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A Critical Analysis of the 'Great Debates' That Structured Traditional International Relations Theory

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Introduction:

The discipline of international relations (IR), like all the social sciences, needs theories to make sense of the world it is trying to examine. There are many contrasting and conflicting views advocated by differing schools of thought within IR. The merits and faults of each school of thought have been contested in what are known as the 'great debates'. The debates were triggered by real world events such as the Abyssinia Crisis, and the failure of the League of Nations in the 1930s. These real world events pitted conflicting ideologies about world politics against each other. Essentially, the great debates are about what the study of IR is or should be. The debates are so fundamental to IR that Ole Wæver (1998, p715) commented that there is no other established means of telling the history of IR. The debates are used by IR practitioners and scholars to define their positions on the way they view the world. However, defining one's position is not as easy as it sounds. What one thing means to someone might not necessarily mean the same thing to another person. IR and the great debates have been characterized by a wide range of shifts, contests, dialogues and discoveries. In his 1985 work, *The Dividing Discipline: Hegemony and Pluralism in International Theory*, Kal Holsti concluded that such shifts, contests and dialogues has led to IR becoming a fragmented discipline. Others believe that shifts, contests, and dialogues between theories helps to reveal their strengths and weaknesses and helps in their refinement which can only make the field of IR stronger. The debates this essay shall focus on in detail are the debate between realism and idealism and the debate between traditionalism and behavioralism as the essay title concerns itself more with traditional IR theory. The inter-paradigm debate and the rationalism versus reflectivism debate will be touched upon to give a more comprehensive overview of the debates but they will not be examined in as much detail.

Realism Versus Idealism/Utopianism:

The first debate this essay will examine will be the debate between realism and idealism/utopianism. This debate in IR is perhaps the one that receives the most attention. Ashworth (2002, p33) remarks that this debate served to indicate IR's coming of age as a science. The origins of this debate in the context of modern IR theory can be traced back to the immediate period following World War 1. World War 1 left deep psychological and political scars which provoked a sequence of reactions, mainly on the part of Woodrow Wilson and other idealists. Idealists sought to create a better understanding of international affairs which in turn would promote the cause of peace. They believed in a harmony of interests between nations. Idealists wanted to develop a set of institutions, procedures and practices that could build upon the harmony of interests and could eradicate or at the very least control war. The jewel in the crown of idealism was the establishment of the League of Nations in 1919. The 1930's were turbulent times and events such as the annexation of the Sudetenland by Germany demonstrated that utopian orthodoxy could not take being slammed up against what Vigneswaran & Quirk (2004, p19) call 'the brutal coalface of reality during the 1930s'. For many, the outbreak of World War 2 signaled the end of idealism/utopianism and left it bereft of credibility. As a result the proponents of idealism/utopianism were painted as naïve pacifists and legalists that were blind to the realities of politics among nations.

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The failure of idealism/utopianism to deal with the foremost crises of the 1930s and the outbreak of another world war caused many to look for a more pragmatic approach to international affairs. This more pragmatic approach came in the form of realism as advocated by E.H. Carr. Realism is generally accepted as being the polar opposite of idealism. Realism espoused that the progress idealism sought to achieve was a total fantasy. Realism also had a historical pedigree to justify itself that could be traced back to Thucydides and Machiavelli. Idealism/utopianism too had a historical pedigree but it was not as convincing. Carr's book, *The Twenty Years Crisis* published 1939 is widely acknowledged as the first major work to popularize the notion of a conflict between realism and utopianism. Its publication caused quite a stir and drew mainstream media attention. Wilson (1998, p6) points out that the work is generally considered to have had a devastating effect on the idealist/utopian thinking of the inter-war period. Even one of the main proponents of idealism/utopianism, Norman Angell, conceded that 'Professor Carr does a public service in compelling those whom he terms the Utopians to take stock of their beliefs'. According to Thomas Davies' (2008) critique of Peter Wilson's work *The Myth of the First Great Debate*, Carr identified three principal problems with the inter-war idealists/utopians:

1. Their devotion of their energies to 'visionary projects' rather than analyzing facts and cause and effect.
2. Their overestimation of the role of law and morality in international politics and underestimation of the role of power.
3. Their failure 'to recognize that their espousal of universal interests amounted to nothing more than promotion and defence of a particular status quo'.

