative relations in the theory are true by definition.

The Value of Closed Systems

Waltz’s project is to conceptually separate out a domain called international politics, and to theorize about it using the notions of units with the motive of survival and anarchy. The project raises the question of whether the notion of international politics as a domain distinguished from such things as foreign policy is genuinely independent of the theory within it. It also suggests a possible alternative understanding of Waltz’s theory.
As seen above, one way to determine what sort of theoretical claim is being made is to ask what sort of response the theorist gives to apparent falsifying instances. A closed system, such as Mises’ theory of human action, would find a place for the instance within the definitions, so that it did not fall outside the theory, or define it as outside the subject domain of the theory. A test of the independence of the theory from the definition of the conceptual domain occurs when we see how the theorist responds when apparently disconfirming instances, such as the behavior of Hitler, Blum, and Chamberlain, are produced against the theory. If the response is one which defines the cases as not properly falling under the category of international politics even though in a naïve view they are perfect examples of international politics though one may reasonably suspect that the argument is circular. Circularity is not necessarily, however, a defect. Mises, for example, thought that the illuminating power of economic analysis was a direct product of the fact that the theory could be constructed in a closed and complete way without reference to empirical considerations.

Waltz himself intends to make substantive factual claims about the domain generally known as intellectual affairs rather than merely an abstractly constructed world called international politics in which results are generated from definitions and stipulations alone. This is important because something that looks like an empirical claim may in fact turn out to be essentially definitional. Waltz’s distinction between foreign policy and international politics as domains of inquiry is especially revealing in this connection. The two domains operate on the actual events in the common domain of international affairs. The theory of “international politics” might proceed by allocating all nonconforming results, results that could not be accounted for in terms of the theory, to the domain of foreign policy. If this is in fact what is being done, claims about the power and reality of structural constraints are conditionally true. They hold when these causes, deriving from foreign policy, do not interfere in such a way that the actions are in conflict with the predictions of the theory. One might claim, in addition, that this almost never occurs, which would mean that international politics is in fact a domain that is causally separable, though not completely so.

There is, however, a correlative claim that can be made from the point of view of “foreign policy” studies. Everything Waltz’s theories purport to explain has already been accounted for by the intentional actions of individuals in positions of power acting on all their own beliefs, perceptions, and so forth. The extent to which beliefs that are correct about the capabilities and intentions of other powers influences these actions is a factual question, but one that can be addressed only within the framework of a Verstehen analysis such as Morgenthau’s. Thus the “interpretive” approach is not an adjunct to the Waltzian approach, concerned only with interfering causes, but a complete and sufficient approach on its own, dealing with the intentional actions in the face of the realities of international politics. The interpretivist asks “why supplement this kind of understanding with another, less fine-grained, kind of ‘theory’?”

For Waltz, the question is a nonstarter. The domain of inquiry that is selected is artificial and is by definition governed by constraint. The definition excludes the intentional actions of foreign policy makers, apart from those involving the wish to survive, as belonging to a separate domain of causality entirely. For Waltz there is a causal question about the extent to which outcomes within this predefined domain are unpredictable as a consequence of these admixed causes, but the answers that he gives to
this question are (as we have already seen) misleading and not especially reassuring. Because the relations he theorizes about are abstractions removed from the particularities of action, we are hard pressed to say what they “contribute” to particular outcomes and there is no way, as Mill recognized 150 years ago, of untangling these causes.

It might seem that this problem of circularity produced by the narrow definition of the subject matter and the restriction of the possible causes is unusual. But as the example of Mill suggests, it is in fact quite common. It is especially common where there is an attempt to create rigorous theories. In sociology, for example, there is a research program which deals with issues of power, and which operates in terms of experiments that are specially designed to mimic the possible variables that interfere in this process to those variables of interest to the program itself. The results consequently are of questionable applicability to issues of “power” outside of the experimental situation itself. It is logically possible that the relationships that appear in the experiments have no real world consequences because actions involving power relations are governed by entirely different kinds of calculations and processes, such as the ones that Waltz himself considered. Ironically, Waltz himself, in earlier writings critical of behavioral science approaches to international politics, such as Osgood’s theory of tension reduction made exactly this point against their relevance to actual international politics.

Two Kinds of Models

Both Morgenthau and Waltz are quite clearly engaged in the construction of models (typologies for Morgenthau). The language that Morgenthau had available to him from Weber was a language of ideal types which Weber characterized in terms of abstraction (by which he meant in part simplification) and by one-sidedness in the sense of the one-sided accentuation of certain features of behavior. This characterization seems to apply very nicely to Waltz’s construction and is itself consciously a part of Morgenthau’s conception as well. Both of them are thus engaged in modeling, yet both produce different models with different virtues. Thinking about the “theories” as alternative explications of models is a useful starting point because the notion of models is itself self-consciously purpose relative rather than essentialist. Many models in physics, for example, are quite self consciously “unrealistic” but they serve their purpose because they enable the analyst to identify a problem domain and define some predictive expectations based on a particular simplification and then analyze the deviations from this simplification. This is (as it happens) entirely in accordance with the uses that Weber himself described for the model of rational decision making. In those cases, the model yields predictions but the predictions are known in advance to be erroneous. Their purpose is to establish a benchmark and a model of what behavior would be or what would occur without the addition of other factors.

