Neither "Mind" nor "Things" but Acting:
Some Philosophical Implications of Pragmatism for International Relations Inquiry

Ni la "mente" ni las "cosas" sino actuar: algunas implicaciones filosóficas del Pragmatismo para la investigación en Relaciones Internacionales

Nem a "mente", nem as "coisas" senão atuar: algumas implicações filosóficas do Pragmatismo para a investigação em Relações Internacionais

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Abstract

Research in the discipline of International Relations (IR) has been dominated by positivism. Positivist philosophy of science has been useful in the conduct of inquiry but it has come at a cost: Cartesian anxiety. That is, the pursuit of absolute certainty, with the demanding assumptions such an ambitious goal entails. In light of these questionable standards, pragmatism is presented as a promising alternative. A pragmatist approach rejects the search for 'truth' and instead proposes a focus on 'warranted assertibility'. As such, it takes the preliminary character of knowledge seriously. Consequently, it is argued that pragmatism can address the shortcomings posed by positivism. By so doing, this exercise makes a call for pluralism, not a new orthodoxy.

Key words:

Positivism, Pragmatism, International Relations, Epistemology, Philosophy of Science.

Resumen

La investigación en la disciplina de las Relaciones Internacionales ha estado dominada por el positivismo. La filosofía de la ciencia positivista ha sido útil para la investigación pero ha tenido un costo: la ansiedad cartesiana. Es decir, la búsqueda de la certeza absoluta, con las exigentes asunciones que esto implica. A la luz de tan cuestionables estándares, se presenta al pragmatismo como una alternativa prometedora. Este acercamiento rechaza la búsqueda de la 'verdad' y en su lugar propone un enfoque en la 'asertabilidad garantizada'. Por tanto, toma en serio el carácter preliminar del conocimiento. Consecuentemente, se arguye que el pragmatismo puede atender las limitaciones del positivismo. Al hacerlo, este ejercicio hace un llamado para el pluralismo, no para una nueva ortodoxia.

Palabras clave:

Positivismo, pragmatismo, relaciones internacionales, epistemología, filosofía de la ciencia.

Resumo

A investigação na disciplina das Relações Internacionais tem sido dominada pelo positivismo. A Filosofia da ciência positivista tem sido útil para a investigação, mas tem tido também um custo: a ansiedade cartesiana. Isto é, a procura da certeza absoluta, com as exigentes suposições que isso implica. À luz de tão questionáveis padrões, o pragmatismo apresenta-se como uma alternativa promissora. Esta abordagem rejeita

Analecta
Política

a procura da "verdade", e em vez disso, ela propõe se focalizar na "assertividade garantida". Por conseguinte, ela leva a sério a natureza preliminar do conhecimento. Consequentemente, argumenta-se que o pragmatismo pode encarar as limitações do positivismo. Ao fazê-lo, este exercício faz um chamado ao pluralismo, e não a uma nova ortodoxia.

Palavras-chave:

Positivismo, pragmatismo, relações internacionais, epistemologia, filosofia da ciência.

Introduction

International Relations (IR) research has been dominated by an approach: positivism. To be sure, this is actually a reflection of the state of the social sciences in general (Jackson, 2011) that, given the notable success of the natural sciences, have sought to emulate them. Thus, efforts have been directed to the unveiling of the truths of the social world, the discovery of the universal laws of society (à la Comte). In the last decades, however, debates within IR have sprung up that question, to a large extent, the pertinence of that dominance.

Positivism is a product of the Enlightenment's goal to (almost literally) shed light on the world by dint of reason and the sciences. In this endeavour, it becomes a complex mixture of philosophical traditions that are combined not without tensions. It inherits modern philosophy's quest for absolute certainty as the only grounds on which a claim to knowledge can be accepted (Bacon, 2012). As such, this position entails rather demanding requirements from research. So much so that the literature has called this "Cartesian anxiety" (Bernstein, 1983).

In fact, those requirements have been criticized and even regarded as unrealistic by some camps. One such perspective is put forward by pragmatism, a philosophical tradition that directly tackles positivism and rejects it from its foundations[1]. Above and beyond a critique, pragmatism offers an alternative to the conduct of inquiry that takes the preliminary nature of knowledge seriously. It embraces fallibilism while committing to anti-scepticism (Bacon, 2012).

