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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Theories of social constructivism and international relations are the two sides of this paper. Their stories are first outlined separately, after which the focus shifts on their point of confluence: social constructivism in international relations theory. Section 1 offers an overview of the discipline of international relations (henceforth abbreviated IR, to be distinguished from “international relations,” which denotes its subject matter), up to the relatively recent import of social constructivism (henceforth SC) from social theory. Section 2 gives a general presentation of SC, including a classification of its philosophical kinds. Three distinct constructivist approaches to IR are also presented. Finally, section 3 analyzes the concepts of “identity” and “interest,” which underlie the intentionality of every player in world politics. The analysis emphasizes SC’s capacity to overstep some limits of its competitors: neorealism and neoliberalism. The main theses that will be spelled out and defended on the account of SC are the following:

- (I) Social entities are constructed through various mechanisms that rely on collective action, and can likewise be dismantled.
- (II) The identities and interests of international actors are, to an important extent, socially constructed. This is reflected in their behavior in world politics.

Arguing for these propositions demands many philosophical detours, partly to introduce concepts and draw distinctions, partly to criticize flawed theoretical proposals. Thus, a substantial portion of the paper was needed to explicate the notion of “social constructivism” (2.2). Although apparently of philosophical interest alone, the analysis excludes some habitual sources of social constructivist IR theory.

I argue against the relativist inclinations that many constructivist thinkers display, and support a version of SC compatible with the scientific realist principle that there is an objective reality, independent of our thoughts

and language, which is also knowable through epistemically objective methods. Thus, while most constructivists put the language before the world, I insist that ontology comes first, followed by epistemology and semantics. The domain of IR receives considerable attention (section 1), since I have assumed that the contribution of SC can only be grasped against the backdrop of the main standard models of IR. However, I do not value SC as an alternative *theory* of international relations, because I regard it as a mere conceptual framework that, although able to expose some weaknesses of the mainstream theories, needs them in order to operate. In other words, I believe that the most promising approach to IR is a version of neoliberalism (1.2) enriched with social constructivist insights.

1. International relations theory: an outline

1.1. Realism and liberalism

There is virtual unanimity among IR theorists that the scene of international politics is *anarchic*, i.e. it lacks a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Unlike domestic (internal) politics, where the state is presumed to have exclusive authority to implement legal norms and punish their violation, the international world knows no overarching authority entitled to enforce global law and order. In the face of anarchy and inevitable conflicting interests, the crucial problem concerns the way in which sovereign states, as primary actors of world politics, should behave so as to advance their interests.

The natural answer seems to be that states should follow their interest by increasing their power. This is the answer given by the doctrine of *realism*. According to Hans Morgenthau (1949/1993), the grandmaster of political realism, interests are advanced through the exercise of *power*, where power is understood, à la Max Weber, as one's ability to make the others act according to one's own will. For the international order, this ability translated into military capability.

So dominant was the idea of the overwhelming importance of military power in the realist thinking that the other founder of modern realism, the British historian Edward H. Carr, took it in his *The Twenty Years Crisis: 1919-1939* to the extreme claim that modern wars were fought not for territories, but just for the display of military superiority. Hence, neither domestic policy, nor public opinion had any role to play in states' foreign policy, other than as mere instruments of military power. The underlying

thought was that, in the international world, power creates its own right; morals, ideas and values were *flatus vocis*.

Hence, understanding international politics required observation of the “big players” – the major world powers. Behind their action stood the *statesmen*, those tragic characters of Morgenthau’s play whose mission was to acknowledge and act according to the national interest. As he details in his exposition of the second “principle of political realism,”

We assume that statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power... That assumption allows us to retrace and anticipate, as it were, the steps a statesman – past, present, or future – has taken on the political scene (1948/1993: 5).

Morgenthau’s conception of *interest* refers to the objective needs of a state, the fulfillment of which goes beyond the “simple moralistic and legalistic” thinking of the “popular mind.” As such, realism’s prescriptions are *amoral*: while the statesman bears a moral responsibility toward the members of his society, the moral norms of no particular nations can be rightly made universal.

For Morgenthau, war was a possible and not unusual effect of the conflict-ridden international anarchy. The self-interested action advocated by realism is best accommodated by a mistrustful mindset urging statesmen to engage in counterbalancing alliances against the hegemon of the day, for otherwise its strength would grow uncontainable. “If you want peace, prepare for war” is the dictum that epitomizes this logic. Self-interested action is directed not only at maximizing the power of the *self*, but also at decreasing the power of threatening *other*. The resulting structure is a *balance of power* on the international scene, exemplified by the pentarchic equilibrium of the European powers in the 19th century, or the bipolar balance of power during the Cold War. The strategy of each state was to preclude a distribution of military might in which any other single power would dominate. *Prima facie*, this reasoning is somewhat simplistic, but the point is not that realism has ignored the richness of affinities and privileged relations among states bound by history and mutual interest. Realism should rather be taken as a fundamental explanatory scheme, to which every pattern of inter-state interaction, regardless of complexity, is supposedly reducible.

It is by now transparent what the realist answer has been to the question that gave birth to IR as an academic discipline in the aftermath of World

War I: "Why do wars occur?" The general cause of wars, the realist argument goes, is the inherently conflictual nature of international anarchy. Yet one of the perverse effects of this reasoning is the so-called *security dilemma*, a token of which was phrased by Thucydides: "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta." The idea is that the increased military power acquired by one state creates a feeling of insecurity in the others. If one does not increase one's military capability, one risks being exposed to others' aggression. If one does increase one's military capability, the others feel threatened and try to contain the threat by arming themselves. Hence, either way, there is a menace of an escalating arms race.

It is, indeed, an upshot of realism's worst-case-scenario predilection that an increase of military power eventually leads to less security for everyone – except, maybe, for the strongest actor. This predicament has led other thinkers to the belief that international anarchy is an environment of potential cooperation among states. An *international community* is developing – that is, an agreed upon hierarchy of states in which mutual help stemmed not only from the recognition of mutual interest, but also from the assumed altruism of human nature.

This view, known as *idealism*, is part of the liberal tradition of political thinking which, as Charles Kegley and Eugene Wittkopf (1997: 19) put it, has at its core "an emphasis on the impact of idea on behavior, the equality and liberty of the individual, and the need to protect people from excessive state regulation." Here is how the two authors characterize idealism's optimistic and moralistic world view:

(1) Human nature is essentially 'good' or 'altruistic,' and people are therefore capable of mutual aid and collaboration. (2) The fundamental human concern for the welfare of others makes progress possible. (3) Bad human behavior is the product not of evil people but of evil institutions and structural arrangements that motivate people to act selfishly and to harm others. (4) War is not inevitable and its frequency can be reduced by eradicating the anarchical conditions that encourage it. (5) War and justice are international problems that require collective or multilateral rather than national efforts to eliminate them. (6) International society must reorganize itself institutionally to eliminate the anarchy that makes problems such as war likely. (Kegley and Wittkopf 1997: 20)

In the tradition of founding political philosophy on a theory of human nature, idealism emphasizes that there is a fundamental goodness in people,

which can be corrupted by improper forms of social organization. Realism shared the concern for human nature, but held opposite views. Influenced by the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, Morgenthau emphasized the human incapacity to refuse temptation, and hence its fallibility. Idealism, on the other hand, shares the Enlightenment's belief in the possibility of human progress. One of its main strands draws on Woodrow Wilson's *Fourteen Points* program (1918), in which the creation of the League of Nations was proposed as a piece of a vaster agenda of constructing a peaceful *postbellum* Europe. Key to the program was Wilson's call for democratic domestic institutions, as he was convinced that democratic societies were the most effective hindrance to war. Idealists hold that the origin of conflicts consists in communication blocks between citizens and their rulers, blocks that are most likely to happen in the undemocratic and unenlightened regimes. Therefore, a peaceful international society demands the spread of democracy in the world. The so-called *democratic peace* – the fact that modern democracies have virtually never waged war against each other – has often been adduced as evidence.

