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**The Historical Turn and International Relations
'Beyond Objectivism and Relativism'**

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Abstract

This paper assesses the recent calls for an ‘historical turn’ in International Relations (IR), and argues that they should be viewed in light of a more widespread movement in the social sciences and humanities ‘beyond objectivism and relativism’, to adopt the phrase of Richard Bernstein. Although not without features unique to IR, the clarion call to ‘re-historicise’ our theories and concepts has been sounded in response to wider concerns over the validity of knowledge claims about the ‘international’, given the impossibility of both truly objective knowledge and complete subjectivity. The ‘Cartesian anxiety’ felt in response to the continued dominance of positivist approaches in IR, then, has led to a number of ‘turns’ of which the historical is but one. But since neither complete objectivism nor true subjectivism are possible, the anxiety is a false one, and the paper thus proposes that what is at stake in the turn is the most appropriate manner in which a re-orientation toward the historical can aid IR in moving beyond objectivism and relativism. Focussing on the contributions of Vaughan-Williams, Isacoff and Kratochwil, it argues that an historical turn in mainstream IR is most likely to proceed along interpretative or pragmatist lines, with an emphasis on argument, reason and practical knowledge.

Keywords

Historical turn, IR, objectivism, relativism, Cartesian anxiety, Bernstein

Introduction¹

International Relations (IR),² we are reliably informed, is currently undergoing an ‘historical turn’.³ The clarion call has been resonantly sounded for us to (re) historicise the concepts and theories we employ, in order to give us more purchase on the central problems of our subject.⁴ ‘Turns’ such as these seem to be increasingly common in the discipline—others have noted ‘constructivist’ and ‘historiographical’ turns,⁵ for example—but it is only after a significant amount of time has elapsed that what a ‘turn’ actually entailed is brought into any degree of relief, as the ‘behavioural turn’ of the 1960s adequately demonstrates. Together, these recent turns do appear to herald the beginning of a new, ‘post-positivist’, era in the study of international politics. But as is often noted, the quasi-hegemonic position of positivist approaches in IR’s US heartland would suggest that isolated claims to such turns, or the ‘remaking’ of the subject, seem little more than exercises in futility.⁶ The least that must be done, if these turns are to have a lasting impact, is to state clearly the reasoning that underpins them, and in what direction we are left facing once we have, indeed, turned. Explaining exactly why the historical turn—the main subject of this paper—is required, therefore, is an important and necessary task.

The paper seeks to contribute to its fulfilment by doing two things. The first is to lay out as clearly as possible the rationale underlying the growing calls for a return to the historical, with the intention of making explicit what is at stake therein. It thus attempts to clarify the different understandings of what Vaughan-Williams has termed the ‘problem of history in IR’,⁷ and the different prescriptions for the development of the discipline along more suitably ‘historical lines’: from a dialogue with historians,⁸ to a renewed interest in the English School and its more sympathetic approach to historical

¹ I would like to thank Rainer Bauböck, Friedrich Kratochwil, and an anonymous reviewer for their useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² This paper follows the convention of using capital letters to denote the disciplines of History and International Relations, and lower case letters for their subject matters.

³ Nick Vaughan-Williams, ‘International Relations and the ‘problem of History’’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol. 34, No.1, (2005), 115-36. The ‘historical turn’, Vaughan-Williams notes, has been identified by Teschke. See Benno Teschke, *The myth of 1648: class, geopolitics and the making of modern international relations* (London: Verso, 2003). See also Stephen Hobden, *International relations and historical sociology: breaking down boundaries* (London: Routledge, 1998); Donald Puchala, *Theory and history in international relations* (London: Routledge, 2003); and Thomas W. Smith, *History and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁴ Vaughan-Williams, ‘International Relations and the ‘Problem of History’’, 116.

⁵ See Jeffrey T. Checkel, ‘The Constructivist turn in International Relations theory’, *World Politics* Vol. 50, No. 2, (1998): 324-48; Duncan Bell, ‘International relations: the dawn of a historiographical turn?’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* Vol. 3, No. 1, (2001): 115-26. Richard Shapcott has also noted a ‘normative turn’, see his ‘Solidarism and after: global governance, international security and the normative ‘turn’ in International Relations’, *Pacifica Review: Peace, Security and Global Change* Vol. 12, No. 1, (2000), 147-65.

⁶ See Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International systems in world history: remaking the study of international relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). On American IR, see Steve Smith, ‘The discipline of international relations: still an American social science?’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* Vol. 2, No. 3, (2000), 374-402.

⁷ Vaughan-Williams, ‘International Relations and the ‘Problem of History’.

⁸ See, for example, Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Bridges and boundaries: historians, political scientists, and the study of international relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001); Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, ‘International History and International Relations theory: a dialogue beyond the Cold War’, *International Affairs* Vol. 76, No. 4, (2000): 741-54; Marc Trachtenberg, *The craft of international history: a guide to method* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

methodologies,⁹ to a rejection of so-called ‘interpretative closure’ that prevents alternative readings of the historical record.¹⁰ The intention, then, is to outline what this historical turn entails for IR, given the multiplicity of different ways in which it has been conceived.

This discussion, however, leads to a second and somewhat stronger claim: namely that the turn to history should be understood as part of a wider phenomenon in the social sciences and the humanities as to the status of the knowledge they produce when they move ‘beyond objectivism and relativism’, in the words of Richard Bernstein.¹¹ This is to argue that the historical turn both exposes many of the issues at the centre of, and itself forms part of, the International Relations variant of a wider concern within these disciplines. That IR variant has, of course, its own unique features: the difference in approaches and techniques used on both sides of the Atlantic being perhaps the clearest.¹² But the historical turn also exposes a number of anxieties that can be seen to transcend the boundaries of IR. Without wanting to oversimplify these deeply philosophical issues, they revolve around the possibility of making valid knowledge claims about ‘how things are’, on the one hand, while on the other accepting the impossibility of gaining ‘objective’ knowledge of states of affairs since subject and object cannot be separated. ‘How things are’, therefore, are always, to a degree, how we see and talk about them. An acceptance of this dilemma, it is argued here, is an important element in the successful implementation of the historical turn in IR.

