

Anthropomorphism, personification and ethics: a reply to Alexander Wendt

PETER LOMAS

Abstract. In his recent article ‘The State as Person in International Theory’, Alexander Wendt advocates explicitly ‘personifying the state’. In his philosophical argument, he opposes a ‘physicalism’ which would reduce states to their individual members with his own ‘thin version of personhood’ derived from social theory. But this approach, neglecting normative criteria, sets up an opposition between false extremes, as well as being false to the full nature of human beings. It is doubtful whether the state is ever, in practice, the perfect corporate agent of Wendt’s prescription, and it would be suspect if it were.

Alexander Wendt, in his contribution to the recent ‘Forum on the State as a Person’ centring on his work,¹ makes two main assertions: (1) the state is routinely treated as a person both by International Relations (IR) theorists and by ‘ordinary citizens, the media and policymakers’;² and (2) IR theorists should accept, and capitalise on, this practice. Both assertions are in my view contentious.

Regarding the first: one of the strongest and clearest trends in IR writing over the past half-century has been a series of attacks on political Realism and its associated conceptions of the state as monolith and primary agent in world affairs. Foreign-policy analysts, for example, sought to show up divisions of thought underlying the actions pursued by state governments towards each other; and practical limits on these governments’ freedom were postulated by theorists of interdependence and pluralism, evoking widening connections at every social level in the modern world. Globalisation theorists have continued the latter argument, especially as regards the limits on governments’ freedom of economic action. In all these approaches the unitary image of states, and the scope of their putative agency, is deliberately qualified.³ Again, recent post- and anti-positivist theorists have issued root-and-branch

¹ ‘The State as Person in International Theory’, *Review of International Studies*, 30:2 (2004), pp. 298–316.

² *Ibid.*, p. 289.

³ For the first, the seminal work is Graham T. Allison’s case-study *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1971). On interdependence and pluralism, see Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1977). Works on globalisation are very numerous. Among recent publications one may mention Martin Shaw, *Theory of the Global State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); David Held and Anthony McGrew (eds.), *Governing Globalization: Power, Authority and Global Governance* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); James N. Rosenau, *Distant Proximities: Dynamics beyond Globalization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); John Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave/St Martin’s Press, 2000); and among the sceptics, John Gray, *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (London: Granta Books, 1998).

condemnations of the simple empiricism they see in much IR writing, alleging the neglect of theoretical approaches inspired by a wealth of other disciplines.⁴ Throughout this intellectual evolution, agency itself, let alone unitary state agency, has become the object of sustained and varied scrutiny, quite independently of whether these studies are well-founded in themselves.

To say, therefore, that ‘the idea of state personhood is meaningful [and] seems to be one thing on which almost all of us agree’,⁵ is on the contrary wide open to contradiction. If ‘state personhood’ has not recently been studied for its own sake, this is less likely to be because IR theorists take it for granted than that they consider it a long-discredited idea. Moreover, untrained ‘ordinary citizens’ have not, in my view, been impervious to analytical lessons from IR scholarship, via the media, over the years. One simple example, about which we hear regularly in the news, is the phenomenon of warring factions radically complicating policymaking in a number of crisis-hit countries. This kind of reporting makes it increasingly suspect to hold forth in public on what Iran or Somalia ‘thinks’ or ‘feels’, or to characterise states as ‘angry, greedy, guilty, humiliated’.⁶ Diplomats and politicians may still use such language, but they, of course, have a professional interest in simplifying complex facts.

Wendt’s philosophical argument

Wendt’s prescription, however, demands to be judged on its own merits. His argument here proceeds via an elaboration of the state as an ‘intentional system’ supporting ‘a thin conception of personhood’ to consideration of it as an organism (or rather superorganism), and as collective consciousness, respectively. The latter two conceptions he declines on either empirical or ethical grounds to support. The core of his argument consists of an opposition between a reductionist ‘physicalism’ which would recognise only human individuals (the ‘members’ of states) as real, and the ‘thin personhood’ approach, based on evidence for collectively-supported actions in the context, and therefore in the name, of states. Throughout, Wendt brings in analogies between humans and other entities, as well as evocations of cognitive behaviour beyond the strictly individual.

