

The Balance of Power as a Historical Institution: Rekindling the History vs. Science Debate

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Paper prepared for the 6 SGIR Pan-European Conference on International Relations,
Turin 12-15 Sept. 2007

Introduction

This paper revisits the 1960s history-science debate in IR, often termed ‘the second debate’, to advance an argument for the fundamental importance of history to the field of international relations. It uses the balance-of-power thesis as developed by Hedley Bull to illustrate this proposition. The central question driving the second debate was: Should the study of international relations be viewed as an inquiry grounded in history, or alternatively, in science? Hedley Bull, as Australian scholar from the English School of IR, made a case for history or as he termed it, for ‘a classical approach’, while the scientific approach was defended by Morton Kaplan, an American IR scholar exponent of systems theory.

The task of this essay is twofold. It aims to advance reasons as to why Bull’s classical approach is, at bottom, the same as historical or interpretive approach in philosophy. In his 1966 article ‘A Case for a Classical Approach’,¹ Bull defined the former as an ‘approach to theorising that derives from history, philosophy and law’ but then went on to advance criticisms *against* science rather than arguments *for* history. The identity of this approach is thus far from clear. Secondly, in the literature the second debate is termed ‘methodological’ but the goal here is to show that its concerns are second-order or philosophical. It raises questions that do not concern simply method or techniques of hypothesis testing but basic questions about theory building, interpretation and measurement, and ethics of research. And eventually it prompts us to ask what the key object of international politics is and what sort of theorising is best suited to account for it.

The discussion has three sections. The first examines Bull’s history vs. science argument in his seminal article. The next section develops ideas that Bull evoked in the article but which demand a clearer articulation. By drawing on the philosophical writings of Michael Oakeshott,² it elaborates what Bull alluded to as ‘philosophy of

¹ Hedley Bull, ‘International Theory: A Case for a Classical Approach’, *World Politics*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1966), pp. 361-377.

² As a curious fact, Hedley Bull was a student of H. L. A. Hart, the most prominent legal positivist and arguably, legal philosopher, in the twentieth-century British legal tradition. Oakeshott, a British idealist, too wrote within a largely legal positivist framework. Both Bull and Oakeshott were fascinated with the question of rule-governed conduct and with the idea that society is fundamentally an

history'. On this basis, it argues that historical understanding serves as a standpoint for theorising human conduct, including the relations of states whenever these are viewed—as it is conventional in the English School—as agents analogous to human beings. History in short calls to life an interpretive and institutionalist theory of IR. The final section aims to lend support to such theory. To this end, it compares the institutionalist and historical notion of balance of power as put forth by Bull³, with the scientific balance-of-power argument of Kenneth Waltz⁴, the pioneer of neorealism in mainstream IR theory.

I. History vs. Science: Bull's Perspective

Before launching this inquiry, it is requisite to spell out that 'history' and 'science' are ideal notions: analytical vantage points for understanding the world, including that of international politics. By using this dichotomy, much complexity is reduced and valuable nuances invariably lost. But I believe that this does not pose a major problem considering the purposes of this essay—a fuller justification of this will have to await section II. The presumption for the time being is that the history-science distinction illuminates more than it obscures.

In his 1966 article, Bull invoked this distinction to dispute the rise and the threatening monopoly of scientific theory over the entire field of IR. By this he meant scientific approaches to international relations such as game theory, conflict studies, coalition theory, bargaining and deterrence theory as taught in the US. Yet, there have been US scholars, for example Stanley Hoffman, whose ideas stand closer to the historical rather than the scientific viewpoint. When Hoffman wrote 'International Relations: Still an American Social Science', he generated a discourse articulating Bullean anxieties over the reign of scientific thinking in IR quarters. Despite that this

association structured by rules. See H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961); Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

³ Bull is not the only one who defended an historical understanding of the balance of power as a key institution of international society. His colleague from the English School, Herbert Butterfield, a professional historian thought along the same lines. But here Butterfield's contribution has not been discussed, given space limitations and the task of focusing on Bull's views. Herbert Butterfield, 'The balance of power', in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), pp. 132-148.

⁴ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

development gained momentum largely in British and continental IR, it indicates how much Bull's *and* Hoffman's legacy has travelled on.⁵ It would thus be unacceptable to portray the history-science controversy as one waged between US and 'UK plus continental' theorists. Related to this, Bull himself thought that the advent of scientific theory in American IR was not a simple function of policy-relevance. As he wrote, 'it is a mistake to see in the scientific approach or in any one of the methods that go to make it up, the instrument of any particular political purpose in foreign or defense policy'.⁶ Indeed, the scientific school included theorists proponents of such policy, Herman Kahn, Morton Kaplan and Thomas Schelling, but also its opponents: Kenneth Boulding, Anatol Rapoport and J. David Singer.⁷ Most importantly, and this is a point concerning theory in general—beyond IR theory—Bull was not hostile to scientific or abstract theorising. He was objecting to the monopoly of science, not to its relevance.⁸

Bull's anti-science argument involved seven theses. Only three will be examined, as they have special relevance for the philosophical problems addressed in this essay. Bull begins his exposition by saying that 'in abstaining from what Morton Kaplan calls "intuitive guesses" or what William Rikert calls "wisdom literature", [scientific theorists] are committing themselves to a course of intellectual puritanism that keeps them (or would keep them if they really would adhere to it) as remote from the substance of international politics as the inmates of a Victorian nunnery were from the study of sex'.⁹ Because of its rhetorical potency, this paragraph has distracted readers from the next one, where Bull articulates his first and crucial thesis. He writes that by assuming that the world of international politics is a clear-cut thing and that the really pressing problem is how to discover rigorous procedures for explaining its workings, scientific theorists commits a double-faux pas. First, they assume that the world of international politics is an analytically unambiguous entity. Second, they also assume

⁵ Hayo Krombach, 'International Relations as an Academic Discipline', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1992), pp. 243-58; Steve Smith, 'International Relations: Still an American Social Science', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 2 no. 3 (2000), pp. 374-402; Stanley Hoffman, 'An American Social Science: International Relations,' (1977) rep. in Stanley Hoffman (ed.), *Janus and Minerva: Essays in the Theory and Practice of International Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press 1987), pp. 3-24.

