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What is This?

Beyond metatheory?

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Abstract
Metatheory is out of fashion. If theory has a purpose, we are told, that purpose is the generation of practically relevant knowledge. Metatheoretical inquiry and debate contribute little to such knowledge and are best bracketed, left aside for the philosophers. This article challenges this all-too-common line of reasoning. First, one can bracket metatheoretical inquiry, but this does not free one's work, theoretical or otherwise, of metatheoretical assumptions. Second, our metatheoretical assumptions affect the kind of practically relevant knowledge we can produce. If our goal is the generation of such knowledge, understanding how our metatheoretical assumptions enable or constrain this objective is essential. Today, the most sustained articulation of the 'bracket metatheory thesis' is provided by analytical eclecticists, who call on the field to leave behind metatheoretical debate, concentrate on concrete puzzles and problematics, and draw selectively on insights from diverse research traditions to fashion middle-range theoretical explanations. Yet by forgoing metatheoretical reflection, analytical eclecticists fail to see how their project is deeply structured by epistemological and ontological assumptions, making it an exclusively empirical-theoretic project with distinctive ontological content. This metatheoretical framing significantly impedes the kind of practically relevant knowledge eclecticist research can generate. Practical knowledge, as both Aristotle and Kant understood, is knowledge that can address basic questions of political action — how should I, we, or they act? Empirical-theoretic insights alone cannot provide such knowledge; it has to be integrated with normative forms of reasoning. As presently conceived, however, analytical eclecticism cannot accommodate such reasoning. If the generation of practical knowledge is one of the field's ambitions, greater metatheoretical reflection and a more expansive and ambitious form of eclecticism are required.

Keywords
analytical eclecticism, epistemology, International Relations theory, metatheory, ontology, practical knowledge

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Introduction

'The end of theory' can mean two things. It can mean the finish of theory; its demise or conclusion, that it will be no more. Or it can also mean the purpose of theory; the ends it serves, the reasons we do it. In debates about the study of international relations these meanings are often conjoined, with arguments about the 'purpose' of theory informing arguments about the kinds of theory we ought to pursue. Other than rank empiricists, few suggest that theory has no purpose at all; that it has no valid ends and should come to an end. It is common, however, for scholars to circumscribe the purposes of theory in such a way as to exclude as useful and desirable particular forms of theory and theorizing. Examples come from all quarters. For some the purpose of theory is the formulation of empirically testable hypotheses, and normative theory is excluded as unscientific. For others the goal is emancipatory change, and 'problem-solving' theory is excluded as inherently conservative. The argument most commonly heard today, however, is that theory's main purpose is the generation of practically relevant knowledge and that metatheoretical reflections and debates are an unhelpful distraction.

This article challenges this move to bracket metatheoretical inquiry in the pursuit of practically relevant knowledge. This is not because I wish to defend theoretical abstraction for its own sake, or because I believe that fundamental questions of epistemology and ontology — the stuff of metatheory — are resolvable in any final or absolute sense. Nor is it because I think the generation of practically relevant knowledge is an inappropriate goal or purpose for International Relations theory; far from it. My concerns are different. First, as others have observed, one can bracket metatheoretical inquiry, but this does not free one's work, theoretical or otherwise, of metatheoretical assumptions. All work has underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions, and these establish the intellectual parameters of our inquiries, determining what we think the social and political universe comprises and what counts as valid knowledge of that universe. Second, our metatheoretical assumptions, however subliminal they might be, affect the kinds of practically relevant knowledge we can produce. If our epistemological assumptions confine legitimate social knowledge to the formulation of empirically verifiable hypotheses, then the knowledge we generate will be limited to inferences about causal relations between variables. As we shall see, though, this leaves us well short of what Aristotle and many others consider true practical knowledge.

Today, the most thoroughly articulated call for us to bypass metatheoretical inquiry on the road to useful knowledge is advanced by proponents of 'analytical eclecticism,' who ask us to 'set aside metatheoretical debates in favor of a pragmatist view of social inquiry' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a: 417). If we want our scholarship to 'speak to concrete issues of policy and practice,' Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein argue (2010a: 412), we should address specific political problems and puzzles, develop middle-range theories that draw creatively on the analytical insights of different theoretical paradigms, and avoid getting bogged down in the unresolvable and unproductive debates over epistemology and ontology that blighted the field's paradigm wars. Katzenstein and Sil are not, of course, the first to call on the field to move beyond metatheory. Their argument is distinguished, however, in three respects. First, in contrast to many other expressions of this position, theirs is both systematic and well grounded in an established body of philosophical thought, that of American pragmatism. Second, their position is an interesting one, in that they are issuing

what many will see as a conservative call for the field to be more practically oriented while simultaneously challenging how the American mainstream does business, through gladiatorial paradigm wars. Finally, the analytical eclecticist position advocated by Sil and Katzenstein has quite rapidly become part of mainstream debates about the kind of knowledge the field ought to pursue and how such knowledge is best attained. For each of these reasons, the eclecticist argument constitutes an important and illuminating site in which to explore the limits of the 'bracket metatheory' thesis.

Sil and Katzenstein are keenly aware of how underlying metatheoretical assumptions structure lower-level theories (see 2011: 482–484). Yet their articulation of analytical eclecticism is deeply structured by unacknowledged metatheoretical assumptions, making it one kind of project and not another. Epistemologically, analytical eclecticism is an empirical-theoretic project: it is intended to address empirical not normative problems and puzzles, and the theoretical insights the eclecticist combines are explanatory not normative, however diverse they might be. Similarly, analytical eclecticism rests on a triadic ontology. The assumptions about the nature of the social and political world that the eclecticist combines are drawn from the three mainstream paradigms: realism's emphasis on material power; liberalism's focus on cooperation among rational egoists; and constructivism's concern with norms and identities. The 'combinatorial logic' of eclecticism is thus confined to a prefigured set of structural factors, causal mechanisms, and social processes. Furthermore, if one examines the emblematic eclecticist work showcased by Katzenstein and Sil, these assumptions are woven together in a distinctive way.

