Beyond Reification and Deconstruction

Towards a Dialogical Approach to Theorizing International Politics

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Is writing a doctoral dissertation a special kind of academic labor? For me it was. For me it was, quite literally, a transformative experience. I am sure the entire thing will seem like a trifle a few years hence, but right now I cannot shake a profound feeling of pride, relief and gratitude—a feeling that is probably completely out of proportion to the work you are holding in your hands. If you have ever been a PhD student, you will understand. If you are a PhD student, you can imagine. Everyone else, please refrain from judgement.

People sometimes ask me what it is like to write a doctoral dissertation. I think I finally have an answer to this question. Imagine that you live in an alternate reality where some people can fly. You respect and admire the flying people and want to become one of them. Since you exhibit all the marks of a person who might, with a little training, soar above the skies, you are admitted on a trial basis into the inner ranks of the flying people. The admission procedure is as follows: you are pushed over the edge of a cliff and told to fly.

As you are falling towards the ground, the more experienced flyers are doing circles around you telling you to “do like us”. You try, with increasing desperation, to mimic their movements as the ground—and certain death—is fast approaching. For a few seconds you feel as if you might succeed, followed by a budding sense of relief (I can do this!). But then: the dreadful realization that you are still falling! And now you are almost at the ground! As you prepare for impact, and annihilation, the impossible happens: you somehow land on your feet, relatively undamaged. Even more shockingly, the people coming to congratulate you are under the impression that you were flying all along. Could this be true, you ask yourself, was the falling just an illusion? You do not really know, but you are glad it is over.

I had some invaluable companions on my journey from the cliff’s edge to the ground. First of all, in the role of “experienced flyers”, my two excellent supervisors: Jon Hovi and Robert Huseby. I only exaggerate slightly if I say that Jon taught me everything I know about academic writing and how to express logical thinking in words. Thus, even if his influence has become more indirect over the years (because I have shamelessly adopted his way of thinking and writing and made it my own), Jon
deserves credit for any part of this thesis that is actually readable and contains internally consistent argumentation. Robert’s main contribution has been to systematically question every assumption I make, in order to force them out in the open. It is simultaneously the most frustrating and most constructive kind of feedback you can get. Socrates said “know yourself!”, Robert adds “let other people know you as well!”. A big thank you to both (Jon and Robert, not Socrates).

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Summary

This dissertation is a philosophical (conceptual) inquiry into the relation between theory and practice in international politics. The thesis that is explicated and defended is that this relation should be conceptualized as a dialogue. By “dialogue” I mean a kind of intersubjective relation between theories of international politics (IR theory) and international political practice that goes beyond the familiar antagonism of essentialist reification and constructivist deconstruction. A turn to dialogue would have important implications for the study of international politics (IR). In particular, a dialogical IR would have an intimate connection with philosophy and history.

The classical understanding of IR theory is that such theory is supposed to reflect the underlying structure—the essence—of international politics. I refer to this position as “essentialism”. The constructivist critique of essentialism is that there is no such thing as an “essence” of international politics. Rather, international politics, as all forms of social practice, can take on a myriad of different forms—and have a myriad of “essences”. Taking one particular form, internal to one social-historical context, and calling it the essence of international politics is an act of unwarranted “reification”: i.e. a legitimization of a possible state of affairs as necessary and unavoidable. Such reification is, in effect, an attempt to stop the conversation on what international politics can potentially be.

The constructivist attitude reconfigures the understanding of the relation between IR and international-political practice. The essentialist has a clear idea of what international politics should be like, but justifies, paradoxically, this idea with reference to its necessity (international politics is such and such, regardless of what we would like it to be). On the constructivist understanding, theory is an explicit-making of the ideational background (the “horizon”) that at any given time underpins international politics as a realm of practice, and gives it a certain shape and form. By showing the social-historical particularity of such horizons (through “deconstruction”), the constructivist re-opens the conversation on what international politics can be—without, ostensibly, taking any particular standpoint on what international politics should be.
The dialogical approach advanced in this dissertation builds on the constructivist position by arguing that this position is, in fact, not merely deconstructive but also (potentially) re-constructive. The process of explicit-making of horizons is not merely negative in the form of “de-reification”/“deconstruction”; it also has a positive aspect in the form enlightenment. There is a difference between performing practices—such as those practices that make up the realm of international politics—in naiveté concerning the horizon (the ideational background) that regulates and makes the practices possible, and performing the practices under (self-)conscious awareness of this horizon (induced by deconstruction).

At the bottom here is the Socratic imperative to know oneself, which does not mean to know one’s private quirks and characteristics, but to know one’s place in the grander scheme of things—to know what is demanded of me in my different capacities, such as, e.g., a practitioner of international politics (if that is what I am). Theory qua insight into one’s horizon, I suggest, is a kind of Socratic self-knowledge; and to be a theorist is, ideally, to be a “midwife” (as Socrates thought of himself) for such insight. This way of thinking re-orients the relation between the theorist and practitioner such that it is no longer a matter of reifying a horizon as “natural”, or merely de-reifying a horizon as a social construct. Rather, theorizing is a matter of disclosing not a “natural horizon”, but our horizon.

In full awareness that our horizon has a social-historical origin, we can focus on the more interesting questions: whether, in practice, international politics currently lives up to the ideals that make up our horizon (it does not), and whether we have a sufficiently good theoretical grasp of our own horizon (we do not). The process of making our horizon explicit (i.e. theorizing) is a process of getting to know ourselves in the Socratic sense. I call this process “dialogue”, and IR as a discipline is a moment in this dialogue as it relates to international politics—a contribution to the larger enlightenment project in which we find ourselves as modern human beings. The next step in IR theorizing should be greater self-awareness of this task and what it demands.
There ought not to be two histories, one of political and moral action and one of political and moral theorizing, because there were not two pasts, on populated only by actions, the other only by theories.

- Alasdair MacIntyre

1 Introduction

In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2014) John Mearsheimer gives an argument for why IR theory is important. International politics, Mearsheimer argues, is already infused with “theory” in a broad sense of the term:

none of us could understand the world we live in or make intelligent decisions without theories. Indeed, all students and practitioners of international politics rely on theories to comprehend their surroundings. Some are aware of it and some are not, some admit it, and some do not (Mearsheimer 2014: 9).

Mearsheimer uses the Clinton administration, whose "foreign policy [...] was heavily informed by [...] liberal theories of international relations” (Mearsheimer 2014: 9), as an example. Clinton’s liberalist understanding of world politics justified policy moves such as the expansion of NATO membership in the 1990s to include Central and East European states. This illustrates, Mearsheimer maintains, how “general theories about how the world works play an important role in how policymakers identify the ends they seek and the means they choose to achieve them” (Mearsheimer 2014: 9-10). Not all theories are *good* theories, however, and Mearsheimer obviously finds Clinton’s liberal outlook naïve in comparison to his own realist understanding of international politics.

But on what basis can Mearsheimer claim that his realist theory is *better* than Clinton’s liberal theory? Mearsheimer argues that “[t]he ultimate test of any theory is how well it explains events in the real world” (Mearsheimer 2014: 6). However, Mearsheimer’s theory is supposed to explain great power politics, which means that the politics of Clinton, a leader of a great power, falls under its domain. But in that case Clinton’s liberalism, the very thing exposed as naïve by realism, would actually count *against* realism as a valid theory. If we argue that Mearsheimer’s explanation is
not meant as a reflection but a re-interpretation of Clinton’s situation (from a realist standpoint) the question is still there: what makes Mearsheimer’s realist re-interpretation better than Clinton’s liberalist interpretation of his own situation?

This thesis is not about the specific relation between Mearsheimer and Clinton. It is about the general relation between International Relations (IR)—the scholarly discipline concerned with international politics—and international politics, with a emphasis on the role of theory in this relation. The overarching question that will occupy us is the following:

what is the relation between IR theory and international politics and what practical implications for IR follow from the nature of this relation?

I ask this question as a philosophical question, meaning as a conceptual rather than as an empirical question. If I had asked the question as an empirical question, one would rightly expect an analysis of whether and to what degree IR theory has actually, as a matter of empirical fact, influenced international politics.¹ This would be an interesting line of inquiry, but it is not this line of inquiry I pursue in this thesis. Conceptual analysis starts a little earlier than empirical analysis. Specifically, conceptual analysis is concerned with how we should think about (i.e. conceptualize) the relation between IR and international politics in the first place.

The answer I give to the question above, i.e. the thesis I explicate and defend in this work, is that the relation between IR and international politics is dialogical. What this means more concretely will be clarified as the argument proceeds, particularly in chapter 4. However, the main idea is to think of theorizing international politics as participating in a historical dialogue on the boundaries of political legitimacy. By “participating” I mean to indicate a contrast to merely “observing”. The idea is that IR theorizing is not speculation about what goes on in some external realm called “international politics”, but a contribution to a conversation on the fundamental

¹ For instance, is it true that political realism “shapes the thinking of virtually every foreign policy professional today in the United States and much of the rest of the world” (Fukuyama 2012: 246)?
principles for political co-existence. Insofar as this conversation is itself part of international politics, then theorizing international politics is a species of *doing* international politics. Exactly how IR theory can contribute to this conversation—and the practical implications this has for IR—I will get into later.

I consider two competing understandings of the relation between IR and international politics: essentialism (chapter 2) and constructivism (chapter 3). I use the terms “essentialism” and “constructivism” in a very specific way: to denote sets of internally connected ontological, epistemological and practical-philosophical commitments out of which an understanding of the relation between IR and international politics may be fashioned. For instance, essentialism is defined as an *ontological* commitment to an unchangeable essence of international politics, an *epistemological* commitment that theory should reflect this essence, and a *practical-philosophical* commitment that theory should enlighten practitioners about this essence so they can adjust to it. Constructivism is the anti-thesis to essentialism: an ontological commitment to the inner socio-historicity of international politics, combined with epistemological and practical-philosophical commitments to social-historical deconstruction.

Essentialism and constructivism do not, of course, exist as self-understandings in the pure ideal-typical forms they appear in this thesis. The point of setting up such ideal-types and relating them internally is twofold. First, I want to map out and evaluate possible answers to how we should conceptualize the relation between IR and international politics. This is a conceptual question that requires conceptual inquiry into how we can form of coherent understanding of the matter—not an empirical survey of how people actually think. Second, I think it is safe to say that the current disciplinary debate on the ontological, epistemological and practical-philosophical issues I raise in this thesis largely takes place within the horizon set by essentialism and constructivism. If we want to transcend this debate we first need to understand these positions.
The purpose of this introductory chapter is to provide a clear statement of the problem, clarify the central concepts of the analysis and give a preliminary review of the argument as it unfolds over the next three chapters.

1.1 Social inquiry as a meeting of horizons

Every inquiry rests, implicitly or explicitly, on certain assumptions. In this and the following sections I try to make my assumptions as explicit as possible. I do not do this in order to “avoid” my assumptions (in which case they would not really by my assumptions anymore), but to open myself up to critique. The fundamental assumption I make is that the meeting between scholar and practitioner (e.g. between Mearsheimer and Clinton)—or between scholar and scholar, or between practitioner and practitioner or between any human beings of any kind—is a meeting of horizons (Gadamer 2013).

Philosophers have used different terms for what I refer to as horizon, such as “background” (Searle 1995: chap. 6), “paradigm” (Kuhn 2012: chap. 2) or “inescapable framework” (Taylor 1989: chap. 2). Another word for “horizon” in this context would simply be “consciousness”, in the sense of a conceptual structure that sets the stage for thinking and being—what is sometimes called a “world view” (Weber 2004: 103). For instance, when someone says that “the social world is ultimately the result of many individuals interacting with one another and that any theory that fails to accept this basic premise rests on mysterious metaphysical assumptions” (List & Spiekermann 2013: 629, emphasis removed), they are stating the basic elements of their world view. World views, when they are made explicit, are called “ideology” when referring to political practitioners (e.g. Clinton) and “theory” when referring to scholars (e.g. Mearsheimer).^3

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^2 There are two kinds of critique I hope to facilitate: (1) whether my argument follows reasonably from the assumption I make (internal consistency), and (2) whether the assumptions themselves are reasonable.

^3 Thus, when we say, for instance, of a politician that he or she is a liberal, we are making a statement about his or her ideology—when we say of a scholar that he or she is a liberal (or a realist, or Marxist etc.), we are making a statement about his or her theoretical standpoint.
Insofar as social inquiry is a meeting of horizons, this puts the social theorist in a position that does not have an equivalent in the natural sciences. In his book *Agents, Structures and International Relations* (2006), Colin Wight makes two important points about this special circumstance of social inquiry. The starting point for any investigation of social phenomena, Wight argues, “must be the concepts [i.e. the horizon] of the agents concerned” (Wight 2006: 57)—if we do not understand how people think, we do not understand why they do as they do. However, “the concept-dependent nature of social relations, does not mean that because agents must have some concept they will always have the right concept. Indeed, some concepts ‘may actually function so as to mask, repress, mystify, obscure or otherwise occlude the nature of what [the agents are doing]’ ” (Wight 2006: 57, emphasis added, citations removed). The fact that the agents’ understandings are not incorrigible “opens up a unique possibility, for the social sciences, that of critique” (Wight 2006: 57).

The relation between analysis and critique is, in many ways, the central issue around which this thesis revolves. We will become intimately familiar with the complexity of this relation as the argument proceeds. For instance, is critique merely a “possibility” in addition to analysis, or is analysis in itself a form for critique? I will argue the latter, but more on that later. The point I am trying convey at this point is the following. In social inquiry, we have (at least) two horizons of understanding: that of the agent(s) being explained and that of the scholar doing the explanation (see also Giddens 1987: chap 1). The question is: who has understood the most and why? This question pertains equally to the validity of explanation as to the validity of critique. In the next sections, I consider the idea of theory in relation to this question.

### 1.1.1 The analytical-critical duality of IR theory

Analytically speaking, the meeting between horizons in social inquiry is a hermeneutic challenge of understanding the other’s thinking in order to explain the other’s being (e.g. particular actions such as extending NATO membership to Eastern Europe). However, such a meeting is not merely a matter of understanding, but also (potentially)

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4 Of course, some natural sciences deal with “horizons” in a more basic sense when studying animals. Animals, however, (as far as we now) do not have religions, political ideals, ideological world-views or conceptions about truth, justice and freedom. If they did, then biology would be in the same position as the social sciences.
a matter of critique. It is not just that, e.g., Mearsheimer analytically understands Clinton; Mearsheimer’s understanding also functions critically in relation to Clinton’s own understanding. At the root of this critical function is Mearsheimer’s theory, which “like a powerful flashlight in a dark room” (Mearsheimer 2014: 11) allows him to see clearly what others (including the practitioners being explained) see only dimly. This is what I refer to as the analytical-critical duality of IR theory.

Before we move on I want to give a philosophical statement of the analytical-critical duality. The analytical relation between IR and international politics is a relation between an observing subject (IR) and its corresponding object (international politics). When this relation is investigated philosophically, it is usually referred to as epistemology. The critical relation between IR and international politics, in contrast, puts the IR scholar in a participatory relation to international politics. In the critical relation, the IR scholar stands in a subject-subject, or intersubjective, relation to international politics. Clarifying the critical role of theory is a question that belongs not to epistemology, but to practical philosophy; it concerns the mediation between theory and practice (Kant 1996b). The two relations are summarized in table 1.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical</th>
<th>International politics as Realm of facts (subject matter)</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Relation</th>
<th>Philosophy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Realm of practice (audience)</td>
<td>Enlightenment</td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Practical philosophy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.1: The analytical-critical duality of IR theory

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5 I am using the term “critique” in a broad sense (in the same kind of sense we might speak of a critique of a movie). A critique, as I use the word, is not necessarily negative; it can also be positive, and usually it is a bit of both. If Clinton had been a realist, Mearsheimer’s critique would, presumably, have been much more positive.

6 The primary epistemological axis of contention as regards theory is between (a) seeing theory as (possibly) reflecting the real but empirically unobservable causal structure of the object (e.g. Joseph & Wight 2010); and (b) seeing theory as an conceptual framework for intellectually structuring the object in the first place (e.g. Jackson 2008). The metaphor for the first case is to see theory as a mirror; the metaphor for the latter case is to see theory as a lens.

7 Note that my primary concern is not primarily the analytical or the critical relation, but the relation between the analytical and the critical relation. This concern separates this thesis from more traditional epistemological and methodological work in IR (such as e.g. Hollis & Smith 2009; Jackson 2011), which tend to work within the confines of the analytical relation; but also from work more exclusively concerned with critique (such as e.g. Walker 1993; Levine 2012). Thus, when I speak of positions such as “essentialism”, “constructivism” and “dialogue”, I speak of a set of commitments that span the analytical and the critical relation.
I should probably clarify why I call the practical relation “critical”. It is common to divide the mediation between IR theory and political practice into pragmatic problem solving (e.g. policy advice) and critique, which suggest that this relation is critical only in certain respects (the classical reference for this division is Cox 1981). However, I think this division is misleading insofar as it implies that problem solving can take place without critique, i.e. without addressing matters of interpretation.

The reason problem solving and critique are inseparable (on a fundamental level) is that an integral part of problem solving is to understand the problem—or even recognizing something as a “problem” in the first place. Mearsheimer’s critique of Clinton is not only that Clinton made the wrong policy choices (although that too, of course), but that Clinton saw the world in the wrong way—which is what provided the basis for his misguided policy choices.\footnote{Let me give another example. When Norway chose to apply for NATO membership in 1949 it was an answer to familiar problem in international politics, namely how to best to provide for national security. The debate around this decision was in no small measure a debate about how to understand this security problem in the first place. At least three conflicting interpretations existed. The first line of conflict was between those who interpreted the security problem through the ideological bifurcation of the international realm into blocs of nations, and those (a minority at this point) who thought in more traditional nation-centric terms. The second line of conflict was between those who saw in the ideological conflict a need to pick sides and those who argued for neutrality. The neutrality argument was both motivated pragmatically (it is safer to be neutral) and ideologically. Especially the communists, but also significant portions of the social-democrats, argued against joining any particular alliance on the grounds that it would make Norway part of the problem rather than a force for finding “a third way” rooted in international solidarity (Meyer 1989). The larger point is that the fundamental understanding of the issue—and understanding that is inexorably linked to one’s general world view—is so intimately related to how one deals with the issue that the two cannot be separated without distortion.}

1.2 Theory and theorizing

When I speak of theory in this thesis, I mean a kind of horizon or an -ism. Connecting the concepts theory and horizon is meant to convey the idea that theory, in a fundamental sense, is inescapable.\footnote{A horizon is something unavoidable: wherever you go you always have a horizon, and beyond any particular horizon is yet another horizon.} There is no position beyond language that allows you to behold or be in the social world in a “pre-conceptual” manner; “the move beyond ‘isms’ can only by yet another ‘ism’ by another name” (Dunne et al. 2013: 415; see also Reus-Smit 2013a). This should not make us despair, but it should make us approach the issue of theory in a specific way. If we cannot become “horizonless”, i.e. non-theoretical and non-ideological, we should instead focus on finding the right horizon, the right –ism.
Even if a theory is a kind of horizon, not all horizons are necessarily “theoretical” to the same degree. If the term “theory” and “theorizing” is to have any meaning at all, it must be distinguished from “non-theoretical” or less theoretical understandings. The traditional connotations of theory is that it is a form of understanding that is systematic, explicit, abstract and universal (Dreyfus 1986; Flyvbjerg 2001: 36-38). I consider what a systematic, explicit, abstract and universal understanding is in section 1.3, when I discuss dialectical argument. In this section, however, I consider the concept of theory more for what it does, i.e. I consider theorizing as a form of practice (as in e.g. Taylor 1985). What is the purpose of theorizing? What do we hope to achieve by moving from a non-theoretical to a theoretical understanding of something?

The first to give an account of theorizing as a practice in the Western tradition was Plato with his allegory of the cave (see Bloom 1968: book VI). Plato conceived of theorizing as a form of enlightenment. Most people live in a “shadow world”, according to Plato, only grasping imperfect reflections of the fundamental ideas that nourish their existence. Theorizing means beholding these ideas in their abstract, universal purity, of which “the last thing to be seen, and with considerable effort, is the idea of the good” (Bloom 1968: 195, emphasis removed). I am not here concerned with the specifics of Plato’s theory, but with theorizing as such. As a social practice, theorizing relies on a dualism between “the surface” and “the underlying”. Theory, in the Platonic sense, is a form of understanding that penetrates to the underlying.

Natural-scientific theory is a good, but also a dangerous, example of Platonic theory. It is a good example in the sense that it is quite obvious how natural-scientific theory takes us beyond the immediate surface of, e.g., the physical world and into a systematic, abstract and universal conceptual framework of “spacetime”, “gravitational waves”, “particles” etc. It is a dangerous example in the sense that natural-scientific theory is about nature, not about social-historical reality—and we must be careful not to take the analogy too far without considering possible complications that follow from differences in subject matter. What sense can be made of the distinction between “the

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10 “Non-theoretical” is in quotes since, in a strict sense, no actual understanding is completely non-theoretical. I am speaking ideal-typically again.
surface” and “the underlying” when we speak of social phenomena such as international politics? This will actually be one of the points of contention as the argument unfolds, so I will not go into it in detail at this point. Instead, I want to connect this discussion of theory and theorizing with the discussion of the special position of social inquiry from the previous section.

I have argued that the question “who has understood the most?” is always a pressing question in social inquiry. Theory is precisely a form of understanding that claims authority in relation to other understandings. As mentioned, the move from a non-theoretical to a theoretical understanding of something is a form of enlightenment. This enlightenment has two practical components. First, theoretical insight allows us to explain phenomena we previously could not explain in a satisfactory manner (or only thought we could explain in a satisfactory manner). Second, theoretical insight makes possible an improved practice directed at that which we now understand better. Theory opens up possibilities for understanding and action.

The need for theory is most acute when prevailing understandings of something, such as international politics, are in some way inadequate so that what is really going on is obscured—possibly with baleful consequences (Taylor 1985: 94). The birth of modern IR theory was motivated precisely by the prospect of a more enlightened form of international politics (Williams 2013). Indeed, “the discipline of international relations may reasonably be described as the last of the great enlightenment […] projects” (Reus-Smit 2001: 577). One of the most striking examples of this ethos is E. H. Carr’s The Twenty Years’ Crisis (2001). Carr’s seminal work was first published in September 1939, just days after the Second World War had broken out. It is worth quoting at length from the preface to the book:

When the passions of war are aroused, it becomes almost fatally easy to attribute the catastrophe solely to the ambitions and the arrogance of a small group of men, and seek no further explanation. Yet even while war is raging, there may be some practical importance in an attempt to analyse the underlying and the significant, rather than the immediate and personal, causes of the disaster. If and when peace returns to the world, the lessons of the breakdown which has involved Europe in a second major war within twenty years and two months after the Versailles Treaty will need to be earnestly pondered. […] The next Peace Conference, if it is not to
repeat the fiasco of the last, will have to concern itself with issues more fundamental than the drawing of frontiers. In this belief, I have ventured to dedicate this book to the makers of the coming peace (Carr 2001: ix, emphasis added).

The contrast between “the underlying and the significant” and the “immediate” captures the Platonic idea of theorizing that I am trying to convey. There is something below the surface of international reality that even practitioners (or maybe in particular practitioners) involved in the day-to-day dealings of international politics do not necessarily see, or may easily lose sight of. Someone needs to keep the big picture in view. Someone should focus not on the immediate dangers and opportunities that politicians are (rightly) worried about, but on the fundamental dangers and opportunities of the historical situation in which we find ourselves.

The mission of the political realists, for instance, has always been to remind the rest of us, especially in times of progressive optimism, that international politics is inherently conflictual and rooted in the struggle for power rather than common ideals. Carr’s critique of the utopianism of the inter-war years and the League of Nations, Morgenthau’s critique of the universalism following the Second World War that led to the creation of the United Nations, and Mearsheimer’s critique of the liberal mentality of 1990s that underpinned the extension of NATO are all examples of such reminders.\footnote{Robert Kagan’s well-titled book \textit{The Return of History and the End of Dreams} (2008) belongs in the same genre.}

\subsection*{1.2.1 The unfashionableness of -isms}

Despite being an integral part of the collective self-understanding of the discipline—and despite the fact that “the main canonical works of international relations theory […] continue to shape much academic work” (Snyder 2011a: 1)—fundamental theory of the kind Carr envisioned is not particularly fashionable in IR at the moment. Indeed, \textit{The European Journal of International Relations} recently devoted a special issue to “The End of International Relations Theory” (Dunne et al. 2013) motivated by the recession of traditional IR theory—the clashes between which once constituted the core of the discipline.
A more pragmatic and less totalizing attitude towards theory seems to be all the rage. The proponents of this turn argue that the future lies in theoretical pluralism and problem-driven analytical eclecticism unencumbered by allegiance to all-encompassing -isms (e.g. Bauer & Brighi 2008; Monteiro & Ruby 2009; Sil & Katzenstein 2010; Jackson 2011). One of the most vocal defenses of this new way of ahead is David Lake’s famous article Why “isms” are Evil, in which fundamental theories are denounced as “academic sects” that acts as “impediments to understanding and progress” (Lake 2011: 465). However, it is not actually isms that Lake disapproves of, but a situation where IR becomes “an intellectual tower of Babylon” (Lake 2011: 472). In other words, it is lack of dialogue across these different “sects” that is the real threat:

we need to be able to communicate across theoretical traditions, compare assumptions and interpret findings. Ideally, we want modular theories—separate, self-contained, 12 and partial theories—that connect more or less well to other theories […]. Even lacking such theories, we need a lexicon that allows translation across theories. Such a lexicon requires a further subtle but important shift in emphasis from what makes us distinct as scholars to what makes us common (Lake 2011: 472-473, emphasis added).