Ostensibly, different IR theories select particular sequences of historical events as evidence for their views and against their opponents' theories. Carr (1946) discredited utopian Wilsonism by pointing at the rubble of Europe after World War II, the horrors of Holocaust, and the outbreak of the Cold War. On the other hand, several global tendencies of the post-Cold War era seem to confirm the liberal worldview: the spread of democracy,¹ an increased global free trade, the emphasis on human rights and humanitarian interventions, the joint efforts to mitigate the effects of environmental disasters, the multitude of arm-control agreements, etc. But then, again, pessimists point at the poorly motivated wars waged by democracies against states that posed no direct threat; the unwillingness to intervene for humanitarian reasons in several of last decade's obvious crises; the caveats of free-trade agreements that led to compensatory increases of tariff barriers, and the apparent recoil of democracy in some of the world's main state-actors.

Besides, there are conceptual problems that idealism seems unable to deal with. First, it lacks a principled basis to distinguish between the extension of a particular dominant state in the world and the international society. Political rallying and bandwagoning by ever more sovereign states around today's world leader is not tantamount with the creation of an international society. Second, idealism seems to ignore the power of threat and its unifying effects upon individual states, as well as the external

manipulability of national symbols and collective emotions. Nonetheless, the gist of idealism is not so much to explain the historical *status quo* as it is to explore the conditions under which improvements become possible.

1.2. Neoutilitarianism

Neoutilitarianism is a label coined by John Ruggie (1998) to designate the *neos* of realism and liberalism – neorealism and neoliberalism – because both of them rely on utility maximizing calculations on the assumption of given ordered sets of preferences. As Ruggie observes, the neoutilitarian rational-choice framework has become the orthodoxy of IR, with remarkably little dissent between its variants. Let us first examine the specifics of neorealism and neoliberalism.

Kenneth Waltz's influential *Theory of International Politics* (1979) introduced the *microeconomic* method of market analysis into the study of international politics. He made an analogy between the economic behavior of individual firms, which by pursuing their interests end up generating a market structure, and the behavior of states, which generate an international political structure. Apart from bringing in rigor and clarity, Waltz's turn to microeconomics stimulated the assimilation in IR using the game theory models of nuclear deterrence and military strategy inaugurated pioneered by Thomas Schelling (1960), and later developed by Steven Brams (1985).

Waltz distinguished between the following levels or "images" of IR: (a) the constitution of human nature, which basically comes to a theory of human nature in the British empiricist tradition; (b) intra-state interactions, i.e. the behavior patterns of the interactions within the state; and (c) the international system, consisting of the entire set of sovereign states and their relations. Waltz, unlike Morgenthau, does not focus on the qualities of the individual in modeling international politics. For Waltz, individual behavior is largely irrelevant with respect to the events and processes of the international scene, and so is the political physiognomy of the state. What really matters is the "third image," that is, the international system itself, whose anarchic structure determines the behavior of states. The basic function of the international system is to bring in order and security. There is no plan or design for implementing international order, because it results from the unplanned self-interested action of individual states. The main concern of a state is its *security*, which is to be pursued through *self-help* strategies in the competitive

environment of world politics. Wars between states do occur, though they are not inevitable but merely possible:

In politics force is said to be *ultima ratio*. In international politics force serves, not only as the *ultima ratio*, but indeed as the first and constant one. ...One who knows that pressing too hard may lead to war has strong reason to consider whether possible gains are worth the risks entailed (Waltz 1979: 113-114).

While for Waltz the structure of the international system is determined by the global action of the strong actors, more recent analyses (e.g., Kupchan 1998) observes that the post-Cold War world is parted into large geographical and cultural regions. Instead of an integrated international system, there actually is a global pluralism of regional systems, each gravitating around some local power and encoding specific worldviews and communication forms. Others have tried to render neorealism more empirically adequate by taking into account the “second image” of Waltz’s tripartition, namely the constraints that the domestic policy exerts on foreign policy. Buzan, Jones, and Little (1993) show the importance for foreign policy of the interplay between politics, mass media and public opinion interests.

Among the contemporary descendants of idealism, Robert Keohane’s *liberal institutionalism* has been among the most influential. Keohane has faulted realism for being “too pessimistic about the prospects for cooperation and the role of institutions” (1993: 271) under conditions of existing common interests among the states. However, liberal institutionalism lies much closer to neorealism than idealism was to classical realism. To use a simple scheme, while neorealism basically consists in classical realism’s dimension of interest as power plus a micro-economic method of analysis, neoliberalism adds to these the dimension of international institutions with an appreciation of their role in transforming the structure generated by materialist individualism. The result is a remarkable convergence of the approaches to IR, and a fruitful standardization of methodological tools. As Ruggie succinctly summarizes,

Both take the existence of international anarchy for granted, though they may differ as to its precise causal force. Both stipulate that states are the primary actors in international politics. Both stipulate further that the identities and interests if states are given, a priori and exogenously – that is to say, external to and unexplained within the terms of their theories. On that basis, both assume that states are rational actors maximizing their own

expected utilities, defined in such material terms as power, security, and welfare. (Ruggie 1998: 9)

Indeed, the disagreements between neorealism and neoliberalism reduce to underlining different aspects of structural anarchy. Neorealism stresses that the states strive for security, and that the structure of the international world is the aggregate effect of this. On the other hand, neoliberalism examines the ways that cooperation can be achieved under anarchy. Neoliberalism emphasizes international cooperation instead of competition. Both the means for and the expression of cooperation are *international institutions*, namely international *regimes* and international *organizations*. International regimes are complexes of norms and rules, which regulate the behavior of member states in specific issue domains such as trade, arms control, human rights, protection of animal species, etc. According to the *Oxford Companion to the Politics of the World*, international organizations “generally constitute the central decision-making components of international regimes and influence the development of these regimes.”

There are several ways in which international organizations contribute to the development of international regimes. First, through their bureaucratic administrative structures – headquarters, secretariat, and regularly scheduled meetings – they facilitate cooperation among member states. Second, they allow less powerful states to associate and exert influence through numbers, thus being able to obtain concessions from the powerful states. Third, international organizations are usually in charge with overseeing the compliance of states with agreements, settling disputes and sanctioning delinquents. It is thus comprehensible how difficult international cooperation would be without the mediation of international institutions.

Nonetheless, different IR doctrines have different ways of accommodating this fact of today's world politics. For neorealists, institutions are “merely intervening variables” (Mearsheimer 1995: 13), mere facilitators of agreements among states. Their use is justifiable in economic terms. They are useful only so long as they keep transaction costs lower than the continuing competition for relatively advantageous positions and are to be discarded when this is no longer the case (Krasner 1985: 5ff). As such, they serve to consolidate the actual pecking order, for otherwise the hegemonic powers would seek different arrangements. By contrast, neoliberals ascribe a substantial role to institutions, which they see as pivotal agents of the international “political market.” First, neoliberals are more sensible than

neorealists to the fact that states typically engage in repeated interactions, so that they must acquire credibility in order to maximize their gains. This, in turn, requires them to be transparent and play by the rules, which actually generates international institutions. Then, neoliberals are not as obsessively preoccupied with security as neorealists, which makes them less mistrustful and self-centered. They also regard *employment* and *economic prosperity* as fundamental dimensions of the national interest and, given the global economic interweaving, they realize that governments alone have insufficient means to solve these problems. Businesses and banks, not nation-states, are the main actors in the international profit-making game. States can only be efficient in pursuing their economic interests if they design and implement rules and norms to regulate the border-transcending action of these non-state actors. Yet this takes us back to international regimes.

