

## Aberystwyth University

### *On Wendt's philosophy: a critique*

Suganami, Hidemi

*Published in:*

Review of International Studies

*DOI:*

[10.1017/S0260210502000232](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210502000232)

*Publication date:*

2002

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Suganami, H. (2002). On Wendt's philosophy: a critique. *Review of International Studies*, 28(1), 23-37.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210502000232>

#### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

#### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400  
email: [is@aber.ac.uk](mailto:is@aber.ac.uk)

# On Wendt's philosophy: a critique

HIDEMI SUGANAMI<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This article subjects to a close philosophical scrutiny the internal logic of Wendt's extensive argument regarding his work's location in the field—in particular, how it relates to, and differs from, the American 'rationalist' orthodoxy in IR, comprising neorealism and neoliberalism. I argue that his empirical hypotheses regarding collective identity formation are plausible in their own right, but that his complex philosophical argumentation, by means of which he tries to locate his work within the American scientific orthodoxy, but away from its individualist core, is unconvincing.

## Introduction

Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics*<sup>2</sup> has already been discussed widely; its reception ranges from wildly enthusiastic to openly hostile.<sup>3</sup> Some reviews are well researched, erudite, and thought-provoking; others are not quite so well executed.<sup>4</sup> None of the existing works, however, subjects to a close philosophical scrutiny the precise internal logic of Wendt's extensive argumentation

<sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to Tore Fougner, Eve Garrard, John Horton, Matthew Paterson, Erik Ringmar, Oliver Stocker, Rob Walker, Alex Wendt, and the two referees of the Journal for their valuable comments on the earlier drafts of this article, which was initially presented as a paper to my Theory Group colleagues at the School of Politics, International Relations and the Environment at Keele University on 28 October 2000.

<sup>2</sup> See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Hereafter *STIP*.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Hayward R. Alker, 'On Learning from Wendt', *Review of International Studies*, 26 (2000), pp. 141–50 and Andreas Behnke, 'Grand Theory in the Age of its Impossibility: Contemplations on Alexander Wendt', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 36 (2001), pp. 121–34.

<sup>4</sup> See, in addition to the two items cited in n. 3 above, David Campbell, 'International Engagements: The Politics of North American International Relations Theory', *Political Theory* (June 2001); Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Desire All the Way Down', *Review of International Studies*, 26 (2000), pp. 137–9; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, 'Constructing Thinking Space: Alexander Wendt and the Virtues of Engagement', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 36 (2001), pp. 109–120; Robert Keohane, 'Ideas Part-Way Down', *Review of International Studies*, 26 (2000), pp. 125–30; Stephen D. Krasner, 'Wars, Hotel Fires, and Plane Crashes', *ibid.*, pp. 131–6; Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Constructing a New Orthodoxy? Wendt's "Social Theory of International Politics" and the Constructivist Challenge', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29 (2000), pp. 73–101; Ronen Palan, 'A World of Their Making: An Evaluation of the Constructivist Critique in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 26 (2000), pp. 575–98; Steve Smith, 'Wendt's World', *ibid.*, pp. 151–3; and Maja Zehfuss, 'Constructivism and Identity: A Dangerous Liaison', *European Journal of International Relations* (forthcoming). I have found Zehfuss's article particularly well-researched, Kratochwil's impressively erudite, and Campbell's especially thought-provoking. Smith's review and Palan's article were also helpful for my purpose. The items listed here and in the preceding note collectively make a vast number of points that cannot be summarized easily, and I will not attempt it here since it is not my purpose to conduct a literature survey on Wendt's reception.

regarding his work's location in the field—in particular, how it relates to, and differs from, the American 'rationalist' orthodoxy in IR, comprising neorealism and neoliberalism. The purpose of this article is to fill this gap. In particular, I argue (1) that his empirical hypotheses regarding collective identity formation seem sufficiently plausible in their own right to warrant historical case studies by those who wish to explore such an avenue, and will also help us speculate on the transformative potentials of the contemporary international system; but (2) that his—to my mind, rather ungainly—philosophical argumentation, by means of which he tries to locate his work within the American scientific orthodoxy, but away from its individualist core, is unconvincing. First I wish to outline the substantive contention of his book.

### Wendt on collective identity formation

Stripped to its core, Wendt's view is that there is no such thing as *the* logic of anarchy; that how states interact with each other depends on what kind of international political culture they live under; that, broadly speaking, there are three such cultures, Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian; and that each culture defines for the states what their social identity or role should be—so that they are 'enemies', 'rivals' or 'friends', respectively. Where the existing international culture is deeply internalized by the states, it will be difficult, though not impossible, for them to alter their identities. This happens, according to Wendt, along a symbolic interactionist path, in which states under anarchy not only learn to co-operate in spite of the 'free rider' problem, but, in so doing, also alter their conceptions of Self and Other in the direction of developing a collective identity. Wendt dedicates an entire chapter to working out the details of how this may occur.<sup>5</sup>

In the beginning, according to Wendt, when states first form a system, they do so in a context free of institutional constraints, and this tends to make states that adopt aggressive, egoistic identities prosper at the expense of those which are more other-regarding. Because there is nothing to prevent it, the system would be dragged down to the level of the most self-interested. This process of selection is reinforced by that of learning: an egoistic and manipulative stance adopted by a state towards another is likely to be reciprocated. As hostile interactions continue and come to prevail within the system, enmity comes to be treated as the name of the game, an attribute of the system itself, rather than that of particular states.<sup>6</sup> This is how an international system comes to acquire the Hobbesian culture.

