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# Diversity in IR Theory: Pluralism as an Opportunity for Understanding Global Politics

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Rather than dead or even moribund, International Relations (IR) theory is most certainly “alive,” although of course exactly how “well” remains a matter for debate. This article explains that each of the traditional and more recent “schools” of theory has its important strengths and serious weaknesses. Some theories are more appropriately applied to particular problems than to others. Analysts need to be conversant with a wide range of theories so they can recognize them when they are being employed (even only implicitly) and also use them as a toolkit when developing a research subject or explanations for patterns observed. Viewing some subjects simultaneously from more than one theoretical perspective often enhances understanding.

**Keywords:** IR theory, pluralism, global politics

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The inspiration for this Forum was a Roundtable Panel at the Joint BISA/ISA Conference held in Edinburgh in June 2012. Part of the buzz at that meeting was about a series of panels sponsored by the *European Journal of International Relations* on “The End of International Relations Theory?”<sup>1</sup> that, in fact, had also been convened at the ISA San Diego annual meeting the previous April. Although the EJIR title seemed to promise some fairly dark talk, predictably, the panels themselves produced not only a wide range of opinions about the present and future of IR theory but also a feeding frenzy concerning the meaning of the key words “end,” “international relations,” and “theory.”<sup>2</sup>

Be that as it may, the EJIR series gave me—in the dual roles of panel chair and presenter—a handy opening. I could not help observing that we were convened in a very large room that barely accommodated (with standing room) an enthusiastic audience of well more than a hundred. Rather than dead or even moribund, it seemed abundantly clear that IR theory is most certainly “alive,” although of course exactly how “well” remains—and seems destined forever to require—a much more challenging and subjective assessment.

However much the casual observer of world affairs, harried practitioner, or naïve scholar may ignore or perhaps go so far as to mock “theory” and “theoreticians,” the truth is that everyone is deeply enmeshed in theory whether they like it or not. Theory in the sense of mindset is arguably implicit in every opinion we human beings express and every action we take. Perhaps, then (unless one navel

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<sup>1</sup>In addition, making appearances at various conferences was an “Occupy IR Theory” contingent.

<sup>2</sup>A few of the papers were immediately available on [www.isanet.org](http://www.isanet.org), and many have subsequently appeared in Wight, Hansen, and Dunne (2013).

gazes to the point of paralysis) it is just as well to be aware of the assumptions that condition our thoughts and behavior. In my experience, for example, most traditional historians are quick to insist that theory has no proper place in history as a discipline, conveniently ignoring the fact that the very subjects they regard as important to research, the patterns and causal relationships they discern, the “periods,” and even the chapters into which they divide their accounts reveal much about their theoretical orientation. How poetical then is the justice in the argument eloquently advanced in this Forum by Halvard Leira that IR scholars should make more use of history.

The need for theory hardly needs reiterating in the IR field. As Rosenau and Durfee (1995:2–3) once expressed it: “It is sheer craziness to dare to understand world affairs,” and theory is just about our only tool for “bringing a measure of order out of the seeming chaos.” Waever (2012:3–7) writes that from a “comparative social science” perspective, “it is striking that Theory has for at least half a century had a strong and central role in the intellectual as well as the social organization of the discipline of International Relations.” As he explains, the main debates have been about theory (and associated methods), the leading figures in IR have been theorists, “the standard format of an IR article in a leading journal has increasingly converged on the theory-plus-case model,” and “non-Western IR communities” continue to be engaged with Western theories. Waever also highlights four recent trends in IR: “a decline of ‘great debates.’” “a fragmentation into subfields and schools” that are not inclined to conversation, a tendency to import theories from non-IR disciplines/fields like economics, organization studies, and sociology, and what he regards as “most revolutionary” in IR—“an increasing orientation toward large-N type of studies with only a rudimentary sense of theory.”

However central theory has always been in IR, the relationship among theories has usually been regarded as Darwinian. The “interparadigm debate” has frequently degenerated into “paradigm wars” and equally internecine conflicts over methodology.

As someone who has been studying and writing about IR for more than the half-a-century Waever surveys, I can testify personally that it has ever been such. When I was a twenty-year-old Masters student at the University of Texas-Austin, my IR professor was a classical realist, and then, I finished my Ph.D. at Columbia, where realism was out of fashion and UN specialists and international lawyers painted a much more liberal view of the world. My first teaching position was at Brooklyn College (City University of New York), where a senior professor of a quantitative persuasion looked me hard in the eye and cautioned: “Son, if you don’t know *how much* there is of something, you don’t know anything at all.”