⁶ Bull, 'International Theory', p. 366.

⁷ Bull, 'International Theory', p. 366.

⁸ For a recent article advancing the same argument see Friedrich Kratochwil, 'The Monologue of Science', *International Studies Review*, no. 5 (2003), pp. 124-128.

⁹ Bull, 'International Theory', p. 366.

that judgement can play some part at the initial stage of hypothesis formulation, but not at that of hypothesis testing, since theory is tested against an essentially ‘fixed’ world (of international politics). Bull finds both of these assumptions flawed.

For Bull, the defect of scientific theory is that it prioritises (scientific) method, while marginalising the question about what constitutes the object of theoretical inquiry. Scientists within IR assume that the central task of theory is to determine *how*—by what technique of inquiry, or statistical or mathematical procedure—international relations can be explored. But Bull argues that its task rather should be to ask: *what* is international relations? What matters, then, is not how we study something but what this something is.¹⁰ Recently, Rob Walker has argued along similar lines that the ontology of international relations—or what international relations as such is—constitutes a basic puzzle that cannot be reduced to a puzzle about method.¹¹ This is why it is inappropriate to portray the second debate as debate over method.

Secondly, Bull argues that scientific theory underplays the power of human judgement to shape reality because it treats the world as an unproblematic given. As a result, scientifically-inclined IR theorists do not allow judgment to enter the purview of hypothesis-testing, since for them the world of international politics against which such hypotheses are tested is by definition something fixed. Variation is permitted in the analytical hypotheses (explanans), but not in the set of ‘phenomena’ to be explained (explanandum)—the latter are givens for the purpose of analysis. But the difficulty with this, Bull argues, is that the question of what international politics is can have more than one answer.¹² For one theorist international politics is an ‘international system’, for another, it is ‘hegemony’, for still another it is ‘anarchy’ and so on. By reducing this plurality of theoretical perspectives to problems of method, scientific theorists prevent the most valuable and insightful contribution that IR theory can make: to define and to clarify the elements of the world we live in.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Navon, ‘The “Third Debate” Revisited’, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 27 (2001), pp. 611-625.

¹¹ R. B. J. Walker, ‘History and Structure in the Theory of International Relations,’ *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1989), pp. 163-183.

¹² Bull, ‘International Theory’, pp. 366-367.

Bull's position is that judgement should be part of hypothesis *testing* because we have to decide as to what the reality of international politics actually is. This is a matter of a theoretical perspective and there are more than one. The perspective Bull favoured is 'international society', a group of states bound together by common practices and institutions.¹³ And as Bull emphasised, by adopting this viewpoint, the theorist is not simply proceeding to test hypotheses but to ask further questions: 'For example, does the collectivity of states constitute a political society or system, or does it not? If we can speak of a society of sovereign states, does it presuppose a common culture or civilization? And if it does, does such a common culture underlie the world-wide diplomatic framework in which are attempting to operate now?...And so on'.¹⁴

But judging what reality is or is not, Bull continues, seems to be a difficult matter for another reason—morality. Like all politics, international politics concerns the problem of violence and the possibility that one agent may inflict harm on another. This provokes questions of right and wrong, or blame and responsibility. But these questions do not have a clear-cut answer to be captured into a neat set of scientific hypotheses—they are moral dilemmas. Or as Bull writes, 'some of these [central questions of international relations theory] are at least in part moral questions, which cannot by their very nature be given any sort of objective answer, an which can only be probed, clarified, reformulated, and tentatively answered from some arbitrary standpoint, according to the method of philosophy.'¹⁵

Another key thesis that Bull takes up in his critique of scientific theory concerns the *relationship* between object and method. His target here is the positivist argument that scientific method is essentially a universal method for studying all area of politics. On this view, it does not really matter how we would define the world of international politics—as 'international society', as 'conflict and cooperation' or as 'international system'—since statistical and game-theoretic procedures are at bottom different expressions of a uniform scientific method. They are based on unambiguous concepts, quantitative measurement and the postulation of empirical or theoretical regularities: scientific laws. This is the method of 'positive science.' Its promise is the cumulation

¹³ Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan 2002 [1977]), p. 13.

¹⁴ Bull, 'International Theory', p. 367.

¹⁵ Bull, 'International Theory', p. 366.

of knowledge, or bringing together the findings of different areas of research, from diplomatic bargaining, to arms races, to judicial politics and party politics. But Bull's objection here is that politics is not amenable to study by a single universal method. Rather, there are multiple methods of inquiry depending on the *object* of inquiry, and specifying this object is itself a matter of theoretical controversy.