It is worthwhile to notice that by admitting the salience of the international agency of non-state actors, neorealists have to consider more carefully the domestic political life of the state. This “entanglement of domestic and international politics” has made the object of Robert Putnam’s (1989) “two level” approach of IR. Putnam has shown that explanations must go beyond both “second image” analyses that focus on the domestic causes of international events, and “second imaged reversed” accounts that center on the international causes of domestic events. He has extended the conceptual framework of game theory to the interplay between the “second” and “third” images:

The politics of many international negotiations can be usefully represented as a two-level game. At the national level, domestic groups pursued their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments. Neither of the two games can be ignored by central decision-makers, so long as their countries remain interdependent, yet sovereign. (Putnam 1988: 434)

Finally, another motivation for neoliberals to confer great importance on international institutions is certainly related to the classic idealist search for peaceful world governance, inspired by Kant’s liberal idea of *perpetual peace* through a cosmopolitan federation of constitutional republics. After all, Kant’s (1795) “articles” describing the steps to be

taken in order to avoid future war would be only achievable within an international framework constituted by institutions such as mutually recognized sovereignty, a “law of nations” and a “law of universal citizenship.”

Summing up the differences and similarities between neorealism and neoliberalism, the main commonalities between the two schools of thought are the assumptions that the international world is anarchic; that sovereign states are the fundamental actors of the international scene; and that states act rationally so as to maximize their interests. Dissimilarities regard the characterization of anarchy – as competitive by neorealists, and as possibly cooperative by neoliberals. Hence their different attitudes about international institutions: while neorealists treat these as mere instruments used in the self-help strategies of states, neoliberals take them as actors of the same level with states; not merely as disposable cogwheels that work to forward the self-interest of the dominant powers, but as genuine sources of norms and regulations that facilitate and oversee international cooperation and also penalize their infringements.

In viewing states as *self*-interested and following *self*-help courses of political action, both neorealist and neoliberals take the *self*, i.e. the identity of the state actor, as well as its interests, as *given*, that is to say pre-formed and serving as independent variables in the rational-choice models that account for the behavior of states in the world. As such, both schools largely neglect the role that ideas and values have in reshaping identities and their associated needs. It is in connection with this insufficiency that SC entered the IR scene.

2. Social constructivism

The first part of this section (2.1) gives a general presentation of the social constructivist philosophy, with a distinction among several kinds of SC and an assessment of its most logically robust version. Subsection 2.2 connects to the philosophy of social science, focusing on the support that SC receives from scientific realism. Subsection 2.3 deals critically with Searle’s theory of institutions, one of the best-articulated accounts of social reality, and 2.4 introduces the three main versions of constructivist approaches to IR.

2.1. The ontology of social entities

As a general theory of existence,² ontology catalogues the existent kinds of objects, relations, events, and properties. This includes garden-variety kinds of our common-sense experience, such as stones and trees and cats, as well as the natural kinds posited by our best-confirmed scientific theories about electrons and fields of force. If such kinds exist, then they exist *objectively*, i.e. independent of our thoughts, languages, and theories. But there is a “corner” of ontology that contains entities dependent on our mental states and social behavior. Let us call them *social kinds*.

Money is an example, since it serves as money only to the extent that most of the people of our culture acknowledge the purchase and exchange function performed by particular types of paper notes or metal coins, or other forms of physical support. This sort of value cannot subsist absent the intentionality that created it in the first place. For illustration, the bills that serve as money in times of hyper-inflation quickly become worthless paper notes, for the society transfers their previous function to other commodities. From the viewpoint of their genesis and functioning, money is a social institution, and so are marriages, universities, states, and peace treaties. Each of them is socially constructed, because they are outcomes of specific mechanisms of collective intentionality and exist in strict dependence on the continuing performance of particular social practices. Apart from institution, the same is true about artifacts – such as sandwiches, statues, books, and computers – deliberately created to serve socially defined purposes. Artifacts are socially constructed in a trivial sense.

Whether specific ontological kinds are constructed or not is not always obvious. For example, the gender status of women is, according to feminist activists, an outcome of social forces and circumstances that resulted in the social ascription of a set of attributes of femininity that many women consider burdensome. The opposite view is to take femininity as given by nature, grounded in the putative biological and psychological distinctiveness of women. Gender is but one instance of a multitude of examples whose social vs. natural features is debated. Ian Hacking (1999), one of the finest observers of constructivism’s nuances, put together a long list of entities claimed to be socially constructed. The list includes authorship, brotherhood, the child viewer of television, emotions, facts, gender, homosexual culture, illness, knowledge, nature, quarks, reality, serial homicide, women refugees, the mind, etc. Some of these kinds are obviously constructed, while accepting that others – such as quarks, reality, or knowledge – are constructed seriously

stretches our intuitions. We shall see below that there is a radical version of SC which accommodates this view. But now I want to emphasize the ideological stake of the constructivist discourse.

The ongoing debates over the meaning of “gender,” “science,” or “culture” are deeply value-immersed, and the debates typically get started by the critics of the *status quo*. There is something “wonderfully liberating,” as Hacking puts it, about the idea that “motherhood and its meanings are not fixed and inevitable, the consequence of child-bearing and rearing” (1999: 2). And some will feel eased by holding that science and its truths are just one set of social practices among others. Certainly, this is emancipation by devaluation; the focus is not on the object of scientific investigation and the corresponding results, but on the “human, all too human” social aspects of science. Besides, even if enlightening, not every kind proven to be a social construct has liberating effects. Among other things, Hacking’s substantial study of the *transient mental diseases* – mental pathologies that burgeon in particular spatial, temporal, and cultural contexts – teaches us about the arguably constructed nature of, for instance, anorexia. Although just as objective in its symptoms as a bone fracture, anorexia appears to be socially “learned.” If this is true, then the real work consists in discovering the mechanisms of such learning.

Now, trying to define SC, it is useful to once more turn to Hacking:

Social constructionists about *X* tend to hold that: (1) *X* need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. *X* is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable. *X* was brought into existence or shaped by social events, forces, history, all of which could well have been different. (2) *X* is quite bad as it is. (3) We would be much better off if *X* were done away with, or at least radically transformed. (Hacking 1999: 6)

Though descriptively useful, (2) and (3) are not essential to SC’s meaning. They are characteristic of a moral discourse on social kinds. But since my primary interest ontological, I shall focus on the *historical contingency* of social kinds, i.e. on the *evitability* of their existence. Fundamentally, social constructs are not effects of natural necessity, but products of contingent social forces and circumstances. In André Kukla’s words, “the type of possibility at issue in constructivist claims is the *option of free agents to do something other than what they actually did*” (2000: 3). Though there is no single overarching mechanism by which social kinds are generated, a salient feature of their contingency is that

they are done and can be undone by adequate collective action. Hence, SC must include theoretical accounts of the ways in which collective action produces social kinds. Some thinkers have focused on speech acts theory (Searle 1995), others on symbolic interactionism (Wendt 1999), while still others chose particular versions of system theory (Onuf 1989).

I choose Searle's most influential approach and subject it to a brief critical discussion. My view is that even if we can come up with adequate theories of such key constructivist concepts as "collective intentionality" and "collective action," it is hopeless to search for a single overarching theory of social kinds. Following Merton's (1967) injunction to elaborate "middle-range theories," I take it that different classes of social kinds are the outcomes of different sorts of social mechanisms that relate the individual (micro) level with the collective (macro) level.