Carr painted idealists/utopians as alchemists who were more concerned with how the world ought to be while realists are painted as scientists concerned with how the world actually is. It is widely held that Carr demonstrated how realism was superior to idealism/utopianism in its ability to rationally explain the persistent and ubiquitous struggle for power amongst nations. With that, realism replaced idealism as the normal science of IR. Hans Morgenthau's work, *In Defence of the National Interest* published in 1951, delivered a stinging attack on utopian ideals and reiterated much of Carr's work.

Assessment of the Realism Versus Idealism/Utopianism Debate:

There is now a growing cohort of scholars such as Wilson and Ashworth that believe that the first great debate in IR was a myth. Ashworth (2002, p36) points out that the realist component of the realist/idealist debate has traditionally centred on the two major realist criticisms of inter-war liberalism written by Carr and Morgenthau. Ashworth believes that realism as described by Carr and Morgenthau does not represent a successful critique of idealism/utopianism. David Long, in his article '*J. A. Hobson and Idealism in International Relations*', identifies three unique strands of liberal thought during the inter-war period. He identifies Hobbesianism (advocating a strong international authority to lay down the law), Cobdenism (advocating non-interventionism and *laissez faire*) and New Liberal Internationalism (advocating the construction of a wide range of functional, welfare orientated, bodies operating between and across states). It is the belief of Wilson (1998, p14) that Carr's critique of idealism/utopianism only covered the first two aforementioned strands but it emphatically did not cover the third. Ashworth (2002, p50) argues that the great damage caused by the myth of a first 'Great Debate' has been to oversimplify the nature of IR in the inter-war period and to close off avenues of research that were too closely identified with the thinkers that were labeled idealists. Also, realist scholars have been accused of misinterpreting inter-war idealism. J. H. Herz, in his article *Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma*, equated inter-war idealism with a vast array of other 'isms' such as pacifism, humanism and optimism for example. Some even go so far as to suggest that idealism/utopianism was merely a catch all term invented by Carr to attack a wide variety of 'isms' he did not agree with. Such criticisms of the first debate should not detract from the fact that many of the assessments Carr made of idealists/utopians were very valid. Practically all the literature concerning the first great debate will concede that it was won by realists. However, it is still far too premature to say that categorically. The post World War 2 era witnessed a revival in idealism/utopian ideals in the form of liberal institutionalism. The debate rages on even to this day.

Traditionalism (Classicalism) Versus Behaviouralism:

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This debate in IR took place in the 1960s and focused mostly on methodological issues. The debate was reflective of the wider behavioural revolution that was occurring in the social sciences. The debate was sparked because of fears amongst some members of the IR community that their field of study was losing its battle to acquire the status of a science. The discipline of IR was shaped by scholars with a keen interest in history, a fact that did not sit well with behavioralists. This debate pitted traditionalists against behavioralists. Another way of thinking about it would be the pitting of history against science. The historical approach is associated with traditionalists and the scientific approach is associated with behavioralists. Key contributors to this debate include Hedley Bull and Morton Kaplan, whose exchanges characterized the debate. These exchanges juxtaposed the historical approach and the scientific approach. Stanley Hoffmann characterized it as 'the battle of the literates versus the numerates'. One of Hedley Bull's main contributions to the debate, '*International Theory: The Case for a Classical Approach*', sought to defend the traditionalist approach from attack by behaviouralists. Bull (1966, p361) defined the traditional approach as 'the approach to theorizing that derives from philosophy, history and law and that is characterized above all by explicit reliance upon the exercise of judgement and by the assumptions that if we confine ourselves to strict standards of verification and proof there is very little of significance that can be said about international relations'. It is clear from Bull's definition that the traditionalist approach values historically based wisdom when it comes to understanding IR. Broadly speaking, behaviouralism is a school of thought that, drawing on empiricist theory of knowledge and positivist philosophy of science, seeks to study human behaviour in reference to observable and measurable behaviour patterns. More specifically, Hollis & Smith (1990, p28) define behaviouralism in the context of IR as 'the path to knowledge via the collection of observable data. Regularities within the data were to lead to the framing and testing of hypothesis from which theories would be constructed'.