In order to make these two interlinking arguments, the paper proceeds in four parts. The following section addresses the rationale underlying the calls for a turn to history. It questions why the turn is necessary at all: what exactly is wrong with or limited about approaches—game theoretic or rational-choice, for instance—that assume certain preferences on behalf of their chosen actors at a given point in time, and move forward from there? Although much of this has been done elsewhere, and in greater depth,¹³ the intention is to present afresh these issues for those who may remain unfamiliar with them. The second section then discusses the literature associated with the ‘historical turn’ more explicitly, and the suggestions made as to how best it can be made, by focussing on the contributions of Vaughan-Williams, Isacoff and Kratochwil.¹⁴ It notes the diverging readings of the turn, but also a number of common factors that

⁹ See Hedley Bull, ‘International theory: the case for a classical approach’, *World Politics* Vol. 18, No. 3, (1966): 361-77, reprinted in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., *Diplomatic investigations: essays in the theory of international politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966). On the English School, see the recent contribution by Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami, *The English School of International Relations: a contemporary reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Vaughan-Williams.

¹¹ Richard Bernstein, *Beyond objectivism and relativism: science, hermeneutics and praxis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

¹² The classic statement on the development of American IR is Stanley Hoffman, ‘An American social science: International Relations’, *Daedalus* Vol. 106, No. 3, (1977), 41-60, reprinted in James Der Derian, ed., *International theory: critical investigations* (New York: New York University Press, 1995). See also Smith, ‘The discipline of international relations: still an American social science?’.

¹³ See, in particular, Smith, *History and International Relations*, and Stephen Hobden and John M. Hobson, eds., *Historical sociology of international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Jonathan B. Isacoff, ‘On the historical imagination of international relations: the case for a ‘Deweyan’ reconstruction’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol. 31, No. 3, (2002): 603-26; Friedrich V. Kratochwil, ‘History, action, and identity: revisiting the “second” great debate and assessing its importance for social theory’, *European Journal of International Relations* Vol. 12, No. 1, (2006), 5-29; Vaughan-Williams.

point to shared origins and common concerns. The third part thus argues that the historical turn in IR can be illuminated by reference to Bernstein's notion of the movement 'beyond objectivism and relativism'. At stake in the historical turn, thereby, is the very status of IR and the knowledge-claims it makes, which must be acknowledged if the turn to the historical is to be truly affected. A short conclusion wraps up the paper by highlighting several residual issues that remain following the foregoing discussion.

Positivism and the turn to the historical

The 'historical turn' springs from continuing dissatisfaction with the positivistic modes of analysis that assumed a dominant position—especially in the United States—in the aftermath of the so-called behavioural 'turn' or 'revolution' of the 1960s.¹⁵ This is by now a familiar story, and there is a risk that the wholesale rejection of positivism, rather than a sophisticated and sustained critique, will result in the negation and not the invigoration of debate. It is certainly not the intention here to rehash it in a simplified manner. It should be acknowledged that contemporary IR theorists working within the positivist tradition are not naïve, as some would evidently believe; it is for more than the fear of hurting the feelings of positivists in IR that their worldview should be treated with respect.

That being said, Bell is correct in observing that 'History, in its various manifestations, plays an essential, constitutive, role in shaping the present', and that, to its detriment, 'in mainstream IR this has often been disregarded'.¹⁶ His point is a simple one: everything that occurs in the international sphere is in some sense a product of history, and this should be reflected in the techniques, methods and concepts used to study international relations. An initial assessment of the historical turn might conclude, therefore, that it is fundamentally concerned with the correction of this situation. In a recent contribution to the turn, for example, Buzan and Little advocate the widening of IR investigations to the entire history of 'international systems': they note that there is more to the history of international relations than the post-Westphalian states system, and call for greater dialogue between IR scholars and world historians.¹⁷

However, the re-historicisation of IR is not solely concerned with including more of it. Buzan and Little's approach for the 'remaking' of IR in a more 'historical' manner derives from a particular understanding of IR's historical 'poverty'; an understanding, moreover, that is not shared by all the contributors to the historical turn. Before moving on to a discussion of the numerous ways in which IR theorists involved in the turn might have us make it, therefore, it is imperative that the full implications of this alleged 'poverty' be clarified. After all, although most would agree that IR is not History, not all would agree that it is ahistorical either. Waltz is not mistaken when, in reply to his critics, he makes what at first appears a paradoxical point: that theory should

¹⁵ As Welch notes, 'The phrase "behavioral revolution" denotes the social sciences' enthusiastic embrace of behavioralism during the 1950s and 1960s.' David Welch, *Painful choices: a theory of foreign policy change* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 5. For a discussion, see, John Lewis Gaddis, 'History, science, and the study of international relations' in *Explaining international relations since 1945*, edited by Ngaire Woods, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 32-48.

¹⁶ Bell, 'International relations: the dawn of a historiographical turn?', 116.

¹⁷ Buzan and Little, *International systems in world history*.

not too closely resemble reality; if it did, it would have little power as a vehicle for comprehending that reality.¹⁸ It follows that the turn to ‘history’ is not a turn to History with a capital ‘h’: it is *not* about giving up the possibility of a degree of abstract and generalizable knowledge, and resorting to the simple ‘telling of stories’.

This characterization of what historians *do*—i.e. tell stories—betrays that we have already arrived at one of the central problems surrounding the historical turn: confusion over the very nature of ‘history’.¹⁹ What does it mean for both international relations and IR to be adequately ‘historical’? Bell’s argument presupposes one notion of the historical: that it is the constituted nature of things, including the subjects of international relations. As Vaughan-Williams has noted, however, IR has tended towards a different conception.²⁰ The ‘problem of history’ here has been traditionally conceived as the impossibility of ‘getting it 100% right’.²¹ In this reading, ‘history’ is simply ‘what happened’, and it is the task of the international relations scholar—as for the historian—to comprehend it in as full a manner as possible. Their methods may be different, but both aim to explain and understand what occurs in international politics.

Although this view contrasts sharply with the idea that history is constitutive of the present, of how the things IR scholars study *are*, it has formed the mainstream in the discipline. This understanding of history—what could be termed the ‘history-as-laboratory’ position—has led IR scholars to use historical events as ready-made data sets with which to test, or, in Welch’s more limited conception, ‘test-drive’, tools sharpened elsewhere;²² the sharper the tools, the nearer the ‘problem of history’ is to being solved. Christopher Thorne has gone so far as to opine that Clio, the muse of history, is IR’s ‘call-girl’.²³ The dominance of the ‘history-as-laboratory’ position leads one to question exactly what is erroneous about the use of historical examples to test theories and conceptual frameworks deductively. Why do these frameworks and concepts *need* to be (re)historicised, and, again, what does this even mean?