In this context, an exploration of the underpinnings of each seems warranted. Consequently, this paper presents a discussion from the philosophy of science. With that purpose, it first introduces positivism. The discussion explores its roots, logic, limitations and requirements of this approach in order to hint to the implications it has for the conduct of research in International Relations. Then, it presents pragmatism as an alternative to positivism. It seeks to show that pragmatism can address the shortcomings of positivism and, by so doing, it can liberate inquiry from restrictions that could hardly be met, if at all. It argues that a pragmatist approach can enhance the rigor in International Relations research by

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1   The case in favor of a pragmatist philosophy of social science has been pursued from different angles (see *e.g.* Cochran 2002, 2012; Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009; Putnam, 2002). Thus, the argument set forth here seeks to, however briefly, contribute to that body of literature by contrasting the convention and the alternative, by building on those insights.

making every choice transparent and thereby securing consistency in inquiry. The final section presents some concluding remarks of this exercise that ultimately is a call for pluralism.

A (brief) Philosophy of International Relations

An analysis of the conduct of inquiry in International Relations requires a discussion of its foundations. Therefore, this section studies the philosophical grounds on which positivism, the conventional approach to research in the discipline, is built. Given that positivism has been dominant on the social sciences in general, the discussion confers the latter as well as topics specific to IR. This approach seeks to provide an accurate understanding of the implications of this framework by encompassing both breadth and depth.

The philosophy of the social sciences is closely related to the philosophy of the natural sciences[2]. The Enlightenment is of particular interest as it showed that the mysteries of the physical world can effectively be uncovered by the rigorous use of the scientific method and the expectation was that it could do the same for the social world. This project was best undertaken by positivism, which has virtually dominated the conduct of inquiry in the social sciences (Jackson, 2011). Perhaps the epitome of this influence is economics. Cochran (2002) asserts that "[i]n subjects like economics, the desire to achieve a similar control over the social world has led to the entrenchment of positivism as an almost unquestioned epistemological and methodological orthodoxy" (p. 525). Positivism has proven quite useful in economics, prompting other disciplines such as political science and international relations to adopt it almost uncritically (Jackson, 2011).

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2   The philosophy of (social) science can arguably be traced back at least to the Greeks. It could be argued that originally philosophy was not conceived to be different from science. In his *Metaphysics*, for example, Aristotle does not differentiate *philosophia* from *episteme* (scientific knowledge) (Waugh & Ariew, 2008). The tradition of conceiving science with episteme and episteme with philosophy seems to endure over the centuries influencing the father of modern philosophy, Descartes. See footnote 8.

Positivism's main influences: Descartes, Hume and Comte

Positivism, as it is known today, is perhaps mostly associated with August Comte's proposal in a *General View of Positivism*. Nevertheless, his work, as that of positivists before and after him, with its assumptions of an external world ruled by universal laws and how this extends to the study of society (Comte, 2009), is better understood in the wider context of historical events and traditions. Thus, positivism appears as the product of a rather large and sometimes conflicting history of ideas. In this sense, two main traditions are combined, not without tensions, to form what is known as positivism nowadays: Descartes' and Hume's thought (Kaboub, 2008; Rosenberg, 1993) *i.e.* rationalism and empiricism, respectively.

The intellectual climate in which these traditions emerged is generated by the 'new sciences' during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The new sciences challenged the worldview advanced by the Scholastics, who sought to find convergence between Christianity and classical philosophy, in an effort to argue that there was structure and purpose to nature (Bacon, 2012). The new sciences, under the notorious influence of Newtonian physics, opposed this view, in favor of generation of scientific (genuine) knowledge, exemplified by the search of immutable laws. It is in this context that Descartes sought to aid the new sciences in their enterprise.

Descartes represents rationalism. In his philosophy, he establishes at least three interrelated themes that have transcended until contemporary research, namely: i) the primacy of the mind; ii) absolute certainty (or absolute doubt); and, iii) deduction. First, he subscribes to mind-body dualism[3], a metaphysical stance that posits that mind and body are two different substances. According to Descartes (1993), the mind was unextended and immaterial but thinking substance, the body, in turn, was exactly the opposite. Moreover, while the body was subject to mechanical laws, the mind was not (Descartes, 1993). As such, he sought to clearly differentiate between the mind from the body so as not to ascribe mental properties to the latter. This position is also, and usefully, referred to as mind-world dualism, in order to emphasize the separation that Descartes establishes between

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3   Throughout this paper this is also referred to as *mind-world dualism* in order to emphasize the fact that by isolating the mind from the world in which the physical body is included, Descartes argues in favor of a mind-independent world (see Jackson 2011).

the mind and an external mind independent world (see Jackson, 2011). Second, contrary to the tradition that knowledge comes from sensation, Descartes argued that the senses can deceive and mislead, thus, knowledge derived from sensation is at most probabilistic and as such doubtful, making the senses an unreliable source for knowledge (Descartes 1993). Therefore, he favored the absolute certainty (Quinton, 2010) to be found in the ideas perceived by the mind alone via the method of absolute doubt (arriving eventually to *cogito, ergo sum* [Descartes 1956]). Finally, Descartes favored the use of mechanistic principles. As such, he rejected the use of substantial forms, and their concomitant final causes, as explanatory principles in physics. Instead, he posits that clearer and more useful explanations can be obtained from deductions derived from universal laws. The implication for philosophy was that its task became the provision of foundations for knowledge in the form of 'basic beliefs' (Bacon, 2012).

