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Wendt's world

STEVE SMITH[1]

Alexander Wendt's book, *Social Theory of International Politics*[2], is published twenty years after Kenneth Waltz's enormously influential *Theory of International Politics*[3]. The similarity in their titles is no coincidence[4], since Wendt wants to build on the insights of Waltz's realism[5] and construct an idealist and holist account of international politics (not, note, international relations). In my view, Wendt's book is likely to be as influential as Waltz's. It is a superbly written and sophisticated book, one that has clearly been drafted and redrafted so as to refine the argument and anticipate many of the likely objections. I think that although I can anticipate the objections of both his rationalist and his reflectivist critics. I am also aware that he makes life difficult for them by defining his ground very precisely, and by trying to define the terms of any debate in which he might be engaged. Criticism of the book is not an easy task. The book is likely to become the standard account for those working within the social constructivist literature of International Politics. It is a book that has been eagerly awaited, and it will not disappoint those who have been waiting for Wendt to publish his definitive statement on constructivism.

Wendt's aim is nothing less than developing a middle way between rationalist and reflectivist theories of international relations. In his first two pages he outlines his position: he wants to defend a 'moderate', 'thin' constructivism both against those more mainstream scholars who reject all notions of social construction as 'postmodernism', and against those 'more radical' constructivists who will think that his approach does not go far enough. Wendt's position is one of 'structural idealism', 'a philosophically principled middle way' between these extremes. Against rationalist accounts of international relations, Wendt wants to argue for both an idealist and a holist account; against more radical constructivists he wants to argue for a science of international relations. Wendt therefore sides with positivists in

[1] I would like to thank the following for their comments on the first draft of this article. I am indebted to them for their comments, and know that none will agree with what I have written: The editors of the journal, particularly Tim Dunne, with whom I have discussed Wendt's work at length over the years, Jenny Edkins, Steve Hobden, Nick Wheeler, Maja Zehfuss, and especially Colin Wight, who has been a particularly ferocious critic of my arguments in this article.

[2] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[3] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading MA: Addison Wesley, 1979).

[4] Wendt's account is a theory of international politics, not relations and this indicates his very precise focus.

[5] Note that in this article I will be dealing with two very different notions of realism, the International Relations version, which I will denote by the word 'realism', and the philosophical position of realism, which I will denote by the words 'scientific realism'.

terms of epistemology, but with post-positivists in terms of ontology.[6] Scientific realism is the 'condition of possibility' for this position.

My task in this brief contribution to the Forum is to examine just what kind of social ontology of international relations this results in. My claims will be that his social theory of international relations suffers from fundamental limitations; that Wendt does not succeed in constructing his philosophically principled middle way; and that his account cannot adequately theorize subjectivity and agency. Let me be clear at the outset, however, that Wendt has responses to my claims, and thus my concern is more to explore and debate his position rather than pretend that I have some knock-down criticisms that will come as news to him.[7]

Below I will argue that there are three main problems with Wendt's social theory of international relations, and I will spend most time on these in the space available. I then want to make three briefer points. But I want to start by noting that the first three, and most fundamental of these problems, derive from his stated (if slightly misleadingly stated) desire to mix positivistic epistemology with post-positivist ontology.[8] In essence, Wendt wants to develop an idealist/holist social scientific theory of international politics—that is to say a theory that stresses the ideational over the material, and holism over individualism. He characterizes his position as occupying the top right quadrant of his matrix (where the horizontal axis is divided, from left to right, into materialism and idealism, and the vertical axis is divided, from bottom to top, into individualism and holism).[9] Let me point out two rather counter-intuitive aspects of this location in the top right, or north-east, quadrant: first, his social science is going to be based on what is commonly termed the Understanding side of the line, not the Explanation side: this is counter-intuitive because it is rare to find an 'Understanding' theorist who sees any form of social 'science' as appropriate for the analysis of the social world. Second, in the same quadrant he notes that there are also feminist IR, postmodern IR, and English School approaches; this is counter-intuitive because none of these approaches adopts social science. Overall, my central problem with Wendt's social theory is that it is above all an attempt to develop a *scientific* account of the social world, whereas I do not believe that such an approach is appropriate. I think that such an approach fundamentally misconceives the nature of the social world, and limits the range of possibilities for a social theory of international relations based on it. I will return to this claim in my conclusion, and will now turn to my reservations about Wendt's social theory.