A major problem with this metatheoretical framing is that it limits the kind of practically relevant knowledge that eclecticist research can produce. So long as eclecticism remains epistemologically an empirical-theoretic project, the knowledge it produces will be empirical-theoretic in form. For positivists it will be confined to inferences about causal relations between measurable variables, and for interpretivists, to understandings of constitutive social relations. But whatever utility such knowledge might have, it cannot, on its own, animate social and political action. Aristotle held that choice was 'the starting point of action,' and choice rests on two things: 'thought,' on the one hand, and 'some moral characteristic' or 'end,' on the other (1962: 148–149). Empirical-theoretic knowledge can contribute to the first of these, but only normative reflection, or 'deliberation' as Aristotle understood it, can provide the second. When International Relations scholars call for more practical or useful knowledge, they seldom explain precisely what they mean. But to the extent that they want knowledge that can address some of today's most pressing questions of international practice — When should states intervene militarily in the domestic affairs of other states? How should the international community respond to national financial crises? What should states do, singularly or collectively, to manage global climate change? And so on. — more than empirical-theoretic knowledge will be required: systematic reflection on the values at stake will be needed as well. Yet it is precisely this latter form of knowledge that lies outside the epistemological boundaries of analytical eclecticism.

The following discussion is divided into four main parts. After clarifying a number of key conceptual issues, the first part explores in greater detail the proposition that bracketing metatheoretical reflection and debate is necessary if we wish to produce practically relevant knowledge. The first half of this proposition, the notion that one can put aside

metatheory, is confronted in the second part. We can stop talking about metatheory — reflecting on its complexities, debating contending positions, and considering what it means for the nature of our work — but we cannot escape it. I illustrate this by excavating the epistemological and ontological assumptions that structure Katzenstein and Sil's articulation of analytical eclecticism, showing how their background assumptions admit only certain forms of knowledge and conceive the social universe in a distinctive way. The third part of the article deals with the second half of the 'bracket metatheory' proposition: the idea that forswearing metatheoretical reflection is conducive to the pursuit of practically relevant knowledge. I return here to Aristotle's understanding of practical knowledge, a form of understanding that could inform political choice, and in turn action, by integrating empirical and normative insights. By bracketing metatheoretical reflection, Sil and Katzenstein fail to see how their unacknowledged background assumptions obstruct the production of such knowledge, as normative forms of inquiry and understanding are epistemologically out of bounds. In the light of this, the fourth part of the article calls for an expanded, more inclusive, form of analytical eclecticism.

'Enough with the metatheory'

Metatheories are commonly defined as theories that take other theories as their subject. Sometimes this is taken to mean that metatheories are concerned with the analysis of other, second-order theories, and at times they are. In International Relations and Political Science more generally, however, the term is used somewhat differently, referring to a set of logically prior assumptions that establish the conditions of possibility for second-order theories. These assumptions are usually said to fall into three broad categories: epistemology, ontology, and meta-ethics. I am concerned here with the first two of these, even though questions of ethics appear at certain points in the argument.

Epistemologies are theories of knowledge. There is some confusion, however, about their nature and precise domain (on this, see Bates and Jenkins, 2007; and the reply in Hay, 2007). For some, epistemology is concerned primarily with *how* one gains knowledge of the world. For David Marsh and Gerry Stoker, for example, epistemology is about 'how we can know' what we know about the world (2002: 11). And for Colin Hay, 'the epistemologist asks "what are the conditions of acquiring knowledge of that which exists?"'(2006: 83). This emphasis on the 'how' question, on the conditions of knowledge acquisition, obscures a more fundamental feature of epistemology: its justificatory aspect. At its most fundamental level epistemology is concerned with what constitutes valid knowledge. As Norman Blaikie explains, 'Epistemology is concerned with the nature and scope of human knowledge, with what kinds of knowledge are possible, and with criteria for judging the adequacy of knowledge and for distinguishing scientific from non-scientific knowledge' (2007: 4).

Ontologies, by contrast, are theories about the nature of being: what can be said to exist, how things might be categorized, and how they stand in relation to one another. 'In political science,' Robert Goodin and Charles Tilly argue, 'major ontological choices concern the sorts of social entities whose coherent existence analysts can reasonably assume' (2006: 10). Several attempts have been made to identify the principal ontologies, or ontological choices, that structure second-order theories in Political

Science and International Relations. Goodin and Tilly list a number of prominent onto-logical positions, including holism, methodological individualism, phenomenological individualism, and relational realism (2006: 10–11). Hay, in contrast, focuses on three key ontological debates: the 'reality' of individuals versus groups, the relationship between structure and agency, and the relative importance of ideational versus material phenomena (2006: 88–93). However one carves them up, ontologies must be distin-guished from second-order theories, even though both entail assumptions about the nature of the social and political universe. The difference between the two is nicely illustrated by Alexander Wendt in *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999). Wendt identifies two ontological debates that divide International Relations theorists: the degree to which structures are material or social, and the relationship between agents and structures. Where scholars locate themselves within these debates shapes the nature of their substantive theories of world politics, determining their 'ontological centre of gravity' (Wendt, 1999: 29). But second-order theories also comprise second-order assumptions that are conditioned by, but not reducible to, underlying ontological assumptions. For example, methodological individualism is the ontological foundation of neoliberal theory, but the notion that institutions facilitate cooperation among ego-ists is a second-order proposition.