Wendt's story so far is a hypothetical one—about what would happen if states encountered one another in a quasi state of nature—and he does not have in mind any particular historical period or case to explain, though he would welcome having his hypothesis tested against history.<sup>7</sup> He does not, however, complete his hypothetical picture by giving an account of how an international system may move from the Hobbesian culture of enmity to the Lockean one of rivalry. Instead, he explores how the Lockean culture might be transformed into the Kantian one of friendship,

<sup>5</sup> See *STIP*, ch. 7. Unless otherwise indicated in footnotes, the following summary is based on my reading of this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> See *STIP*, p. 264.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

suggesting that this is the problem faced by the international system *today*, because '[w]hether or not international politics has been Hobbesian for most of history, states managed to escape that culture *some years ago*'.<sup>8</sup> However, Wendt's exploration of the paths from the Lockean to the Kantian culture turns out also to be a hypothetical one, pointing to a few factors which may contribute to bringing about such a transformation, and not aimed to explain any specific case of transition.

In his discussion, Wendt notes three familiar factors which would, under appropriate conditions, contribute to the process of transformation from a more individualistic culture to a culture of collectivity. These are what he calls 'three master variables'—interdependence, common fate, and homogeneity. They are presented by Wendt, not simply as factors contributing to co-operative behaviour, but more specifically as factors which help reshape the identity or role of states from 'rival' to 'friend'.

Interdependence would help cultivate collective identity, especially if 'someone had the bright idea of portraying the situation as one of interdependence'.<sup>9</sup> Then a discourse may begin about what 'we' should do. Wendt adds that collective identity is more likely to result from interdependence where interaction between states is more dense, leading to the formation of "'core areas", around which concentric circles of identification might then develop'.<sup>10</sup> He acknowledges that interdependence would not lead to co-operation where the fear of exploitation is pronounced, but suggests that, in the Lockean culture, such a fear would be less serious than in the Hobbesian one, making it more likely for interdependence to contribute to the creation of a co-operative scheme. Where a fear of exploitation is not very intense, common fate, too, is said by Wendt to contribute to the emergence of a 'We who should work together',<sup>11</sup> although he adds that where the threat is not so acute, the emergence of perceptions of common fate may depend on much 'ideological labor' by "'entrepreneurs" and/or "epistemic community" who take the lead in reframing how actors understand themselves'.<sup>12</sup> As for homogeneity, or mutual likeness, Wendt rightly acknowledges a number of reasons why it is not by itself sufficient to produce prosocial behaviour, but suggests that it may contribute to increasing the ability of Self and Other to see themselves as members of the same group. Where, prompted by these three master variables, co-operation and collective identity begin to prevail in the interactions of states within a system, a tipping point will again be reached, and friendship, as opposed to rivalry, will come to be seen as the attribute of the system itself. This is how the system comes to live under the Kantian culture.

But none of this would happen, Wendt acknowledges, if states could not trust that a prosocial behaviour would be reciprocated by others. How do states come to know that other states would be self-restraining? Here Wendt suggests three plausible scenarios. First, through repeated compliance with the norms enjoining the peaceful settlement of international disputes, states gradually internalize the institution of the pluralistic security community. By observing each other's habitual compliance, states gradually learn that others can be trusted. Second, some states—

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339; italics mine.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 347–8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 352–3.

democratic states in particular—are strongly predisposed to settle their disputes with each other by peaceful means. This only needs to be appreciated among such states for them to realise that they would be self-restraining. Third, a state may reach a moment of reflexivity, in which it is realised that other states' hostility towards it is to some extent due to its own hostile attitude towards them. If, as a result, the state in question unilaterally resorts to policies of self-binding or sacrificing, as did the Soviet Union under Gorbachev's 'new thinking', then it might succeed in signalling to the others that it could be trusted.

