JIRD

Inside the epistemological cave all bets are off

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In this short rejoinder to Friedrich Kratochwil's plea for a 'pragmatic approach to theory building', I argue that, despite his claims to the contrary, his position essentially rests on a curious form of foundationalism and relativism. The problem, as I identify it, is that Kratochwil's attempt to move contemporary debate forward fails because he treats the issue only in epistemological terms. Kratochwil is deeply suspicious of the very idea of the 'real world' and reduces it to an infinitely malleable construct of our ways of thinking and talking about it. This means that he remains trapped in the epistemological cave and is condemned to an endless quest to solve problems that have no solution. But the real world is not simply something that we think and talk about but, rather, we engage with it in practice and as such it offers resistance to our attempts to grasp it. Hence, it is not a subject without a voice in the global conversation. This is an important theoretical limit, particularly in relation to contemporary issues surrounding global environmental problems.
Journal of International Relations and Development (2007) **10,** 40–56.
doi:10.1057/palgrave.jird.1800109

Keywords: dogmatism epistemology; foundationalism; reality; relativism; theoretical pluralism; truth

Introduction

When, in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, the prisoner released from his chains returns to inform his fellow inmates that he has discovered that their world is an illusion, he could be forgiven for being surprised by their response. Not only do they think he is on the verge of insanity, but they threaten to kill any prisoner who continues to peddle this dangerous myth (Plato 1955). If, for the sake of argument, we cast Friedrich Kratochwil in the role of the unchained prisoner, we can view his keynote address to the convention of the Central and East European International Studies Association (CEEISA) in June 2006, and published in this journal, as an attempt to dispel some of the damaging myths and illusions to which International Relations (IR) theory clings. At this point, however, the parallels break down. Kratochwil's plea for 'a pragmatic approach to theory building' is not based on an engagement with what is

'outside' the cave. According to Kratochwil, even if we admit that there is something 'out there', we can know nothing of it (Kratochwil 2000: 91). Indeed, the attempt by his fellow inmates to reach the 'world out there' is probably the root cause of all their ills. Unlike Plato's prisoners who contentedly observe the shadows believing them to be reality, Kratochwil's fellow detainees are a troublesome lot, dissatisfied with their predicament and convinced that there is a 'world out there' that can be grasped if only we try hard enough.[1] In Kratochwil's opinion, all the digging of tunnels and probing of the walls of the cave in the hope of revealing the 'world out there' is apt to bring the whole lot crashing down on our sorry heads.

The irony is that if Kratochwil were to address Plato's original prisoners, his proposals would not endanger his life since they would simply reaffirm what the prisoners already believed. There really is nothing to concern us but the shadows on the walls of the cave and the idea of a 'world out there' is itself the illusion and hence a meaningless distraction. In Kratochwil's cave, on the other hand, the prisoners are not likely to take kindly to his proposals and, while they are thankfully not as violent as Plato's, they will still object.

Although ultimately I side with the objectors, there is much that Kratochwil proposes that I agree with. In particular, I share his frustration concerning a great deal that passes for epistemological debate within IR. I say 'passes' for epistemological debate because I do not think that many of the issues claimed to be epistemological actually are. Moreover, the fact that the discipline treats these issues as epistemological obscures what is really at stake, which I believe is ontology. The crucial differences between the various theoretical schools within IR revolve around competing claims about what the world is, what it might become, and what the most important processes are; and these are ontological and not epistemological questions.[2] This does not mean that no important epistemological issues have emerged or that epistemology is unimportant to what we do. But in construing all meta-theoretical debate as epistemological, we lose sight of other important aspects. Given Kratochwil's exasperation with the 'hypertropic concern with epistemological issues that continues to characterize the field' (Kratochwil 2007: 1), it is puzzling that his response retreats even deeper into the epistemological cave.

In this short rejoinder, I intend to address some of these issues and argue that as long as we remain locked inside the epistemological cave we are condemned to an endless quest to solve problems that have no solution.[3] This is graphically illustrated by Kratochwil's intervention, which, despite his claims to the contrary, is, I suggest, ultimately a form of foundationalism and relativism.[4] A curious mix I agree, but this is a problem entirely of Kratochwil's own making. Underpinning these positions is a commitment to a particular metaphysics that rejects the idea that the world itself plays a role in helping us adjudicate competing knowledge claims. Under the grip of this metaphysics, ontology