It is argued here that the history-as-laboratory view entailed by positivism inevitably leads to a number of problems that do, in fact, require a turn to the ‘historical’ in a sense other than that of history as a data set. One such problem with this view concerns the difficulty in comparing historical situations. As John Ruggie has noted, ‘[h]ow many cases have there been of nuclear polarity? Or of any other kind, for that matter? How many hegemons have been “like” that the United States in the twentieth century, or Britain in the nineteenth?’²⁴ What he makes clear is that history is not simply ‘out there’ to be discovered, but is both constitutive of the world which we study, but also of the concepts we use to study ‘history’ itself. As a consequence, approaches that do take the world as it seems to be—such as the history-as-laboratory conception—suffer from serious shortcomings. As Constructivists such as Finnemore

¹⁸ For a full conversation between Waltz and his opponents, see Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), in particular, Waltz, ‘Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power’, pp. 98-130. See also, Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).

¹⁹ The classic statement remains, E. H. Carr, *What is history?* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

²⁰ Vaughan-Williams.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

²² Welch, *Painful choices*.

²³ Christopher Thorne, ‘International relations and the promptings of history’, *Review of International Studies* Vol. 9, (1983), 123.

²⁴ John G. Ruggie, ‘What makes the world hang together? Neo-utilitarianism and the social constructivist challenge’, *International Organization* Vol. 52, No. 4, (1998), 880.

have pointed out, the interests and preferences of international actors, for example, are not as simple as has been previously thought by mainstream IR scholars.²⁵ These preferences and interests are—contra rational-choice or game theoretic conceptions—always in the process of being made and re-made, and cannot be deemed exogenous to the specific situation and actors that are the subject of analysis.

Thus, although influential and certainly not without merit, the history-as-laboratory approach to international studies entailed by positivism, and advocated by the most authoritative methodology textbooks in IR,²⁶ leads to a number of paradoxes and sometimes even absurdities, with the result that an ‘historical’ approach—in the constitutive sense of understanding how these preferences and interests *came to be that way*—comes to be seen as a sensible ‘way out’. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the notion of time and history are in the process of being ‘brought back in’ to IR and the social sciences more generally.²⁷ In Political Science, specifically, the focus has been placed on the notion of ‘path dependence’, and the ‘unintended consequences’ that shape and shove preferences often long after original decisions were taken.²⁸

However, part of the argument of this paper is also that the turn away from the positivistic, history-as-laboratory, approach, towards a history-as-constitutive one does not provide unproblematic prescriptions when it comes to the creation of a more historical ‘IR’. This is evidenced by the fact that a multiplicity of different putative historical ‘ways out’ have been put forward, and can be explained by noting that historical knowledge is not a stable, objective, or ‘scientific’ category that sits well within positivistic frameworks. A reflection on the origins and development of interests and preferences, to use the aforementioned example, is likely to provide a more adequate account of the motivations of decision-makers than the assumption of some ‘good’ being sought. But, again, by itself this does not offer a complete account of them since historical knowledge does not pertain to the same objective standards required by positivism. This is to acknowledge then that there is not a single, objective, method by which to understand ‘how things are’, since this, in turn, necessitates a satisfactory answer to the crucial question of the nature of historical knowledge: how do we know how things came to be as they are, and hence how they are? It follows that there is no such thing as a uniquely ‘historical’ approach to international politics, and nor a turn to the historical lead us on to safer or more secure disciplinary pastures.

In fact, the same reason that IR scholars have struggled with history is that historians themselves have had little more certainty—although Trachtenberg is perhaps a little harsh in arguing that the Philosophy of History is no help in this regard.²⁹ What he highlights—inadvertently as it turns out—is that what history, and thereby what an ‘historical’ approach *is*, is far from settled. This poses serious problems for the historical turn in IR: unless some shared and relatively stable definition of the problem can be identified, the possibility of a genuine discussion on the historical turn may prove out of reach. Hence, while practical problems with the history-as-laboratory view

²⁵ Martha Finnemore, *National interests in international society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

²⁶ See Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing social inquiry: scientific inference in qualitative research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to methods for students of Political Science* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997).

²⁷ See, for example, Andrew Abbott, *Time matters: on theory and method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), and Paul Pierson, *Politics in time: history, institutions, and social analysis* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).

²⁸ Pierson, *Politics in time*.

²⁹ See Trachtenberg, *The craft of international history*, Chapter One, ‘The theory of historical inquiry’.

are easy to identify—Lustick, for example, notes the secondary selection bias arising from the use of the work of historians³⁰—the problem of historical knowledge would seem somewhat more fundamental. It is thus unsurprising that although ‘there seems to be an emerging consensus that history is taken far more seriously within the discipline today’, Vaughan-Williams remains pessimistic as to whether a turn to history has truly been affected at all.³¹ He is correct in noting that the assertion that it has turned ‘depends entirely on what is meant by ‘history’ in the first place...What do we mean when refer to *history* in IR?’³²

The difficulty of finding an answer to this question has contributed to the oft-noted ‘ambiguous, indeed at times downright hostile relationship between scholars of International History and their counterparts in International Relations (especially International Relations theory).’³³ While their subject matters are ostensibly the same—wars, diplomatic crises, alliances, trade agreements, and so on—scholars in the two disciplines have seemingly only conversed with one another when forced to by the convening of so-called ‘interdisciplinary’ conferences.³⁴ Yet despite the fact that there is no consensus on the nature of historical knowledge, nor how the historical turn should be made and in what direction the discipline should be directed, it does not follow that the turn should not be made at all.

Having attempted to lay out the major—and as yet unsettled—issues at stake in the turn to history in as straightforward a manner as possible, the following section explores a number of the analyses that have attempted to move the debate forward in interesting and distinct ways. By so doing, however, they display different readings of the ‘problem of history’ in IR that accord with their own purposes, and that can serve to obscure the central issues at stake in the historical turn; issues that unite it with similar movements and concerns across the social sciences and the humanities, as discussed in the third section of the paper.