Wendt realizes that '[i]n most situations the best that can be expected is concentric circles of identification, where actors identify to varying degrees with others depending on who they are and what is at stake, while trying to meet their individual needs as well'.<sup>13</sup> Still, he believes that while such a progressive transformation is not inevitable, it is likely in fact to be irreversible—barring severe 'exogenous shocks'.<sup>14</sup> This is because, Wendt believes, '[w]ith each "higher" international culture states *acquire* rights—to sovereignty in the Lockean case, freedom from violence and security assistance in the Kantian—that they will be loathe to give up, whatever institutions they may create in the future'.<sup>15</sup>

What Wendt has here is a set of hypothetical causal sketches of collective identity formation in interstate relations. His substantive contribution is to have suggested a number of possible scenarios, based on various combinations and permutations of these sketches, of the process through which the dominant international political culture, states' conception of themselves, and their behaviours all become increasingly less egoistic. It is not my purpose to engage in empirical testing of Wendt's substantive hypotheses. Suffice it to express my appreciation here that they point to quite plausible transformative potentials of the contemporary international system, and help undermine neorealism's immutability thesis;<sup>16</sup> and further that Wendt's approach, based on structurationism and symbolic interactionism, offers a more comprehensive picture of the 'evolution of co-operation' than the well-known Axelrod version.<sup>17</sup> I am somewhat troubled that the inequality of power among states and the cultural diversity in the contemporary world are absent, or largely absent, from Wendt's considerations, but it is not my aim here to try to formulate more plausible empirical hypotheses than those contained in his work.

As I stated at the outset, the focus of this article is to expound and criticize the complex philosophical argumentation by means of which Wendt locates his own approach in the field. His basic contention in this respect is that, like neorealists and neoliberals, he is on the side of science, but that, unlike them, he is not an individualist. In connection with the first part of this contention, he expresses his allegiance to scientific realism, which, as I shall try to argue in the next section, would seem redundant—at least for his purpose of demonstrating the reality of the state. In connection with the second part, he invokes the distinction between causal

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 364.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> See Andrew Linklater, 'The Achievements of Critical Theory', in Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 279–98.

<sup>17</sup> See Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Co-operation*, with foreword by Richard Dawkins (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990).

and constitutive relationships, on the basis of which, as I shall explain and scrutinize in the subsequent section, Wendt thinks he can demonstrate the fundamental inadequacy of the individualist ontology presupposed in neorealism and neo-liberalism. There follows another section, in which I argue that, because of his own concession to the individualist ontology, the difference between his position and the other two he is criticizing is a matter of degree.

### Scientific realism and the ontological status of the state

Concerning those entities—such as subatomic particles—which are not observable directly by our senses but which scientists invoke to explain physical phenomena, there are, as Wendt explains, two standard positions to which philosophers of science subscribe: empiricism and scientific realism. Because these entities cannot be directly observed, empiricists do not accept that they can be said to exist. By contrast, scientific realists argue that it is reasonable to infer the existence of these entities as the cause of certain observable effects, given that the theory invoking their existence, independently of our knowledge-claims about them, is our most satisfactory explanation for those effects. If every unobservable thing invoked in scientific theory were nothing but a fiction, scientific realists say, the success of science would be an unintelligible miracle.<sup>18</sup>

My position is to refuse to be forced into choosing between these two alternatives. On the one hand, I consider that reducing the criterion of existence solely to direct observability is misguided. It unduly narrows the range of things that can legitimately be said *to exist*, and, in particular, I see no good reason why the verb '*to exist*' cannot be extended to cover a host of other things, 'the English language', 'the proof of Fermat's last theorem', 'the United Nations', just to list a few candidates as they come to mind. In any case, the idea of direct observability is itself quite problematic. I am also persuaded that the success of science could not be just a miracle, and am willing to entertain the *possibility* that at least some of the directly unobservable things invoked in scientific theory may be 'really present', that is, existent independently of our knowledge-claims about them. On the other hand, I believe science to be fallible, and assume there to be no guarantee that those unobservable theoretical entities, which science invokes in their currently best explanation of nature, will not be rejected by science at some future point.<sup>19</sup> Of course, all our scientific assertions can be construed realistically, that is, as involving ontological commitment on the part of those who make such assertions. But scientific assertions can be said to depict the world as it is independently of our knowledge-claims only if they are *not wrong*, and we can never be sure which, if any, scientific assertions are of this sort. In the end, I wish to remain agnostic as regards the real (that is, knowledge-independent) existence of theoretical entities invoked in the currently best explanation of nature. In fact, I do not understand why it is necessary to go beyond simply acknowledging that a particular entity is invoked in

<sup>18</sup> See *STIP*, ch. 2.

<sup>19</sup> See, however, W. H. Newton-Smith, *The Rationality of Science* (London: Routledge, 1981), which combines scientific realism with a sophisticated analysis of verisimilitude.

the currently best scientific explanation, and that implicit in the idea that this entity *explains* nature is the supposition that it exists independently of our knowledge.

What I find harder to grasp is why it is necessary to invoke the doctrine of scientific realism, which does not strike me as problem-free, in order to hold a sensible view that states, though unobservable by our senses, are really existent. Yet this is the line Wendt advances in his book when he discusses the reality of the state. The following key passage needs to be quoted in full:

If on June 21, 1941 we had attributed to ‘the German state’ the intention to invade the Soviet Union the next day, we would have correctly predicted the behavior of millions of individuals on the 22nd. Without that attribution it would have been difficult, even impossible, to predict and make sense of what was going on. The challenge for nominalists [or those who reject scientific realism] is to explain why this is the case. If the concept of state agency is merely a useful fiction, *why* is it so useful as to seem almost indispensable?