remains hidden or is displaced by yet another epistemological category that underwrites all knowledge claims. For just as the positivists viewed what exists as coterminous with what can be an object of experience, so Kratochwil treats what exists as coterminous with a structure of rule-governed human activity through which objects are constructed. Both advocate an anthropocentric metaphysics with existence always linked to some or other human attribute. Through this metaphysics, we purge ourselves of the need for a concern with nature independent of our interests and ultimately take upon ourselves the mantle of creators of worlds. Thus, Kratochwil claims that 'the objects of experience are not simply there in the outer world, but are the results of our constructions and interests' (Kratochwil 2007: 6)[5] and that the only secure grounds for all knowledge claims is a notion of truth derived from a procedural notion of rule-following in accordance with the practices of a community (Kratochwil 2007: 12). What are important in this respect, however, are not only his claims concerning these issues, but the consequences of them, and this can be graphically illustrated by looking at them in relation to the pressing environmental problems that confront humanity today.

Before proceeding, however, I want to say a little about the argumentative strategy I have employed and why. I have adopted a style that might be described as a series of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments that attempt to demonstrate the consequences of Kratochwil's position. Many of these cohere around what I perceive to be an unnecessary discarding of the real world in Kratochwil's argument and, as a consequence of this, a meta-theory of social science that proceeds as if the 'way the world is' is of no consequence to the community of academics who attempt to come to know it.[6] Once adopted, this approach simply perpetuates a materialist/idealist dichotomy that is, potentially at least, politically and ethically debilitating. This 'flight from reality', as Ian Shapiro (2005) has called it, is a common theme in many post-positivist approaches where, even if it is accepted that there is a world independent of our dealings with it, ultimately suggest that our descriptions of it take priority such that it seems infinitely malleable to shaping in accordance with our concerns and interests.[7] I believe that this is a mistake and it leads to absurd conclusions that are rarely accepted even by those theorists keen to keep the world in 'scare quotes'. My aim in this piece is to push some of these absurdities to their limit. My hope is to elicit responses that clarify just what is meant by the claim that the real world is irrelevant.

A Theorist in Search of a Way Forward

Kratochwil's attempt to push beyond the epistemological wars by remaining inside the epistemological cave is not as puzzling as it might seem given that he

assumes all meta-theoretical debate to be epistemological. Thus, for example, he argues that he aims to 'review some of the issues that meta-theorizing was supposed to address and show how this project of securing knowledge through hierarchization and finding absolute foundations failed' (Kratochwil 2007: 2). Likewise, he suggests that issues such as incommensurability, reductionism and materialism *vs* idealism are arcane epistemological concerns (Kratochwil 2007: 2). But in what sense, for example, is the materialism *vs* idealism question epistemological?

As it has developed in IR, this is a debate about whether social outcomes are best explained in terms of material factors or ideational ones.[8] A related debate within philosophy attempts to grasp whether being or ideas ultimately matter. In either debate, no epistemological issues are involved until a specific claim is made.[9] We can certainly ask any theorist who takes a position of either side of this debate how they know (the epistemological question) their chosen factor is determinate in the last instance. But their epistemological response to this question is not the same as the claim itself, but rather defends the claim on one or other basis. And we assess these claims on a number of grounds. Given that we do not know in advance what the epistemological support for any given claim may be, then it also follows that scientists cannot afford to be epistemological dogmatists, pinning their colours to only one epistemological mast. Philosophers can trouble themselves with convoluted debates about the relative merits of one particular epistemological stance over another — empiricism *vs* rationalism, for example — after all it is their job, but scientists need to be epistemological opportunists (Einstein 1949) using a wide range of epistemological supports and never knowing in advance which one, or which mix of them, is relevant until a specific claim is made.

In some respects, this might seem to place me close to the position that Kratochwil suggests is absurd. For is not my position a form of 'anything goes'? Well, again agreeing with Kratochwil that we should reject traditional logic and its associated yes or no answers, I will reply both yes *and* no.[10] Yes, it is an 'anything goes' position insofar as I reject outright that we need to commit ourselves to any particular epistemological position in advance of making or judging particular knowledge claims. I can see no good reason for giving any specific epistemological standpoint a position of *a priori* privilege. But I can also answer no because this position does not mean that we are unable to make informed judgements on the basis of the evidence for the claim.