However, what should we make of this lexicon that brings all the different fundamental theories together? Would not such a conceptual framework be a new -ism? Let us consider Lake’s suggested lexicon, which is “to think of politics as composed of some actor pursuing interests while engaged in interactions with other actors within institutions” (Lake 2011: 473, emphasis removed). This, of course, is more than a “lexicon”, it is (at least part of) a fundamental theory of politics. This theory of politics, Lake argues, “does not, in my view, privilege one tradition over another” (Lake 2011: 473). This is both questionable (his lexicon sounds very in tune with neo-liberalism and neo-realism) and a bit naïve. It is precisely the content of terms such as “actors” and “institutions” and the relation between them—issues that Lake dispenses with in a single sentence—that are theoretically contested.

12 A “modular theory” is not, strictly speaking “self-contained”, but part of a bigger whole (a module is only a “module” qua being part of a larger system).
Let me give an example that foreshadows some of the discussion in later chapters. One of the main quarrels between structural realism and constructivism—two of the traditional IR –isms—is the relationship between agency and structure. This quarrel, furthermore, is rooted in conceptual disagreement about how to understand the terms “agent” and “structure” in the first place. For structural realists, structure is something akin to a physical environment: external to agents and constraining and enabling action in the same way as physical surroundings might constrain and enable action. For constructivists, on the other hand, structure is social and internally related to agents’ identities, constraining and enabling by providing “norms and shared understandings of legitimate behavior” (Fierke 2011: 181).

Thus, “structure” plays an important role in both structural realism and constructivism, but the term does not mean the same thing. Additionally, it is not just that the terms have different meanings, but the constructivists claim to have a better understanding of structure. This is the controversy and it cannot be resolved simply by pointing out that both sides use the same word. If we are really serious about theoretical engagement we need to start at the beginning and take fundamental conceptual issues seriously. However, the exact “terms of engagement” (Dunne et al. 2013: 415) between fundamental theories are generally unclear. We want to move beyond a “debilitating relativism”, but at the same time avoid a “paradigmatic ‘war of all against all’ ” (Dunne et al. 2013: 415, 120). I believe the dialectic approach used in this thesis provides precisely such a third alternative.

### 1.3 Dialectic

This thesis is written dialectically. Dialectic is a specific way of conducting a philosophical argument associated with Plato-Socrates, Hegel, Marx and the Frankfurter school among others (for general discussions, see e.g. Jay 1996; Westphal 1998; Warren 2008). The driving force of dialectical inquiry is the Socratic imperative to know oneself, which is a plea to examine one’s own conceptions and ideas—one’s own horizon—as to whether it is consistent with itself. Such self-examination is sometimes called an “immanent critique” because it evaluates positions using the

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13 I am simplifying the structural realist position a bit here, see discussion in section 2.5.
positions’ own criteria. A very simple example of an immanent critique is the liar’s paradox: “[a] writer who says that there are no truths [...] is asking you not to believe him. So don’t.” (Scruton 2012: 6).

The liar’s paradox illustrates how a position can trip itself up. However, pointing out the internal inconsistency involved in claiming that truth does not exist is not, on its own, a very constructive form of critique. A good dialectical argument is both negative and positive; it both de-constructs and re-constructs. The trick to understanding this process is that deconstruction and reconstruction happens, so to speak, in two different “places”: in front of your eyes and behind your back. The position that has been deconstructed is laid out before you as a dissected object whose limits you have now seen and therefore gained distance to. The new position that has been erected, however, is not so immediately noticeable: it is the position from where the limits of the deconstructed position are visible, the position you are now standing. Kierkegaard has put it as follows: “[t]he secret of all comprehending is that this comprehending is itself higher than any position it posits” (Kierkegaard 1980: 95). To understanding a position is to transcend it and, through understanding, establish a new, higher position.

Do not understand “place” and “position” in a spatial sense. It should rather be understood in an existential-ontological sense. Let me suggest three metaphors to aid this understanding. The first metaphor is to “think of reality as a set of concentric spheres, progressively revealed as we detach gradually from the contingencies of the self” (Nagel 1986: 5). Human existence has different spheres that form a set of concentric circles moving from particularity (“the contingencies of the self”) to universality. Each of us is composed of aspects that vary from the individual-idiosyncratic, the social (things we share with some contemporaries, e.g. nationality), the historical (things we share with all contemporaries, e.g. modernity) to the universal (things we share with all human beings, regardless of social-historical circumstance). The purpose of dialectic argument is to get to the outmost, in the sense of “most universal”, sphere of existence.
The second metaphor is “broadening horizons”, which speaks to the immanent
dimension of dialectical argument. The idea of “broadening horizons” is meant to
capture that the movement from particularity to universality is not a movement from
one particular perspective to another particular perspective. Rather, this movement is
more like discovering a more fundamental way of thinking that forces a re-
interpretation of alternative ways of thinking as moments of that more fundamental
horizon. As one’s horizon expands, former positions, previously thought to be
fundamental, are left behind along the way. Note that “left behind” does not mean
simply discarded, but re-interpreted (from a more fundamental horizon). Thus, a
position that is superseded is not, for that reason, completely invalidated. Rather, it is
merged into a larger whole.

The Hegelian term *aufheben* is the best description of what happens in a
transition from one position to another in dialectical argument. This concept, which
does not really translate well, has three meanings: to annul, to keep and to elevate
(Skjervheim 1996b: 22). It is a paradoxical term, but the phenomenon itself is
paradoxical. In his famous preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977), Hegel warns
against a tendency to unduly simplify philosophical refutation in either/or terms:

> conventional opinion […] tends to expect a given philosophical system to be either accepted or contradicted; hence it finds only acceptance or rejection. It does not comprehend the diversity of philosophical systems as the progressive unfolding of truth, but rather sees in it simple disagreements (Hegel 1977: 2).

Next, he offers an alternative metaphor for how to think about transitions from one
philosophical system to another:

> [t]he bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the other. […] These forms [the bud and the blossom] are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible [i.e. they cannot both be at the same time]. Yet at the same time [they are] moments of [a larger] unity (Hegel 1977: 2).
It is precisely seeing the whole, rather than fixating on particular parts (or erroneously taking any particular part to be the whole), that is the ambition of dialectical argument. However, Hegel’s bud-to-blossom metaphor is also a bit misleading. Thinking of the transition from bud to blossom as a whole is easy enough since we can picture it as a series of external transitions happening before our eyes. Or to put in terms that will play an important part in this thesis: it is a whole that we observe from the outside; it is not a whole we participate in. This difference is crucial, but also a bit difficult to grasp and hold on to, which is why the metaphor of expanding horizons is so important. A third metaphor, “levels of reflection”, can help us complete the idea of dialectic argument.

In IR textbooks, different theoretical horizons (liberalism, realism, constructivism etc.) are often presented in a manner that gives the impression that they are on the same level. That these –isms might represent different levels of understanding—that some of them are more fundamental than others—is not, it seems to me, a possibility that is commonly entertained. Dialectically speaking, what makes one horizon better than another is insight into the limitations of the less fundamental horizon. The relation between the more and the less fundamental horizon is asymmetrical. Specifically, the two horizons belong to different levels of reflection, such that “from the lower level of reflection [i.e. from a less fundamental horizon] it is not possible to understand the thought that is on the higher level of reflection [i.e. the more fundamental horizon], while the higher level of reflection can understand the lower level” (Skjervheim 1964b: 178, my translation).

Let me briefly illustrate how dialectical argument is supposed to work. The two alternative positions considered in this thesis are essentialism (chapter 2) and constructivism (chapter 3). One way to think of these two positions is simply as different, competing understandings of the ontological, epistemological and practical-philosophical issues we consider in this thesis—which they are. However, constructivism and essentialism are also internally related. Specifically, constructivism can be understood as a response to internal contradictions in the essentialist position.
Insofar as constructivism resolves these anomalies, constructivism represents, dialectically speaking, a higher level of understanding (in relation to essentialism). In other words, the relation between essentialism and constructivism is asymmetrical in the sense outlined above: constructivism understands essentialism better than essentialism understands itself. Indeed, if my argument is correct, it follows that when essentialism understands itself, it becomes constructivism.

The question, of course, is how far back one can go. The answer is that one can only go back to the beginning, to the dialectic itself. Consider that the piece of insight on which the previous paragraph ended—i.e. the insight into the internal relation between essentialism and constructivism—does not belong to essentialism nor to constructivism; it is a dialectical insight. Thus, we actually have three levels of self-insight: essentialism, which does not understand itself; constructivism, which understands essentialism; and dialectical thinking, which understands both essentialism and constructivism. The demonstration and the defense of my thesis, which are so closely related that they cannot really be considered separate tasks, will be precisely to follow this spiral of self-knowledge, starting with essentialism and ending in the dialectical horizon—an ending which, in a sense, takes us back to the beginning, since the argument itself is dialectical.

A dialectical argument, as it works its way through the layers of particularity towards the universal, gradually becomes more and more abstract. This is unavoidable: if you want to say something universal that stands on its own regardless of particular circumstance, it will necessarily have to be formulated in abstract terms. If you want to say something universal that stands on its own regardless of particular circumstance, it will necessarily have to be formulated in abstract terms. Thus, the chapters in this thesis become increasingly abstract (and, I imagine, more difficult to understand). However, abstract truths are not “empty” or inconsequential. True, such truths amount to very little on their own but they are not meant to stand on their own. Rather, they are meant to be a beginning; not a beginning that you can subsequently forget, but something to hold on to as you get involved with more particular problems.

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14 There is really nothing strange about this. We see the same thing in, for instance, natural science: the more fundamental the science, the more abstract it becomes. Theoretical physics, for instance, is so abstract that its central theories (the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, string theory etc.) cannot be concretized and explained without also distorting them to some degree.
If a horizon sets the stage for subsequent thinking and being, dialectic is concerned with setting (or more precisely: re-setting) the stage correctly.\textsuperscript{15}

1.4 Review of the argument

In this section, I provide a preliminary run-through of the argument as it unfolds over the next three chapters. The argument consists of immanent critiques of two philosophical positions—essentialism (chapter 2) and constructivism (chapter 3)—that from the dialogical point of view (chapter 4) misunderstand something fundamental about the relation between IR and international politics. The primary dialectical fuel for these immanent critiques is the analytical-critical tension inherent in IR theory that I introduced in section 1.1. The ambition of the thesis is to carve out a position beyond essentialism and constructivism through dialectical insight into the limitations of these positions. The different positions I consider are summarized in table 1.2 (next page).

\textsuperscript{15} The primary motivation for writing this thesis is, naturally, that I think there is something wrong with the how the stage for IR scholarship is currently set up. Of course, I am fully aware that IR is not really one stage, which I consider to be part of the problem. I am also aware that I am “playing with fire” (Jackson 2011: chap. 1) by even suggesting that IR should gather under one horizon (and it is no use pretending that I am not in order to avoid offending people). I think that some IR scholars have understood more than others about what they are doing, and that certain IR scholars might even be doing more harm than good— not out of malice, not out of deficiency in empirical knowledge or worldly wisdom, but out of lack of Socratic self-knowledge.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human nature essentialism (chapter 2)</th>
<th>Ontology</th>
<th>What is IR theory?</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Critique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No or only a nascent concept of “world”. Ontology focused on an ineradicable part of human nature that is “political”.</td>
<td>A specification of what it means to be political (“political man”).</td>
<td>Show how the special properties of being political give international politics its particular shape and form.</td>
<td>Correct fundamental misunderstandings concerning the nature of international politics.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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| Structural essentialism (chapter 2) | Objective world. Agents are situated in an external environment (akin to a physical environment) to which they must adjust. | A reflection of the objective structure (the essence) of international reality. | Show how the objective structures of the international realm shape international politics. | Correct fundamental misunderstandings concerning the nature of international politics. |

| Constructivism (chapter 3) | Inter-subjective world. Agents think and act under a conceptual horizon that structures what is possible and legitimate. | A form of reification: the elevation of a particular social-historical horizon into a “natural” structure. | Show how different inter-subjective worlds give rise to different forms of international life. | De-reification. Show how supposedly natural structures are really social-historical constructions. |

| Dialogue (chapter 4) | World as an ongoing historical dialogue of evolving inter-subjective horizons (that IR is on the inside of). | A contribution to the historical dialogue specifying the current limits of the politically possible and legitimate. | To interpret international politics in light of the dialogical ideal (insight into the dialogue itself is our current horizon). | To critique the current state of affairs in international politics in light of the dialogical ideal: how far have we come, where do we go from here? |

Table 1.2: summary of the positions considered in this thesis.

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16 I separate analysis and critique only as a heuristic device. Only in essentialist positions is there a (attempted) separation of these two functions.
1.4.1 Chapter 2: Essentialism

Essentialism divides international politics into an objective unchanging part, its *essence*, and a contingent changeable part, the subjective understandings of the practitioners. This division solves the analytical-critical issue as follows: IR theory analytically reflects the essence of international politics and critically enlightens the subjects involved in international politics by providing insight into this essence. I consider two variants of essentialism that I relate dialectically, meaning that I investigate the second kind of essentialism as a response to internal contradictions in the first kind.

The first variant of essentialism is represented by Hans Morgenthau, who locates the essence in the subjectivity of political practitioners. The most important aspect of Morgenthau’s thinking for our purpose is his distinction between essence and appearance. The essence is the “political man”, and appearance is the false layer of professed ideologies and values that tend to cover up this essence and make it seem as if international politics is about other things than it actually is. Political realism, according to Morgenthau, sees through this appearance and into what is really going on—something which makes realism “not only a guide to understanding [for the analyst], but also an idea for action [for the practitioner]” (Morgenthau 2011: 264).

There is an underlying paradox in this line of thinking. State leaders are both the subject matter and the audience for Morgenthau’s theory. Accordingly, he lands himself in the paradoxical situation of both arguing that state leaders (*qua* subject matter) are political realists by nature and that state leaders (*qua* audience) should be political realists as a sort of moral imperative. Indeed, one of Morgenthau’s primary grievances is that state leaders continually fall short of the political realist ideal. However, the mere fact that political realism is an ideal—a way of being that has to be actively pursued—undermines Morgenthau’s *justification* for political realism, which is that it represents international politics as it is, regardless of what practitioners want it to be.

The internal contradictions in Morgenthau’s essentialism are rooted in his locating the essence that theory is supposed to reflect in the subjective element of international politics, i.e. in how practitioners of international relations are and how
they think. A second kind of essentialism ostensibly avoids this problem by distinguishing more clearly between the subjective and the objective part of international politics, locating the essence in the latter in the form of unchanging and eternal structures. Kenneth Waltz and his *Theory of International Politics* (1979) is the canonical statement of this position. The cornerstone of Waltz’ ontology is a distinction between agency and structure that corresponds, respectively, to the subjective-contingent and the objective-eternal part of international reality. IR theory, on Waltz’ understanding, is supposed to reflect the structural rather than the subjective element of international politics.

For Waltz, the structure of the international realm is akin to a physical environment that constrains, rewards and punishes certain ways of being. Practitioners who are ill-informed about the nature this environment tend to fare badly—and so do the political communities they represent. Structural essentialism re-configures the analytical-critical duality as follows: theory analytically reflects the objective structure of international politics and critically enlightens the subjects inhabiting this structure. Such enlightenment can help practitioners better navigate international politics but it cannot change the structure, as the fundamental structural characteristic of international politics is quite unaffected by the characteristics of its inhabiting subjects.

However, in the end, Waltz cannot maintain the strict separation of structure and agency he needs to make his solution work. The analogy with a physical environment can only be carried so far. A social structure is, after all, not like a wall or a cliff. Rather, a social structure, Waltz argues, is a *principle* of arrangement (Waltz 1979: 80). In international politics, this organizing principle is supposed to be anarchy, which again is supposed to be disconnected from the characteristics of the agents living under anarchy. But anarchy, as Alexander Wendt would point out, does not in itself dictate any particular way of being (Wendt 1992); if it did, it would not really be anarchy.

And indeed, Waltz’ organizing principle turns out not be anarchy. Instead, Waltz holds that “[i]nternational-political systems […] are formed by the coaction of self-regarding units” (Waltz 1979: 91). However, *self-regard* is obviously a characteristic of the agents. Furthermore, self-regard is equivalent to what Waltz calls
the “international imperative”, which is “take care of yourself!” (Waltz 1979: 107, 201). This imperative surfaces both in the analytical part of the book where Waltz argues that each country is necessarily “constrained to take care of itself” (Waltz 1979: 109, emphasis added), and in the critical part of the book where he introduces self-help as an “international imperative” (Waltz 1979: 201). The circle is obvious: the structuring principle is self-regard and this structure is then used to advocate self-regard.

The lesson to be drawn from essentialism is that you cannot avoid the subjective element when dealing with social phenomena such as international politics. Any so-called objective structure, once you start digging into it, is rooted in subjectivity, i.e. in a particular way of being. This is means that whatever the merits of self-regard (Waltz) and prudence (Morgenthau)—and I am not saying that self-regard and prudence is necessarily bad advice—this way of being cannot be justified with reference to an objective (in the sense of non-subjective) realm of “the real” separate from the subjective realm of “the ideal”. International politics cannot be completely abstracted from the self-understandings of the agents involved in international politics.

1.4.2 Chapter 3: Constructivism

Constructivism begins with the realization on which the chapter on essentialism ends: that the shape and form of international politics is rooted in subjectivity. The term “subjectivity”, however, no longer means the same thing as it did in structural essentialism. In structural essentialism, the subjective stands opposed to an objective environment. The subject is located in this environment in much the same way as one might be physically located in a building. Constructivism is first and foremost a rejection of this starting point, i.e. a rejection of the subjective and the objective as a fundamental ontological division, and a re-interpretation of the “objective” as a form of (inter-)subjectivity—what Christian Reus-Smit calls “constitutional structures”:

coherent ensembles of intersubjective beliefs, principles, and norms that perform two functions in ordering international societies: they define what constitutes a legitimate actor, entitled to all the rights and privileges of

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17 Morgenthau understands this, which is what makes his work so tension-filled (see section 4.4).
statehood; and they define the basic parameters of state action (Reus-Smit 1999: 30).

Re-interpreting essences as such intersubjective horizons, the constructivist critique is that essentialism reifies particular intersubjective horizons as “natural”, when they are, in fact, social-historically contingent. Instead of the essence of international politics, constructivism holds, international politics can have different essences and take different forms. This is not only an ontological dispute; it also provides a new foundation for thinking about the relation between IR theory and international politics.

Constructivism allows IR scholars to take a more analytical stance towards international politics. The reason essentialist IR theory has a critical relation to international politics is the claim to have discovered how international politics necessarily must be. Given that what international politics is like depends on how international politics is understood, the claim to have discovered the essential aspect of international politics makes essentialist theory critical: it entangles essentialist theorists in the belief system sustaining international politics at any given time, either supporting or undermining it (or a bit of both). The constructivist, however, asks not “what is the essence of international politics?” but “what do people take to be the essence of international politics?”. By avoiding essentialist claims themselves, constructivists can be analytical in a much stronger sense.¹⁸

Analytically speaking, constructivism connects intersubjective horizons to forms of international life. In this endeavor, essentialist IR theories are a good source of material since they often state explicitly the world views that are current in a particular social-historical context and justifies certain ways of being. When Waltz reflects on how his theory was made, the best answer he can give is “creatively” (Waltz 1979: 9). John Hobson has somewhat more to add:

¹⁸ This move is equivalent to what Karl Mannheim refers to as the transition between the evaluative (critical) to a non-evaluative (analytical) study of belief systems “where […] no judgements are pronounced as to the correctness of the ideas to be treated. This approach confines itself to discovering the relations between certain mental structures and the life-situations in which they exist” (Mannheim 1997: 71).
Waltz’ master-variables in world politics – anarchy, sovereignty, self-help, balance of power and great power politics – are all derived from his reading of the modern European inter-state system. Thus in viewing these specifically European norms and practices as natural, be both tempocentrically [i.e. anachronistically] extrapolates them back in time, as well as universalizes these provincial features through space [ethnocentricity] (Hobson 2012: 210).

Thus, while Waltz considers his theory as reflecting the eternal, unchanging structure of international politics, Hobson considers Waltz’ theory as reflecting something else, namely a particular way of thinking nourishing a particular form of international life in which Waltz participates (not as a practitioner, of course, but as an ideologue for practitioners). However, Hobson’s analytical relation to Waltz (and, by extension, to everyone who shares Waltz’ horizon) is not neutral. While Waltz is imprisoned within this particular social-historical horizon, Hobson is not. Rather, Hobson’s position is one of insight into Waltz’ horizon that Waltz himself lacks. This analytical superiority puts Hobson in a critical relation to Waltz, and to everyone—scholar or practitioner—who is imprisoned within the same horizon as Waltz and are thereby (unwittingly) victims of tempo- and ethnocentricity.

The larger point is that constructivist analysis of essentialist beliefs is a form of critique. Such analysis is based on a fundamental asymmetry between the deconstructed agents under study (whether scholars or practitioners) who are assumed to be essentialists—i.e. who are assumed to subscribe to an “ensemble of beliefs, principles and norms” that support a certain form of international politics—and the deconstructing constructivist. History, as it emerges for constructivism is a series of external intersubjective worlds, each containing its own essence (re-interpreted as an inter-subjective horizon). This is the analytical starting point for constructivism, but this analytical starting point has a critical edge. The constructivist does not share the horizon she attributes to the people under study. Rather, she has gained an analytical

19 Note that once Waltz’ theory is mediated through a constructivist understanding it loses its critical function, since its critical function was rooted in Waltz’ essentialism. In a sense, Waltz theory, reinterpreted from a constructivist standpoint, becomes exactly the purely descriptive theory it was intended to be; that is, descriptive of a particular kind of (inter)subjectivity underpinning a particular kind of international society. However, this re-appropriation of Waltz’ into a constructivist framework is also a transition to a new theory based on ideational constitutional structures as the fundament for international politics, and therefore also at the same time a debunking of Waltz.
distance to these horizons through social-historical particularization (deconstruction)—an analytical distance that is also a critical distance.

Constructivist analysis and critique is directed at (essentialist) others; it is Waltz that Hobson deconstructs, not himself. However, constructivism is itself a form of subjectivity that is internal to a social-historical horizon. If the central commitments of constructivism are possibility—i.e. that any given social phenomenon “X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is” (Hacking 1999: 6)—and human agency—i.e. that we live in a “world of our making” (Onuf 2013)—then a belief in human freedom to take charge of our historical situation in a fundamental way is the (implicit or explicit) horizon of constructivism. This horizon, which is distinctly modern and liberal (even, perhaps, “Western”), is no less social-historical than any other horizon that constructivism deconstructs.20

The larger point is that the difference between the constructivist and the essentialist is not that one is internal to history and the other is not—the difference between, e.g., Hobson and Waltz is not that Waltz is inside of history and Hobson is on the outside. Rather, the difference is one of self-awareness of one’s own historicity; it is a difference between living immediately under a horizon, taking it as natural, and having insight into this horizon. Such self-awareness is a form of emancipation: coming to know your horizon also frees you from that horizon in a certain sense by giving you critical distance to it. This insight into the emancipatory side of constructivist critique takes us beyond constructivism and into dialectical thinking.

1.4.3 Chapter 4: Dialogue
The immanent critiques of essentialism and constructivism in chapters 2 and 3 are meant to do two things. Firstly, they are meant to illustrate how the analytical and the critical aspect of IR theorizing cannot be separated. The logic behind this insight has

20 The emancipation that lies in freedom from “the illusion that there is only one way of thinking” (Mannheim 1997: 11) connected to a natural world order is in many ways the defining aspect of the modern liberal political identity. This attitude, which is a relatively recent historical phenomenon, is deeply subversive to traditional authority, whose legitimacy is linked to the belief in a natural order of things. The concrete political and social transformation associated with this historical development, in Europe at least, was the breakdown of “the monopoly of the ecclesiastical interpretation of the world” (Mannheim 1997: 10) exercised by the Catholic church during the Middle Ages. The modern, liberal horizon, and the freedom it brings (and the analytical opportunities it opens up), is so naturalized now that we hardly think of it as a horizon at all.
already been laid out once in this introduction: social analysis is a (re)interpretation of agents who also interpret themselves. For instance, to deconstruct someone—even if intended as a purely analytical exercise—is also a form of critique: the person being deconstructed might not be aware of the socio-historicity of his or her horizon—or even that he or she has a horizon at all. By becoming aware of his, a new layer to that person’s self-interpretation has been added in the form of self-awareness of one’s own horizon, something which, I argue, makes an emancipatory difference.

Secondly, the critiques in chapters 2 and 3 are meant to provide the ground for a way of thinking about IR theorizing that takes us beyond essentialist reification and constructivist deconstruction. In chapter 4, I build on two insights from these chapters to disclose this new way of thinking: (1) theory as a regulative ideal (which makes it critical), and (2) theorizing as the laying bare of transcendental horizons (which makes it analytical). These two elements are combined by thinking dialectically, which means to think in first-person rather than in third-person mode. To illustrate what I mean by the latter consider that constructivist critique can be used in two ways: as an ideological weapon against essentialist others (third-person thinking) or, when turned inward dialectically, as an emancipatory tool (first-person thinking). In the latter case, deconstruction is not an end in itself, but serves a larger purpose of disclosing our own horizon, our own “constitutional structure” (note the use of the first-person “we”, which is meant in the most inclusive sense—including you, the reader).

Dialectically understood, constructivist self-critique has both a negative and a positive aspect: the negative side of constructivist critique is the removal of the natural necessity of being any particular way (through self-awareness of one’s own socio-historicity); the positive side of constructivist critique is the discovery of the freedom to define oneself. To see the latter aspect, consider the following passage from Hubert Dreyfus, which I think summarizes the constructivist attitude neatly:

[t]o exist [as a human being] is to take a stand on what is essential about one’s being and being defined by that stance. Thus [a human being] is

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21 The difference between first-person and third-person is further elaborated in section 3.4 of chapter 3 and in the introduction to chapter 4.
22 Dialectically speaking, all critique is self-critique, see section 1.3
what, in its social activity, it interprets itself to be. Human beings do not already have some specific nature (Dreyfus 1991: 23).