The Historical Turn

Despite a multiplicity of issues that remain to be settled in relation to the historical turn, there has been no small number of attempts to influence how it should be made, and thus no shortage of interpretations as to the fundamental points of contestation. This section discusses three such statements in the form of Vaughan-William’s Derridean approach, Isacoff’s case for a ‘Deweyan reconstruction’, and Kratochwil’s account of the historical nature of agency and the need for a *sui generis* approach to the study of international *politics*.³⁵ The intention is not to play these authors off against one other in an attempt to find the most appropriate flame-carrier for the historical turn; each represents an important contribution to the debate. The intention, rather, is to argue that while their approaches differ, they draw on a similar set of concerns about the relationship between IR and history entailed by positivism. Moreover, they do so from three distinct viewpoints: a Derrida-inspired postmodernism, a pragmatist middle ground, and an interpretivist approach put forward by a leading Constructivist. Hence,

³⁰ Ian S. Lustick, ‘History, historiography, and Political Science: multiple historical records and the problem of selection bias’, *The American Political Science Review* Vol. 90, No. 3, (1996), 605-18.

³¹ Vaughan-Williams, 117.

³² *Ibid.*, 117.

³³ Kennedy-Pipe, 741.

³⁴ See Elman and Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries*.

³⁵ Vaughan-Williams; Jonathan Isacoff, ‘On the historical imagination of international relations’; Friedrich Kratochwil, ‘History, action, and identity’.

although the choice of these three contributions has not been taken for any reason relating to what might be labelled ‘research design’, to retrace our steps and understand both their shared concerns and divergent prescriptions should give a degree of coherence to the debate over the historical turn in IR. Although that debate includes more positions than can be covered here—such as those of the English School, and a number of historical sociologists—these authors offer important readings of the wider debate about the need for a more historical IR.

Vaughan-Williams: a ‘Derridean’ turn

Of the three contributions, Vaughan-Williams puts forward the case for the most radical reconstruction of IR theory. His concern is not simply to bring history ‘back in’ to IR, but more specifically to reinstate the ‘problem of history’.³⁶ The problem of history here is the inability of IR scholars and historians to offer ‘true’ accounts of international events given the ‘radical uncertainty of historical meaning’: the impossibility of getting it ‘100% right’.³⁷ By itself, of course, this is saying little new. Historians have long been aware that their interpretations of past events are not objectively ‘true’, and not simply because of inadequate access to sources.³⁸ Indeed, even natural scientists have been forced to get to grips with the consequences of such indeterminacy in the wake of Heisenberg’s ‘uncertainty principle’.³⁹

The impossibility of objective truth has never been a problem as such, but Vaughan-Williams is quite correct that this indeterminacy has important implications. He argues that ‘Instead of projecting the radical uncertainty of historical meaning into its object of study’—i.e. embracing what we cannot possibly ‘know’—‘the preference in IR is to impose a form of interpretative closure on the historical record’.⁴⁰ As Ashley has noted, this tendency ‘arrests ambiguity and controls the proliferation of meaning by imposing a standard and a standpoint of interpretation that is taken to be fixed and independent of the time it represents.’⁴¹ The historical turn Vaughan-Williams would have us make, then, would be to recognise the ‘problem of history’ thus defined and to accept its implications, namely the dangers of ignoring the inherent historicity of our interpretations—and the meanings they pertain to discover—and seeking instead to impose a finality of judgement upon them. This approach does not, he is at haste to remind us, ‘purport to solve the “problem of history” in IR...on the contrary...it demands that the ‘problem of history’ must be seen to be and remain, precisely, as a problem in our analyses of world politics.’⁴² Just as historians must accept that there is no inherent truth to their narratives, IR scholars must accept that there is no inherent truth to the more generalized knowledge we seek.

³⁶ Vaughan-Williams, 117.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁸ See Peter Novick, *That noble dream: the “objectivity question” and the American historical profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

³⁹ On Heisenberg and his uncertainty principle, see, respectively, volumes 4 and 7 of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Craig, (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 327-9 and 841-2. For a discussion, see Stephen Toulmin, *Return to reason* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), particularly Chapter Six, ‘Rethinking method’, pp. 83-101.

⁴⁰ Vaughan-Williams, 117.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 117, quoting Richard K. Ashley, ‘Living on border lines: man, post-structuralism, and war’, in James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro, *International/intertextual relations: postmodern readings of world politics* (New York: Lexington Books, 1989).

⁴² Vaughan-Williams, 136.

Those averse in principle to any sort of ‘post-modernist’ approaches will no doubt recoil at being told that theirs is a fruitless task, bound to fail; all the more so based upon the reasoning of some ‘exotic (presumably Parisian) social theory.’⁴³ Vaughan-Williams’s argument is certainly inspired by such a theoretical standpoint, and is replete with linguistic ruminations that some find mere philosophical trickery. This includes the neologism *differance*, which Derrida uses to highlight the way in which language is not sufficiently stable to convey meaning unproblematically: ‘Meaning is always already on the move, constantly referring, differentiating and deferring.’⁴⁴ But the argument that Vaughan-Williams puts forward is a strong and persuasive one. In particular, the warning against the closing off of alternative possible interpretations should be heeded: it helps us see through differences that rest on methodological approaches and to see that all works of IR—whether positivist or not—represent *interpretations* of their objects of study. As Vaughan-Williams notes, ‘On this basis the aim becomes to show *how* something is what it is rather than *why* it is what it is. Our attention is diverted away from the search for ultimate causes towards an analysis of different representations in any given context.’⁴⁵ As such, it is more useful to determine their worth in terms of the strength of those interpretations, and the arguments they put forward, rather than upon ostensibly ‘objective’ standards such as theoretical ‘rigour’.

Although a strong argument and an important contribution to the historical turn, however, it is unlikely that Vaughan-Williams’s recommendations will gain much credence in the IR mainstream he attacks with such vigour. This is not, one would hope, simply because of his post-modernist influences. It is, rather, that the reading of the ‘historical’ he espouses runs counter to that held by the overwhelming majority of IR scholars—in the US and elsewhere. This can be seen with reference to the debate between traditional and critical historians his article considers. Simply put, most IR scholars would agree with those such as Richard Evans who see history as what actually happened, and that although it may not be impossible to reconstruct it with complete accuracy, it is the historian’s—and the IR scholar’s—task to represent as faithfully as possible the events themselves.⁴⁶ As Vaughan-Williams points out, the ‘traditionalists’ do have something of a ‘trump’ argument⁴⁷ up their sleeves when it comes to the integrity of the past: ‘Auschwitz was not a discourse. It trivialises mass murder to see it as a text...Auschwitz was indeed inherently tragedy and cannot be seen as either a comedy or a farce.’⁴⁸ The majority of IR scholars would no doubt have more than a little sympathy for this sentiment, and although Vaughan-Williams’s discussion of the ‘problem of history’ therefore raises a number of central issues involved in the turn to the historical, it is likely to stumble on what remains a somewhat controversial definition of ‘the historical’.

