

Toward an A Priori Theory of International Relations

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past seventy years or so, the discipline of international relations has been marked by numerous and fundamental epistemological and methodological debates. The first of these numerous debates arose in response to the publication of Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* in 1948, which pitted "idealists" like E.H. Carr against "realists" like Morgenthau.¹ In the years following the publication of *Politics Among Nations*, debates like this one were to multiply dramatically in response to the emergence of numerous new methodological and epistemological "schools." Interestingly, however, none of the new schools of international relations ever sought to contest the epistemological and methodological pronouncement which serves to introduce Morgenthau's *magnum opus*:

"This book purports to present a theory of international politics. The test by which such a theory must be judged is not *a priori* and abstract but *empirical and pragmatic*. The theory, in other words, must be judged not by some preconceived abstract principle or concept unrelated to reality, but by its purpose: to bring order and meaning to a mass of phenomena which without it would remain disconnected and unintelligible. *It must meet a dual test, an empirical and a logical one: Do the facts as they actually are lend themselves to the interpretation the theory has put upon them, and do the conclusions at which the theory arrives follow with logical necessity from its premises? In short, is the theory consistent with the facts within itself?*"²

In this passage, Morgenthau not only dismisses the possibility of constructing an *a priori* theory of international relations, he even dismisses the possibility of *judging* theories of international relations by *a priori* standards. Instead, Morgenthau claims that theories of international relations must meet the same criteria we use to judge all empirical theories:

¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1948). On Morgenthau's role in sparking this first debate, see John A. Vasquez, *Classics of Ir* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1986), pp. 2-3.

² Morgenthau, *op. cit.* p. 3.

empirical verifiability or falsifiability and internal logical consistency. In the fifty seven years since Morgenthau made this epistemological claim, no objections have ever been made to the basic epistemological assumption that international relations can never be an *a priori* discipline.³

The fact that no objections have been made to the assumption that international relations can never be an *a priori* discipline is profoundly intriguing for two reasons. First, international relations has been plagued with numerous and severe methodological disputes throughout the entirety of its existence as a distinct discipline.⁴ This fact alone would have led one to think that at some point during the last fifty seven methodologically and epistemologically turbulent years someone might have given apriorism a sympathetic look. The second and much more profound reason for surprise is that all claims that international relations must be an *a posteriori* discipline are themselves *a priori* claims. This point will have to be elaborated much more extensively below, but for now it is enough to observe that Morgenthau's empiricist epistemological pronouncement above, (and, in fact, *all* such pronouncements categorically denying the possibility of an *a priori* science of international relations), is not known to be true *a posteriori*; rather, it purports to be true *universally* and *a priori*. One would have expected that someone in the last fifty seven years would have observed that since these epistemological claims are purportedly known to be true *a priori*, other *a priori* truths about international relations might be discovered as well.

In this paper, I take up the long-overdue task of constructing the foundation for an *a priori* theory of international relations. For, contra Morgenthau and the legions of empiricists

³ This is not to say that there have been no criticisms of the empiricist epistemology over the past half century in international relations. On the contrary, there have been numerous. As will be seen below, however, these criticisms never amounted to a challenge to the basic assumption that international relation must be an *a posteriori* discipline.

⁴ A succinct summary of the many methodological debates that have plagued the discipline over the last six decades is provided by Kjell Goldmann, "International Relations: An Overview," in *A New Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Robert E. Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (New York: Oxford, 1998). pp. 402-403.

who have followed him, it would not only be *possible* to construct an *a priori* theory of international relations, the foundation for such a theory *already exists*. The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part I describe the *a posteriori* epistemology underlying all modern theories of international relations. Special attention will be paid to the seemingly aprioristic nature of rational choice theory. In the second part I argue that *aposteriorism* is unsuitable as an epistemology for the study of human action in general, and international relations in particular. In the final section I explain how an aprioristic theory of international relations can be constructed on the praxeological foundation of the Austrian School of economics.

II. THE A POSTERIORI EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF ALL MODERN THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

International relations scholars are apt to see their discipline as fundamentally divided over epistemological and methodological issues as a result of the recurring methodological and epistemological debates that have plagued the discipline over the past five decades.⁵ It is possible, however, to identify an epistemological characteristic uniting all of the various schools since Morgenthau's day. This is precisely their universal and absolute commitment to the idea nothing can be known about the realm of international relations *until* one examines the empirical "evidence." There have been, to be sure, serious disagreements about what constitutes relevant "evidence" over the past five decades.⁶ But beneath the surface of these superficial debates about what constitutes evidence lies a universal commitment by *all* international relations scholars that one must look at the empirical "evidence" *before* any conclusions can be reached about international phenomena.

⁵ Ibid. *loc. cit.*

⁶ For example, the empirical evidence considered relevant by a positivist international relations scholar differs radically from the empirical evidence considered relevant by an hermeneutical international relations scholar.