Assessment of the Traditionalist Versus Behaviouralism Debate:

Curtis & Koivisto (2008) observe that 'behaviouralists like Kaplan argued classical political realist approaches lacked rigor and instead celebrated the merits of statistical modelling and other quantitative methods to study what were taken to be causal laws (or regularities) of international relations'. Other famous behaviouralists that shared this point of view included J. David Singer, famous for his work on the Correlates of War and Thomas Schelling, famous for his work on game theory. In response to the viewpoint of behaviouralists, Bull argued that taking such a scientific approach could not advance IR theory in a meaningful way because utilizing scientific methods such as statistical modeling could not contribute to the understanding of an interpretive subject matter. Bull (1966, p370) even went as far to say behaviouralists 'have done a great disservice to theory in this field by conceiving of it as the construction of and manipulation of so called models'. Bull admitted that there was a need for rigor within international political theory but he was adamant that this rigor could be provided by traditionalism. Finally, Bull's rebuttal of behaviouralism (1966, p375) also concluded that practitioners of the scientific approach, by cutting themselves off from history and philosophy, 'have deprived themselves of the means of self criticism and in consequence have a view of their subject and its possibilities that is callow and brash'.

However, Bull himself had shortcomings. Curtis & Koivisto (2008) note that while Bull voiced objections to scientific methodology, he did not specify any alternative to it. They argue that this perhaps fostered a convention whereby particularly British IR scholarship did not feel the need to develop its methodologies. Conversely, the same cannot be said of the United States, where IR scholars continued to develop methodologies. Kurki & Wight (2006, p17) point out that the model of science that dominated behaviouralist thinking was positivism. Positivism espouses that scientific knowledge only emerges with the collection of observable data. Kurki & Wight (2006, p17) suggest that positivism is now so intrinsically linked with behaviouralism that it closes down all debate on what kind of science IR might be. This is perhaps ironic considering that the second debate was meant to be about the opening up of methodological issues. Despite this and Bull's stinging attack, behaviouralism went on to be quite successful.

The Inter-Paradigm Debate:

The success of behaviouralism sets the scene for the next debate. Kurki & Wight (2006, p18) state that by the time of this debate arose, a consensus had emerged about a commitment to positivism. For example, the father of neo-realism, Kenneth Waltz, exemplified a desire to draw up theories that utilized positivist methodology and objectivity of the natural sciences. The inter-paradigm debate, also known as the neo-realism versus neo-liberalism debate, took

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place in the 1980s. This debate is historically more ambiguous than the previous two debates. Schmidt (2002, p11) points out that this third debate owes its origins to the difficult times experienced by realism in the 1970s when events in the realm of international politics appeared to contradict some key realist assumptions. Critics began to attack the state centric nature of realism. Out of this grew Keohane and Nye's theory of complex interdependence. Such developments can be described as neo-liberal in nature. The development of neo-liberalism demonstrated that self-interested actors in a context of anarchy are capable of co-operating. This is something traditional realism had denied. Grasa & Costa (2007, p10) observe that this scenario has provoked reactions that appear to reveal a certain degree of dissatisfaction regarding the capacity of the old realist/idealist labels to now define the limits between the two theoretical approaches. Indeed, neo-liberalism shared some common ground with neo-realism. For example, they both accepted the assumptions on international anarchy and the rational egoism of states. The publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* in 1979 is widely regarded as having given a new lease of life to realism. Waltz himself stated he sought to 'develop a more rigorous theory of international politics than earlier realists had done'. He would do this using a positivist framework. Wæver (1996, p162) points out that Waltz's brand of neo-realism opted to abandon 'general speculation and reflection' in favour of 'expressing itself in the form of theory of a system of clearly specified sentences'. Realism 'was no longer an ethico-philosophical position' and the 'sweeping statements on the nature of life and politics' had been substituted for 'precise statements'. Some have argued that neo-realism and neo-liberalism share a similar scientific, methodological and epistemological approach to IR so the debate qualifies as one of being an intra-paradigm debate as opposed to an inter-paradigm debate. Also, with this debate there has been avoidance in declaring one side of the argument as the victor. Wæver (1996, p162) remarked about the third debate, 'it is seen as a debate not to be won, but a pluralism to live with'.