The call to bracket metatheoretical reflection has been a persistent feature of debate in International Relations. In calling for IR to be more 'substantive,' to 'produce theories which are capable of analyzing historical processes and specific issues within them,' Fred Halliday argued that metatheories 'should be discussed where they belong, in phi-losophy departments' (1995: 745). Kalevi Holsti made a similar point when writing that 'in many of our scholars' excursions into epistemology, ontology, and metatheory, we sometimes lose sight of one of our common purposes in international relations scholar-ship: to make a seemingly difficult and often chaotic field of ideas, activity, and practice more intelligible through the process of clarification and, moreover, contextualization' (2000: 29). William Wallace, in an oft-cited article, claimed that the field 'has become too detached from the world of practice, too fond of theory (and metatheory) as opposed to empirical research, too self-indulgent, and in some cases too self-righteous' (2003: 304). In the same year, Andrew Moravcsik argued that 'Scholars of international rela-tions should dwell less on the metatheoretical, ontological, and philosophical status of social science, thereby postponing the day when the specific problem of theory synthesis itself is addressed concretely. We should think more about the ways in which theoretical synthesis might help understand concrete events in world politics' (2003: 136). More recently, David Lake has criticized the divisiveness of epistemological positioning, argu-ing that 'We reify each [epistemological] approach, reward extremism, fail to specify research designs completely, apply epistemologies selectively where they are most likely to work, and then claim universality. Through these pathologies, we not only create aca-demic religions of different theories but also become committed to academic sects of different epistemologies' (2011: 476).

Different though they are, a common theme runs through each of these critiques: that metatheoretical reflection and debate draws scholars away from understanding the real world, from developing theories that address concrete political puzzles and problemat-ics. There is, however, an underdeveloped quality about many such critiques; they

express the author's frustrations with the field — often in an 'off the cuff' manner — but are seldom well elaborated, and rarely located in any coherent philosophical position on the nature and foundations of social theory. In this respect, the version advanced by Katzenstein and Sil stands out. As noted in the introduction, their position has been systematically and comprehensively elaborated; articulated in multiple journal articles (Katzenstein, 2010; Katzenstein and Sil, 2008; Sil, 2000b; Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a, 2011) and a dedicated monograph (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010b), and both authors have applied their version of eclecticism in a range of empirical studies (see, in particular, Sil, 2002; Suh et al., 2004). Furthermore, Sil and Katzenstein have worked hard to ground their position in the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey, William James, and Charles Pierce, arguing that 'pragmatism offers a reasonable, flexible, and useful alternative to rigid (if implicit) epistemic commitments that frequently drive and are reinforced by inter-paradigm debates' (2010b: 44). In doing so, they locate analytical eclecticism within the broader 'pragmatist turn' now occurring in International Relations, a turn itself driven by a despair at the irresolvability of basic metatheoretical disputes. Because of its well-elaborated form, articulation with wider intellectual currents, and no doubt Katzenstein's standing in the field, analytical eclecticism is now a prominent alternative in mainstream debates within the United States about knowledge production and the appropriate form of research in International Relations.[1]

Katzenstein and Sil present analytical eclecticism as a scholarly stance — an attitude toward knowledge and inquiry — and a set of attendant investigative, argumentative, and communicative practices. Above all else, it is an approach distinguished by a willingness to bypass metatheoretical debates and adopt a pragmatist approach to social and political analysis (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a: 417). In elaborating such an approach, they identify with the preference of Dewey and pragmatists for the consequential evaluation of knowledge in relation to concrete social problems, the rethinking of knowledge claims with reference to the knowledgeable experiences of real-world actors, seeing scholarly dialogue as embedded within, and transformable by, wider social and political discourses, and for an 'open-ended ontology' that makes no prior assumptions about why actors adopt particular stances toward social and political change (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a: 417–418).

This eclecticist aversion to metatheory grows out of two concerns. The first is a commitment to the practical, to the orientation of scholarship toward the solution of concrete world problems, and to the location of scholarly argument and debate within the realm of broader social practices. From such a perspective, metatheoretical inquiry is an academic parlor game, a distraction drawing good minds away from the proper social purposes of International Relations and Political Science. The second concern is the aforementioned skepticism about the resolvability of fundamental epistemological and ontological debates. Not only are existing paradigms said to rest on contrasting metatheoretical foundations, but these are seen as 'irreconcilable' and 'unverifiable,' especially those concerning epistemology (Sil, 2000b: 354). Metatheoretical debates are thus divisive, undergirding the field's paradigm wars, and 'interminable' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a: 417). There is, in the end, no way to settle centuries-old arguments about what constitutes truth, about whether ideas or material factors are more fundamental, about the relationship between agents and structures, or about the epistemological status of moral

claims. Metatheoretical inquiry is thus not only too distant from the correct social purposes of the social sciences, but the irresolvability of the most fundamental issues of epistemology and ontology undermine any other rationales it might have.

In elaborating the eclecticist position, Katzenstein and Sil begin by characterizing the existing state of theoretical debate in International Relations. Because of their location within the United States academy, they see such debate as dominated by three major paradigms or 'research traditions' — realism, liberalism, and constructivism — each of which rests on its own distinct set of metatheoretical principles. These principles provide the deep foundations of each paradigm, structuring its analytical assumptions and practices over time:

> Because research traditions are typically founded on metatheoretical principles that are distinct from those informing competing traditions, each intrinsically favors some types of scholarly endeavors over others, as evident in the selection and framing of research puzzles, the representation and interpretation of relevant empirical observations, the specification of evidentiary standards, and the attention to certain causal mechanisms at the expense of others. (Katzenstein and Sil, 2008: 110)

Yet even though these foundational principles perform such a deep structuring role, a key proposition in the eclecticist argument is that they can be bracketed, and that the analytical eclecticist can draw selectively from the secondary, middle-range analytical insights of these traditions to fashion new answers to concrete problems. In Katzenstein and Sil's words, 'features of analyses in theories initially embedded in separate research traditions can be separated from their respective foundations, translated meaningfully, and recombined as part of an original permutation of concepts, methods, analytics, and empirics' (2008: 110–111). In other words, for the analytical eclecticist, it is both possible and desirable to separate the analytical superstructures of established research traditions from their metatheoretical bases, and to redeploy the former while dispensing with the latter.