This passage is, in a sense, self-contradictory. It is, of course, quite understandable what Dreyfus means by human beings not having some specific nature; it means that human beings are, in large part, what they make of themselves. However, this freedom to define oneself is in itself a kind of “human nature”. If the self is a relation to itself (a self-interpretation), then “[t]he self is freedom” (Kierkegaard 1980: 27) (see section 4.1.1). Insight into our own socio-historicity is also an insight into what makes us social-historical, which is our freedom (to define ourselves). Disclosing this freedom is to disclose a horizon with practical implications for how to relate to each other—whether we are speaking of relations between political communities or relations between IR scholars and political practitioners (the latter kind of relation is, of course, the main focus of this thesis).

When theorizing becomes simultaneously analytically deconstructive and critically reconstructive in this manner—i.e. when the practical intent of theorizing is to disclose our common horizon rather than dogmatically telling others to be a certain way or to ideologically debunk their way of being—theorizing becomes dialogue. Constructivism, on its own, is not dialogue, but it is a step on the road towards dialogue. Constructivism opens up possibility where essentialism sees only necessity. The contribution of constructivism to the conversation is to see that the limitations to political change represented by the current state of affairs in international politics, while real enough, are not principled limitations. Whoever sanctions the current state of affairs theoretically as something that cannot possibly be overcome (and not merely something that might be difficult or undesirable to overcome) because it is the natural and inevitable way of things, needs a good dose of deconstruction before dialogue can begin.

This deconstruction turns into dialogue the moment it (dialectically) sees its own limits—in particular, that socio-historization of theory is not really an effective critique of theory. True, a theory of international politics is internally connected to and justifies a particular form of international politics. However, theories of international
politics are not, for that reason, equivalent to the forms of international politics they justify—i.e. IR theory is not reducible international political practice. Rather, a theory is an idealization that practice can only approximate. Morgenthau knew this:

> a perfect balance of power [...] will be scarcely be found in reality, [political realism] assumes that reality, being deficient in this respect, must be understood and evaluated as an approximation to an ideal system of balance of power (Morgenthau 1978: 8).

The essentialist mistake is to justify a regulative ideal—such as a balance-of-power system—as a natural law in the same sense as the law of gravity is natural law.23 The constructivist is right to point out that the regulative ideal that Morgenthau is peddling has an inner socio-historicity.24 Specifically, Morgenthau’s ideal is part of a political horizon that emerged in Europe after the Westphalian settlement and was refined in the 19th century with the advent of the modern nation state (see section 4.4). The constructivist mistake, however, is to consider this political horizon as “debunked” merely by virtue of having socio-historicity.

But an ideal—and therefore a theory—cannot be debunked by social-historical particularization; only the justification of the ideal as “natural” is undermined by recuperating its social-historical origins. Debunking an ideal can only be done with reference to a higher ideal, i.e. by arguing, for instance, that “no good person [...] would want to operate by the cynical tenets of realism unless they were forced to do so” (Fukuyama 2012: 248, emphasis added). The constructivist argument is precisely that we are not forced25 to do anything: if international politics is currently cynical, oppressive, war prone and unjust (or if it is the opposite of these things) it is not because it has to be that way. We can blame ourselves—or “the world” as the externalization of our collective failures and accomplishments—but we cannot blame natural necessity.

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23 The law of gravity is also, in a sense, an idealization (Cartwright 1983)—but no less real for that matter.
24 Morgenthau is also aware of this.
25 Please note: “forced” in the same way as the law of gravity forces you to fall down if you jump out the window.
If the horizon that Morgenthau idealizes is inadequate (and I think it is, see section 4.4), it is not because it has socio-historicity—all horizons have socio-historicity—but because this horizon is not on par with the level that theoretical reflection has reached in history. Today, we can look back at the 19th century political horizon and see it more clearly than the people who lived more immediately within this horizon and took it as “natural” could. The difference between now and then is not merely that time has passed, but that we have emancipated ourselves from what was “natural” back then, such as denying women the vote, colonialism, seeing war as a part of an healthy international system etc.

This claim to historical supersession is not like saying that Renaissance music is better than Baroque music, which is, arguably, merely an expression of taste. Rather, it is a deeply moral, ethical and political claim: we know better now (Taylor 2003: 176), by which I mean we know ourselves better—we have greater insight into our universal community of freedom and what it demands of us. It is, I argue, against this background that the question of justification of IR theory must be understood. If taking a theoretical standpoint is to take a stance in an evolving historical dialogue on the boundaries of political legitimacy in international politics, as I will suggest in this thesis, then there is no way of justifying that stance with reference to something beyond the dialogue itself. However, neither is that necessary, because the dialogue is its own standard and its own ideal. We have arrived at a point in history were we have insight into the dialogue itself and the demands it puts on our inter-subjective relations (including international relations and the study thereof). Any IR theory that does not recognize this is, I would argue, not on par with the horizon we live under.

1.5 The dialogical horizon

Jodi Dean in her *The Communist Horizon*, uses the term “horizon” similarly to how I use it, namely to designate a dimension of experience that we can never lose, even if, lost in a fog or focused on our feet, we fail to see it. The horizon is Real in the sense of impossible—we can never reach it [for then it would not be our horizon anymore - AH]—and in the sense of actual […]. The Horizon shapes our setting. We can lose our bearings, but the horizon is a
necessary dimension of our actuality. [T]he horizon is the fundamental division establishing who we are (Dean 2012: 1).

What is the horizon we live under? Dean believes that “the horizon that conditions our experience is communism” (Dean 2012: 1). My stance, in contrast, is similar to Richard Bernstein’s idea that the horizon to which we are inexorably attached—that which we cannot rid ourselves of without betraying our own highest principles and therefore ourselves—is “the promise of dialogical communities” (Bernstein 1983: 227), i.e.

the coming into being of a type of public life that can strengthen solidarity, public freedom, a willingness to talk and listen, mutual debate, and a commitment to rational persuasion (Bernstein 1983: 226).

Both essentialism and constructivism are, I suggest in this thesis, incompatible with dialogue. I do not mean that they are explicitly hostile to dialogue, but that they are, in Dean’s phrase, “lost in a fog”—not seeing clearly their own deleterious effects on the struggle to “increase the spheres of social interaction that are governed by dialogue […] rather than [merely] power and force” (Linklater 2001: 31). It is fairly obvious how essentialism shuts down dialogue: by reifying certain ways of being (and their associated social structures) as “natural” and inevitable, and therefore beyond discussion.

Constructivism re-opens the dialogue through debunking essentialist naturalness—and in the process unlocks the specter of (radical) social change. However, constructivism, if it is not checked by dialectical insight into its own conditions of possibility, shuts down dialogue again in a different, but no less effective way. The weapon of constructivism, the principle of particularization, when applied consistently dissolves any ambition of developing “[u]niversalistic ethical concepts abstracted from specific forms of [social-historical] life” (Linklater 1990: 141).

The constructivist ban on universalistic thinking is not meant as a hostile move. Far from it: “the case against universality is often concerned with safeguarding

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26 Which corresponds in important ways to Bernstein’s (1983) objectivism and relativism.
tolerance and diversity” (Linklater 1990: 141). However, tolerance is not a goal in itself. When tolerance is totalized (with the best of intentions) it becomes a kind of “liberal tyranny” where

[o]ne is allowed to grow and develop freely; one is even encouraged to find one’s own personal world view. If one finds such a world view [whatever it is] then it is accepted with an overbearing goodwill and Allesverstehen that precisely hinders this world view from being tried out in dialogue. Human growth, which should also be a growth in wisdom, is only possible in a dialectical relation with others. If this dialectic is replaced by tolerance and Allesverstehen, human growth is stunted (Skjervheim 1996a: 142-143, my translation, emphasis in original).

A dialogue is founded on the commitment of a common search for insight, and a political dialogue is concerned with the question of “rational authority”; i.e. “the question […] whether institutions might exist that can be accepted by all and with which we can all identify” (Skjervheim 1996d: 105). This question cannot be asked in the climate of anti-universalism that is (at least) latent in constructivism. Thus, when elevated to an –ism, constructivism runs a particular danger, namely

[t]he danger of the type of “totalizing” critique that seduces us into thinking that […] there is no possibility of achieving a communal life based on undistorted communication, dialogue, communal judgement, and rational persuasion (Bernstein 1983: 227).

The point I am trying to make is that both essentialists and constructivists are participants in the historical dialogue (cf. section 4.2), but that their own participation is distorted by operating under the horizons of essentialism and constructivism. Furthermore, I am trying to argue that the transition to a dialectical horizon—which includes acknowledging dialogue as the regulative ideal for the practice of IR theorizing—is an important step out of this confusion. In the last instance, this is a question of the right way of being with others in the world—of preserving and promoting that valuable but tenuous middle ground in political and social life where “there can be genuine mutual participation and were reciprocal wooing and persuasion can prevail” (Bernstein 1983: 227).
I hope you are not thinking in literal terms, as if institutional structure were literally like the hidden structure of a building.

- Martin Hollis

2 Essentialism

Essentialism, as I use the term, is a set of internally connected ontological, epistemological and practical-philosophical commitments. Ontologically speaking, essentialism entails a commitment to an objective essence of international politics that is principally immune to change—something that must be worked with rather than transformed. The analytical function of IR theory is to reflect this essence (epistemology). The critical function of IR theory is to enlighten practitioners about this objective essence so they can better adjust their behavior to the realities of their situation (practical philosophy).

There are two traditional versions of essentialism in IR: one placing the essence in subjectivity and one placing the essence in structure. The paradigmatic example of the former is Hans J. Morgenthau’s Politics Among Nations (1978); the paradigmatic example of the latter is Kenneth N. Waltz’ Theory of International Politics (1979). These two works will be the main illustrations of essentialism in this chapter. Most conventional accounts present the difference between Morgenthau and Waltz as one of analytical focus (e.g. Hollis & Smith 2009)—a level of analysis issue—or different hypotheses about what makes international politics the way it is (e.g. Donnelly 2000; Mearsheimer 2010). I take a different approach, and consider the relation between Morgenthau and Waltz as dialectical relation. I am primarily interested in the move from Morgenthau’s “human nature essentialism” to Waltz’ “structural essentialism” as an internal development of the essentialist position itself—as essentialism trying to resolve its own internal contradictions.

The driving force of this dialectic is the analytical-critical duality of IR theory (cf. section 1.1.1). The essentialist “solution” to the analytical-critical duality is rooted

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27 "Practical" refers to the relation between theory and practice (see introduction).
28 As such, essentialism is a form of philosophical realism (see Joseph & Wight 2010)
29 But see the disclaimer below.
30 For a discussion of the dialectic method see introduction.
in the division of international reality into a subjective and changeable part—a part that can be informed by IR theory—and an objective and eternal part (the essence)—the part that can be reflected by IR theory. The primary threat to this solution is that the objective and eternal should turn out to be subjective and changeable, in which case theory would lose both its analytical footing and its primary justification as a critical-enlightening force in international politics.

The search for the essential part of international reality is what takes us from one essentialist position to the next in this chapter. Morgenthau argues that the essence of international relations is located in the subjectivity of political practitioners (“political man”). However, this creates a paradox: either practitioners are political realists by necessity, in which case political realism is true (according to essentialist standards) but cannot possible fulfill any kind of critical-enlightening function; or practitioners are not political realists by necessity, in which case political realism can fulfill its critical-enlightening function but is not true (according to essentialist standards). 31 Waltz solves this problem by distinguishing more clearly between the subjective and the objective—between agency and structure—and locating the essence in the latter.

The Waltzian solution depends on a strict separation of agency and structure—a separation he, in the end, cannot maintain. The “objective” characteristics of the international realm are, it will turn out, not inseparable from the “subjective” characteristics of the agents inhabiting the international realm. In fact, Waltz has to smuggle in a particular kind of agent—the self-regarding, power seeking nation state—in order to create the kind of international reality he has in mind. This makes Waltz’ argument circular in the same way as Morgenthau’s argument: power seeking and self-regard is justified as a strategic adaption to an environment defined by power seeking and self-regard. The larger point is that structure cannot be divorced from subjectivity. This creates an internal crisis in essentialism as there is no non-subjective place to ground theory. This sets the stage for the transition to constructivism, to which the next chapter is devoted.

31 See also the Mearsheimer-Clinton example in the introduction.
2.1.1 **A disclaimer**

Before we begin the analysis I want to make a qualifier in the hopes of avoiding a certain kind of misunderstanding. Neither Morgenthau nor Waltz are perfect examples of essentialists, nor would they necessarily have understood themselves as essentialists. This is particularly true of Waltz whose self-understanding is in many ways the opposite of essentialist. A theory, Waltz argues is “not an edifice of truth and not a reproduction of reality [but] a depiction of the organization of a domain [e.g. international politics]” (Waltz 1979: 8). In other words, Waltz understands theory in purely *analytical* terms—as something merely used to structure an object of empirical observation (see Jackson 2011: 112-115). Thus, “one can therefore not legitimately ask if [theories] are true, but only if they are useful” (Waltz 1979: 117).

I do not agree with Waltz’ “analyticisism” (Jackson 2011: chap. 4). I think it is an effective, but unfair, way of immunizing one’s own position against theoretical critique. I also think it is a self-undermining position. When Waltz depicts the international realm as a “self-help system” whose stability depends on power-balancing, is that not meant to reflect something true about international politics? When Waltz talks about structures that “constrain and select” does he mean real, actual structures with real, actual effects, or his he merely making a theoretical assumption that is helpful for empirical analysis? If it is the latter, then it seems completely unwarranted to transform these theoretical assumptions into real-life practical standpoints, such as arguing that Iran should be allowed to develop a nuclear bomb because “power begs to be balanced” (Waltz 2012: 2).

In this chapter I treat Waltz’ theory as more than an analytical tool (it is, of course, that too). Rather, my reading is that his theoretical standpoint is also a claim to say something fundamentally true and important about international politics that both scholars and practitioners should listen to. This is not a terribly controversial reading of Waltz, although it, admittedly, flies in the face of Waltz’ own meta-theory (for a good analysis of Waltz’ meta-theory, see Wæver 2009). If the point was to replicate Waltz’ self-understanding, this would be a problem. However, the point is not to replicate Waltz’s self-understanding—or Morgenthau’s self-understanding for that matter. This chapter is not primarily about Morgenthau and Waltz, but about
essentialism. This means that my treatment of Morgenthau and Waltz, given that their own self-understandings are not entirely essentialist (and they are not), will be a bit unfair.\footnote{I try to repair some of the damage when I return to Morgenthau in chapter 4. Waltzians will have to remain offended I am afraid.} This cannot be helped.

The same disclaimer applies to the next chapter on constructivism. Not all scholars who understand themselves as constructivist will agree with my understanding of constructivism. I, of course, think that my understanding gets to the heart of what constructivism as a position entails—the implicit argument being all the more specific variations of constructivism out there are variations on the central themes presented in chapter 3. Operating at the level of generality that a philosophical thesis requires entails a lot of simplification and idealization, and not every possible position can be investigated. The question is whether I have made the right simplifications or if I have missed something of essential importance to my argument. I, obviously, do not think I have (or else I would have included it in the argument), but this is a question I necessarily must leave to the critical reader.

\subsection*{2.2 Morgenthau's paradox}

In his \textit{Politics Among Nations} (1978) and other writings, Morgenthau presents a political theory of international politics connected to a set of meta-theoretical principles. Morgenthau’s primary meta-theoretical commitment is that “a theory of international relations must seek to depict the rational essence of its subject matter” (Morgenthau 2011: 264). Morgenthau locates this essence in a “human nature” that transcends social and historical context: \footnote{The term “human nature” is often interpreted biologically (e.g. Donnelly 2000; Mearsheimer 2001: 19), but it is not necessarily to take it quite so literally (Williams 2007). The important idea is that we have a backstop to human subjectivity, i.e. something that cannot be changed and just have to be worked with.}

human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece endeavored to discover these laws. Hence novelty is not necessarily a virtue in political theory, nor is old age a defect (Morgenthau 1978: 4).
The essence Morgenthau refers to is will to power and (national) self-regard. However, it is important to distinguish between the essence of politics and the appearance of politics, according to Morgenthau, since appearances can be deceptive. Political practitioners often lack the courage to admit—to themselves as well as to others—that they are by nature Machiavellians. The politician, Morgenthau argues, “cannot help “playing an act” by concealing the true nature of his political actions behind the mask of a political ideology […]. [P]oliticians have an ineradicable tendency to deceive themselves about what they are doing by referring to their policies not in terms of power but in terms of […] ethical and legal principles” (Morgenthau 1978: 100).

The critical-enlightening role that political realism can play is clear. Political realism represents enlightenment and reason that, if it were generally accepted, would bring about a more honest political practice more in line with its essence. It is important to note that although Morgenthau certainly wants international politics to be more Machiavellian, this is not an expression of Morgenthau’s personal preference. According to Morgenthau, it is not just that international politics can be Machiavellian. In an important sense international politics always and already is Machiavellian—it is just (sometimes) covered behind a façade of ethics and morality. This is the first hint of Morgenthau’s paradox, namely that “Morgenthau spends half his time explaining that states follow their national interests and the other half lecturing American leaders that they should do so” (Guilhot 2011: 42).

Let us disaggregate this paradox as a tension between the analytical and the critical dimension of Morgenthau’s theory. The critical edge of Morgenthau’s writing is clear. Indeed, Michael Williams has suggested that the classical realist project of which Morgenthau was a part should be understood as an enlightenment project (Williams 2013). However, the justification for political realism as a valid theory is not its critical-enlightening function. Rather, Morgenthau’s argument for political realism is based on its analytical accuracy, i.e. that political realism depicts “historical processes as they actually take place” (Morgenthau 1978: 4, emphasis added). This way of justification is not accidental “as the prescriptive value of realism obviously proceeds from its descriptive accuracy. No good person would want to operate by the cynical tenets of realism unless they were forced to do so” (Fukuyama 2012: 245).
However, there is an obvious problem with justifying political realism analytically, since what “actually took place” is a matter of interpretation. Consider that, according Morgenthau’s own logic, we can see historical processes from two different angles: as it was experienced by the agents involved, with all their potential ideological distortions, and as they are interpreted by the political realist armed with insights into human nature. Of course, these two interpretations might coincide (if the agent understands himself and his situation in political realist terms), but then again, they might not. Either way, the brute circumstance that these two interpretations may or may not coincide—i.e. the brute circumstance that we are dealing with a meeting between horizons (cf. section 1.1)—makes analytical justification problematic. I will now try to clarify this difficulty.

The following statement brings out the tension between the two different perspectives: “[as scholars] we think as he [the statesman] does, and as disinterested observers we understand his thoughts and actions perhaps better than he, the actor on the international scene, does himself” (Morgenthau 1978: 5). However, if we understand the political actor better than he understands himself we do not, strictly speaking, “think as he does”. Rather, we, the political realists, are thinking on a higher level than he, the statesman, does—unless, of course, the statesman is also a political realist. As such, the statesman’s understanding of what he is doing cannot possibly count as independent evidence for political realism, since political realism is itself the criterion for whether the statesman’s understanding is accepted as valid or ideologically distorted.

Morgenthau’s *analytical* understanding of events in international politics is also a form of critique. The agents involved in these events have their own understanding and this understanding is, presumably, important for what “actually happens”. If the statesman in question *thinks* he is acting for reasons relating to “ethical and legal principles”, then Morgenthau, committed as he is to political realism, must argue that the statesman is either lying or is the victim of some kind of misunderstanding regarding his own motives. If the statesman is lying, Morgenthau is sympathetic, since lying is often good statecraft:
[t]o rally a people behind the government’s foreign policy […] the spokesman of the nation must appeal [among other things] to moral principles, such as justice, rather than to power. This is the only way a nation can attain the enthusiasm and willingness to sacrifice without which no foreign policy can pass the ultimate test of strength (Morgenthau 1978: 95).

Morgenthau mentions Roosevelt and Churchill as men with good instincts for satisfying the people’s need to feel that their nation’s cause was morally justified through the use of “ideological disguises” (Morgenthau 1978: 94). It is primarily the second case, the statesman who honestly believes in his own moral justification, who is most in need of realist guidance. When Morgenthau comes across these types of statesmen he is often not kind in his judgement:

Neville Chamberlain’s politics of appeasement were, as far as we can judge, inspired by good motives; he was probably less motivated by considerations of personal power than were many other British prime ministers [i.e. less of a Machiavellian], and he sought to preserve peace […]. Yet his policies helped to make the Second World War inevitable, and to bring untold miseries to millions of men (Morgenthau 1978: 6).

In the end, Morgenthau’s empirical analysis is just as much about passing judgment on current and historical political practice from the standpoint of political realism as it is about validating political realism itself as a theory. Is this an accident—something that could have been avoided by a more careful essentialist—or is it a real, inescapable difficulty of essentialism itself? Let us review the paradox again.

The root of the paradox is that Morgenthau tries to combine two incompatible ideas: (1) the epistemological idea that IR theory should be judged by its descriptive accuracy concerning how statesmen think and act; and (2) the practical-philosophical idea that IR theory has a critical-enlightening function, since “not all foreign policies have always followed [a] rational, objective, and unemotional course” (Morgenthau 1978: 7). Political realism is both a description and an ideal. Since it is both these things, the criteria of evaluation cannot be strictly empirical; one cannot evaluate an ideal, which speaks to what ought to be, using empirical observation, which speaks to what is. Morgenthau himself is aware of this latter point:
it is no argument against the theory here presented that actual foreign policy does not or cannot live up to it. That argument misunderstands the intention of this book, which is to present not [a] description of political reality, but a rational theory of international politics (Morgenthau 1978: 10).

But a rational theory of international politics cannot, in principle, be validated empirically against what “actually happens”. Rationality is not an empirical conjecture; it is a critical standard for evaluating behavior. Of course, whether particular statesmen acted rationally—i.e. according to Morgenthau’s theory—can be evaluated empirically, but such an evaluation presupposes the theoretical standard used for evaluation; it is, emphatically, not a test of that standard. To be rational is to live up to an ideal. Comparing this ideal to practice as it currently is and historically has been is a critique of that practice, not a critique of the ideal. Actual international political practices might deviate a good deal from the political realist standard of rationality, such as Morgenthau argues that Neville Chamberlain’s policies of appeasement did, but that does not in itself invalidate (nor could it validate) that standard.

Morgenthau’s essence—and therefore Morgenthau’s theory—is a kind of ideal, i.e. a critical standard to which practice can approximate that, when recognized and acted upon, is constitutive of a certain kind of international life. Morgenthau himself, I think, would not disagree with this. Indeed, it follows almost by default from his emphasis on subjectivity. A person, Morgenthau argues, is a composite of different subjectivities; 34 “of “economic man,” “political man,” “moral man,” “religious man,” etc. ” (Morgenthau 1978: 14). A theory of politics is concerned with “political man”, and abstracts from the other aspects of existence. Political man is a way of being that corresponds to a particular sphere of practice, the political sphere, and not to others, such as the family sphere, where other ways of being are appropriate. 35

Morgenthau’s theory of politics, then, is really a specification of the set of values that make up an ideal-typical way of being in the realm of politics—

34 A constructivist would probably call different these different subjectivities identities.
35 A healthy human being is not merely a political man; “[a] man who was nothing but “political man” would be a beast, for he would be completely lacking in moral restraints” (Morgenthau 1978: 14).
international politics in particular. It is an ideal that envisions a very specific form of international life (see also section 4.4). It idealizes the classic balance-of-power-system in Europe, which, according to Morgenthau was an international society in the true sense of the word—a “common system of arts, and laws, and manners, the same level of politeness and cultivation, and [a shared] sense of honor and justice” (Morgenthau 1978: 262). This shared understanding prevented, for a long time, great-power war on the continent. Morgenthau’s diagnosis of his contemporary historical situation is one of decay compared to this Golden Age. In his contemporary historical situation, Morgenthau finds a lack of such shared values, which gives the struggle for power “a ferocity and intensity not known to the other ages” (Morgenthau 1978: 263).

Morgenthau was not shy about spelling out the practical-political implications of his theoretical standpoint, which I think he saw as the whole point of political analysis. On this point I think Morgenthau has much to teach contemporary IR, and I will return to Morgenthau in chapter 4. The most important point at the current stage of the argument is to note how Morgenthau’s supposedly neutral reference to the essence of international politics is actually a political ideal. What started as mere statement of how things are (like it or not) turns into a political project of transforming how things are. The paradox stems primarily from the way Morgenthau justifies his theory, which is not as an ideal but as a reflection of an inescapable aspect of international politics. This contradiction is not accidental, but a consequence of Morgenthau’s own essentialist commitments.

Morgenthau’s essence is a form of subjectivity—a particular way of being that is supposed to be “human nature”. But to foreshadow the constructivist critique which of the next chapter: when you are dealing with human subjectivity there is no “natural” way to be that. A political agent certainly can be a Machiavellian, but he can also be Gandhi, and most political actors are probably somewhere in between. The indeterminacy of human political identity turns all models of any particular identity—such as classical political realism—into a standard against which any particular self-understanding can be measured. That does not in itself make these ideals wrong (a

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36 These values are tempered prudence, that sees in politics the art of the possible, and nationalism, which mandates always looking to the national interest first—the primary interest being survival—rather than personal moral convictions or abstract universals.
subject we will return to) but it makes it problematic to justify any such particular ideal of “political man” with reference its natural necessity.

2.3 Interlude: Aron and the road to structure

The turn to structure in political realism, i.e. the move from classical to structural realism, was partly prompted by the need to find some other place than subjectivity to ground theory (although it was not necessarily formulated in these terms). It was also, however, a good deal more. In particular, it was a transition from a philosophical-historical to a more social-scientific way of approaching international politics. An important, but somewhat forgotten, figure in this intellectual evolution is Raymond Aron, whose thoughts on theory are interesting for our discussion.