Isacoff: a ‘Deweyan’ reconstruction

In its more limited aims—warning against once and for all judgement, and serving a reminder that objective truth is always out of reach—Vaughan-Williams is in agreement

⁴³ Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt and Peter J. Katzenstein, ‘Norms, identity, and culture in national security’, in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The culture of national security: norms and identity in world politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 34.

⁴⁴ Vaughan-Williams, 127-8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 123-4. See also Richard J. Evans, *In defence of history* (London: Granta Books, 1997).

⁴⁷ Vaughan-Williams, 124, quoting Patrick Finney, unpublished article.

⁴⁸ Evans, *In defence of history*, 124.

with the second contribution to the historical turn focussed on here, that of Jonathan Isacoff.⁴⁹ Isacoff explicitly advocates the reconstruction of IR along pragmatist lines, in particular the work of John Dewey. Before summarizing his argument, two points are of particular interest. The first is that pragmatism has gained an increasing amount of attention within the subject recently.⁵⁰ Indeed, it could be argued that it currently represents a challenger to historical sociology for the position of ‘main contender’ for IR’s historical re-orientation. The second and weightier point is that this reorientation seeks to maintain the commitment to the past—to international politics *as it is*—whilst accepting the untenability of positivist approaches. Isacoff makes clear that his concern is to offer a ‘way-out’ of the ‘positivist versus post-ist wars by examining the pragmatist thought of John Dewey’.⁵¹

Isacoff’s reading of the ‘problem of history’ is thus clearly more in line with the historical ‘traditionalists’ and, by extension, the mainstream position within the discipline of International Relations, than is the case with Vaughan-Williams. That ‘problem’ is how to ground claims to historical knowledge, and thus avoid the seemingly zero-sum debate between historical objectivists and historical relativists.⁵² Moreover, since he does not need to make the case for an alternative reading of the ‘problem of history’ in IR, Isacoff is free to make a more sympathetic assessment of the manner in which the argument between positivists and post-modernists over the issue of historical knowledge has taken place. In particular, this allows him to draw out the full power of the post-modern critique, whilst agreeing with McCullagh that ‘Since the positivist approach ‘is a part of our cultural inheritance which has been of such spectacular value...it would seem foolish to abandon it’.⁵³ His concern, therefore, is the exploration of a possible *via media*.

Dewey’s philosophy of history accepts the point that the meaning of things cannot be deemed independent from those things. The meaning that these objects have for us are instead ‘socially constructed’.⁵⁴ However, rather than grasping radical indeterminacy like Vaughan-Williams would have us, accepting a Deweyan reconstruction, according to Isacoff, entails accepting historical enquiry as a process by which stable, intersubjective, understandings about the past can be created—despite the fact that these understandings remain intersubjective and not, therefore, true in any real sense. The intention, thereby, is to fix ‘order to interminable processes for the purposes of practically coping with temporality.’⁵⁵

This ‘fixing of order to interminable processes’ seems to recognise the problems associated with interpretative closure, but at the same time maintains that semi-closure is a price that must be paid in order to know how to ‘go on’ in certain practical

⁴⁹ Isacoff, ‘On the historical imagination of International Relations’.

⁵⁰ See, for example, David Owen, ‘Re-orientating International Relations: on pragmatism, pluralism and practical reasoning’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol. 31, No. 3, (2002), 653-73, and the special edition of *Millennium*, Vol. 31, No. 3, (2002).

⁵¹ Isacoff, 604.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 607-8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 609.

⁵⁴ See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality* (London: Penguin, 1967). The socially constructed nature of the ‘international’ is closely associated to ‘Constructivist’ IR. See Alexander Wendt, *Social theory of international politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Ted Hopf, *Social construction of international politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

⁵⁵ Isacoff, 614.

situations; or, at the very least, accept the path chosen as a valid one.⁵⁶ It thus offers a way in which the power of science as a mode of experience—to use the terminology of Michael Oakeshott—can be harnessed, while once again accepting its fallibility ‘in the final analysis’.⁵⁷ Following the pragmatic road out of the historical turn, therefore, recognizes both the limitations but also the necessity of making *positive* contributions to the study of international affairs, a critique that might be levelled at Vaughan-Williams.

The pragmatic approach seems to offer just the ‘way out’ of the ‘post-ist’ wars as Isacoff promises at the outset of his article.⁵⁸ In so doing, it has many points of concurrence with so-called ‘post-positivist’ approaches to IR: in particular, the work of Colin Wight.⁵⁹ Although Isacoff is unclear on this issue, it is to be assumed that Dewey would retain the view of history as a scientific enterprise, as does Wight, who bases his account of agents and structures in international politics on Bhaskarian Scientific Realism.⁶⁰ This has proven popular amongst those IR scholars who take the critique of positivism seriously, whilst wishing to retain for it the status of a science.⁶¹

However, in advocating the use of pragmatic analysis for explicitly normative ends, Isacoff seems to be taking the approach in a direction that does not correspond with the view of ‘scientific’ activity held by mainstream IR.⁶² The ‘normative’ purpose here is the possibility of IR making a more positive contribution to society: specifically ‘the improvement of the public good.’⁶³ IR’s task thus remains the analysis of international politics *as it is*, but it also has the aim of aiding in the construction of a more imaginative and democratic future: the world *as it should be*. This raises a number of important issues regarding the nature of IR after positivism, specifically whether it should address current questions of international politics—be ‘policy relevant’—or take a more impartial stance—one could call it the ‘ivory tower’ view. This is a familiar theme in all of the human sciences, and brings into focus not only the status of the knowledge they produce but its ostensible purpose as well, since, as we are aware, ‘theory is always for someone and for some purpose.’⁶⁴

While acknowledging that intersubjective agreement on certain purposes—such as democracy—might mask asymmetric power relationships, a pragmatic approach presents a more neutral, or optimistic, conclusion on these questions. It remains unclear, however, what the proper place of values is in pragmatic approaches to IR. A number of ‘critical theorists’ argue that once freed from the constraints of positivism, the type of conservative, ‘problem-solving’, approaches that could be underpinned by Isacoff’s reconstruction themselves become problematic.⁶⁵ It seems instead that IR ‘after positivism’ cannot but go down the road of normative theorizing, a road that takes

⁵⁶ This phrase is associated with the later Wittgenstein. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations* (London: Macmillan, 1953). See also Peter Winch, *The idea of a social science and its relation to philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁵⁷ See Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933).

