

## Getting Started with International Relations Theory

Written by Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters and Dana Gold

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# Getting Started with International Relations Theory

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, ROSIE WALTERS AND DANA GOLD, DEC 24 2017

**This is an excerpt from *International Relations Theory – an E-IR Foundations beginner’s textbook*.  
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Theories of IR allow us to understand and try to make sense of the world around us through various lenses, each of which represents a different theoretical perspective. They are ways to simplify a complicated world. In a familiar analogy, theories are like maps. Each map is made for a certain purpose and what is included in the map is based on what is necessary to direct the map’s user. All other details are left out to avoid confusion and present a clear picture. Since a picture paints a thousand words, go to Google and type in ‘Singapore MRT’ and then click on images. There you will see a map of Singapore’s Mass Rapid Transit network. Enlarge it and stare at it for a moment. What you see there are lines, stations and some basic access information. You will not see public toilets, roads, banks, shops (and the like) charted as these are not essential to travelling on the system. Theories do a similar thing. Each different theory of IR puts different things on its map, based on what its theorists believe to be important. Variables to plot on an IR map would be such things as states, organisations, people, economics, history, ideas, class, gender and so on. Theorists then use their chosen variables to construct a simplified view of the world that can be used to analyse events – and in some cases to have a degree of predictive ability. In a practical sense, IR theories can be best seen as an analytical toolkit as they provide multiple methods for students to use to answer questions.

Some students love studying IR theories because they open up interesting questions about the world we live in, our understanding of human nature and even what it is possible to know. Some students, however, are eager to get straight to the real-life (often described as ‘empirical’) case studies of world events that made them want to study IR in the first place. For these students, studying IR theory might even seem like a distraction. Yet it is crucial to point out that embarking on the study of International Relations without an understanding of theory is like setting off on a journey without a map. You might arrive at your destination, or somewhere else very interesting, but you will have no idea where you are or how you got there. And you will have no response to someone who insists that their route would have been much better or more direct. Theories give us clarity and direction; they help us to both defend our own arguments and better understand the arguments of others.

This book presents a wide range of IR theories, split into two sections. The first section covers the established theories that are most commonly taught in undergraduate IR programmes. The second section expands to present emerging approaches and offer wider perspectives on IR theory. By giving equal space to the two sections we encourage readers to appreciate the diversity of IR theory. Each chapter of the book has a simple set of aims in mind. First, to compress and simplify the basics of each theory. Although theories are complex, our aim with this book is to provide an accessible foundation for further study rather than try to survey an entire field of scholarship. To return to the map analogy from above, our aim with each chapter is to give you a starting point on your journey – you will have to read deeper and wider to fully appreciate each theory’s complexity. Like a good map, the chapters signpost you to where you can find this literature. Second, and to help you continue your journey in IR theory, each chapter also presents a case study of a real-world event or issue. This allows you to see each theory in action as a tool of analysis and understand the insights that IR theory can bring. The final chapter of each of the two sections (chapters 10 and 20) breaks this format and instead offers an innovative perspective on IR theory as a whole – allowing you to take a fresh view of things and reflect back on the discipline as you reach the mid and end points of the book.

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Unlike most other textbooks, there are no boxes, charts, pictures or exercises included. The philosophy underpinning this book is that these things can be a distraction. This book, like others in the E-IR Foundations series, is designed to capture attention with an engaging narrative.

Before we get started, one very important note. You may notice that some of the theories you are introduced to here are referred to by names that also occur in other disciplines. They may be related to those theories, or not related at all. This can sometimes be confusing – for example, realism in IR is not the same as realism in art. Similarly, you may hear the word 'liberal' being used to describe someone's personal views, but in IR liberalism means something quite distinct. To avoid any confusion, this note will serve as a caveat that in this book we refer to the theories concerned only as they have been developed within the discipline of International Relations. Where minor exceptions to this rule are necessary, this will be stated clearly to avoid reader confusion.