The fate of Aron is that he was a transitional figure, uneasily occupying an intellectual space somewhere between the classical realists and structural realists—between Morgenthau and Waltz. Aron’s work, in particular his tome Peace and War (2003), is suffused with historical sensibility and admiration for prudent statecraft that are hallmarks of classical realism, but his understanding of theory is largely sympathetic to the scientific self-understanding that was sweeping IR at the time (Peace and War came out in 1966). In the essay What is a theory of international relations? (1967) Aron addresses the theory question explicitly. Theory, Aron argues has two meanings in the Western tradition. On one hand, we have

theory as contemplative knowledge, drawn from ideas or from the basic order of the world, […] the equivalent of philosophy. In that case, theory differs not only from practice […], but from knowledge animated by the will to “know in order to predict and thus be able to act.” At most it [i.e. theory] changes the one who has conceived it and those who are enlightened by it (Aron 1967: 186).

On the other hand, we have

authentically scientific theories, with those of physical science offering the perfect model. In this sense, a theory is a hypothetical, deductive system consisting of groups of hypotheses whose terms are strictly defined and whose relationships between terms (or variables) are most often given in mathematical form (Aron 1967: 186).
Thus, a scientific theory of IR, if it could be constructed, would go beyond mere philosophical enlightenment and provide grounds for a political practice based on prediction and control. Morgenthau would (and did) scoff at such an idea. Indeed, an opposition to a “scientification” of political life was somewhat of a central motif in his writings (Guilhot 2011; Williams 2013). His Scientific Man vs. Power Politics (1967) is probably his most explicit treatment of the topic, but also in Politics Among Nations he contrasts the “‘scientific’ alternative to the ‘perennial wisdom’ of a rationalist approach to international politics”, christening the former “scientific utopianism” (Morgenthau 1978: 41).

Aron, showing the full elasticity of his thinking, actually ends up in a position very close to Morgenthau on theory: “if we expect a theory of international relations to provide the equivalent of what a knowledge of construction materials provides the builder of bridges, then there is no theory and never will be” (Aron 1967: 204). The reason for this surprising conclusion (given Aron’s initial declaration of the superiority of scientific theory) is that IR, unlike physics, is concerned with subjectivity; i.e. with the thoughts and actions of men and women burdened with the freedom and responsibility of interpreting what is going on, taking a stances and making choices. What a theory can offer, Aron argues, is at best

an understanding of [the] various ideologies—moralism, legalism, realism, and power politics—through which men and nations think out problems in international relations, establish their goals or assign themselves duties (Aron 1967: 204, emphasis added).

The limits for scientific theory in IR, as Aron sees them, are ontological—that is, inherent in the kind of the subject matter that IR deals with. His way of putting it is interesting in light of what was to follow in IR theory: “the object of knowledge [for IR] is not only the logic of systems but also the logic of action” (Aron 1967: 206,

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37 In a later essay, Morgenthau describes the scientific approach as “still another type of progressivist theory”; “Its aim is not the legalization and organization of international relations in the interest of international order and peace but the rational manipulation of international relations […] in the interest of predictable and controlled results (Morgenthau 1970: 46).
emphasize added). The primary thrust of Kenneth Waltz’s seminal work *Theory of International Politics* (1979)—the foundational text, one might say, of structural realism—is precisely to move away from “the logic of actions” and focus on “the logic of systems”.

2.4 Waltz and the discovery of structure

For Waltz, the primary fault of previous IR theorists (and he sees no important difference between Aron and Morgenthau in this regard) is that they focused too much on *agents*—too much on “finding out who is doing what to produce the outcomes [of interest]” (Waltz 1979: 62). However, this approach is bound to fail since “the behavior of states and of statesmen […] is indeterminate” (Waltz 1979: 68). The focus of IR theory, Waltz argues, should not be on individuals and their actions, but on the *system* in which these actions take place. The international system, in Waltz’ ontology, is decoupled from the agents inhabiting the system and acts as an external “constraining and disposing force” (Waltz 1979: 69). To explain outcomes in international relations, according to Waltz, is to show how a certain outcome, although it could *in principle* have been completely different (because we are dealing with human beings), nevertheless was to be expected given the structure of the system.

Most importantly for our discussion of the relation between IR and international politics, the move from Morgenthau to Waltz—the move to structure—also a shift in the IR scholar’s position vis-à-vis international politics. With Morgenthau we are *in* the hustle and bustle of actual political practice, putting “ourselves in the position of a statesman who must meet a certain problem of foreign policy under certain circumstances” (Morgenthau 1978: 5). Indeed, the all-encompassing drive in Morgenthau’s writing, as one observer has put it, is to “enter into the moral world and engage the problems dilemmas, fears, and aspirations of human relations” (Bain 2000: 446). With Waltz, on the other hand, we are someplace high above the action where agents are barely visible anymore and certainly less important, reduced as they are to more or less interchangeable “behaving units” (Waltz 1979: 62).

We can say that Morgenthau adopts more of a *participant* perspective, while Waltz adopts more of an *observer* perspective (Skjervheim 1996c). Note that this is an *existential* distinction. Both Morgenthau and Waltz are observers in the sense that they
are not actual participants in the social practices we usually refer to when speaking of international politics. In this sense, a scholar is always an observer. The distinction between observer and participant is not primarily related to social role—both Morgenthau and Waltz are scholars, not practitioners—but to the intellectual vantage point they adopt in their analysis. The difference between these vantage points is level of \textit{existential engagement} in their subject matter.

To illustrate what I mean by “existential engagement”, consider a situation \textit{without} existential engagement. The astronomer studying the movements of planets is not existentially engaged in her subject matter; she does not see the universe as the planets do and understand their movements in light of their values and world views. She does not participate existentially in the life of the planets, because there is no such life to participate in—only the mechanical operation of immutable natural laws pushing physical objects mindlessly around. If the astronomer were to start looking for \textit{meaning} in planetary movements she would no longer be doing astronomy but a completely different social practice, such as astrology.

When studying planets, the question of existential engagement is moot—there is simply nothing to be existentially engaged in. However, when studying social and political life, things are different. In this case, existential engagement is at the very least a possibility. The question is whether existential engagement is also a \textit{necessity}, i.e. whether in order you explain why people do as they do, you must understand how they think. As Hollis and Smith has suggested, if we really are serious about modelling IR on natural sciences such as physics and astronomy, the answer to this question is, perhaps, “no”:

if three centuries of physics [is] taken as the model to emulate, it is tempting to suggest that it really does not matter what the actors of the international scene have in their minds. In the strongest version of this approach behavior is generated by a system of forces or a structure, external not only to the minds of each actor but also external even to the minds of all actors (Hollis & Smith 1991: 3).

The larger point is that focusing on structure, existential disengagement and “scientification” (moving towards a natural-scientific ideal) are internally related.
Structure is only visible from the outside and not from within the structure itself. This outside position belongs to the existentially disengaged observer—a position that can be occupied by anyone, scholar or practitioner, prepared to extract him- or herself intellectually from his or her immediate context.

We can continue the analogy to astronomy in order to illustrate this point. The perspective of astronomy on the solar system is not the perspective of any particular astronomer at any particular physical place in the solar system. Although all particular astronomers are physically located at such a particular point in the solar system, their perspective qua astronomers is not. Astronomy allows us to escape our physical limitations and investigate the solar system from an intellectual vantage point that is liberated from our own physical limitations. Our models of the solar system are not made from the perspective of someone standing on earth and looking up at the sky—the structure of the solar system is simply not visible from that position.

The move to a more disengaged position is not actually a sharp break with Morgenthau. Rather, Waltz’ approach is a radicalization of elements that are also present in Morgenthau’s thinking. It is the theorist’s disengaged position, Morgenthau argues, that allows him to see through the muddle in a way that practitioners themselves might not:

[it]he more removed the individual is from a particular power struggle, the more likely he is to understand its true nature. So it is not by accident […] that scholars are better equipped than politicians to understand what politics is all about (Morgenthau 1978: 93).

There is a certain sense in which the theorist must be “disengaged” in order to see the big picture he or she is supposed to see; it is part the job requirement, so to speak. However, there are different ways of understand this requirement. We can understand this ethos as equivalent to approaching the natural-scientific ideal, where the imperative is to become as detached an observer as is humanly possible. But we can also understand this imperative in another sense—a sense which is perhaps not as immediately understandable—namely as a dialectical imperative to come to know our most fundamental horizon (see section 1.3). I am getting a bit ahead of myself here
(we will return to dialectical thinking in chapter 4), but to give a preliminary feel for the difference between these two approaches, consider the following passage from Thomas Nagel’s book *The View from Nowhere* (1986):

>a view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual’s makeup and position in the world […]. […] A standpoint that is objective by comparison with the personal view of one individual may be subjective by comparison with a theoretical standpoint still farther out. The standpoint of morality is more objective than that of private life [i.e. personal interests], but less objective than the standpoint of physics (Nagel 1986: 5).

But is the standpoint of physics or, more generally, the scientific standpoint really the most fundamental standpoint? If we by “most fundamental” mean something like “analytically detached to the highest degree”, then I am inclined to agree that yes, in *that* sense, the perspective of science is the most fundamental standpoint. However, in another sense, at least one standpoint more fundamental than science exists: the standpoint that critically evaluates and judges science as the most fundamental standpoint, i.e. Nagel’s own *philosophical* standpoint.

The philosophy that situates science as the most fundamental standpoint is itself a theoretical standpoint “still farther out” than science. This philosophical standpoint, however, is not a disengaged analytical-observer standpoint; it is rather a deeply engaged, critical standpoint—a *horizon* that provides a normative hierarchy for arranging more standpoints, such as “the standpoint of physics”, as more or less fundamental. Getting to this background horizon is what “seeing the big picture” means when we are thinking dialectically, and the road to this horizon is the kind critique from the *inside* that I have performed in these latter two paragraphs.

Waltz, however, is not thinking dialectically. Instead, he understands the imperative to see the big picture in an, arguably, more common way: to establish a view of international relations from the *outside*, akin to astronomy’s perspective on the solar system. To theorize international relations, on Waltz’ understanding, *is* to adopt an outside vantage point from where the international realm emerges as the solar system emerges from the astronomer: as a finite and delimited object. This follows
from Waltz’ *mimetic* understanding of theory as a “depiction of the organization of a domain and of the connection among its parts” (Waltz 1979: 8). This commitment is a fundamental part of Waltz’ horizon—a horizon that that even constructivists who came after and rebelled against Waltz would struggle to free themselves from.

### 2.5 Structure and the analytical-critical duality

Let us track back to the analytical-critical duality of IR theory. As already mentioned, it is not obvious that this issue is relevant to Waltz, since he has a purely *analytical* understanding of his own theory (cf. disclaimer in section 2.1.1). A theory, Waltz claims, is an intellectual device for the observing IR scholar, the purpose of which is primarily explanation (and perhaps prediction). Theoretical progress is *analytical* progress: to move from a more or less inductive fact collection, to a higher level of understanding where the different pieces of empirical information is seen as parts of a whole (Waltz 1979: 8).

This insistence on theory as merely an analytical tool puts Waltz at odds with his realist predecessors. Both Morgenthau and Aron also speaks of theory as an analytical tool for carving out a piece of social reality called “international relations” in order to study it (Aron 1967: 187; Morgenthau 2011: 264). However, they also insist that theory is something more than *just* an intellectual device: “a theory of international relations presents not only a guide to understanding, but also an idea for action” (Morgenthau 2011: 264).

Aron’s understanding of the critical function of theory is very interesting in this regard, since it is less connected to particular ways of being—such as Morgenthau’s “political man”—and more focused structure. Theory, Aron argues, speaks to the parameters for action set by the environment in which action takes place. This would likely also be Waltz’ understanding of how his own theory functions critically (if he believed that theory had a critical function). After all, his theory is supposed to delineate “the constraints that confine all states” (Waltz 1979: 268). Referring to the

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38 An understanding for which they are all indebted to Max Weber’s notion of ideal types (see, in particular Weber 2004). Aron makes the connection to Weber explicit, the close intellectual kinship between Morgenthau and Weber has been noted by several Morgenthau scholars (e.g. Barkawi 1998; Turner & Mazur 2009), and Patrick T. Jackson has recently made the argument that Waltz is an methodological Weberian (Jackson 2011: chap. 4)
practical implications of Waltz’ theory, Alexander George and George Bennet regard “structural realism as a theory of constraints on foreign policy, rather than a theory of foreign policy” (George & Bennett 2005: 268, emphasis added).

However, how exactly should we understand “structure” and in what sense does structure constrain? Should we understand structure, in this context, as an external environment—akin to physical environment—that constrains behavior in the same way a physical environment does? Let me try to explain what I mean by this. A physical landscape has certain features that you must adapt to in order to navigate it effectively (or even, in some cases, to survive). Being in the middle of a vast ocean, for instance, is a structural circumstance you have to deal with, whether you like it or not. You can either adapt to your circumstances and learn to swim, or you can give up and drown—either way, it is no use wishing you were on dry land. I do not think that Waltz’ conception of structure is quite as crude as this (see below and section 3.2 in the next chapter), but it gives us a place to start.

Obviously, the comparison between social and physical structures in the previous paragraph cannot be taken literally. The “stuff” of social structure is not physical-material. A “social landscape” is a metaphor—it is not actually a landscape in the same sense as an ocean, a forest or a mountain range is a landscape. So what is it? Aron suggests we think of the structures made visible by theory as the “rules of the game” of international relations. He differentiates between mapping out these rules, the subject of theory, and doing well in the game, the subject of praxeology. As an analogy Aron uses the game of soccer. Soccer has a certain social structure (the rules of the game) that makes it soccer and not something else. Taking that structure as given, one can develop strategies for doing well in the game (Aron 2003: 8-9).39

Two things should be noted about Aron’s structures-as-rules that both point towards the next phase of the argument in chapter 3. First, rules, whether they are explicitly agreed upon or have emerged in a more implicit manner, are socially dependent. Neither soccer nor international relations are naturally occurring phenomena that would have been there also in the absence of human beings. Second,

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39 There are some obvious connection to Wittgenstein (1958) here that I am not pursuing.
rules are normative, and the most fundamental rules concern the boundaries of political legitimacy:

I tried to determine what constituted the distinctive nature of international or interstate relations, and I concluded that it lay in the legitimacy or legality of the use of military force (Aron 1967: 190).

Thus, the legitimacy of using military force is the inescapable background against which all international politics take place. This is the fundamental constraining condition that, like being in the middle of the ocean, one must adapt to in order to survive and thrive. The practical implications that Aron derives from this fundamental insight are, largely, identical to Waltz. Aron speaks of the “necessity of egoism” that “derives logically from [...] the state of nature which rules among states” (Aron 2003: 580); likewise Waltz derives the “international imperative” that is “take care of yourself!” (Waltz 1979: 201).

However, despite their similar practical attitudes, Waltz would probably not entirely agree with Aron’s way of deducing the necessity of self-regard. Waltz’ central idea is that it is anarchy, i.e. the absence of a central government holding the monopoly on the use of force, that is the fundamental condition of international politics—not that the use of military force is legitimate. Legitimacy has nothing to do with it; it is the mere possibility that, at any moment and for whatever reason, any particular state may use military force that is important. Using violence to get one’s way is not “off the table” in the international realm as it is in a (well-functioning) domestic realm. This is, as I understand it, what Waltz means by “the structure that constraints all states”.

However, there are some problems with this structure-as-anarchy understanding. The absence of a central government holding monopoly on the use of force in international politics is not really a theory (in the essentialist sense), but an empirical fact—something that could conceivably change. Theory is what makes this empirical fact of anarchy so important. But to answer this question, you need to make assumptions about agents, about how they see each and relate to each other. As
Alexander Wendt famously pointed out: it does not follow logically from the empirical fact of anarchy that states have to relate to each other in any particular way (Wendt 1992: 396)—war of “all against all” and security communities are both possibilities that are perfectly compatible with the fact that no world government exist.

Waltz himself is aware of the problem of thinking of anarchy as a structure. A structure, Waltz argues, “is an organizational concept” (Waltz 1979: 89): a principle by which something is arranged and brought into order. But “[i]f structure is an organizational concept, the terms “structure” and “anarchy” seem to be in contradiction” (Waltz 1979: 89). Anarchy is not an ordering principle; indeed, anarchy would be the absence of an ordering principle. But Waltz is not saying that the international realm is disordered. Rather, Waltz is claiming that there is “an order without an orderer” (Waltz 1979: 89)—a structure that “emerge[s] from the co-existence of states” and is “formed by the coaction of their units” (Waltz 1979: 91) rather than imposed by a central power.

How does this order come about? “International-political systems, like economic markets, are formed by the coaction of self-regarding units” (Waltz 1979: 91, emphasis added), “formed and maintained on a principle of self-help that applies to the units” (Waltz 1979: 91, emphasis added). But if the structuring principle in question is self-regard, then Waltz has not divorced agency from structure after all: self-regard is an agent characteristic. It takes a special kind of state—the kind committed to Waltz’ own “international imperative” (take care of yourself!)—to make the kind of structure Waltz has in mind.

The point of repeating this familiar critique of Waltz is that it re-opens the same kind of analytical-critical paradox we find in Morgenthau’s thinking. Placing the essence in structure rather than agency was supposed to solve this paradox. If what actually does the work in Waltz’ theory are assumptions about agency, then either we are back with the “human nature” argument of Morgenthau, with all its associated problems, or we have laid the ground for something new, something beyond essentialism. This something new, I would argue, is constructivism, which we turn to in the next chapter.
One observes world history and, lo and behold, each age has its own moral substance.

- Søren Kierkegaard

3 Constructivism
We are trying to get a grip on the relation between IR theory and international politics—in particular, how we should think about the relation between analytical and the critical aspects of such theory. In the previous chapter we considered essentialism. Essentialism holds that international politics has two distinct parts: the objective essence that exists independently of whether practitioners of international politics recognize it or not, and the subjective understanding of this essence. This opens up the possibility of splitting up the analytical and critical function of IR theory as follows: the analytical task of theory is to reflect the objective essence of international politics; the critical task of theory is to enlighten and transform subjective understandings of this essence.

For this solution to work, the essence and the understanding of this essence—the objective and the subjective—must be strictly separable. Morgenthau, however, places the objective essence in subjectivity (in human nature), which creates a paradox since now both the analytical and the critical function of theory is directed at the subjective aspect. Waltz remedies this situation by moving the essence out of subjectivity and into the structure that surrounds the subject—a structure that, supposedly, is what it is independent of the inhabiting subjects’ understanding of what it is. Waltz’ project depends crucially on getting to pure objective structure, completely untainted by subjectivity. His failure to do so sets the stage for the constructivist turn in IR, which explicitly tries to account for the irreducible subjective dimension of international politics.

My interest in constructivism must be understood in light of the question under investigation. In this chapter I consider constructivism in the same manner as I considered essentialism in the previous chapter: as a horizon of ontological, epistemological and practical-philosophical commitments that, among other things, provides a way of thinking about the relation between IR and international politics and
the role of theory in this relation. The ontological basis for constructivism is a re-interpretation of structure from something akin to a physical constraint to an intersubjective world—a conceptual horizon that sets the stage for what is possible and legitimate to do in international politics (see section 3.1). As with the move from human nature essentialism to structural essentialism, I am primarily interested in the move from structural essentialism to constructivism as a dialectical response to the internal contradictions in the former position.

The problem with Waltz’ position, for our purpose, is not primarily that he does not appreciate the role of ideas in international politics (although that too, in an indirect sense), but that he cannot free himself from Morgenthau’s analytical-critical paradox. Just like Morgenthau, Waltz wants to justify his theory analytically—as a reflection of an underlying, inescapable circumstance of international politics. The critical function of Waltz’ theory is a secondary issue of enlightening practitioners about this circumstance, telling them to be a certain way. The paradox re-appears when the way Waltz is telling international practitioners to be is precisely what would make international politics the way Waltz imagines it to be by necessity. The idea of a structure divorced from subjectivity turns out to be an illusion, which means that the structural essentialist solution to the analytical-critical paradox is also an illusion.40

Waltz wants to find something beyond subjectivity that can be reflected analytically, which is what prompts his search for objective structure. This search takes the form a sort of phenomenological reduction of international politics where “[w]e abstract from any particular qualities of states and from all their concrete connections” (Waltz 1979: 99). But if we abstract from all the qualities of the states and their concrete connections, we also abstract away international politics itself. This cannot be done and Waltz ends up smuggling back in theoretical assumptions that speaks precisely to state characteristics (self-regard) and the nature inter-state relations (self-help). The critique one can direct at Waltz is not that his structure is a form of subjectivity, which is unavoidable, but that he is not aware of this and justifies this way of being as adaption to objective circumstances.

40 Given, of course, that no other kind of social structure completely divorced from subjectivity can be found.
The constructivist sees structural essentialism for what it is: the theoretical elevation of a particular way of being into a “natural” way of being by calling it objective. The dialectical relationship between constructivism and essentialism is actually quite complex. It is not only essentialist IR theorists such as Morgenthau and Waltz that are subject constructivist critique and analysis (for a (critical) review of critiques of these two thinkers, see Behr & Heath 2009), but essentialism itself. It is important to keep in mind that essentialism, re-interpreted from constructivism, is not primarily an academic position, but more fundamentally a way of “relating” to one’s own conceptual horizon as natural. I put “relating” in quotation marks because to relate to one’s own conceptual horizon as natural is, in a sense, not to (consciously) relate to one’s horizon, but to live unreflectively and immediately under this horizon.

Constructivism is, among other things, a re-interpretation of what theorizing international politics entails, namely to lay bare the conceptual horizon under which international politics is conducted. This is obviously an analytical task, but it also has a critical edge. In particular, constructivist analysis dissolves more immediate, essentialist ways of being and thinking through deconstruction. 41 Constructivist analysis is directed at people living inside a social-historical horizon, i.e. inside an intersubjective world (see next section). Living under a horizon, however, can be done with varying degrees of naïveté concerning that horizon, i.e. varying degrees of insight into the horizon itself. The difference between naïveté and self-insight into one’s own horizon is a difference between seeing one’s own situation dimly and seeing it clearly—between knowing what is in historical movement and what (if anything) is not.

Constructivist critique, as long as it is not understood dialectically (next chapter), is purely negative: it merely dissolves essentialist naïveté. The logical conclusion of this process is a nihilistic kind of anti-universalism that reduces all horizons to social-historical perspectives. This puts a paradoxical twist on our entire discussion. The essentialist believes that international politics has to be a certain way

41 The relation between structural essentialism and constructivism is like the relation between insight into the fundamental “rules” of international politics, and insight into the socio-historicity of any particular fundamental rules of international politics. The latter insight is really the same as saying that there are no rules of international politics in the absolute sense that essentialists argue there is.
(by necessity); a constructivist knows that international politics do not have to be any particular way (by necessity). Once the constructivist level of insight is reached and a naïve belief in natural necessity is removed, we can ask: how should international politics be? We have now gone full circle, since this is really the same question as Morgenthau asked (given that his essence is actually an ideal). But by getting back to this question, we have seemingly removed the grounds for answering it. How do we justify any particular form of international life without unwarrantably reifying some particular social-historical horizon? This is the topic of chapter 4.

3.1 The ontology of constructivism

It is common to think of a world as an objective, external environment distinguishable from its inhabiting subjects. The physical world is a good example of a world in this sense of word. However, we also use the term “world” in a different sense, such as when we say that millionaires and beggars live in different worlds, or claim that the world has changed since the 1950s. By such expressions we are not referring so much to differences in physical surroundings so as to existential differences in lived experiences. The millionaire and the beggar might be in physical proximity, but their worlds—their lived experiences—are far apart. It is this latter meaning of the word “world” that is implied when talking about intersubjective worlds (for a more fine-grained and philosophically sophisticated treatment of the concept of "world", see Heidegger 1962: chap. 3, in particular p. 93).

The intersubjective concept of “world” is closely related to Thomas Kuhn’s concept of a “paradigm”. Kuhn’s discussion of paradigms and worlds in the natural sciences is helpful, I believe, to bring out the difference between an objective world such as the physical world, and an intersubjective world. Let me give an example. After the switch from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican paradigm in astronomy a whole range of phenomena (sunspots, new stars, comets etc.) were suddenly discovered without any change in physical equipment. Indeed, many of these phenomena had been previously discovered by scientists in other cultures with considerably less sophisticated observational equipment who were unburdened with the Ptolemaic
conceptual commitment to the immutability of the heavens. What had changed was Western astronomy’s conceptual equipment:

[us]ing traditional instruments, some as simple as a piece of thread, late sixteenth-century astronomers repeatedly discovered that comets wandered at will through the space previously reserved for immutable planets and stars. The very ease with which astronomers saw new things when looking at old objects with old instruments may make us wish to say that, after Copernicus, astronomers lived in a different world (Kuhn 2012: 116, emphasis added).

What sense can we make of astronomers “living in a different world” after Copernicus? I want to suggest that we can make perfect sense of this if we distinguish between the objective physical world studied by astronomy, and the intersubjective social world in which astronomy is conducted as a social practice (a distinction Kuhn did not, but should have made). Copernicus did not change the physical makeup of the universe, but he changed “the world of astronomy”. Copernicus did not change or make the solar system, but he changed astronomy’s conceptualization of its own subject matter such that the solar system became understandable as a “solar system”, in the first place. Astronomers lived in the same physical world after Copernicus, but not in the same existential world, which is to say not in the same social-historical or intersubjective world.

To say that astronomy is a practice, is to say that astronomy takes place against a transcendental background that acts as a condition of possibility for astronomy being astronomy. This conceptual background does two things. First, it puts astronomy, in the modern sense of the term, on the existential menu as something that can possibly be done in at all; and, second, it provides the (implicit or explicit) criteria for distinguishing between better and worse performances of this practice. To say that astronomy is a social-historical practice is to say that this transcendental background was not handed down from eternity in its current form: astronomy, as we think of it today, is the result of a long historical development that includes some revolutionary changes along the way (which, by the way, is not in any way a threat to astronomy’s status as a science). If we generalize this notion of social-historical practice beyond
astronomy, and include international politics and the study of international politics (IR), we get the constructivist ontology.

