

Waltz, Wight and Our Study of World Politics

Written by A.C. McKeil

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A.C. MCKEIL, MAR 23 2013

R.J. Vincent dissuaded his students from treating classic IR thinkers, “like parcels at the post office.”[1] This is compelling guidance, since the works of great thinkers can be interpreted and classified in numerous ways and the fallacies of anachronism and reification often go hand in hand. Moreover, as the great pedagogue Zimmern argued, for the student, “the function of a book is to stimulate his intelligence, not to befuddle it, to serve as an instrument for his own thinking rather than as its lifeless substitute.”[2] In the study of International Relations, Kenneth Waltz and Martin Wight surveyed international thought perhaps most thoroughly and are its most celebrated systematizers. Waltz devised his famous three images and Wight his three so-called traditions.[3] How does a comparison of their thought stimulate our own thinking about international relations and world politics generally?

A comparison of Waltz and Wight’s taxonomies raises several interrelated observations. One, their taxonomies eschew the historicity of ideas. That is, they avoid questions concerning the changes and patterns of ideas across time and social location. Also, their taxonomies are derived from questions of a similar kind since they concern a similar thing, namely war. Furthermore, while both have immensely enriched our thinking, neither taxonomy illuminates a conclusively compelling answer to their authors’ questions, since their categories conceptually bleed into one another. These observations, at least to me, suggest certain alternative questions about international relations and world politics generally. These will be considered following a brief comparison.

In the first instance, Waltz and Wight’s taxonomies can be compared and contrasted by the questions they applied to international thought. Waltz’s question in *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* is: “Where are the major causes of war to be found?” or where is the major cause of war located?[4] Wight’s question in his published lectures in *International Theory: The Three Traditions* and ‘An Anatomy of International Thought’ is: What are the moral justifications for war and the international system generally? In comparing their taxonomies, Waltz can be said to have applied to the history of ideas the question of what is or are the causes of war and Wight that of what ought to be. In formal words, Waltz sought the efficient and permissive causes where Wight emphasized the final cause, in the Aristotelian sense. In the linguistic sense, Waltz sifted through the history of ideas for factual statements and Wight sought value statements.[5]

In this way, their taxonomies are different answers to different questions but they overlap because they are questions of a similar kind since they concern a similar thing, namely warfare. In this light, Wight’s traditions are consistent positions on Waltz’s images.

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Wight's Traditions

		Realism: Machiavellians	Rationalists: Grotians	Revolutionists: Kantians
Waltz's Images	First Image: The Individual	<i>Human nature is violent</i>	<i>Some people are good some bad</i>	<i>People are good or can become good</i>
	Second Image: The State	<i>States are self-regarding</i>	<i>Some states good some are bad</i>	<i>States can become good</i>
	Third Image: System/Society of States	<i>The states system is self-help</i>	<i>The society of states has a degree of order</i>	<i>The system can become good and transcended</i>

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This above crude table is fashioned merely to demonstrate the overlap between the two taxonomies. This table shows how interpretations of Waltz's question are made consistent across his images, depending on the world-view of a given tradition. While Waltz's question of identifying the major cause cuts across epistemological world-views both Wight and Waltz's questions concern the same social phenomena, warfare, and arguably the same social world where these world-views play out.[6]

An interesting point to support this observation is that both Waltz and Wight considered the image or tradition practitioners held in mind to be causally significant in international affairs. Waltz explicitly claims, "The practice of politics is greatly influenced by the images the politicians entertain." [7] Wight argued, "political philosophy of international relations is the fully-conscious, formulated theory, illustrations of which you may find in the conduct of some statesmen, Wilson, probably Churchill, perhaps Nehru." [8] For Wight, perhaps even more than Waltz, ideas influenced the international environment. [9] Both thinkers' engagement with the history of international ideas were partly meant to free the minds of practitioners from prevailing dogmas or misconceptions. [10] Neither thinker discounted the causal role any of their categories played in international affairs and their taxonomies, in this way, can be seen as systematic attempts to clarify the questions practitioners confront.

However, neither Waltz's nor Wight's taxonomy illuminates a generally or fully compelling answer to their authors' questions, since their categories conceptually bleed into one another. While Waltz admitted the, "vogue of an image [in practitioners' minds] varies with time and place, but no single image is ever adequate" he argued the system level is the major cause of war because it contains the permissive cause, an anarchical or decentralized structure. [11] However, Suganami cogently argues how the logic of permissive causes infuses each image. He points out that,

if the fact that there is nothing in the international system to prevent war is a permissive cause of war, then, by the same token, the fact that there is nothing of the sort, for example, in the make-up of man, or anywhere else for that matter, must also count as war's permissive cause. [12]

As permissive causes are generally found, so are major causes, because images of causal location conceptually bleed into one another. For example, the role of leaders in international affairs infuses all three of Waltz's images and creates a degree of conceptual fuzziness in Waltz's own thinking. When Waltz discusses state leaders' psyches and attitudes he confuses the location of causation. [13] Is the conduct of a leader a first, second or third image? If a state leader holds a Schmittian interpretation of international law as permissive of war, rather than a Kelsenian theory of law, which may proscribe war, and this leader declares a war, in which image are we to locate the cause of that war? [14] In the individual leader, the state that individual leads, or the system which she interprets as permissive of war? Waltz, while himself being a third image thinker, did contemplate, as he put it, whether, "Some combination of our three images, rather than any one of them, may be required for an accurate understanding of international relations." [15] While enriching our thinking about war and international affairs, Waltz's taxonomy, under logical and conceptual scrutiny, does not illuminate a fully compelling answer to his question of the major cause of war, unless we consider an holistic answer, or case histories.