In other words, all theorists of international relations from Morgenthau's day to the present have been universally and unswerving committed to what I will call "epistemological aposteriorism." As the label indicates, the defining feature of "epistemological aposteriorism" is the belief that knowledge about the social and natural world can only be gained *a posteriori*.⁷ The remainder of this section will be devoted to identifying the universal commitment to epistemological *aposteriorism* in some of the major methodological schools in international relations.

The commitment to epistemological aposteriorism is most obvious in the schools which adopted major portions of the positivist epistemological and methodological programme. This is true for the straightforward reason that the defining feature of positivism (in both its nineteenth century and modern forms) is its commitment to the idea that only empirically verifiable statements have any meaning at all.⁸ Since only potentially empirically verifiable statements have any meaning, according to the positivist, *all* knowledge about the natural and social worlds is thus related in an essential way to experience. Positivism thus represents the most pure form of epistemological aposteriorism, because *all* of our knowledge is held by the positivist to be ultimately and necessarily imputable to experience.⁹ Some recent defenders of the positivist

⁷ Thus, "epistemological aposteriorism" refers to a more general category than "empiricism." Empiricism is a form of epistemological aposteriorism, but there are many other manifestations as well, such as historicism, hermeneutics, cognitivism, post-modernism, *et cetera*.

⁸ For a description of nineteenth century positivism, see, F. A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1979). Part II., For descriptions of modern positivism, see, Brand Blanshard, "The Rise of Positivism," in *Reason and Analysis* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1964)., Paul Diesing, *How Does Social Science Work? Reflections on Practice, Pitt Series in Policy and Institutional Studies*. (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991). Ch. 1.

⁹ In this connection, compare Comte's positivist pronouncement: "All competent thinkers agree with Bacon that there can be no real knowledge *except that which rests upon observed facts.*" Auguste Comte, *Introduction to Positive Philosophy* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970). P. 4. Emphasis added., with Organski's shockingly similar pronouncement: "[A] scientific study must be concerned with empirical facts, i.e., *it must be testable by evidence that is available to the senses.*" A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958)., p.5. Emphasis added.

version of epistemological aposteriorism in international relations are Michael Nicholson and Thomas Biersteker.¹⁰

Since the 1960's, however, dogmatic verificationist positivism has become far less popular in international relations, and social science generally, largely as a result of the work of Karl Popper and his devotees.¹¹ As a result of this partial decline of positivism, many international relations scholars have adopted a form of empiricism that is far less ambitious than positivism. The scientific enterprise for these post-positivist empiricists looks something like this:

- “1) State the theory being tested.
- 2) Infer hypotheses from it.
- 3) Subject the hypotheses to experimental or observational tests.
- 4) In taking steps 2 and 3, use the definitions of terms found in the theory being tested.
- 5) Eliminate or control perturbing variables not included in the theory under test.
- 6) Devise a number of distinct and demanding tests.
- 7) If a test is not passed, ask whether the theory flunks completely, needs repair or restatement, or requires a narrowing of the scope of its explanatory claims.”¹²

For my purposes in this paper, it is enough to recognize that advocates of this form of empiricism are every bit as committed to epistemological aposteriorism as the positivists. Whether they are testing their hypotheses with qualitative case studies or large-n quantitative studies, these empiricists assume (at least with respect to the phenomena under study) that the arbitrating factor in their research is the *a posteriori* evidence. This form of empiricism under-girds the vast

¹⁰ See, Michael Nicholson, *Causes and Consequences in International Relations: A Conceptual Study* (New York: Cassell Academic, 1996), and Thomas J. Biersteker, "Critical Reflections on Post-Positivism in International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1989).

¹¹ A relatively good compendium of articles and book sections that were important in the partial decline of positivism is provided in Harold Morick, ed., *Challenges to Empiricism* (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1972).

¹² Kenneth N. Waltz, "Laws and Theories," in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, ed. Robert O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). pp. 41-42. For a similar statement of the empiricist research program in international relations, see, Bruce Russett, Starr, Harvey, Kinsella, David, *World Politics: The Menu for Choice*, 8th ed. (Belmont, Cal.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006). pp. 39-42.

majority of contemporary international relations scholarship, from Morgenthau and Mearsheimer, to Organski and Russett.¹³

Positivism and its less dogmatic empiricist offspring are not, however, the only extant forms of epistemological aposteriorism in contemporary international relations. Several other popular variants of epistemological aposteriorism are historicism, hermeneutics, cognitivism, and rational choice theory. Again, for my purposes it is enough to recognize that each of these methodological and epistemological schools take it as given that the *a posteriori* evidence is the final arbiter of a theory's usefulness or validity. The historicist seeks to understand international phenomena through detailed analyses of history, by means of which, it is assumed, it is possible to discover laws of history.¹⁴ It need hardly be said that the examination of the historical record is a purely *a posteriori* enterprise. In seeming contrast, hermeneutical explanations of international phenomena seek to explicate the meaning of the actions and speech of the actors involved in any given international event.¹⁵ The examination of the meaning of the speech and actions of actors is purely an historical activity as well, and is thus an *a posteriori* activity no less than that of historicism.¹⁶ The various cognitive theories of international relations are similarly committed to epistemological *aposteriorism*. These scholars tend to point to empirical

¹³ Morgenthau, loc. cit., John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001)., Bruce Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: Norton, 2001). A sure sign that a scientist is committed to this form of epistemological aposteriorism is the presence of a hypothesis in his work and an *a posteriori* "test" of that hypothesis.