⁵⁸ Isacoff, 604.

⁵⁹ See Colin Wight, *Agents, structures and international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* See also Roy Bhaskar, *A realist theory of science*, 2nd Ed. (Brighton: Harvester, 1978).

⁶¹ See, for example, Wendt, *Social theory of international politics*.

⁶² See King, Keohane and Verba, *Designing social inquiry*.

⁶³ Isacoff, 603.

⁶⁴ Robert Cox, ‘Social forces, states, and world orders: beyond International Relations theory’, *Millennium*, Vol. 10, No. 2, (1981), 126-55, reprinted in Keohane, *Neorealism and its critics*, pp. 204-254, quote at p. 207.

⁶⁵ On ‘problem-solving’ versus ‘critical’ theory, see Cox, *ibid.*

it far away from the search—however in vain—of a degree of objectivism. A pragmatic turn to history, therefore, does not offer the comfort that it appears to on the surface, as this important question is left open.

Kratochwil: history, agency and praxis

Isacoff's argument has a number of points of agreement with the final contribution to the historical turn under consideration here, that of Kratochwil on 'History, Action and Identity'. Like Isacoff, Kratochwil's concern is to use the turn to history to remodel the study of international politics along practical lines. Rather than seeking 'scientific' status for our inferences, he argues that the acceptance of a *sui generis* understanding of the political leads to a desire for 'practical wisdom' with which to address specific problems of international politics. This 'practical wisdom' or 'practical knowledge' is explicitly contrasted with 'technical' forms of understanding political issues that scientific approaches to the social and political sciences often strive for, since politics is no longer viewed as an enterprise comparable to a sort of 'social mechanics'.

Crucially, Kratochwil posits, this specific, *practical*, knowledge that politics requires is by necessity *historical* in nature. The term 'historical' here does not refer to the attempt to gain direct 'lessons' from history drawn from the history-as-laboratory view as outlined above.⁶⁶ Rather, his claim is 'that it is through historical reflection that we become aware of the "dialectic of choice" in which from the present the past is recollected and joined with the future by means of a political "project".'⁶⁷ Kratochwil thus widens the 'historical' element of the turn from the historian or IR scholar himself or herself, to include the subjects of their concern as well; both the observer and the observed, individuals and collectivities alike, are seen as intensely historical entities. Their identity and agency—their very ability to act—is predicated upon a certain reading of their historical condition. '[T]he conceptualisation of a social system without any recourse to the ideas and values the actors themselves hold seems futile indeed. Precisely because social reality is not simply "out there" but is made by the actors, the concepts we use are part of a vocabulary that is deeply imbricated with our political projects.'⁶⁸

Once again, in making his contribution to the debate over how a putative 'historical turn' should be affected in IR, Kratochwil also makes clear his own understanding of what is problematic about the current relationship with history. In his view it is quite clear that 'history' is not simply a laboratory, but nor is it simply the constituted nature of the object IR scholars study. "[H]istory", Kratochwil argues, 'is the encounter with the "self"⁶⁹, and is, as such, 'an indispensable precondition for grasping our predicament as agents'.⁷⁰ It follows from this that IR is a discipline concerned with the argumentative process of determining what does count as valid *practical* knowledge in international politics in light of this encounter.

⁶⁶ Kratochwil, 7. On the notion of history as 'teacher', see Reinhart Koselleck, '*Historia magistra vitae: the dissolution of the topos into the perspective of a modernized historical process*', in *Futures past: on the semantics of historical time* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1985).

⁶⁷ Kratochwil, 8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

Kratochwil is making a similar point here to one made by Clausewitz, according to the reading of the military historian John Tetsuro Sumida.⁷¹ Sumida argues that in the second book of *On War*, Clausewitz puts forward a practical notion of theory in relation to its role in the teaching of future generals. Because the ‘fog of war’ cannot be predicted in some objective, ‘scientific’, manner—just as international politics cannot for Kratochwil—it is only through the exposure to a large number of historical examples that the trainee can hope to master the situations he is likely to face. Even then he may not make the right decision in the event. Both Clausewitz and Kratochwil, therefore, advocate theory as intensely practical, as opposed to a number of postmodernists who explicitly view their approach as anti-*theory*.⁷² However, for Kratochwil, ‘Even for ‘problem-solving’ theory, we need to understand the peculiar problems of *praxis* and that entails an awareness of our predicament as historical beings.’⁷³

Beyond Objectivism and Relativism

The previous section was not intended to outline a solution to the ‘problem of history’ based on the three contributions under review. Instead, it was designed to demonstrate that a number of key issues keep cropping up time and again—both in terms of the factors motivating the turn to history, and the solutions that contributors propose—which would seem to add weight to the argument that they stem from more fundamental concerns. Thus, that the ultimate ‘reality’ of objects, and, in particular, the meaning of the term ‘historical’ itself, for example, repeatedly rear their heads as motivations, and that the centrality of argument and of *praxis* offer elements of tentative ‘ways out’, is not deemed accidental. If these more basic concerns can be explicated, therefore, it may give us a more adequate understanding of the issues at stake in the turn to history in IR.

In the absence of a commonly accepted solution to the ‘problem of history’ in IR, and by way of a positive contribution to the literature of the historical turn, it is argued here that the calls for a turn are united by a shared source: an acknowledgement of the problems of making valid knowledge claims given the rejection of positivism, and the desire to assuage the effects of this ‘Cartesian anxiety’, in the words of Bernstein.⁷⁴ The historical turn is thus borne from the need to exorcise this anxiety, an anxiety that arises from the rejection of objectivism, on the one hand, and the unwillingness to prostrate the discipline before the ‘spectre of relativism’ on the other.⁷⁵ The argument of this final section is that the historical turn is but one element of a debate over the discipline’s core nature and status beyond this Rubicon, and the terms of the debate of the historical turn *as a whole* can be brought into shaper relief in light of Bernstein’s notion of [IR] ‘beyond objectivism and relativism’.

A sense that IR is moving—and has been moving—‘beyond’ something is not, in fact, entirely novel. Over ten years ago, Smith, Booth, and Zalewski edited a volume entitled *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, which attempted to make clear that there were many more important and interesting theoretical issues at stake in the

⁷¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On war* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1984); Jon Tetsuro Sumida, ‘The relationship of history and theory in *On War*: the Clausewitzian ideal and its implications’, *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 65, No. 2, (2001), 333-54.

⁷² Vaughan-Williams, 134.