The fact that philosophers have been unable to provide secure foundations for one or other epistemological stance does not alter the fact that we continue to use these positions to get along in the world. In this respect, I agree completely with Kratochwil's claim (2007: 11) that both absolute certainty and absolute doubt are impossible positions to hold, and that we 'go on' in a situation located somewhere in between. It may be philosophically naïve of me

to claim that if I wish to know how many cars are parked in my drive, then the easiest way is to probably go and look. But I can do this without needing philosophy to prove empiricism infallible. Equally, in certain circumstances I might be able to ascertain how many cars are in my drive without looking; if, for example, I know that at time T1 that there were three cars and that one went away at time T2, then, if asked at time T3 (assuming these events are sequential), I have a legitimate case to say 'two'. Of course, in either case, I could still be wrong but the point is that the claim about the existence of a certain number of cars can justifiably be supported on various epistemological grounds and we do not know in advance which will be the most appropriate. Hence the context in which the claim emerges is also an important aspect of its validity. In both cases, there is no doubt that observation or the process of rational deduction is theoretically laden, but to say that our concepts help carve up the world in certain ways is not to accept that they either determine the physicality of what exists or can, in all cases, stop an object from existing.[11]

Again, in some respects, my position might appear to be quite close to Kratochwil's pragmatist alternative. After all, pragmatists generally argue that we should do what works. There are certainly aspects of Kratochwil's position that do suggest some affinities with my notion of epistemological opportunism. Thus, for example, he argues that 'each science provides its own court and judges the appropriateness of its own methods and practices' (Kratochwil 2007: 12). This is, indeed, the position scientific realists adopt in relation to epistemological and methodological matters, although Kratochwil seems to reject that scientific realism out of hand.[12] But it is not clear why each science would need to judge the appropriateness of its own methods and practices unless there are some fundamental ontological differences that distinguish the object of study; which is exactly why scientific realists insist that ontology forms the starting point of all enquiry, not the *a priori* commitment to a set of scientific methods.

According to the positivist view of science, there is a general set of rules, procedures and axioms which, when taken together, constitute the 'scientific method'. Although the various strands of positivism disagree over the exact form of these axioms, the need to define them is common to all versions (Halfpenny 1982). For scientific realists, on the other hand, there can be no 'scientific method' because differing phenomena will require differing modes of investigation and perhaps different models of explanation. This argument is embedded in the differing ontological domains that concern the individual sciences. Hence there can be no scientific method as such, since differing object domains will require methods appropriate to their study and a range of epistemological supports.

Kratochwil's position is very different. He accepts that we have to 'search for viable criteria of assessment of our theories' (Kratochwil 2007: 1), but exactly

which criteria does he suggest? First, he explicitly rejects the notion that the world itself will play any role, arguing that 'if we recognize the constitutive nature of our concepts then we have to accept that we never ''test'' against the ''real world'' but only against other more or less-articulated theories' (Kratochwil 2007: 3). The use of 'never' is a very strong statement and seems to rule out any role for empirical research.[13] Of course, Kratochwil may argue that by 'real world' he does not mean the world of experience but some Platonic realm beyond experience. But, in so doing, he would be aligning himself with the positivists who also denied the possibility of accessing reality beyond that which can be experienced. Equally, of course, the empirical is part of the real world even if it does not exhaust it. Ultimately I think Kratochwil, like the positivists, does treat the world as the 'world of experience'. This means that he has a very philosophically idealist notion of the real world, which also means that rather than transcending the materialist/idealist dichotomy, he is clearly on one side of it.[14]

There is, however, some confusion regarding this issue. For example, despite claiming that the objects of experience are the result of our constructions and interests, he also argues that no one really contests the claim that there is a common substratum to these objects (Kratochwil 2007: 6). Equally in previous work he has claimed that no one seriously doubts the existence of an independent world (Kratochwil 2000: 91). Given these claims, it seems that the point he is trying to make is the relatively uncontested idea that we describe the world in certain ways and that those descriptions play a role, perhaps even determine, in how we interact with the world. I know of no one who would object to this, but this is a long way from the claim that we construct objects in a physical sense, by describing them in particular ways, or that the world plays no role in terms of the assessment of our claims.