¹⁴ Barrington Moore and Brian Downing, for example, hazard purely historical explanations for the international phenomena they seek to understand. See, Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966)., and Brian M. Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹⁵ See, for example, Charles Reynolds, *Theory and Explanation in International Relations* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1973).

¹⁶ As I have written elsewhere with respect to the *aposteriorism* of the hermeneuticians: "The very idea of searching for meaning within written or acted 'texts' necessarily implies that one does not know what's in those texts *until* one looks; i.e., this methodology is the same old *a posteriorism* in different clothes." Mark R. Crovelli, "What Empiricism Can't Tell Us, and Rationalism Can," *mises.org* (January 26, 2006). Note 7.

psychological evidence that people tend to value gains and losses differently.¹⁷ And, once again, the evidence employed by these scholars is *a posteriori* no less than the evidence of the positivists and the historicists.

Over the past twenty years or so the rational choice school has become one of the most influential methodological paradigms in international relations.¹⁸ Because their methodology appears to be deductive and aprioristic at first glance, the rational choice school might at first appear to challenge my assertion that all modern schools of international relations are committed to epistemological *aposteriorism*. Starting with a few general “axioms” about human behavior, the rational choice theorist then proceeds to deduce all of the logically entailed implications of the “axioms” in different contexts. In order to see why rational choice theory still represents a manifestation of epistemological *aposteriorism*, it is necessary to take a closer look at their so-called “axioms.”

The so-called “axioms” of rational choice theory are in actuality merely *hypothetical* assumptions about human rationality that are used by rational choice theorists to construct empirically testable hypotheses about human action.¹⁹ These axioms are thus not propositions about human rationality that are known to be irrefutably true; rather, they are merely *hypothetical* assumptions in need of *a posteriori* substantiation. This is especially true of the formal models that are often derived from rational choice assumptions. Formal models are never merely constructed and allowed to stand as they are. Instead, some form of *a posteriori* evidence is sought to confirm the validity and explanatory potential of the model, and relate it to the “real

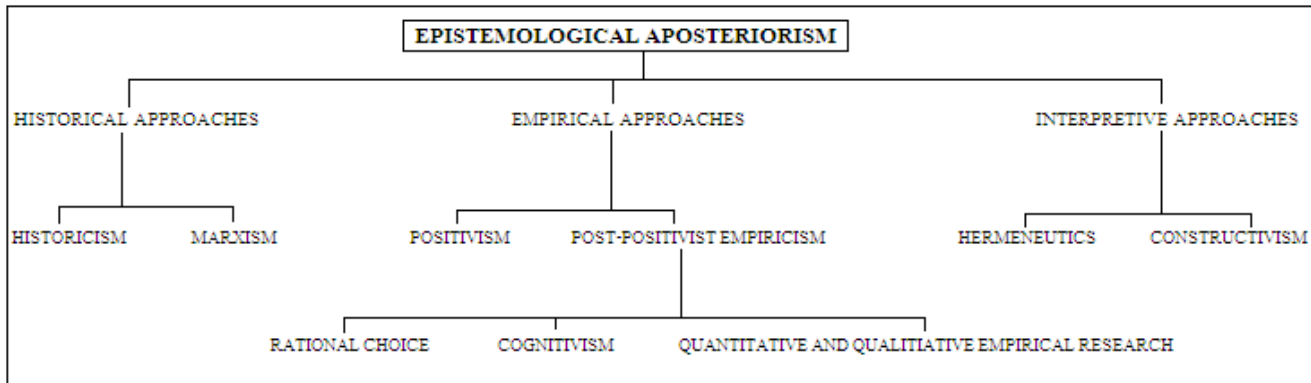
¹⁷ See, for example, Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), and Jack S. Levy, "Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997).

¹⁸ Levy, "Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations." p. 87.

¹⁹ William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook, "The Assumption of Rationality," in *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1973), and Kenneth A. Shepsle, Bonchek, Mark S., *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior, and Institutions* (New York: Norton, 1997), Ch. 2., where the completely hypothetical character of rational choice rationality assumptions is explicitly acknowledged.

world.”²⁰ Rational choice theory thus represents merely a rather sophisticated methodological manifestation of epistemological aposteriorism, and not a challenge to the fundamental idea that international relations must be an *a posteriori* discipline.

In sum, every contemporary methodological school of international relations hangs from epistemological aposteriorism in the basically following way:



In the next section I will attempt to clip this thread between epistemological aposteriorism and the major methodological schools.

III. THE POVERTY OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL APOSTERIORISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

In the forgoing section I argued that despite the seeming myriad methodological and epistemological variations between the various schools and sects of international relations, there exists a shockingly uniform commitment to the idea that international phenomena must be studied *a posteriori*. In this section I tackle the seemingly more formidable task of demonstrating why epistemological and methodological aposteriorism is an inappropriate epistemology for the study of human action.