[6] 'Epistemologically I have sided with positivists . . . on ontology—which is to my mind the more important issue—I will side in subsequent chapters with post-positivists'. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 90.

[7] I must also declare an interest in this book: I am the editor of the series in which it is published; I was one of the two readers for the publisher of the penultimate draft of the manuscript; and I have had a series of exchanges in print and in correspondence with Wendt over the last decade. I hope this article will serve as the next phase of this intellectual engagement.

[8] In fact, Wendt is not trying to do something quite as extreme as this: he is using scientific realism to develop a non-positivistic social science of international relations.

[9] See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 29 and 32.

Wendt's scientific realism: the ideational / material problematic

As Wendt makes clear throughout the book, his approach is firmly embedded in a form of scientific realism. Wendt is 'a strong believer in science . . . I am a "positivist"'.[10] The 'positivist' label is not really accurate, since Wendt's position is one of scientific realism, which he defines by the following three principles: '(1) the world is independent of the mind and language of individual observers; (2) mature scientific theories typically refer to this world; (3) even when it is not directly observable'.[11] Wendt notes the two standard objections to this view: first 'whether scientific theories refer to, and thus provide knowledge about, reality "out there" . . . [second] . . . even if science can know nature, it cannot know *society*'.[12] The first of these comes in two forms, with empiricists arguing that scientists cannot *know* about unobservables, and postmodernists arguing that we cannot even know if observables exist. The second criticism is based on the argument that since scientific realism assumes that reality is independent of humans (subject and object being distinct), then there is a real problem for scientific realism to analyse the social world when it consists in the main of ideas. Wendt spends a lot of time answering these two sets of objections, and his case is very tightly argued. But I am not happy with the answers he gives.

Basically I think that Wendt cannot overcome the problems he so skilfully outlines. Ultimately I think that social phenomena are indeed intersubjective and therefore cannot stand in relation to human subjects *as objects*; without this relationship scientific realism cannot operate. The fact that many realist natural scientists think that scientific realism cannot apply to the social world because of this problem indicates that Wendt has a difficult task on his hands. I will deal with a very specific epistemological outgrowth of this dispute below when I look at Wendt's view of the relationship between causal and constitutive effects. But for now the main point is that Wendt's position depends upon him showing that scientific realism can operate in the social as well as the natural worlds, and that, contrary to the position that Martin Hollis and I have argued, Explanation rather than Understanding is the appropriate way of analysing the social world. In short, Wendt accepts naturalism.

Now, some scientific realists have argued exactly this position, but Wendt does not follow their reasoning in an important way. The nub of the issue is the relationship between the material and the ideational worlds. Contrary to the argument of one of the leading proponents of scientific realism and naturalism, Roy Bhaskar,[13] Wendt adopts a rather imprecise notion of the relationship between the two, and this, I think, leads to significant problems. Let me illustrate this by asking how Wendt sees the relationship between the material and the ideational: the central problem is that 'social kinds' and 'natural kinds' are different in that 'realism about natural science is based on a materialist ontology, whereas the nature of social kinds seems to imply an idealist or nominalist one'.[14] Wendt's way of resolving this problem is to claim that 'To varying degrees, social kinds are materially grounded, self-organizing

[10] Ibid., p. 39.
[11] Ibid., p. 51.
[12] Ibid., pp. 48–9.
[13] See especially Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1979).
[14] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 68.