## A brief introduction to IR theory

As international relations has grown in complexity, the family of theories that IR offers has grown in number, which presents a challenge for newcomers to IR theory. However, this introduction should give you the confidence to get started. To kick off, this section will briefly introduce IR theory via a three-part spectrum of traditional theories, middle ground theories and critical theories. As you read further into the book, you should expect this simple three-part picture to dissolve somewhat – though it is a useful device to come back to should you get confused.

Theories are constantly emerging and competing with one another. This can be disorientating. As soon as you think you have found your feet with one theoretical approach, others appear. This section will therefore serve as both a primer and a warning that complexity is to be expected ahead! Even though this book presents IR theory in a particularly simple and basic way, complexity remains. IR theory requires your full attention and you should buckle down and expect turbulence on your journey.

Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) set the stage for understanding how and why certain theories are legitimised and widely accepted. He also identified the process that takes place when theories are no longer relevant and new theories emerge. For example, human beings were once convinced that the earth was flat. With the advancement of science and technology, there was a significant discovery and humans discarded this belief. When such a discovery takes place, a 'paradigm shift' results and the former way of thinking is replaced by a new one. Although changes in IR theory are not as dramatic as the example above, there have been significant evolutions in the discipline. This is important to keep in mind when we consider how theories of IR play a role in explaining the world and how, based upon different time periods and our personal contexts, one approach may speak to us more than another.

All of the theories previewed in this section (and many more besides) are covered in their own chapters in the book.

Traditionally there have been two central theories of IR: liberalism and realism. Although they have come under great challenge from other theories, they remain central to the discipline. At its height, liberalism was referred to as a 'utopian' theory and to some degree is still recognised as such today. Its proponents view human beings as innately good and believe peace and harmony between nations is not only achievable, but desirable. In the late eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant developed the idea that states that shared liberal values should have no reason for going to war against one another. In Kant's eyes, the more liberal states there were in the world, the more peaceful it would become, since liberal states are ruled by their citizens and citizens are rarely disposed to go to war. This is in contrast to the rule of kings and other non-elected rulers who frequently have selfish desires out of step with citizens. His ideas have resonated and continue to be developed by modern liberals, most notably in the democratic peace theory, which posits that democracies do not go to war with each other.

Further, liberals have faith in the idea that the permanent cessation of war is an attainable goal. Putting liberal ideas into practice, US President Woodrow Wilson addressed his 'Fourteen Points' to the US Congress in January 1918 during the final year of the First World War. The last of his 'points' – ideas for a rebuilt world beyond the war – was

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the setting up a general association of nations: this became the League of Nations. Dating back to 1920, the League of Nations was created largely for the purpose of overseeing affairs between states and implementing, as well as maintaining, international peace. However, when the League collapsed due to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, its failure was difficult for liberals to comprehend, as events seemed to contradict their theories. Therefore, despite the efforts of figures such as Kant and Wilson, liberalism failed to retain a strong hold and a new theory emerged to explain the continuing presence of war. That theory became known as realism.

Realism gained momentum during the Second World War, when it appeared to offer a convincing account for how and why the most widespread and deadly war in known history followed a period of supposed peace and optimism. Although it originated in named form in the twentieth century, many realists look back much further. Indeed, realists have looked as far back as the ancient world, where they detected similar patterns of human behaviour as those evident in our modern world. As its name suggests, advocates of realism purport that it reflects the 'reality' of the world and more effectively accounts for change in international politics. Thomas Hobbes is often mentioned in discussions of realism due to his description of the brutality of life during the English Civil War of 1642–1651. Hobbes described human beings as living in an orderless 'state of nature' that he perceived as a war of all against all. To remedy this, he proposed a 'social contract' between the ruler and the people of a state to maintain relative order. Today, we take such ideas for granted as it is usually clear who rules our states. Each leader, or 'sovereign' (a monarch or a parliament, for example), sets the rules and establishes a system of punishments for those who break them. We accept this in our respective states so that our lives can function with a sense of security and order. It may not be ideal, but it is better than a state of nature. As no such contract exists internationally and there is no sovereign in charge of the world, disorder and fear rules international relations. For realists, we live in a system of 'international anarchy'. That is why war seems more common than peace to realists; indeed, they see it as inevitable.