²⁰ Robert Axelrod, for example, did not merely construct a hypothesis about the evolution of cooperation and leave his theory at that. Instead, he sought for *a posteriori* confirmation of his theory in the form of iterated computer simulations of the prisoner’s dilemma. Axelrod, *op. cit.*

There are two essential and debilitating reasons why epistemological and methodological aposteriorism is inappropriate for the study of human action: 1) it would be impossible for the defender of epistemological aposteriorism to deny, without self-contradiction, the possibility of discovering true *a priori* propositions about human action upon which an *a priori* theory of international relations could be erected, and 2) epistemological aposteriorism is demonstrably unable to discover anything universally true about human action. The remainder of this section will be devoted to substantiating these claims.

I will begin by demonstrating the truth the first claim; namely, that it would be literally impossible for the defender of epistemological aposteriorism to deny, without self-contradiction, the possibility of discovering true *a priori* propositions about human action. First, it is necessary to discuss what is meant by the phrase “true *a priori* proposition.” A true *a priori* proposition is a proposition that is “necessarily true and not a tautology.”²¹ The truth of an *a priori* proposition, moreover, is grasped and without the aid of any *a posteriori* evidence; it is immediately and self-evidently known to be true upon reflection alone.²² An example of a true *a priori* proposition is the so-called “law of contradiction” in logic, which is known to be necessarily true regardless of time or experience. We know that it is absolutely true, for

²¹ David Gordon, *The Philosophical Origins of Austrian Economics* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1996). p. 30. On this see also, A.C. Ewing, "The 'a Priori' and the Empirical," in *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. Arthur Pap Paul Edwards, *Free Press Textbooks in Philosophy* (New York: Free Press, 1965). p. 658., Murray N. Rothbard, "In Defense of Extreme Apriorism," *Southern Economic Journal* 23, no. 3 (Jan., 1957)., and Arthur Pap, *Semantics and Necessary Truth: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Analytical Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1958). I am intentionally avoiding the question of whether there exists a distinction between synthetic and analytic *a priori* truths. For the present purpose, this question is irrelevant. Here it is sufficient to define *a priori* propositions simply as non-tautological propositions which are known to be necessarily true without inspecting the *a posteriori* “evidence.”

²² On this see, Oliver A. Johnson, "Denial of the Synthetic a Priori," *Philosophy* 35, no. 134 (1960): “An a priori proposition is non-empirical. It is not a hypothesis to be confirmed or disconfirmed by empirical evidence but a necessary truth, known through reason.” p. 256. See also, Ewing, *loc. cit.*: “In order to see that 5+7=12 we do not need to take five things and seven things, put them together, and then count the total number. We can know what the total number will be simply by thinking.” See also, Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Analysis*, vol. 12, *The Paul Carus Lecture Series* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1964)., Morris Raphael Cohen, *Reason and Nature: An Essay on the Meaning of Scientific Method*, 2nd ed. (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959)., and Hans-Hermann Hoppe, *Economic Science and the Austrian Method* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1995). Part II.

instance, and *without any further a posteriori experience*, that the propositions “George W. Bush exists” and “George W. Bush does not exist” cannot both be true at the same time.

Armed with this definition of the *a priori*, we are now in a position to see why it is impossible to deny, without self-contradiction, the possibility of discovering such true *a priori* propositions about human action. This is true, quite simply, because *it is impossible to formulate a denial of the possibility of discovering true a priori propositions about human action that is not itself a (purportedly) true a priori proposition about human action*. In other words, if someone were to deny the possibility that we can discover true *a priori* propositions about human action, he would, in the very process of his denial, perform the very thing which he was attempting to deny was possible to perform. Consider, for example, Morgenthau’s claim cited at the beginning of this paper:

“This book purports to present a theory of international politics. The test by which such a theory must be judged is not *a priori* and abstract but *empirical and pragmatic*. The theory, in other words, must be judged not by some preconceived abstract principles or concepts unrelated to reality, but by its purpose: to bring order and meaning to a mass of phenomena which without it would remain disconnected and unintelligible.”

Morgenthau is clearly claiming here that it is impossible to construct an *a priori* theory of human action as it is manifested in international politics.²³ The vital question that we must seek to answer here, however, is *how* does Morgenthau know this to be true? There are essentially two, and only two, ways that Morgenthau could know this to be true: 1) he could know it to be true *a posteriori*, or 2) he could know it to be true *a priori*. In the former case, what would it mean to know that it is impossible to construct an *a priori* theory of international politics based upon the *a posteriori* evidence? What possible *a posteriori* evidence could ever “prove” that an *a priori*

²³ If he is not claiming this, then why can’t we judge his theory of international politics by *a priori* standards?

theory of international relations is impossible, except for the (assumed) fact that none has heretofore been produced? Even if it were true, moreover, that no *a priori* theory of human action has been so far produced, (an assumption I intend to dispel below), this would by no means prove that such a theory is entirely impossible. Indeed, it would be entirely fallacious to conclude that it is impossible to construct such an *a priori* theory simply because none has ever been constructed to date, for this would be an obvious instantiation of the *argumentum ad ignorantiam* fallacy.²⁴

If, on the other hand, Morgenthau is claiming to know *a priori* that it is impossible to construct an *a priori* theory of international politics, he has involved himself in an obvious self-contradiction. It is clearly self-contradictory to assert, *by means of an a priori proposition about human action* (as human action is manifested in scientific research about international politics), that it is impossible to discover true *a priori* propositions about human action. For, we are then entitled to inquire why it is impossible for us to discover such true *a priori* propositions about human action when Morgenthau apparently claims to have already found one!