phenomena with intrinsic powers and dispositions that exist independent of the minds and/or discourse of those who would know them'.[15] Yet, later in the book, Wendt argues that the 'social constructivist approach inquires into the extent to which ideas *constitute* these ostensibly 'material' causes in the first place . . . what makes a theory materialist is that it accounts for the effects of power, interests, or institutions by reference to 'brute' material forces—things which exist and have certain causal powers independent of ideas.'[16] Again: 'The central thesis is that the meaning of power and the content of interests are largely a function of ideas.'[17] This is not quite 'ideas all the way down' since he believes that material forces have some effects on power and interest; he argues for the existence of a 'rump materialism' which has '*some* intrinsic causal powers'.[18]

The problem is that Wendt seems to alter his view of the relationship between the material and the ideational. Sometimes the former has 'some intrinsic causal powers', at other times the ideational constitutes the material. Thus he wants to 'defend a "rump" materialism which opposes the more radical constructivist view that brute material forces have no independent effects on international politics.'[19] This rump materialism sees material factors having three types of 'independent' effects: the distribution of capabilities, the technical composition of material capabilities, and geography and natural resources. For Wendt, 'at some level material forces are constituted independently of society, and affect society in a *causal* way. Material forces are not constituted solely by social meanings'.[20] Yet in other places, Wendt argues the opposite: 'the effects of anarchy and material structure depend on what states *want*';[21] 'it is only because of their interaction with ideas that material forces have the effects they do';[22] 'Ultimately it is our ambitions, fears, and hopes—the things we want material forces *for*—that drive social evolution, not the material forces as such'.[23] His most expansive claims are: 'The issue of "how" ideas matter is not limited to their causal effects. They also matter insofar as they constitute the "material base" in the first place';[24] and 'This is not to say that we should never treat cultural contexts as given, within which materialist explanations may be compelling, but in doing so we should recognize that the latter acquire their causal power only in virtue of the contexts of meaning which make them what they are'.[25]

I think that these quotes reveal a confusing and ambiguous picture of the relationship between the material and the ideational, sometimes the material is an independent causal variable, at other times it is a dependent variable whose power depends on the ideational, at still other times it is an intervening variable. Whatever the precise relationship he intends, he consistently seems to me to violate the central premise of naturalism, which is that there is a unity about the material and the ideational. Wendt, following Bhaskar, sees three differences between natural kinds

[15] Ibid., p. 77.
[16] Ibid., p. 94.
[17] Ibid., p. 96.
[18] Ibid., p. 98.
[19] Ibid., p. 110.
[20] Ibid., p. 111.
[21] Ibid., p. 96.
[22] Ibid., p. 112.
[23] Ibid., p. 113.
[24] Ibid., p. 135.
[25] Ibid., p. 136.

and social kinds: social kinds are more space-time specific; social kinds depend more on the beliefs of actors; and social kinds depend more on human practices.[26] For naturalists, these differences do not preclude scientific realism as a way of studying both the natural and the social worlds. This is because, as Wendt notes, 'human beings are *natural* kinds . . . In the last analysis a theory of social kinds must refer to natural kinds . . . which are amenable to a causal theory of reference. Constructivism without nature goes too far'.[27]

Yet later on in the book Wendt writes: 'we can only properly theorize this relationship [between material forces and ideas] if we recognize that at some level they are constituted as different kinds of independently existing "stuff". This formulation of the materialism-idealism problem is ultimately Cartesian, insofar as it separates the world into two kinds of stuff—in effect mind and body'.[28] When Wendt lays out the content of his rump materialism, things get more confused. Take the following three consecutive sentences: 'I argue that only a small part of what constitutes interests is actually material. The material force constituting interests is human nature. The rest is ideational: schemas and deliberations that are in turn constituted by shared ideas or culture'.[29] The core of his rump materialism is human nature which he says has five material needs: physical security, ontological security, sociation, self-esteem, and transcendence.[30] Wendt's rump materialism 'is an ontological argument that we need some such theory to explain human behaviour . . . like power, interests are not ideas *all* the way down. This is a significant idealist concession to materialism'.[31]

All of this leaves considerable doubt as to the status of Wendt's rump materialism. Is it really 'ideas all the way down', or even 'ideas almost all the way down'? In some places, the most plausible reading is that the material, via his conception of human nature and his definition of the causal nature of material forces, does indeed do most of the work ('constructivism without nature goes too far'). Another is that it indeed is 'ideas all the way down' (material forces 'acquire their causal power only in virtue of the contexts of meaning which make them what they are'). In other words in some places the material is independent of the ideational, in others it is dependent; but in both cases the ideational and the material are very different kinds of stuff, and this seems to make naturalism impossible.