Difficulties, however, arise with this developing argument. First, Wendt’s method of reasoning is doggedly analogical and indirect; it is also, in places, strangely inverted, comparing and approximating inanimate things to people, rather than the reverse.⁷ Unsurprisingly, this produces no substantive refutation of the common-

⁴ See, for example, Steve Smith and Ken Booth (eds.), *International Relations Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); and Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For a survey of IR theory focusing on state theory, see John M. Hobson, *The State and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁵ Wendt, ‘The State as Person’, p. 289.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

⁷ For example, explicitly: ‘[M]ost of us would probably say machines could never be persons’: *Ibid.*, p. 296. Cf. on p. 304, para 3, the syllogism: ‘[S]ince we have already established that states have intentions, they must also have minds’. Strictly speaking, this remark is in extension of an author just quoted (but whose views we are expected to take as given, rather than analysable in an IR context).

sense view that, whatever the state is or however it ‘behaves’, it is not a human individual. ‘Personhood’ is simply a misleading neologism here; and ‘personality’ in the mouths of most people to characterise any state, including their own, would, I suspect, be a tentative, metaphorical usage – what Wendt calls an ‘as-if’ practice, and openly wants to go beyond.

Second, the opposition set up in Wendt’s procedure is one between false extremes. For the commonsense view of reality can accommodate *both* persons (human individuals) *and* the state (as something like, but also unlike, a human individual). Hence, it is not necessary to argue that the state actually *is* a person. On this view, the state may still have a place in our social world (albeit a limited one), and potentially, a causal impact on international relations. ‘Group minds’, as I shall argue, are not unreal, they are just ad hoc.

Wendt’s difficulties, as I see them, are traceable to deeper shortcomings. One is his apparently preconceived idea that Realist generalisations about the state are to be rejected unconsidered, because ‘[p]olitically, realism about state persons seems to lead down the road towards fascism and collectivism’.⁸ Yet Realism in IR theory is the intellectual tradition most associated with the personification of the state, and cannot be so easily dismissed. I think a fair distinction could have been drawn here between thinking and unthinking holism. The latter involves a kind of monsterisation, as in the Sun King’s, or a Chinese Mandarin’s, *l’État c’est moi*, or the characterisation by old-style Cold Warriors of ‘Communist China’, or ‘Communist Russia’, as the embodiment of evil. This procedure inflates one individual, or a few, to the putative dimensions of the collectivity; it implies no real interest in questions of identity, or in how a society of individuals might be better understood as integrated for the sake of agency – which seems to me the core of value to be extracted from Wendt’s project.

A more fundamental problem is Wendt’s conflation of two ontological ways of thinking. There is a conceptual difference between anthropomorphism (the identification of a non-human entity as a human one) and personification (the identification of a human entity as an individual). Wendt’s opening definition⁹ blurs the distinction, because he is so determined to portray the state not merely as human – which as a human creation it unavoidably, in some sense, is – but also as an *individual*, an undivided person – which is precisely what we see in the Realist caricatures just outlined.

These errors expose a normative confusion, which is bound to show up in the proofs of Wendt’s advancing thesis. And indeed, we do not have far to look. Thus, when he moves from systemic to organismic comparisons, he argues for a key difference between the human ‘form of life’ and all others in biology and organisation – a difference which appears merely relative. Later, introducing the factor of consciousness (crucial both to individuals’ self-awareness and to their conceptualisation of the state), he contradicts himself directly: ‘Trying to understand collective

⁸ Ibid., p. 315; cf. p. 292.

⁹ ‘To say that states are “actors” or “persons” is to attribute to them properties we associate first with human beings – rationality, identities, interests, beliefs, and so on’. Ibid., p. 289. Cf. p. 315: ‘[I]f the “as if” view of state persons is correct, then the concept *and its associated anthropomorphic discourse* are dispensable.’ (Italics added).

consciousness is made harder by the fact that we [*sic.*] do not understand even individual consciousness', he writes on page 312. Two pages later, 'physicalism [*sic.*] cannot even explain individual consciousness'. Yet it is 'physicalism', in his argument, which is the source of IR theorists' unwillingness to rationalise their supposedly-routine personification of the state.

Defining the state

Whatever the definition of consciousness, I suggest that the key difference between the human form of life and all others is our ability to conceive abstraction; and this is where the state comes closest to being imbued with human traits. For the state is an abstract conception – a complex normative idea, shared by a group of people, of how they should or might order their affairs. When it is *perfectly* shared, it is arguably not simply an idea, but embodied as a series of willed actions: for example, through instruments, like governments, which in that instance receive the voluntary and collective – the whole – support of 'their' people; and also as implied acceptance by them of their particular inheritance among the common properties of all states, such as formally-established territorial limits. The problem is that the idea is rarely, if ever, perfectly shared in practice, and perhaps decreasingly so today.