The realist has a ready answer: because it refers to a real but unobservable structure. Drawing on the Ultimate Argument for the reality of unobservables discussed in chapter 2, the realist could argue that it would be a ‘miracle’ if a concept that predicted observable behavior so well did not refer to something real. Like quarks, capitalism, and preferences, we know that states are real because their structure generates a pattern of observable effects, as anyone who denies their reality will quickly find out. If John refuses to pay taxes on the grounds that the US state is merely a fiction, then he is likely to experience consequences just as real as he does when he stubs his toe on a table. The reasoning here is abductive: positing a structure that is capable of intentional action is ‘an inference to the best explanation’ for the patterns of behavior that we observe (chapter 2, pp. 62–3). In the realist view, any system, whether biological or corporate, whose behavior can be predicted in this way counts as an intentional agent.<sup>20</sup>

Note that in the above passage Wendt does not distinguish between whether the state, though unobservable, is *real*, and whether the state, though seemingly different from a real person, still counts as an *intentional agent*. To deal with the latter first, I am clearly a nominalist on this issue, as I believe that the idea of a state as an intentional agent cannot be anything other than a useful fiction. Why this fiction is ‘so useful as to seem almost indispensable’ is simply that, in those cases where the fiction appears so useful, the states concerned are highly effective. Of course, not all states are as effective as was Nazi Germany at a moment of its highest effectiveness, that is, when Hitler’s decision to invade another country was being implemented, as in Wendt’s example; but, clearly, the US state is effective enough in collecting taxes, and many other areas, to make John, again in Wendt’s example, suffer the consequences of his non-payment. In the circumstances, refusing to pay taxes on the ground that the US state is merely a fiction would make John not just a nominalist, but a fool. John suffering the consequences does not show nominalism as such to be an erroneous doctrine; rather it demonstrates his idiosyncratic stupidity. For if he had been a sufficiently prudent nominalist, he would still have noted the usefulness of going along with the fiction that the United States, like a real person, was an intentional agent, and would have paid his taxes.

Now, it may be asked, how could a state, an effective one, get its effectiveness if its status as an intentional agent were a mere fiction? To this, my answer is simple. A state is effective, and hence our understanding of it as an intentional person is a

<sup>20</sup> *STIP*, p. 216.

useful fiction, to the extent that individuals treat it as an important component of the world that they inhabit. But does this not mean, after all, that as a result of the individuals treating a state in this way, the state comes to exist in the world? I would accept this, but only in the sense that states—effectively existing ones—belong to our *social* world, and I would add that this social world of ours is *ideational* in the relevant respects.

The most important thing to notice about 'the ontological status of the state' is that the state belongs to the realm of institutional facts, and as with any social institution, the existence of any particular state is necessarily a historical one. Grounded in historically continuous collective consciousness, a state (an effective one) presents itself as a historical, societal, given—or reality—to all individual persons, inside and outside the state, even though it would be true to say that the state would not exist, or continue to do so, if no individual ever held seriously the belief that it existed.<sup>21</sup> What is striking about Wendt's discussion of this subject is that he seems to be in agreement with all these propositions,<sup>22</sup> yet much exercised about the supposedly metaphysical nature of the idea that unobservable structures can have effects.

But this should not have troubled him. What cannot go unnoticed at this point is that Wendt's own concept of causation allows him to say that '[n]orms are causal insofar as they regulate behavior' and '[r]easons are causes to the extent that they provide motivation and energy for action'.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, neither 'norms' nor 'reasons' are the sorts of things that Wendt would wish to call observable structures. So, according to Wendt's idea of 'causation', unobservables can and do 'cause'. And I do not think that either of these beliefs—that norms can be causal or that reasons can be causes—commits one necessarily to the version or aspect of scientific realism according to which it is reasonable to believe in the objective existence of an unobservable entity invoked in the currently best scientific explanation. It seems to me possible to remain agnostic on this issue and subscribe to the notion of causality, according to which following a norm or acting for a reason counts as a species of what can legitimately be called a causal process. In saying this I commit myself to thinking that 'norms' and 'reasons' are the sorts of things that can meaningfully be said to 'exist' 'independently of our explanation' of the action concerned, but I think this is sustainable while remaining agnostic about the objective existence of an unobservable entity invoked in the currently best scientific explanation of nature.

It should be added here that in his book Wendt rejects the covering-law model of scientific explanation in favour of the view that scientific explanation consists in presenting a plausible causal mechanism underlying the phenomenon in question.<sup>24</sup> This view is also associated with, or treated as an aspect of, scientific realism. I in fact accept this view so far as 'causal mechanisms' are understood to refer to one kind of generative potentialities *which it would seem reasonable to suppose are embedded in the world in order for us to make sense of what happens in it*. This version or aspect of scientific realism is consonant with the idea that the transformative potentials towards a less egoistic international political culture are not just imagined, but really present in the world of international politics. But it seems to be only in the

<sup>21</sup> See John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> See *STIP*, pp. 24, 215–221.

<sup>23</sup> *STIP*, p. 82.