Bull's argument returns to the point that it is crucial to be clear as to what the theorist thinks is the relevant object of international politics. Because for Bull this object (or as he calls it 'subject-matter') in the last resort involves the actions and decisions of fallible human beings—policy-makers, soldiers, but also analysts—it is not susceptible to exploration *via* a unitary scientific method. Whenever scientific theory attempts to force artificial coherence upon the inherently ambiguous area of human action and judgement, it is bound to face formidable difficulties. Or as Bull expresses it:

The difficulties that the scientific theory has encountered do not appear to arise from the quality international relations is supposed to have of a "backward" or neglected science, *but from the characteristics inherent in the subject matter* which have been catalogued often enough: the unmanageable number of variables of which any generalization about behaviour must take account; the resistance of the material to controlled experiment; the quality it has of changing before our eyes and slipping between our fingers even as we try to categorize it; the fact that the theories we produce are the affairs that are theorized about are related not only as subject and object but as cause and effect, thus ensuring that even our most innocent ideas contribute to their own verification or falsification.¹⁶

As this quote illustrates, Bull regards human beings as interpreting and self-interpreting animals, in the sense that the theories which they espouse and part of the very reality they seek to explain. On these premises, theoretical explanation is itself part of the universe of human interpretation and understanding. Before we can explain, we should be able to understand. So for Bull theorising human conduct—and IR theory in particular—falls within the purview of the interpretive or hermeneutic

¹⁶ Bull, 'International Theory', p. 369, emphasis added.

tradition, disclosed in the writings of philosophers such as Dilthey, Schleiermacher and more recently, Gadamer,¹⁷ and to early modern authors of international law, philosophy and history like Grotius, Pufendorf, Hobbes, and Kant.

Finally, in dissecting scientific theory, Bull puts forward a third—a similarly unflattering thesis—that science is characterised by a ‘fetish for measurement’.¹⁸ As before, this criticism applies to scientific theory, not just to IR theorising predicated on scientific postulates. As Bull remarks, ‘For anyone dedicated to scientific precision, quantification of the subject must appear as supreme ideal, whether it takes the form of the expression of the theories themselves in the form of mathematical equations or simply that of the presentation of evidence amassed in quantitative form’.¹⁹ Quantification is a determining feature of positive science. And there is, as Bull admits, nothing objectionable in adopting the standpoint of such positive science. But the problem is that within mainstream IR this standpoint tends to drive out all other alternatives, turning quantification into *an ideal* of proper theorising. For its proponents, non-quantitative research hardly qualifies as theory.

But as Bull remarks, quantification is a proper method solely if we wish to study regularities or patterns. Entities that are similar and which occur repeatedly can be studied either *via* abstract models or *via* statistical methods (where their recurrence can be predicted by probability theory). But quantification stops being a proper method in the minute we set out to explore *individuals*—be it an individual decision-maker such as Napoleon, an international crisis such as Cuba 1962, or a country such as Cambodia. In Bull’s words:

The difficulty arises where the pursuit of the measurable leads us to ignore *relevant differences between the phenomena that are being counted*, to impute to what has been counted a significance it does not have, or to be so distracted by the possibilities that so abound in our subject for counting as to

¹⁷ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works*. Vol. I *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991 [1883]); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev edn. (New York: Continuum, (1998 [1960])); Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism: And Other Essays*, ed. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1805-1833] 1998).

¹⁸ Bull, ‘International Theory’, p. 372.

¹⁹ Bull, ‘International Theory’, p. 372.

be diverted from the quantitative inquiries that are in most cases more fruitful.²⁰

To illustrate this proposition, Bull goes on to discuss Karl Deutsch's scientific theory of security communities where the level of integration among countries is measured as 'foreign trade as a proportion of total resources', 'mail sent abroad', or 'number of diplomatic agreements arrived at'. In criticising Deutsch's approach Bull notes that it 'often ignores the most relevant differences between the units counted: differences between the content of one item of mail and another, the diplomatic importance of one treaty and another, the significance of one inch of newspaper column and another.'²¹ In short, the question about individuality is a question of difference but scientific theory that looks for patterns is ill-equipped to tackle such issues.

Finally, Bull implies that the question of measurement is important because it concerns deeper problems of theory construction. But such problems, he alleges, are often glossed over by scientific theorists. They assume, erroneously, that measuring a concept is the same as explaining how this concept supports the general proposition they seek to defend. Thus, Bull writes: 'Foreign trade is foreign trade, and a precise measurement of foreign trade *is not a precise measurement of anything else* unless an explanation is advanced as to why this is so'.²² Bull's point in effect—since the argument is implicit—is that measurement can contribute to the testing of a specific (scientific) hypothesis or proposition but it cannot tell us how this proposition fits into the framework of the larger theory it is derived from. Scientifically-minded researchers are not careful enough to distinguish a single hypothesis from a comprehensive theory comprising many such hypotheses.

²⁰ Bull, 'International Theory', p. 373.

²¹ Bull, 'International Theory', p. 374.

²² Bull, 'International Theory', p. 374, emphasis added.

II. History vs. Science: Oakeshott's Perspective

Bull's argument offers a powerful criticism of the scientific approach to international politics. Science downplays human judgement; it invites the theorist to reduce questions of object to questions of method; it cannot account for individuality and difference, but leads to an obsession with measurement and quantification. And it has little if anything to say about the moral dilemmas that plague the daily routine of policy-makers, diplomats and soldiers. Yet, Bull's contribution is mostly negative. It provides reasons as to why science is an inappropriate approach for the study of politics, but not why the classical approach is the best possible alternative. That is, the basic puzzle still is: what is a classical approach and why does it matter for IR theorising?

