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# Keep muddling through?

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> *And in matters of war I am sure you yourselves will bear me out when I say that here generalship makes the best forecasts on the whole, and particularly of future results, and is the mistress rather than the servant of the seer's art, because it knows better what is happening or about to happen in the operations of war; whence the law ordains that the general shall give orders to the seer, and not the seer to the general. May we say this, Laches?*
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> Plato, *Laches* 198E-199A

What is the ground by virtue of which the discipline of International Relations (IR) may claim authoritative knowledge of its subject? Why should officials charged with making policy consult and even defer to the findings, the forecasts, the expert advice of mere scholars? Why aren't the practitioners of international politics – career diplomats, statesmen – held (as much by themselves as by us) to be the reigning experts? The answer is obvious: IR lays claim to 'knowledge in its most stringent sense and in its highest form' through 'adherence to *the* standard of knowledge', (Bueno de Mesquita, 1985: 123, emphasis added) that is, to the *scientific* standard. Only this claim to dignity makes it conceivable that men of affairs would give ear to prognostications regarding the outcome of this election or the results of that policy, especially when those predictions seem contrary to their plain view of things or 'gut feelings'.

Despite a reputation for rigor sufficient to impress upon many policy-makers the value of seeking counsel from scholars of IR, the foundations for IR's claim to scientific standards of knowledge are (as hardly needs saying) widely contested within the field. Recognizing and responding to the intradisciplinary strife, Monteiro and Ruby (2009) protest that since 'foundations are themselves necessarily without foundations' and 'therefore, their truth-status is unascertainable' (2009: 26), consequently, 'the

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quest to ground IR inquiry on philosophically secure foundations is not likely to succeed' (2009: 24). They urge scholars of IR to drop the inquiry concerning the foundations for knowledge in their discipline, in the hope that an armistice will end the many 'acrimonious exchanges' (2009: 35) and free them to get on with their work.

Monteiro and Ruby's challenge to the integrity of both the regnant and minority foundational positions in IR is welcome; their horror of 'imperial foundational projects' is just, if the emperor can really be seen to have no clothes. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the argument has been pursued far enough; for, had it been, another conclusion regarding its implications for the future of IR would have been reached. In what ensues, I attempt to follow the reasoning to its proper conclusion: if the discipline of IR is to concede that the question of its foundation for knowledge cannot be settled, then the understanding of politics possible for the proposed 'post-foundational' IR cannot be distinguished from that non-scientific, common sense understanding that the *science* of IR had sought to supersede, namely the perspective of the practicing statesman. I then consider the character and difficulties of this form of knowledge, concluding that the question of philosophical foundations cannot long be avoided.

The invitation to ignore the foundations of knowledge in IR raises a crucial question: in the absence of certainty regarding the status of IR as science, how are scholars to conceive of their efforts and the fruit they may bear? Monteiro and Ruby answer that we must 'eschew[ ] a priori judgments based on foundational commitments on what constitutes legitimate work in IR, thus judging work on its *substantive contribution*' and emphatically '*not* on the degree to which the chosen approach conforms to a particular conception of science' (2009: 18, emphasis added). It may be noticed that this position bears more than a passing resemblance to the type of response identified by Anthony Giddens as 'despairing' and described by Yousef Lapid as 'an instinctive desire not to be disturbed by foundational, or "meta"-scientific, problems' (Lapid, 1989: 236, citing Giddens, 1979: 238).[1] But, precisely this alleged distinction – between genuine scientific work that rests upon a solid foundation, and a contribution that could be recognized as substantive without regard for its foundation – prompts a further question: how could a contribution possibly be judged 'substantive' except by evaluating the extent to which it

[1] 'Noting that experts in meta-science rarely agree among themselves', continues Lapid, 'this response … encourages social scientists to go on with some "useful" or practical work. Unfortunately, this retreatist pattern neither addresses nor settles the issues raised by the current intellectual transfiguration. Worse still, the creative potential of the crisis is lost in the "haste of wanting to know"'. (Lapid, 1989: 236)

conforms to 'science'? Such a judgment would seem to require recourse to a 'conception of science', indeed to *the* conception of science, if that judgment is to be anything more than a 'subjective matter of taste' (2009: 37).