<sup>24</sup> See *STIP*, pp. 81–2.



context of discussing the real existence of the state that Wendt makes an explicit use of scientific realism, and he does so, in my view, unnecessarily—for all that he needs to do in this context is to point to the causal potentials of collectively held ideas, to which the discussion of the reasonableness or otherwise of the belief in the knowledge-independent existence of certain subatomic particles would seem to me irrelevant.<sup>25</sup>

### **Causation, constitution, individualism and holism**

One does not have to uphold the philosophical doctrine of scientific realism to believe that international relations should be studied scientifically. But Wendt professes to do the latter,<sup>26</sup> and his subscription to scientific realism can be seen as part and parcel of this scientific orientation on his part. By proclaiming to be on the side of science, Wendt has positioned himself within mainstream American International Relations, at the core of which lie neorealism and neoliberalism. But it is also Wendt's wish to transcend these two closely interrelated positions, and he pictures himself as doing so through his rejection of the individualist ontology presupposed in these positions. My view is that while Wendt's approach, based on structurationism and symbolic interactionism, does produce hypotheses that go beyond those stemming from neorealism and neoliberalism, the way in which he tries to distinguish his position categorically from these two contains a number of problems. In this section, I hope to demonstrate this step by step.

#### *Wendt's reasoning*<sup>27</sup>

The gist of Wendt's complex reasoning, aimed at undermining neorealism and neoliberalism in favour of his own position, is as follows. These doctrines are both fundamentally unsatisfactory because they are based on individualism. Individualism is in turn inadequate because it assumes that the agents's properties—or

<sup>25</sup> Smith also briefly remarks that Wendt's scientific realism 'seems largely to drop out in the second half of the book when he analyses international politics, where symbolic interactionism underlies the argument'. Smith, 'Wendt's World' (see n. 4 above), p. 163. In his comments on an earlier draft of this article, Wendt alerted me to the fact that his 'concern to grant the reality of unobservables pertains not only to the state, but also (and if not more so) to the deep structure of the states "system"', and questioned if my argument about the state applies there also. If by 'the states system', Wendt means its 'structure', then, to the extent that his 'structure' is 'cultural', and 'culture' is a system of collective beliefs, my argument does seem to apply there as well. See also Kratochwil's impressively erudite engagement with Wendt's book, in which he casts serious doubt on Wendt's understanding of scientific practice, and his rendition and employment of scientific realism, and characterizes Wendt's combination of scientific realism and constructivism as a failed marriage. Kratochwil, 'Constructing a New Orthodoxy?' (See n. 4 above). My discussion here has focused more narrowly on the internal logic of Wendt's own argumentation regarding the need to embrace particular aspects of scientific realism in order to make it possible to entertain the thought that states and the states system are causally efficacious.

<sup>26</sup> See *STIP*, p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> The reconstruction of Wendt's reasoning here is based on my reading of his entire book in which relevant aspects of his thinking are scattered. In particular, see *STIP*, chs. 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, but especially pp. 77–88 and 165–84.

identities and interests—are logically or conceptually independent of the social structure. In fact, the identities and interests of the agents are *not* independent of the social structure logically or conceptually. This is because there is a *constitutive* relationship between them. In a *causal* relationship, the cause and the effect are logically or conceptually independent of each other; but, by contrast, a constitutive relationship entails the presence of a logical or conceptual linkage between that which does the constituting and that which is thereby constituted. Thus, the presence of the structure's constitutive impact on the agents' properties means that the agents are not logically or conceptually independent of the structure, and this, according to Wendt, reveals the inadequacy of individualism, and with it, the fundamental unsatisfactoriness of the two doctrines concerned. Central to this line of thinking is the distinction between causation and constitution, based on the belief that a logical or conceptual linkage is absent from the former, while present in the latter.

I sympathize with Wendt's desire to undermine the two dominant paradigms of IR at a stroke. It would be exceedingly satisfactory for a metatheorist of a particular discipline if she or he could come up with anything like a single conceptual distinction, the neglect of which can be shown to have helped false doctrines to flourish, and Wendt's strategy here is of that sort. However, I am not persuaded that it works well and want to show why. For this purpose, I wish first to analyse the nature of 'causation' and 'constitution' in some depth as I find Wendt's own rendition somewhat lacking in precision.

### *Causation and constitution*

In his discussion of causation, Wendt does not clearly separate an analysis of causal relations from that of causal statements. The former requires us to speculate on what goes on in the world, independently of us, when what we call, or rightly recognize as, 'causing' goes on; it asks for a rationally defensible interpretation of what 'causation' as such is (to which one possible answer of course is that it is 'nothing'—for 'causation', or 'causal *necessitation*', is all in the mind, according to this 'causal irrealist' view). The latter, by contrast, requires us to explicate our understanding of what it means to say that something causes or caused something else.<sup>28</sup> Wendt does not in fact say much about the first subject, but he suggests that causal processes are mechanistic ones producing effects, somewhat analogously to the workings of machines.<sup>29</sup> He gives more space to the second subject, and states as follows: 'In saying that 'X causes Y', we assume that (1) X and Y exist independent of each other, (2) X precedes Y temporally, and (3) but for X, Y would not have occurred'.<sup>30</sup>

My only objections to this analysis are (1) that he might have clarified whether this is meant to be an analysis of a singular causal statement, regarding the occurrence of a particular event at a particular time, or that of a general one, regarding a regular causal sequence; and (2) that he might have drawn attention to the danger of using symbols like 'X' and 'Y' in this context, which is to obscure the fact that the

<sup>28</sup> See J. L. Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe: A Study of Causation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

<sup>29</sup> See *STIP*, pp. 81–2.