It is important to understand that, despite what the layout of the chapters in this book may suggest, there is no single variant of each theory. Scholars rarely fully agree with each other, even those who share the same theoretical approach. Each scholar has a particular interpretation of the world, which includes ideas of peace, war and the role of the state in relation to individuals. Nevertheless, these perspectives can still be grouped into theory families (or traditions) and this is how we have organised the material in this book. In your studies you will need to unpack the various differences but, for now, understanding the core assumptions of each approach is the best way to get your bearings. For example, if we think of the simple contrast of optimism and pessimism we can see a familial relationship in all branches of realism and liberalism. Liberals share an optimistic view of IR, believing that world order can be improved, with peace and progress gradually replacing war. They may not agree on the details, but this optimistic view generally unites them. Conversely, realists tend to dismiss optimism as a form of misplaced idealism and instead they arrive at a more pessimistic view. This is due to their focus on the centrality of the state and its need for security and survival in an anarchical system where it can only truly rely on itself. As a result, realists reach an array of accounts that describe IR as a system where war and conflict is common and periods of peace are merely times when states are preparing for future conflict.

The thinking of the English school is often viewed as a middle ground between liberal and realist theories. Its theory involves the idea of a society of states existing at the international level. Hedley Bull, one of the core figures of the English school, agreed with traditional theories that the international system was anarchic. However, he insisted this does not mean the absence of norms (expected behaviours), thus claiming a societal aspect to international politics. In this sense, states form an 'Anarchical Society' (Bull 1977) where a type of order does exist, based on shared norms and behaviours.

Constructivism is another theory commonly viewed as a middle ground, but this time between mainstream theories and the critical theories that we will explore later. It also has some familial links with the English school. Unlike scholars from other perspectives, constructivists highlight the importance of values and of shared interests between individuals who interact on the global stage. Alexander Wendt, a prominent constructivist, described the relationship between agents (individuals) and structures (such as the state) as one in which structures not only constrain agents but also construct their identities and interests. His phrase 'anarchy is what states make of it' (Wendt 1992) sums this up well. Another way to explain this, and to explain the core of constructivism, is that the essence of international relations exists in the interactions between people. After all, states do not interact; it is agents of those states, such as

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politicians and diplomats, who interact. Since those interacting on the world stage have accepted international anarchy as its defining principle, it has become part of our reality. However, if anarchy is what we make of it, then different states can perceive anarchy differently and the qualities of anarchy can even change over time. International anarchy could even be replaced by a different system if an influential group of other individuals (and by proxy the states they represent) accepted the idea. To understand constructivism is to understand that ideas, or 'norms' as they are often called, have power. As such, constructivists seek to study the process by which norms are challenged and potentially replaced with new norms.

Critical approaches refer to a wide spectrum of theories that have been established in response to mainstream approaches in the field, mainly liberalism and realism. In a nutshell, critical theorists share one particular trait – they oppose commonly held assumptions in the field of IR that have been central since its establishment. They call for new approaches that are better suited to understand, as well as question, the world we find ourselves in. Critical theories are valuable because they identify positions that have typically been ignored or overlooked within IR. They also give a voice to groups of people who have frequently been marginalised, particularly women and those from the Global South. Much of this book's expansion pack deals with theories set within this larger category.

Marxism is a good place to start with critical theories. This approach is based upon the ideas of Karl Marx, who lived in the nineteenth century at the height of the industrial revolution. The term 'Marxist' refers to people who have adopted Marx's views and believe that industrialised society is divided into two classes – the business class of 'owners' (the bourgeoisie) and the working class (the proletariat). The proletariat are at the mercy of the bourgeoisie who control their wages and therefore their standard of living. Marx hoped for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat and an eventual end to the class society. Critical theorists who take a Marxist angle often argue that the organisation of international politics around the state has led to ordinary people around the globe becoming divided and alienated, instead of recognising what they all have in common – potentially – as a global proletariat. For this to change, the legitimacy of the state must be questioned and ultimately dissolved. In that sense, emancipation from the state in some form is often part of the wider critical agenda.