In his conclusion, Wendt returns to this issue, and again argues that he is not claiming that it is 'ideas all the way down'; 'culture supervenes on nature'.[32] Yet he then goes on to repeat his claim that the social and the natural worlds comprise very different objects, requiring different methods, but not a different epistemology. His claim is a very bold one: 'There is nothing in the intellectual activity required to explain (sic) processes of social construction that is epistemologically different than the intellectual activity engaged in by natural scientists. Scientists in both domains are concerned with explaining why one thing leads to another, and with understanding how things are put together to have the causal powers that they do. The

[26] Ibid., pp. 69–71.
[27] Ibid., p. 72.
[28] Ibid., p. 112.
[29] Ibid., p. 115.
[30] Ibid., pp. 131–2.
[31] Ibid., p. 132.
[32] Ibid., p. 371.

fact that the objects of these activities are material in one case (natural kinds) and ideational in the other (social kinds) may call for different methods of enquiry . . . but methods are not epistemologies'.[33]

My main worry, then, is that Wendt is ambiguous as to the relationship between the material and the ideational worlds, and his notion of rump materialism is variously described as a causal, as an intervening and as a dependent variable. In addition, by defining the social and the natural as comprised of different 'stuff', he opens the door to the criticism that naturalism cannot hold, and that instead very different kinds of theory are required to deal with each. For the more radical constructivist, Wendt seems to give final say to the material; yet, for the naturalist, his approach seems to resemble philosophical idealism. It all depends on your selection from the quotations cited previously. In this sense, Wendt, by wanting it both ways at various points of his argument, opens himself up to criticism from all sides. Ultimately, I think this problem arises because Wendt is unclear about the nature of intersubjective understandings. I do not think that intersubjective understandings can fulfil the three criteria for realism noted above. They cannot be independent of discourse; they *are* discourse, and if people stop behaving according to them then they no longer exist.

Constitutive and causal theories

The question of the status of intersubjective meanings leads us to what is for me, along with my next, related, point, probably the deepest problem in the book, although I concede at the outset that Wendt has thought long and hard about this topic and will clearly have a ready reply to what follows. But, to keep my side of the argument going, I am troubled by his notion of causal and constitutive theories. This is central to his arguments for the utility of scientific realism, and it is a position that he has developed at length in the book and in a recent article in this Journal.[34]

Wendt's argument is that there are two kinds of explanation, causal and constitutive. Wendt argues that, contrary to both positivists and post-positivists, scientists in both the natural and the social sciences do both kinds of theorizing. For Wendt, the distinction is that causal theory asks 'why?', and to an extent 'how?', and constitutive theory asks 'how-possible?' and 'what?'. This move is central to Wendt's analysis since he is only too aware that there is a long-standing problem in the social sciences in treating reasons as causes. Therefore, for Wendt to maintain naturalism, he has to be able to find a way of bringing in science without relying solely on standard causal analysis. As he notes, causal analysis has particular problems when applied to the social world, because it is difficult to conceive of human action in the standard Humean model of causal logic. It is for this reason that Wendt wants to augment causal analysis with constitutive analysis. Note that for Wendt 'there are many ways in which society *is* caused in a mechanistic manner'.[35] But he also wants

[33] Ibid., p. 372.
[34] See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 77–89; Alexander Wendt, 'On Constitution and Causation in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 24 (1998), pp. 101–117.
[35] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 82.

to use constitutive analysis, which he claims overcomes the absence of the antecedent relationship between cause and effect that applies in causal analysis. Constitutive theorizing involves asking how features of the social world are constituted, that is to say how, for example, ideas constitute the meaning of material forces, and social structures constitute actors with identities and interests. One can readily see how important this form of theorizing is for Wendt's holist/ideational social theory.

