

Towards a Space-Time Heuristic: Notes on Meaningful and Factual Truth

Written by Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro

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Scholarly arguments aside, few would contest that, as a broadly conceived science, International Relations (IR) is committed to truth. By science, I deploy Patrick Jackson's (2016: 21-24) broad conception, derived from Max Weber, that it seeks to conduct empirical analysis to produce knowledge. But however seriously that commitment is taken, determining truth is no simple task. As IR is beset by many – perhaps incompatible – methodologies, theories and research agendas, ascertaining any truth is easier said than done. Considering the prevailing disagreements in IR, I argue that, instead of one comprehensive concept of truth, it is best to disentangle it into meaningful and factual truth. In doing so, IR is likely to acquire a better sense of which sets of claims can or cannot be disproved alongside each other.

The status of truth and how best to achieve it remains hotly debated in IR (Wallace, 1996; Wight, 1996, 2018; Fluck, 2012; Michelsen, 2018). It is hardly a novel problem. Even before IR became an increasingly pluralistic endeavor – constituted by competing epistemologies from the late 1980s onward (Waeber, 1996) – students of IR were already called upon to judge the claims of liberal institutionalists against their structural realist counterparts. Liberals offered a competing set of proposals on how international organizations mitigated distrust and fostered cooperation in the international arena (Axelrod and Keohane, 1985; Keohane, 1988; Keohane and Nye, 2017). Several realists, however, especially John Mearsheimer (1995: 15-16), dismissed those claims, arguing that liberal institutionalism was perhaps appropriate for the study of political economy, but not international security. In a similar vein, Joseph Grieco (1988: 487) contended that liberal institutionalism's "optimism about international cooperation is likely to be proven wrong."

But this begs the question as to whether optimism or pessimism – two temporal concepts – are even vaguely susceptible to being proven untrue. Both pessimism and optimism point to an unknown future, such that refutation is to be endlessly postponed: are they to be proven wrong tomorrow, in five years' time, or a century from now? The debate remains and is likely to remain unsettled. Only a few decades later, Mearsheimer blamed the war in Ukraine on liberal internationalism (Mearsheimer, 2014, 2018, 2019). Francis Fukuyama (2022), on the other hand, suggests otherwise: liberalism has in no way been rebutted, since liberal democracies are, according to him, likely to prevail in the end.

Either way, assessing optimism against pessimism is only complicated by the fact that temporal concepts, much like spatial notions, constitute the building blocks of all social theories. They are the bases on which most meaningful claims about the empirical world are made. In other words, ascertaining truth is not just a matter of returning to a past event or fixing a point in the future in which an assertion can be empirically refuted. Both time and space were already present at the outset of any truthful statement. Hence, assessing truth is also about interpreting the underlying spatial and temporal assumptions that made those claims – those revelations of reality – possible in the first place. At the same time, it is impossible to deny that facts too must be accounted for. The meanings of phenomena are interspersed with the events as they happen in the "real" world. For instance, although one may certainly contest whether an attack was made by a terrorist or a guerrilla fighter, depending on distinct meaningful spaces and times, no one, except by lying, would deny that an attack had taken place. In other words, the labels which empirical facts acquire depend on a coherent set of spatial and temporal assumptions. But, to make

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meaningful claims persuasive in IR, facts must also be accounted for and appropriately processed.

In any case, before harking back to the relationship between facts, space and time, it is important to bear in mind that the task of determining truth is complicated further by scholarly divisions as to what IR studies and how best to research it. As already mentioned, IR is a remarkably pluralist field (Levine and Mccourt, 2018; Corry, 2022), so much so that IR is currently beset by a sort of paradigm peace (Dunne, Hansen and Wight, 2013). Where ontology, epistemology and methodology were once hotly debated (Waever, 1996; Lake, 2011; Reus-Smit, 2012; Wight, 2019), today each scholar tends to follow his or her prerogative according to the “school” to which she or he belongs. Truth claims are subsequently discussed within the confines of each paradigm, methodology or theory. To that effect, pluralism – coupled with the ongoing “paradigm truce” – also raises its own set of problems, the most important of which is the absence of debate amongst competing paradigms, including among potentially different truth claims. In the absence of those debates, the prospects of relativism are increasingly difficult to dismiss. In other words, IR might be closer than ever to taking two mutually exclusive claims to be equally true.

Bearing the prospects of relativism in mind, scholars have sought to unpack its origins and effects (Jackson 2019; Michelsen and Tallis 2018; Schiller 2020; Wight 2018). And yet, before raising the alarm bell, the nature and meaning of “truth claims” warrants further clarification. Patrick Jackson (2015: 17), for example, has rightfully highlighted that it should be checked whether any two truth claims are indeed “contradictory, or whether they are instead saying two different things.” If different things are being said, each assertion rests on a potentially distinct ontology, despite the appearance of contradiction. In other words, they reveal a specific social world that overlaps little – if at all – with the constituent features of another world. Much like the argument Mearsheimer leveled on liberal institutionalists, the point is not that they are saying something false; merely that they are saying something else about another type of social experience. That still begs the question, however, as to what makes ontologies incompatible with one another.