On close reading, however, it seems that Sil and Katzenstein are primarily concerned with endless epistemological debate, far less with ontology. While analytical eclecticism is said to be characterized by a bracketing of both epistemological and ontological metatheory, there is a particular impatience with the 'epistemological absolutism' of both positivists and interpretivists. Debates about what constitutes true knowledge of the social and political world, and the methodological injunctions that flow from these, are rejected in favor of a pragmatist 'focus on the consequences of truth claims in a given context' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010b: 45). Differences over ontology, by contrast, are considered far less intractable. In seeking to show the scope of the eclectic combining of insights from different paradigms, Sil and Katzenstein go to some lengths to map out the ontological commonalities between realism, liberalism, and constructivism (2010b: 31–34). As we shall see, this mapping has distinctive contours. What matters here, though, is that ontology is not considered an intractable mire in the same way as epistemology. This reflects, it should be noted, a broader tendency of post-'third debate' International Relations, with scholars of diverse persuasions advocating a focus on ontology over epistemology.

The stuff we carry with us

Katzenstein and Sil may well eschew metatheoretical reflection and debate in favor of a pragmatist approach to social and political inquiry, but their pragmatism remains deeply structured by metatheoretical assumptions, however conscious or unconscious these might be. These assumptions constitute analytical eclecticism's metatheory, and they make it a distinctive kind of social-scientific project, one with particular boundaries and particular content.

The ins and outs of knowledge

In his early writings, Sil devoted considerable attention to uncovering the epistemological roots of theoretical debates in International Relations, and to developing theoretical, conceptual, and analytical strategies for moving beyond these differences (Sil, 2000a, 2000b). In one piece he recommends that scholars of diverse persuasions embrace their common commitment to 'understanding aspects of social life,' and seek a 'common understanding of the distinctive advantages (and limitations) of varied approaches designed to investigate different kinds of "truths" at different levels of abstraction' (Sil, 2000a: 500). In another he criticizes scholars for attributing epistemological primacy to things they deem ontologically primary (giving epistemological primacy to agency, for example, because the scholar thinks that individuals are the irreducible basis of society). His solution here is to advocate a position of epistemological agnosticism, characterized by a refusal to assign epistemological primacy to aspects of the social and political universe (agents/structures, ideas/material factors), and the adoption of flexible analytical categories that draw attention to the interconnections between, and mutual constitution of, such factors (Sil, 2000b: 377). It is curious, though, that neither here nor in his work with Katzenstein does Sil use his keen eye for the underlying epistemological assumptions of established theories and approaches to scrutinize the epistemological framing of his own proposed solutions, analytical eclecticism included.

   Analytical eclecticism is an epistemologically bounded project. In *Beyond Paradigms* (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010b), Sil and Katzenstein are clear in specifying what analytical eclecticism is not — it is not theoretical synthesis, it is not the view that anything goes, and it is not the same thing as multi-method research or methodological triangulation (2010b: 16–18). They should have added as well, though, that analytical eclecticism does not challenge one of the key boundary conditions that sustains International Relations as a sub-field of Political Science in the United States. It does not question the notion that International Relations is, and should remain, an explanatory enterprise, with normative inquiry left to political theorists and philosophers. From Katzenstein and Sil's various elaborations, it is clear that analytical eclecticists are exclusively interested in empirical problems and puzzles, and that the table from which eclecticists select analytical insights is laid only with empirical-theoretic knowledge. There is, therefore, a *grund* epistemological choice circumscribing analytical eclecticism, one that places normative forms of knowledge off the table.

   This is clearly apparent in the range of 'exemplary' eclecticist works that Sil and Katzenstein survey in *Beyond Paradigms*. In the following section I refer to these works

to show how a particular ontology informs much of the eclecticist research they favor. For now, however, I am interested in what they overlook, in work that is neglected despite its ambitious eclecticist character. No mention is made, for example, of Robert Keohane's essays with Allen Buchanan on the preventive use of force (Buchanan and Keohane, 2004), and on the legitimacy of global governance institutions (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006). In his 2000 Presidential Address to the American Political Science Association, Keohane called on the profession to contribute to the development of a new generation of global governance institutions, a project demanding explorations of the 'real' and the 'ideal' (2001). His essays with Buchanan seek to do just this, combining Keohane's work on institutional cooperation with Buchanan's normative theory. Richard Price's (2008) exploration of how constructivist empirical-theoretic insights can inform moral and ethical deliberation about world politics is also overlooked, despite the fact that Price's volume draws leading constructivists onto the difficult terrain between empirical and normative forms of scholarship. Whatever one thinks of these works, each is a model of eclecticism. It is a more ambitious form, though, one that breaks established epistemological boundaries to bridge empirical and normative inquiry.

What makes the world go around

Ontological assumptions are no easier to escape than epistemological ones, and analytical eclecticism rests on its own distinctive ontology, albeit largely unstated. On the one hand, it is deeply structured by its relationship to the standard paradigms, or 'research traditions,' of American International Relations: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Sil and Katzenstein reject the notion that progress in understanding world politics is best achieved through gladiatorial struggles between rival research paradigms, but are at pains to stress that they are not opposed to paradigmatic research per se. Indeed, such research is thought to constitute a necessary precursor to the eclecticist scholarship they advocate. 'For any given problem,' they write, 'before a more expansive [eclecticist] dialogue can take place among a more heterogeneous community of scholars, it is useful to first have a more disciplined dialogue on the basis of a clearly specified set of concepts, a common theoretical language, and a common set of methods and evaluative standards predicated on a common metatheoretical perspective' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010b: 8; also see Sil and Katzenstein, 2011).

There are, of course, advantages to such an approach. In addition to the benefits enumerated by Sil and Katzenstein, at its very best, working within the frame of rival research traditions encourages a certain 'discipline of mind,' compelling the researcher to think systematically about contending explanations and interpretations. This having been said, though, working out from established research paradigms or traditions pre-structures the ontology of analytical eclecticism, presenting the eclecticist with a finite set of pre-packaged assumptions and propositions about the nature of agents, structures, rationality, the material world, and the relative importance of ideas. The eclecticists' art is to combine these in new and interesting ways, but the colors on their palette come from pre-existing research traditions: the realist emphasis on material power, the liberal focus on rational agency, and the constructivist stress on norms and identity. A strength of Katzenstein and Sil's vision is seeing these traditions as complex, variegated, and at

times internally contradictory entities, and it is the points of convergence and complementarity between paradigms that enables the eclecticist to combine their insights in new explanations (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010b: 31–34). The realist emphasis on the material interests of states is not incompatible, for example, with a liberal emphasis on states as rational egoists concerned with material gain. The analytical eclecticist is still working, however, with insights provided by the three mainstream traditions, however pluralistic these might be.