Postcolonialism differs from Marxism by focusing on the inequality between nations or regions, as opposed to classes. The effects of colonialism are still felt in many regions of the world today as local populations continue to deal with the challenges created and left behind by ex-colonial powers such as the United Kingdom and France. Postcolonialism's origins can be traced to the Cold War period when much activity in international relations centred around decolonisation and the wish to undo the legacies of European imperialism. This approach acknowledges that the study of IR has historically centred on Western perspectives and experiences, excluding the voices of people from other regions of the world. Crucially, postcolonial scholars have argued that analyses based on Western theoretical perspectives, or that do not take into account the perspectives of those in former colonies, may lead international institutions and world leaders to take actions that unfairly favour the West. They have created a deeper understanding of the way in which the operations of the global economy, the decision-making processes of international institutions and the actions of the great powers might actually constitute new forms of colonialism. Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* described how societies in the Middle East and Asia were regularly misrepresented in Western literary and scholarly writing in a way that positioned them as inferior to the West. Postcolonial scholars are, therefore, important contributors to the field as they widen the focus of enquiry beyond IR's traditionally 'Western' mindset.

Another theory that exposes the inequality inherent in international relations is feminism. Feminism entered the field in the 1980s as part of the emerging critical movement. It focused on explaining why so few women seemed to be in positions of power and examining the implications of this on how global politics was structured. You only need look at a visual of any meeting of world leaders to see how it appears to be a man's world. Recognising this introduces a 'gendered' reading of IR, where we place an issue such as gender as the prime object on our map. If it is a man's world, what does that mean? How have certain characteristics traditionally viewed as masculine – such as aggression, emotional detachment and strength – come to be seen as essential qualities of a world leader? Which qualities and characteristics does this exclude (it might be empathy and cooperation) and what kind of actions does this result in? By recognising that gender – the roles that society constructs for men and women – permeates everything, feminism challenges those roles in a way that benefits everyone. It is not simply a question of counting

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male and female bodies. Rather, feminists ask how gendered power structures make it difficult for women or men who display supposedly feminine traits to reach the highest levels of power. Given that those positions involve making life and death decisions, it matters to all of us whether the person who gets there is known for their aggression or their compassion. With all this talk of socially constructed gender roles, you might be beginning to see some overlaps – with constructivism, for example. We are doing our best to present each approach separately so that you have a clearer starting point, but it is wise to caution you that IR theory is a dense and complex web and not always clearly defined. Keep this in mind as you read on and as your studies develop.

Perhaps the most controversial of the critical theories is poststructuralism. This is an approach that questions the very beliefs we have all come to know and feel as 'real'. Poststructuralism questions the dominant narratives that have been widely accepted by mainstream theories. For instance, liberals and realists both accept the idea of the state and for the most part take it for granted. Such assumptions are foundational 'truths' on which those traditional theories rest – becoming 'structures' that they build their account of reality around. So, although these two theoretical perspectives may differ in some respects with regard to their overall worldviews, they share a general understanding of the world. Neither theory seeks to challenge the existence of the state; they simply count it as part of their reality. Poststructuralism seeks to question these commonly held assumptions of reality, not just the state but also more widely the nature of power. Michel Foucault's contribution to poststructuralism was his identification of the knowledge–power nexus. What this means is that people in a position of power, including politicians, journalists, even scholars, have the ability to shape our common understandings of a given issue. In turn, these understandings of the issue can become so ingrained that they appear to be common sense and it becomes difficult to think outside of them, leaving room for only certain kinds of action. Power is knowledge and knowledge is power. By analysing the way in which a certain understanding of an issue becomes dominant, poststructuralists aim to expose the hidden assumptions it is based upon. They also aim to open up other possible ways of being, thinking and doing in international politics.

As this brief introduction to IR theory has shown, each theory of IR possesses a legitimate, yet different, view of the world. Indeed, beyond the theories explored above are many other theories and perspectives that you will find in the expansion pack section of this book. It is also important to note that the theories covered in this book are not exhaustive and there are more that could be examined. However, the book's editors believe that we have provided a good starting point for achieving an overall understanding of the field and where the most common, and most novel, approaches and perspectives are situated. It is not necessary – and probably not wise so early in your studies – to adopt one theory as your own. It is more important to understand the various theories as tools of analysis, or analytical lenses, that you can apply in your studies. Simply, they offer a means by which to attempt to understand a complex world.