The problem, again as he explicitly discusses, is that this distinction between causal and constitutive theory involves treating constitutive theory in a social scientific way, rather than seeing it as something that requires a different form of social theory, such as those forms commonly found under the label of Understanding (or Verstehen). Wendt therefore concludes that 'there is no fundamental epistemological difference between Explanation and Understanding'.[36] This is a very bold claim, and it is of interest that he notes that on this point he is in agreement with King, Keohane and Verba in their major text on rationalist research methods and design.[37] I think that the fact that he is in agreement with these writers should give pause for thought about how different is his model of the social world to theirs.

In my view, Wendt's view of constitutive theorizing is very different to the dominant use of the term 'constitutive' in the social sciences, where it tends to be contrasted to explanatory theory. Indeed, I read Wendt as seeing constitutive theory as a form of causal theory, or at least as a form of theorizing that leads to, or is prior to, causal explanation. In this light my worry is that Wendt seems to be avoiding the issue of how relevant is causal analysis to the social world by proposing an additional form of theory that turns out to be more an adjunct than an alternative to causal theorizing. Illustrative of this are the examples he gives of the constitution of social kinds: in each case the constitutive works so as to give the object the causal properties it has. As he writes: 'In addition to providing a basis for causal explanations . . . constitutive theories imply hypotheses about the world that can and should be tested'.[38]

Wendt's position is most clearly expressed in the following quote: 'social life is continuous with nature, and as such social science must be anchored to the world via the mechanisms described by the causal theory'.[39] In short, Wendt sees constitutive theorizing as explaining the social world only when linked up to causal theory, and as such he readily talks of norms, socialization, social interaction, and reasons as causal.[40] The problem with this is that his position in the top right (or north-east) quadrant looks suddenly vulnerable to being explicable by top left (or north-west) types of social theory, and of course this is exactly the claim that is made about the underlying assumptions of scientific realism. But whilst Bhaskar and others can defend their position by rejecting the assumptions of a materialist-idealist split

[36] Ibid., p. 85.
[37] Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). Note also the similarities between Wendt's views on the causal role of ideas and the comments of the main neoliberal treatment of the issue. See Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane, 'Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework', in Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane (eds.), *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 3–30.
[38] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 87.
[39] Ibid., p. 58.
[40] Ibid., p. 82.

between natural and social kinds, this option is not open to Wendt precisely because of the way in which he has already separated the ideational from the material.[41]

Can reasons be causes?

The philosophical problem underlying my concern over the difference between constitutive and causal theory as defined by Wendt is whether reasons can be causes. Wendt needs to answer in the affirmative if he is to be able to adopt a naturalistic epistemology, and therefore he has to introduce constitutive theory as a way of overcoming the obvious problem that reasons cannot be causal in the standard Humean way, where a causal relationship is one between separate objects, and one where cause is prior to effect. This issue has been a major debating point in contemporary philosophy, and the mainstream consensus is that reasons can be causes. There are many objections to this mainstream position, mainly based on whether the reasons we give for our actions are indeed the 'real' reasons, a problem particularly deep given the insights of psychoanalysis. A second problem is over whether it is our reasons as distinct to our reasoning intentional state that is the cause of our actions. But nonetheless the view that reasons can be causes is indeed the dominant position in the philosophy of mind. The seminal paper on this is by Davidson,[42] and Wendt quotes this in both his book and in his recent article on causation.[43]

Now, Davidson's position is itself hotly contested in philosophy, mainly by followers of Wittgenstein. In the social sciences, the standard interpretation of this is Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy.*[44] Although he has modified his view about the nature of causation, Winch's position in both the first and second editions of the book is that the notion of cause is very different in the natural and social worlds. The key concept for Wittgenstein and Winch is that of following a rule, which is logically related to the possibility of making a mistake. 'Knowing how to go on', as Wittgenstein puts it,[45] involves interpreting a rule, and this cannot be a causal process: 'Try not to think of understanding as a "mental process" at all. For *that* is the expression which confuses you. But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, "now I know how to go on"?'[46] As Winch puts it: 'The phrase "causal explanation" . . . indicates *what* is being explained—roughly the source or origin of something—and so far says little or nothing about *how* it is being explained, or what the explanation looks like'.[47] For