The term “transcendental conditions of possibility” is from Kant, who must be considered one the (unwitting) founding fathers of constructivism. Kant’s most famous question was the following: how is mathematics and natural science possible? Note that Kant is not questioning whether mathematics and natural science exist, but rather “how they are possible—for that they are possible is proved through their actuality” (Kant 1998: 147, emphasis added). In more contemporary terms, we can put it like this: Kant starts from the established fact of natural science and seeks to make sense of this social practice through delineating the conceptual conditions of possibility underpinning this practice (in the shape and form it had in Kant’s day). Kant called this “transcendental critique”, and it is central to his philosophical method.

Transcendental critique of natural science as a social practice, Kant argues, is different from doing natural science. Thus, what comes out of Kant’s transcendental critique is a different kind of knowledge than natural scientific knowledge—and these two forms of knowledge cannot be understood or evaluated according to the same standards. Insight into the conditions of possibility for natural science is a form of transcendental knowledge which is not “occupied with objects [as natural scientists are] but rather with the mode of our cognition of objects” (Kant 1998: 149). The difference is subtle, but important. While natural scientist study nature, Kant is concerned with the conceptual framework natural scientists use to study nature—including the very concept of “nature” itself.

Two things separate Kant from modern-day constructivists. First, Kant was not concerned with the socio-history of this conceptual framework. Second, Kant was not concerned with the larger totality—the world—in which more specific practices, such as natural science and international politics, take place. The concept of an intersubjective world comes after Kant. An intersubjective world is a shared horizon of meaning (Ruggie 1998) that nourishes particular ways of being. This entails a rethink of “structure” and how it relates to agency. Where “structure” for Waltz “designates a
set of constraining conditions” (Waltz 1979: 73), 42 the constructivist notion of structure is more like a *stage* on which practical activity can be performed. As such, structures both enable and constrain; they put limits on what can be done, but they also open up possibilities.

For instance, a “humanitarian intervention” can only take place in an intersubjective world that contains certain ideas about how a minimum standard for human dignity can justify the use of military force. These ideas do not exist merely inside the head of individual statesmen, but are part of the larger ideational context in which international politics is conducted in the 21st century. There were not and could not be humanitarian interventions in medieval times simply because medieval intersubjectivity did not contain the ideational materiel necessary to underpin the political practice we know as “humanitarian intervention”. Likewise, certain forms of political actions that were possible in medieval Europe, such as religious crusades, are not part of the menu of political possibilities in contemporary European politics—these practices belong to a historically dead inter-subjectivity.43

Intersubjective structures cannot, naturally, be decoupled from the subjects that inhabit them. Instead, the very notion of inter-subjectivity assumes a mutually constitutive relation between agency and structure, such that structure makes agency possible and agency maintains, reproduces and sometimes alters structure (Hopf 1998: 172-173). One side of this equation is the formation of identities and corresponding world views from the ideational material available in one’s social-historical context. For instance, political realism is a world view, but being a political realist—which is inseparable from interpreting the world in a particular way—is also an *identity*. In real life, of course, “pure” political realism does not exist, but is always colored by the larger historical and social context. As an example, consider Richard Sakwa’s analysis of Vladimir Putin as a political realist with Slavic characteristics:

42 A more constructivist understanding of structure is actually latent in Waltz. One of the ways “which structures work their effects”, Waltz argues, “is through socialization that limits and molds behavior” (Waltz 1979: 76, emphasis added).

43 The most important aspect of this horizon is perhaps that it gives *purpose* to international politics, and makes it about something—whether it is reclaiming the Holy Land, dealing with climate change, securing peace, glorifying the nation or whatever. The idea is that international war, conflict and cooperation does not happen merely for the sake of war, conflict and cooperation in itself, but for the sake of some larger ideal(s) connected to a fundamental historical horizon (For a general treatment of the idea of a fundamental horizon, see Taylor 1989: chap. 2. I return to this idea in the next chapter).
Russia’s foreign policy under Putin can be described as a ‘new realism’. It is a realism concerned not so much with balancing as with joining, while at the same time tempered by neo-Slavophile concerns about autonomy and uniqueness, and pragmatic Euroasianist notions of balance between East and West (Sakwa 2007: 270).

The other side of the agent-structure equation is the role of agency in maintaining or transforming the intersubjective world through practical activity—indeed, by merely being who they are. This side of things is captured in such formulations “a world of our making” (Onuf 2013) and “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt 1992). “Making” is, however, an unfortunate choice of words insofar as it gives associations to acts of deliberate design, rather than the more subtle, often unconscious, transformative or supportive effect ideas have on practices and institutions:

[f]irst, obviously, for most institutions we simply grow up in a culture where we take the institution for granted. We need not be consciously aware of its ontology [i.e. its ideational basis]. But second […] in the very evolution of the institution the participants need not be consciously aware [that they are maintaining/ changing it] (Searle 1995)

After this introduction to the basic ontological concepts of constructivism, we now return to the main concern of this thesis: the relation between IR and international politics. As before, we approach this issue through the analytical-critical duality. Section 3.2 deals with the analytical side of constructivism, section 3.3 with the critical side; the final sections of the chapter deal with the relation between the analytical and the critical side of constructivism (3.4.) and the limits of constructivism (3.5) as a horizon for understanding the relation between IR and international politics.

3.2 The analytical side of constructivism

Constructivism opens up a new program for empirical research in the form of investigating the constitution and historical movement of the intersubjective backgrounds that underpin different forms of international politics—what Christian Reus-Smit has called “constitutional structures” (Reus-Smit 1997; 1999: chap. 2).
Some of the conceptual groundwork for this research program is latent in the more “constructivist” parts of Waltz. Consider the following passage:

[The behavior of [a pair of agents] cannot be apprehended by taking a unilateral view of either member. The behavior of the pair cannot, moreover, be resolved into a set of two-way relations because each element of behavior that contributes to the interaction is itself shaped by being a pair. They have become part of a system. [...]. Each acts and reacts to the other. Stimulus and response are part of the story. But also the two of them act together in a game, which—no less because they have “devised” it—motivates and shapes their behavior. Each is playing a game, and they are playing a game together. [...]. In spontaneous and informal ways, societies establish norms of behavior (Waltz 1979: 75, emphasis in original).

Waltz is clearly suggesting that participation in the international realm is also the participation in a kind of broader social “game” defined by certain higher-order rules (cf. Aron’s notion of structures as rules in section 2.5). It is precisely that higher-order dimension that “define both the rules of the game what the pieces are” (Buzan 2014: 31), and its fundament in the larger social-historical background, that constructivists are interested in. Different social-historical backgrounds correspond to different—even radically different—forms of international co-existence (see e.g. Reus-Smit 1999; Buzan & Little 2000).

The failure of Waltz from a constructivist perspective is that he takes one particular kind of international co-existence—only one kind of “game”—and treats it as if this was the only possibility. In other words, Waltz elevates a particular social-historical possibility to universal necessity. Constructivism is a move “beyond Waltz” to more fundamental questions that are latent but not explicitly addressed in Waltz’ own work:

neorealism assumes that all units in global politics have only one meaningful identity, that of self-interested states. Constructivism stresses that this proposition exempts from theorization the very fundamentals of international political life, the nature and definition of the actors (Hopf 1998: 176).
Alexander Wendt’s critique of the neo-neo debate is a good example. “Neorealists and neoliberals may disagree about the extent to which states are motivated by relative versus absolute gains”, Wendt argues, “but both groups take the self-interested state as the starting point” (Wendt 1992: 392). There exists, however, a more fundamental set of questions “about identity- and interest-formation” (Wendt 1992: 392) of which neoliberals and neorealists seem unaware. The mere existence of a state system does not explain why a state system is a certain way: “self-help and power politics do not follow either logically or casually from anarchy” (Wendt 1992: 394).

Wendt, famously, developed this argument further and distinguished between three different “cultures of anarchy”—the Hobbesian, the Lockean and the Kantian—each with their own kind of logic. In a Hobbesian anarchy everybody is an enemy—a potential threat to one’s own survival—and should be treated as such. In a Lockean anarchy the role structure is more differentiated, where “the kill or be killed logic […] has been replaced by a live and let live logic” (Wendt 1999: 278). In the Lockean world one speaks of rivals rather than enemies. The difference between these two terms is a certain degree of mutual recognition and respect: “unlike enemies, rivals expect each other to act as if they recognize their sovereignty, their “life and liberty”, as a right, and therefore not to try to conquer or dominate them” (Wendt 1999: 278). Finally, in a Kantian anarchy a third kind of relationship prevails: that of friendship, where “disputes will be settled without war or the threat of war” (Wendt 1999: 298).

However, Wendt does more than to particularize Waltz and therefore debunk his essentialist claims. Wendt’s constructivist standpoint also leads him to re-examine the historical record with fresh eyes and find something very different from Waltz:

[t]o my mind the empirical record suggests strongly that in the past few centuries there has been a qualitative structural change in international politics. The kill or be killed logic of the Hobbesian state of nature has been replaced by the live and let live logic of the Lockean anarchical society (Wendt 1999: 277).
Furthermore, “since World War II the behavior of the North Atlantic states, and arguably many others, seems to go well beyond a Lockean culture”; “a new international political culture has emerged in the West within which nonviolence and team play are the norm” (Wendt 1999: 294). None of these developments are visible from a realist perspective that operates with a fundamental commitment to an unchanging objective core of international politics; it is only through “de-reification” of this core that structural change becomes a possible analytical topic in IR.

“Structural change”, of course, means something deeper than e.g. mere redistribution of material power. However, what exactly does it mean? What constitutes structural change in international politics? The commitment to the possibility of structural change on the level that constructivism envisions is a much more politically significant commitment than perhaps many constructivists are aware of. Wendt is certainly right in arguing that constructivism is a form of “strong liberalism” (Wendt 1992: 393), or perhaps more accurately a form of idealism: a commitment to ideas as the fundamental component of the social world (including international politics) and, accordingly, a belief that changing ideas quite literally changes the world. For some this might be a very radical idea. However, it is follows naturally from the constructivist ontology specified in section 3.1.

Not all ideational change amounts to structural change (or would amount to structural change if the new ideas took hold and started to permeate practice), so we need to be even more specific. In this regard, I do not think Wendt goes quite deep enough. Consider the difference between, say, a Kantian relation and a Hobbesian relation in Wendt’s scheme. The difference is obviously important: the first case is a relation between friends, who, although they still disagree about stuff, would not consider going to war against each other as a way resolving these disagreements; the second instance is a relation between enemies, in which case war is not “off the table” at all, but rather provides the background for all dealings they have with each other.

Norway, Sweden and Denmark are a good example, I think, of how international relations can move from a Hobbesian to a Kantian kind. Today, a Nordic war is close to unimaginable. However, this is not a “natural” state of affairs. Rather, this situation is a fairly recent and remarkable historical development. Norway, in
particular, did not always feel so safe from what today are some of its closest allies. A speech given by Jørgen Løvland, who would become Norway’s first Foreign Minister in 1905, can serve to illustrate this point:

We must not look away from the truth. Norway has never had enemies in Germany and Russia as we have in Denmark and Sweden. [O]ur big neighbours have never hurt us. No, it is Denmark and Sweden who have been dangerous.  

If we accept that Norway has gone from something close to a Hobbesian to something close to a Kantian relationship with its neighbors over the last century, then there is still the question of why and how it happened. What fundamental shift took place so that, after the Second World War in particular, what was arguably Norway’s worst enemies had now become its closest friends? A clue to this transformation might be found in the white paper on the Norwegian parliament’s decision to apply for NATO membership in 1949, where we read that “in its culture and as concerns social ideals and fundamental values Norway is most naturally at home amongst the Western democracies”.  

The move from a Hobbesian to a Kantian relation between the Nordic countries, I would argue, is internally connected to the emergence of political identities built on values and ideals that transcend national boundaries that took place in the first half of the 20th century. This move away from traditional 19th century nationalism, when each nation was a self-sufficient moral-political entity, to a more ideologically based identity is one of a series of fundamental re-orientations of the international-political horizon that took place over the last 200 years. Samuel Huntington retells the story of these changing political fault lines of European politics in his The Clash of Civilizations (2002):

beginning with the French Revolution the principal lines of conflict were between nations […]. […]. This nineteenth-century pattern lasted until

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45 Actually the primary change seems to have happened from 1905 to 1945.
World War I. [...]. In 1917, as a result of the Russian Revolution, the conflict of nation states was supplemented by the conflict of ideologies, first among fascism, communism, and liberal democracy and then between the latter two. In the Cold War these ideologies were embodied in the two superpowers, each of which defined its identity by its ideology and neither of which was a nation state in the traditional European sense (Huntington 2002: 52).

What Huntington is describing here are re-configurations of what I, in section 3.1, referred to as the intersubjective world or horizon that nourishes particular forms of international politics. When Francis Fukuyama argued (somewhat fairly at the time, I think) that “theorists of international relations talk as if history did not exist” (Fukuyama 2012: 246) he referred precisely to the lack of awareness of the historical evolution of the “human horizon” (Fukuyama 2012: 246). Part of this re-configuration was a re-shuffling of who were friends are and who were enemies. More fundamentally, however, this movement in the moral and conceptual background also transformed the political space of what is possible, reasonable and legitimate to do in international politics (see section 4.4).

3.3 The critical side of constructivism

In the previous section, I focused on the analytical side of constructivism. However, constructivism also has a critical side. Specifically, constructivism is critical of essentialist theory and practice that “reifies” and “naturalizes” social structures. Reification, on Luckman and Berger’s classic definition is

the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things [...] as if they were something else than human products—such as facts of nature, result of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will (Berger & Luckmann 2011: 88).

In opposition to this, constructivism seeks to

“denaturalize” the social world, that is, to empirically discover and reveal how the institutions and practices and identities that people take as natural, given or matter of fact, are, in fact, the products of [...] social construction (Hopf 1998: 182).
Reification occurs both consciously through theory and unconsciously in practice. Regarding the latter, constructivism stands in a critical relation to the “pre-theoretical” consciousness of the agent who lives immediately into his or her social world, taking it as natural and given. This mode of being in the world, where one is not conscious of one’s social surroundings as social-historical constructions is a form of reification, resulting simply from the unquestioned acceptance of the way things are. When “tradition becomes master”, Heidegger writes,

it does so in such a way that what it ‘transmits’ is made so inaccessible […] that it becomes concealed. Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial ‘sources’ from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been […] drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that have had such an origin (Heidegger 1962: 43).

Recuperating those “primordial sources” is precisely what constructivism sets out to do through social-historical deconstruction, i.e. through showing the inner socio-historicity of particular forms of life. From the standpoint of constructivism, the unquestioning acceptance of the way things are as natural and self-evident is a form of naïveté, rooted in lack of insight into the socio-historicity of one’s own thinking and being. This is another kind of “self-deception” than we find in essentialist writings. Morgenthau’s “self-deceiving” political agent is one who hides behind “ideological justifications and rationalizations” (Morgenthau 1978: 92). While for Morgenthau this self-deception is a kind of coping mechanism that renders the “contest for power psychologically […] acceptable to the actors and their audience” (Morgenthau 1978: 93), the constructivist notion of ideological self-deception is deeper.

Karl Mannheim once made a distinction between the particular and the total conception of ideology that can help clarify this difference. The particular understanding of ideology (Morgenthau) is psychological: an agent’s ideas are regarded as “more or less conscious disguises of the real nature of a situation”, ranging from “calculated attempts to dupe others to self deception” (Mannheim 1997: 56-57).
The reason Mannheim calls this understanding of ideology *particular* is that it is only parts of the agent’s ideas that are under suspicion:

[i]f it is claimed for instance that an adversary is lying, or that he is concealing or distorting a given factual situation, it is still nevertheless assumed that both parties share common criteria of validity—it is still assumed that it is possible to eradicate sources of error by referring to accepted criteria of validity common to both parties. The suspicion that one’s opponent is the victim of an ideology does not go so far as to exclude him from discussion on basis of a common theoretical frame of reference (Mannheim 1997: 57).

From a constructivist point of view, however, the agent living naïvely into her social world, taking it as natural, is not *consciously* deceiving herself or others—something that implies that she knows, deep down, that the social reality she takes as “natural” and self-evident is really a social-historical construct that could be different. Indeed, she can only “reify” the social world insofar as she has actually not reflected on the social-historical contingency of the world she takes for granted. We must not make the mistake of thinking, Berger and Luckman argues, that constructivism is the original mode of being and that everyday reification is “a sort of cognitive fall from grace”:

[o]n the contrary, the available ethnological […] evidence seems to indicate the opposite, namely that the original apprehension of the social world is highly reified […]. This implies that an apprehension of reification as a modality consciousness is dependent upon an at least relative dereification of consciousness, which is a comparatively late development in history (Berger & Luckmann 2011: 88, emphasis in original).

The discovery that the social world is a human construction belongs to the later stages of history. It is only when a culture starts to systematically question its own foundations that de-reification enters the stage. This questioning is a long process of replacing tradition with reason that started in earnest in the Western world with the Enlightenment. Unlike, for instance, the Renaissance, Anthony Pagden has recently argued, “the Enlightenmet […] begun not as an attempt to rescue some hallowed past
but as an assault on the past in the name of the future. [...] It was a period that sought to overturn every intellectual assumption, every dogma, every “prejudice” (a favorite term) that had previously exercised any hold over the minds of men” (Pagden 2013).

Such questioning, regardless of its particular content and direction implicitly or explicitly accepts the constructivist premise of a non-natural social world that does not have to continue being as it currently is. The difference between a more immediate, naïve consciousness that has not started this radical questioning and a constructivist consciousness is captured in Mannheim’s total conception of ideology:

[i]nstead of being content with showing that the [agent] suffers from illusions or distortions on a psychological [...] plane, the tendency now is to subject his total structure of consciousness and thought to a thoroughgoing sociological analysis (Mannheim 1997: 76-77).

By “thoroughgoing sociological analysis” Mannheim is referring to the explication of the link between a way of thinking and being to the social-historical background in which the agent is embedded. This kind of analysis is a much more radical kind of critique since studies thinking itself “as a function of the life-situation of a thinker” (Mannheim 1997: 57).

It is not only in the pre-theoretical, immediate relation with the social world that reification occurs; reification also occurs through theorizing. The process of theoretical reification is to take some social phenomenon and “bestow on [it] an ontological status independent of human activity and signification” (Berger & Luckmann 2011: 88)—to elevate certain aspect of a social-historically contingent culture into the status of eternal and universal truth. This is, of course, exactly the critique that constructivist direct at essentialist theories—whether it is Morgenthau’s human nature or Waltz’ structures.

The critical element in essentialism lies in pointing out the discrepancy between essence and understanding—between the inner truth of international politics (the objective, eternal part) representable in theory and practitioners’ understanding of this essence (the subjective, changeable part). The critical element in constructivism, on
the other hand, lies in dethroning exactly such appeals to having discovered the eternal essence of something. Saying that X is socially constructed, is to say that “X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present […] is not inevitable” (Hacking 1999: 6). When the essentialist says “X is human nature”, the constructivist counters that humans have no “nature”, they have identities. When the essentialist says “international politics must be X”, the constructivist counters “international politics can be X”. It is the idea that international reality by necessity has to be a particular way that is the target of constructivist critique: “social constructivism is basically about questioning the inevitability of the social status quo” (Guzzini 2000: 154, emphasis added).

3.4 Constructivism and the analytical-critical duality

In sections 3.2 and 3.3, I considered, respectively, the analytical and the critical side of constructivism. In this and the following section I focus on the relation between these two sides of constructivism—in particular, how constructivism re-orientates the analytical-critical relation between IR and international politics. Waltz ends his famous book with a chapter on “the management of international affairs” (Waltz 1979: chap. 9), in which he tries to derive practical applications of his principles.47 His essentialist commitment to having found the objective structure of international politics allows him to do so quite unproblematically; it is no less strange than someone having discovered the spherical shape of the earth deriving practical advice concerning navigation from this discovery.

The practical implications of essentialist theory take the form of adjustment to an unchanging political reality.48 The practical implications of constructivist analysis are, in a sense, precisely the opposite: the de-reification of supposedly unchanging structures opens up possibilities beyond strategic adaptation—possibilities of changing the very structures essentialists insist we must adapt to. The reason for this is, of course, that “structure” is no longer an objective structure akin to a physical environment, but a horizon of “intersubjective meanings that define what constitutes a

47 Perhaps going against his own meta-theory introduced at the start of the book, cf. section 2.1.1.
48 Of course, this is the essentialist self-interpretation of what is going on. The constructivist would argue that “adjustment to realities” is, in fact, the (unconscious) reification of a social-historically contingent form of life (cf. previous section).
legitimate state and what counts as appropriate state conduct” (Reus-Smit 1999: 156). This redefinition of structure in itself re-orient the analytical-critical relation between IR and international politics, from adjustment to structures to insight into and therefore emancipation from structures (the link between emancipation and insight is further specified in the next chapter).

At the end of his book The Moral Purpose of the State (1999), which is an investigation into different horizons under which international politics have been conducted throughout history, Reus-Smit divulges the practical intent of his analysis: “to contribute to a broadly defined critical theory of international relations” (Reus-Smit 1999: 168), whose ultimate goal is to “promote emancipatory transformations in the nature of social and political community” (Reus-Smit 1999: 168). One very important part of such transformation is the very realization that transformation is possible at all: that international politics does not have a fixed nature, but can be transformed as the “normative foundations that undergird [international] societies” (Reus-Smit 1999: 168) are changed.

De-reification of the “naturalness” of international politics—expanding our political imagination by putting before us historical alternatives to the present system and pushing us to confront the intersubjective structure of contemporary international life—is effective in freeing ourselves from “the tyranny of the present”. However, insight into the transformability of international politics is not in itself enough, for how should international relations be transformed? As Reus-Smit notes, “unless the normative and the sociological are brought together, no progress can be made” (Reus-Smit 1999: 170). But this is also the last sentence of his book—further than this he cannot take us. I want to suggest that this is not just the end of Reus-Smit’s book, but the limits of constructivism itself.

Constructivist analysis particularizes standpoints, which gives it a critical function. However, this function in itself is purely negative: it debunks (essentialist) justifications of any particular position as “natural”, but it does not justify any new position. I now want to say something about why that is. To justify a position is, in principle, to justify one’s own position. To justify someone else’s position without reservation is to make that position one’s own. Another way to put this is that
justification is something that is done in *the first person* (Skjervheim 1973: 86). Examples of first-person questions are “what is just?”, “what is good?”, “what is legitimate?” etc.

Empirical questions are not first-person questions. Rather, first-person questions are turned into empirical questions by re-asking them in *third person*—i.e. asking not, for instance, “what is just?” but “what does X hold to be just?”. One way to think about the transition from essentialism to constructivism as a move from asking questions in first person mode to asking third person question. It is not important, from a constructivist standpoint, whether the “the norm of discursive justice [that] provided the justificatory foundations for the ancient Greek practice of arbitration” (Reus-Smit 1999: 35) is valid, or whether “the pursuit of civic glory, or *grandezza*” (Reus-Smit 1999: 8) is a noble undertaking. What matters is that the ancient Greeks believed in discursive justice and that renaissance Italians held *grandezza* to be a central purpose of international politics. If the ancient Greeks and renaissance Italians did not have these commitments, then Reus-Smit’s argument is wrong.

In other words, constructivist analysis is parasitic on someone else—i.e. the people under study such as ancient Greeks and renaissance Italians—asking and answering first-person questions. However, constructivism itself merely asks third person questions. This transition from thinking in first person (e.g. “what is good?”) to thinking in third person (“what do people think is good?”) is a form of existential detachment. When I ask the question in third person I do not have to take a stance myself. Or to put it in some familiar terms: I become an observer of rather than a participant in the life I am analyzing.

Analytical detachment is something that structural essentialism and constructivism has in common. Waltz also avoids first-person questions by focusing on objective structures. The difference between constructivists and Waltz is that constructivists have realized that “objective structures” actually are answers to first-person questions—i.e. that these structures are intersubjective horizons containing fundamental commitments to what is good, bad, legitimate and so forth. Thus, any claim to have discovered an objective structure of international politics is actually an answer to fundamental first-person questions. This discovery opens up a new
possibility for analytical detachment. If international politics is constituted by ideals, beliefs and identities, then this ideational structure can itself be investigated without any commitment “as to the correctness of the ideas to be treated” (Mannheim 1997: 71)—an approach that “confines itself to discovering the relations between certain mental structures and the life-situations in which they exist” (Mannheim 1997: 71).

In a way, constructivism is the ultimate outside-observer position. Different forms of life emerge as delimited social-historical horizons for the constructivist analyst to dissect and explain. In principle, this attitude can be directed at the whole of history, which then becomes a series of external intersubjective worlds whose variety and richness affords endless possibility for the researcher to explore the manifold ways humans can organize their existence. The constructivist, in this observer position, realizes what Henrik Ibsen’s Peer Gynt considered a pleasant possibility for spending one’s life:

I will follow the path of the human race!
Like a feather I’ll float on the stream of history,
make it all live again, as in a dream,—
see the heroes battling for truth and right,
as an onlooker only, in safety seconded (Ibsen 2012: 136).

Apart from the question of whether such an existentially detached position beyond consideration of “truth and right”—i.e. beyond first-person questions—is desirable, the more urgent questions is whether such a position is even possible. The answer to this question actually takes us back to the fundamental assumption with which I began this thesis: that a meeting between the scholar and the people under study is a meeting of horizons; it is always a (re-)interpretation of self-interpretations.

This hermeneutic-critical relation is obvious in cases such as Mearsheimer’s interpretation of Clinton (see introduction) and Morgenthau’s interpretation of Neville Chamberlain (see section 2.2). It is less obvious, but still present, in cases such as Reus-Smit’s interpretation of ancient Greeks and renaissance Italians. The ancient Greeks and renaissance Italians, Reus-Smit’s study are participants in a world; they
live under a horizon defined by “[h]istorically specific beliefs about legitimate statehood and rightful state action” (Reus-Smit 1999: 26). Reus-Smit is not a participant in their world in this way, he does not live under their horizon; he is rather the outside observer for whom these horizons appears as “historically specific”. As such, in relation to ancient Greeks and renaissance Italians, Reus-Smit qua constructivist is not only chronologically situated at a later point in historical time (that too, of course), but also existentially situated outside of the horizons under which the ancient Greeks and the renaissance Italians lived.