To correct for this, this section puts forward the view that the classical approach is coextensive with a philosophy of history. In the 1966 article, Bull invoked the expression 'philosophy of history' in passing, but did not explore the matter further.²³ In this part, my essay draws on the writings of Michael Oakeshott to defend the standpoint of philosophy of history—henceforth called simply 'history'—against science (or the philosophy of science). There are three reasons for this choice. To begin with, Oakeshott was interested in the fundamental distinction between history and science as alternative perspectives for understanding reality, a theme that has been explored by very few philosophers.²⁴ Another consideration is that Bull's attack on science concerned primarily the notion of positive science or positivism. But there are other paradigms of science—for example, scientific realism²⁵—whose premises are non-positivist. Oakeshott's definition of science, as it will become evident shortly, is valuable because it can be applied to both positivist and non-positivist science. Finally, Oakeshott's definition of history offers a *systematic* response to the problems of scientific theorising Bull identified—that is, it invokes concepts such as

²³ Bull, 'International Theory', p. 375.

²⁴ An eminent exception is Wilhelm Windelband, 'History and Natural Science', Rectorial address, Strasbourg 1894, *History and Theory*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1980 [1894]), pp. 169-185.

²⁵ Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso, 1997); Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1998 [1979]); Margaret Archer et al. (eds.) *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (Milton Park: Routledge, 1998). For recent contributions to scientific realist literature in IR see the forum on scientific and critical realism in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, (March 2007), pp. 321-416.

individuality, difference and human judgement. Last but not least, Oakeshott's argument elucidates the elementary premises behind Bull's theory of international society and its key institutions such as the balance of power.

For Oakeshott, history and science each stands for a *mode* of understanding reality, a sort of Weberian ideal model.²⁶ There is no such thing as an objective view—or 'view from nowhere'²⁷—for grasping reality as a whole. Understanding instead is inherently perspectival: the theorist sees reality as refracted through the prism of a 'mode' (as Oakeshott terms each analytical standpoint). Each mode is an epistemological perspective for making sense of reality; it is not a segment of reality. Similarly, when Bull distinguishes 'international society' from an 'international system',²⁸ he does not have in mind different slices that are cut from the world of international politics, but rather its alternative theoretical images.

The curious thing about science and history, Oakeshott writes, is that both can be viewed as departures from a third mode—practice.²⁹ When we inhabit the world of practice, we are employing end-means reasoning, seeking to realise certain wished-for ends. That is, we labour to bring a current situation or state of affairs in accordance with a projected or future state of affairs, as animated by our desires. In more mundane terms, practice is a world where we wish to satisfy our desires, moving from point A to point B, and then to point C and so on. Within the mode of practice fall theories such as consequentialism, as well as the pragmatic tradition more generally. Expressed somewhat differently, practice is an idiom of problem-solving, where once a single problem is resolved, a new one arises that too presses us for a solution—a procedure that as Hobbes exclaimed chillily, 'ceases only in death'. Oakeshott admitted that practice is perhaps the most elementary mode of the human condition, as we are all its prisoners.

²⁶ The following section is based on my reading of Michael Oakeshott's *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933).

²⁷ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²⁸ Bull, *Anarchical Society*, p. 13.

²⁹ See Michael Oakeshott, 'The Activity of Being an Historian', in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, new edn (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991 [1962]), pp. 151-183.

But if practice is a heavy burden—because there is no resting place for the agent chased by ever new desires—then history and science are modes of escape. By traversing over to the realm of either history or science, we are forgetting or liberating ourselves from the ever present practical problems that beg for our attention. Perhaps there is a romantic element in how Oakeshott conceived of the historical and scientific enterprise. But there is more than a grain of truth in the conjecture that at the dawn of humankind, people began to think, to imagine in some sort of a systematic manner, or to philosophise once they had leisure and at least a temporary relief from practical difficulties such as hunger or the danger of virulent death. If practice is an idiom of action—where human beings are expected to act in response to a situation and in the pursuit of wished-for ends—history and science are idioms of theorising. Their ‘purpose’ is to understand the world, not to act upon it. The job of the scientist *qua* scientist, or the historian *qua* historian, is to think systematically—that is, within a framework of concepts and assumptions called science, and respectively, history.

Oakeshott in effect portrays history and science as self-contained theoretical worlds, whose assumptions are not to be judged by the standard of practical relevance. It is curious that Bull too had a similar view of IR theorising, regarding it primarily as an analytical rather than practical or policy-orientated enterprise. Embedding Bull’s thought in Oakeshott’s philosophy then would not do violence to Bull’s ideas.

Further, Oakeshott does not claim that it is impossible to make *factual* (as opposed to practical) propositions within each world: the historical and the scientific. Instead, he argues that each fact is a product of theory—a view that parallels Bull’s position (discussed above) that the facts of international politics, are actually *conclusions* derived from the *premises* of one or another theory of international politics. All facts, then, are theory-dependent. There is no pool of innocent facts, unadulterated by theory, despite what positivist science alleges.

Oakeshott’s stance is radical because it suggests that history and science are incommensurable modes. What counts as fact in history, does not and cannot count as fact in science: ‘H₂O’ (science) is not ‘water’ (history). The proposition ‘water equals H₂O’ is a scientific, not a historical proposition. For while scientific language employs mathematical or technical vocabulary (the idiom of chemistry in this case), historical

language is every-day language. The fact that Napoleon drank a glass of water before the battle at Waterloo is not thereby changed, in a historical narrative, if chemistry all of a sudden discovered that ‘water equals XYZ’. The crucial consideration here is *not* the ultimate essence of an entity. Rather, there are two entities (water as opposed to H₂O or XYZ) because there are two different logics of inquiry. Each logic dictates a different relationship between a number of key concepts and such concepts make possible the subsequent theoretical description of specific entities or agencies as ‘facts’.