[41] Ibid., p. 372.
[42] Donald Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', *Journal of Philosophy*, 60, pp. 685–700.
[43] Wendt, 'On Constitution and Causation in International Relations', p. 107; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 116. For two excellent discussions of the nature of ideas and causation in international relations, see Albert Yee, 'The causal effects of ideas on politics', *International Organization*, 50, pp. 69–108, and Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes, 'Beyond belief: ideas and symbolic technologies in the study of international relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3, pp. 193–237.
[44] Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).
[45] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), paragraphs 151 and 179 at pp. 59–60 and 72–3.
[46] Ibid., paragraph 154 at p. 61.
[47] Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, revised edn (London: Routledge, 1992), p. xiii.

Winch, although causal analysis is appropriate to both the social and the natural worlds, they are very different epistemologically: one is Understanding, the other Explanation. Hence to be able to understand what someone is doing means that we can see the rule being followed. This is a very different notion of the social world to that of Explanation.

Wittgenstein's later work, especially *The Blue Book*,[48] deals with the distinction between reasons and causes. The main difference is that, for Wittgenstein, to ask for a reason for action is to try and find the rule that led to the action, whereas to ask for a cause is to trace the mechanism, or find a statistical regularity, or a historical origin. Crucially, finding a cause would say nothing about the reason. Note also that the search for a cause, and treating reasons as causes, implies that human action is consciously caused, that the reasons actors give for their behaviour is indeed the cause of that behaviour. This distinction has been developed in philosophy by writers such as Richard Peters and A.I. Melden. For Peters, meaningful human action, as opposed to bodily action, cannot be understood in terms of causes, only in terms of rule-following.[49] For Melden, causal analysis is inappropriate to the social world because our motives for action, by referring to the action to which the motive applies, thereby cannot be a causal relationship between separate phenomena.[50]

For Wendt, however, reasons can be causes, and indeed this is essential to him if he is to uphold naturalism; but note that, as quoted above, 'social science must be anchored to the world via the mechanisms described by the causal theory'.[51] My claim is that it is very difficult to reconcile that claim with Wendt's claim that his is an idealist (rather than a materialist) account of the social world. It is especially problematic when one recollects that Wittgenstein also fits in Wendt's top right (or north-east) quadrant, and yet Wittgenstein is not discussed extensively in the book. In his article on causal and constitutive theory Wendt notes in a footnote that 'In saying that reasons can be causes I am taking one side in a debate about what remains a controversial issue; for an opposing Wittgensteinian view. . . .'[52] My concern is that an idealist account seems best suited to exactly this alternative Wittgensteinian account, rather than one that stresses the ultimately causal nature of the social world.

This is certainly a point of difference between Wendt and other leading constructivists such as Kratochwil and Onuf, both of whom differ from Wendt when it comes to the nature of rule-governed behaviour in the social world. Kratochwil notes that 'there is a crucial difference between causal explanations in the world of observational facts and that of intentions'.[53] Onuf's version of constructivism, like Kratochwil's, stresses the rule-based nature of social life, and paints a far more

[48] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975). For the discussion on reasons and causes see pp. 14–15.
[49] Richard Peters, *The Concept of Motivation* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).
[50] A. I. Melden, *Free Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).
[51] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 58.
[52] Wendt, 'On Constitution and Causation in International Relations', p. 107, fn. 18.
[53] Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 25.

nuanced conception of the nature of regulative and constitutive rules than does Wendt.[54]

Having outlined what I think are the most fundamental problems in Wendt's social theory of international politics, I want now to make three much briefer points, all of which flow from the above discussion, and each of which can be relatively straightforwardly expressed. Space precludes my dealing with any of the following in more than outline detail.