As these personal reminiscences might suggest, in the late 1960s, the paradigm debates were mostly between realists and liberals, while the methodology contests were between self-styled empiricists or social “scientists” and practitioners of what Hedley Bull later championed as the “classical approach.” The former tended to gather data and crunch numbers; the latter believed understanding came primarily from the application of wisdom to a proper reading of history and diplomatic practice. Although the division between the scientists and others did seem to die down for some years, today it is back with a vengeance—especially in many US universities and major journals—and indeed, it is now made more complicated with the pervasiveness of game and rational choice theories. It is significant that a recent major survey of the IR field found that “since 2002, more articles in the major journals employ quantitative methods than any other approach,” which the survey took to be “evidence of bias” insofar as “the percentage of articles using quantitative methods is vastly disproportional to the actual number of scholars who identify statistical techniques as their primary methodology” (Maliniak et al. 2011:439). The same survey (p.455) found that by

2006, almost 90% of all major journal articles were “positivist,” defined as those that “implicitly or explicitly assume that theoretical or empirical propositions are testable, make causal claims, seek to explain and predict phenomena, assume that research is supported by empirical means, and aspire to the use of a scientific method.”

Nevertheless, IR theory in general has continued to evolve at an almost bewildering pace, which can be interpreted as evidence either of wondrous vitality in the field (as I prefer) or of intellectual fragmentation to the point of absurdity—or perhaps of something in between. Certainly, if we are to go on having paradigm wars, there are many more paradigms or variations thereof to clash on the battlefield. I myself have been a combatant on more than one theoretical battlefield over the years, but I have to confess that I have grown tired and downright impatient with all the *sturm und drang*. So often, frankly and sadly, the contests seem to be about little more than power and privilege in the IR profession. Yes, it is healthy to debate the efficacy of particular paradigms and methods as applied to particular puzzles, but “wars?”

Fierce contests over theory and methodology do continue today, but fortunately, in my view, there is also growing apace in IR what I read as a major counter-trend that embraces and celebrates diversity. A landmark book in 2010 was Sil and Katzenstein’s, *Beyond Paradigms*, that advanced a strong argument for *Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics* (see also Lake 2011, 2013). Jackson (2011:chap. 7) similarly refers to a movement toward “a pluralist science of IR”; Dunne, Hansen and Wight (2013:416–17) to the virtues of “integrative pluralism”; and others like Franke and Weber (2011), to the advantages of “pragmatism.” It is interesting and perhaps significant that this seems to be the trend in some natural sciences as well. For instance, cosmologist Stephen Hawking has recently expressed the opinion that the “theory of everything” that he and various others have sought for many years—a sort of Holy Grail of theoretical physics—may never be found and that therefore the only alternative may be to settle for a range of theories (grouped as “M theory”), each of which explains some things well but cannot account for other phenomena (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010:116–17; Ferguson 2012:210–11).

There are many reasons to welcome increasing diversity in theory and methodology, and to explore the many benefits that pluralism may offer us for understanding global politics.

Traditional IR theory approaches like the once-dominant paradigm classical realism, as well as neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and ES (formerly, the English School; for example, Liklater and Sukanami 2006; Navari and Green 2014) still have their many followers, no doubt, partly because they *are* traditional.<sup>3</sup> However, of course, these “schools” of theory have also persisted because they have long appeared to explain various important things rather well. A similar reputation for explanatory utility is enjoyed by a more recent and increasingly popular arrival into the IR mainstream, especially but by no means exclusively among European analysts: constructivism.

Allow me to illustrate (what hardly needs illustrating) the utility of different mainstream approaches by referring to Chinese foreign policy, an aspect of which subject I happen to have been writing about lately. Central concepts in realism—states, sovereignty, anarchy, national interests, power, security concerns, prudence as a cardinal virtue, and avoidance of moral crusades—have certainly not lost their resonance in today’s world. For instance, Chinese foreign-policy-speak often seems to come directly from the sacred texts of classical realists. For

<sup>3</sup>Marxism used to be regarded as one of the major IR paradigms, but Marxism’s prestige and influence rapidly declined with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and advance of capitalism even in China. Nonetheless, neomarxist ideas do survive in world systems theory and in various currents of critical theory.

their part, neorealists can convincingly argue that the rise-of-China story is fundamentally about shifting global power structures, from Cold War bipolarity to “American empire” unipolarity to multipolarity with an increasing number of great powers. Liberals are also persuasive with their observation that, even under anarchy, a measure of international cooperation and surrendering of sovereignty (or better, of autonomy) is unavoidable for states; international institutions, law, and norms in general are “normal” phenomena for “international society” and do “matter.” Thus, the Chinese were eager to join the WTO and now find themselves both somewhat helped and constrained by its rules. At the same time, the very existence of the WTO dispute resolution process makes it less probable that trade-related issues like the dollar/renminbi exchange rate will escalate into a full-fledged trade war. Meanwhile, constructivists can stress the fact that the reactions of the rest of the world to China’s rise and activities in the South China Sea inevitably reflect different assessments of Chinese capabilities and intentions.