Hume, on the other hand, argues for a different (although similar in certain respects) view, which highlights three elements: the primacy of experience, the division of knowable propositions, and causality and induction. First, as an empiricist, Hume believes that the scope, limits and justification of all knowledge are not given by the mind but by experience (Rosenberg, 1993). By experience it meant both sense perception and introspective awareness of one's own state of mind (Dicker, 1998). Regarding the second, he asserts that an exhaustive typology of the objects inquiry can be divided into 'relations of ideas' and 'matters of fact'. The former encompasses the sciences such as Arithmetic and Geometry, and every statement that can be intuitively or demonstratively certain (Dicker, 1998). Matters of fact, in turn, are those objects of human reason that seem to correspond with reality (Dicker, 1998). Finally, Hume focused on the study of causation. However, he argues that inductive inferences (inferences from past experience, that the future will resemble the past) cannot be logically justified. However, given that in fact human beings rely on inductive reasoning and that most natural sciences rests on the belief that nature will not change, he recognizes it is indispensable for both purposive action and scientific inquiry (Dicker, 1998).

As can be gathered from the, necessarily simplistic but arguably sufficient, discussion above, in the effort of establishing what constitutes knowledge claims, there is convergence as well as conflict between Cartesian and Humean thought. The main common ground is their philosophical ontological position, the relationship of humans with the world. Both scholars adhere to the view that there is a 'world out there', *i.e.* mind independent world (Jackson, 2011). The implication being that truth or knowledge is that which reflects that external world as it is. The main difference between Descartes and Hume is epistemological, the

manner in which humans can know that world. In seeking to bridge the gap between the mind and the world while Descartes chose the mind, Hume stayed with the senses.

Despite this tension, by late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries positivism gained currency as an approach to provide genuine knowledge characterized by mind-world dualism and empiricism[4]. As such, its influence extended over the social sciences as well[5].

Contemporary positivism: logical positivism and logical empiricism

Arguably, the most important version of early positivism has been logical positivism, a philosophy put forward by the Vienna Circle[6] in the 1920s. The logical positivist program, as an epistemology, sought to establish what could be considered knowledge. The explicit purpose of logical positivism was to make philosophy rigorous and scientific, beyond any previous effort (Waugh & Ariew, 2008). It differed from older versions of positivism because of its focus on "logical analysis of the statements and concepts of empirical science" (Carnap quoted in Waugh & Ariew, 2008, p. 18) for the clarification of problems and assertions (Caldwell, 1994).

The logical positivist proposal turns around the idea of meaningfulness (or cognitive significance). Only cognitively meaningful statements warranted scientific scrutiny and the status of knowledge claims (Uebel, 2014) and these statements could only be either analytic or synthetic (Caldwell, 1994). Analytic were those statements that are tautologies and self-contradictions or those statements that are 'true simply because of their meaning' (Putnam, 2002). That

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4   Empiricism later moved towards phenomenalism, encompassing thereby 'experience' more broadly, as the sciences developed and the senses were greatly aided by instruments such as the telescope and the microscope (Jackson, 2011).

5   Positivism's promise to make universal laws discernible, thereby making it possible to control and predict the social world just as the natural one, seemed to be fulfilled. It offered the epistemological foundation for just such enterprise and soon the methodological rhetoric of economics was dominated by it, even if its practice did not always reflect it (Caldwell, 1994).

6   Some of the more significant members over the years included Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, Phillip Frank, Kurt Gödel, Hans Hahn, Karl Menger (the economist's son), Otto Neurath, and Friedrich Waismann (Caldwell, 1994, p. 11).

is, they were justifiable by a priori reasoning (Uebel, 2014). Synthetic –non-analytic truths– were those factual statements that can be verified by evidence (Caldwell, 1994). As such, they were justifiably only *a posteriori* (Uebel, 2014). For logical positivists, mathematics consists of analytic truths and synthetic truths were those that reflected the empirical world[7]. As Hahn, Neurath & Carnap (quoted in Caldwell, 1994) assert:

> We have characterized the *scientific world-conception* essentially by *two features.* *First* it is *empiricist and positivist:* there is knowledge only from experience, which rests on what is immediately given. This sets the limits for the context of legitimate science. *Second,* the scientific world- conception is marked by the application of a certain method, namely *logical analysis.* The aim of scientific effort is to reach the goal, unified science, by applying logical analysis to the empirical material. (p. 13; emphasis in the original)

This program focused on objectivity and in so doing it established a dichotomy between facts and values. The former were objective, the latter were not. Indeed, themes previously regarded as philosophical, namely metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics, were deemed meaningless because they either cannot be translated into logically correct form or there are no empirical grounds to establish their truth or falsity (Waugh & Ariew, 2008). Further, this focus on factuality can be observed in the very differentiation of the empirical sciences (*e.g.* physics, social sciences) from the formal ones (*e.g.* mathematics), ascribing synthetic statements to the former and analytic to the latter, in an effort to "[…] renew empiricism by freeing it from the impossible task of grounding logical and mathematical knowledge" (Uebel, 2014, p. 90), as its factuality was not empirical but came from formal reasoning.