What is true of Morgenthau's claim is true, moreover, of all such claims universally denying the possibility of constructing an *a priori* theory of human action—they are either purportedly based upon *a posteriori* evidence (in which case they fall prey to the *argumentum ad ignorantiam* fallacy), or they purport to be true *a priori* (in which case they are obviously self-contradictory).²⁵ Moreover, the fact that *any conceivable* equivalent claim will display these logical faults, means that it is altogether logically impossible to deny without self-contradiction

²⁴ The *argumentum ad ignorantiam* fallacy arises whenever a proposition is taken to have been *proven* false (e.g., "It is possible to construct an *a priori* theory of international relations"), simply because no one has yet been able to prove it to be true. Irving M. Copi and Carl Cohen, *Introduction to Logic*, 9 ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 116-118.

²⁵ Laurence Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason: A Rationalist Account of a Priori Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). "[T]he practice of even those who most explicitly reject the idea of substantive *a priori* justification inevitably involves tacit appeal to insights and modes of reasoning that can only be understood as *a priori* in character, if they are justified at all." p. xi.

that it is possible to discover true *a priori* propositions about human action. And this amounts to saying that it is axiomatically and irrefutably true that it is possible to discover true *a priori* propositions about human action, which could form the theoretical foundation for an *a priori* theory of international relations.²⁶

The second debilitating reason why epistemological aposteriorism is inappropriate for the study of human action (and therefore international relations), is that the *a posteriori* “evidence” offers absolutely no guide to how people will act in the future. People have the capacity to choose to act differently in the future from the way they have acted in the past, and this fact about human action essentially rules out the possibility of discovering anything about human action *a posteriori* that purports to be more than merely historical narrative.²⁷ There is, in other words, absolutely no way to ensure that one is not falling prey to the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy when one investigates human action in a purely *a posteriori* manner.²⁸ One can never conclude, for instance, that democracy as such is more peaceful than other forms of government *solely* because we have observed that it has been so in the past; for, there is absolutely no way to establish *a posteriori* that man will continue to choose to act in the same manner in the future.²⁹ This problem, moreover, arises irrespective of the number of *a posteriori* observations that one has gathered. *A posteriori* researchers with one observation are in the same

²⁶ “[I]f a man cannot affirm a proposition without employing its negation, he is not only caught in an inextricable self-contradiction; *he is conceding to the negation the status of an axiom.*” Murray N. Rothbard, “The Mantle of Science,” in *Scientism and Values*, ed. Helmut Schoeck, James W. Wiggins (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1960), p. 162. On this, see also: Hoppe, *Economic Science and the Austrian Method.*, pp. 60-61., and Blanshard, *Reason and Analysis.*, p. 276

²⁷ See especially, Ludwig von Mises, *Theory and History* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1985), and Ludwig von Mises, *Epistemological Problems of Economics*, 3 ed. (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2003). Ch. 1.

²⁸ On this, see the brilliant comments by Hans-Hermann Hoppe. Hans-Hermann Hoppe, “Is Research Based on Causal Scientific Principles Possible in the Social Sciences?” in *The Economics and Ethics of Private Property: Studies in Political Economy and Philosophy* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2006).

²⁹ Still another problem is that since the empirical facts do not “speak for themselves,” there always exists an *infinite* set of alternative explanations that would also be consistent with the facts, Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), p. 30.,

boat as those with ten thousand with respect to the future—in neither case can the researcher demonstrate *a posteriori* that man will continue to act in the future in the way he has been observed to act in the past.³⁰

In this section I have established two essential and debilitating reasons why epistemological aposteriorism is inappropriate for the study of human action: 1) it is irrefutably true that true *a priori* propositions can be discovered about human action, and 2) advocates of epistemological aposteriorism can *never* be sure that they are not falling prey to the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy, because man can choose to act differently in the future from the way he has acted in the past. In the following section I will demonstrate that it is possible to construct an *a priori* theory of international relations on this foundation.

IV. TOWARD AN *A PRIORI* THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Up to this point I have only established that it is *possible* to discover true *a priori* propositions about human action. In this section I will demonstrate that an entire *a priori* theory of international relations can be erected upon this foundation.