To illustrate this issue he uses the example of a table, which he claims is something entirely different to a 'physicist, the chemist, the cabinet maker, the user, or the art historian' (Kratochwil 2007: 6). Now, of course, how we use a table, or how we describe it is almost exclusively a matter of our discourses and interests. No one doubts this. Nor does anyone doubt that objects can be described in a number of differing ways. Yet the fact still remains that in order for any object to function as a table it needs to have a set of properties such that it can fulfil that role. Hence, we construct tables out of materials, such as wood, that have the properties of being able to support objects placed on them. No matter how creative we are within our community of rule-following scientists, we are not yet able to construct tables out of water.[15]

Thus, the world itself simply cannot be discarded in the manner Kratochwil suggests. One can think of many such examples where the world does in a very real and important sense talk to us: penalizing any attempt to put out fires using petrol rather than water for example; attempting to run our cars by

packing them with environmental waste; or attempting to feed the starving of the world on fresh air as opposed to substances that provide nutritional value.[16] If Kratochwil's idealist metaphysics were correct, all of these should be possible as long as we have an interest in achieving them, and providing enough of a given community followed the rules governing this process. The nature of matter itself, however, seems to block this move, which, because we continuously interact with the material world, cannot be simply described, as Kratochwil does, as 'irrelevant' (Kratochwil 2007: 6). In a very meaningful and practical sense the world does communicate with us, accepting or rejecting our attempts to fashion it in ways to suit our interests on the basis of its specific modes of being (Pickering 1995).

Likewise, when physicists or chemists interact with a table they generally do so in terms of it being a table, to place computers on, etc.[17] Similarly, art historians also relate to tables as tables and only treat particular tables with additional properties as 'art objects'. And it is not just any table that can function as a work of art, but only a table that does indeed possess certain properties that match it to the rules that determine what constitutes an 'art object'. Without this, just about any table would do and the notion of forgery in art would be redundant. Of course, these issues are infinitely more complicated in the social world where existence is dependent upon language and concepts.[18] Nonetheless, even in this realm existential claims made by theorists in academia are not a necessary, or sufficient, element to bring social objects into being, and nor do academic claims to the contrary stop particular social objects from existing. Social objects existed long before institutionally located social scientists attempted to describe them.

Equally, in order to transcend the materialism/idealism dichotomy, we should be wary of embracing too sharp a distinction between natural and social processes. Accordingly, it is the case that human patterns of behaviour are impacting on global environmental processes in ways we have yet to fully understand and these processes will continue irrespective of whether we reach an intersubjective agreement on what they mean. And, of course, these same human-influenced processes will react back on social life in unforeseen ways, again often irrespective of our descriptions of them.[19]

Given Kratochwil's absolute rejection of the world as playing a role in theory choice, perhaps it is reason, as in the classical rationalist tradition, that plays an important role in theory choice? But this too is rejected (Kratochwil 2007: 11). In the final analysis, Kratochwil suggests only one criterion and this is 'a procedural notion of rule-following in accordance with the practices of a community' (Kratochwil 2007: 13). Rules provide the foundation upon which all scientific practice depends, and rules are determinate of truth (Kratochwil 2007: 13). Understood one way, this is hardly a novel idea. After all, and accepting for the sake of argument, the Winchian proposition that all social

activity is rule-governed, it hardly conflicts with any view of science (Winch 1958). Thus, one could conceive of a community of scientists adopting the rule 'follow positivist principles in your research'. Or an alternative community might follow the 'rule' that all scientists should check their findings against the world. But Kratochwil has ruled these forms of rule-following out so it is not just any set of rules that a community should follow; some forms of rule-following behaviour are not allowed. This leaves us with the question of what kind of procedural rule-following Kratochwil deems acceptable. Since he only tells us which ones are inadmissible, not those to be followed, we can only infer the set of rules that remain.

According to Kratochwil, all truth claims gain their force only insofar as an individual has followed the rules that are legitimated by the community of which she/he is a member. Given that rules relating to reason and the world itself have been denied validity, which epistemological rules are left? I can think of only two, of which only one is part of Kratochwil's 'safe bet'. The first, which Kratochwil does not accept, would be an authoritarian epistemology; we accept as truth that which the powerful determine to be true. I think we can all agree that this is scarcely a good rule to follow, and I can think of no community of academic scholars adhering to such a rule. The second, which I think is Kratochwil's position, is a conventionalist epistemology. Truth resides in agreement.[20] We follow the rule 'adopt as true the claim that receives the most assent' among the community of scholars.[21] Kratochwil suggests just this in his claim that the 'court' that decides all truth claims within science is the practitioners themselves (Kratochwil 2007: 12). Rule-following, according to this conventionalist epistemology, is a social activity since the criteria of correctness do not belong to individuals but are shared by the community members. Often this is cashed out as 'common understanding' or intersubjectivity. The classic articulation of this argument was Wittgenstein's, for whom conformity to the rules was not an optional matter of individual consent but characterizes a community's form of life. The commitment to the rules is based on agreement, or conformity in terms of practice (which is essentially the same thing), that is not interpretable in any deeper sense. Wittgenstein calls this the bedrock, or form of life, which can be given no further justification (Wittgenstein 1958: §217). We do not question or validate the rules; we simply follow them. Truth is determined by our shared judgements, which manifest themselves in our rule-governed activities.