The significance of this prestructuring increases as the number of paradigms within the eclecticists' gaze decreases — the smaller the number, the more confined the ontological parameters of analytical eclecticism. As presently conceived, this gaze is deliberately blinkered. Sil and Katzenstein readily admit that their articulation of analytical eclecticism is conditioned by the environment of American International Relations, and one consequence of this is that the ontological presuppositions eclecticists have to work with are those of the three paradigms found in post-Cold War American textbooks. Katzenstein and Sil adopt this focus because this is the paradigmatic universe of American International Relations, and this is the community they most wish to engage. They insist, however, that this move in no way affects the underlying logic of analytical eclecticism. In theory, eclecticists could draw on a much wider spectrum of research traditions, including those popular outside the American mainstream: the English School, feminism, or post-structuralism, for example. All that would be needed to change is 'what constitutes eclectic research practice' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010b: 36).

Superficially, this appears straightforward and unproblematic — as eclecticists put more colors on their palettes, their art changes; they mix different things, in different ways, arriving at different kinds of explanations and understandings. Yet things are not so simple. As we have seen, Sil and Katzenstein's version of analytical eclecticism is bounded by a set of underlying epistemological assumptions, and these assumptions deem certain forms of knowledge admissible and others beyond the pale. We have already seen that normative insights and modes of argument are disqualified by these assumptions, but so too are certain ontological ideas. The fate of two key concepts illustrates this. There is now a voluminous literature that demonstrates the inherently social nature of power: its relational quality, the constitutive importance of discourse and communication, and its dependence on perceptions of legitimacy. None of this has dented the overwhelming practice within American International Relations to treat power as a material phenomenon and a capacity of individual actors. Why this should be so is relatively straightforward: if power rests on the material capabilities of individual actors, then it is, at least in theory, measurable and epistemologically assimilable. A similar story applies to the concept of society. For scholars of the English School, a core assumption is that society among states is ontologically 'real,' making them 'holists' in Goodin and Tilly's schema. Yet despite the liberal interest in institutions, and the constructivist emphasis on social norms and identities, the concept of society (as opposed to 'the social') has gained little traction in mainstream American International Relations. This is partly because the prevailing rationalist ontology reduces social phenomena to intervening variables that mediate the relationship between individual actors and political outcomes, and partly because epistemologically these variables, intervening or not, need to be measurable. It is this latter imperative that lies behind the constructivist focus on social norms instead

of society more broadly, as the former are thought to be more readily characterized and analyzed as measurable dependent and independent variables.

The implicit ontology of analytical eclecticism

Knowing that analytical eclecticism works within an ontological framework set by the three mainstream research traditions tells us a lot about what it is not and something about what it is. Much more can be said on the latter question, however. While the eclecticism set out by Katzenstein and Sil works with, and within, a limited set of ontological assumptions and propositions, how these are selected and combined is said to be the preserve of individual scholars, determined largely by the analytical demands of the puzzles they confront. Yet a close examination of the exemplary works highlighted in *Beyond Paradigms* reveals an interesting convergence in how in practice eclecticists combine ontological propositions harvested from the major research traditions. The end result is an implicit eclecticist ontology.

Here it is useful to briefly revisit some of Martin Hollis's early writings, as his distinctive ontology is particularly apposite. My purpose here is not to endorse (or critique) Hollis's ontology, only to use it as a way of structuring ideas implicit in eclecticist practice. Hollis was no radical. Intersubjective ideas were important, as was language. But his ontology had a firm material base — 'life in a desert full of oil differs from life in a tundra full of bears' (Hollis, 1977: 26). 'Social life,' he wrote, 'has a natural setting, imperfectly mastered and, like other contexts, both enabling and constraining' (Hollis, 1977: 187). He was also strongly committed to the notion that humans are rational actors; indeed, he went so far as to argue that 'Rational action is its own explanation' (Hollis, 1977: 21). Yet beyond this rump materialism and assumption of individual rationality, Hollis's ontology was thickly social. Humans act within webs of intersubjective meanings: ideas, norms, and values that affect how actors understand material and physical phenomena, and when institutionalized, provide 'stores of power and stocks of reasons of action' (Hollis, 1977: 188). Central to Hollis's ontology was the concept of social roles, understood as 'normative expectations attached to social positions' (1977: 70–71). Roles are focal points around which social rules coalesce, and these aggregations of rules both constrain actors by licensing social sanctioning for non-performance and empower them by providing socially recognized reasons for action. But while Hollis saw roles and their attendant rules as constitutive of social action, he resisted the overall structuralism that accompanies such views. Humans are socially constituted, but they are also autonomous. Social roles are not monolithic, they are aggregations of rules, but there are invariably more than one set of actions consistent with these rules (Hollis, 1977: 77). Furthermore, actors almost always have multiple roles, and they change over time. Humans are not only constrained and empowered by these role complexes, they navigate them consciously as well as unconsciously; they encounter the social universe rationally and creatively. '[S]ocial action,' Hollis concludes, 'can be understood only as the rational expression of intention within rules' (1977: 186).