INDIVIDUAL HUMAN ACTION

The starting point for such a theory will have to be a proposition about *all* human action that is known to be irrefutable true regardless of time or place (an *a priori* axiom), from which we can deduce other necessarily true propositions implied by the axiom. Fortuitously, such an

³⁰ Gathering more *a posteriori* observations only entitles the researcher to say “I’ve seen X in the past more frequently than you’ve seen Y in the past.” More *a posteriori* observations, however, can in no way demonstrate that man will continue to act in the future in the same way that he has been observed to act in the past. In fact, human action occurs on the basis of subjective knowledge, and future subjective knowledge simply cannot be predicted based upon past observations: “It is an outright absurdity to conceive of subjective knowledge, whose every change has an impact on actions, as predictable on the basis of antecedent variables and as capable of being held constant. The very experimenter who wanted to hold knowledge constant would, in fact, have to presuppose that his knowledge, specifically his knowledge regarding the experiment’s outcome, could not be assumed to be constant over time.” Hoppe, *Economic Science and the Austrian Method.*, p. 45. C.f., Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. xii-xiii.

axiom has already been established and elucidated by the members of the Austrian School of economics. This axiom is known as the “action axiom”:

*Axiom 1: Man acts.*³¹

This proposition simply cannot be refuted without self-contradiction, because any conceivable attempt to refute it (even solely in one’s head) would *itself* constitute an action.

While this axiom may not seem particularly useful as a starting point, it implies other necessarily true *a priori* propositions about voluntary human action such as:

*Implied Axiom 1: Human action is purposeful, and hence, involves a choice between alternative courses of action.*³²

*Implied Axiom 2: Human action means using some means to attain some subjectively valued and intentionally chosen end at some point in the future.*³³

*Implied Axiom 3: Every human action demonstrates that the actor (subjectively and ex ante) preferred that course of action the most out of all the available actions open to him at that time.*³⁴

*Implied Axiom 4: Human action always involves the use of property, (i.e., man’s body, vocal chords, standing room, and other appropriable resources).*³⁵

Notice that it would be impossible to deny any of these propositions without immediate self-contradiction. Any attempted refutation would *itself* be a voluntary and purposeful action utilizing one’s property (body), demonstrably preferred over other courses of action, using some

³¹ See in particular, Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 4th rev. ed. (Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Foundation for Economic Education, 1996)., pp. 1-142., and Murray N. Rothbard, *Man, Economy and State* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1993)., pp. 1-66.

³² Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 10-13, 232-233

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-23.

³⁴ Murray N. Rothbard, "Toward a Reconstruction of Utility and Welfare Economics," in *The Logic of Action One: Method, Money, and the Austrian School* (London: Edward Elgar, 1997)., and Murray N. Rothbard, "Praxeology: The Methodology of Austrian Economics," in *The Logic of Action One: Method, Money, and the Austrian School* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1997).

³⁵ The axiomatic status of this proposition was first put forward and defended by Hans-Hermann Hoppe. See, Hans-Hermann Hoppe, *The Economics and Ethics of Private Property: Studies in Political Economy and Philosophy*, 2 ed. (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2006)., and Hans-Hermann Hoppe, "The Ethics and Economics of Private Property," in *Companion to the Economics of Private Property*, ed. Enrico Colombatto (London: Edward Elgar, 2004)., and Hans-Hermann Hoppe, *Democracy--the God That Failed: The Economics and Politics of Monarchy, Democracy and Natural Order* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2001)., pp. 200-201n.

means in an attempt to realize some subjectively valued and intentionally chosen end. For our purposes here, one other implied axiom correlated to (3) above is especially important:

*Implied Axiom 5: Coerced action (action compelled by aggressive, non-defensive violence or the threat of aggressive violence) necessarily involves a welfare loss for the coerced party, in that he is forced to choose a course of action he otherwise would not have voluntarily chosen.*³⁶

Another way of phrasing this axiom would be to say that when a man is coerced, he is forced to abandon the course of action he subjectively and *ex ante* values most in order to take up the course of action forced on him.³⁷ These fundamental characteristics of all human action can now be utilized to deductively analyze the international system.

THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

In order to see how these axioms of human action apply to international relations, which concerns itself with States, it is necessary to come to understand what the State is, and what kind of actions the members of the apparatus of the State perform. The State is unlike any other organization in that its members possess the monopolistic legal right to initiate aggressive (i.e., non-defensive) violence against the individuals residing in a given territory.³⁸ This aggressive violence primarily takes place through two forms: 1) taxation, and 2) enforced legislation by

³⁶ For an elaboration of this libertarian distinction between coerced and voluntary human action, see especially, Murray N. Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), and Hoppe, *The Economics and Ethics of Private Property: Studies in Political Economy and Philosophy*, and Rothbard, "Toward a Reconstruction of Utility and Welfare Economics."

³⁷ Yet another way of saying this would be that coercion can never satisfy the Pareto Rule. See, Jeffrey M. Herbener, "The Pareto Rule and Welfare Economics," *Review of Austrian Economics* 10, no. 1 (1997).