Logical positivism's focus on the empirical world shows its influence from the physical sciences. First, my mimicking the latter, logical positivists sought to provide certainty and objectivity to the social sciences. It could be argued that this stance was phenomenalist[8] and some early logical positivists were (Caldwell, 1994). Moreover, the stress on observability and the primacy of physical evidence

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7   This reflects Hume's influence in positivism by borrowing the division that he draws regarding the types of proposition pertaining human reason. See previous section.

8   Phenomenalism can be regarded as an extension of empiricism. While the latter focuses on the sense, phenomenalism encompasses 'experience' broadly conceived in order to account to inferences made by 'mediated observation', that is, observation aided by specialized instruments (Jackson, 2011).

led logical positivist to assert the unity of science on methodological grounds, establishing thereby that both social and natural sciences are concerned with observable phenomena[9] (Caldwell, 1994).

> Thus, with the aid of the new logic, logical analysis leads to a *unified science*. There are not different sciences with fundamentally different methods or different sources of knowledge, but only *one* science. All knowledge finds its place in this science and, indeed, is knowledge of basically the same kind; the appearance of fundamental differences between the sciences are the deceptive result of our using different sublanguages to express them. (Carnap quoted in Caldwell, 1994, p. 16; emphasis in the original)

Logical empiricism, close to the second half of the century, would iron out some of the rough edges in logical positivism[10]. The emphasis for logic empiricists was on determining when a non-analytic statement can be synthetic (and thereby a knowledge claim) or nonsensical. Traditionally, efforts in this regard had focused on the concept of *testability* or *verifiability*: a statement is meaningful if subject to empirical test. However, the Vienna Circle's criterion of complete verifiability proved to be too strict since it rules out meaningless statements of universal form used for specifying general scientific laws[11] (Caldwell, 1994). Hence, Karl Popper suggested instead the principle of *falsifiability* for distinguishing between scientific and non-scientific statements. That is, putting scientific systems to empirical negative tests, so as to try to refute them (Popper, 2002a). While this proposal solved the problem of verification it had shortcomings of its own for it failed to accept affirmative existential hypothesis as meaningful[12] (Caldwell, 1994). Consequently, another alternative was put forward by Carnap, with the notion of *confirmation*. In contrast to truth, an absolute concept that transcends

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9   This seems to coincide with Descartes' approach as probably best expressed in his tree analogy. In the Preface of the French version of his *Principia Philosophiae,* he refers to philosophy as being "like a tree whose roots are metaphysics, whose trunk is physics, and whose branches, which issue from this trunk, are all the other sciences. These reduce themselves to three principal ones, namely, medicine, mechanics, and morals" (quoted in Waugh & Ariew, 2008, p. 16).

10 It is worth noting that logical empiricism was less radically empiricist than its predecessor (Caldwell, 1994).

11 A much referred to illustration is the statement "all ravens are black". This is not conclusively verifiable, and thus in lack of cognitive significance, because one exception could prove it false and no number of verifications could guarantee that such counter instance will not be found.

12 Ayer (1959) shows this best when he asserts that "[o]ne can say that there are no abominable snowmen, for this could be falsified by finding them; but one cannot say that there are abominable snowmen, for this could not be falsified; the fact that one had failed to find any would not prove conclusively that none existed" (p. 14).

time, conformation is a relative one. The truth of a law cannot be verified, that is tested on all possible instances, but it can be confirmed on single instances and these tests allow the increasing confirmation of a law (Caldwell, 1994).

In this context, towards the second half of the last century, Karl Popper becomes a figure with his critique of the logical empiricists. He insisted on falsifiability, rejected the inductive logic and argues a different growth of knowledge. According to Popper (2002a), scientific theories begin as bold conjectures and they attain the status of scientific if they pass severe critical tests, that is, if they are falsifiable[13]. Those theories that can be more severely tested, those that are more prohibitive, are regarded as having higher empirical content (Popper, 2002b). Those that survive repeated tests are considered corroborated. For Popper, content and probability vary inversely, thus corroborated theories are less probable. Consequently, refutation and corroboration, not confirmation of theories that have inductive probabilities, is the focus of science, and, importantly, is the way scientific knowledge grows (Popper, 2002a, 2002b). Popper's view, resisted at first, came to be associated with positivism with time.