It is difficult to view this as anything other than a form of foundationalism. All epistemological judgements, for Kratochwil, ultimately rest on this one criterion: that of conformity to the rules governing conduct within a community, in effect agreement. Moreover, this is a universal criterion that, despite his claims to the contrary, is generalized across all the sciences, or at

least, insofar as truth resides in this rule structure, this seems to be the logical consequence of his argument. We have here a monistic epistemological stance that provides the truth conditions for every science. Equally, it is difficult to see how this approach legitimates Kratochwil's claim (2007: 12) that it can allow for the formulation of 'new questions that could not even be asked previously' since in order to be understood as a relevant question would require that something already falls under some or other rule that already has almost universal consent among the community. Without agreement within the community, it is difficult to see how any question, let alone an answer to it, can get off the ground.

And it is in relation to this issue that the problem of relativism emerges. For it is not an issue of agreement of judgements within a community, but the lack of agreement across communities and the absence of a set of meta-rules that can adjudicate claims among competing communities that is the real problem. This dilemma is nicely illustrated by the turn to realism in the later work of Jurgen Habermas (2003). According to Habermas, there are two fundamental aspects of the linguistic turn. First, all 'experience is linguistically saturated such that no grasp of reality is possible that is not filtered through language' (Habermas 2003: 30). Second, that all languages are both culturally and temporally specific, which entails that there is a plurality of languages, each governed by its own rules that demarcate the boundaries of the community. Accepting these two assumptions generates a significant problem: whether there are any universal elements of language which are invariant across communities that might provide a point of contact for members of differing communities.

Ultimately, Habermas solves this issue by embracing a form of non-classical realism that recognizes that we are not only cognitive agents taking part in rule-governed communicative action, but also practical agents who navigate their world through a process of problem-solving. Our practical confrontations with the world allow us to generate knowledge of that world. Knowledge emerges from the relationship that exists between the world itself, the rules that govern our linguistic competence and our ability to practically engage with the world on the basis of our descriptions of it. One practical aspect of the world that all agents know is the resistance it offers to their practices (Pickering 1995). Successful activity depends upon the ability of agents to anticipate this resistance and work with it, or find innovative ways to use it to their own advantage. According to Habermas, the pragmatic presupposition of a language-independent world resides in this resistance and that once this is made explicit agents not only assume an independent world but also know that there is one. Hence although the linguistically constituted intersubjective world has an epistemic priority, the language-independent reality that resists our activity has ontological priority.

Kant took a different view and got around this problem by embedding certain universal properties of the world in human categories, or understanding. Kant believed that all humans share a fundamental system of categories (space, time, causality, etc.) in order for experience to be possible at all (Kant 1791/1881). Moreover, it is clear that, for Kant, the source of these categories lies not in the world itself but in the principles of human understanding. So according to Kant, it is the structuring of the mind that makes experience possible. All discursive, rational beings share the same fundamental categories and must conceive of the physical world as spatially and temporally unified. Through these common and universal categories, those beings are also able to arrive at judgements concerning an intersubjective realm of empirical objects. This means that, for Kant at least, objective knowledge of the scientific or natural world is possible. But Kratochwil suggests no universal criteria for making judgements across communities; he rejects both Habermas' ontological realism and Kant's universalizing vision of humanity structured by a common understanding.

Without such a universalizing set of meta-rules governing cross-community disputes, it is difficult to see how relativism is not the logical result. After all, even the existence of the world itself is dependent upon the rules governing different communities. In effect, Kratochwil's metaphysics has opened up the floodgates to Kuhnian ontological incommensurability, with the problem being not only how we decide among competing knowledge claims about a world we share in common, which itself is difficult enough, but the altogether more radical problem of the possibility that there is not one world, but many (Wight 1996). There are as many worlds as there are communities. So it is possible to envisage two communities, each following their own rules and each reaching radically different positions in virtue of those rules. Think, for example, of a community that sees no problem with using natural resources to fuel opulent and consumerist lifestyles, and compare it with another that views those same lifestyles as leading to the potential wholesale destruction of the globe. Which community is right? Whose advice should we follow? Maybe it does not matter but, in Kratochwil's world, both communities are right as long as the judgements they have arrived at have been in accordance with the procedures governed by the rules to which the community is committed. But again, it is not just that we are unable to decide but that, according to Kratochwil, we do not need to decide because the various communities construct their own (and we can presume different) worlds and as such there is nothing over which to disagree.