³⁸ On this see, *inter alia*, Murray N. Rothbard, "The Anatomy of the State," in *Egalitarianism as a Revolt against Nature and Other Essays* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2000), Franz Oppenheimer, *The State*, trans. John Gitterman (New York: Free Life Editions, Inc., 1975), Ch. 1, Lysander Spooner, "No Treason," in *The Lysander Spooner Reader* (San Francisco: Fox & Wilkes, 1992), pp. 84-85, Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 139, Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and Auberon Herbert, *The Right and Wrong of Compulsion by the State and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1978). Steve Chan, *International Relations in Perspective: The Pursuit of Security, Welfare, and Justice* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), P. 7. Contrast this definition of the State with Russett, Starr and Kinsella's thoroughly ambiguous and question begging definition contained in one of the most popular introductory textbooks in the field: "A legal entity consisting of a government that manages the affairs of a population in a given territory." Russett, *World Politics: The Menu for Choice*, p. 528.

means of the State's monopolistic policing agencies. Moreover, and this is vital, taxation always involves the *coerced* redistribution of property from one class of individuals to another class of individuals.³⁹ Based upon what has already been said about coercion above, it should be clear that insofar as taxation always involves coercion, it always involves a welfare loss for the taxed parties in that they are forced to act in ways they otherwise would not have acted. They are, in other words, forced to adopt a course of action (pay the tax) that ranked below whatever actions they would have subjectively valued more at the time. To put this even more bluntly, the existence of States funded through taxation creates a situation in which the taxed parties are all made subjectively worse off *ex ante* than they otherwise would have been. The first implication for international relations should be clear: The very existence of tax-funded states necessarily and logically entails massive subjective *ex ante* welfare losses for all coerced taxpayers.

Moving on to the relations between States, the first thing we can deduce, (and which should be the first principle of international political economy), is that *any* State interference with trade, both interstate and intrastate, necessarily involves a reduction in both economic efficiency and welfare. The truth of this claim relies on another subsidiary axiom derived from axioms 2 & 3 above:

Implied Axiom 6: Every voluntary exchange on the free market demonstrates that both parties to the exchange expect ex ante to benefit from the exchange—otherwise the exchange would not take place.

Since both parties to any conceivable actual market exchange subjectively and *ex ante* expect to benefit from the trade, *any* coercive interference with these exchanges will reduce the subjective

³⁹ On taxation's necessary creation of two unequal classes, see John C. Calhoun, *A Disquisition on Government* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1953), p. 16. Schumpeter's witty observation about the coercive aspect of taxation is also apposite here: "The theory which construes taxes on the analogy of club dues or of the purchase of the services of, say, a doctor only proves how removed this part of the social sciences is from the scientific habits of mind." Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1976). p. 198n.

wellbeing of at least one of the parties.⁴⁰ Moreover, since every voluntary exchange demonstrates a double inequality of value (I value your goods more than my own, and vice versa—hence we trade), every voluntary exchange moves goods from less value-productive uses to more value-productive uses, as judged by the actors themselves.⁴¹ Again, any coercive impediment placed (tariffs, minimum wages, environmental standards, *et cetera ad nauseam*) in the way of these subjective value-maximizing exchanges will block the flow of goods from less value-productive uses to more value-productive uses, which is the very definition of inefficiency.

If we supplement the analysis thus far with the empirical observation that money is being used in the international economy as a medium of exchange, we find yet another *a priori* effect of government interference with international and intra-national trade. The use of money creates the possibility for calculating whether or not resources are being used in their most value-productive manner by reckoning in prices.⁴² Should this pricing system be coercively dismantled or tampered with, there exists no way to determine whether or not resources are being used in their most value-productive way. The implication of this analysis of pricing for international relations is also clear: In cases where States create a coercive monopoly over the provision of some good that disturbs the pricing system (e.g., policing and defense services) or they coercively tamper with the pricing of the factors of production in some other way (e.g., issue

⁴⁰ Again, this is to say that any coercive interference with free-market exchanges always violates the Pareto Rule.

⁴¹ It must be stressed at this point that the value being discussed here is purely and solely *subjective*, because there exists no such thing as “objective economic value.” See, Murray N. Rothbard, “Praxeology, Value Judgements, and Public Policy,” in *The Foundations of Modern Austrian Economics*, ed. Edwin G. Dolan (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1976).

⁴² This is the root of Ludwig von Mises’ famous proof that economic calculation is impossible under socialism, because without prices for factors of production, the socialist planner will have no way to determine whether or not he is using resources in the most value-productive way, or whether he is squandering them. See, Ludwig von Mises, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1990)., and Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism*, trans. J. Kahane (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1981). See also, F. A. Hayek, ed., *Collectivist Economic Planning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1935).

credit un-backed by savings), they will ensure that resources do not move to their most value-productive uses.