Unhelpfully, Wendt declines in his article to define the state,¹⁰ but in his *Social Theory of International Politics* he at least names five 'essential properties' of all states:

(1) an institutional-legal order, (2) an organization claiming a monopoly on the legitimate use of organized violence, (3) an organization with sovereignty, (4) a society, and (5) territory.¹¹

Since these comprise both animate and inanimate elements, they cannot possibly all cohere at once to make an entity which has putative agency, except in the unstable and temporary way that I have just described a normative idea as doing, that is, in the minds of the whole population, under conditions of perfect and conscious collective support – which is in practice hard, if not impossible, to achieve, let alone verify.

Wendt gives no example, either, in his article, of actual defended state personification, applied to events in international relations, but again we may have recourse to *Social Theory of International Politics*.

[W]e routinely explain [states'] behavior as the 'behavior' of corporate agents, and these explanations *work* in the sense that they enable us to make reliable predictions about individuals. 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.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 291, note 11.

¹¹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 202.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 216, italics in original. War-making is also an instance of the kind of collective action which Wendt evokes in his article as a relevant manifestation of collective intentions ('The State as Person', for example, pp. 297 and 299), so it does not seem unfair to quote here from his earlier book.

I would argue, in contrast, that many fair-minded people, IR specialists or not, would support the following alternative ‘explanation’ of the events of 22 June 1941.

The *German armed forces* invaded *Soviet territory*. In one sense their individual or collective intentions were, and remain, irrelevant, because they were, *at the time*, both under military discipline and the coercion of SS officers. They were also presumably inspired, in the middle of a war, by the desire to defend their lives, families, homes and livelihoods – independently of whether they accepted any responsibility for the crisis (which further muddies the analytical waters after the event).

In the previous paragraph I have stressed the randomness, provisionality, unverifiability, and contestability, including in the individual agents’ own minds, of their collective beliefs about their state and their place in it, at that moment in German history. These are distinctive phenomena, perhaps, of a society at war (but this is Wendt’s own example). One way, in other words, of explaining the ‘behaviour’ of the Nazi state on the date in question which attempts to be both epistemologically and normatively complete is to depict that day instead from the inside, as a snapshot of the wider experience of Nazism; and Nazism itself as an idea not fully shared, at least willingly, by all Germans for any length of time.

An alternative explanation, still extant, is that all Germans did in fact behave like ‘a corporate agent’, in willing collective support of the Nazi ideology, with (among other extraordinary and repellent features) its unprovoked hostility to foreign peoples, its bogus eugenics, and its persecution to death of the European Jews. About this interpretation (which I do not share) it seems fair to say that, like all interpretations, it is incomplete, and that even if it were persuasively shown to be true, it would still be controversial. The crucial fact here is that the ultimate embodiment of the Nazi idea, based on the assumption of perfect corporateness, was a perversion – a world state which would exclude every other people’s idea of a state; centring, in reality, on one actual individual (Hitler), not the interests of the collectivity or the individuals in relation within it; and dependent on the subversion of settled social life through the permanent waging of war.

There are, in any case, plenty of peacetime examples available of imperfectly-shared conceptions of the state. I may be an Amazonian forest-dweller – indifferent to, unwilling even to be seen as partaking of the modern Brazilian state, in the name of which more powerful people than myself claim me and make my life difficult. Or I may be a Sahelian nomad, driven by my livelihood, or by blood ties, or both, to reject the territorial division of the desert which makes foreigners of my relatives and other people’s property my only available means of sustenance. Or I may be a more complex secessionist or irredentist – say a believer in Scottish political independence within a European Union, rejecting the historical development and perhaps some of the values of the ‘United Kingdom’ state. Or I may be simply a believer in the community of all humankind, above and beyond other things. Not one of these individuals is represented with any satisfaction (let alone perfectly) by the institutions which concretise, in apparent perpetuity, someone else’s idea of ‘his’ or ‘her’ state; not one of them is actually helped by the conception of the state as a person. Examples of this kind could be multiplied; and of course multiple reservations held about a state’s legitimacy will end up undermining its effectiveness as well.¹³

¹³ The foregoing paragraphs should be set against Wendt’s section on group intentions on p. 299, which a lack of space prevents me from dealing with in more detail.

Further, over and above the value of individuals' perceived self-interest, the idea of collective intentions and the ethical value of their outcome are inseparable from the principle of individual self-transcendence for the greater social good; and in this context the state today, especially the state in international relations, is an inherently ambiguous entity. Individuals may dissent in principle from state policies undertaken in their name because they disagree with their moral implications either for their own society, or for humanity as a whole, as suggested above. Yet the automatic membership of all humanity in divided 'sovereign' states, decreed since 1945, complicates the former impulse, and obstructs the latter.