Although Monteiro and Ruby concede that, in a post-foundational IR, 'any approach to "doing IR" must prove its own legitimacy by demonstrating its ability to further our understanding of international relations', they deny that it may do so 'by asserting its superiority according to some foundational argument' (2009: 37). It thus remains unclear how, in the absence of some foundation, we can be sure *that* we have understood at all, much less whether our understanding has been 'furthered'. We are left with the assertion that 'standards of scholarship should be defined within the IR community, based on how a particular argument relates to the general topics deemed relevant to the discipline and, given its relevance, how an argument is internally consistent and externally valid, that is, supported by empirical evidence' (2009: 37, emphasis added). Individual scholars are exhorted or allowed to pursue their own inquiries into foundational questions (2009: 36), and while there is always the danger that a Caesar will emerge to establish a new 'imperial foundational project', in any event it is not the views of individual scholars that are deemed relevant in these matters. For, to restate in the words of Kuhn, 'there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community' when that assent is its own foundation (Kuhn, 1996: 94).[2]

If 'scientific knowledge … is the quality whereby we demonstrate … that a man knows a thing scientifically when he possesses a conviction arrived at in a certain way, and when the first principles on which that conviction rests are known to him with certainty' (Aristotle, 1960: 333), then it would seem that the 'substantive contribution', which is to be judged by an IR unwed to any foundation other than that constituted by its own assent, is not to be judged in a scientific manner. In this light, when it is said that 'substantive contributions' can be 'supported' by 'empirical evidence' (2009: 37), the assertion can mean nothing more than that 'there are things which can only be seen as what they are if they are seen with the unarmed eye' and not 'from the perspective of the scientific observer' (Strauss, 1988: 25). For can't every ordinary scholar of IR (not to say, every ordinary human being) judge the empirical evidence, insofar as it *is* empirical and available to our experience or perception? There is then no reason why perception should be assisted by whatever

[2] Cf. the view that 'treating science as a self-contained system with its own rules and norms based on *scholarly conventions* and reason rather than irrefutable principles of logic places the scientific approach on a more adequate epistemology' (Vasquez, 1995: 238, emphasis added).

method or apparatus is thought to be characteristic of scientific understanding, whose foundations are after all unsettled. Thus, the difference between the nonscientific 'perspective of the citizen' (Strauss, 1988: 25) and that of the post-foundational scholar of IR has vanished. If there is still to be knowledge of IR, and if there is no basis for choosing among 'meta-theoretical' foundations, then the knowledge left to us must be of a nonscientific, nontheoretical kind. A 'substantive contribution' the knowledge of this sort can mean nothing other than a contribution to what was once regarded as 'practical knowledge' of the political.

To see more fully the implications of this, let us consider the following anecdote told by Leo Strauss while he himself was reflecting on the extent to which philosophic or scientific knowledge might be necessary for our understanding of politics, and particularly for that understanding that might culminate in political action:

> I may refer to the story told in England of H. G. Wells meeting Winston Churchill and asking about the progress of the war. 'We're getting along with our idea', said Churchill. 'You have an idea?' asked Wells. 'Yes', said Churchill, 'along the lines of our general policy'. 'You have a general policy?' Wells persisted. 'Yes', answered Churchill, 'the K. M. T. policy'. 'And what is the K. M. T. policy?' asked Wells. 'It is this', replied Churchill, 'Keep Muddling Through'. (Strauss, 2007: 517–18)[3]

Observing that the possibility of '*theoretical* knowledge of things *political*… is by no means self evident' (Strauss, 2007: 515, emphasis original), Strauss nonetheless declared that 'I have not the slightest doubt as to the possibility of devising an intelligent international policy, for example, without having any recourse to political philosophy' – or for that matter, one may add, without recourse to a firmly founded science of IR (Strauss, 2007: 518). Is there a decisive difference between the understanding possible for a post-foundational IR and the 'practical wisdom, common-sense, horse sense, shrewd estimation of the situation' (Strauss, 2007: 517), that is, the nonscientific knowledge of the statesman and practitioner of IR? I have my doubts, and in any event, it is not obvious what distinguishes the perspective of the post-foundational IR scholar who need no longer trouble himself concerning the foundations

[3] I am grateful to historians Richard Toye and David Reynolds for their suggestion that 'Keep Muddling Through' is a sanitized version of Churchill's oft-repeated dictum 'K.B.O. – Keep Buggering On', which Strauss probably rendered this way for polite company. Paul Addison, agreeing with this suggestion, also directed me to one instance in which Churchill did use the expression 'muddling through'. See Addison (2007: 41): 'It is in virtue of this that we shall muddle through to success & [sic] for lack of this Germany's brilliant efficiency leads her to disaster'.

for his 'knowledge', and that of 'the successful man of affairs … [who] does not require political philosophy for his guidance' (Strauss, 2007: 517). No reason presents itself to show why a post-foundational IR – whose chief difference from an IR that is uncertain of its scientific status is that it has shrugged off the question and thereby surrendered the last shred of its dignity as science – should lay claim to any more respectability than the political insights of a Churchill, a Kissinger, a Kennan. It is striking how similar the disavowal of foundational inquiry is to the neglect of those foundations implicit in the position of Strauss's Churchill: both suggest that one can know something of politics, and even formulate policy, without a settled philosophical foundation for that knowledge.