While eclecticists profess an analytically promiscuous approach to ontology — a mixing and matching of realist, liberal, and constructivist propositions according to the analytical demands of the problematic at hand — their practices betray a 'combinatorial

logic' broadly consistent with Hollis's. Three examples illustrate this, each highlighted by Sil and Katzenstein as an exemplar of eclecticist scholarship. The first is Barnett and Finnemore's study of international organizations, *Rules for the World* (2004). This work is noteworthy for Sil and Katzenstein because the authors make two eclectic moves: taking states seriously while seeing international organizations as autonomous bureaucratic entities, and 'integrating the regulatory and constitutive styles of analysis favored by neoliberal institutionalists and constructivists respectively' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010b: 162–163). Important as these points are, they miss the deeper ontological logic that informs Barnett and Finnemore's argument. In highlighting the continued significance of states, they establish a series of material constraints on organizational autonomy — states hold the purse strings after all. And when they speak of both states and international organizations, they speak as though they are rational actors — full-fledged agents, acting with reason. Yet the remainder of their argument is thickly social. In seeking to understand the autonomy and dysfunction of organizations, they define them as bureaucracies, systems of administration characterized by hierarchy, continuity, impersonality, and expertise (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 17–18). The most distinctive thing about these bureaucracies — in fact, the key to both their autonomy and dysfunction — is that they are constituted by, and are generative of, social rules. Internally, rules establish the standard operating procedures that enable international organizations to function, they frame how bureaucrats 'define, categorize, and classify the world,' they help make the world amenable to bureaucratic intervention, and 'rules can be constitutive of identity, particularly of the identity of the organization' (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 18). Externally, endowed with multi dimensional authority, organizations exercise power by transforming information into knowledge and formulating social rules. 'Sometimes the classification of the world, the fixing of meanings, and the diffusion of norms alter the incentives for particular policies or types of behaviour, and thus serve to regulate action. At other times such mechanisms help to define social reality itself and thus provide the constitutional foundations for subsequent action that needs to be regulated' (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 31).

A second example, this time from the security field, is David Kang's *China Rising* (2007). Kang sets out to understand why China's rise has not caused other East Asian states to engage in balancing behavior. For Sil and Katzenstein, his argument is eclectic because it blends realist, liberal, and constructivist considerations, resisting the pull of any one paradigm. But again, Kang's mixing and matching takes a distinctive form. Like Hollis, he acknowledges a set of base material conditions that enable and constrain China and its East Asian neighbors. As Sil and Katzenstein observe of his argument, 'Military and political capabilities set the constraints under which states operate' (2010b: 93). In addition to this, Kang's states are portrayed as rational actors, navigating through processes of regional change on the basis of their own interests, and mindful all the time of the perceived interests of others. Yet all of this takes place within a social universe, one in which ideas, intersubjective understandings, and mutually recognized social roles play a determining role. Indeed, in reflecting on the nature of his eclecticism, Kang argues that material conditions, such as the balance of power and economic interdependence, 'are relatively minor factors in the calculations of states' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010b: 96). The interests of East Asian states, he contends, are

deeply conditioned by perceptions and beliefs, many of which are subjective. But this domestic constitution of interests takes place within a wider intersubjective framework, one in which states are constructing their identities and statuses through interactions with others. Indeed, the great 'take home' of Kang's argument is that East Asian states, including China, are in the process of reconfiguring and renegotiating their individual role identities within an overarching hierarchical order.

Len Seabrooke's *The Social Sources of Financial Power* (2006) is my final example. Seeking to explain why different states have different international financial capacities, Seabrooke earns his eclecticist stripes by advancing a novel thesis that seeks to move beyond existing rational institutionalist, historical institutionalist, and economic constructivist arguments. As with previous examples, Seabrooke's argument takes material conditions and interests seriously: the states, rentiers, and low-income groups that populate his story are all driven by economic imperatives. Moreover, these actors are all cast as rational, as autonomous entities acting for good reasons. Yet, as the title of the book indicates, Seabrooke's argument is strongly social. The key factor determining the different international financial capacities of states is whether or not governments establish domestic financial practices — access to credit, property ownership, and taxation systems — that are seen as legitimate by low-income groups. But, as Seabrooke stresses, legitimacy is a social phenomenon: governments may cultivate it, but subordinate groups ordain it. Legitimacy rests firmly on social recognition, which is in turn based on perceptions rooted in intersubjective beliefs and social norms. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Seabrooke's approach is his emphasis on the everyday struggles waged by average people over the legitimacy of the national financial practices that affect their basic well-being. It is here that intersubjective understandings feature most prominently in his argument. As Sil and Katzenstein note, Seabrooke's understanding 'of rationality is deeply penetrated by "thick" substantive norms': the struggles of low-income groups 'are informed by their perceptions of how the world works and how they should act, adhering to instrumental and value-oriented beliefs' (2010b: 114).

Practically relevant knowledge

Pointing out that analytical eclecticism is structured by a set of distinct epistemological and ontological assumptions is one thing. My main aim, however, is to show that the bounded nature of its eclecticism limits the kind of practically relevant knowledge eclecticist work can generate. Making International Relations scholarship more relevant is one of Katzenstein and Sil's primary motivations. There has been a 'persistent chasm,' they argue, 'between what "suppliers" of social research offer and what the prospective "users" of the research seek' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010b). By moving beyond the field's incessant paradigm wars, and adopting a pragmatic form of problem-driven research, analytical eclecticism is said to provide 'a means to reduce the gap between the practical knowledge required by policymakers and everyday actors, and the research generated by academic disciplines and subfields' (Katzenstein and Sil, 2008: 125). But while eclecticist research clearly yields valuable knowledge about diverse social and political phenomena, not all knowledge is 'practical' knowledge.

Here is not the place for a lengthy meditation on various forms of knowledge. It is sufficient to note that over time a prominent strand of thinking has given practical knowledge a distinctive meaning. We have already seen that Aristotle tied practical knowledge (*phronesis*) to social and political action, contrasting it with scientific knowledge (*episteme*) and artisanal or craft knowledge (*techne*). For Aristotle, action flowed from choice, and choice depended on a particular kind of knowledge, one that combined normative purpose with 'thought,' 'reasoning,' or 'intelligence' (1962: 147–149). Immanuel Kant also emphasized the distinctiveness of practical knowledge. In a commonly quoted passage, he defined 'theoretical knowledge as that through which I know what is [*was da ist*], and practical knowledge as that through which I represent what ought to be [*was da sein soll*]' (quoted in Engstrom, 2002: 56). Again, practical knowledge is action-oriented, concerned in particular with issues of normative choice.