2.2. Varieties of social constructivism

In line with Kukla, I distinguish between a metaphysical, a semantic, and an epistemic brand of SC. *Metaphysical constructivism* is the claim that the world we live in is socially constructed. This can either mean that *some* facts about the world are socially constructed – a moderate statement; or that *all* facts, actual and possible, are socially constructed – a strong statement. Within *strong metaphysical constructivism* it is interesting to distinguish between social constructs that are knowable to us and those that are not.³ The thesis that both knowable and unknowable facts are socially constructed can be labeled *radical metaphysical constructivism*. For those with naturalistic intuitions, there is a compelling reason why radical metaphysical constructivism cannot be coherent. Metaphysical constructivism – both moderate and strong – presupposes the existence of an unconstructed realm of brute facts, out of which social kinds get constructed. To buttress the idea – quite unproblematic outside philosophical circles – that there is an external, unconstructed part of reality, Searle (1995) resorts to a transcendental argument.⁴ He distinguishes between the brute reality of the external world and the constructed facts:

The simplest way to show that is to show that a socially constructed reality presupposed a reality independent of all social constructions, because there has to be something for the construction to be constructed out of. To construct money, property, and language, for example, there have to be raw materials of bits of metal, paper, land, sounds, and marks, for example.

And the raw materials cannot in turn be socially constructed without presupposing some ever rarer materials out of which they are constructed, until we eventually reach a bedrock of brute phenomena independent of all representations. The ontological subjectivity of the socially constructed reality requires and ontologically objective reality out of which it is constructed (Searle 1995: 190).

Thus, radical constructivism's truth demands a version of monistic idealism in ontology, denying the very notion of brute facts and professing the existence of a mental substance. But the existence of such a substance would also be socially constructed, and the existence of the existence too, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Consequently, Ockham's razor is well used in rejecting radical metaphysical constructivism.

A different kind of constructivism is of *epistemic* nature and regards the warrant of our rational beliefs. Epistemic constructivism is the claim that rational belief warrant is socially constructed, hence dependent on the social practices of one community or another. In other words, rational belief warrant is relative to a culture or paradigm. This is, indeed, just another name of *epistemic relativism*. Finally, a *semantic* kind of constructivism should also be distinguished, according to which *meanings* are socially constructed, i.e. byproducts of social practices. Still, not only are social practices specific to different societies, they are also liable to fortuitous change. Hence, as the argument goes, meanings are undetermined.

It is important to clarify the dependence relations between these variants of constructivism. While it is relatively easy to argue that the ontology of natural kinds is separate from their epistemology and semantics, there are good reasons hold the contrary about social kinds. For one thing, social kinds elementarily depend for their existence on the beliefs of sufficiently many members of a social group. Accordingly, under certain conditions, epistemic constructivism entails metaphysical constructivism. For another, it has frequently been suggested that the construction of social reality occurs through the mediation of constructed meaning (Guzzini 2000: 149). This comes down to a putative entailment from semantic to epistemic to metaphysical constructivism. Guzzini is certainly right about drawing our attention to the importance of *reflexivity* – understood as the process through which the ascription of meaning creates matters of fact. Nonetheless, it will be show that, along with most constructivists, Guzzini overstates the extent to which reality is constructed through the imposition of meanings through our linguistic practices.

Let us pause here and discuss in more detail the question of reflexivity. As we have stated, reflexivity denotes the phenomenon through which, by attributing a meaning to a social entity, the characteristics and behavior of that entity change unpredictably. Hacking coined the notion of *looping effect of human kinds* to designate the fact that classifying people in certain social categories modifies their expectations. This, in turn, alters not only their behavior, but also the very content of the categories they have been put under:

People [classified within one kind or another] can become aware that they are classified as such. They can make tacit or even explicit choices, adapt or adopt ways of living so as to fit or get away from the very classification that may be applied to them. (Hacking 1999: 39)

Thus, the idea of a detached observer of a social phenomenon becomes problematic, as the action of observing creates significant ways of connection with the observed phenomenon. Then, the possibility of discovering laws of social sciences (i.e. universal generalization over conditional forms of behavior) is controversial, for the very fact of getting acquainted with such a generalization can alter the behavior patterns so as to invalidate any prediction. Self-fulfilling prophecies and “suicidal” predictions serve as apt illustrations. They support the belief of some philosophers that there are no social laws, while others insist on the possibility of framing probabilistic regularities of social behavior (Rosenberg 1988).

In the methodological analyses of social science, reflexivity refers to the situations in which a theory is affected by its own injunctions, taking itself as an object. In the case of SC, this is rendered transparent through the following reasoning: if facts of the world are socially constructed, is the fact that those facts are socially constructed itself socially constructed? We can ascend indefinitely with the same sort of interrogation, up to higher and higher logical levels. I have given a detailed discussion of this kind of reflexivity in Dudău (2003: 133-39). The analysis has to take into account the specifics of each of the three major kinds of constructivism. Concerning metaphysical constructivism, I emphasized the difficulty of its radical ilk to explain away the incoherence it engenders by claiming the constructed nature of *all* facts about the world. The very fact of this construction would then be socially constructed, and so would be the meta-level fact of constructing the construction, and so on, endlessly. Yet the moderate versions of metaphysical constructivism,

which admit that some parts of the world are independent of intentionality, have no difficulty with reflexivity.

Epistemic constructivism/relativism's admission that every belief is warranted relatively to a paradigm entails the belief that every belief is warranted only relatively to a paradigm, which in turn is warranted relatively to a paradigm. Therefore, the assumption that epistemic constructivism is warranted self-defeatingly implies that it is not epistemically warranted. One attempt to avoid this inconsistency is to admit that epistemic relativism is warranted only relatively to a paradigm. However, a relative relativism is equivalent to the claim that only relatively to a paradigm can the belief that relativism is warranted relatively to a paradigm be warranted, which takes us aback into an infinite regress. Another attempt is to pick a paradigm of reference, relative to which all beliefs seek justification. In this privileged paradigm, the belief in the relativity of rational belief warrant would be absolutely warranted.

Eventually, however, it remains unclear how could an absolute warrant for relativism be itself exempt from relativism. Arguing for the existence of some epistemic bedrock⁵ implies either paying mere lip service to relativism, or discarding it altogether. This verdict will appear too blunt and simplistic to believers in the constructed character of knowledge. As already noted, the attraction of this idea comes from the thought that semantic constructivism entails epistemic constructivism, which further entails metaphysical constructivism. This order needs to be entirely reversed. But, for now, we turn to the discussion of semantic constructivism's reflexivity.

Recall that semantic constructivism consists in the claim that meanings are undetermined, because they are the outcome of social practices, which makes them liable to unpredictable change. Insofar as different social practices can accommodate the use of a linguistic expression, their empirical content remains undetermined. Applying semantic constructivism reflexively to itself, we obtain that the empirical content of the sentence "S has no determinate empirical content" is undetermined. It is not immediately clear what logical consequences follow from here, so we have to deploy further argumentative capabilities of semantic constructivism.

The notion that the meaning of an expression consists in its use comes from Wittgenstein's philosophy of language: the *use* theory of meaning. According to Wittgenstein (1953), language is a social practice governed by rules and conventions. Linguistic activity is led by rules just as a game is played according to rules. In fact, he coined the term "language game" to characterize this conception. There is a language game of

marriage, one of arithmetic, another of justice, etc. Now, there are obvious virtues to this theory, since it easily accounts for the conventional character of meaning and its spatio-temporal variability. Nevertheless, its chief vulnerability is the neglect of the referential relations between expressions and the external world. This raises several problems.