Agency, language, identity and subjectivity

From the above, it will not be difficult to deduce that I think that Wendt has a particularly narrow view of human subjectivity and a very limited notion of agency. Given Wendt's view of language, it follows that his agents are not constituted by language, rather it is a tool that they use. Wendt has no discussion of how actors are constituted into self and other in the first place. Thus Wendt's world is one in which certain social features are indeed given, and in which identities are stable. There is no discussion of how subjectivities and identities are formed, there is no discussion of the 'identity of identity'. I realise that Wendt can point to his use of symbolic interactionism and structuration theory, especially in chapter four of the book (though, it is hard to see quite how his use of symbolic interactionism and structuration theory can be licensed by his earlier reliance on scientific realism); but I still read him as essentially unconcerned with the construction of agents, subjectivity and identity. Thus, as David Campbell has noted, Wendt argues 'that the [human] body is "the material substrate of agency" that remains for the individual once the constitutive properties of the self are stripped away'.[55] The effect of this is that Wendt is unable to question 'the assumption of pregiven, material bodies as the unproblematic ground for identity and politics . . . [this] forecloses the potential of Wendt's argument to come to terms with the complexities and contingencies of politics'.[56] For Campbell, Wendt does not take the constitution and nature of agency seriously; he cites Judith Butler who argues that 'Agency belongs to a way of thinking about persons as instrumental actors who confront an external political field. But if we agree that politics and power exist already at the level at which the subject and its agency are articulated and made possible, then agency can be *presumed* only at the cost of refusing to inquire into its construction'.[57] In her most recent work, Butler elaborates on Foucault's notion of how power forms the subject, and thus how it links the social to the psychological. This it seems to me raises far deeper questions about language, subjectivity, agency and identity than does Wendt. I will limit myself to one illustrative quote from Butler: 'power works not merely to dominate or oppress existing subjects, but also to form subjects . . . the formative dimension of

[54] Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), and Nicholas Onuf, 'Constructivism: A User's Manual', in Vendulka Kubalkova, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert (eds.), *International Relations in a Constructed World* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998.

[55] David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, revised edn. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 220.

[56] Ibid., pp. 220–21.

[57] Ibid., p. 220.

power is to be understood in a nonmechanistic and nonbehavioristic fashion'.[58] This is a view of subjectivity that starts asking questions exactly where Wendt stops.

States are people too

My concern here is not so much the obvious one that Wendt treats states as the dominant actors in international politics (although it must be pointed out that, following my comments on agency and identity above, Wendt does indeed assume that these are the pre-given actors for international politics). Rather I have three main worries about his treatment, in chapter five, of the nature of the state as corporate agent. The first problem is that he indeed does treat states as people: 'The issue of how states get constituted as the "people" of international society has been neglected'.[59] Wendt argues 'that states are real actors to which we can legitimately attribute anthropomorphic qualities like desires, beliefs, and intentionality'.[60] The following quote is particularly interesting, since I think it shows a massive gap between his theoretical position outlined in the first part of the book and his operationalization of it. These 'real actors' are 'ontologically prior to the states-system. The state is pre-social relative to other states in the same way that the human body is pre-social . . . we can theorize about processes of social construction *at the level of the states system* only if such processes have exogenously given, relatively stable platforms'.[61] Note how states are now 'exogenously given', 'relatively stable' and 'pre-social', like Wendt's individuals! As he sums it up in a subheading, 'States are people too'.[62] Or to note four phrases on one page: 'the ideas held by individual states . . . state cognition . . . states think . . . states have internalized . . .'.[63] The central problem with this is that, as Colin Wight has pointed out, it requires a rejection of one of the main tenets of scientific realist accounts of the social world, namely 'Bhaskar's claim that 'nothing happens in society save in virtue of something human beings do or have done' . . . Where in Wendt's theory are the only moving forces in the social world; human beings?'.[64] The state becomes reified in Wendt, and thus, again to quote Wight, 'Wendt's location of agency in the state is inconsistent with his approach to the agent-structure problem. Wendt advocates a structurationist solution…at the level of the state and the state system, and a structuralist solution at the level of the individual and state. Wendt's theory of the state rests on the classic error of methodological structuralism—the attribution of agential powers and attributes of human agents to a collective social form'.[65]