There is a reason that makes comprehensible, even if it does not entirely excuse, the leap to a post-foundational IR. If it were true that there is no basis for choosing among foundations, or at any rate while for the time being the answer is unclear, what would we gain by letting a hundred schools contend? Would our research not be in danger of paralysis, and does our research not have 'real world' effects? Insofar then as the more competent or less capricious conduct of foreign policy relies on the efforts of IR, insofar as its scholars have influence, would a discipline paralyzed by discord not run the risk leaving policymakers to their own questionable devices, and whims? The call to drop foundational questions within the discipline thus constitutes a retreat from crumbling ivory towers to much lower ground where, safely ensconced in a fortress of 'empirical evidence' and common sense, which no man is thought able to assail, IR scholars can continue to exert their benign influence.

But it could be objected that some scholars of IR will not be at home in this new fortress, especially those who believed in the primacy of foundational questions. For they have at best an undeveloped version of that common sense understanding which requires 'a knowledge of particular facts … derived from experience' (Aristotle, 1934: 349–351) and which scholars, because as they are not public officials, do not have. What sort of function can be served by a post-foundational IR, which prizes the common sense understanding but would seem hindered by its lack of practical experience in public affairs? Fortunately, we need not look far to discern what this might be.

Strauss did not take for granted that theoretical knowledge of politics was possible, but this did not prevent him from recommending Kurt 'Riezler's analysis of the world political situation' as 'an excellent model from which students of international relations could learn an important part of their craft' (Strauss, 1988: 240). The analyses of intelligent observers, whose observations, however, lay no claims to science, might still be of the great use to practitioners of the 'craft' of IR. Accordingly,

the importance of the formative experiences that educate such educations that sharpen the sight of such observers cannot be overstated. Machiavelli contends that his reading of ancient historians (themselves intelligent observers of politics) and 'the capital I have made from their conversation' (Machiavelli, 1998: 110) was contained in *The Prince*, a book dedicated to a practitioner of politics. Never mind that Machiavelli was a practicing diplomat himself, for he insists that his knowledge is derived not just 'from long experience with modern things', but also 'a continuous *reading* of ancient ones' (Machiavelli, 1998: 3, emphasis added). He laments the fact that statesmen of his day had failed to obtain 'a true knowledge of histories' and thus undertakes to write 'so that those who read these statements of mine can more easily draw from them that utility for which one should seek knowledge of histories' (Machiavelli, 1996: 6). Hobbes translated Thucydides for Lord Cavendish, recommending his history as one that contained 'profitable instruction for noblemen, and such as may come to have the managing of great and weighty actions' and noting that 'the principal and proper work of history [is] to instruct and enable men, by knowledge of actions past, to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently towards the future' (Thucydides, 1989: xx–xxi).

The reading of political history can thus be a source of instruction or second-hand experience for scholars of IR[4] just as the analysis of world politics it inspires can be a means of influence on public officials. Scholars may not have direct experience of office, but they have the leisure that policymakers lack; it is no accident that so many statesmen were able to make such fruitful use of their leisure before entering public life. One thinks of Kissinger, whose colleagues ridiculed his dissertation on Metternich and Castlereagh and suggested 'that perhaps he should transfer to the History Department' (Isaacson, 1992: 74), but whose studies were surely decisive for the way he conceived of his diplomatic own efforts. Kennan relates that he read 'thirty volumes of Chekhov's works, plus six fat volumes of his inimitable letters, not to mention a good deal of peripheral memoir material', and goes so far as to claim that 'there could … have been no better grounding in the atmosphere of pre-revolutionary Russia than this great body of Chekhoviana, unparalleled as it was in perceptiveness, vividness, objectivity, and artistic feeling' (Kennan, 1967: 49), that is, no better means of developing what we today would call 'area expertise'.

[4] Kenneth Thompson attributed 'the weakness of many ventures into theory' to 'their essentially ahistorical character', opining that 'the best writings on diplomatic theory have come from observers … who brought to theory a profound grasp of diplomatic practice over the sweep of history' (Thompson, 1967: 158).

I fully expect that this notion in particular will be laughed away as the quaint idiosyncrasy of an otherwise intelligent man. And indeed, it is surpassingly vague; are we merely to imbibe Chekov and let the wisdom course through us? Are IR scholars to produce a proliferation of policy analyses – Kennan's 'X Article' comes to mind – for the delectation of officials? How would the penetrating analyses be distinguished from the mere partisan commentaries? Nevertheless one cannot condemn as absurd, or as merely old-fashioned, these products of the common sense understanding of international politics if spirited debate as to a more *scientific* approach to IR is ruled out. One would have to resign oneself to the fact that conventions or fashions will arbitrate what work is privileged over the rest. I, therefore, do not see how dropping foundational questions frees scholars to do work that is any more solid, or how it would leave a field that had at least maintained a genuine aspiration to science with anything more than its pretensions. For those to whom an IR founded on a merely practical or common sense understanding is unthinkable, the real difficulties will sooner or later have to be faced.