⁷³ Kratochwil, 24.

⁷⁴ Richard Bernstein, *Beyond objectivism and relativism*, pp. 16-9.

⁷⁵ See *ibid*.

study of international relations than were betrayed by the ‘neo-neo’ debate.⁷⁶ The idea that IR was moving ‘beyond’ positivism also reflected the widespread idea that IR was changing in response—and perhaps coordination with—developments in international politics since the Cold War.⁷⁷ Indeed, Isacoff makes it quite plain that the ‘value-added’ of a Deweyan reconstruction is the ability to move ‘beyond positivism and postmodernism’.⁷⁸ However, a brief glance at the major journals in the discipline would suggest that the attachment to positivism is still prevalent. It is this resistance to a truly ‘post-positivist’ IR, it is suggested here, that has resulted in the necessity of a number of ‘turns’ of which the historical is a prominent example.

Yet ‘objectivism versus relativism’ is not merely another antimony to add to the already-lengthy list of unbridgeable chasms that pepper the landscape of contemporary IR theory: ‘art versus science’, ‘understanding versus explanation’, ‘constitutive versus causal theories’, ‘reflectivism versus rationalism’—one could go on almost *ad infinitum*. In fact, the dichotomy does not actually represent a dichotomy at all since neither pure objectivism nor pure relativism are possible. Positivists of every stripe, both in the natural and social sciences, are working from the assumption that although not ‘true’ in a complete sense, they can and should continue to work as if it were true; or, in the case of some Scientific Realists, they can agree on its ‘truth’ through intersubjectivity, rather than objectivity.⁷⁹

Pure relativism, however, is equally impossible because the truth of the relativist position breaks down as soon as its claim to validity is questioned: ‘For implicitly or explicitly, the relativist claims that his or her position is true, yet the relativist also insists that since truth is relative, what is taken as true may also be false.’⁸⁰ Since it cannot be true and false at the same time, ‘One cannot consistently state the case for relativism without undermining it.’⁸¹ A pure relativist position is ultimately untenable. This is what Bernstein means then when he notes that when the objectivism versus relativism antimony is exorcised the anxiety falls apart, since there was no antimony in the first place. The Cartesian anxiety in IR that has given rise to the historical turn, therefore, has derived from a misunderstanding of the current state of the philosophy and practice of natural science, on the one hand, together with a somewhat irrational fear of more relativist approaches—such as that of Vaughan-Williams on the other.

Positivist approaches, which assume broadly that international relations can be studied like other natural kinds,⁸² has been retained largely because it appears to offer the best response to the Cartesian anxiety. However, the commitment to positivism has in actuality reflected a commitment to standards to which natural scientists themselves

⁷⁶ Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski, eds. *International theory: positivism and beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). On the ‘neo-neo’ debate, see David A. Baldwin, ed. *Neorealism and neoliberalism: the contemporary debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁷⁷ See Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen, eds., *International Relations and the end of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). In particular, see Rey Koslowski and Friedrich V. Kratochwil, ‘Understanding change in international politics: the Soviet empire’s demise and the international system’, pp. 127-65.

⁷⁸ Isacoff, 616.

⁷⁹ See Wight, *Agents, structures and international relations*. It should be noted here that not all Scientific Realists are positivists. For a discussion on Scientific Realism and its application to IR, see, Fred Chernoff, ‘Scientific Realism as a Meta-Theory of International Politics’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 46, (2002), 189-207.

⁸⁰ See Bernstein, p. 9, and pp. 8-16.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸² For an interesting discussion see Wendt, *Social theory of international politics*, pp. 64-77.

do not attempt to adhere; the ‘methods’ attached to positivist social sciences that act as independent reference points as to the quality of inferences represent much more stringent requirements than scientists follow. The paradoxical situation has arisen, therefore, that the natural scientist uses the tools he or she finds most appropriate the task at hand, while the student of politics—which would seem to be much more contingent and historical, and hence requisite of specific rather than general knowledge—has disabused himself of this luxury. This is not to state, then, that the assumption of certain preferences and interests on the part of actors in international politics is always incorrect, but rather that it cannot be taken *a priori* as the most suitable method by which a particular political situation should be addressed—that depends on the context.

In seeking to bring that context back into our reflections about politics, it would seem to follow that the historical turn in IR is a direct confrontation with the question of what IR *is*—what type of knowledge claims it can make—when objectivism and relativism are rejected.⁸³ In short, the historical turn begs the question ‘[W]hy do we study international politics and what purposes does the discipline of IR serve?’⁸⁴

Of course, these are heady claims that it would seem impossible to fully support here. But they are worthwhile making since they highlight certain points of correlation in the anti-positivist critique in IR, and especially the historical turn under investigation here. Quite independently of Bernstein’s work, both Isacoff and Kratochwil approach understandings of what is at stake in the historical turn that significantly reflect Bernstein’s reading of movements within continental and analytic philosophical traditions. Isacoff relies on Richard Rorty’s pragmatist reading of John Dewey⁸⁵ to underpin his version of the turn, whilst Kratochwil focuses on the importance of practical knowledge involved in international *politics*. In so doing, both echo sentiments Bernstein makes in what is itself an extended commentary on the movement beyond objectivism and relativism based on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, with a reflection on the contributions of, among others, Richard Rorty.⁸⁶

It is unlikely, therefore, that the points of correlation between the issues raised by the historical turn—in particular the approaches of Isacoff and Kratochwil—and the movements beyond objectivism and relativism identified by Bernstein are mere coincidence. Rather, it would suggest that there is a core group of concepts that form a basis around which an answer to the question of ‘What is left over once the false dichotomy has been exorcised?’, and hence what IR *is*, can be formed. We are left with, as Kratochwil and Isacoff in particular pointed out, and to a lesser extent Vaughan-Williams, argument, interpretation, reason and practical wisdom. Each of these, moreover, is both historically conditioned, but also rest on arguments drawn from history for their persuasive power and pertinence for the political issue at hand.

Reason, for example, the very basis on which we agree to discuss the validity of truth claims, and on which so-called ‘objective’ knowledge still has a powerful pull is, according to Thomas Kuhn’s work in the Philosophy of Science, intensely historical.⁸⁷

⁸³ This is noted by Richard Shapcott. See his, ‘IR as practical philosophy: defining a ‘classical approach’’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* Vol. 6, (2004), 271-91.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁸⁵ Isacoff. See also Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

⁸⁶ Bernstein, *Beyond objectivism and relativism*.