This brings us to the question, what are the key postulates of history and science? To simplify matters, each mode can be identified by three clusters of postulates—(a) about its key objects, actors or agencies; (b) about the causal connections between such agencies; and (c) about its character as a theoretical language. Let us first attend to the scientific mode.

Science, Oakeshott, writes is the world understood ‘under the category of quantity’. Bull had a similar idea in mind when making the point that positive science is driven towards quantification. The goal of science, Oakeshott continues, is the full ‘communicability of scientific results’—or what philosophers like Popper and Lakatos call the ‘growth of scientific knowledge’.³⁰ The archetype language of science is mathematics because mathematical symbols are the closest match to the desired standard of perfect communicability. The archetype is not physics as it is often assumed,³¹ because the matter at hand is not what entities exist out there but what theoretical *vocabulary* can describe them.³² And this is a disguised way of saying that science attempts to remove, or at the very least, to minimise the ambiguity inherent in ordinary human language. Because Oakeshott focuses on language—rather than on entities (or objects) as Bull did—Oakeshott’s definition of science encompasses both positive science and non-positive science (such as quantum mechanics or critical realism).

³⁰ Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds), *Criticism and The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959); Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*. New York: Harper, 1961).

³¹ For an illuminating account of physicalist and positivist scientific theory see Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* (London: Routledge, 1961).

³² Here I use the term ‘theoretical description’ in its technical philosophical sense. This term does not imply an antithesis between description (fact-finding) and explanation (fact-explaining).

Not only the language of science, but its objects are abstract. They can be described by reference to generalised notions such as ‘type’, ‘kind’ or ‘class’. They are assumed to have either replicable or patterned character, and they presuppose no uniqueness or individuality. Each object is not an individual, ‘John Malkovich’, but an *instance* drawn from a general class, ‘movie-star’.

The connection that the scientist attributes to such objects, Oakeshott argues, is a causal relationship. Causality is an independent or third element that interferes between any two events or objects. Since changing the objects does not change the underlying causal connection (a substitution that is possible simply by virtue of the patterned or replicable character of such objects) such connection can be expressed in the form of causal laws.³³ The result of these three assumptions about causality, scientific objects, and language, is an abstract mathematical universe populated by classes of objects whose functions, properties and behaviour can be captured by models or probabilistic statistical calculus.

History, in contrast, begins with an assumption about the ambiguity of human language. Language is not transparent but opaque—it reveals while also concealing. An intelligent human being thus is caught up in a situation where meaning is present but where it demands to be clarified further, by considering the actions and utterances of other human beings. This is the well-known problem of context and interpretation. But while in science the theorist interprets the meanings of inanimate objects, in history the object of interpretation are other human beings and the artefacts they have produced *via* conscious human activity. What demands to be interpreted in the case of history, then, does not have the character of an object or a ‘thing’, but rather the character of an interpretation (or idea). The job of the historian is to interpret interpretations—an exercise termed ‘double hermeneutics’.³⁴ As a mode, history is made intelligible by the hermeneutic or interpretive tradition of philosophy.

³³ See William H. Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

³⁴ Michael Oakeshott does not use himself the term double hermeneutics but this is the bottom line of the argument he advances in *On History*. Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999 [1983]).

In hermeneutics, the goal of inquiry is to understand the individual, not the general. History is indeed a hermeneutic idiom for it does not study instances of generalisations but individuals—persons such as Charles V or Churchill, individual countries such as India or the German empire, or individual historical epochs such as the Reformation or the Industrial revolution. Even when historical research employs generalisations, such as the concepts of ordinary language (such as ‘king’ or ‘country’ which exemplify general notions) the ultimate point is to throw light on some concrete individuality. Once this individuality (the thing to be explained) is linked to other relevant individualities (the explaining elements) in a coherent story or account, the task of historical investigation has been completed.

Because of this, the relationship attributed to events or agencies within the historical world is one of contingency, not causality. Contingency presupposes that there is no overarching element—a casual law or mechanism—that is invariant and that can intervene between *any* two events. On the contrary, a contingent relationship, as its name indicates, is contingent on or dependent on the concrete identity of the individual events or agencies concerned. An account that discusses the relationship between individuals such as Churchill to Roosevelt is not comparable and cannot tell us anything about the relationship between Pope Boniface VIII and Philip IV of France. Contingency is a procedure where events and agencies are viewed as analytically connected to one another through noting else but other events or agencies.

It follows that the difference between history and science is categorical. The key premises of science are mirror image or the logical opposite of those of history. This does not deny the possibility that a researcher can pursue both activities: but it denies the choice to pursue them at the same time and within the framework of the same theory. The history-science distinction provides a comprehensive framework for theory-construction. On its basis, we can better understand the implication of Bull’s criticism of positive science. Bull suggested that scientific theory in IR dismisses the opportunities of theoretical pluralism confining these to mere methodological pluralism, and that it mistakes hypotheses for full-fledged theories. In Oakeshott’s terms, IR theorising is restricted to the province of science. Even when scientists employ historical evidence, their task is not to acquire a clearer and complete (in Hegelian terms) understanding of an individual by reference to other such individuals;

it is rather to use historical record to test scientific hypotheses whose ultimate aim is scientific generalisation.