In the same vein, an additional contribution of logical empiricists is the attempt to describe all the types of explanation that occur in science. Both deductive and inductive logic (in an effort to address Hume's problem of induction) are encompassed by the so-called *covering laws*[14]: the deductive-nomological and inductive-probabilistic models. The former shows the belief that the natural and social worlds are governed by universal laws and, thus, can be studied in the same way. The latter was an attempt to incorporate the increasing use of statistical laws (Caldwell, 1994). These were considered to exhaust the possible ways in which science is carried out, although the latter was subject to much critique. Thus, mainly the former came to be regarded as the scientific method, which separates science from non-science.

Positivism, as an approach to inquiry searching for certainty, has grown and incorporated insights from different sources. As this brief discussion shows, some of its ideas are conflicting and of rather difficult resolution. Because of this it

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13 Popper insists on his concept of falsifiability as useful for distinguishing between scientific and non-scientific statements, not just between meaningful and meaningless statements. He admitted that there could be non-scientific meaningful statements (Caldwell, 1994).

14 The covering laws refer to the rather known statements of the type "if A occurs, then B will follow" (Riley, 2007, p. 115). That is, they encompass the formulation of hypothesis composed of *explanans* and *explananda*.

has been deeply criticized to the point that by the 1970s it was asserted that "[…] the positivistic program for philosophy of science has been repudiated by contemporary philosophy of science" (Suppe, 1977, p. 632).

Nevertheless, its hold on the social sciences has proven pervasive[15]. Indeed, the most fundamental philosophical tenets of positivism have endured resiliently and currently remain alive and kicking. One is ontological, the other epistemological, namely ontological realism and correspondence theory of truth. The former refers to what has been termed mind-world dualism, the assumption that there is a world 'out there' independent from human cognition. The latter is the epistemological position that the world can be known through experience and that truth (knowledge) is only statements that match or mirror that world. As such, in practice, the legacy of positivism in IR becomes rather evident[16]:

> 1) belief in the unity of science; 2) commitment to a strict fact/value separation; 3) belief in the existence of regularities in the social as well as the natural world that licenses deductive-nomological and inductive- statistical forms of covering law explanation; and 4) empirical validation, falsification, being viewed as proper inquiry. (Smith, 1996, p. 16)

Beyond Positivism: Pragmatism

Pragmatism originated in late nineteenth century in the United States. In the aftermath of the US American Civil War pragmatists were arguably influenced by distrust in absolutist ideas, such as those that fueled the war (Menand, 1997). Against this background, pragmatism was born as a theory of meaning concerned exclusively with practical consequences. For Peirce (1905), the founder of pragmatism, the meaning of concepts is the practical effects of acting according

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15　As Caldwell (1994) states "[f]ew economists keep up with developments in the philosophy of science, and as such it is understandable that many may still labor under the illusion that economics is, or can be, a positivist discipline" (p. 4).

16　There is no coincidence that these four points resonate strongly with what scholars like Kolakowski (quoted in Krauss, 2005) have argued are the defining aspects of positivism: "(1) the rule of phenomenalism, which asserts that there is only experience; all abstractions be they "matter" or "spirit" have to be rejected; (2) the rule of nominalism – which asserts that words, generalizations, abstractions, etc. are linguistic phenomena and do not give new insight into the world; (3) the separation of facts from values; and (4) the unity of the scientific method" (p. 761).

to them[17]. This approach has important bearing for the philosophy of science. According to Peirce, the pursuit of Cartesian 'basic beliefs', immediate foundations of knowledge or universal laws –the pursuit of absolute certainty– is nonsensical, as there is no 'intuitive' knowledge, knowledge that is given directly and immediately to the mind. Knowledge is inferential; knowledge presupposes interaction with the external world (Bacon, 2012).

These core ideas have been further elaborated by other pragmatists. Albeit, as it is often the case in philosophy, it is rather difficult to encompass different thinkers under one label[18], the following discussion on pragmatism focuses mainly, though not exclusively, in the contributions of the classical pragmatists as their contribution seems more relevant for the purposes of this paper.