<sup>30</sup> *STIP*, p. 79.

events thereby represented are describable in many ways. The second point is particularly pertinent because, under some descriptions, the cause-event and the effect-event can be seen to have a logical or conceptual relationship—as can be seen, for example, if we are to say ‘the heat hitting the reflector at the back caused it to be projected forward’. This shows that Wendt’s independence requirement, stated in (1), is not in fact reducible to the claim that there should not be any logical or conceptual connection whatsoever between the cause-event and the effect-event, or more precisely, that there should not be any descriptions available of the two events, such that, under these descriptions, the two are seen to be logically or conceptually linked. This realization would lead to the view, to which I subscribe, that the independence requirement should be interpreted to mean, innocuously, that the cause-event and the effect-event are simply *different* events. It is always ‘something *else*’ that ‘something’ causes—it is one of the conditions of our readiness to attribute a causal statement to a particular sequence of events that there is indeed a sequence of two *separate* events. It is not precluded that these events, under suitable descriptions, have a logical or conceptual link—as suggested by the reflector example above.<sup>31</sup>

As for ‘constitution’, Wendt suggests that there are a variety of constitutive relationships,<sup>32</sup> but in his book he draws special attention to the holist variety with respect to the social world whereby ‘social kinds’ are constituted by, or embedded in, ‘discursive structures’. He offers some helpful examples: “‘treaty violations’” are constituted by a discourse that defines promises, “‘war’” by a discourse that legitimates state violence, “‘terrorism’” by a discourse that delegitimizes non-state violence’.<sup>33</sup> Such constitutive relationships are on the plane of socially accepted ideas, and the presence of such a relationship can be appreciated when, and only when, the logical or conceptual connection, accepted within the society, between the items so connected is understood.

The discussion above points to a somewhat neater way of distinguishing a causal from a constitutive relationship than I believe I found in Wendt’s analysis: whereas the former is a mechanistic relation of production, the latter is a relation of logical or conceptual enablement. For my part, I would add that causal relations also obtain when agents perform intentional acts to bring about some consequences. Wendt will not object to this, given his conception of an intentional, ‘auto-genetic’, agent, which I shall discuss later in this article. In short, a causal relationship has to do with mechanistic or intentional bringing about of an effect-event, whereas a constitutive relationship has to do with making something (or a particular description of something) logically or conceptually possible.<sup>34</sup>

Now, Wendt gives much prominence to a constitutive relationship in his discussion because he believes, and wants to show, that the agents’ identities and interests are constituted by the social structure, and because for his purpose it is imperative, he thinks, that the relationship could be demonstrated to be of a constitutive kind as he defines it. As he moves to a more substantive discussion of

<sup>31</sup> See Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe* (see n. 28 above), p. 32; Donald Davidson, ‘Actions, Reasons, and Causes’, in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 3–19, at p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> See *STIP*, pp. 83ff.

<sup>33</sup> *STIP*, p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> This is the most lucid I can make of the distinction between the two kinds of relationship that Wendt invokes at key junctures in his argument. Wendt’s category of ‘constitutive theorizing’ is in fact wider than is suggested by the way the distinction is explicated here. See *STIP*, pp. 83ff. But this does not seem to me to affect the argument that follows.

international politics in the final chapters of his book, he identifies three cultures of anarchy, or three discursive structures under which states may find themselves. These, as we saw, are labelled Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian. It is his key contention that these cultures not only causally influence the lives of states living under them or coming into contact with them, but they each constitute for the states their identities, or roles, distinctive of each culture. Thus, the Hobbesian culture is said to constitute states as enemies, the Lockean culture as rivals, and the Kantian culture as friends.<sup>35</sup> But I am not sure that Wendt's argument works.

### *Mutual constitution or equivalence*

My reason for doubting that, for example, the Hobbesian international culture can be said to be constitutive of state identity of enmity is a logical one. I take it that in this context 'the Hobbesian international culture' and 'state identity of enmity' are shorthand expressions, respectively, for (1) 'the international system having the Hobbesian culture (and neither of the two other cultures)' and (2) 'states having enemyhood (and neither of the two other roles) as their identity'. We should recall, however, that, according to Wendt, the constitutive process works in both directions here.<sup>36</sup> I take this to mean that, in Wendt's thinking, (1) is logically necessary for (2), but (2) is also logically necessary for (1). This makes me think that (1) and (2) are not in fact mutually constitutive, but different descriptions of one and the same situation, just as 'A becoming the wife of B' and 'B becoming the husband of A' are two different—one male-centric, the other female-centric—descriptions of one and the same event, their marriage.