⁸⁷ See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, 2nd Ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970).

Rationality is not something independent of us, but is part of our ‘webs of belief’, or whatever one chooses to call the structures that order our very being in the world.⁸⁸ Moreover, this should not be thought of as some ‘new’ phenomenon; this was all there ever was. It simply looks new because of the tightness with which our webs of belief upheld—and continue to uphold—positivist and objectivist standards. Despite this tightness, our investigations into the nature of international politics always have been conditioned by our particular time and place, the vantage point of our present.⁸⁹ As Gadamer reminds us, we are unable to break free from our *prejudgements*.⁹⁰ Yet, of course, if we acknowledge that we are unable to escape our prejudices, the negative connotations that words such as ‘prejudice’ and ‘prejudge’ continue to hold for us begin to break down.

The turn to the ‘historical’ in IR, then, is about replacing the view of history that holds it as a laboratory of facts with one that recognises the historically conditioned nature of our concepts and methodologies, but also, fundamentally, of ourselves and the very system of reason within which we are bound. Realisation of this allows us to ‘fuse our horizons’ with those of the past in order to achieve ‘effective *historical* consciousness’ with which we assess the validity of our claims to practical knowledge about politics in light of history.⁹¹

Conclusion

This recrudescence of practical knowledge is, of course, not simply a concern of IR, but of all the social sciences, as generations of students and scholars have been taught both to seek the objective and the technical, and to work in modes assuming their existence. It is also a concern that resonates throughout Western thought, through the myth of the ‘expert’ and our ongoing infatuation with technical knowledge, and our downplaying of practical wisdom. Indeed, who can blame us when it is *technē*—the putting into practice of technical knowledge—that has seemingly allowed us the capacity of flight and taken us to the moon? It is understandably difficult to subscribe to the view of natural science as simply a particularly tightly spun web of belief when *technē* has given us so much, while the same can seemingly not be said for *phronēsis*, or ‘prudence’, and the use of practical knowledge.

However, without a willingness to recognize both the limitations and possibilities of the move beyond objectivism and relativism in IR, the anxiety that characterises the discipline will surely continue. In order to aid with this recognition, this paper has suggested that the same reasoning which underpins the calls for an historical turn in IR represent a larger concern in the philosophy of the social sciences of their claims to knowledge ‘beyond objectivism and relativism’. An acknowledgement of the misplaced nature of the Cartesian anxiety that stems from resting on the unfamiliar ground beyond this frontier, therefore, provides an alternative perspective from which to comprehend and debate the numerous ‘turns’ that have competed to reorient the subject, of which the historical is a particular variant. It allows

⁸⁸ ‘Webs of belief’ is a prominent theme in Clifford Geertz’s *The interpretation of cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). On the notion of being-in-the-world, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

⁸⁹ Kratochwil, 15.

⁹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 1975).

⁹¹ *Ibid*, my italics.

us to avoid the danger, pointed out by Vaughan-Williams, of interpretative closure, whilst also enabling us to make valid claims to knowledge about the ‘international’.

But a number of important issues remain. The first concerns what might seem an unsatisfactory conclusion for potential converts from positivism, that of its displacement with mere argument, or, worse still, ‘interpretation’, especially when this battle was one that was thought won.⁹² Those who have been ‘trained’ in technical ‘skills’ might well wonder where these have gone, and exactly what they have been replaced with. As Bernstein himself notes, it is unclear whether Gadamer’s notions of the ‘fusion of horizons’ and the creation of ‘effective historical consciousness’ actually succeed in providing a complete basis for positive knowledge claims, which is so close to the heart of the identity of the social sciences.⁹³ It may legitimately be asked, therefore, ‘Where now *technē*?’ Surely technical knowledge is not entirely to be dispensed with? After all, ‘*technē* without *phronēsis* is blind, while *phronēsis* without *technē* is empty.’⁹⁴

The second point raised by the foregoing discussion is whether hermeneutics and pragmatics are fundamentally complementary, or that IR’s move beyond objectivism and relativism requires us to make a choice between the two. Or are there further options? This is particularly important given the commitment of many of the founding fathers of pragmatism to science,⁹⁵ and the opposite tendency among those who favour an interpretative approach, including Gadamerian hermeneutics. While both offer a possible grounding for IR beyond objectivism and relativism, it seems likely that there are many issues yet to settle, particularly concerning the nature of ‘scientific knowledge’. Thus, despite the fact that advocates of IR as science have moved significantly away from outmoded conceptualizations of what it means to do science, the ‘art versus science’ debate will rumble on.

The third and final point concerns the matter of values and their proper place in studies of international politics. It may well be the case that IR scholars can be persuaded of the impossibility of stepping outside their own value judgements and *prejudices* when making their analyses. But it will be a more difficult task to accept that the aim of impartial, dispassionate analysis is no longer the main goal of the discipline of International Relations. Given this, what is the proper position of values in empirical and theoretical works in IR? Is it possible to note certain assumptions or biases at the beginning of an analysis, and then to continue as before? Or should explicitly normative theorizing become the standard?

There remain, in sum, numerous matters to discuss about what IR *is* ‘beyond objectivism and relativism’. By itself, the notion offers few solutions. It does, it is hoped, help us to understand the rationale underlying attempts to reconcile two strong tensions within our disciplinary condition: namely those between the desire for objective analysis, and the knowledge of its impossibility. It also suggests that the turn to history is but one of these attempts, and that it is thus unsurprising to note the degree of overlap with calls for other ‘turns’—the ‘linguistic’ and ‘constructivist’ turn for

⁹² For a defence of the suitability of interpretation to the study of the social sciences, see Charles Taylor, ‘Interpretation and the sciences of man’, in *Readings in the philosophy of social science*, edited by Michael Martin and Lee C. McIntyre (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1994).

⁹³ Bernstein.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁹⁵ See John Dewey, *The quest for certainty* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1929). See also George Herbert Mead, *Mind, self and society: from the standpoint of a social behaviorist* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

example—that put forward similar critiques and air similar concerns.⁹⁶ In so doing, it points at least to the general direction the turns might lead: just as ‘Perhaps, despite grand claims about clear and distinct ideas, transcendental proofs, conceptual necessities, philosophy has never been and never will be more than a shifting battleground of competing opinions,’⁹⁷ the same can be said of International Relations.

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⁹⁶ See Checkel, ‘The Constructivist turn in International Relations theory’, and Shapcott ‘Solidarism and after’.

⁹⁷ Bernstein, p. 15.

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