Above all Oakeshott's articulation of the logic of the historical world elucidates three arguments central to Bull's international society approach, and crucially, the connection between them, since Bull did not explicate them fully. These arguments include the rule-governed character of the international realm; the concept of rules as expressions of human intelligence; and the concept of rules as historically changing practices. The next and final section takes up this theme, by focusing on the institution of balance of power.

III. The Balance of Power as a Historical Institution

Bull's theory of the primary institutions of international society³⁵—balance of power, war, diplomacy, the great powers, and international law—it is argued, can be best understood in the context of Oakeshott's mode of history. This is so because history is coextensive with the interpretive or hermeneutic tradition of philosophical inquiry,³⁶ and this tradition imparts a peculiar meaning to institutions treating them as *human* rules or practices. In simpler terms, history entails a specific theory of human institutions, and a theory of a similar sort can be found in Bull's writings. After sketching out what history implies for our understanding of institutions, the discussion concludes by briefly contrasting Bull's institutionalist notion of the balance of power with Waltz's scientific articulation of the balance of power.

History and the notion of rules are closely related. Wittgenstein's and Oakeshott's philosophy elucidates this point. The world of human affairs, as Wittgenstein writes,

³⁵ For a recent treatment see Barry Buzan, *From International Society to World Society? English School Theorising and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³⁶ For accounts of the place of hermeneutics in English School theorising see Richard Little, 'The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* vol. 6, no. 3 (2000), pp. 395-422; Roger Epp, 'The English School on the Frontiers of International Society: a Hermeneutic Recollection', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 24, no. 5 (1998), pp. 47-64.

is a realm of rule-following.³⁷ But, and this is a stance he shares with Oakeshott,³⁸ human beings are viewed as rule-following agents because a rule is a *proposition* intelligible to a rational human being as opposed to a mechanical command executed by a machine. There is a radical difference between human intelligence and artificial intelligence. For example, a person, John, can misunderstand a rule and this misunderstanding can still account as to why he did what he did—for example, got overrun by a car *because he misunderstood the traffic rules*. The key consideration here is that what can be understood can also be misunderstood: hence the importance of interpretation and double hermeneutics. But a machine cannot misunderstand a command—it either executes it or it does not—there is no place for interpretation in this context. In effect, this implies that history and rule-following are related idioms because both presuppose a humanist standpoint—a world intelligible to ordinary men and women. Science in contrast is a world of mathematical equations that is also, or perhaps exclusively, intelligible to artificial intelligence such as computers or machines. Because human interpretation and understanding is absent from the scientific world, it is a stretch of language to call the *regularities* or *patterns* that science records rules.

The question of how institutions change indicates another point of contact between the humanist idiom of rule-following and history. To answer questions like this—for example, have the rules of the international society changed or not in the twentieth century?—we need to exercise judgement; this was Bull’s argument. Institutional change therefore is at once an historical and interpretive business. To capture this double character of rules—the changing or contingent and the interpretive—Bull used the word ‘practices’. But there is an entire tradition of thinking in these terms. The language of practices is invoked by Oakeshott, by eighteenth-century humanist Giambattista Vico,³⁹ and as Bull himself observed, by the school of ‘classical’ authors of international relations such as Grotius, Pufendorf, Kant, and Vattel. This indicates that history—and by implication interpretation and rule-following—are the three crucial components behind Bull’s ‘classical approach’.

³⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edn, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967 [1953]).

³⁸ This is one of the central arguments Oakeshott advances in *On Human Conduct*.

³⁹ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, rev. trans. from 3rd edn T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968 [1744]).

Having clarified this triad of elements behind the classical approach, we are able to make better sense of Bull's theory of the balance of power as a historical institution. This permits us to understand his defence of the balance of power as a central—arguably the cardinal—institution of the society of states as well as his disagreement with scientific balance-of-power theorists such as Waltz.⁴⁰ Interestingly, the idea of balance of power is itself permeated by a tension between the historical and the scientific standpoint. Although this idea has occupied political theorists, diplomats and rulers since antiquity, it gained prominence in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars when a concordat of great powers used it as a founding principle of what came to be known as the Concert of Europe (1815). The Concert aimed at, and in a large measure succeeded, in guaranteeing the territorial arrangements among its member-states, the by-product of which was a historically unprecedented span of peace on the continent. But later on the balance of power was blamed as a major precipitating element in the outbreak of World War I. Quite disappointingly, this principle seemed to work well in the nineteenth century but not so well in the twentieth. So there were historical reasons as to why it could not be elevated into a general or scientific law of international politics.

Yet, mainstream IR theorist Kenneth Waltz (1979) propounded an abstract balance-of-power theory purporting to explain state conduct irrespective of historical circumstances and regardless of the characteristics of actors involved.⁴¹ It assumed that all states are uniform units driven by a simple motive—desire to survive—and that unless a state balances (through a system of alliances or internal build-up of its capabilities) against a rising hegemon (or a group of stronger states) it has little if any chance of survival. Amassing relatively more power, or 'capabilities' in Waltz's terms, than a competitor becomes a dominant strategy for each state.

But the ensuing struggle for power maximization—and herein lies the crucial distinction between Waltz's neorealism and classical realism that Bull was receptive to—is not a matter of conscious foreign policy choice. Its logic is inherent in the

⁴⁰ Curiously, in attacking science in his 1966 article, Bull objected directly to Morton Kaplan's systems theory. Waltz's structural realist theory was written much later but Bull never took issue with it.