## Thinking like a scholar

Since studying IR theory requires real focus, you should start to consider how to make the space and time to concentrate as you read this book. You will need to put your devices on silent, close your internet browsers and find a quiet space to work. Take ten-minute mini-breaks every hour or so to do other things and make sure to eat a decent meal midway through your study session to give you a longer break. Finally, try to get a good night's sleep before and after you study. Your brain does not absorb or retain information very well when you are sleep deprived or hungry. There will be times in the year when panic sets in as deadlines approach, but if you have already developed a good reading strategy you will find you are in good shape for the task at hand. So, before we delve further into IR theory, we will try to give you some tips to help you think like a scholar.

Reading for scholarly purposes is not the same as reading for pleasure. You need to adopt a reading strategy. Everyone has their own way of doing this, but the basic tip is this: *take notes as you read*. If you find that you don't have many notes or your mind goes a little blank, then you might be reading too quickly or not paying enough attention. This is most likely if you are reading digitally on a computer or tablet, as it is very easy for eyes to wander or for you to drift onto a social media site. If this happens, don't worry: just go back and start again. Often, reading something a second time is when it clicks.

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Best practice is to make rough notes as you read through each chapter. When you get to the end of a chapter, compile your rough notes into a list of 'key points' that you would like to remember. This will be useful when you come to revise or recap an issue because you won't necessarily have to read the entire chapter again. Your notes should trigger your memory and remind you of the key information. Some textbooks do this for you and provide a list of key points at the end of each chapter. This book, being a foundational book for beginners, does *not* do so: we want readers to develop the important skills of reading and note-taking for themselves and not take short cuts.

Although there is no substitute for reading, if you find a certain theory is not clicking, go to the online resources section of the E-IR Student Portal (linked below) and you will find carefully selected audio and visual resources on each theory to give yourself a different perspective: <http://www.e-ir.info/online-resources-international-relations-theory/>

By making notes on everything you encounter you will form a strategy that will allow you to retain the most important information and compress it into a smaller set of notes integral to revision for examinations or preparation for discussions and assignments. It's best to use digital means (laptop/tablet) so you can create backups and not risk losing valuable handwritten paper notes. If you do use paper notes, take pictures of them on your phone so you have a backup just in case.

You should also note down the citation information for each set of notes at the top of the page so that you can identify the source you took the notes from if you need to reference it later in any written work. As theories are most often developed in written form it is important to understand how to properly reference the work of theorists as you encounter them. Referencing sources is very important in academia. It is the way scholars and students attribute the work of others, whether they use their exact words or not. For that reason it is usual to see numerous references in the expert literature you will progress to after completing this book. It is an important element of scholarly writing, and one that you should master for your own studies. In this book we have tried to summarise issues from an expert perspective so as to give you an uninterrupted narrative. When we need to point you to more specialist literature, for example to invite you to read a little deeper, we do so by inserting in-text citations that look like this: (Hutchings 2001). These point you to a corresponding entry in the references section towards the back of the book where you can find the full reference and follow it up if you want to. Typically, these are books, journal articles or websites. In-text citations always include the author's surname and the year of publication. As the reference list is organised alphabetically by surname, you can quickly locate the full reference. Sometimes you will also find page numbers inside the brackets. For example, (Hutchings 2001, 11–13). Page numbers are added when referring to specific arguments, or a quotation, from a source. This referencing system is known as the 'Author-Date' or 'Harvard' system. It is the most common, but not the only, referencing system used in IR.

When the time comes for you to make your own arguments and write your own assignments, think of using sources as if you were a lawyer preparing a court case. Your task there would be to convince a jury that your argument is defensible, beyond reasonable doubt. You would have to present clear, well-organised evidence based on facts and expertise. If you presented evidence that was just someone's uninformed opinion, the jury would not find it convincing and you would lose the case. Similarly, in academic writing you have to make sure that the sources you use are reputable. You can usually find this out by looking up the author and the publisher. If the author is not an expert (academic, practitioner, etc.) and/or the publisher is unknown/obscure, then the source is likely unreliable. It may have interesting information, but it is not reputable by scholarly standards.

