

## Book Review

### ***The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: The Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics***

**Daniel McArthur**

Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: The Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 288 pp. ISBN13: 978-0-415-77627-1. \$35.00 (pbk.)

Book reviews in this journal usually proceed by considering the value of the book in question for Dewey scholarship. In this case I would rather say that this book is of interest to Dewey scholars. Jackson's general project is heavily informed by Dewey's pluralistic brand of pragmatism. As Jackson notes "Dewey's *Logic* . . . stand[s] firmly in the tradition leading to this book" (216). Dewey scholars will greet Jackson's extension of this approach to the study of international relations warmly.

Over the last thirty years, international relations specialists have debated the merits of a variety of methodological and philosophical options while at the same time a dominant theme has been to make the field as "scientific" as possible. Philosophers will, of course, find much in this debate familiar as it mirrors many of the controversies that have taken place in the philosophy of science over the same period. International Relations (IR) theorists find themselves disputing, along with their philosophical counterparts, the nature of the scientific method and the merits of scientific realism versus its empiricist, historicist, and social constructivist rivals. Jackson's project is a worthwhile attempt not only to trace out the philosophical disputes that are of importance to IR scholars, but also to learn from the debates and to provide a coherent approach to methodological questions. I think IR theorists will find Jackson's book a useful place to start when approaching the

philosophical issues in their field, and they will find Jackson's recommendations congenial. Jackson's most important conclusion is that no single methodology or philosophical understanding of the scientific method ought to dominate the field. The goals of the particular IR study in question and the context of the research need to be considered when deciding on the appropriate approach. In this Jackson proposes that competing methodological proposals be considered and negotiated in a pluralistic philosophical context.

To help the IR theorist do this, much of Jackson's book takes up the task of laying out a neat (if sometimes controversial) taxonomy of the various options, each one associated with various philosophical traditions, ontological commitments and epistemological proposals. Jackson proposes four main categories: neopositivism, critical realism, analyticism and reflexivity. Neopositivism, according to Jackson, is the dominant approach but it is faced by lively rivals. Neopositivism has its origins in empiricist philosophy stretching back to Hume and before, leading through Comte to the logical positivists of the twentieth century. In IR, this school of thought seeks to discover covering laws that cover cases of international relations (an example is the hypothesis that genuinely democratic states do not resort to warfare in settling disputes). Since experiments are impossible, similar cases are compared against one another (varying only in the key variables under study, such as the presence of democracy). This is done in order to determine if the cases obey postulated laws. Neopositivism is associated with ontological commitments to an objective reality, a strongly empiricist epistemology and an aversion to theoretical posits or entities that cannot be observed.

Critical realism reflects the recent postpositivist philosophies of science that have been critical of the antimetaphysical attitude of positivism. It seeks not just covariant laws but the genuine causes of phenomena as well. While similar in many respects to neopositivism in her commitment to empirical methods and a mind independent reality, the realist wants to go beyond the directly observable. While a positivist might agree that salt dissolves in water, a realist will want to claim that salt always has the unobservable disposition of solubility, even when it is sitting dry on the table. Reference to such dispositions becomes important in realist IR case studies.

Analiticity and reflexivity have their origins in idealist and various other non-empiricist philosophical traditions. Key features include their rejection of dualist distinctions between mind and world, and their rejection of mind independent reality. Jackson does a solid job of distinguishing between the two options as far as IR method is concerned; philosophers will still see some overlap in the two area's idealistic origins. Analyticists, consistent with their rejection of the mind world distinction, include social constructivist approaches. Reflexivist IR studies, again following from the rejection of dualism, include activist or engaged approaches where societies are compared with one another, not to uncover covariant laws or real causal properties, but to highlight unrecognized and oppressive assumptions in our own. Marxist, feminist and postcolonial approaches to IR often fall into the reflexivist category.

Jackson's broad conclusion is that the philosophical and ontological disputes can carry on in the background, meanwhile the competing methodological options that present themselves to IR scholars can be variously adopted, as needed, in a pluralistic environment. Occasions exist where each of the various proposals not only let us learn, but also do, useful things. Here, Dewey's influence shows through. This is useful and worthwhile advice. No good reason exists why a usually neopositivist researcher might not sometimes find merit in the analysis of another culture that is conducted for the purpose of highlighting problems in our own. Why should a postcolonial theorist object to a neopositivist who uncovers a genuine regularity that might someday be used to prevent a war?

The book is very well written, and it does a great job of laying out its methodological taxonomy. It presents a lot of philosophy to an IR audience in a clear, concise, and accurate way. Its conclusions are of interest but it will also find much use as a solid reference book. Philosophers will find a few minor errors that nevertheless do not detract from the main conclusions. Neopositivists and realists can both fairly be said to believe in a mind independent reality, but this not Cartesian dualism. Descartes was a substance dualist, he took mind to not exist in space and time (it is "unextended," in his words), ordinary matter is extended. Neopositivists and realists are not dualists of this sort. Their belief in a mind independent reality does not preclude conceiving of the mind as a physical object, existing in the world, and subject to physical law. This error corrected, Jackson is perfectly fair in identifying the positivist and realist rejection of philosophical idealism as an important ingredient in their methodological proposals that bear on IR research.

Another minor quibble is that while Jackson's account of neopositivism and critical realism are very solid as far it goes, it is not quite up to date. He tends to contrast neopositivism from older logical positivism by associating Popper's falsificationism in the former. This is no longer true. More recent confirmation theory has revived, if not the verification theory of meaning, the respectability of the notion of inductive confirmation. This is the case for both positivistic and realist philosophers. I would be interested to see of contemporary confirmation theory affects the methodological options available to IR theorists.

While there is much merit in Jackson's goals and conclusions, many philosophers will want to urge that such a pluralistic approach be approached with more caution. Much of the literature canvassed in the analyticist and reflexivist camps has been subject to very powerful criticism. Jackson is aware of this, of course, but he minimized how damning some of this criticism has been or how thoroughly discredited much of this literature is. As Jackson notes, while many constructivist social scientists have sought to construct something more sophisticated than an anything-goes relativism, much of it too quickly collapses back into that absurdity. For this reason, Latour has repudiated many of his former views and fiercely attacks his "supporters" who write to him with the claim that 9/11 was a "social construct." If the conclusions of science are just constructs, then so is the claim that this is so.

What can a constructivist say at this point? How can the constructivist adjudicate between rival conclusions or even defend her own? The school of thought, in many cases, violates Jackson's main methodological virtue. You can't do anything on the basis of much constructivist theory, and attempts to do so can do more harm than good. A great deal of nonsense has been written with very depressing results. The nadir so far is represented by Steve Fuller's recent and foolish attempt to defend, on a constructivist basis, a form of intelligent design from the evidence for natural selection. At this point, I would be unapologetic about saying that analytic philosophers do not need to defend their total rejection of such proposals and IR theorists should be just as suspicious. If the science wars are not over yet, they ought to be. That said, while I would recommend adopting Jackson's proposals with a bit of caution, taken broadly, I think Jackson's advice for IR scholars can be adopted, finding the good wheat while avoiding the chaff.

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