⁴¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 102-129.

structure of the international system and has nothing to do with regime type or the plans of concrete decision-makers. The international system has an anarchical structure in the sense that no overarching authority exists to organise state relations. Under such structural conditions of anarchy, each state must rely on its own resources to survive ('self-help'). The result is an automatic tendency—a general law in scientific terms—for the formation of balances of power (global or regional). The result is a universal, timeless international *system* of balance of power among states, to which each state reacts mechanically. Balancing by the individual state is not a conscious action comparable to the conduct of human beings, but a mechanical *reaction* that characterises artificial intelligence or inanimate objects.

Waltz's neorealist theory is scientific: the balance of power it portrays embodies patterns, regularities or general laws. It is the ultimate law of international politics. This law has the status of a law of nature⁴²—states which fail to comply with it will gradually die out the same way in which a firm which ignores the law of supply and demand (say, through inadequate pricing) will be eliminated from the market. Clearly, such a naturalistic theory of politics admits no considerations of morality and legitimacy. Considerations of this sort animate the alternative, humanist and historicist tradition whose starting premise is not the natural but the social world.

Unlike scientific theorists, humanists and historians since Grotius have viewed the balance of power as a device used to check the rise of a hegemon, to prevent world-domination by a single, and therefore potentially tyrannical, empire. According to this perspective, the balance of power is not an automatic mechanism but a *policy*—it is planned and executed by human beings, decision-makers, acting on behalf of political associations. Its operation calls for effort or action—it cannot obtain automatically or by itself.

More importantly, for humanists like Bull, the balance of power is an institution—or a *principle* of action—aside from being a *policy* or a course of action. Bull in particular follows Emmerich de Vattel, an eighteenth-century Swiss jurist, in defining the balance of power as a principle or as a 'state of affairs such that no one power is in a

⁴² 'Law of nature' as a physicalist idea is to be distinguished from 'natural law' (*ius naturale*) or a humanist idea, stipulating immutable moral principles governing the conduct of human beings.

position where it is preponderant and can lay down the law to others'.⁴³ In a similar fashion, the German historian A. H. L. Heeren saw in the balance of power the bedrock of the European nineteenth-century order.⁴⁴ Heeren defined the balance of power as 'the attention paid by different states to the preservation of their mutual independence, by preventing any particular one from rising to a such a degree of power as should seem inconsistent with the general liberty.'⁴⁵ In turn, the states-system is a 'society of independent individuals, variously related to each other,'⁴⁶ whose character 'must be sought ...in its *internal freedom*, or, in other words, in the *mutual independence of its members*, however disproportionate they may otherwise be in regard to physical power. It is this feature which distinguishes such a system from one of an opposite class, that is, where an acknowledged preponderance of one of the members.'⁴⁷

This humanist outlook led Bull to postulate that the world of states can be modelled on the analogy of the social world of intelligent beings,⁴⁸ or that *anarchy* can be combined with *society*.⁴⁹ Bull thereby asserted that international order or social relations are possible, despite that the international realm is anarchical or lacking a common superior. For Bull, the premise of anarchy does not entail the Waltzian conclusion that states are forced to eliminate rivals—because, as Bull argues, relative security is *not* an overarching concern for states⁵⁰—nor does it entail the atomistic doctrine of self-help whereby each agent is potentially suspicious of and hostile to every other agent.⁵¹ Indeed, if mutual suspicion and hostility were the ubiquitous feature of the international realm, society of states could not be established—an image

⁴³ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 97.

⁴⁴ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 12.

⁴⁵ A. H. L. Heeren, *A Manual of the History of the Political System of Europe and Its Colonies From Its Formation at the Close of the Fifteenth Century to Its Reestablishment upon the Fall of Napoleon*, 5th edn, 2 vols (Oxford: Talboys, 1834), vol. I, pp. 12, 232.

⁴⁶ Heeren, *A Manual of History*, vol. I, viii.

⁴⁷ Heeren, *A Manual of History*, vol. I, viii, emphasis added.

⁴⁸ As Bull clarifies, a qualified analogy but not an identity can be established between the international order and the domestic order. When compared to human beings, states are not threatened by what Thomas Hobbes called a fear of 'violent death'; states are not characterised by equal power or equal vulnerability; and states are not preoccupied with relative security, *The Anarchical Society*, pp. 44-48.

⁴⁹ Hedley Bull, 'Society and Anarchy in International Relations', in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), pp. 35-50.

⁵⁰ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 107.

⁵¹ 'Potentially' is an important qualification since there is no assumption for the actual presence of hostilities.

familiar from the Hobbesian ‘war of all against all’. Against this, Bull envisages the possibility of international society of states who coexist under shared rules. They agree on common institutions, even though they do not agree to be governed by a common superior (be it a single all-powerful state or a group of such states). International society then realises the ideal of international order through rules and institutions.

Bull explicitly wrote that the balance of power is an institution. An institution is characterised as a device which constrains conduct, or as Bull writes, as one which presupposes ‘mutual restraint’. In his terms, ‘[the balance of power] implies ...that each state should not only act to frustrate the threatened preponderance of others, but should recognise the responsibility not to upset the balance itself: it implies restraint as well as the restraint of others.’⁵² The idea that state conduct is *habitually* inscribed by limits reveals unambiguously Bull’s institutionalist standpoint. Institutions or rules impose constraints on conduct—they set limits on what agents can do.

The implication is that while for institutionalist like Bull the interest of states is curbed by rules—and in this sense institutionalised within international society—for theorists like Waltz states are engaged in the pursuit of naked self-interest that admits of no such limitation. And because interests are supposed to be pursued within the framework of common rules, Bull’s balance-of-power theory has an ethical dimension that Waltz’s theory lacks.