It should be safe to assume that you know what a book is (since you are reading one!) and that you understand what the internet is. However, one type of source that you will find cited in this book and may not have encountered before is the journal article. Journal articles are typically only accessible from your university library as they are expensive and require a subscription. They are papers prepared by academics, for academics. As such, they represent the latest thinking and may contain cutting-edge insights. But, they are often complex and dense due to their audience being fellow experts, which makes them hard for a beginner to read. In addition, journal articles are peer reviewed. This means they have gone through a process of assessment by other experts before being published. During that process many changes and improvements may be made – and articles often fail to make it through peer review and are rejected. So, journal articles are something of a gold standard in scholarly writing.

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Most journal articles are now available on the internet, which leads to confusion as students can find it difficult to distinguish a journal article from an online magazine or newspaper article. Works of journalism or opinion are not peer reviewed and conform to different professional standards. If you follow the tip above and 'search' the publisher and author, you should be able to discern which is which. Another helpful tip is length. A journal article will typically be 10–20 pages long (7,000–11,000 words); articles of journalism or commentary will usually be shorter.

A final note on the subject of sources: the internet is something of a Wild West. There is great information there, but also a lot of rubbish. It can often be hard to tell them apart. But, again, if you follow the golden rule of looking up the author and looking up the publisher (using the internet), you can usually find your way. However, even some of the world's biggest websites can be unreliable. Wikipedia, for example, is a great resource, but it often has incorrect information because it is authored, and usually edited, by ordinary people who are typically enthusiasts rather than experts. In addition, its pages are always changing (because of user edits), making it hard to rely on as a source. So the rule of thumb with the internet is to try to corroborate anything you find on at least two good websites/from at least two reputable authors. Then you can use the internet with confidence and enjoy its benefits while avoiding its pitfalls. When preparing assignments, however, you should only use the internet to supplement the more robust information you will find in academic journals and books.

Another important part of learning to think like a scholar is to understand the language that scholars use. Each discipline has its own unique language. This comprises a range of specific terms that have been developed by scholars to describe certain things. As a result, a lot of the time you spend learning a discipline is spent learning its jargon so that you can access and understand the literature. Instead of packing this book with jargon we have tried as far as possible to explain things in ordinary language while easing you into the more peculiar terminology found within IR theory. This approach should keep you engaged while giving you the confidence to read the more advanced literature that you will soon encounter.

Understanding key terms even applies to something as basic as how to express the term 'International Relations'. The academic convention is to capitalise it (International Relations, abbreviated as 'IR') when referring to the academic discipline – that is, the subject taught in university campuses all over the world. IR does not describe events; rather, it is a scholarly discipline that seeks to *understand* events – with IR theory being a major tool in that endeavour. On the other hand, 'international relations' – not capitalised – is generally used by both scholars and non-scholars to *describe* relations between states, organisations and individuals at the global level. This term is interchangeable with terms such as 'global politics', 'world politics' or 'international politics'. They all mean pretty much the same thing. We have maintained this capitalisation convention in the book.

We should also mention that as this book is published in the UK it is presented in British English. This means words like 'globalisation' and 'organisation' are spelt with an 's' rather than a 'z'.

### Bottom line

All theories are imperfect. If one was accurate at accounting for behaviour and actions in IR, there would be no need for any others. The sheer volume of different IR theories should be a warning to you that International Relations still is a young discipline that is undergoing significant formative development. Within that development is a sometimes fierce set of arguments over the nature of the state, the individual, international organisations, identity and even reality itself. The important point to remember is that theories are tools of analysis. Often they are pertinent and insightful when applied correctly to understand an event. But just as often they are imperfect and you will find yourself reaching for a more applicable theoretical tool. This book will equip you with a foundational starting point for developing your own IR theory toolkit, so that no matter what your task, you are armed with all that you need to get started in your analysis and well oriented to access – and understand – the key texts and more advanced textbooks within the field. Good luck!

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Full references for citations can be found in the PDF version, linked at the top of this page.

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