Why then must we leave it at accepting that foundations for scientific knowledge are necessarily without foundation? Perhaps it is inevitable that many scholars of IR will defer to those eminences who practice the 'Philosophy of Science', but is this desirable when the same authorities have left the discipline so uncertain of its status?[5] Descartes, believing that philosophy had after 'many centuries' produced nothing 'which is not in dispute and consequently doubtful and uncertain', (Descartes, 1960: 8) did not respond by ceasing to think but by thinking all the more seriously. And at least one philosopher, arguing against those who held that 'if … there are first principles, they are unknowable, since they do not admit of demonstration, which these thinkers hold to be the sole condition of knowledge' – against these, he suggested that 'not all knowledge is demonstrative', that 'the knowledge of immediate premises is not by demonstration' and yet that 'scientific knowledge is possible' (Aristotle, 1960: 37–39, cf. 255–261).

It will have to be asked whether the assertion that 'foundations are themselves necessarily without foundations… are … constituted by *a priori* knowledge, and therefore … cannot be proven true or false' (2009: 26) – whether this assertion itself is not *a priori* knowledge concerning the

[5] Not the least reason it might be undesirable is that docility and deference to 'Philosophy of Science' has resulted in rampant misunderstanding thereof. See, for example, (Elman and Elman, 2002) for a discussion of the extent to which scholars of IR have misunderstood or misused the thought of Imre Lakatos.

character of foundations, and thus necessarily succumbs to its own conclusion. I do not believe that question can be regarded as answered in such a way as to foreclose forever the possibility of scientific.[6]

In fact what is more difficult to see is how IR scholars could possibly be convinced *not* to raise foundational questions, however great their complacency and however much a post-foundational IR might deaden the philosophic impulse. For won't the difference between the character of what is known to IR and what is known by others eventually be questioned? And if the discipline cannot or will not provide an answer, won't the questioner be dissatisfied? Thereafter, and surely in response to the injustices or problems he finds in the reality of international affairs, won't he seek out some basis for knowledge other than common sense? He need not take it for granted 'that human action has principles of its own which are known independently of theoretical science' (Strauss, 1995b: 205) or that IR 'is not a science, because matters of conduct admit of variation' and 'things whose fundamental principles are variable are not capable of demonstration' (Aristotle, 1934: 337).

Anyone attempting to break free of the fortress of common sense in order to scale the heights of science will have to consider whether that fortress was merely sunk too low in the valley to give a full view of things, or whether it, too, was built on sand. For 'empirical evidence', or the bare fact, is said to be the basis both for the practical understanding as well as the scientific; science is 'a specific modification of … [the] prescientific understanding' (Strauss, 1995a: 305) of those facts. Yet, if it is true that empirical evidence, that is, 'the merely sensibly perceived thing', is 'itself derivative', if 'there are not first sensibly perceived things and thereafter the same things in a state of being valued or in a state of affecting us' (Strauss, 1995a: 305), then it is unclear how either the common sense or scientific understanding of IR can possibly be called knowledge. As one scholar has put it while calling attention to the latter problem in the field of sociology, which however is a problem for all science: if 'to state a fact is by definition to hold a value, [then] claims to knowledge cannot transcend the limits of our own historicity' (Zerilli, 2006: 416).

This difficulty is not disposed of by pointing out that (like the assertion that there is no basis for choosing among philosophical foundations) the claim 'exempts itself from its own verdict about all human thought'

[6] 'For who are we to believe that we have found out the limits of human possibilities?' Strauss asked. 'We may think that the possible alternatives are exhausted by the great thinkers of the past … but we cannot exclude the possibility that other great thinkers might arise in the future – in 2200 in Burma – the possibility of whose thought has in no way been provided for in our schemata' (Strauss, 1995a: 306).

(Strauss, 1965: 25) or that it presumes 'as the absolute insight [that] it must belong to the absolute moment in history' (Strauss, 1971: 3). But to have raised the problem is enough to show that the flight from foundational questions is no escape from the difficulties. The call for 'foundational prudence', far from freeing us to make more fruitful contributions to IR scholarship – to keep muddling through, now without acrimony or discomfort – profoundly alters what such substantive contributions to the understanding of international politics can mean. Scholars of IR who accept this call may feel a temporary sense of relief, but they will soon enough be forced to question whether and how their understanding differs from those who practice what they study from afar; they will be forced to question the ground for that art of divination, those sophisticated methods through which the future is forecast by seers whose wont it is to attach themselves to statesmen. And finding no answer from a discipline rendered mute by its agreement to disagree, they can hardly help arriving at the conclusion that whereas they cannot say why they are scientists, they know they must become philosophers.

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