Neither 'mind' nor 'things' but acting

Pragmatism overcomes the limitations of empiricism and rationalism, and the tensions of combining them. At its most basic level, it departs from 'acting', not from 'things' or form 'reason' or thought, thereby preventing false starts (Kratochwil, 2011). Pragmatism rejects the view of inquiry as a mind passively receiving knowledge from a world that is unveiled to it, as if truth corresponds to reality. Dewey called this 'spectator theory of knowledge' (Bacon, 2012). Instead, it opts for a naturalistic approach, influenced by Darwin, in which it sees the generation of knowledge as the process of interaction between the human organism and its environment (Dewey, 1985). Therefore, it regards inquiry as the process by which humans engage with their environment, through manipulation and testing of hypotheses, so as to solve an obstacle until they are able to further human action again. In this sense, it seeks to take seriously actual research practices and human cognition. The aspiration of pragmatism has been described

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17 The pragmatic maxim proposed by Peirce (1905) stated: "Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then your conception of those effects is the WHOLE of your conception of the object" (p. 171; emphasis in the original). Later this view would be extended, in an anti-positivist manner, by William James (1977) who asserts: "To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all" (pp. 377-378).
18 For a discussion on different pragmatist and their contribution to this philosophical tradition see Bacon (2012), Misak (2007, 2013), Menand (1997), Talisse & Aikin (2011).

as "[…] a philosophy that is at once naturalist and humanist, a philosophy that fully respects the modern scientific worldview without thereby losing contact with the world of human experience" (Talisee & Aikin, 2011, p. 4).

In this sense, pragmatism takes the preliminary character of scientific knowledge seriously. Pragmatists abandon the idea of universal laws in the social world. Dewey (1985) states that "[…] conceptions, theories and systems of thought […] are tools. As in the case of all tools, their value resides not in themselves but in their capacity to work shown in the consequences of their use" (p. 163). Once these tools can no longer fulfill their purpose, new ones are required. Thus, any 'truth'[19] established via pragmatist science settles a controversial or complex issue, or answers a particular question, for the time being, until something appears to disturb the settlement, forcing inquiry to start anew (Cochran, 2002). Furthermore, that something cannot be anything. Dewey (2008a) emphasizes that questioning presumptive knowledge requires reasons. Although the confidence placed on knowledge is provisional, such objects are considered settled until there is reason to doubt them.

The collapse of positivist dichotomies

Pragmatism addresses certain dichotomies established by positivism. For example, Quine (1980) shows that the logical positivist's analytic-synthetic dichotomy does not hold because no statement is void of empirical content[20]. Further, Putnam (2002) addresses another of the most fundamental dichotomies of positivism, that between facts and values. For positivism science is the realm of fact because it is empirically verifiable, whereas areas such as ethics were unverifiable and thus the mere expression of preference (Bacon, 2012). According to Putnam (2002, p. 145), this is "the last dogma of empiricism".

However, facts and values are inextricably entangled. For classical pragmatists value and normativity are ubiquitous in all of experience (Putnam, 2002). This

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19 Dewey did not endorse the use of the term 'truth' due to is positivist connotation, although he used it under this caveat. Instead, he favored "warranted assertibility" (Quinton, 2010) to describe the state in which a hypothesis succeeds in turning an indeterminate situation (one in which there is an issue to be resolved, which prompts inquiry) into a determinate one (Bacon, 2012).

20 Putnam (2002), along the same lines argues that the analytic-synthetic dichotomy is a distinction rather than a dichotomy.

has important bearings for the practice of science itself. If 'value' is not equated with 'ethics', as though they were synonymous, it becomes clear that science presupposed values, 'epistemic' values. Putnam (2002) is emphatic:

> These pragmatist philosophers did not refer only to the kind of normative judgments that we call "moral" or "ethical"; judgments of "coherence", "simplicity," "plausibility," "reasonableness," and of what Dirac famously called the beauty of a hypothesis, are all normative judgments in Charles Peirce's sense, judgments of "what ought to be" in the case of reasoning. (p. 31)

Further, epistemic concepts such as those cited, Putnam (2002) claims, cannot be separated into factual and evaluative parts. Epistemic notions are thus inescapably normative, framed within a particular context of evaluation (Bacon, 2012).

Against ontological realism and correspondence theory of truth

More fundamentally, pragmatism rejects positivist ontology and epistemology. It rejects the stance of a world existing independent of the human observer and the concomitant correspondence theory of truth, which posits that the object known is unaffected by the knower (Cochran, 2002). The mind does not observe a world in itself but acts in the world and by so doing it changes it (James, 1977). Further, Kant demonstrated in his transcendental turn that the observed object is constituted by the observing subject (Jackson, 2011). Thus, observation of practical facts is not theory free but theoretical and pre-theoretical. This implies that the subject is implicated in the constitution of the object and therefore it is not possible to derive concepts directly 'the world' (or 'the facts'). Thus, since there is no 'world out there', the categories used to understand it do not come from objects but from the mind (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009).