Wight's categories, in their own way, also bleed into one another and while deepening our learning, do not fully answer Wight's question. Under scrutiny, the traditions form a continuum. The first indicator of overlap is the fact that thinkers and their texts do not fit easily into Wight's patterns of thought. A classic example, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, while, as one would expect, contains positions on all three of Waltz's images, can also be catalogued, as Vincent demonstrated, in all three of Wight's traditions. [16] It is a curious exercise to apply Wight's taxonomy to the immense amount of academic IR literature of the twentieth century. One either thinks the categories too vague, since great thinkers like Keohane straddle several at once, or the categories are too rigid, and thinkers are tossed into one of three piles of unequal size.

The problem with Wight's taxonomy is the inclusion of the *via media* or Grotian category since both realism and idealism must slide into it to give it substance. Kant slides into the radical solidarist spectrum of the Grotian tradition, as Linklater has demonstrated, and Morgenthau slides into the pluralist band, as Wight posited. [17] Either, there is no viability for a *via media* or there is no viability for segregating elements of what is essentially the same thing, the same social world. [18] In summarizing his taxonomic argument, Wight confesses, "when I scrutinize my own thought

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I seem to find all these three ways of thought within me.”[19] While enriching our thinking on international conduct, morality and the final causes of war, Wight himself did not derive a conclusive answer from his taxonomy.

Is the taxonomic approach to the history of ideas flawed since it failed to generate conclusive and compelling answers for Waltz and Wight? Or, are their questions of the unanswerable kind? I do not think the taxonomic analytical method is inherently flawed and Waltz and Wight are rightly celebrated thinkers since their contributions to the grand questions of war and international life are immense. Waltz and Wight themselves outgrew their engagement with the history of international ideas. Waltz pursued his engagement with purely third image analysis and Wight deepened his engagement with realism in *Power Politics*, which, nevertheless, arguably expresses an account of international affairs holistically negotiating the role of all his three traditions.[20] However, some alternative questions do follow from a comparison of their contributions.

Chiefly, what insights does an holistic approach to the history of political ideas reveal? If we study the dynamic relations between Waltz’s images or Wight’s traditions simultaneously, how is our understanding of the major and final causes of war illuminated? Thinkers, treated in this way, are not readily treated like parcels for categorization. Students, in this alternative approach, can treat texts as meditations or symposiums on questions, rather than objects wanting labels or categories. In holistic reading, the student must prioritize the author’s questions and compare them to her own. A richer, closer, subtler and more complex understanding of the author’s ideas and the story of political philosophy generally is demanded.

Moreover, this approach evokes the historicity of ideas and concepts of influence and originality in textual readings. An holistic approach turns thinking towards the historical sociology of knowledge.[21] The taxonomic approach deliberately eschews questions concerning the changes and patterns of ideas across time and social location. Perhaps this was a general aspect of IR thinking at the time, and during the twentieth century generally, in its pursuit of solving the question for which International Relations was invented, that of war and peace.[22]

If this is not the dominant or singular question and approach in the academic pursuit of international relations any longer, being joined by critical, feminist, postmodern and many miscellaneous questions, what sociological preconditions are necessary in society and culture to affect this intellectual change? This question, the sociology of the scholar in society and culture, as is actively being studied in IR scholarship today, presupposes an engagement with studying world politics generally, which is no less than the sum relations between scholar, society and international affairs.[23] Are works seeking a broader engagement of political study beyond international relations into world politics symptomatic of a contemporary *zeitgeist*?[24] Presumably, in some degree more or less, that is plausible.

Are there traditions of world theory in the history of political thought? Are the images of social causation inter-related in a world wide way? Today, there is much scholarship circling questions of world relations and there are different methodological approaches to it.[25] What are the sociological preconditions of studying world politics? Identifying the questions appropriate to studying what Manning described as the “social cosmos” and “global social dynamics” seems to follow from these sociological points.[26] That is, a study of world politics which matches an holistic approach to the history of ideas begs certain primary questions.