Interestingly, E.H. Carr (not known for his Aristotelian or Kantian sensibilities) understood practical knowledge in a strikingly similar way. Carr is often portrayed as an arch realist, a savage critic of interwar idealism and a sober student of the abiding realities of power politics. Yet, as others have insisted (see, e.g., Booth, 1990; Cox, 2004; Jones, 1998), Carr's thought is considerably more complex than this caricature suggests. *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is as much a vision for the fledging 'science' of International Relations as a critique of interwar liberal internationalism. Carr imagined a science that would speak to key questions of political action in world politics, that would help 'to cure some ill of the [international] body politic' (1964: 3). But because sound political action had to be 'based on a coordination of morality and power' (Carr, 1964: 97), International Relations had to address both the harsh realities of world politics and the values animating action in the first place: it had to be a 'science not only of what is, but what ought to be' (1964: 5). For Carr, this was the mark of mature thought, thought that 'combines purpose with observation and analysis. Utopia and reality are thus two facets of political science. Sound political thought and sound political life will be found only where both have their place' (1964: 10).

For each of these thinkers, practical knowledge is the kind of knowledge that can address questions of how I, we, or they should act. In contemporary world politics, these include, among other things: how should the international community respond to national or regional financial crises? What roles should great powers or hegemons play in global governance? How should the flow of refugees be managed? What should be done to protect human rights globally? How should climate change be addressed? What practices should be employed in combating transnational terrorism? What role should international institutions play in managing global challenges? To what extent, and in what way, should cultural difference be recognized and accommodated in world politics? What should be done about widespread and persistent global poverty? By any measure, these are among the most profound practical problems facing the international community today, but addressing them poses a distinctive intellectual challenge: they can only be answered by integrating empirical knowledge and normative reasoning.[2] No amount of methodologically well-established causal inferences can tell us when states should intervene or what practices should be employed in the fight against terrorism; values and principles are also at stake. Yet no amount of artful philosophical reasoning from first principles can answer these questions either. In each case, we need to understand the

conditions of action: when can intervention achieve the desired ends, for example, or what are the systemic sources of terrorist violence, the forms that it takes, and what practices encourage or diminish it?

One might respond that we need not follow Aristotle, Kant, and Carr in defining practical knowledge in this way; that there are other conceptions that do not limit it to knowledge that can answer questions of how we should act. For instance, Elizabeth Anscombe famously argued that when an agent does something intentionally, she knows what she is doing without observation; this is practical knowledge (1963: 48). The link between practical knowledge and action remains in this conception, but it is the often unreflective knowledge associated with 'doing' something, not prospective knowledge about how one ought to act. Two things are worth noting here. First, even if the Aristotelian conception is contestable, or at the very least there are different forms of practical knowledge, the question for International Relations scholars is whether they should pursue the kind of knowledge needed to address the sorts of questions of international political action set out above. If the answer is 'yes,' then integrating empirical and normative forms of inquiry is unavoidable. Second, when scholars like Katzenstein and Sil call for the generation of more practically relevant knowledge, they are not referring to the kind of knowledge emphasized by Anscombe: the non-observational knowledge that an actor has of what he or she is doing. International Relations scholars might reflect on what they do when they engage in the practice of studying world politics, and they might, through the use of various interpretive techniques, seek to understand what other actors thought they were doing when they acted in a particular way, but neither of these constitutes the practically relevant knowledge normally called for.

Eclecticism reconceived

Nothing in the preceding pages questions the proposition that eclectic scholarship is needed in International Relations. Quite the reverse: there is an imperative need for International Relations scholars to break established theoretical and analytical boundaries. My concern, though, is that this needs to be more than breaking the bounds of our empirical research traditions; it needs to be more than paradigm transcending. Katzenstein and Sil are far from the first to call for more eclectic forms of International Relations scholarship; indeed, leading members of the English School have called for scholarship that combines positivist, hermeneutic, and critical modes of analysis (Little, 2000), a more expansive form of eclecticism than simply drawing off the major American paradigms. Yet these differing conceptions of eclecticism remain largely empirical-theoretic enterprises, concerned with understanding how the world is. To be sure, there is an epistemological difference between those who hold onto a positivist conception of knowledge and more interpretive scholars. However, little of this work confronts the more substantial epistemological boundary between empirical-theoretic inquiry, on the one hand, and normative inquiry, on the other. But if we think the field ought to be producing the kind of practical knowledge advocated above, then this is precisely the boundary a more ambitious form of analytical eclecticism needs to cross.

There have, of course, been previous calls for scholarship that straddles this boundary. Hedley Bull advocated a classical approach to international relations, one that includes

the study of politics, law, and philosophy, the last of which encompasses questions of ethics and morality (1966). Critical theorists have called for scholarship that incorporates sociological, normative, and praxeological forms of inquiry (Linklater, 1992). And international political theorists, such as Mervyn Frost, have used empirical insights into the nature of settled international norms as the basis for the development of a set of practically oriented ethical principles (1996). In one sense, therefore, my call for a more expansive form of eclecticism is a reiteration of these earlier appeals. My position here is closest to Bull's (and perhaps Frost's), however. Where critical theorists are interested in the integration of empirical and normative knowledge for the purposes of fostering emancipatory systems change, Bull saw it as essential for addressing crucial yet day-to-day questions of political action in world politics.