This strategy may be understood as a solution to the problem of complexity posed by Mill. But it represents self-conscious decisions to simplify and thus to break down complex problems in a particular that allows for the massive complexity produced by full particular descriptions to be managed by first dividing the complexity into that which can be managed by the model and that which cannot and then by modeling through other simplifications the remaining complexities to the extent that it can be modeled.
Typically models are constructed for delimited domains, but the domains are not constructed in an essentialist way in terms of aspects of actions but in terms of the events or objects that fall into the category for which the model is being constructed. Models (of course) are generalized beyond the initial uses or varied by altering their formal structure and applied to new domains if they prove useful, but the new domains are also definable independently of the simplifications defined by the model itself. With Waltz, the simplifications and the definitions of the domains are the same thing. But if we alter Waltz’s “aspects” view of international politics and identify it with some independently delimitable set of events, Waltz’s model also can be understood as a model, and we can make claims about its applicability and about its other virtues in comparison with other models. And these virtues are typically relative to our purposes. Thus a model that enables rough but largely accurate predictions with a minimum of computational complexity may be, for some purposes, better than a model that allows precise predictions but requires more computation or data. In the social sciences, we may want a model that enables us to make fine-grained distinctions relating to micro-level relationships, or we may prefer a large scale model that relates highly aggregated variables but enables no predictions of individual behavior.

Are the purposes of Morgenthau’s models and Waltz’s the same? Morgenthau makes quite clear that for him the purpose is understanding. What Morgenthau’s model does is to enable the analyst to understand why political leaders responsible for foreign policy act in particular ways in response to the actions of other states, and what sorts of actions are irresponsible. It recognizes that part of the decision making processes of responsible leaders involve domestic considerations, since a critical component of power is legitimacy or support. The focus is on the decisions of the responsible ruler and the scale of evaluation is not so much rationality per se but responsibility. Responsibility is understood in terms of the national interest to which the leader is responsible. Morgenthau takes for granted that there will be irresponsible, feckless, stupid, and incompetent leaders and takes for granted that responsible leaders will be aware that their counterparts in decision making in other countries may very well fall into these categories. The model is practice-informing to the extent that in one’s practice shares the political value of responsibility. If one’s ends are not, in Weber’s language, this-worldly, and one has an ethics of intention, one is not concerned with responsibility for the consequences. As Morgenthau says, the politician cannot say “act justly and let the heavens fall.” But Morgenthau and Weber both are well aware that responsibility is not a political value that is universally shared. They were also well aware that the facts of failure and success do not map perfectly onto the categories of responsible and irresponsible political decision making. Nevertheless, they do so with a high degree of probability. Politicians who are willing to risk the national interest in pursuit of possibly unrealizable goals are far from rare in political history, and given their focus on responsibility and on the problem of providing political understanding useful from the point of view of the responsible leader, it is no surprise that the understanding of politics they seek to provide is sufficiently rich to encompass the range of possible leaders and courses of political action that they might encounter, especially including the charismatic leader whose motivations are completely distinct from the politics of responsibility. As the user audience is composed of responsible statesmen, it is not surprising that the intentions and decisions faced by the responsible statesmen are the focus of his analysis.
What is the purpose of Waltz’s model? Like Morgenthau, he claims that it is substantially true of the domain of application as he defines it. But he also makes a claim about the power of certain parsimonious assumptions to account for the actual behavior of nations in international politics. The implications of this claim make this model interesting. If it is the case that we may effectively predict certain kinds of very important state actions by reference to a very small number of simple assumptions, it is unnecessary, for the purpose of making these predictions, to consider such matters as the fine-grained details of the foreign policy development process in various nations, the nature of domestic political considerations, and the psychology and aims of leaders. These turn out to be simply irrelevant. They may affect many of the details of the events, the timing, the rhetoric, and so forth, all of which are of interest from other points of view: that of the biographer, or of the policy maker or diplomat writing a speech to be delivered the next day. From the point of view of the questions of war ad peace, or of decisions to seek nuclear weapons, they add nothing, or very little.

Three Questions for Kenneth Waltz

1. Morgenthau’s realism was designed for a specific historical audience, as he himself says. To surpass Morgenthau on his own terms would be to surpass him with respect to his own purposes, which were different from yours. Do you believe that your theory answers his questions for his audience, that is to say the responsible statesman, better than he does? In other words, do you think that the considerations you employ state constraints that it is sufficient for the responsible statesman to take into account, to the exclusion of all others, such as considerations of the character and ideology of the opposing leaders?

2. Your model can be understood as an interpretive scheme in the manner of Morgenthau’s. It is an abstraction of motives that makes actions that are only partially intelligible more intelligible. The same claim, that interpreting in this way allows on to predict successfully almost all of the time, can be made for both models, as they apply to the same material. There are well-known and severe problems in characterizing the model in the manner it was characterized in 1979? Is there any reason to retain this notion of theory today?

3. Is it in fact possible to make significant predictions about such important matters as the effect of nuclear proliferation on the basis of the very simple assumptions on which you have relied? Or is it necessary to add considerations that fall outside of these assumptions to make the necessary predictions? To predict that the possession of nuclear weapons makes a nation more responsible in its behavior, for example, seems to require more knowledge about nations and the way they change than anything in the theory. If you acknowledge this, aren’t you also acknowledging the limitations of your definition of the domain of international politics? Of your formal conception of international politics?

References