The relation between Reus-Smit and the people he studies is asymmetrical in the following way: while ancient Greeks and renaissance Italians cannot see above their own horizons (for in that case their horizons would, strictly speaking, not be their horizons any more), Reus-Smit can see the limits of their horizons as historical perspectives next to others. We can say that ancient Greeks and renaissance Italians are, existentially speaking, naïve in relation to Reus-Smit. While they, presumably, simply believed in certain values as a consequence of being children of their times, Reus-Smit has liberated himself from such immediacy. Reus-Smit has a critical distance to ancient Greek or renaissance Italian life that the ancient Greeks or renaissance Italians did not have—at least insofar as they were in fact ancient Greeks and renaissance Italians, and not modern-day constructivists such as Reus-Smit.

Gadamer has remarked that interpretation “is always more than merely re-creating someone else’s meaning” (Gadamer 2013: 383). It is easy to think, Gadamer argues, that in historical analysis “one must leave one’s own concepts aside and think only in the concepts of the epoch one is trying to understand” (Gadamer 2013: 414). However, “[t]his demand, which sounds like a logical implementation of historical consciousness is […] a naïve illusion” (Gadamer 2013: 414). Understanding, for instance, renaissance Italians or ancient Greeks in order to comprehend their mode of life is not the same as becoming a renaissance Italian or an ancient Greek, who could not possibly comprehend their way of life in the same way that we can. An ancient Greek, for instance, did not think of himself as an “ancient Greek”.

What makes the interpretative relation critical (and not just limited), however, has nothing to do with historical or cultural distance, but with existential difference, i.e.
the difference between living naïvely within a horizon (taking it as natural) and knowing its inner socio-historicity. The historical fact that ancient Greeks do not seem to have had the same insight into their own socio-historicity as modern people do is, in one sense, accidental. The difference is first and foremost a difference in self-insight, not a historical difference. Even among modern people the insight into our own socio-historicity is not universal. Thus, existentially speaking, the relation between Reus-Smit and ancient Greeks is the same as the relation between Reus-Smit and Waltz. The relevant difference, for the purpose of critique, is between essentialism (Waltz, ancient Greeks) and constructivism (Reus-Smit) as levels of self-insight into one’s own horizon.

Constructivist analysis stands in a potentially emancipatory relation to its subject matter: it can provide Socratic self-knowledge to the agents under study, in the form of insight into their own horizon (cf. section 1.3). This, I argue in the next chapter, gives such analysis purpose beyond deconstruction—and recognizing this purpose puts the IR scholar in a dialogical relation to international politics. Before we move on to the dialogical horizon, however, I want to explore on an alternative to using constructivist critique dialectically, namely to use it as an ideological weapon. Constructivism that is not tempered dialectically can easily slide into becoming merely ideological debunking. I raise this particular worry because it is a real and fundamental threat to establishing dialogue.

3.5 When constructivism becomes ideology: anti-universalism

Social-historical particularization is an effective ideological weapon against essentialist positions. Carr, writing some years after Mannheim introduced the sociology of knowledge, noted how the social-historical particularization of thought (ideological debunking), had become an integral part of the political realm. This provided a new kind of ammunition for political realists:

[i]n the last fifty years, thanks mainly though not wholly to the influence of Marx, the principles of the historical school ⁴⁹ have been applied to the analysis of thought; and the foundations of a new science have been laid

⁴⁹ A reference to the German Historical School (Ranke, Droysen, Dilthey etc.) who took over Hegel’s concept of historical worlds.
[...] under the name of the “sociology of knowledge”. The [political] realist has thus been enabled to demonstrate that [...] intellectual theories and ethical standards [...] far from being the expression of absolute and a priori principles, are historically conditioned, being both products of circumstances and interests and weapons framed for the furtherance of interests. [...] This is by far the most formidable attack which utopianism has to face; for here the very foundations of its beliefs are undermined by the realist critique (Carr 2001: 68).

Mannheim was really the first \(^50\) to think the implications of social-historical particularization all the way through. When all conceptions and ideas have been socio-historicized, then what? What comes after the total conception of ideology? After all, “it may be asked whether [...] while we are destroying the validity of certain ideas by means of the ideological analysis [i.e. by social-historical particularization], we are not, at the same time, erecting a new construction” (Mannheim 1997: 79).

Mannheim found new firm ground in the very principle of particularization itself. The insight into the socio-historicity of thinking and being was itself the start of a new position: “the realization that norms and values are historically and socially determined can henceforth never escape us” (Mannheim 1997: 84). This realization is itself constitutive of a new historical subjectivity. Francis Fukuyama, in his famous The End of History and the Last Man (1992), has given one of the best portraits of this subjectivity:

[h]istory teaches us that there have been horizons beyond number in our past—civilizations, religions, ethical codes, “value systems”. The people who lived under them, lacking our modern awareness of history, believed that their horizon was the only one possible. Those who come late in this process, those who live in the old age of mankind, cannot be so uncritical. Modern education [...] liberates men from their attachments to tradition and authority. They realize that their horizon is merely a horizon, not solid land but a mirage that disappears as one draws closer [...] This is why modern man is the last man: he has been jaded by the experience of history, and disabused of the possibility of direct experience of values (Fukuyama 2012: 306, emphasis in original).

\(^{50}\) With the possible exception of Nietzsche.
Fukuyama’s uses the word “horizon” in a slightly pejorative sense (“merely a horizon”), obviously having in mind the kind of naïve (from our, modern perspective) horizons that, for instance, renaissance Italians who actually believed in things like civic glory lived under. There are still many people today, Fukuyama argues, “who would like to “live within a horizon.” That is, they want to choose a belief and commitment to “values” […] such as those offered by traditional religion” (Fukuyama 2012: 307), but a modern person such as Fukuyama cannot go back to such essentialist forms of life. Modern man’s relation to his horizon is not direct, but mediated through the awareness of his own social-historical particularity.

Constructivism is a product of a particular social-historical situation that, since we need a name for it, can call “modernity”. 51 Furthermore, constructivism (if not reinterpreted dialectally) is, in an important sense, caught in the negative aspect of modernity—the Nietzschean modernity in which no absolute ideas can take root. As such constructivism is, on one hand, not very constructive; it can leave no solid ground, for “the ground itself is but the rubble of construction” (Onuf 2013: 35). However, on the other hand, it is precisely at this point, when the constructivist attitude is totalized, that something new—a new ideology—is erected.

An ideology contains an inner criterion for separating clearheaded from distorted interpretations of the world (Skjervheim 1973: 74). One such criterion is the commitment that all values are socially and historically determined. Thus, Mannheim speaks of “ideological distortions” when “we try to resolve conflicts and anxieties by having recourse to absolutes, according to which it is no longer possible to live [for a constructivist]” (Mannheim 1997: 86). Accordingly, any reference to “transcendental-religious factors” (Mannheim 1997: 84)—any attempt to “separate thought from the world of reality, […] to exceed its limits” (Mannheim 1997: 87)—is debunked as ideological. The imperative is clear: “[t]hought should contain neither more nor less

51 An intellectual history of constructivist thinking, which I have no space for here, would probably start with Kant’s discovery of transcendental conditions of possibility (cf. section 3.1) and then move on to Hegel’s historization of these transcendental conditions. The 19th century German Historical School subsequently turned the concept of intersubjective world into a historical-empirical research program. Karl Mannheim, at beginning of the 20th century, brought these ideas into sociology, arguing that transcendental subjectivity is not only historical but also social—i.e. that the structure of consciousness is conditioned by social position (a discovery he attributes to Marx). In the process, Mannheim also gave the first comprehensive account of the ideological-critical dimension of this way of thinking.
than the reality in whose medium it operates” (Mannheim 1997: 87). Anyone who claims to speak on behalf of the universal rather than a particular perspective can be, quite literally, put in his place (i.e. socially-historically situated) by constructivism.

This anti-universalism is itself an ideology—and it is pervasive in contemporary political thought. I will give one example that I think is very instructive because it highlights the internal connection between constructivist analysis and anti-universalism. In his famous book on civilizations, Huntington notes how the very concept of civilization itself has changed in modern times. The “classical” concept of civilization was a critical concept that differentiated between what was essential to a civilized form of life and what was not, i.e. “[t]he [classical] concept of civilization provided a standard by which to judge societies” (Huntington 2002: 41).

The classical concept of civilization was universal. As a standard for judging societies, civilization did not refer to any particular society; it was an ideal to which particular societies could approximate. “Civilization” referred to the highest possible form of life that humanity could reach for. As such, separating the civilized from the uncivilized was ultimately a question for philosophy; it was, in Skjervheimian terminology, a first-person question of “what is good?”, “what is right?”, “what is just?” etc. During the 19th century, however, the concept of civilization took on a more cultural and particular meaning, where people increasingly spoke of civilizations in the plural. This meant “renunciation of a civilization defined as an ideal, or rather as the ideal” and a shift away from the assumption that there was a single standard for what was civilized […]. Instead, there were many civilizations, each of which was civilized in its own way (Huntington 2002: 41, citations removed).

Note that the cultural relativization of the civilization concept is also a move from first-person to third person question; instead of asking, e.g. “what is good?” one asks “what do different peoples think is good?” 52 In other words, civilization becomes an

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52 The analytical concept of civilization was above all taken up and turned into an empirical research program by the 19th century German Historians. The fundamental principle for this research tradition was laid down by Leopold von Ranke: “[t]o history has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for
analytical rather than a critical concept. In the process “civilization” loses its political edge, and refers simply to “the overall way of life of a people” (Huntington 2002: 41), whatever that way of life may be. In principle, the analytical concept of civilization places the social life of uncontacted tribes in the Amazon on the same civilizational level as modern Europe. We are all civilized in our own way.

However, if the analytical concept is considered a more enlightened way of thinking about different forms of life than the classic concept, the analytical concept actually turns into a new critical standard. The analytical concept becomes a political weapon against any attempt at justifying some form of life as better, more civilized, or more enlightened than other forms of life. If any particular ideal of civilization comes to dominate, it can only be the result of power and oppression:

[t]he Western universalist belief posits that people throughout the world should embrace Western values, institutions, and culture because they embody the highest, most enlightened, most liberal, most rational, most modern, and most civilized thinking of mankind. [...]. Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers three problems: it is false; it is immoral; and it is dangerous. [...]. Culture [...] follows power. If non-Western societies are once again to be shaped by Western culture, it will happen only as a result of [...] Western power. Imperialism is the necessary logical consequence of universalism (Huntington 2002: 310, emphasis added).

Thus, the analytical concept of civilization, although in one sense neutral is also deeply political. Specifically, if the analytical concept is allowed to be absolutized it becomes a form of anti-universalism, where the very possibility of thinking, not on behalf of a particular community, but on behalf of a universal community is denied a priori. We can summarize the ideology of anti-universalism as follows: political ideals, if they originated in a particular time and place (such as the modern West), is only valid in that particular place at that particular time. The spread of political ideals...
beyond that time and place is inevitably a form of oppression, paternalism or imperialism. 54

Anti-universalism is also anti-enlightenment. In particular, it betrays the most central commitment of the enlightenment: a belief in universal reason. This belief is more important than one might think. It is, for one thing, absolutely fundamental for the prospect of engaging with others across cultural, national and religious barriers. If we (as I do) agree with Andrew Linklater that we should “increase the spheres of social interaction that are governed by dialogue […] rather than force” (Linklater 2001: 31), then we cannot put a ban on universalism. Let me try to illustrate what happens if we put in place such a ban using Kant—a spokesperson for universal reason if there ever was one.

Kant made a sharp distinction between the particular and empirical, and the universal and rational. The particular and empirical separates people from each other—the universal and rational unites. Rising above particular differences, Kant envisioned “a [universal] union of rational beings through common objective laws, that is, a kingdom, which can be called a kingdom of ends (admittedly only an ideal) because what these laws have as their purpose is just the relation of these beings to one another” (Kant 1996c: 83). The fundamental conditions of possibility for such a union of rational beings is, naturally, mutual recognition as rational beings (Kant 1996c: 85). Such mutual recognition means placing everybody on principally equal terms before reason. Only from this position of radical symmetry can we ask the question “whether institutions might exist that can be accepted by all and with which we can all identify” (Skjervheim 1996d: 105)—i.e. only from this position can we ask first-person question. If such questions are disallowed as oppressive, then dialogue itself is disallowed.

Social-historical particularization is an effective weapon against taking any particular form of thinking and being as natural, but it is also, if it is totalized, an

54 Anti-universalism has a long pedigree in IR. Morgenthau, for instance, considered universalism to be the primary threat to the stability of the international society of his time. Today, he writes at the beginnings of the cold war, each contending party in the struggle wants to remake the international society in its own image; “the world has room for only one [way of life], and the other must yield or be destroyed” (Morgenthau 1993: 263). The third possibility, beyond giving in or being destroyed, namely that differences could be resolved through dialogue and reason, seems to be excluded a priori, not even worthy of consideration. He ends his famous book by approvingly quoting Winston Churchill that “[i]t is idle to reason or argue with the Communists” (Morgenthau 1993: 560) The message is clear: there is no point in talking to each other.
effective weapon against dialogue and theoretical reflection. Consider John Hobson’s recent book on the Euro-centricity of IR theory, which is probably one of the most systematic works of deconstruction ever written in IR. Very symptomatically for this line of thinking, the book ends on a question:

[t]his book provides a key dual challenge to the discipline of IR. [W]e need to ascertain the extent to which IR scholars can concede the Eurocentric foundation of their discipline, and […] we need to ascertain whether this is or is not a problem. […] IR theory can no longer represented as positivist, objective or value-free. In which case, the key question is […] ‘to be or not a Eurocentric’ (Hobson 2012: 344).

Well, should we be Eurocentric? One thing is to connect current conceptions of world politics as expressive of values tied to a particular time and place (modern Europe)—this constructivism can do (it is a third-person inquiry). Another thing entirely is whether these values and conceptions are valid, reasonable, problematic etc.—this constructivist analysis cannot answer (it being a first-person inquiry). As C. S. Lewis once remarked “you cannot go on ‘seeing through’ things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it” (Lewis 2001: 80). Of course, we cannot, at this point, go back to the essentialism of chapter 2. In the final chapter, I consider an alternative way forward for theorizing international politics.

55 And do we have really have choice in the matter? Is not deconstructing IR theory as Eurocentric in itself a pretty Eurocentric thing to do? Has Hobson himself somehow detached himself from his social-historical situation or is his own work infused with modern European values, such as the value of not being ethnocentric?

56 In fact, we are, in a sense, already beyond constructivism. The limits of constructivism we have started to draw up at the end of this chapter is not a kind of insight that belongs to constructivism itself; it is rather a dialectic insight into constructivism as an –ism, i.e. as a horizon.
As for us, whatever the case may be, we believe in freedom.

- Simone de Beauvoir

4 Dialogue

The topic of this thesis is the relation between IR theory and international politics. Let us draw some conclusions concerning this relation from the discussion so far. From Morgenthau we learned that theories are ideals that (if realized in practice) corresponds to a particular shape and form of international politics. From constructivism, we learned that such ideals are internal to intersubjective horizons—a set of answers to first-person questions that form a more or less “coherent ensembles of intersubjective beliefs, principles, and norms” (Reus-Smit 1999: 30) setting the boundaries for what is possible and legitimate—and that these horizons are in social-historical movement.

Where do we go from here in IR theory? Once the ideology problem is discovered—i.e. once it is discovered that “theoretical thought is not autonomous, that our ideas are conditioned by our interests and our [social-historical] situation” (Westphal 1998: 43)—it is impossible to go back to naïve essentialism. Yet insofar as we cannot escape theory, we still need to ask and answer first-person questions. This dilemma is by no means new in IR. Carr’s classic critique of utopianism, for instance, was based on the idea that theories are not “a priori propositions, but are rooted in the world of reality in a way which the utopian altogether fail to understand” (Carr 2001: 13). However, Carr was not oblivious to the dangers of totalizing the particularization of theory: “denying any a priori quality to political theories, and in proving them to be rooted in practice, falls easily into a determinism which argues that theory [is] nothing more than a rationalization of conditioned and predetermined purpose” (Carr 2001: 13).

A healthy study of international politics, Carr argued, must be “based on a recognition of the interdependence of theory and practice” (Carr 2001: 13, emphasis added). In other words, a healthy discipline would avoid to the twin dangers of theorizing that does not understand its own social-historical rootedness and political

57 Cf. discussion of “constructivism as ideology” in section 3.5.
purpose, and ideological debunking that sees theory only in terms of its social-historical rootedness and political purpose. Daniel Levine has recently echoed the latter part of Carr’s warning (see also section 3.5):

[c]ritique is not merely something to be directed outward, against specific value constructs that particular IR theorists may dislike. It [i.e. critique] must also be directed inward […]. When critique fails in this latter aspect, it cannot sustain itself over time. It becomes merely […] a means by which one partisan agenda hacks away at competing ones (Levine 2012: 12, emphasis in original).

In a climate of all-out theoretical warfare as Levine is portraying, dialogue is lost. This might not be a terrible loss if it is merely academic, but insofar as academic theories do not exist in a vacuum outside of society but reflect real political differences (when we call them “ideologies” instead of theories) the loss of dialogue is more pressing. In the end, this is a question of how people with different conceptual horizons can relate to each other in a constructive manner. This goes way beyond the very specific kind of meeting of horizons considered in this thesis, namely that between IR scholars and political practitioners. It is, among other things, (part of) an IR theory in its own right. After all, international politics is also about meetings between agents, in the form of representatives for political communities, with different, often conflicting, understandings (Jervis 1976: 160-164).

Theoretical critique is perhaps better than theoretical dogmatism in such meetings, but, then again, perhaps not if such critique becomes one-sided and purely negative. Critique, after all, “is no end in itself” (Behr 2015: 37); “a de-essentializing, critical project needs some kind of reconstructive direction” (Behr 2015: 37). But whence does this “reconstructive direction” come from? What we need, I suggest, is to combine two insights from the preceding chapters: (1) that IR theory is a set of answers to first-person questions, i.e. not a neutral reflection of how international politics is by natural necessity, but first and foremost a political ideal; and (2) that IR

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58 Behr himself does not really suggest a specific direction so much as general caution. Since all kinds of concrete political-theoretical stances, in Behr’s view, are “imposing” and “violent”, their practical effects should at least not be irrevocable; political activity “must not bring about irreversible consequences” (Behr 2015: 37).
theorizing is the laying bare of the transcendental, social-historical horizon of international politics. This entails thinking of this horizon itself as an ideal, which again means that this horizon cannot be disclosed by asking empirical third-person question. Instead, we must turn constructivist critique from third-person to first first-person mode, which means to re-interpret such critique dialectically.

To illustrate what I mean by re-interpreting constructivist critique dialectically, consider an issue I have touched upon several times—and which goes to the very heart of theorizing—namely what it means to go beyond the commonsensical surface and gain a (more) theoretical understanding of international politics. Both structural essentialists and constructivists share a basic understanding of this process as existential disengagement from the international realm so that it appears as a delimited, objectified whole. This places the epistemological observer on the outside of an ontological object, which creates a fundamental analytical-critical asymmetry between the deconstructing subject and the deconstructed subject(s). Social-historical deconstructing is based on re-locating essentialist ways of thinking and being (answers to first-person questions) inside a delimited intersubjective world visible to the constructivist, but not to the essentialist. In this sense, the deconstructed essentialist is naïve in relation to the constructivist.

However, the constructivist outside observer position is not an absolute outsider position, insofar as every existing human being (and IR scholars are surely existing human beings) is located in a social-historical context. It is not the case that essentialists, such as ancient Greeks, renaissance Italians and Kenneth Waltz are on the inside of history, and constructivists, such as Reus-Smit and John Hobson, are on the outside. They are all in history, but they are in history in different ways. Thus, if we want to speak of different positions in history as more and less fundamental in terms of understanding (and if not we must give up the Platonic concept of theorizing), another distinction than outside/inside is called for, namely that of narrower and wider horizons. Instead of thinking of essentialist naïveté and constructivist critical distance as two different horizons—that of, respectively, the constructivist and the deconstructed—think of naïveté and critical distance as moments in the development of one horizon. Instead of thinking of constructivism and essentialism as two
externally conflicting positions, think of them as internally related levels of reflection (cf. section 1.3).

Thinking in terms of expanding horizons makes the relation between essentialism and constructivism *pedagogical* rather than oppositional. It does not remove the principled asymmetry between these positions, but it removes the principled asymmetry between any particular people holding these positions. One’s ideological counterparts become victims of lack of self-insight to be educated rather than opponents to be debunked. For an example of this way of thinking, consider Richard Ashley’s famous critique of neo-realism as an “orrery of errors,” a self-enclosed, self-affirming joining of statist, utilitarian, positivist, and structuralist commitments” (Ashley 1984: 228). What is notable about Ashley’s critique of neo-realism is that it does not question the *integrity* of neo-realists, but their lack of self-understanding:

I am being unfair. To suggest, as I have, that neorealists play a trick of sorts is to imply some kind of intentional duping of an innocent audience. This is surely wrong. It is wrong because neorealists are as much victims as perpetrators (Ashley 1984: 248).

The contribution that constructivist critique can make in terms of self-insight is, naturally, to lay bare the inner socio-historicity of (international) theory and practice. What difference does this contribution make? In this chapter, I argue that the insight into our own socio-historicity is a new kind of “essentialist” insight into human nature—an insight that discloses a new horizon beyond essentialism and constructivism that, among other things, sets the stage for a new kind of international politics and a new kind of study of international politics. This horizon is not imported from the outside, but is discovered as we add an extra layer of dialectic self-insight to our own philosophical-historical situation. As such, I am not trying to make a radical break with constructivism in this chapter, but to continue along the road that constructivism has opened up.
4.1 From debunking to emancipation

I have distinguished between two ways of using constructivist analysis: as an ideological weapon for debunking essentialist others and as a dialectical-pedagogical tool for emancipation. If we just want to debunk others, then the meeting of horizons becomes a battleground, where “everyone knows [the] other, but nobody knows himself” (Skjervheim 1996e: 121). However, in addition to being an effective (negative) weapon against dogmatic essentialism, constructivist analysis also has a positive, emancipatory side—a side that is often underplayed by constructivists themselves in order to “satisfy mainstream theorists on their terms” (Neufeld 2001: 134). Harnessing this positive side of constructivist analysis is the clue to “bringing the sociological and the normative together”, as Reus-Smit puts it.

The emancipatory power that lies in insight into one’s own horizon is well described by Mannheim:

[w]henever we become aware of a determinant which has dominated us, we remove it from the unconscious motivation into that of the controllable, calculable, and objectified. [M]otives that which previously dominated us become subject to our domination; we are more and more thrown back upon our true self and, whereas formerly we were the servants of necessity, we now find it possible to unite consciously with forces with which we are in thorough agreement (Mannheim 1997: 169).

Mannheim’s point, which echoes Ashley’s point above, is that essentialism is a form of bondage, and that understanding one’s horizon and, through such understanding, transcending one’s horizon is a form of emancipation. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall have stressed this somewhat under-appreciated point in their article on power in international politics:

[although] constructivists have emphasized how underlying normative structures constitute actors’ identities and interests, they have rarely treated these normative structures themselves as defined and infused by power, or emphasized how constitutive effects also are expressions of power (Barnett & Duvall 2005: 41).
What kind of power are we dealing with? Not with the power of one particular agent over another, but the “productive power” (Barnett & Duvall 2005: 48) of intersubjective horizons. Skjervheim (1968: 138-139) has made a distinction between anonymous and non-anonymous power that I think is useful to build on this point.

Non-anonymous power is the explicit exercise of control that particular agents (such as a government) have over other agents (such as citizens). Anonymous power, on the other hand, is the control that larger forces exercise over agents without being wielded by any particular agent. The power that intersubjective horizons has over people and societies is of the anonymous sort; it is a form of “self-imprisonment” that shackles one to a particular form of life out of ignorance of (better) alternatives. One source of such dogmatism is essentialist reification, for which an insight into one’s own socio-historicity is an effective solvent. This makes deconstruction a kind of enlightenment—i.e. a kind of “emergence from […] self-incurred minority” where “minority is inability to make use of one’s own understanding” (Kant 1996a: 17, emphasis removed).

However, the danger with becoming aware of the socio-historicity of thinking and being is that one starts to understanding oneself and others entirely in terms of social-historical differences. Social-historical barriers are, of course, real barriers—people think differently. As such, there is something to thinking of “‘the international’ as a realm [of] endless and seemingly irresolvable contestations – over meanings and morals as much as resources and power” (Seth 2013: 28). However, one should not reify these actual barriers into a priori unsurmountable barriers that cannot be overcome expect by coercion and force. This is actually a new form of reification, the reification of social-historical differences. Some thinkers (including Mannheim) have drawn anti-universalistic conclusions from the discovery of the socio-historicity of thinking and being (cf. discussion in section 3.5). In fact, the self-insight into our own socio-historicity shows us something completely different.

4.1.1 Freedom as the condition of possibility for constructivism

The discovery of the socio-historicity of thinking and being is also a universal insight into something that all human beings have in common, regardless of social-historical differences, namely that we are all social-historical beings. This insight, furthermore,
is also an insight into another universal feature of human existence, namely the freedom to define ourselves. This freedom is immune to social-historical deconstruction, because it is a condition of possibility for there being something to deconstruct in the first place. Or in other words: what is deconstructed are particular self-definitions, not the universal freedom of self-definition itself. This freedom is paradoxical in the following way: it only truly exists for you if you know about it, yet ignorance cannot take it away. One way to discover this freedom is to try to deconstruct yourself.