This opens up the intriguing philosophical possibility of a foundationalism that is also relativist. It is foundationalist since Kratochwil provides only one epistemological criterion to which judgements within communities must conform. But it is also relativist since the standards that govern those

judgements, and indeed the world that is the subject of those judgements, are internal to the community under consideration and there are no rules governing disputes across communities. Hence, Kratochwil attempts to avoid the difficult issue of relativism by expunging all differences within communities and making cross-community dialogue both impossible and unnecessary.

One final germane example might help illustrate just what is at stake in this issue. In March 2003, the United States (US) and associated allies launched 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'. The so-called legitimate basis of the war against Iraq was the claim that Iraq was in violation of United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1441 regarding weapons of mass destruction.[22] Although there was much debate surrounding the legitimacy of the war on the basis of this resolution, there was little dispute among the major intelligence communities that Iraq did indeed possess weapons of mass destruction. These intelligence communities had agreed on the rules governing their practices and, as far as we can tell, these rules were followed. On Kratochwil's account, this means that it was simply 'true' that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.[23] Alternative, non-intelligence communities around the globe took a different view and argued that resolution 1441 provided no legitimate basis for military action against Iraq. These alternative communities did not substantially challenge the claims concerning weapons of mass destruction, for how could they dispute the claims of the 'experts' in the intelligence communities; and on Kratochwil's account, they had no legitimate basis for doing so since they were not part of the community that governs the construction of intelligence-related truths. The intelligence communities had followed the rules pertaining to intelligence communities, and hence their claims were 'true' in the limited sense Kratochwil employs the terms. And there was certainly, at least if we accept Kratochwil's pragmatist alternative, no use in these alternative communities pointing to the world and saying 'look there really aren't any weapons there'. Dr. Blix could have saved himself a lot of trouble had he read Kratochwil before embarking on a long and fruitless search.

As it turned out, however, the real world had a different truth that paid no attention to the rule-governed behaviour of the intelligence communities. There were, in fact, really (yes really) no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and no amount of creative rule-following by the Bush regime and the Blair government could pull weapons of mass destruction out this particular hat. What this example illustrates is the importance of the way the world is to all forms of critical inquiry. We cannot reduce truth to agreement, or conformity with rule-governed behaviour, and if we do so we play into the hands of those powerful forces that long ago decided on what the rules are and who gets to change them. One way, the marginalized can challenge prevailing modes of thought and particular rule structures is by illuminating how they provide

a distorted version of the world, and we cannot do this if we keep the world in scare quotes, or deny its existence. Gaining epistemological access to this world is not easy, but we should not follow the siren call of the sceptic who, in the face of this seemingly insurmountable task, gives up altogether.

Conclusion

Kratochwil situates his argument by expressing dissatisfaction with contemporary theoretical debate in the discipline and seems to suggest a new way of looking at things. In the final analysis, however, his 'plea for a pragmatic approach to theory building' is not a new position, but rather represents the reiteration of a position that has formed one of the poles that constitute the limits of contemporary theoretical debate. Hence, this is not a plea for a truce in the epistemological wars but yet another volley aimed at establishing theoretical dominance. Yes, we can be pragmatic but only if we discard the world and reason as supports for our theoretical judgements. Ultimately, Kratochwil's position seems locked within the late 19th/early 20th century tradition that proposed a fundamental distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. Of course, when these distinctions emerged, they made sense due to the model of science that dominated. Given developments in the philosophy of science and the wider social theoretic field throughout the latter part of the 20th century however, these oppositions look increasingly untenable. We do not have to accept this dichotomy but that Kratochwil does illuminates a residual commitment to the bivalent logic he attempts to reject. Because we have no *direct* access to reality he assumes this means we have no access to it at all. Since epistemologists have been unable to provide secure foundations, he discards the traditional epistemological project completely. But these are not the only options and we should reject the bivalent logic that forces us to embrace unnecessary either/or choices.