First, as shown by a famous series of mental experiments conducted by Hilary Putnam (1975) and Tyler Burge (1978), expressions having the same use in two virtually identical linguistic communities can nonetheless have different meanings. Imagine, for instance, together with Putnam, a planet identical to ours with the exception that the word “water” would refer not to H₂O, but to some substance with the chemical structure XYZ. Imagine a denizen of planet Earth and its counterpart of Twin Earth pointing to identical glasses of “water.” They would refer to different things, although both their mental states and linguistic uses of “water” would be the same.

Second, the *antirepresentationalism* inherent to the use theory of meaning, i.e. its refusal to associate the meaning of an expression with its property of representing external fragments of reality, leads to the absurd possibility of learning a language without understanding it. The idea was developed by Searle (1980) in his “Chinese room” argument. Searle imagines himself secluded in a closed room in which he receives paper scraps with Chinese ideograms. Although he does not understand a bit of Chinese, he returns intelligible signs that he mechanically writes down following the instructions of a very detailed textbook that he has at disposal. The textbook simply presents him with the pragmatically acceptable options of associating other signs with the presented ideogram. Provided enough time and sufficient syntactic information, one could thus effectively communicate in an alien language without a drop of knowledge of that language. This possibility is, of course, highly unlikely, yet there is little that the use theory of meaning can object to it.

The results of the above analysis may eliminate the concern of some constructivists that the construction of meaning entails the construction of knowledge. Kratochwil (1989), for example, takes the following antirealist argument: we approach the external reality by means of particular descriptions. These descriptions are unexceptionably anthropocentric, culture-dependent and, to an important extent, conventional. Hence, they cannot “carve out nature at its joints.” What and how we know is determined by how we ascribe meanings and characterize the world thus articulated. Notice that there is no denial of an objective reality, independent of our minds and theories. Nonetheless,

what remains beyond human meaning-ascription, description, and categorization is part of a realm “without kinds or order or motion or rest or pattern,” as Goodman (1978: 20) put it, undifferentiated and uncategorized. Kinds and structures, the argument goes, come as a matter of human imposition, in a contingent and conventional manner.

The world we live in could have been differently represented, for our most successful theories could have looked quite differently. They could have dealt in radically different categories and conceptual schemes. This argument is typically adduced by semantic and epistemic antirealists and aims at establishing a semantically determined version of ontological relativism. Certainly, the attribution of meaning cannot be utterly arbitrary, for unless our descriptions of the world were significantly empirically adequate, we would be unable to survive.

There are external constraints on our linguistic practices, and this is something that no reasonable supporter of ontological relativism would deny. But the idea is that in order to successfully cope with the constraints of the outside world it is not required to assume the truth of the descriptions about the world, but merely their empirical adequacy, i.e. their ability to “save the phenomena.” Similarly, efficient social practices can be performed without assuming that they rest on true descriptions of the world. All they need is pragmatic adequacy. But, first of all, we want to know *why* a particular linguistic practice is pragmatically adequate. Again, the use theory of meaning does not have much to say about that. Second, the following question poses itself: of all the indefinitely many possible ways of dealing with the natural world, how have the actual ones been selected? The antirealist answer is that various possible worldviews undergo a competition for *power*, the winner of which comes to enjoy unquestioned authority.

So, an analysis of power is indispensable for any complete constructivist account – be it of ontology, knowledge, society, or politics. Thus, the current scientific view of the natural world – admitting, for the sake of simplicity, that there is only one such view – has come to be accepted by way of a process through which the textual output of the scientific establishment gained so much authority as to become “facts.” According to Latour and Woolgar’s celebrated *Laboratory Life* (1986), scientific facts are merely “hardened pieces of text.” The authors see science as an association of “graphomaniacs” trying to persuade the society that their discursive output represents objective facts. “Facts” are inscriptions invested with so much authority that, once established, are never challenged or reinvestigated. To get their own texts to enjoy this status,

scientists need *credibility*, the main currency of scientific practice. Credibility can be gained and traded according to market principles. One must invest credibility to make certain that further gains will be in place. In sum, “scientific facts” are whatever “pieces of hardened text” happen to win the power battle within the scientific “tribe.”

Foucault’s (1975) genealogical approach underlines in a more sophisticated manner the connection between knowledge and power. His disciplinary “bodies of knowledge” are intrinsic parts of the systems of social control. Interestingly, however, Foucault does not deny the possibility that bodies of knowledge objectively reflect reality, but insists that they will always serve power interests. They are inevitably selective, for bodies of knowledge are generated about the subjects of social control. Yet the institutionalization of knowledge has a subversive potential, since it can transcend “the project of domination” which is meant to serve. While in general *social power* designates the capacity to affect the interests of agents as well as their rights and duties, Foucault’s insight is that power has not only a “repressive” dimension, but also a “productive” one, obviously related to the Hacking’s earlier introduced *looping effect of human kinds*. The act of naming, classifying, and diagnosing people as criminals, homosexuals, or insane actually constructs criminals, homosexuals, and insane people.

Critics have questions the coherence of this view, for reasons common to all “hidden interests” or “dominance” theories. Since the knowledge it conveys is an intrinsic part of a project of domination, hence of a form of social power, Foucault’s genealogical account is itself a power discourse among others. Besides, the conflation between the actual production of social agents and the production of identities that agents assume rests on the controversial assumption that nothing transcends the discursive frame of social construction. This has been implicitly rejected by the endorsement of Searle’s transcendental argument for the existence of brute facts. Nonetheless, the gist of Foucault’s account served as a fundamental ingredient for Stephen Lukes (1974), whose original view is that power not only concerns the actors’ conflictually carrying out their will to pursue their interests, but also, and more fundamentally, how actors perceive and define their interests. We will return to identities and interests in section 3.

2.3. Searle’s theory of institutions

There are three fundamental notions introduced by Searle that he takes to explain “institutional reality” in its entirety: *collective intentionality*,

the *assignment of functions*, and *constitutive rules*. *Collective intentionality* denotes a “we”-mode of functioning of individual intentionality. For instance, every member of a football team acts during the game in a we-mode, irreducible to his/her representation of the game-roles. Searle considers collective intentionality a primitive concept, characterizing a fundamental feature of social consciousness. To be sure, it is not that Searle has in mind something like a supra-individual mental substance. Collective intentionality is, putatively, an aspect of the individual mind, conceived as different from self-referring mental states plus the beliefs about the behavior of others. Anyway, it is beyond the purpose of this paper to discuss collective intentionality in detail. Suffices to mention that (a) Searle does not offer sufficient empirical evidence for the claim that collective intentionality is a biologically primitive phenomenon, and (b) the issue of its irreducibility is also questionable, for *we-intentionality* can be understood as individual intentionality along with the beliefs and expectations that the individual forms by way of social interaction.

The *assignment of function* involves taking a particular object and it ascribing to it a social function. A river can be designated as the border between two countries that people have a right to cross only under certain conditions. The object can also be social: slips of paper printed by the state are assigned the function of money, so that they can function as a medium of exchange. The social functions thus assigned to objects are labeled by Searle *status function*, for reasons that will become transparent below.

Constitutive rules are rules that not merely regulate (as in “drive on the right-hand side of the road”) but also give rise to some new domain that would not exist without them. The distinction between *regulative* and *constitutive* rules, central to virtually any version of social constructivism, is aptly drawn by Searle:

I distinguish between two sorts of rules: Some regulate antecedently existing forms of behavior; for example, the rules of etiquette regulate interpersonal relationships, but these relationships exist independently of the rules of etiquette. Some rules on the other hand do not merely regulate but create or define new forms of behavior. The rules of football, for example, do not merely regulate the game of football, but as it were create the possibility of or define that activity. The activity of playing football is constituted by acting in accordance with these rules; football has no existence apart from these rules. I call the latter kind of rules constitutive rules and the former kind regulative rules. Regulative rules regulate a pre-existing activity, an activity whose existence is logically independent of the existence of the rules.