The second problem follows from this and is that despite the discussion of corporate agency, when it comes to the analysis of international politics, this drops out altogether. Wendt's definition of the state as actor in international relations

[58] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 18.
[59] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 195.
[60] Ibid., p. 197.
[61] Ibid., p. 198.
[62] Ibid., p. 215.
[63] Ibid., p. 372.
[64] Colin Wight, 'They shoot dead horses don't they? Locating agency in the agent-structure problematique', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5, p. 127.
[65] Wight, 'They shoot dead horses don't they?', p. 128.

leaves little room for domestic debate over the nature of state identity. There is no role for domestic politics in constructing the 'pre-social', 'exogenously given', platform of the state. State identities are literally outside his analysis, and the domestic setting is ignored. This seems a very restricted social theory, one in which the 'relatively stable' state identity is placed outside politics, and outside analysis.

Finally, note that Wendt has a progressivist notion of international politics, and yet it seems difficult for his theory to account for change. As to the former, he argues that 'the history of international politics will be unidirectional: if there are any structural changes, they will be historically progressive'.[66] As to the latter, and paradoxically given his commitment to explaining how social actors construct their worlds, I am simply not sure that he can account for change in international politics given the power of the holism that he advances. In short, how do his social constructions get constructed given that his world is composed of pre-social actors with stable identities?

Conclusion: the importance of epistemology

In conclusion I want to make one final point: *contra* Wendt I think that epistemology matters. I accept that a complete preoccupation with it can prevent detailed empirical analysis, and that the discipline can get too caught up with the perennial and fundamental questions of philosophy. But that does not mean that we can ignore epistemology, nor can we effectively side-step the issues by claiming that one can get too bogged down in arcane and ultimately pointless debates. I think that both ontology and epistemology matter to any social theory. Wendt's world is one that is based on the view that scientific realism can provide the *via media*. It is for this reason that he argues that the fact that the social and natural worlds are composed of different types of stuff (ideas and material) does not necessitate a different epistemology. The problem is that he does not always follow the logic of that epistemology, for example by anthropomorphizing states, and by treating the material and the ideational in inconsistent ways. Ultimately he has to maintain that reasons are causes if his naturalism is to hold, and this seems to me to be a very limited notion of the role of ideas in the social world.

So, what kinds of things exist in Wendt's world? Wendt starts his book by stressing that he is concerned with ontology, rather than epistemology. In conclusion, let me comment on what his world looks like. First, it is a world very similar to the world of rationalist scholars. They will find much to admire about the book, and much with which they agree. I think that many constructivists, such as Kratochwil and Onuf, will be less satisfied, arguing that ideas constitute much more than Wendt allows. Second, Wendt's world is one where 'exogenously given', 'pre-social' agents act on the basis of their rump material constitution (human nature for individuals, and a set of five material givens for state actors). The overlap with rationalist scholars over the role of ideas is considerable. Third, Wendt's world is a world composed of two different sorts of stuff, the ideational and the material, with a complex and at times contradictory relationship between the two, a position that

[66] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 312.

violates one of the central tenets of scientific realism. Finally, and despite what he claims, his epistemology of scientific realism, so expertly outlined in the first part of the book, seems largely to drop out in the second half of the book when he analyses international politics, where symbolic interactionism underlies the argument. I wonder if this results from Wendt's concern to ground his enterprise as a social science so as to avoid criticisms from the rationalists who see only a testable, causally-based social science as scholarly appropriate and legitimate. Therefore, if we focus on Wendt's concern with ontology, my view is that Wendt's social world is social in only a very limited sense. If we return to questions of epistemology my view is that Wendt's world is one where his epistemological position does not in fact license his analysis of international politics. Wendt's world is therefore a familiar place, and it is for exactly that reason that his book will come to define the limits of dealing with the ideational in the mainstream of International Relations for the next decade.