The classical political theorists evolved their theories of the state in an expansive context, in which the ordering of society and political participation were conceived not only ideally, in response to individuals' wishes (including for self-transcendence), but also practically, as a way of delineating part of the known world. The material implications of this have become increasingly clear, and increasingly restrictive, in post-Westphalian times. Locke set out principles of property, especially property in land, against the background of the Enclosures. Nowadays, everyone alive inhabits a wholly-claimed world, enclosed by the boundaries of states – a world of official, *im*-personal 'owners' of highly-unequal fixed resources.¹⁴ The political 'membership' of states is equally involuntary and arbitrary. Locke, Rousseau and Mill grappled with the problem of social solidarity in communities of strangers outgrowing traditional communities of fellowship (extended-family, local, cultural). In the modern (post-1945) world, everyone lives in a forced community of strangers, a fact reflecting imperatives of order and economic ambition rather than simple coexistence. The moral space for the individual's *voluntary* self-transcendence, whether within the wider social context of his/her state, or in the world as a whole, is proportionately diminished.

In my view Wendt fails to confront these normative challenges, leaving himself only a bloodless version of 'state persons' entirely requiring to be verified by 'cognitive' evidence. Thus, concentrating on what he calls 'psychological persons', and excluding 'legal persons', with their 'rights and obligations', and 'moral persons' who are 'accountable for actions under a moral code',¹⁵ he overlooks the all-important fact that in actual human beings these identities are undivided; which is why, *contra* his slogan, states cannot 'be people too' (not individuals, that is). His self-imposed restrictions, moreover, are unnecessary because he has already (at length, in *Social Theory of International Politics*) rejected nominalism.¹⁶ Hence, it is open to him to proceed via an ontology which holds abstract (including normative)

¹⁴ Cf. R. N. Berki, 'On Marxian Thought and the Problem of International Relations', *World Politics*, 24: 1 (1971).

¹⁵ Wendt, 'The State as Person', p. 294.

¹⁶ *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 215ff. At one point (p. 306) in his recent article, Wendt remarks: '[P]rior to the normative question is an ontological question of whether states are organisms at all'. This is characteristic of a false distinction he makes throughout. In philosophical realism, normative considerations are treated as neither prior nor subservient to ontology, but an integral part of it. Nominalists may reserve the right to treat normative considerations as optional, but as I understand it they reject ontology itself, as a metaphysics of the ordering of reality, in the process. For an admirable exposition of the distinction between nominalism and realism, and a defence of the latter, see Reinhardt Grossmann, *The Existence of the World: An Introduction to Ontology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

ideas as real, and to develop a fully-normative theory of the state in international relations.¹⁷

Such a project would, however, I suggest, be a rather unrewarding one. Once you posit the idea of individual self-transcendence (the key *structural* element in Wendt's conception) you have an idea with no natural limits. The state is the avatar of a community of all humankind, or it is nothing. As Philip Reynolds put it, over thirty years ago:

Service of the ends and values of people may require the submergence of the state. The state is not a person. It has no innate moral attributes. It has no honour. It has no inherent right to survive.¹⁸

¹⁷ It is true that Wendt refers approvingly, at one point, to the notion that 'individuals should be the ultimate bearers of rights and responsibilities'. Further, he admits: 'Like any collective intention, state persons can only be real as long as individuals accept and participate in their existence'. ('The State as Person', pp. 292 and 316). In my view, however, these are isolated, unsupported assertions at variance with his general argument (and reflecting his normative confusion). Significantly, in concluding he introduces a note of pure wishful thinking: 'IR scholars . . . routinely treat state persons "as if" they were real. Given IR's claim to authoritative knowledge about world politics, the continual performance of this narrative in IR theory contributes importantly to making this "fantasy" a reality.' (Ibid., p. 316, inverted commas in original). As I argued at the beginning of this article, it is contestable whether IR scholars 'routinely' have this 'fantasy'; and in any case, anyone seeking to turn fantasy into reality would hardly deserve the title of scholar.

¹⁸ P.A. Reynolds, *An Introduction to International Relations*, 1st edn. (London: Longman, 1971), p. 47. To add a final word on language, it also follows, from all that has gone before in my argument, that it is *never* right to speak of states acting (or to use some synonymous verb). True, it is not unusual to find this practice going on, unexamined, in IR writing, and not only in Realism, which is why Wendt has been able to seize upon it (sometimes calling it 'shorthand' himself); but it remains a misleading habit. An act is a literal thing. It has effects. Only people can carry one out. The most we can say is that in the idealised framework of inherited, created states governments act: (1) faithfully or (2) unfaithfully, in the name of 'their' people, who (3) may or (4) may not be misguided in terms of what we consider right or wrong conduct towards other governments and 'their' people. It is on these four normative conditions that the analysis of international relations, properly speaking, turns.