Self-deconstruction has actually become fashionable in IR, in the form of a methodological principle known as “reflexivity” (after Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992): “[r]eflexivity is everywhere. If one had to choose a single buzzword that is driving current debates within the field of International Relations (IR), especially those that are about IR itself, the ‘R’ word would be at the top of the list” (Tickner 2013: 627). Reflexivity entails that “the tools of knowledge production are turned back on situation of scientist himself” (Jackson 2011: 157). Pierre Bourdieu, with whom the very term “reflexivity” is closely associated, explicates this methodological principle as “self-objectification”:

[the most effective reflection is the one that consists in objectifying the subject of objectification [i.e. the researcher]. I mean by that [an analysis] that dispossesses the knowing subject of the privilege it normally grants itself and that deploys all the available instruments of objectification (statistical surveys, ethnographic observations, historical research, etc.) in order to bring to light the presuppositions it owes to its inclusion in the object of knowledge (Bourdieu 2000: 10).]

The most interesting thing about self-objectification for our purpose, however, is its limitations and what those limitations show us about human existence:

[there are certain limits to what one can perceive as ‘fact’, or […] to what one can objectify. In principle one cannot objectify oneself. I can rightly enough regard myself as a fact, but it is not denoted in the fact […] I register and ascertain [the act that I] register and ascertain [myself as a fact]. I may in the next instance correctly ascertain my ascertaining, but
this ascertaining, which is grasped by reflection, is something other than what I live in the moment. This “I” which objectifies, but which itself always eludes attempts to become objectified, this “I” which is always subject, but which can never become object, which, when one attempts to objectify it, is no longer here and now, but always was here and now [...] has been called [...] “existence” (Skjervheim 1996c: 129, emphasis altered).

The term “existence” as it used by Skjervheim in this passage speaks to the inescapable circumstance that being human is something beyond being a social-historical object. You qua existing subject is not co-extensive with the various external, social-historical facts about you qua social-historical object that you may unearth through empirical investigation (e.g. that you are a male, 21st century Norwegian political scientist from a middle class background); you are also your relation to these facts and your relation to your relation to these facts and so on ad infinitum.

Self-objectification is an attempt to stop this infinite process of self-relation and box existence into being a particular, delimited object. However, a person “cannot rid himself of the relation to himself any more than he can rid himself of his self, which, after all, is one and the same thing, since the self is the relation to oneself” (Kierkegaard 1980: 17). This relating-to-oneself that is constitutive of being a human self is a continually ongoing activity of taking a stance and realizing certain possibilities (e.g. being a political realist). Since “to be” is a task, it is a misunderstanding to equate the realized possibilities with the person as an existing self. The term “existence”, thus, takes on a special significance when dealing with human subjects, “expressing not its “what” (as if it were a table, house or tree) but its Being [i.e. its always ongoing relating to itself and the world at large]” (Heidegger 1962: 67).

The mistake involved in the idea of self-objectification is precisely to misunderstand oneself as co-extensive with one’s realized possibilities, which, in effect, is to think of oneself as if one were a table, house or a tree and not an existing self. The scholar who finds himself as a social-historical object and says “this is me” forgets that he or she is actually the one pointing to the object and speaking. This is important since what I just jestingly referred to as “pointing and speaking”—the difference between the constructivist subject and the deconstructed object (in this case
“oneself”)—is precisely the asymmetry that self-objectification was supposed to eliminate in the first place (cf. Bourdieu quote above).

The attempt to objectify yourself, i.e. to imprison your own existence in the external social-historical facts about yourself, is really to deny yourself your ongoing freedom to define yourself. However, you cannot deny yourself that freedom. You can be unaware of this freedom, in the sense that you can define yourself without explicitly reflecting on your own freedom to define yourself—but once you have reflected on this freedom you cannot then proceed to deny it. An insight into your own socio-historicity is an insight into your own freedom. However, this insight is easily hidden if you only deconstruct others—or if you mistakenly think you are deconstructing yourself when you externalize some social thing and call it “yourself”.

But if you cannot deconstruct yourself, why would you think you can deconstruct others? If that other is also a self-relation (i.e. freedom), then there is a part of him or her that is just as immune to deconstruction as you are. This is the part you have in common with that other person, even if neither of you are aware of it. For all your social-historical differences, you both find yourself “in the situation of being a reflecting human being” (Skjervheim 1964b: 174, my translation). I am trying to make three points. The first point is negative: to highlight the ontological limits of deconstruction. The second point is positive: that this limit, i.e. human freedom as self-relation, is the beginning of something new beyond constructivism. The third point is that this new beginning is not imported from the “outside” of constructivism, but is discovered dialectically as a condition of possibility for constructivism itself—i.e. as we “direct critique inwards”, to speak with Levine.

The latter point can be elaborated as follows. Self-relation—and the freedom implied in self-relation—is the (usually unacknowledged) horizon for constructivist analysis. If the freedom to define oneself did not exist, then there would be nothing for the constructivist to analytically deconstruct in the first place. This freedom is also what makes deconstruction potentially emancipatory. However, I say “potentially” because deconstruction can also be used non-dialectically, as an ideological weapon against essentialist others. It is only when deconstruction is used dialectically as a door
opener to the horizon of deconstruction itself—as a window into our own freedom—that it becomes both de-constructive and re-constructive. Once we open this door, new possibilities for analysis and critique open up. We now turn to these new possibilities.

4.2 The historical dialogue
Constructivist analysis is made possible by a combination of two universal insights into the human condition: the radical freedom to define ourselves combined with the necessary inner socio-historicity of any particular self-definition. A human being, therefore, “is just as much an historical idea as a biological species” (Skjervheim 1964a: 35, my translation). This sets the stage for a very particular, and a very modern, kind of history: to empirically investigate the process “where man defines itself and redefines itself” (Skjervheim 1964a: 35, my translation), and the different intersubjective worlds, such as “ancient Greece” and “renaissance Italy”, that this process gives rise to.

Call this “process of definition and re-definition”—i.e. the continuous struggle “about fundamental questions of right and wrong” (Fukuyama 2012: 62)—the historical dialogue. This dialogue has both a theoretical and a practical dimension; movements in political horizons (theory) and corresponding movements in political practice as new horizons connected to new worlds replace old horizons supporting old worlds. These transitions are struggles—and usually not purely intellectual struggles. Indeed, sometimes new ideas only defeat old ideas through war or revolution. Thus, the mutually constitutive relation between identity and structure, dialectically understood, is both harmonious and disharmonious. When disharmony becomes dominant we can speak of alienation as “the individual stands over against a society that does not express him” (Taylor 1986: 171). If alienation spreads, the political legitimacy of the established order is threatened.

At certain junctures in history we might see a new horizon gaining ground, unsettling the established order, and creating a political climate of crisis. In such situations something’s got to give—and it is usually the established order. In the long run, even the mightiest empire cannot beat fundamental shifts in the boundaries of political legitimacy. As an example, consider Reus-Smit’s (2013b) recent history of
how a bourgeoning human-rights self-consciousness fueled the evolution of modern international society:

[...] In their twilight years, the Holy Roman Empire, the Spanish Empire, and Europe’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century empires all suffered severe crises of legitimacy. Political systems experience such crises when support among those subjected to their rule collapses [...] [...]. New, distinctly modern ideas about individual rights took root in each context, and as they spread, were interpreted, reconstituted and embraced as legitimate, subject peoples re-imagined themselves as political agents, developed new political interests in the recognition and protection of their rights, challenged established regimes and entitlements, and sought institutional change (Reus-Smit 2013b: 4).

I am building towards a reconsideration of the relation between IR and international politics as a relation between IR theorizing and this historical dialogue. However, before we get further into the particulars of theorizing international politics (in the next and the final section), I want to lay some philosophical groundwork. What I am getting at is really a new kind of ontology—a rethink of how man and society is connected—where “what is most essential to our being-in-the-world is that we are dialogical” (Bernstein 1983: 229), i.e. that being human and being a participant in a dialogue are two sides of the same coin. This ontological shift, just as the ontological shift from the objective to the intersubjective notion of “world”, underpins a re-orientation of the epistemological (analytical) and practical-philosophical (critical) commitments related to theory.

Let me try to clarify what I mean by “being dialogical”. I have spoken of existing as a continual task of relating rather than being a particular thing. One particularly important category of beings we relate to are other human beings, i.e. intersubjective relations. Inter-subjectivity is just as inescapable a part of the human condition as freedom of self-definition. Such freedom without inter-subjectivity would be completely empty and abstract, a ghost-like existence. In actual existence, “...the

Note that when I say “ontology” I do not mean merely “scientific ontology” (Jackson 2011: 28) as opposed to epistemology; i.e. I do not merely refer to the constitution of the social world qua subject matter for an observing epistemological subject (e.g. the IR scholar), but to the constitution of the social world as such—including the part of it inhabited by the epistemological subject. When I endorse Bernstein’s idea that “we are dialogical”, the “we” in question is universal; it refers to all us, whether we are scholars, politicians, students, Americans, Chinese, ancient Greeks, renaissance Italians or whatever.
Others’ are already there with us” (Heidegger 1962: 152). It is impossible to exist in the human sense of the term in a social-historical vacuum. Even in our most solitary reflections, others are present in the very concepts we use to define ourselves:

[t]he language I use [as a meditating self], is not my private language, but belongs to linguistic society. This society has a history, and my language […] is historically loaded [with] the reflections of earlier generations. Through the language I use other language users are already implied. [I]nter-subjectivity is therefore not something that is constituted through radical egologic meditation […]. I, as radically meditating subject [i.e. as self-relation], must also employ language (Skjervheim 1973: 163).

If we in “reflections of earlier generations” include what I above referred to as the historical dialogue, then simply existing makes you, in a sense, a participant (however unwittingly or reluctantly) in that dialogue.  

The phrase “radical egologic meditation” is a reference to Edmund Husserl, and by extension to Descartes who served as Husserl’s model for reflection (see Husserl 1999). The purpose of such meditation is to existentially detach from the world so that the world can be revealed as an existential whole, i.e. as a delimited, intersubjective horizon in the constructivist sense. This detachment is analogous to the existential move from participation to observation that characterizes the move first from Morgenthau to Waltz, and then from Waltz to constructivism. Consider the following passage from Husserl’s famous *Cartesian Mediations*:

If the Ego, as naturally immersed in the world, experiencing and otherwise, is called “interested” in the world, then the phenomenologically altered […] attitude consists in a splitting of the Ego: in that the [analytical] 61 Ego establishes himself as “disinterested onlooker”, above the naïvely interested Ego (Husserl 1999: 35, emphasis in original).

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60 Of course, the topic of this thesis—the relation between IR and international politics—takes us well beyond merely existing. To theorize on international politics is to participate in the dialogue in a very specific manner on a very specific topic. My point is simply that IR theorizing does not take place outside of the historical dialogue, which would mean that it somehow took place outside of inter-subjectivity or even language itself.

61 Husserl uses the term “phenomenological”, a philosophical term, to describe the second Ego. To avoid introducing more philosophical terminology than necessary, I use the more immediately understandable term “analytical”.

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The two different Egos in Husserlian transcendental philosophy corresponds to the distinction between naïve essentialism (the interested Ego) and constructivism (the analytical Ego). An important thing to note is that the relation between these two Egos is internal in the sense discussed at the beginning of this chapter (and in section 1.3): the “disinterested onlooker” and the naïve participant are not two different subjects—e.g. the researcher/constructivist and the researched/essentialist—but two levels of reflections in one consciousness. The movement between these two levels of reflection, i.e. from naïve participation to analytical disinterestedness, is, Husserl argues, an emancipatory movement towards an “absolute freedom from prejudice” (Husserl 1999: 35, emphasis removed, cf. section 4.1).

This emphasis on disinterestedness and value freedom that we find in Husserl is pervasive in social inquiry. Reflexivity, for instance, is supposed to be “a way of making sure that one’s knowledge-claims are as close to being disinterested as it is possible for them to be” (Jackson 2011: 172). The self begins naïvely in the world, but through a process of reflection extracts itself (existentially, if not actually) out of the world and into a position where it is “free from the ‘biases’ linked to his or her position and dispositions” (Bourdieu 2004: 114). The Husserlian ideal is even found among more critically inclined scholars. Levine, for instance, argues that “IR needs a form of critique in which theory’s [ideological] nature is accepted even as theorists continue to strive for “value freedom” ” (Levine 2012: 12). One sometimes gets the feeling that expressing values—being engaged, taking a stance—is just an unfortunate side effect of theorizing, something to be avoided as far as possible.

However, analytical disinterestedness, whatever its virtues (and it has virtues), is never total—n or is it a goal in itself. In particular two aspects of our background stand out as impossible to existentially detach from: (1) the language we use and, by extension, the inter-subjective community of which we are a part; and (2) our freedom qua self-relations that makes existential detachment possible in the first place.

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62 Husserl’s term is “phenomenology”.

63 Compare with the methodological ambition of reflexivity “as a way of making sure that one’s knowledge-claims are as close to being disinterested as it is possible for them to be” (Jackson 2011: 172). Reflexivity is a constitution of an appropriate epistemological subjectivity through an existential movement from a participant to an observer position: the self begins in the world, but through a process of reflection extracts itself (existentially, if not actually) out of the world and into a position where it is “free from the ‘biases’ linked to his or her position and dispositions” (Bourdieu 2004: 114).
Existential detachment is a form of reflection—a way of being-in-the-world that begins with friction between these two inescapable circumstances of social-historical finitude and transcendence.

Reflection is an “act of separation whereby the self becomes aware of itself as essentially different from the environment and external events and from their influence upon it” (Kierkegaard 1980: 54). This act of separation is, from the very first moment, an emancipatory act. Thus, reflection is not disinterested: “the most fundamental reflection is both insight and interest, and the fundamental interest is the interest in emancipation” (Skjervheim 1973: 167, my translation). This emancipatory interest underlies the ongoing struggle of becoming an individual by taking a stance and being defined by that stance as one’s identity (Taylor 1989: 27)—what Habermas calls the “the progress of reflection toward adult autonomy” (Habermas 1971: 281).

When we start reflecting we find ourselves in an intersubjective, social-historical situation that we cannot simply think away. We cannot begin completely anew somewhere “right outside of the human tradition” (Lewis 2001: 41) as if history never happened. In this sense, “history does not belong to us; we belong to it” (Gadamer 2013: 286). Yet, and this is the fundamental paradox that human freedom creates, in one sense we can begin anew: “I have unreflectively taken over many opinions, and I am, in that sense, a “product” of my environment [i.e. a social-historical object]. But I do not have to continue being merely [such a product]” (Skjervheim 1964b: 173, my translation). It is an important difference between living unreflectively into one’s social-historical situation, accepting whatever is handed down by tradition as natural and unproblematic, and actively questioning prevailing ways of thinking and being. The break with immediacy that reflection represents is, in this sense, a new beginning.

Reflection qua the active questioning and examining of one’s horizon can be done sporadically and intermittently or it can be done systematically. In the latter case, we can speak of theoretical reflection. Charles Taylor has suggested, helpfully I believe, that we think of social theory as what happens when we try to “formulate

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64 A horizon, after all, is “not a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further” (Gadamer 2013: 247).
explicitly what we are doing” (Taylor 1985: 93). By “formulating explicitly” Taylor means, in effect, what I in section 3.1 referred to as clarifying the conditions of possibility—the constitutional structure—that is essential to our own social-historical life. This is an analytical task, but it has a critical intent:

The framing of a theory rarely consists simply of making some continuing practice explicit. The stronger motive for making and adopting theories is the sense that our implicit understand [i.e the pre-theoretical understanding] is in some way crucially inadequate or even wrong. Theories do not just make our constitutive self-understandings explicit, but to extend, or criticize or even challenge them. It is in this sense that theory makes a claim to tell us what is really going on (Taylor 1985: 94, cf. discussion of theory in section 1.2).

Theoretical reflection, then, is a particular way of being in the historical dialogue. This way of being, although expressive of a particular kind of social-historical experience (not all forms of social life reach the point of systematic theoretical reflection), is not confined to any particular social-historical context. Quite the opposite: as an exercise of critical reason it cuts across social-historical barriers and makes it possible for us to engage with people in other social-historical situations—who, for all their social-historical “otherness”, are also self-reflective beings. For instance, we cannot become Socrates, for he was an ancient Greek and we are not, but we can still learn from Socrates in much the same way as his contemporaries could, because both we and Socrates belong not only to history and particular societies, but also to a universal community of reflection that transcends history and societies. This universal community—which is both real and ideal—is what I refer to when I talk about the dialogical horizon (cf. section 1.5).

4.3 IR theory and the historical dialogue

I now want to track back to the more specific focus of this thesis, namely the relation between IR theory and international politics. The larger point I want to bring over from the previous section is that we should think of IR theorizing as the systematic
self-reflective part of international politics.\textsuperscript{65} Such reflection, if performed dialectically, has an existential direction towards emancipation and is part of a larger political project towards a universal dialogical community. This ideal is a new analytical-critical lens for analyzing and participating in the historical dialogue on international politics. In this and the next section, I try to concretize what this dialogical turn means for theorizing international politics. To this end I return to the Reus-Smit example from before.

Reus-Smith is concerned with how the modern political horizon—in particular, “modern of ideas of individual rights”—came to be a theoretical and political reality. Obviously, this is a story that can only be told from our modern horizon, and not from any of the earlier horizons that Reus-Smit investigates as stages towards this horizon. In other words, the analysis will necessarily be a \textit{re-interpretation} of these earlier horizons.

Let me give an example. One of the transitions that Reus-Smit deals with in his book is the move from the mediaeval to the modern world. Or more precisely a particular phase of that movement: the Reformation and the ensuing religious conflicts that lead to the peace settlements of Augsburg (1555) and Westphalia (1648). The Reformation is a good example of a movement in the basic ideational fabric of the world that works like a “hidden hand” in history—what Hegel calls movement in Spirit \textit{[Geist]} (Hegel 1988)—the significance of which is only visible in retrospect. I will dwell on this particular historical transition, and Reus-Smit’s interpretation of it, as I think it is an instructive example in several respects.

In medieval Europe, political legitimacy was not tied to nations to the same extent as it would later be. Instead, legitimacy was grounded largely in the community of Latin Christendom, where “the most profound manifestations were the [Holy Roman] empire’s dependence on the papacy for its legitimacy [and] the papacy’s dependence on the empire for its security” (Reus-Smit 2013b: 78). National

\textsuperscript{65} Whether this reflection is done by academics or practitioners is less important. The aim of reflection is to clarify the larger inter-subjective horizon under which both international politics and IR is conducted—and you do not have to occupy any special social position in order to do this (although I am sure it helps if you get paid to do it).
sovereignty, accordingly, was severely circumscribed, as Hedley Bull, among others, have noted (see also Ruggie 1993: 150):

> [i]n [medieval Europe] no ruler or state was sovereign in the sense of being supreme over a given territory and a given segment of the Christian population; each had to share authority with the vassal beneath and with the Pope and (in Germany and Italy) the Holy Roman Emperor above (Bull 2002: 245).

Furthermore, in the mediaeval world, “[t]here was no notion that rights were universal, possessed by individuals equally, or that the universal rights of individuals could form the basis of legitimate authority” (Reus-Smit 2013b: 80). Both these aspects of political legitimacy—national sovereignty and individual rights—Reus-Smit argues, would undergo internally connected changes during the Reformation and its aftermath.

One of the principal elements of the Reformation was a re-drawing the boundaries of church and state. For instance, in the Augsburg Confession (1530), one of the most important documents of Protestantism, the separation of church and state is clearly stated. Today, we are used to thinking of church-state separation as a national issue, but in medieval Europe this was very much an international issue as well. Removing church authority from worldly affairs was a clear challenge to the Papacy’s position in European politics. The result was to transfer sovereignty away from Rome and first to the princes, and then to the nations, of Europe. As Daniel Philpott has argued, “[national] sovereignty, in substance if not in name, comes directly out of the very propositions of Protestant theology” (Philpott 2001: 109).

The state-church separation had two sides: the church should not interfere with worldly affairs, but neither should the state be concerned with spiritual matters. This is the Protestant bargain: “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21), or as Martin Luther put it:

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66 “the power of the Church and the civil power must not be confounded. The power of the Church has its own commission to teach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments. Let it not break into the office of another; let it not transfer the kingdoms of this world; let it not abrogate the laws of civil rulers; let it not abolish lawful obedience; let it not interfere with judgements concerning civil ordinances and contracts; let it not prescribe laws to civil rulers concerning the form of the Commonwealth”. The Augsburg Confession (1530), article XXVIII. Available at: http://bookofconcord.org/augsburgconfession.php
[i]f [...] your prince or temporal lord commands you to hold with the pope, to believe this or that, or commands you to give up certain books, you should say, It does not befit Lucifer to sit by the side of God. Dear Lord, I owe you obedience with life and goods; command me within the limits of your power on earth, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe, and to put away books, I will not obey; for in this case you are a tyrant and overreach yourself, and command where you have neither right nor power.67

What we see in this passage, Reus-Smit argues, is “the individual’s right to liberty of conscience, although not couched in the language of rights” (Reus-Smit 2013b: 86).68 Of course, Reus-Smit can couch this transition in the language of rights, because he, unlike Luther, lives under a horizon where this part of Protestant theology has turned into (secular) human rights theory. To think of Luther as a human rights activist is not wrong—he did argue for what we today would call freedom of conscience—but it is also a judgement by posterity using concepts that would have been alien to Luther himself.69

It is easy to forget that for the vast majority of history, the horizon of universal human freedom currently expressed in the idea of human rights—and inwardly grasped through radical reflection (cf. sections 4.1.1 and 4.2)—was, at best, nascent. Hegel stressed this point in his philosophy of history:

[t]he consciousness of [f]reedom first arose among the Greeks, and therefore they were free; but they, and the Romans likewise, knew only that some are free – not man as such. Even Plato and Aristotle did not know this. The Greeks, therefore, had slaves; and their whole life and the maintenance of their splendid liberty, was implicated with the institution of slavery; a fact moreover, which made that liberty on the one hand only an accidental, transient and limited growth; on the other hand constituted a rigorous thralldom of our common nature – of the Human (Hegel 1988: 18).

68 Cf. article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on “the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”. Available at: http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/
69 Luther was not a modern, human-rights respecting person. Among other things, he believed “that witches exist and that the devil practices harmful sorcery through them” and that they should be “executed swifly” (Brauner 2001: 54, 55).
However, once we have recognized this universal freedom, we cannot go back. It is too late now to take back the words “[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. There is simply no returning to previous moral horizons that justified things like slavery and colonialism. Even if, say, the United States could re-start the slave trade or establish colonies—“could” in the sense of having the material power to do it—that does not really matter, because the moral horizon that could have justified such actions and given them some higher meaning is gone.

The only thing we can do now, at this point in history, is to re-reconstruct those earlier horizons using constructivist analysis, and the reason we can do that—the condition of possibility for such analysis, which, to repeat, is a distinctly modern phenomenon—is that we live under a horizon marked by awareness our own freedom. The thing we cannot deconstruct, i.e. the horizon that we cannot look back upon as a delimited intersubjective world, is that freedom itself, which is our horizon. The current boundaries of political legitimacy are drawn around this freedom, and we cannot simply think those boundaries away as social-historical constructions, in part because this very freedom is the condition of possibility for social-historical construction (and subsequent analytical deconstruction).

I want to dwell for a moment longer on the Reformation example in order to extract one more lesson from it, namely how “deep” the notion of a horizon goes. I have made the point about the inescapability of horizons several times, but it is worth repeating because of the dangerous habit (which I share) of continually forgetting one’s own horizon. Among other things, a horizon encompasses what we today think of as the religious and the secular aspects of existence. The secular-religious divide—which is so hardwired into modern, liberal thinking that it tends to become invisible to us modern liberals—is not a “natural” way of dividing up existence, but largely internal to one particular social-historical experience (for a landmark discussion of the dangers of naturalizing the religious-secular division, see Asad 1993). Thus,

while it seems obvious to Western liberals [...] that religion and politics constitute two different spaces, each with its own rules, norms, and logic,

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this may not be the case in other cultures and societies (Mandaville 2014: 11).

That the religious-secular division is not “natural” does not mean that it is wrong (see next section). This is not the place for either defending our denouncing this distinction. My concern is slightly different, namely to properly locate dialectical movement in history, which takes place on the level of horizons. The orthodox story of the Westphalian origins of modern international politics, which I have partly re-told in this section, is that European politics went from a religious to a secular phase, with the peace agreement in Westphalia marking the transition between the two. Religion was removed from international affairs and became a national—and eventually even private—affair. “Holy war” was no longer a part of the intersubjective horizon under which European politics was conducted.

This secularization story is increasingly being challenged as IR is rediscovering religion (Petito & Hatzopoulos 2003; Thomas 2005; Hurd 2007; Snyder 2011b). Part of this re-discovery is the dawning realization that perhaps religion “never left” (Hurd 2009: 2)—that perhaps “religious international politics had been there all along” (Snyder 2011a: 1). Westphalia, Hurd notes in one of the most important contributions to this bourgeoning field, “was secular and also deeply Christian” (Hurd 2009: 2). The secular-religious distinction is itself a religious principle. I do not mean this only in the sense that this distinction, as a matter of historical fact, is internal to Protestant theology. My point is that, in a more general sense, sorting out how the divine relates to the earthly (as when Jesus divided the world into what belonged to Cesar and what belonged to God) is necessarily a piece of theology.

The larger point I am trying to make is that an apolitical conception of religion and an areligious conception of politics are internally connected within a larger horizon that is both religious and political. Thus, we do not really have a dichotomy (religion-politics), but a triad: religion, politics and the background against which religion and politics are constituted as distinct spheres of existence—a background that acts as a condition of possibility for speaking of the religious and the political as
different spheres. It is this underlying mediation that divides up existence in a certain way, but which itself transcends the divisions it makes, that I refer to as a “horizon”—the “constitutional structure” (Reus-Smit 1997) of a life world—and it is on this fundamental level that dialectical movements in history (and in thought) happen.

4.3.1 Re-opening the issue of justification

At the beginning of this thesis, I raised the question of what makes one IR theory better than another as a motivation for philosophically clarifying the relation between IR and international politics. The essentialist answer to the issue of justification, of course, is that an IR theory is valid to the extent that it reflects the objective essence of international politics. The constructivist critique of essentialism is in no small measure a critique of this idea of justification (as a kind of reification). Constructivism, however, struggles with re-grounding justification in something else than essences and thereby runs the risk—if it is not re-interpreted dialectically—of becoming purely negative, incapable of justifying anything.