What, though, are the obstacles to this more ambitious form of eclecticism, and how robust are they? Traditionally, mainstream International Relations scholars (and political scientists) confined the field to empirical-theoretic inquiry on epistemological principle. Empirical social science, it was thought, could yield insights that approximated 'truth' in a way that normative inquiry, burdened as it was by subjective values, could never realize (for a classic statement of this much-echoed position, see Easton, 1967: 221). The tenuous nature of this position is now widely acknowledged, increasingly by mainstream scholars. As Friedrichs and Kratochwil observe, it is based on two long-outdated ideas: ontological realism, and a correspondence theory of truth. The first holds that there is an objective natural and social universe; the second that statements about that universe constitute truth when they match reality (Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009: 703). Neither of these assumptions is easily sustainable. Even if we accept that the world has an existence independent of our ways of seeing and speaking (which I do), we only know that world through our conceptual frameworks and value systems. Furthermore, as Charles Taylor (1985) explained, the social and natural worlds are different: the former is constituted by inter-subjective meanings that demand different forms of understanding. If these propositions are correct, then the correspondence theory of truth collapses. As Friedrichs and Kratochwil remind us, if the world out there is only ever understood through our concepts and theories, then there is no way to 'test' them, in any decisive sense, against objective reality (2009: 704–705). In practice, Friedrichs and Kratochwil argue, science rests not on the correspondence theory of truth but a consensus theory, in which the validity of scientific propositions is determined not by their match with reality but by 'communities of practice.' 'In the process of inquiry, scientists themselves set the definitions of their problems and assess evidence produced by their methodological procedures, rather than merely lifting the veil of nature' (Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009: 712).[3]

Two implications flow from this. First, if the old epistemological principle that confined International Relations scholarship to empirical-theoretic inquiry is no longer sustainable, it is disciplinary convention, it would seem, that quarantines empirical from normative forms of inquiry. Second, if social-scientific studies of international relations indeed rest on a consensus theory of truth, then the epistemological differences between empirical and normative forms of knowledge appear less stark. Normative reflection and debate about world politics has long proceeded on the basis of a consensus theory of truth, in which the status of claims has been determined by rule-governed debate within differentiated communities of theorists and philosophers. This is apparent in contemporary

debate about the moral status of human rights. On the one hand, there are those like James Griffin who wish to establish human rights as universal moral principles, grounding them in an account of normative agency and human personhood (2008). On the other hand, there are scholars such as Charles Beitz who deny any metaphysical status to human rights, but instead derive their moral standing from an account of contemporary human rights practices (2009). This debate takes place within a community of philosophical practice, one characterized by rules regarding conceptual clarity, logical coherence, engagement with counterarguments, and the use of empirical examples. None of this suggests that this community of practice is identical to those that exist in the empirical social sciences, only that they are akin; that in both, admissible knowledge is the product of a rule-governed sociological process, not the matching of propositions to reality, in one case, or moral subjectivism (as Easton thought) in the other.

A central claim of this article is that analytical eclecticism, as presently conceived, is structured by a *grund* epistemological assumption that admits only empirical-theoretic forms of inquiry and knowledge. This assumption sits uncomfortably, though, with the values Katzenstein and Sil take from American pragmatism. Most importantly, in their account of these values, they seem to accept a consensus theory of truth: they see 'the production of knowledge as fundamentally a social and discursive activity,' and that the quality of knowledge is improved through 'expanded participation' and 'open deliberation' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010b: 46). This would suggest that the *grund* epistemological assumption framing analytical eclecticism is 'assumed' by disciplinary convention, not on principle. Why not, then, expand the scope of analytical eclecticism, especially if this will better enable the production of practically relevant knowledge? Such a move is enabled not only by the collapse of the correspondence theory of truth that purportedly distinguished empirical from normative inquiry, but also by the apparent symmetry between communal processes of knowledge generation in both realms.

Conclusion

Bracketing metatheory does not free one's work of metatheoretical constraints. It is simply a decision not to talk about or debate one's choices and presuppositions, however conscious or unconscious these might be. As Wendt famously declared, we all 'do' ontology (1999: 370), and the same is true of epistemology. The only options are whether or not we reflect on these background assumptions, consider how they frame our work and with what consequences. Advocates of the 'bracket metatheory' thesis hold that metatheoretical debate is pointless as fundamental questions of ontology and epistemology are irresolvable. But debate with a view to resolution is not the same as reflection with an eye to consequences. The first may well be pointless, but the second is essential.

As we have seen, it is often claimed that bracketing metatheory is necessary if the field is to concentrate on what really matters: the generation of practically relevant knowledge. Yet a lack of metatheoretical reflection can undermine this very goal, as the current articulation of analytical eclecticism demonstrates. By not reflecting on the metatheoretical assumptions that constitute the epistemological boundaries and ontological contours of their conception of analytical eclecticism, Sil and Katzenstein fail to see how these assumptions impede the production of Aristotelian forms of practical

knowledge, the kind of knowledge required to address key questions of political action in contemporary world politics. Such knowledge can only ever be the product of the integration of empirical and normative insights, yet the latter are epistemologically outside the scope of analytical eclecticism.

The obstacles to expanding this scope are a matter of disciplinary convention, though. The epistemological assumptions that define eclecticism as an empirical-theoretic project no longer rest on robust philosophical foundations: they rest instead on the norms and predilections of a particular community of practice. Promoting a more expansive and ambitious form of eclecticism thus depends on revising these norms and promoting new practices. This is admittedly a substantial undertaking, but the seeds of such a project lie undeveloped in Sil's and Katzenstein's writings. By opposing the notion that progress in understanding is produced by gladiatorial paradigm wars, they have already challenged long-established norms and practices of the American mainstream. More importantly, one consequence of Sil and Katzenstein not reflecting on the epistemological assumptions presently circumscribing analytical eclecticism is that they fail to see the tension between these assumptions and their acceptance of key elements of pragmatist philosophy. Recognizing this disjuncture, and accepting the full implications of pragmatism for how the boundaries of eclecticism are drawn, would remove a self-imposed constraint on the nature of the eclecticist project and enhance its potential to generate practical forms of knowledge.

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Notes

1.	The prominence of analytical eclecticism is less pronounced outside the American mainstream, where the field has not been as constrained by the inter-paradigm debates, and where, as a consequence, the need for 'eclectic' research has been less urgent and arguably less novel.
2.	Mervyn Frost has made this point at length: many of the most fundamental political questions facing the international community today are normative questions, and answering them demands engagement with normative theory (see Frost, 1996). My position differs from Frost's, however, in emphasizing the necessary integration of empirical-theoretic and normative-theoretic forms of knowledge.
3.	Thomas Kuhn made the same observation long ago, of course. International Relations scholars embraced his notions of paradigms and normal science, but have ignored his central point that the production of scientific knowledge is a sociological process, the result of rule-governed communal practices (see Kuhn, 1962).

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