Moreover, ontological realism fails for reasons specific to the social sciences. Unlike the physical world, the social one is not made out of objects. Social reality, as Weber emphasized, is constituted by intersubjective meaning and value relations (Friedichs & Kratochwil, 2009). Therefore, social knowledge is based on both explaining (*erklären*) and understanding (*verstehen*).

Positivist epistemology is related, to a large extent, to its ontology. Therefore, if ontological realism falls, so does correspondence theory of truth. Since it posits that knowledge claims are only those that mirror the world, truth is a property of the world (Kratochwil, 2007). However, as stated above, what is perceived as the world cannot be separated from the concepts and theories of the observer. This certainly does not deny the existence of a reality but it does stress that if the observed is constituted by the observer, there cannot be a test against it[21] (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009).

Additionally, in the case of the social sciences, correspondence theory of truth poses particular challenges. As the discussion in the previous section shows, the positivist quest for certainty establishes a binary logic: something either is or is not (Kratochwil, 2007), statements are true or false. This can hardly apply to the social sciences where yes or no answers are quite scarce. In fact, as Friedrichs & Kratochwil (2009, p. 705) point out, the category of undecidable questions, a category that supposedly cannot exist, is "embarrassingly large".

Epistemological instrumentalism and consensus theory of knowledge

A pragmatic alternative entails two elements: the acknowledgment of knowledge generation as a social activity and the purpose of research as the generation of useful knowledge (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009). Consequently, instead of ontological realism, pragmatism proposes epistemological instrumentalism and against correspondence theory of truth, pragmatism proposes consensus theory of knowledge.

Regarding epistemological instrumentalism[22], as mentioned above pragmatism is problem oriented and, as such, is concerned with useful knowledge. This means, that research should serve a clear, explicit purpose, but not any purpose. Here the Friedrichs & Kratochvil's (2009) caveat is relevant:

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21 The practical implication being that the positivist method of hypothesis testing is no longer required as it only makes sense if one subscribes to mind-world dualism and empiricism (Jackson, 2011).
22 This denomination reflects Dewey's own preferences regarding his theory of knowledge, which he called instrumentalism (Quinton, 2010).

> Social scientific knowledge is not primarily knowledge for its own sake as in first philosophy, nor for the sake of money as in business, nor for the sake of beauty, nor for the sake of power, and so on. Its purpose is to enable orientation in the social world. Its utility consists in helping us to understand complex social phenomena and/or to explain observed social regularities. Its value can be assessed by looking at how it enables orientation in the social world, including the tractability of relevant social problems. (p. 706)

Apropos consensus theory of knowledge, the implication is twofold. First, pragmatism emphasizes the contingent nature of knowledge. The positivist quest for certainty and the approximation to the 'truth' is rejected. For Dewey, laws are not universal and immutable, solely waiting to be discovered (Cochran, 2002). Instead they are more or less useful generalizations that work in a certain situation until they are found faulty and the search for new ones begins again.

Second, it recognizes that knowledge is socially produced (Quinton, 2010). Since knowledge generation is committed to the methods and standards shared by epistemic communities, this entails that knowledge claims are always put to their consideration and debate (Dewey, 2008b). It is these communities of practice who help define the problems and critically assess the results of research instead of simply lifting the veil of nature. But, as Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009), state, this is not enough,

> To avoid the risk of academic self-encapsulation, social scientific knowledge also needs to be externally evaluated. It should resonate with other academic disciplines, with the human "objects" of study, and with society at large. The more scholarly consensus is meaningful to such multiple constituencies, the more it warrants the exacting predicate of knowledge. (p. 706)

Thus, the critical element of the epistemological project is kept. Kant's court, which he argues is reason itself (Jackson, 2011), is replaced by communities of scholars (Kratochwil, 2011). Each community provides its own tribunal and evaluates the appropriateness of its own practices and methods. Thus, instead of objectivity, pragmatism favors agreement[23] (Rorty, 1979). Further, against positivism's binary logic, in the social sciences, these communities often deal with

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23 "For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can" (Rorty quoted in Talisse & Aikin, 2011, p. 4).

difficult questions and assess the results of knowledge claims by weighting the evidence, instead of applying a dichotomous template.

Importantly, epistemological instrumentalism and consensus theory of knowledge should be conceived of as two sides of the same coin (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009). On the instrumental side, pragmatism does not entail acceptance of anything that works. That is, it is not instrumentalism à la Friedman, approving anything that yields useful predictions (Kratochwil, 2011). The social nature of the generation of knowledge must necessarily be respected for knowledge claims to warrant such status. On the consensus side, pragmatism seeks to avoid the *de facto* manufacturing of agreement in specific circles. Thus, the purposive element of addressing a problem and the more demanding procedural requirements regarding the intersubjective and critical nature of knowledge need to be fulfilled (Kratochwil, 2007).