For Bull, the balance of power embodies ethical concerns for two reasons. But we have to take a short detour to see why. Bull’s overarching argument in his major work *The Anarchical Society* has an ethical ring. The book’s central question is: How is order among states possible? Or, how an international society, meaning its key institutions, can procure order? This remark needs clarification. It is well-known that Bull was preoccupied with order as opposed to justice, and that he planned to write a sequel to the *Anarchical Society* to explicate the principles of international justice; a plan frustrated by his untimely death in 1985. A point that should not be overlooked is that Bull’s discussion of *order* is itself an exercise in ethical theory or ‘normative

⁵² Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 106.

theory'. Order is not asserted by Bull as an analytical problem to be corroborated by subsequent empirical testing to find out to what extent it reflects or accurately predicts what is going on in the international realm. On the contrary, order is itself a normative problem which demands justification because it generates the international realm as a distinct social reality. For Bull, as obviated by his dedication to the classical approach to (IR), theorising does not mirror an unproblematic reality but actively constructs it. Bull embraces the postulates of an interpretive and pluralist tradition which allows us to think of reality as comprising multiple worlds—the world of international society being one possibility among many.⁵³ Because each of these worlds is constructed by the theorist, each demands justification. In this sense, all theory is normative theory (there is no positive or purely explanatory theory).

Following from this, the first reason as to why the balance of power has an ethical dimension is that Bull considers it to be a principle that has value. The balance of power is valuable because it is conducive to international order, which in turn is desirable as it procures certain 'elementary goals of social life' such as survival, security of promises, and stability of property.⁵⁴ These goals are common to a society of human beings, as well as a society of states. Notice that the balance-of-power contribution towards the goal of orderly relations among states cannot be assessed by abstract considerations such as those enumerated by Waltz: polarity, number of actors or alliances, or defensive or offensive purposes of such alliances. These are not improper concerns but they belong to the scientific IR paradigm which cares little about the moral aspect of politics.

The second reason as to why, as Bull insists, states value the balance of power is because it prevents a world hegemony. Hereby he espouses Vattel's and Heeren's argument that a universal empire would extinguish the capacity of states to be independent agents choosing freely their own fortunes. The moral value of freedom and mutual independence legitimises the balance of power. This leads Bull as well as for other humanists to view the balance of power as *the* central practice of

⁵³ Bull comments that international society is one of the analytical modes for understanding world politics, *The Anarchical Society*, pp. 39, also p. 49.

⁵⁴ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, pp. 5-6.

international society.⁵⁵ This practice in effect defines the ideal image of this society—as a club of free and equal political agents.

It follows that precisely because the balance-of-power is an institution, it presupposes moral choice and entails responsibility. Its institutionalist logic suggests that certain decision-makers, for example Metternich or Castlereagh, were not compelled—by the structural logic of an abstract international system—to pursue a balance of power politics. Rather they *chose* to do so after weighing the political circumstances at the time, but they could have chosen otherwise. In the last resort, then, it is in the area of moral or ethical considerations where the clash between history (which assumes intelligent beings who have responsibilities towards one another) and science (which postulates abstract players who do *not* act in the context of significant others) is manifested in its starkest form. For morality too belongs to the historical world.

Conclusion

In bringing this essay to a close, it should be reiterated that the controversy between scientific and historical approaches to studying human and state conduct is not an isolated concern about the latest or most fashionable paradigm in the discipline of IR. It is a debate about theory in general. Bull's critique of positive science identified the necessity for social science research (and therefore for the IR field) to move beyond the positivist ideal of methodological pluralism—still espoused in present-day IR—to a condition of genuine theoretical pluralism. For what we need as researchers are

⁵⁵ The triad of elementary goals Bull enumerates are de facto *legal rights* secured by law. This leads to the puzzle as to whether the balance of power or, alternatively, international law is the defining rule of international society. Bull's thinking on this point has not been clear. For he writes: 'The first function of international law has been to identify, as the supreme normative political organisation of mankind, the idea of society of states. *This is...the fundamental constitutional principle of world politics in the present era.*' *The Anarchical Society* (pp.134-135, emphasis added). But previously he has argued that the balance of power is the *precondition* without which international law cannot function (pp. 102, 112). And finally that 'It is a paradox of the principle of the balance of power that while the existence of a balance of power is an essential condition of the operation of international law, the steps necessary to maintain the balance often involve violation of the injunctions of international law' (p. 104). But while the tension between international law and the balance of power is an issue that needs to be postponed for another occasion, the key argument here is that both institutions for Bull are justified on ethical grounds.

different theoretical platforms, not merely different hypotheses launched from one and the same platform.

The history-science debate prompted also basic questions about the power of theorising to construct the social world, and indeed, the world of international relations. Bull's defence of the historical way of theorising disclosed a commitment to a philosophical worldview that accords primacy to intelligent conduct as opposed to inanimate behaviour. The postulates of such conduct were systematically articulated in Oakeshott's philosophy.

History, as this discussion of Bull's and Oakeshott's views has hopefully shown, is an irreducible (to science) standpoint for making sense of human institutions, as well as of institutions upheld by states such as the balance of power. In rearticulating the age-old humanist view that a society of states, because it is a society of equals, is predicated on a balance-of-power principle which prevents the emergence of a single superstate Bull raised not only historical and interpretive questions, but critically, ethical questions. Bull and Oakeshott, in advancing the conversation between the modes of science and history, thus have invited us to rethink the thorny theme of what constitutes moral conduct—in human affairs and in the relations of states.