Constitutive rules constitute (and also regulate) an activity the existence of which is logically dependent on the rules. (Searle 1965/1998: 131)

The *game of chess* simply is the formal rules of the game, since it could not exist without them. This is quite unlike the case of traffic regulations: driving would still be possible in their absence, though it would be more dangerous. Searle formalizes constitutive rules as

X counts as Y in context C ,

where X denotes the object upon which the status function is assigned, Y denotes the new status, and C represents the context – social and cultural – in which the ascription takes place. In the case of the game of chess, “ X [a move] counts as Y [checkmate] in context C [chess]” (Searle 1995: 28). Because X does not temporally precede and is not independent of Y , they cannot stand in a causal relationship. This is the test for the constitutive character of a rule, as opposed to the regulative ones.

Searle regards the scheme “ X counts as Y in C ” as explanatory for all institutional facts, and indeed for all social life, given his conviction that social kinds are all institutional. This is a claim in need of argumentative support, because it opposes the strong intuition that institutional facts comprise only a limited part of the social phenomena. It is therefore important to understand the importance that Searle’s speech acts theory plays in his views on social reality (Searle 1995) and rationality (Searle 2001). The status-ascription scheme formalizes the speech act of an actor whose authority to perform it is socially accepted: “We accept that S has the power to do A ”, where A is the status-ascription scheme. Further, we *accept* that S has that power because of the status S acquired through a prior speech act, and so on. We have thus the picture of a complex network of constraints that regulate our social behavior, constraints that result from speech acts such as promises, proclamations, assertions, threats, apologies congratulations, requests, etc. Their normative power constitutes, according to Searle, the binder of social life.

However, there are concerns that Searle overvalues the normative power of speech acts. In the language of moral philosophy, the key to Searle’s account of normativity is to identify what Bernard Williams (1981) called *external reasons*, i.e. reasons for human action that are not part of the agent’s “subjective motivational set.”⁶ Searle’s thesis is that speech acts create external reasons for action. While Williams believes that

there is no such a thing as an external reason, Searle argues that speech acts create desire-independent reasons for action. He presents the argument informally by means of the following scenario:

Suppose I go into a bar and order a beer. Suppose I drink the beer and the time comes to pay for the beer. Now the question is, granted the sheer fact that I intended my behavior to place me under an obligation to pay for the beer, must I also have a reason independent of this fact, such as a desire to pay for the beer, or some other appropriate element of my motivational set, in order to have a reason to pay for the beer? That is, in order to know if I have a reason to pay for the beer, do I first have to scrutinize my motivational set to see if there is any desire to pay for the beer, or to see if I hold any general principles about paying for the beer that I have drunk? It seems to me the answer is, I do not. In such a case, by ordering the beer and drinking it when bought, I have already intentionally created a commitment or obligation to pay for it, and such commitments and obligations are species of reasons. (Searle 2001: 186-187)

The commitment to pay for the beer is part of the language game of placing an order for it. No further motivation is required, according to Searle. He states that “the obligation to keep a promise is internal to the act of promising, just as the commitment to truth telling is internal to the act of statement making” (Searle 2001: 193). But why are other rational agents required to accept the truth of my utterance? And how does my promise create an external reason that constrains my action? He elaborates that “the obligation to keep a promise derives from the fact that in promising I freely and voluntarily create a reason for myself. The free exercise of the will can bind the will...” (2001: 199). And yet, where exactly rests the constraining force of a reason that I voluntarily create for the sake of semantic cooperation? Why is it, in general, that I cannot promise without being forced to keep my promise?

It does not seem to me that Searle’s account can rest on semantics alone. Generally, as I see it, what makes me abide by my promise is an external constraint, such as the desire of avoiding the unpleasant consequences of breaking the obligations created through my speech acts. Such consequences can either consist in punitive measures against particular rule-breakings, or exclusion from similar future social interaction. Hence, the sole kinds of motivations for action are desires and needs, whether we are aware of them or not. There are no external reasons for action, but merely internal ones, as the “classical” view has it.

The above argument shows that there is more to institutional facts than the normativity characteristic of language games. This normativity rests on the agent's subjective motivational set, and it is not external to it. Moreover, Searle neglects the overwhelming mass of social facts, events and processes that are *unintended* consequences of collective action. Institutions are relatively stable and predictable patterns of interaction that rest on a texture of social rules, but they frequently favor unpredictable forms of social behavior, and sometimes even to their own destruction. We mentioned above the self-fulfilling prophecies, of which a *bank run* is an example: when a majority of a bank's customers withdraw their deposits for fear of insolvency, the outcome is likely to be insolvency, regardless of whether the fear was justified or not. Hence, there is more to the social world than institutions and the class of facts related to their workings.

2.4. Social constructivist approaches to IR

There are three important versions of constructivist approaches to IR. Chronologically, the first constructivist theory of international relations was given by Nicholas Onuf's complex work, *World of Our Making* (1989). Then, Friedrich Kratochwil established himself as a key constructivist, especially through his important *Rules, Norms, and Decisions* (1989). But undoubtedly the most influential constructivist thinker in IR matters is Alexander Wendt, upon whose work I shall insist in greater detail. I start with brief presentations of Onuf's and Kratochwil's versions of constructivism.

Onuf understands constructivism as an explanatory frame applicable across the whole spectrum of science. In general, the social world is constructed through the imposition of meaning upon the raw facts of nature. Meaning, in his view, is essentially dependent on following rules. Thus, he takes an analysis of rules to be the starting point of any inquiry of social life. Rules, according to Onuf, are 'statements that tell people *what [they] should do*' (1998: 59). Rules provide guidance for human behavior and thereby make shared meaning possible. Also, rules create the possibility of agency, for people can agents in society only insofar as they *follow* rules – or at least *according to* rules.

There is a remarkable similarity between Onuf's conceptualization of rules and the one of Searle, as Onuf also grounds the normative power of rules on the performance of speech acts. His reasoning is that speech acts are successful insofar as their occurrences have consequences of the same type. Repetition turns them into social conventions. Some conventions get

institutionalized in virtue of being accepted as obligatory; thus they become rules. Certainly, much of the criticism raised against Searle's speech acts theory of normativity applies here. Speech acts do not seem to have sufficient constraining force to account by themselves for social norms.

At a different juncture, Onuf's constructivism takes an antirealist twist. He endorses the view that both the knowledge we acquire and the truths we subscribe to are relative to specific contexts, where contexts are regarded as constituted by linguistic rules and practices. Meaning is the fundamental link between language and reality. Our view of the world is inescapably signification-laden, as the matter under investigation is indelibly related to the language we use. Since meaning consists in adequately performed speech acts, it follows that both *what* and *how* we know depend on our linguistic performance. We cannot step outside of the world of our social constructions and have a neutral perspective. Thus, we end up with the earlier mentioned determination of both epistemology and ontology by semantics. Nonetheless, we have shown that there is no need for such a neutral lookout from which to compare words with the world and hand down decisions regarding their correspondence. The empirical success of our best scientific practices is not context-relative, and neither is ontology.

The foundational interest in the role of language is also shared by Kratochwil, though his focus is rather on how the norms and rules that guide human behavior are produced by everyday language. He asserts that international politics must be analyzed from the viewpoint of *norms*, for human behavior is influenced not merely by instrumental rationality, but also by rules and norms understood as "antecedent conditions for strategies and for the specification of criteria of rationality" (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996: 219). Kratochwil takes inspiration from Habermas' theory of communicative action in his account for social normativity. Communication is crucial to his theory, because speech acts and rules depend on successful communication. They succeed only insofar as they achieve the desired effect in the addressee.