It is ironic that Kratochwil uses the term pragmatic to describe his own position. Charles Peirce, often considered to be a major figure in the development of pragmatism, argued that it was impractical to begin study by doubting things we have no reason to doubt and that we should only test, what there is reason to test (Peirce 1955). In the context of Kratochwil's 'safe bet', we would do well to heed Peirce's advice and ask if there is any reason to doubt the belief that we interact with an external reality, or doubt the validity of logic and the senses in assessing what our interactions with that reality tell us about it, albeit with suitable qualifications. As Ruth Lessl Shively (1997: 57) has argued, it is a strange form of pragmatism that insists that we replace ordinary forms of thought concerning our relationship with an external reality with radical forms of rule-governed linguistic contextualism. Indeed, is it not

impractical to attempt to convert realist-minded publics to non-realist ways of thinking, and is there no more than a hint of elitism in the claim that such publics should abandon realist modes of thought simply because a small group of philosophers and theorists think them outdated and misconceived (Shively 1997: 57)?

Yes, let us indeed be ruthless epistemological pragmatists by not privileging any epistemological position, but ruling none out either. For to adopt a bivalent logic in relation to these issues and accept Kratochwil's 'safe bet', does indeed place us in the improbable position of being both foundationalist and relativist. We do not need epistemological certainty in order to get along in the world, and a truly pragmatic approach to theory building would be a little less quick to discard potential sources of support. The first move in transcending the epistemological *impasse* is to reject that belief that epistemology sets the terms of debate and to pay greater attention to the fundamental ontological differences that lie at the core of all theoretical dispute. For as long as we remain locked in the dark recesses of the epistemological cave, all bets are off.

Notes

1 I have not taken issue with all of the questionable assumptions that underpin Kratochwil's argument; for example, the implied claim that epistemologists have given up on the search for foundations, or that debate within the sociology of science, has cohered around one position. However, it is worth registering an objection to his claim that it is an unquestioned assumption of traditional epistemology that truth is a property of a 'world' out there (2007: 1). This is a highly contested claim and the idea of a 'world out there'—in effect, philosophical realism—has never been a dominant position within philosophy. In fact, if philosophy has a dominant mode of thought, it is idealism, not realism; hence, the old joke, 'how many philosophers does it take to change a light bulb? Three, one to change the bulb and two to stand around arguing over whether or not the light bulb exists'. Indeed, what Heidegger (1927/1967) called the 'scandal of philosophy' is not the repeated attempts to argue for the existence of the external world, but that such arguments are expected in the first place; particularly, when the very thing that is being argued for is a necessary precursor to our being able to argue about it in the first place.

2 It is possible to attempt to efface the distinction between ontology and epistemology by arguing that all ontological arguments are put in terms of language; hence, all arguments are epistemological in form. However, to do so, and remain consistent, would require acceptance of the belief that 'to be' is the same as 'to be known'. This would also entail that prior to something being known it did not exist. Hence, there really were no dinosaurs, planets, black holes, etc., until we 'knew' of them. This is a very strict form of philosophical idealism and eventually leads to solipsism.

3 Another way of putting this might be in terms of Wittgenstein's (1922) view that these are not really genuine problems at all, but are the result of a certain misuse of language.

4 It is also possible to view Kratochwil's position as a form of instrumentalism, despite his claims to the contrary (Wight 2007).

5 It is this linking of existence with interests that ultimately ensures that Kratochwil's position is instrumentalist in form.

6 Kratochwil's argument is primarily aimed at those members of the academic community who attempt to construct accounts of a world beyond the academy. As such, his position effectively entails that scholars of international politics should concern themselves only with their descriptions of the world and alternative theories produced by other members of the academic community. The social world beyond these accounts is deemed to be irrelevant. However, Kratochwil's rejection of the real world informing theory choice is puzzling given that he claims truth is 'theoretically formed *assertions* ***about*** *the world*' (Kratochwil 2007: 1). Since truth claims are ***about*** the world, this implies that theorists should at least check their claims against the world (Godfrey-Smith 2003).

7 Even Alexander Wendt's (1999) 'rump materialism' plays no role in his substantive theory of international politics (Guzzini and Leander 2001; Brglez 2001). The choice between a materialistic or an idealistic social theory is unnecessary and whether ideas or matter take priority in social outcomes is not a theoretical issue but an empirical one that should be at the heart of our inquiries.

8 Marx (1859/1904) encapsulated what is at issue here with his claim that it 'is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness'.

9 A consistent sceptic might argue that there are no genuine ontological questions since the idea of matter is of course an idea; which, of course, is to claim that the ultimate constituents of the world are ideas. Kratochwil seems to come close to this, but ultimately it is not a position he can sustain given that elsewhere he has claimed that 'hardly anyone … doubts that the ''world'' exists ''independent'' from our minds' (Kratochwil 2000: 91).