Adding another axiom to this analysis allows us to say still more about the international system:

*Implied Axiom 7: "Every actor requires some amount of time to attain his goals, and since man must always consume something and cannot entirely stop consuming while he is alive, time is always scarce. Thus, ceteris paribus, present or earlier goods are, and must invariably be, valued more highly than future or later ones."*⁴³

The importance of this axiom to international relations can scarcely be overestimated; for, while man will *always* prefer present goods over future goods, the *rate* at which he prefers present goods over future goods can vary enormously. What is more, different political systems affect this rate of time preference in apodictic ways. As Hans-Hermann Hoppe has demonstrated, the time preference of political leaders is affected by the length of their terms in office. Specifically, the longer that a leader holds office, *ceteris paribus*, the lower his time preference will be.⁴⁴ Contrariwise, the shorter the leader's term in office, *ceteris paribus*, the higher his time preference will be. Again, the implication for international relations is clear: Those countries with shorter terms for their leaders (democracies in particular) will be more present-oriented. Most importantly, the more present-oriented a leader is, *ceteris paribus*, the more likely he is to engage in aggressive actions toward other nations.

To conclude this section I will discuss one final feature of the international system that can be determined deductively and *a priori* (although this by no means exhausts what can be known *a priori*). When there exists a mechanism through which the considerable costs of war (in both lives and treasure) can be externalized by the aggressor onto other people, there is a

⁴³ Hoppe, *Democracy--the God That Failed: The Economics and Politics of Monarchy, Democracy and Natural Order.*, p. 1. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Ch. 1. See also, Hans-Hermann Hoppe, "The Political Economy of Monarchy and Democracy, and the Idea of a Natural Order," *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 11, no. 2 (Summer, 1995).

greater probability that war will take place than if those costs of war must be borne by the aggressor himself. Specifically, when the ruling class has the capacity to tax and conscript, there will be, *ceteris paribus*, both more frequent and larger wars.⁴⁵ Moreover, when that ruling class possesses a coercive monopoly on the production of defense services, they will supply defense services that are both lower quality and higher priced than would be the case if those services were competitively produced on the free-market.⁴⁶

V. CONCLUSION

It should be clear that the preceding foundation for an *a priori* theory of international relations in no way needs to be “tested” against the *a posteriori* evidence. No amount of psychological “evidence,” historical “evidence,” demographic “evidence,” hypothetical assumptions about human rationality, or interpretive “evidence” could ever refute (or substantiate for that matter) these deductions. This is not to say that these deductions are completely impervious to attack. On the contrary, one may wish to contest the validity of many of them. The vital thing to notice, however, is that in order to attack them one must attack the deductive process which produced them. These deductions have essentially the same epistemological status as mathematical proofs. If one wishes to contest the validity of a mathematical proof, one does not go out in the world and search for cases in which $5+7$ does not equal 12, or examine the psychological makeup of the mathematician. Instead, if one wanted to

⁴⁵ Hans-Hermann Hoppe, "Government and the Private Production of Defense," in *The Myth of National Defense: Essays on the Theory and History of Security Production*, ed. Hans-Hermann Hoppe (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2003).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 344. C.f., Benjamin R. Tucker, *Instead of a Book, by a Man Too Busy to Write One; a Fragmentary Exposition of Philosophical Anarchism* (New York: B.R. Tucker, 1893). "Defense is a service, like any other service. It is labor both useful and desired, and therefore an economic commodity subject to the law of supply and demand. In a free market this commodity would be furnished at the cost of production. The production and sale of this commodity are now monopolized by the State. The State, like almost all monopolists, charges exorbitant prices. Like almost all monopolists, it supplies a worthless, or nearly worthless, article." p. 22. See also, Gustave de Molinari, *The Production of Security*, trans. J. Huston McCulloch, *Occasional Papers Series* (New York: Center for Libertarian Studies, 1977)., Morris Tannehill, Tannehill, Linda, *The Market for Liberty* (San Francisco: Fox & Wilkes, 1993)., and Murray N. Rothbard, *For a New Liberty* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

disprove the mathematical proof, one would attack the deductive process which produced it. To point to *a posteriori* “evidence” as if it were able to refute the proposition $5+7=12$, or the proposition “man acts” and all its derivatives would be an immediate sign that one had entirely misunderstood the status of the propositions. As Hoppe points out in this regard:

“These propositions’ validity ultimately goes back to nothing but the indisputable axiom of action. To think, as empiricism does, that these propositions require continual testing for their validation is absurd, and a sign of outright intellectual confusion.”⁴⁷

The deductions I have thus far made, insofar as they are accepted, point to two general conclusions about international relations: 1) Interference in the international economic market by States always decreases the subjective *ex ante* wellbeing of all the individuals who are affected by the interference, and always shifts resources away from their most value-productive uses, and 2) The very existence of tax-funded States creates a situation in which frequent and large-scale warfare is more likely than in cases where tax-funded States do not exist. These conclusions, moreover, indicate that international relations as a field cannot afford to simply examine the relations between States as if human life is impossible in the absence of States.⁴⁸ Indeed, if the preceding exposition is even partially correct, human life would be preferable in many ways in a world without *any* States.

⁴⁷ Hoppe, *Economic Science and the Austrian Method.*, p. 64.

⁴⁸ "The fundamental question of political philosophy, one which precedes questions about how the state should be organized, is whether there should be any state at all. Why not have anarchy? Since anarchist theory, if tenable, undercuts the whole subject of *political* philosophy, it is appropriate to begin political philosophy with an examination of its major theoretical alternative." Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974). p. 4

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