Further, *meaning* is a matter of social endorsement expressed through intersubjectively shared norms. Social interaction is possible only on the ground of – at least partially – shared meanings. There is an intrinsic interpretive element in social action which cannot be eliminated, as the social choices of individuals are regulated by norms and values. Therefore, there is no neutral (*wertfrei*) discourse on social affairs. In individual decision making, norms and values come in through the use of a *narrative*,

i.e. an interpretative story developed out of a particular *topos* or commonplace that offers a shared understanding of the issue. Rules and norms are interwoven in the texture of intersubjectivity and are thus fundamental for grasping meaningful action.

Wendt's version of constructivism revolves around the *identity* of the actors involved in international politics. Recall that realism and liberalism, as well as their "neos," assume that the identities and interests of the state actors are exogenously given and, on that basis, prescribe rational strategies for maximizing those interests. Wendt's insight, on the other hand, is that the identities and interests of states are socially constructed in the process of social interaction. Also, the environment of interaction is shaped through the process of interaction.

Wendt conceptualizes this in terms of Giddens' dichotomy between *agent* and *structure*, which he regards as mutually constitutive and as having equal ontological standing. Wendt shares with neorealism – the main target of his criticism – the assumption that the international world is anarchic, that the state is the fundamental agent on that scene, and that states pursue self-help courses of action. However, he denies that anarchy is necessarily competitive, arguing that the characteristics of anarchy depend on the process of international interaction. "Anarchy is what states make of it," as he put it (1992). He also turns to meanings and intersubjectivity in order to support this claim. People act on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to object, and meanings are themselves the output of interaction. Wendt is careful not to take the excessively interpretivist line of Onuf and Kratochwil. On the contrary, he has embraced a vigorous scientific realism that allows him to separate language from reality and knowledge. So, he can easily embrace a moderate social constructivism, ontologically compatible with the belief that there is an unconstructed world, independent of our intentionality, and that it is knowable and, indeed, partly accurately represented by our best theories.

Wendt develops his constructivist account of IR based on the belief that anarchy does not have to be competitive, and hence that conceptions of interest do not have to be self-centered. Behavior, according to Wendt, is influenced by intersubjective rather than material structures. Intersubjective structures are responsible for the formation of identities, defined as 'relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self' (Wendt 1992: 397). Further, as will be seen in the next section, identities are constitutive of interests, which are defined in the process of conceptualizing situations. The most significant consequence of Wendt's

view of the socially constructed character of identities and interests is, I think, that “social identities involve an *identification* with the fate of the other” (1996: 52). The boundaries of the Self have a remarkable degree of plasticity. They can be shrunk to the core, “personal” dimension of the Self, or expanded over the whole collective of actors engaged in cooperation. In order to grasp this adequately, we need a closer look at the cogs and wheels of his theory.

3. Identities and Interests

It has been noted that both neorealism and neoliberalism take the *self*, i.e. the identity of the state actor, as well as its interests, as exogenously *given*. But what does the *self* stand for when talking about *self*-interested states pursuing *self*-help strategies? There is a strong representation of the empiricist camp in the political philosophy of the state, according to which the state is, ontologically speaking, a mere useful fiction or metaphor. It allows us, by presuming its autonomous agency, to readily explain and anticipate international politics. For example, Stephen Krasner (1999: 7) considers that

the ontological givens are rulers, specific policy makers, usually but not always the executive head of state. Rulers, not states – and not the international system – make choices about policies, rules, and institutions (Krasner 1999: 7).

There is no state in the sense of an independently existing agent, argue the empiricists. There is a long and respectable philosophical tradition behind this stance, going back to Hobbes and Locke, of regarding the states as a form of collective authority, an aggregation of individual wills that follow from individual delegations of authority in order to better pursue the interests of the many. However, Wendt see the state as a genuinely existing entity with substantive ontological status. He deals at length with the inability of the instrumentalist thinking about state agency to reduce it to individual action without explanatory loss.

It is not my main interest here to address the pros and cons of the notion that the state is a unitary actor. Yet I find very apt and useful the dimensions and distinctions that Wendt has introduced to analyze the concept of state, its identity and interests. There are five characteristics that Wendt singles out as definitional for the notion of state:

(1) an institutional legal order, (2) an organization claiming a monopoly on the legitimate use of organized violence, (3) an organization with sovereignty, (4) a society, and (5) territory” (Wendt 1999: 202).

The notions of “institutional legal order,” “monopoly on the legitimate use of violence,” “society,” and “territory” are sufficiently transparent for our purposes, although there are salient philosophical aspects to discuss about them. The concept of “sovereignty” is much more in need of clarification. Wendt distinguishes between an *internal* and an *external* kind of sovereignty, where the former refers to “the state as the supreme locus of political authority in society,” and the latter to “the absence of any external authority higher than the state, like other states, international law, or a supranational Church.” (1999: 207-208). He takes external sovereignty as “relatively straightforward,” but recent research on the topic displays the potential source of confusion that is the concept of sovereignty in IR. The best analysis of sovereignty belongs to Krasner (1999). He distinguishes four distinct meanings that have been ascribed to the term “sovereignty”:

International legal sovereignty refers to the practices associated with mutual recognition, usually between territorial entities that have formal juridical independence. *Westphalian sovereignty* refers to political organization based on the exclusion of the external actors from authority structures within a given territory. *Domestic sovereignty* refers to the formal organization of political authority within the state and the ability of public authorities to exercise effective control within the borders of their own policy. *Interdependence sovereignty* refers to the ability of public authorities to regulate the flow of information, ideas, goods, people, pollutants, or capital across the borders of their state (Krasner 1999: 3).

Krasner admirably documents that these four sorts of sovereignty do not covary, meaning that “a state can have one but not the other” (1999: 4). He turns to March and Olsen’s older distinction between the *logic of expected consequences* and the *logic of appropriateness* to construct his theory of sovereignty.

Logics of consequences see political action and outcomes, including institutions, as the product of rational calculating behavior designed to maximize a given set of unexplained preferences. Classical game theory and neoclassical economics are well-known examples. Logics of

appropriateness understand political action as a product of rules, roles, and identities that stipulate appropriate behavior in given situations. (Krasner 1999: 5)

Using this terminology, Krasner argues that the logics of consequences dominates the scene of international politics, and that the institution of sovereignty is being hypocritically used in an instrumental sense, under the appearance of institutionally regulated behavior. He puts it bluntly under the slogan "Sovereignty is organized hypocrisy." The domestic life of states is dominated by the logic of appropriateness, for the domestic social and political system is strongly institutionalized and the roles of the political actors are strongly regulated. However, the international environment, characterized by conflicts of interests, power asymmetries and the lack of an overriding authority, offers the actors in particular situations the possibility to choose from different rules and follow those that best promote their interests. For example, the conflicting rules of nonintervention in another state's essential jurisdiction and humanitarian intervention are given course according to the instrumental interests of the decision-makers.