Rationalism Versus Reflectivism:

This fourth debate in IR is said to have emerged around the mid 1980s but it is still considered as being ongoing. Rather confusingly this debate is also referred to as the third debate by some IR theorists. This debate once again focuses on the issue of science in IR. According to Yosef Lapid (1989, p237) this debate consisted of a 'disciplinary effort to reassess theoretical options in a post positivist era'. When looking at this debate we have to look at the explaining/understanding divide in IR. Kurki & Wight (2006, p20) state that explanatory theorists seek to emulate the natural sciences in following scientific methods and in seeking to identify general causes, advocates of understanding focus on the analysis of the internal meanings, reasons and beliefs actors hold and act in reference to. We also have to examine positivism and postpositivism. Positivism has a number of assumptions such as science must be focused on systematic observation. If this is the case then positivists can reveal the operation of general laws. However, positivists avoid talking about realities they cannot observe. Postpositivists have adapted positivism to take such criticisms into account. Postpositivism seeks to build a unified logic of inference for both quantitative and qualitative inquiry and foreground the role of observation and measurement in the hope of rescuing social science from speculative and unsystematic social inquiry.

Kurki & Wight (2006, p22) note that the rationalist/reflectivist divide takes the explaining/understanding divide and the positivism/postpositivism divide and encapsulates them under a single label. The terminology was famously used by Robert Keohane. Keohane took rationalism from rational choice theory which is a methodology constructed from a commitment to a positivist view of science. Rational choice theorists accept the complexity of the social world but ignored the majority of it. Rational choice theorists believe that individuals and states should be treated as utility maximizers. If they are viewed this way we may be able to make grounded predictions about them based on observed outcomes. Kurki & Wight (2006, p23) point out that Keohane noted the emergence of a series of other theories such as feminism, critical theory and constructivism that were critical of the rationalist approach. He dubbed them reflectivist because of their rejection of positivism. Brown (1997, p58) notes that those that fall under the reflectivist umbrella are a very disparate group, with their rejection of positivism their only thing in common. This is where the heart of the debate lies today.

Problems With the Great Debates/Concluding Thoughts:

Many scholars have commented on the rather strange way that IR views itself through a series of debates. There are many problems associated with the way IR views itself. Schmidt (2002, p12) states 'there are so many problems with

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and difficulties involved in understanding the history of the field within the framework of the great debates that we might be better off simply to reject discussing this account of how the field has developed'. The first problem is that not everyone accepts that debates even occurred in the first place. This is especially the case with the first debate as demonstrated by Ashworth and Wilson. The second problem of the debates was that they did not do justice to the nature of the controversies taking place in the world. The focusing of so much attention on a limited number of debates by IR scholars perhaps detracted from a number of other controversies worthy of study in IR. The third problem of the debates was that the scholars that contributed to the debates were largely British or American. This geographical divide also spilled over into their work and their failure to reach a consensus on issues did not help with the coherency issues of the debates. Fourthly, as previously stated, the debates are used by IR practitioners and scholars to define their positions on the way they view the world. However, boundaries between debates are somewhat blurred at times and a number of important works do not fit neatly into any one debate. The dominant themes of the great debates did indeed reveal the strengths and weaknesses of their rivals and one can see refinements in the debates being made. Despite this, IR is still developing as a field and further refinements are necessary. Thomas Kuhn's 1962 study of the history of science stated that science developed through a series of distinct phases. Kuhn hypothesized that science did not progress via a linear accumulation of new knowledge but underwent periodic revolutions in the form of paradigm shifts. The first phase of a science will lack any paradigm. The next stage involves the building of paradigms. Over time these paradigms will mature and will be challenged by certain anomalies. Science will then reach a crisis point. A new paradigm will form that subsumes the old paradigm along with the anomalous results into one framework. One can see IR going through this development process but it has not quite reached the end of its evolutionary period yet. It is apparent that IR is still unclear what it wants to be. Kal Holsti spoke of IR being a fragmented discipline. So far the great debates have served to fragment IR as a discipline rather than bind it together.

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