Pragmatist International Relations

Consequently, pragmatism can free the potential for creativity and rigor, contributing thereby to the growth of knowledge. But this growth does not constitute only the incremental accumulation of knowledge within a self-correct dynamic between conjectures and refutations à la Popper. It is characterized by the paradigmatic revolutions (Kuhn, 1970). Scientific knowledge does not advance only by knowing 'more', coming closer to the truth, but knowing 'different'. That is, scientific progress consists in formulating questions that could not even have been thought of before (Kratochwil, 2007).

This approach can prove fruitful for different disciplines within the social sciences but it has particular implications for international relations. This is because the debate on the adequate way to conduct research in the discipline has been rather rich but inconclusive in the last decades (Jackson, 2011). In this context, it seems useful to provide a critical account of the dominant approach to inquiry and propose an alternative. This may help to shed some light on the discussion and, in fact, explain some of its inconclusiveness. Additionally, in practice, research in IR has not stopped because of this situation and the discussion above can provide insights as to why. This raises the question of how can positivism be so flawed and dominant at the same time. Apropos, Friedrichs & Kratochwil (2009) argue that much of the research in the field is pragmatist in essence but disguised as positivist *ex post* in order to comply with the conventional

standards, which are positivist. Hence, the inconclusiveness of the philosophical debate in IR as well as the continuing practice of research despite the latter may be the symptoms of the same illness; lack of plurality. It is simply futile to attempt to assess pragmatist inquiry with positivist parameters, which is also the case conversely. It is pointless to try to evaluate an (philosophical) ontological position from the point of view of another (Jackson, 2011). However, this seems exactly to be the case[24] and goes to show the urgency for further exploration of plausible alternatives that enrich the conduct of inquiry.

In this sense, the pragmatist approach to inquiry in International Relations may bring up a fallacy –that without the assumptions of positivism, and the quest for absolute certainty that derives from them, the alternative is complete relativism or even nihilism (Kratochwil, 2011). However, questioning the convention, as mentioned at the outset of this paper, should do the opposite: enhance awareness. It does not follow, that without universally valid timeless foundations, 'anything goes'. Quite the contrary, in the absence of such unrealistic expectations, the call is to mindfully select alternative positions that permit furthering inquiry, in the social sciences in general and International Relations in particular, adequately.

Conclusions

Aristotle, in the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, stated "All men by nature desire to know". This points to a human quality of being inquisitive. The sciences are perhaps the best example of how humans have sought to answer their inquiries. Moreover, philosophers and other scholars have endeavored to establish the grounds on which those answers constitute 'justified true belief' (knowledge). From the outset of modern philosophy, these efforts have mainly focused on the positivist tradition, which has become the dominant approach within the social sciences in general and international relations in particular.

Certainly a step forward from Scholastic thought, positivism it not without limitations. Based on the successes of the natural sciences, positivism sought to translate Newtonian insights to the social socials, that is, unveiling of immutable

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24 Illustrated notably by the obsession with hypothesis testing in research carried out in IR schools. As mentioned above, such an approach can only make sense if the research subscribed to mind-world dualism and empiricism. And whether it actually can subscribe to it, as argued above, can be contested.

timeless laws of society. This led to the pursuit of certainty, which, as has been argued above, entails rather demanding requirements for the conduct of inquiry in the social sciences. Of particular interest is the assumption of a mind-independent world which can be known, and the belief that only those statements which match it or mirror it are acceptable knowledge claims. That is, ontological realism and correspondence theory of truth.

Against this backdrop, this paper has presented pragmatism as an alternative that addresses positivist shortcomings. Pragmatism departs from acting, not from reason (the mind), or from things (the world). It proposes a naturalistic view of the generation of knowledge in which it is a product of the interaction between human beings and their environment to solve a problem in order to further human action. This knowledge is accepted until there are reasons not to. Therefore, it takes the preliminary character of knowledge seriously. The proposal for research in IR is epistemological instrumentalism and consensus theory of knowledge.

In this sense, pragmatism provides a way to carry out research with greater awareness of theoretical assumptions and implications, and without positivism's demanding requirements. It has been argued that absolute certainty is not the antidote for Cartesian anxiety. Instead, recognizing its limitations and looking for alternatives can more helpful. However, pragmatism is not to be regarded as a silver bullet for IR research. A final corollary of the discussion presented in this paper is to hint to the benefits of searching for alternatives to positivism. Rather than replacing positivism with a new orthodoxy, the call is for pluralism. There is much to gain from questioning the dominance of positivist methodology. Developing this line of research and positioning alternatives on the debate can prove a quite fruitful endeavor (see *e.g.* Jackson, 2011). If nothing else, at least it can contribute to the caution and transparency with which we approach research. This alone constitutes a step in the right direction for furthering research in International Relations.

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