Now, where do *identity* and *self* fit into this analysis of the concept of *state*? It is easier to answer this by taking into account the four aspects of identity that Wendt distinguishes in a social kind, namely the *personal/corporate* (depending on whether it concerns particulars or corporate agents, respectively), *type*, *role*, and *collective* aspects. The personal/corporate identity refers to the distinctive material constitution of the entity. For states, corporate identity can be spelled out along the definitional characteristics delineated above, where sovereignty is to be taken in its internal sense. Type identity "refers to a social category or 'label' applied to persons [or entities] who share ...some characteristics, in appearance, behavioral traits, attitudes, values, skills, knowledge, opinions, experience, historical commonalities, and so on" (Wendt 1999: 225). An actor – individual or corporate – can have multiple type identities simultaneously, as it can share various sets of values and opinions, and display different forms of behavior in relationship with different other actors. Through shared beliefs and values, type identity introduces a cultural element in the overall analysis of identity.

Further, role identities are cultural *par excellence*, as they designate the culturally conditioned roles that an actor plays in relation to the others. Roles are assigned relational predicates, such as "son," "teacher,"

“ruler” with respect to individuals, or “ally,” “enemy,” “hegemon” with regard to states. Each of them presupposes at least another object in order to apply validly. The “learning” of roles is a matter of the actors’ collective knowledge of each other’s beliefs and expectations. By acquiring such collective knowledge, each of the actors bound by relational predicates internalizes adequate behavior rules, which position them with respect to one another. Thus, the *self* reflects itself in the *other* and this reflection is assimilated in the actor’s identity.

Finally, collective identity is reached through a cognitive process “in which the Self-Other distinction becomes blurred and at the limit transcended altogether” (Wendt 1999: 229). Collective identity is the most salient aspect of Wendt’s account of IR. Unlike neorealism and neoliberalism, SC observes the circumstances under which the boundaries of the self extend over, or are engulfed by, the other. Obviously, given the essential distinctiveness expressed in the personal/corporate aspect, identity cannot be collective in every respect, but only regarding some issue-specific properties.

Interests follow from the nature of identity, because what an actor *wants* depends on who an actor *is*. Ultimately, interests are motivational factors whose fulfillment contributes to the reproduction of their underlying identity. But we must distinguish between the actor’s *subjective* perception and opinions of what her needs are, and the *objective* actions that must be taken in order to meet the identity’s needs. Both kinds of interest have to be properly explained. Subjective interests are important because they are the proximate motivators of political actors. Statesmen, for instance, typically define and assess the national interest according to their information, values, and ideology. It is, therefore, salient to have a proper description of their subjective views on what the national interest is and how it is to be pursued.

Naturally, if political decision-makers constantly pursue a subjective national interest that diverges from the objective one, the identity underlying their political views will perish. But then how can one ever ascertain what the national interest really is? Is it something that only some elites, maybe privileged by way of skills and information, can grasp? Or it is simply what the majority of a society decides it is best for the most? Incidentally, the former can be true, yet the elites of undemocratic states can lack the legitimate means to pursue their objective interest. On the other hand, though democratically sanctioned ways of action are legitimate, majorities can be wrong or short-sighted

(suboptimal). It is relevant to delineate some salient aspects of the national interest.

George and Keohane (1980) identify three dimensions of the national interest: physical survival, autonomy, and economic well-being, to which Wendt adds "collective self-esteem" (1999: 235). Fundamentally, the national interest concerns the *survival* of the society and its individual members. Realism and neorealism assume that survival is the only thing that matters to the national interest of a state. But of course, our intuitions command other dimension too, since they are not indifferent to *how* the members of a state live in actuality.

Yet before turning to the remaining dimensions of national interest, recall that the parsimonious realist model is rather an attempt to give a reductive explanation of rational foreign policy, in which any kind of interest that a state may have on the international scene relies on the fundamental one: survival. *Autonomy* refers to the ability of a state to retain exclusive control over the allocation of its resources and the choice of its government. It is a characteristic of the internal sovereignty of a state. Further, *economic well-being* designates the material resource base of a state. The economic status is crucial not only for the possibility of survival, but also for its sovereignty and *self-esteem*. Wendt aptly notices that "self-esteem is a basic human need of individuals, and one of the things that individuals seek in group membership" (1999: 236). Self-esteem is a psychological factor unmistakably influenced by culture, hence also by the relationship between the *self* and the *other*. These four dimensions of national interest may not be concomitantly achievable – in fact, they can even diverge. Yet, "in the long run all four must be satisfied. States that do not will tend to die out." (1999: 239)

Summing up, the issue is not really whether states can act altruistically, that is motivated by something else than self-interest. Philosophically, any action, even the most generous one, can be explained as a matter of self-interest, for there is no motive for action outside of the subjective motivational set of the agent. The genuine theoretical contribution of SC is that the *self* can expand so as to merge, in certain significant respects, with the *other*, to the effect that altruism can be understood as the effect of a transformed self-interest. Once a particular group of states form a collective identity, self-interested action is actually perceived as cooperative. The European Union is the favorite source of evidence for SC. The issue of constructing an European identity can be analyzed as a

process of social groups progressively “learning” to identify with others in “concentric circles,” as Wendt put it.

Nonetheless, I choose the following concluding example to show not only the theoretical resources of constructivism, but also some obvious limits of neorealism. In a controversial article published in the *London Review of Books* in March 2006, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt maintain that the amount of economic and military help that the US provides Israel in virtue of their privileged partnership defies the logic of self-interest that Washington should follow according to the neorealist prescriptions. The authors list a series of measures of material support that the US has given Israel after World War II, which they deem disproportionate relative to both the benefits that such a support brings Washington, and the objective needs of Israel as an industrialized country. They identify the reason for this level of support in the domestic American politics, and particularly in the efficient “Israel Lobby,” which, as they surmise, has managed to divert America’s Middle East foreign policy from the American national interest. I shall not here review the pros and cons that have been expressed in the debate triggered by this paper.⁷ The point of bringing forward this particular case is to show that the neorealist conceptual framework, from within which Mearsheimer and Walt argue, makes difficult for them to see the possibility of an increasing perception of collective identity between Israel and US, grounded in historical, cultural, moral, and civilization elements of identity. Consequently, there is a dominant perception of similarity of interests in both Americans and Israelis regarding many coordinates of their foreign policy, as well as an empathic understanding of each others’ security fears. Up to a certain point, it is open to discussion whether Washington had more to gain in terms of security and economics from a more pro-Arab attitude in the Middle East. Yet no sophisticated foreign policy analysis can ignore actors’ identities in accounting for the ways they act in order to achieve their interests.

NOTES

- 1 As Kupchan and Wittkopf (1997: 47) point out, "Between 1974 and 1980, more than thirty countries converted their governments from dictatorial to democratic rule. This pace accelerated during the 1980s in democratization's 'third wave'... By 1992, more than half the world's governments were, for the first time, democratic. Although modest reversals have been evident since 1993 and Russia's commitment to democratization was in doubt in 1996, the long-term global trend toward democratization appears to be entrenched."
- 2 Our interest here is not in analyzing the concept of "being," or what it is for something to exist, but in dealing with the question "what exists?" or "what kinds of general things are there?"
- 3 In the special case of social ontology, there is a mutual dependence of ontology and epistemology that is not in place in the realm of natural kinds. Since social kinds are the outcome of collective action, it is useful to distinguish between the *intended* (hence acknowledged as least as possible) and *unintended* results of social action. Conceivably, some constructed facts are inaccessible to human knowledge by any means of inquiry. Kukla calls the facts inaccessible in principle *noumenal*.
- 4 In transcendental arguments, the assumption is made that a certain condition holds, and then the presuppositions required by that conditions are depicted.
- 5 Just to make clear, *absolute* refers here to the relation of epistemic warrant of any belief by a given epistemic context. As such, it does by no means conflict with the idea of fallibility of any knowledge claim.
- 6 The *subjective motivational set* includes desires, patterns of emotional reaction, attitudes, etc.
- 7 A very good sample is given in the July/August 2006 issue of *Foreign Policy*.

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