While there tends to be scholarly consensus on the lack of ontological compatibility amidst several IR theories (Jackson and Nexon 2013), there is no clear criteria as to what prompts lack of “worldly” overlap. In this regard, determining some sort of ontological heuristic seems pertinent, as it provides an indication as to which claims can or cannot be disproved. Moreover, the heuristic must disentangle the relationships between space, time and facts. Indeed, space and time are two potential reasons for ontological incompatibility. In other words, harking back to the temporal and spatial assumptions of most statements provides a means by which to determine whether they are revealing alternative – as opposed to mutually exclusive – things about a given phenomenon. If that is so, they rest on – and reveal – a distinct meaningful truth about that phenomenon.

Meaningful truths are the grounds on which IR scholars, if not most social scientists, build the broader spatial and temporal claims they make about the reality around them. Social theories must rest on some assumptions regarding the nature of time and space if they are to say something meaningful to students, politicians and experts alike. While critical theory has repeatedly invoked that theory itself is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose”, Robert Cox (1981: 128) also added that “perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically social and political time and space.” Most social theories tend to position themselves, either tacitly or explicitly, as to the timing of events, a process that Kimberly Hutchings and Andrew Hom have convincingly showcased over the course of IR’s so-called “temporal turn” (Hutchings, 2008; Hom, 2020). To take an example, liberal institutionalists build their theories on a progressive temporality, such that given phenomena are liable to being improved over time. Robert Keohane (2012: 135) once claimed that:

Gilpin was wrong to see just endless cycles, within a fundamentally unchanging reality, and Mearsheimer was wrong to forecast ‘back to the future’ in Europe. Progressive change, driven in part by new ideas both of ethics and feasibility, does occur.

Realists, by contrast, build their claims on the assumption of temporal repetition, that the international arena relies on an endless cycle of dispute over power. Fundamental change is therefore rarely if ever possible. The same goes for the spaces through which those two theories are built. Realism discloses a world based mainly on independent actors, with mutually exclusive borders; whereas liberal institutionalists routinely refer to interdependence, which

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presumes a system in which goods, services and people permeate borders. All the same, a sceptic can simply declare that those theoretical constructions defy empirical reality as we know it. One could simply argue that most of the modern world is interdependent, insofar as structural realism, including its avowed state-centrism, bears little resemblance to actuality. But to make that claim is to foreclose another spatial and temporal conception. For some actors, states and their borders still matter. A military general, for instance, must evidently presume some sort of geopolitical entity if national security is to be ensured. In other words, his or her spatial temporal assumptions are scarcely analogous to those of a trade minister who detects and reproduces interdependencies among allegedly arbitrary borders.

Besides revealing a distinct experience, meaningful truth says something that is not entirely refutable. Scholars tend to say different – rather than contradictory – things when they point to meaningful truths. This is not to say that conversations among different schools of thought are precluded, but that different meaningful truths are likely to reveal distinctive layers of an otherwise complex social reality. And it is precisely for that reason that they need to engage in dialogue with one another: not so much to refute the other claim, but to showcase what else is missing from a certain depiction of “reality”. It is indeed an important conversation to be had and one that is likely to reverberate beyond academia. The practice of politics, unlike academic discussion, is not merely about picking a theory and applying it to “reality”, but of judging and acting in accordance with the many distinctive ways of reading said “reality.”

That being said, IR is not fiction. Not that fiction cannot be studied in IR, but the discipline, as a broadly conceived science, does more than say something meaningful about the world in which we live. It goes without saying that meaningful truths can also be disclosed via art – literature, movies, painting, photography, music, and so forth – which are pure inventions, or which otherwise fictionalize reality. IR, however, is committed to another type of truth, namely factual truth. As with most social sciences, IR wishes to say something meaningful about facts, and thus reality as it is experienced. Following Arendt, facts “are as compelling for anybody witnessing them with his eyes as the proposition that two and two make four is for anybody in his right mind” (Arendt, 1988: 59). Facts are despotic in nature because they can only be refuted by way of lying. Of course, this is not to say that facts cannot be grounded differently across space and time; only that they correspond to events that are liable to being verified via the senses, testimony, and so forth. As far as discussions over fact are concerned, refutation is certainly possible. Yet, facts are meaningless unless they are grounded in space and time. Facts can subsequently acquire more than one meaning to the effect of revealing a complex social reality.

In conclusion, how is truth to be assessed and how is it best discussed? Answering these questions depends on what type of truth is to be ascertained. While statements x and y may appear to be similar, they may ultimately point to different aspects of a certain phenomenon because of alternative spatial and temporal assumptions. Provided that the same temporal and spatial assumptions are taken, distinctive meaningful claims can nevertheless be refuted based on how – and whether – they incorporate certain facts. Otherwise, if no spatial or temporal overlap exists, scholars disclose a feature of “reality” in much the same way liberals and realists have done since IR’s inception.

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Towards a Space-Time Heuristic: Notes on Meaningful and Factual Truth

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