In suggesting that (1) and (2) are different descriptions of one and the same situation, however, I am not making a generalized claim that structural and agential properties are identical, or that one can be reduced to the other. But, in this particular instance, I fail to see the difference between (1) and (2), which strike me as two ways of making the same point—one at the system-level, the other at the unit-level. The Hobbesian international culture just is states having enemyhood as their identity, and states having enemyhood as their identity just is the Hobbesian international culture.

### *Back to causal relations*

It may be noted that, if the Hobbesian international culture and state identity of enmity are one and the same thing, and cannot therefore be mutually constitutive, neither can there be a causal relationship between them because, as we saw, such a relationship demands that the cause and the effect be different events (or situations). However, it is a reasonable causal hypothesis that the presence or dominance, in a given international system, of the idea that under anarchy states are inevitably in the

<sup>35</sup> See *STIP*, ch. 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171, 180, 259, 260.

Hobbesian state of ‘war of all against all’ would tend to make states think of themselves as enemies and behave in a hostile way towards each other, make it difficult for them not to do these things, and encourage those entering the system to follow the pattern. Would we have to abandon this reasonable causal hypothesis as a consequence of rejecting Wendt’s constitutive thesis?

Fortunately not. We can hold on to the definitional linkage between the Hobbesian international culture and state identity of enmity, and yet, without contradiction, subscribe to a causal hypothesis that the Hobbesian idea (that under anarchy states are inevitably enemies all against all), if present or dominant in an international system, tends to make states think of themselves as enemies and behave in a hostile way towards each other, make it difficult for them not to do these things, and encourage those entering the system to follow the pattern. This causal hypothesis, it will be noticed, relates, as it should, two items which are not one and the same thing: on the one hand, the presence or dominance, within a given system, of a general idea about the consequences of anarchy; and on the other, the tendency of the individual units to act out the scenario.

Over and above this plausible causal hypothesis, which Wendt himself accepts, there is, I submit, only his definition of the Hobbesian culture as the culture of enmity. It is entirely consistent with this assessment that, when he moves to flesh out his allegedly constitutive thesis regarding the relationship between international political cultures and state identities, he ends up offering a number of straightforwardly *causal* narratives.<sup>37</sup>

### Wendt’s concession to individualism

I have argued that Wendt’s strategy—to undermine neorealism and neoliberalism by demonstrating individualism to be inadequate and to do so by pointing to the constitutive relationship between the existing cultural structure of the international system and the states’ role or identity associated with the culture—contains a number of moves that cannot go unchallenged. I believe at least some of my challenges would persuade the reader to think again about the efficacy of Wendt’s strategy. But I now want to draw attention to two other things. First, Wendt is quite persuasive in his portrayal of how in the course of interaction states may be caused to alter not only their behaviour but also their identity.<sup>38</sup> Since this is a major contribution to our understanding of the mechanisms of the evolution of co-operation between states (neglected by the neorealists, and only partially understood within the neoliberal paradigm), Wendt does not have to drive himself quite so hard to cause further damage to the two theoretical positions which his own in substance supersedes. Second, his drive in this regard to criticize the individualist basis of neorealism and neoliberalism is somewhat misguided because, notwithstanding his

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 274ff.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., ch. 7.

stress on holism, he makes very important concessions to the individualist ontology himself. In this section, I want to say a few words about this last point.

*Wendt on individualism and holism*

In a clearly formulated passage, Wendt contrasts individualism and holism as follows:

The individualist hypothesis is in effect that all identities are personal identities, all interests personal interests, all behaviors meaningful because of personal beliefs. Nothing in or about the actor or his behavior logically or conceptually presupposes other actors or culture. The holist hypothesis is that culture constitutes role identities and their corresponding interests and practices. Regardless of the thoughts in one's head, one cannot be a certain kind of agent, or engage in certain practices, unless these are recognized by others. If holists are right then it will be impossible to reduce society to independently existing idiolects, as required by the individualist view that thought is logically prior to society. Individualist approaches to social inquiry may still be useful for some questions, but will be inherently incomplete insofar as they presuppose irreducible societal facts. If the holist is right, in other words, we will have to revise our conventional view of intentional agency, which is rooted in individualism, if not jettison it altogether.<sup>39</sup>

While being critical of individualism, Wendt is equally unwilling to subscribe to radical holism, according to which 'intentionality is merely an effect of discourse',<sup>40</sup> or 'motive and intentionality [far from being causes of behaviour] actually refer to the public criteria by which we make behavior intelligible, by which we make *ascriptions* of motive'.<sup>41</sup> What Wendt prefers is a moderate holism, which means the same as a moderate individualism. It is 'not that culture does not help constitute the meaning of an agent's desires and beliefs, but that agents have a role to play in social explanation which cannot be reduced to culture'.<sup>42</sup> But in coming to terms with the need to accommodate individualism, Wendt makes remarks which are worthy of attention. According to him:

[It is possible to distinguish] between individuality *per se* and the social *terms* of individuality. The former refers to those properties of an agent's constitution that are self-organizing and thus not intrinsically dependent on a social context. Some of these properties are material: individuals live in genetically constituted bodies that do not presuppose other bodies, and have minds in virtue of independent brains. Others are cognitive: agents exist partly in virtue of their own thoughts, which they can continue to have even if they are marooned on a desert island. Both kinds of properties are essential to intentional agency, and, even if they are caused by society, they exist independent of them. They give the Self an 'auto-genetic' quality, and are the basis for what Mead called the 'I', an agent's sense of itself as a distinct locus of thought, choice, and activity. Without this self-constituting substrate, culture would

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 179; Wendt's italics.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

have no raw material to exert its constitutive effects upon, nor could agents resist those effects. The intuitions that sustain individualism are rooted in this aspect of individuality.<sup>43</sup>

### *Wendt's Cartesianism*

What is striking in the above passage is Wendt's apparent subscription to the view that we have a sense of ourselves as a distinct locus of thought, choice, and activity, and that we have a presocietal individuality which enables us to be intentional agents. Unlike rocks, he says, human beings are intentional agents that 'exist partly in virtue of *their own thoughts*'.<sup>44</sup> The point here could be that the actual content of our thoughts are socially constituted and produced, but that, nevertheless, such thoughts are ours in the very restricted sense that we are conscious that the thinking is going on inside our head. But that would not distinguish Wendt from radical holists, for whom, when we think we are doing the thinking, it is in fact the culture that is doing it; but, as we saw, Wendt professes not to subscribe to such a radical position. It seems to follow from this consideration that here Wendt is saying that we are indeed capable of thinking the thoughts not constituted by our culture. In short, agents are not constituted by the discursive social structure through and through. It is in conformity with this line of thinking that Wendt also accepts that there are certain pre-given human traits which are part of human nature,<sup>45</sup> and, in a parallel fashion, he talks of certain objective national interests inherent in statehood.<sup>46</sup> It seems to me, however, that if Wendt is willing to make this degree of concession to individualism, then his effort to undermine neorealism and neoliberalism because of their rootedness in individualism begins to lose its edge. The difference between Wendt, on the one hand, and Waltz and Keohane, on the other, is a matter of degree. For Wendt the difference is no doubt highly significant; for the more radical holists it is less so.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181–2. The penultimate sentence here, incidentally, is intriguing. If a constitutive relationship is, as Wendt says, one of logical or conceptual enablement, not like a billiard ball hitting another, it makes no sense to talk of the constituting element *exerting* effects upon the element thereby to be constituted, or the latter *resisting* the effects exerted by the former. 'Exertion' and 'resistance' may be appropriate metaphors in some causal relationships, but are not possible in logical or conceptual relationships. Wendt's reference here to 'exertion' and 'resistance' would seem to reveal that, at least part of the time, he is not distinguishing the two kinds of relationships clearly. Likewise, Smith says that he is 'troubled by his [Wendt's] notion of causal and constitutive theories', that, in his view, 'Wendt's view of constitutive theorizing is very different to the dominant use of the term "constitutive" in the social sciences, where it tends to be contrasted to explanatory theory', and he considers 'Wendt as seeing constitutive theory as a form of causal theory'. Smith, 'Wendt's World' (see n. 4 above), pp. 156, 157.

<sup>44</sup> *STIP*, p. 181; see also p. 225.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131–3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 233–8.

<sup>47</sup> The individualist basis of symbolic interactionism, followed by Wendt, has been noted by Palan, 'A World of Their Making' (see n. 4 above).

## **Concluding remarks**

As Friedrich Kratochwil has observed in his review of Wendt's book, '[a] work of such scope and complexity is likely to engender a series of questions that arise from ambiguities in the argument, or out of mistakes in logic or fact'.<sup>48</sup> As Steve Smith has noted, however, Wendt's is a 'sophisticated book, one that has clearly been drafted and redrafted so as to refine the argument and anticipate many of the likely objections ... Criticism of the book is not an easy task'.<sup>49</sup>

My critical engagement with this book has focused on the way it characterizes itself, rather than upon its substantive contentions. As far as the latter goes, it is my view that Wendt's exploration of transformative potentials in the contemporary international system places him above Waltz and Axelrod. But in the course of my detailed engagement with the self-characterization of the book, I hope to have eliminated some ambiguities in the argument and pointed out some mistakes in its logic.

In particular, I have argued that Wendt's invocation of scientific realism is unnecessary for the purpose of ascertaining the reality of the state; that his discussion of causal and constitutive relationships could be tightened; that his demonstration of the specifically constitutive relationship between a given international political culture and the corresponding identity of the states is unconvincing; and that his castigation of individualism as the main source of the inadequacies of neorealism and neoliberalism is marred by important concessions he makes to it.

<sup>48</sup> Kratochwil, 'Constructing a New Orthodoxy?' (See n. 4 above), p. 87.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, 'Wendt's World', p. 151.