10 The rejection of formal analytical logic requires qualification, for to reject it in absolute terms is to affirm it. Like Derrida (1988), I do not reject 'all or nothing' logic in total. Some things are susceptible to this form of logic and some are not.

11 It might be argued that I am guilty of stretching the *reductio ad absurdum* too far and that Kratochwil is not suggesting that we 'physically' construct the world. Yet, given his claim that the world out there is 'irrelevant' and that he states that the 'the objects of experience are not simply ''there'' in the outer world, but are the results of our constructions and interests' it is difficult to see how else to interpret his position. In this respect, I think Kratochwil's position would be immeasurably strengthened had he heeded his own advice and applied the 'unproductive nature of universal doubt' (2007: 11) to his own claims in relation to the world.

12 Kratochwil's rejection of scientific realism is more fully developed in his critique of Wendt (Kratochwil 2000). However, there are substantial problems with his understanding of the scientific realism, in particular, he seems to suggest that because scientific realists posit an independent reality existing 'out there' that they then assume that we have direct access to this reality, or that this reality has one preferred way of being represented and that scientific realists believe that science achieves this. None of these positions are adopted by scientific realists. For a more detailed critique of Kratochwil's understanding of scientific realism, see Morgan (2002) and Wight (2007).

13 The fact that we can know the real world only through our descriptions of it does not mean that we then only deal with those descriptions, or test theories only through comparing alternative descriptions. In science, we use these descriptions to inform us of how the world is and we test these descriptions against the world *and* against other theories.

14 One of the great enduring myths of post-positivist IR is the belief that positivists were philosophical realists. Most positivists, apart from a few exceptions, were strongly anti-realist, arguing that existence was dependent upon the human attribute of experience, and that theoretical terms should not be treated realistically. And this is not just a matter of inconsistency between avowed philosophy (anti-realism) and methodological practice (realism). Any philosophical position that sees existence as predicated on some human attribute is, by

definition, a form of idealism (Kolakowski 1972; Hollis 1996). At best, the kind of unreflective practice that passes for science in most of IR is a form of empirical realism that has not fully considered the philosophical basis of its knowledge claims. In this respect, it is ironic that Kratochwil draws on the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics to further attack the notion of an 'already existing nature', given that this interpretation was firmly embedded in logical positivism. It is also wrong to infer, as Kratochwil does, that this interpretation proves anything. Einstein was certainly not the only scientist who took a realist view of quantum mechanics (Redhead 1995). For an overview of these debates and a defence of the realist interpretation, see Norris (2000).

15 In theory, it may be possible to use water to construct a table, just as we can use it to construct 'water beds', but in order to do so we will need to find a material able to contain the water such that the completed object has the necessary structural integrity able to play its allotted role.

16 These are not simply easy examples drawn from the natural world, and what they demonstrate is the impossibility of conceiving of the social world as totally distinct from the natural world.

17 When tables do appear in the scientific discourse of physicists or chemists, they do so not as tools to place objects on but as periodic, elemental and so on. Physicists and chemists deal in matter, molecules and chemical reactions, etc., not tables as such.

18 Crucially, the introduction of these aspects to the social world should not lead to a denial of the material world; after all, humans have to possess particular properties such that rule-following behaviour is a possible form of activity. On this and for a strong case for why Wittgenstein's arguments on language imply realism, see Kirk (1999).

19 I am not suggesting that our descriptions have no impact on how we react to these processes. On the contrary, the important point is that our descriptions do indeed determine (in part) how we react to these processes. But given that the processes do exist in particular forms if we misdescribe them, or simply remain unaware of them, we may not orientate our behaviour in appropriate ways that might bring about less damaging consequences. Social life is always materially embedded, which is not the same thing as saying it is materially determined.

20 Kratochwil (2007: 13) suggests that this is not his position, arguing that his rules-based account 'cannot be reduced to the … consensus of a concrete group of scientists'. However, given that he has denied both the world and reason a legitimate role in the 'court' of judgement, it is difficult to see what epistemological options remain. Equally, it is difficult to see how intersubjectivity, or rule-following in accordance with the community of scholars, can be cashed out in terms other than agreement of some form or other.

21 In using quotation marks here I do not intend to suggest that this way of putting the issue is actually employed by Kratochwil. However, it is implied by his position.

22 Weapons of mass destruction are a good example of the impossibility of separating the social and natural worlds. Are these natural objects or social objects?

23 There is also little point in communities other than the intelligence community attempting to set out a different position since the rules governing sensitive knowledge related to state security give priority to those communities charged by the state to produce such 'truths'.

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