One of the first things to emerge in our discussion, when considering Morgenthau, was that IR theory is a regulative ideal for international-political practice. Such ideals have the strongest hold on us when we are not aware of them as ideals at all, but think of them as the “natural” order of things—i.e. when they are part our unquestioned horizon. In a sense, constructivism begins with the insight into these ideals as ideals, but also with the insight into the social-historical origins of these ideals. This lays the ground for an empirical research program of investigating how different social-historical horizons underpin different forms of international politics. The justification of any particular horizon becomes difficult, however, because it is no longer possible to think of any particular horizon as “natural”.

However, even if no particular horizon is “natural” it does not follow that all horizons are equally good, rational and enlightened—it just means that horizons have a

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71 As such, even if Protestant theology is in one sense apolitical since it walls of the church from worldly affairs and vice versa, this walling off is in itself deeply political—at the time it was even revolutionary. The political implications of the Reformation were staggering: it would fuel one of the most devastating wars in European history (the Thirty Years War); and its nascent ideas of individual freedom would find its way into Enlightenment philosophy and from there violently into actuality again in the French Revolution. And, importantly for our purpose, the Reformation would leave in its wake (although not in its immediate wake) a system of independent, constitutional states—“no Reformation, no Westphalia” (Philpott 2001: 108).
social-historical origin. Once we have realized this, the question of justification is back on the table. But how can we say that one horizon is better than another if no horizon is “natural”? This question actually turns the entire issue of justification on its head. It is precisely because no horizon is “natural” that we can speak of better and worse—or more and less enlightened—horizons. If there was a “natural horizon”, something that was just as present in the mind of the first man who descended from the apes as it is today, then the idea of a progressive historical dialogue would be nonsensical. Either we can deny that such progress has taken place (or even can take place), in which the case the issue of justification is moot again, or we must seek out the criteria by which we can make sense of such progress as progress (i.e. not merely change).72

The first thing to note is that such a criterion cannot simply be the mere passing of time. Just because something came chronologically later in history it is not for that reason an improvement on what came before. Fukuyama, one of the contemporary thinkers who have taken the idea of historical progress most seriously, runs perilously close to such historical opportunism in passages such as these (his terms “consciousness” and “perspective” are roughly equivalent to what I call “horizon”):

[c]onsciousness—the way in which human beings think about fundamental questions of right and wrong, the activities they find satisfying, their beliefs about the gods, even the way in which they perceive the world—has changed fundamentally over time. And since these perspectives were mutually contradictory, it follows that the vast majority of them were wrong, or forms of “false consciousness” to be unmasked by subsequent history (Fukuyama 2012: 62)

However, it does not exactly follow from the fact that these horizons were mutually contradictory that the “vast majority of them were wrong” or “forms of false consciousness”. It is not history itself that sees the limitations of historical horizons—only the subject surveying history (Fukuyama in this case) can do that. When Fukuyama claims that any particular horizon has been transcended in history he is not

72 But will not any such progress criterion be internal to a social-historical horizon? Yes, but this would only be a fundamental problem if we insist on sticking with the dogma that universal truth cannot have a social-historical origin—which is a self-undermining dogma since that dogma itself would be a universal truth with a social-historical origin.
simply speaking on behalf of history; he is judging historical horizons from a historical horizon, namely his own.

This, I have been arguing, is unavoidable; we all have to speak from somewhere. Accordingly, it is not the fact that Fukuyama has a horizon and uses it to pass judgement on history and participate in the historical dialogue that is problematic. What is problematic is that he does not clarify his own horizon and why his horizon is superior to the horizons he debunks. I am being a bit unfair to Fukuyama here (he does have something to say about his own horizon in other parts of the book) in order to make a point concerning justification of horizons, namely the role that self-reflection plays in this endeavor.

By “self-reflection” I refer to the dialectical process of situating oneself in the historical dialogue through self-insight into one’s own horizon (cf. section 4.2). Part of this is self-historicizing, but the most important part, for justificatory purposes, is the existential position one occupies (cf. introduction to this chapter). The latter is what provides not only historical but critical distance to alternative horizons and closes of certain social-historical existence possibilities. I want to begin with a simple example borrowed from Skjervheim to illustrate this latter point.

Romanticism, which began with Jean-Jacques Rousseau (in particular Roussau 2012), was one of the first reactions to the modern disenchantment brought on by the Enlightenment. The romantics celebrated the immediate life as the highest form of human existence and encouraged feeling above reflecting. However, one thing is to live immediately, another thing is to want to live immediately:

[w]hat Rousseau wants is to restore a lost naïveté, but what he achieves is something entirely different. Instead of bringing back naïveté, he becomes the founder of something entirely new in European culture: the modern sentimentality. This is not accidental. The immediate does not understand itself as immediate, which is precisely what makes it immediate. Rousseau’s idealization of immediacy is not itself immediate, it cannot be. Immediacy cannot idealize itself without annulling itself. [...] One “goes back to nature”, but brings the arts and literature with one. The European elite begin travelling to the countryside, without for that reason becoming simple peasants. Quite the opposite, a new layer of complexity is added to European emotional life. Grown men cry when they read Rousseau, they cry for Rousseau and the world, but also for their own predicament (Skjervheim 1964b: 24, emphasis in original, my translation).
The inability to go back to immediacy once immediacy has been destroyed by awareness of itself is an example of an existential inability. Even if one wants to go back, as Rousseau wants, one can’t. Romanticism is, in the end, built on an illusion and the insight into this illusion is the beginning of one of the next big movement in European thought, nihilism. After Rousseau comes Nietzsche. However, it is not only inability that closes of existence possibilities, but also, I would argue, existential progress.

Simply put, existential progress entails that “once you have been through the transition [...] you can’t rationally go back” (Taylor 2003: 176, emphasis added)—that certain transitions in history are of such a nature that reason precludes going back. Let us return the example of the Reformation once more. The break with the medieaval world was definitive. We can poetize the life world of the medieval, but we cannot live it. It is, of course, a myriad of reasons why we cannot go back to a medieval horizon (for one thing we would have to forget a good deal of scientific advances). However, one of the ways that reason stops us from going back—the one that is most interesting for our discussion—is connected to the very fact that we can analyze the mediaeval horizon as a delimited intersubjective world in the first place, namely the (implicit or explicit) insight into human freedom that makes constructivism possible (cf. section 4.1.1).

Gadamer once claimed even “[t]he consciousness of being [historically] conditioned does not supersede our [historical] conditionedness” (Gadamer 2013: 465). But is this true? In one sense, Gadamer is right: historical self-awareness itself has a historical origin. However, as I have tried to argue in this chapter, the self-awareness of our own historicity actually shows us something that transcends history, namely our freedom to define ourselves. This freedom, which is a condition of possibility for being social-historical, is certainly restricted by social-historical circumstance (I cannot be a renaissance Italian, for instance), but it is not reducible to social-historical circumstance (I can still be something).

One source of progress in history, then, is self-insight into our own freedom—an insight, I have tried to show, that transcends social-historical barriers and represents
a latent universal community. This emancipatory piece of self-insight shuts the door to a certain way of being. Specifically, it shuts the door on ways of being sustained by essentialist beliefs in a natural order of things, and prepares these now-historical forms of life for deconstructive post mortems, as instances of “a shape of life [that] has grown old, and [that] cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized” (Hegel 1991: 24).

Once self-relation has been discovered it cannot be undiscovered. This is, in many ways, where modernity begins: with the recognition that we live in a world of our own making (Onuf 2013)—“that we make ourselves what we are” (Sartre 1992: 101, emphasis in original)—and trying to come to terms with this realization and disclose the new horizon we find ourselves under. The negative side of this horizon is directed at what we have emancipated ourselves from, namely the “the illusion that there is only one way of thinking” (Mannheim 1997: 11) connected to a natural world order. The contrast between the middle ages—“the ages of authority” (Lewis 2012: 5)—and modernity is very pronounced on this point: “[i]n their political thought, and in the discussion of political questions, [modern, liberal] citizens do not view the social order as a fixed and natural order” (Rawls 2005: 13). 73

The positive side of this transition is the radical responsibility for our own situation that has been granted us:

[i]f we look back upon all previous efforts that have ever been made to discover the principle of morality, we need not wonder now why all of them had to fail. It was seen that the human being is bound to laws by his duty, but it never occurred to them that he is subject only to laws given by himself but still universal (Kant 1996d: 82 emphasis in original).

Of course, if we believe that our social-historical differences go “all the way down” then there would be nothing in which to root an universal moral law (and the ideology of anti-universalism looms), but I hope I have given some reason to resist such reification of social-historical differences. However great these differences may be, the illusion that they are absolute can only be maintained by refusing to engage in

73 Both constructivism and political liberalism share a common origin in the turn that Western thought took during the Enlightenment, liberating the subject from the world and thereby introducing the specter of political change. Nietzsche (2003: 114), not without reason, called Descartes the grandfather of the French revolution.
dialogue with each other. I am not primarily referring to the fact that once people start talking with each other instead of about each other it often turns out their disagreement was not that fundamental after all. Rather, I am referring to the very condition of possibility of dialogue itself, namely that we are all existing human beings in the sense delineated in section 4.1.1, i.e. that we are all first and foremost self-relations and not social-historical things.

The discovery of dialogue as the highest form of intersubjective relation is not new—Socrates knew this. What is “new”, or at least seems to be better understood in modernity than in any other age, is the universal nature of the dialogical ideal, i.e. that a true dialogue (an ideal) suspends all particular social-historical differences (see e.g. Linklater 2001: 30). One can have “dialogue” with ancient Greeks and renaissance Italians just as one can have a dialogue with one’s contemporaries—and one can have a dialogue with one’s bitterest enemies just one can have a dialogue with one’s closest allies—as long as we all share the experience of being self-reflective human beings. A universal community of reflection (still more an ideal than a reality) is accessible once one starts thinking of people—scholars or practitioners, friends or enemies, ancient Greeks or renaissance Italians—as “not primarily objects to be studied, but potentially partners in reflection” (Skjervheim 1964b: 174, my translation).

I am not saying that international politics or the study of international politics is, as a matter of empirical fact, dialogical in this sense. Indeed, it is fairly obvious that it is not—that “the order of the current system is no true order at all, for it has [...] little [place] for humans as humans rather than humans as members of discrete communities” (Rengger 2001: 92). What I am saying is that this ideal is our “inescapable framework” (Taylor 1989: chap. 2) that represents the outer limits of self-knowledge—the most fundamental horizon we have dialectical access to—and therefore provides the criterion for judging IR theory that tries to explicate our current horizon in order to say something about where we are in the historical dialogue.74 Our position is one of

74 For instance, Andrew Linklater has argued that “the commitment to dialogue […] requires the development of societies that that regard the differences between human beings as less important than their shared experience in pain and suffering” (Linklater 2001: 30). The argument developed in this chapter suggests that a different kind of “shared experience” is more important, namely mutual respect for each other as self-relations.
insight into the dialogue itself—something that both precludes going back to a past before this insight and sets the stage for new kind of future.

4.4 By way of conclusion: re-interpreting IR theory as a moment in the historical dialogue

The dialectical/dialogical view of IR theory presented in this chapter, while not exactly mainstream at the moment, is not wholly unfamiliar to IR either. In particular, this understanding of theory resonates with the task that Carr once gave to the discipline of IR: “to explore the ruins of our international order and discover on what fresh foundations we may hope to rebuild it” (Carr 2001: 226). The background for Carr’s plea, written at the outbreak of the Second World War, was a sense of crisis in a sense similar to how, e.g., Reus-Smit uses the term: an old world straining under the weight of new ideas.

Up until the First World War, a shared intersubjective horizon—what we might call the 19th century horizon—had kept European affairs fairly orderly since the end of the Napoleonic wars. It is in this period that international politics as we know it today begins to find its form. Hegel, who was a contemporary with these developments, noted “an essential feature now first presenting itself in the political aspect of the time, a connected system of States and a relation of States to each other” (Hegel 1988: 431-432, emphasis in original). A new kind of international society emerged, where “the preservation of the balance of power, had now taken the place of that general aim of the elder time, the defence of Christendom, whose centre was the Papacy” (Hegel 1988: 432) (cf. Reformation example above). This was the golden age for European great power politics:

[t]he European system of states was an action-guiding image in the heads of foreign policy elites of individual countries. At least since the Congress of Vienna [1815], it [i.e. the European system] no longer produced fragile balances more or less automatically but required political management structured by a basic set of both manifest and unspoken rules. Statecraft, at least in theory, consisted in upholding national interests only so long as it did not threaten the functioning of the system as a whole. This worked for four decades—a long time in international politics (Osterhammel 2014: 467).
Then, “came a period of eighteen years, from 1853 to 1871, in which five wars were fought with great-power participation” (Osterhammel 2014: 469), as the European system was rocked by the revolutions of 1848 and the national unifications of Germany and Italy. However, the system proved resilient: “the ideals of the Concert of Europe persisted. Wars remained short and contained” (Strachan 2003). It was not until the First World War (which many historians consider the end of “the long 19th century” that lasted from 1789 to 1914) that the international system itself—designed precisely to prevent a major war—broke down in such a way that it could not be put back together.

The end of the First World War in 1919 was also the end of 19th century world, but what would replace it was far from evident. The attempted replacement for the Concert of Europe, the League of Nations (1920), proved less than successful. Despite being an innovation in many ways, the League of Nations was a continuation rather than a break with the 19th century thinking; it was a state-centric system based on the idea of an underlying common interest in the preservation of the system itself. The crisis inter-war years, in Carr’s diagnosis, was precisely the failure to see beyond this 19th century horizon:

The real international crisis of the modern world is the final and irrevocable breakdown of the conditions which made the nineteenth-century order possible. The old order cannot be restored, and a drastic change of outlook is unavoidable (Carr 2001: 237).

It was into these circumstances that modern IR was born, and its task, as Carr saw it, was to theoretically rebuild the horizon of international politics. This was a task that the first wave of post-war IR theorists took seriously—not least because they had lived through the horrors of the Second World War and knew what was at stake. The arguably most influential of these theorists, at least in an American context, was Morgenthau.

For Morgenthau (going against his own essentialist principles, really) it was imperative to recognize the ways that the international world had changed from the 19th century and into the two world wars. One of the principle changes concerned
nationalism—one of the most important building blocks of the 19th century horizon. The new nationalism, Morgenthau, argued is “essentially different from what traditionally goes by that name” (Morgenthau 1978: 338):

[t]raditional nationalism sought to free the nation from alien domination and give it a state of its own. This goal was considered a rightful one not for one nation only, but for all nations [i.e. it was a universal principle - AH]. Once a nation had united its members in one state, national aspirations were satisfied (Morgenthau 1978: 338).

The tensions that traditional nationalism gave rise to were of two kinds: internal conflicts in multi-national empires as individual nations sought self-government, and conflicts between different nations over their territorial extensions. Once these differences had been ironed out, the main causes of war in the system should, in theory, be removed:

[i]t was hoped as late as the aftermath of the First World War that, once the aspirations of all nations for national states their own were fulfilled, a society of satisfied nations would find in the legal and moral principles of national self-determination the means for its own preservation (Morgenthau 1978: 339).

What Morgenthau is referring to in this passage is, of course, the kind of Wilsonian thinking underlying the League of Nations. The reason why this did not work, Morgenthau argues, was that the traditional kind of nationalism it required to work was no longer present:

[t]he nationalism of today, which is really a nationalistic universalism, has only one thing in common with the nationalism of the nineteenth century—the nation as the ultimate point of reference for political loyalties and actions. But here the similarity ends. For the nationalism of the nineteenth century the nation is the ultimate goal of political action, the endpoint of the political development […]. For the nationalistic universalism of the late twentieth century the nation is but the starting point of a universal mission […]. While nationalism wants one nation in one state and nothing else, the nationalistic universalism of our age claims for one nation and one state the right to impose its own valuations and standards of action upon all the other nations (Morgenthau 1978: 339).
This is where Morgenthau locates the problem, and it is on the background of this diagnosis that proposes to move forward. His solution is, in the short run, a revival of prudent diplomatic practices; in the long run, a world state: “[i]t is only when nations have surrendered to a higher authority the means of destruction which modern technology has put in their hands—when they have given up their sovereignty—that international peace can be made as secure as domestic peace” (Morgenthau 1978: 560).

Let us now consider two questions. Is Morgenthau’s diagnosis correct? And if it is correct, why not simply go back to traditional nationalism instead of establishing a world state? I think the answer to first question is “no”, and that this answer also shows why (1) going back to traditional nationalism is not an option at this point in history and (2) that it is nevertheless unnecessary to construct a world state to secure international peace.

Morgenthau is simply wrong when arguing that the ideological division of the world that was carved out after the First World War is a form of nationalism. “Nationalistic universalism” might be a good description of Hitler’s third reich, but it does not really capture the ideology of, say, the Soviet Union, which was not “Russian” or “Slavic” but communist. Communism does not have “the nation as the ultimate point of reference for political loyalties”, but, depending on how you look at it, a social class (the proletariat) or a political party (the communist party). The spread of communism is not the spread of a Russian way of life, but the spread of an idea—the origin of which was Germany—in principle unconnected to any particular nationality. The nation, a cultural product of modernity that rose to dominance in the 19th century, was (and still is) a source of political legitimacy, but after the Second World War it was no longer the ultimate source of political allegiance.

Real nationalism, i.e. putting the cultural whole known as a nation above anything else, including universal principles, is really a 19th century phenomenon. Even a self-conscious philosopher of freedom such as Hegel could not see past the nationalist horizon in a way that we since have learned to do (and in this lies our critical distance to Hegel and his time). The nation is a goal in itself in Hegel’s philosophy. Individuals are subsumed within the nation and their absolute duty is to
preserve “the independence and sovereignty of the [nation-]state – even if their own life and property as well as their opinions and all that naturally falls within the province of life, are endangered or sacrificed” (Hegel 1991: 360). Indeed, the sacrifice of individuals takes on an almost grotesque rituality for the ultimate aim of preserving national health and vigor in Hegel’s writings:

It is a grave miscalculation if […] [the nation’s] ultimate end is seen merely as the security of the life and property of individuals […]. For this security cannot be achieved by the sacrifice of what is supposed to be secured – on the contrary. – The ethical moment of war is implicit in what was stated above. For war should not be regarded as an absolute evil […]. […] The higher significance of war is that, through its agency […], the ‘the ethical health of nations [Völker] is preserved (Hegel 1991: 360).

For, “[n]ot only do peoples emerge from wars with added strength, but nations […] troubled by civil dissension gain internal peace as a result of wars with their external enemies” (Hegel 1991: 362). Although Hegel’s nationalism sounds harsh on our ears, it was not particularly radical at the time. This is the age of the great nation building projects, and the unification of fragmented nations such as Germany and Italy into one national-political entity. It reached its culmination, in many ways, with the disintegration of the last of the grand European multi-national empires, Austria-Hungary, in the First World War.

Why is the difference between this 19th century nationalism—in which “[nation-]states are complete and morally self-sufficient entities” (Carr 2001: 153)—and 20th century universalism invisible to Morgenthau? Because, I believe, he is theoretically committed to interpreting everything in terms of national interest. Accordingly, universal ideals are re-interpreted as national ideals. This, in my view, is a misinterpretation, but it is not an accidental misinterpretation. Rather, his misreading of the historical situation follows naturally from the theoretical framework through which Morgenthau understands international politics. This theoretical framework does not contain the concepts necessary for truly grasping the new layer to the world had been added during the 20th century when “the conflict of nation states was supplemented by the conflict of ideologies” (Huntington 2002: 52).
The difference between a *nationalistic* state system, where each nation is a self-sufficient source of political allegiance, and a state system where political legitimacy is connected to universal ideals such as democracy, freedom, communism etc. is very important. IR theory, I think, got off to a bad start by not really appreciating the ideational depths of international life beyond the nation-state in 20th century international politics. Instead IR was caught up in a nation state-centric theoretical framework that was already outdated, and from which it struggled to free itself. When Morgenthau ends his famous book urging nation states “to surrender to a higher authority”, he is not aware that this had, in a sense, already taken place—at least if we mean by “authority” moral authority. No political philosopher could after the Second World War can say with a straight face that “the state is the divine will” (Hegel 1991: 292).

Morgenthau, if he were to stick to his realist principles, would, of course, have to deny any higher, moral authority in international politics (he does not, in fact, stick so consistently to these principles). In his theoretical framework, any normative element in international politics comes from the outside; it is not part of its essence. This fundamental theoretical commitment sets the stage for his contribution to rebuilding the international order:

[i]n a world whose moving force is the aspiration of sovereign nations for power, peace can be maintained only by two devices. One is the self-regulatory mechanism of the social forces which manifests itself in the struggle for power […] that is, the balance of power. The other consists of normative limitations upon that struggle, in the form of international law [and] international morality (Morgenthau 1978: 25).

Obviously, the assumption that “the aspiration of sovereign nations for power” is the primary moving force of the world stacks the deck rather heavily in favor of power balancing as the more realistic option of the two. International law and morality are portrayed as contrasts to the underlying reality of world politics. However, the assumption of the primacy of power is precisely that—an assumption. It is quite

75 Not in sense that states were unimportant, but in the sense that they were no longer the ultimate reference-point for political identity.
another matter whether this assumption is true. Is it really the case that the power in itself, i.e. power completely abstracted from ideals, is the primary moving force in world politics? Is national power an end in itself—i.e. something to direct political energy towards for its own sake—or is national power, however important it may be, primarily a means to other political ends?

Carr once remarked on “the impossibility of being a consistent and thorough-going realist” (Carr 2001: 89), as consistent realism provides no “ground for action” (Carr 2001: 89). After all, people usually have reasons for wanting and using power that (in their eyes) justifies their wanting and using it. This way of thinking turns the whole situation around: normative ideals are no longer only outside limitation on power struggle, but also an integral part of power struggle itself, namely that which give the struggle for power purpose and meaning. This purpose has changed over the course of history and has included things like national self-determination, reclaiming the Holy Land, the spread of civilization etc. all of which are connected deep down to what Reus-Smit calls “the moral purpose of the state” (Reus-Smit 1999)—which again is connected to the most elementary building blocks of the intersubjective horizon under which politics (or any social practice) is conducted.

Morgenthau, in a sense, knows this. After all, his contrast between traditional and universalistic nationalism speaks precisely this historically changing intersubjective background of meaning and purpose that sets the stage for international politics. Thus, there are (at least) two Morgenthau: the theoretician presented in chapter 2 who sets down certain principles such as the eternal nature of international politics and the primacy of power over ideals; and the analyst and political participant who flaunts his own principles, and is thereby able to provide an interesting and thought-provoking analysis of the historical situation he finds himself in. Yet one cannot completely escape theory, and the second Morgenthau is hampered by his theoretical starting point, which hides what he is doing from himself; it does not give

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76 If they do not feel the need to justify themselves because “might makes right” or something of the sort, then that too is a form of justification.
77 Note that we have now transitioned to a new theoretical framework—one that contains the notion of intersubjective structures. Note further that this transition is not the denial of power struggle as a fundamental element of international politics, but the imbuing of these struggles with meaning connected to political identity.
him the right concepts and acts as a stumbling block to his participation in the historical dialogue.\textsuperscript{78}

More important than the analytical shortcomings of the horizon that was set for IR by scholars such as Morgenthau, are its associated \textit{political} shortcomings. The inability to analytically penetrate into the ideational foundation of post-1945 international politics—and instead misreading these foundation through a 19\textsuperscript{th} century lens—potentially stopped the discipline from noticing, and therefore also from theoretically fortifying, the real developments in the boundaries of political legitimacy that took place in this period.

Michael Freeman has noted an interesting contrast between the efforts to rebuild the international order after the First and the Second World War. It is significant, Freeman argues, that “the Covenant of the League of Nations, adopted in 1919, made no mention of human rights” (Freeman 2001: 127). Rather, as previously mentioned, the League of Nations represented a typical nation-centric approach, which was in line with the dominant political-philosophical thinking of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Thus,

\begin{quote}
[w]hen the United Nations, in 1945, declared one of its principal aims to be the promotion of human rights, it was, under the impact of the Nazi horrors, opposing the mainstream of 150 years of social theory (Freeman 2001: 127).
\end{quote}

Although the \textit{idea} of an international reality grounded in human rights goes back to Kant, wiring this idea into the actual fabric of international society was something new. Indeed, one of “[t]he most striking fact about the international law of human rights is its nearly complete absence prior to the end of World War II” (Simmons 2009: 36). Although overshadowed in many ways by the Cold War, the human rights turn after the Second World War—expressed first in the Universal Declaration and then in a series of subsequent conventions—is possibly of a much deeper and long term

\textsuperscript{78} Note that this is \textit{my} reading of Morgenthau made from the dialectical horizon of this thesis. My claim is as follows: I understand Morgenthau better than he understands himself. This claim, although provocative, is no different from Morgenthau’s claim to understand international practitioners better than they understood themselves (cf. section 2.1).
significance insofar as it represents one those shifts in the boundaries of political legitimacy that shuts the door behind itself. From this point on in history, there is no going back to 19th century nationalism.

IR theory, which has generally lacked the necessary concepts for understanding fundamental political change, has struggled to appreciate the significance of human rights (notable exceptions are Ropp & Sikkink 1999; Reus-Smit 2013b). This shortcoming is both analytical and political—and, if the argument in this thesis is correct, ultimately rooted in lack of self-awareness of IR’s own position in the historical dialogue it studies. In this area, IR still has a lot of work to do. Unless we have somehow managed to extract ourselves from the historical dialogue, we have not reached “the end of IR theory” (Dunne et al. 2013). Theorizing international politics has barely begun. The road ahead is just as long as the road behind, and we have to clear it at as we go along. This thesis is meant as a small, but perhaps not unnecessary, contribution to removing at least some of the conceptual obstacles in our immediate path.
5 Bibliography


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