I think Vincent’s work on world society had begun to outline some inroads to them.[27] Broadly speaking, can the relations between individuals, various sub-state and trans-state groups and states today, on a global scale, be considered in societal terms? What forms and sources of conflict exist in world politics? What are the moral justifications of a world society?[28] There are diverse social objects, processes and events in world relations open to study, the scholar and IR being one. Furthermore, addressing questions of this kind may contribute to resolving the tension between IR’s Western centrality, as the sociology of knowledge has highlighted, and awareness of cultural and political plurality in a global academic enterprise.[29]

Nevertheless, these alternative questions are perhaps, for reasons unclear, parochial to our times. Under this ambiguity, while the various questions I have suggested are perhaps compelling, any engagement with the history of ideas from their point-of-view cannot consider them timeless, nor our age wholly unique in the history of ideas.

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Comparison of Waltz and Wight's works in hindsight suggests that while engaging our own questions systematically is immensely rewarding, to understand our social world in a full and rich manner, our questions posed to the history of ideas should also be prioritized with reflexivity.

Overall, this brief comparison and discussion of alternative questions is only what Vincent would describe as, "half-way towards a good idea," since engaging in social science requires engaging questions, not only clarifying them.[30] Waltz and Wight addressed important questions, both for scholars, practitioners and society at large. While not entirely successful in solving them, the accomplishment of their works continues to inspiringly enrich our thinking today.

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- [1] Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (Macmillan: London, 1998), p.163.
- [2] Alfred Zimmern, *Learning and Leadership: A Study of the Needs and Possibilities of International Intellectual Cooperation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p.45.
- [3] Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions* ed. Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter (Leicester & London: Leicester University Press, 1991).
- [4] Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, p.12.
- [5] For a discussion of the relation between Hume's is ought distinction and the linguistic fact value distinction, see John R. Searle, 'Fact and value, 'is' and 'ought,' and reasons for action' in *Philosophy in a New Century: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.161-180.
- [6] For a discussion of world-views in IR see R.M.A. Crawford, *Idealism and Realism in International Relations: Beyond the Discipline* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- [7] Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, p.225.
- [8] Wight, 'An Anatomy of International Thought' *Review of International Studies* (1987), 13, p.221.
- [9] Ian Hall, *The International Thought of Martin Wight* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), p.140-143.
- [10] See, Ian Hall, *Martin Wight*, p.155-156.
- [11] Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, p.225.
- [12] Hidemi Suganami, *On the Causes of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.23.
- [13] Suganami, *On the Causes of War*, p.18.
- [14] For a discussion of Hans Kelsen, Carl Schmitt and International Relations see, Hidemi Suganami, 'Understanding Sovereignty Through Kelsen/Schmitt' *Review of International Studies*, 33 (2007), pp.511-530.
- [15] Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, p.14.
- [16] R.J. Vincent, 'The Hobbesian Tradition in Twentieth Century International Thought' *Millennium: Journal of*

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International Studies, 10 (1981), pp.91-101.

[17] Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami, *The English School of International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chp.5; Wight, *International Theory*, p.160; Hidemi Suganami, in lecture at Aberystwyth University, Nov.9th, 2011, argued all three traditions, at least in IR scholarship, are overlapping variants of liberalism broadly conceived.

[18] For discussion of this question see, Chris Brown, 'International Theory and International Society: The Viability of the Middle Way?' *Review of International Studies*, 21 (1995), pp.183-196.

[19] Wight, 'An Anatomy of International Thought,' p.227.

[20] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979); Wight, *Power Politics* 2nd edition (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1995).

[21] See, for classic statements, Karl Mannheim's, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1979); or Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1991).

[22] Isaiah Berlin, 'Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century' in *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty* ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp.55-93.

[23] Iver Neumann, 'The Practitioner/Theorist Divide, Again' *e-International Relations*, Feb.28th, 2013: <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/28/the-practitionertheorist-divide-again/>.

[24] See, *Weltgesellschaft: Theoretische Zugänge und empirische Problemlagen* (Bielefeld: University of Bielefeld, 2005), particularly, Jens Geve and Bettina Heintz, 'The 'Discovery' of World Society: Emergence, Limits and the Theory of World Society' pp.89-119.

[25] See, for example, John Burton, *World Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); John W. Meyer, John Boli, George M. Thomas and Francisco O. Ramirez, 'World Society and the Nation State' *American Journal of Sociology*, 103 (1997), pp.144-181; Chris Brown, 'World Society and the English School: An 'International Society' Perspective on World Society' *European Journal of International Relations*, 7 (2001), pp.423-441; Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); for a fascinating taxonomy of methodology see P.T. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: The Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[26] C.A.W. Manning, *The Nature of International Society*, 2nd edition (London: MacMillan Press, 1975), p.7-9, 177, 201.

[27] R.J. Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[28] For the moral bases of a world society see, John Williams, 'Pluralism, Solidarism and the Emergence of World Society in English School Literature' *International Relations*, 19 (2005), pp.19-38.

[29] For sociology of IR see, Steve Smith, 2000, 'The Discipline of International Relations: Still an American Social Science?' *British Journal of International Politics and International Relations*, 2 (2000), pp.374-402; Smith, 'The United States and the Discipline of International Relations: 'Hegemonic Country, Hegemonic Discipline' *International Studies Review*, 4 (2002), pp. 67-85.

[30] Tim Dunne, *Inventing the English School*, p.161.

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