Influential as they are, traditional IR theory approaches have never explained enough to capture anywhere near a full intellectual market share, and over time, if anything, their shortcomings have also become more and more apparent. Consider first classical realism (for example, Morgenthau 1978; Mearsheimer 2001). Classical realists cling to the notion that a state’s national interests are essentially objective, that is, easy enough for a country’s policymakers and attentive publics to “read.” Yet beyond a few very general “interests” such as “survival” (which is rarely directly at stake), specific interests are difficult to identify, articulate clearly, and use as a guide for policy. For instance, realist Walt (2013) observes: “[T]he Western lurch into Mali shows the recurring tendency for great powers (or even medium powers like France) to get involved in places first and then define them as ‘vital interests’ later. . . . Put differently: if Mali can be seen as a vital interest, then *anywhere* can.” Any exercise identifying national interest is inherently subjective from the start: most “interests” are “perceived” rather than self-evident. Also highly subjective is the challenge of balancing or establishing priorities among competing perceived interests. Is slowing China’s rise in the US national interest?<sup>4</sup> If so, is this more important than a host of other aims, such as having a prosperous trading partner and market entry for US firms, securing China’s cooperation with Iran and North Korea, or encouraging the progress of democracy and human rights in China? If, as Morgenthau insisted, all national interests can be reduced to the pursuit of power, how is “power” to be conceived and measured? Capabilities are of many types and, as Nye has persistently reminded us, include a variety of “soft” forms. Morgenthau (1978:158) conceded that a country’s “reputation”—not only for making credible threats but also for the “legitimacy” of its national values and goals—carries considerable weight in diplomacy. Yet he tended to abhor appeals to political ideology and morality that nonetheless, many analysts would argue, are part of the human condition and important contributors to a country’s influence. To be sure, particular states may be widely labeled as major powers, rising powers, “have nots,” or some other sweeping generalization about power. But, at the end of the day or the policy stream, *all* capabilities are inherently *relative* to target actors, issues, and context. For instance, not for lack of trying or military capabilities, the US superpower proved unable to dislodge Cuba’s Castro or (for that matter) Papa Doc Duvalier.

Mention of major powers or any power ranking for states points up yet another of classical realism’s problems, that it is forever bleeding off into neorealism (for example, Waltz 1979; Keohane 1986) or some sort of assessment of system structure. Once again, we have a core definitional challenge; in this case, *what sort* of structure? Should we focus on military capabilities, economic clout,

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<sup>4</sup>Kirshner (2012) demonstrates that realism offers a wide range of possibilities as to how to regard and respond to the rise of China.

democracies vs. old-fashioned dictatorships or “Asian value” regimes, world religions, regions, distribution of multinational firms, terrorist or organized crime networks—or what? For that matter, there are the perennial debates about structure vs agency, the whole (however defined) vs parts. When push comes to shove, how much can structure really explain about outcomes? For example, Waltz (1979) might have warned us that, in a bipolar world, missiles in Cuba would have alarmed the Kennedy administration, but he could not have answered the far more important question of whether either side was prepared to escalate the face-off as far as nuclear war.

As for liberal theory, it is easy to identify numerous areas of human affairs that veritably cry out for more international cooperation, policy coordination, and institution building, but where such progress is almost nonexistent or woefully inadequate. As any student of international integration/regime theory or bureaucratic politics at the state level can testify, policymaking is typically an exceedingly complex process that involves a bewildering number and variety of actors with competing perceived interests. Neoliberal institutionalists (for example, Keohane 1984, 2002) do rather better in highlighting the latter. Progress is slow at best; paralysis, dysfunction, and even institutional disintegration are ever-present possibilities. Whether it is the European Union saving the euro or the US Congress avoiding default or a fiscal cliff, things can get ugly very fast. Decision makers frequently appear to be decidedly irrational—whether they actually *are* irrational or are simply prisoners of their ideology, beholden to narrow interests, or applying a “rationality of irrationality” strategy.

Here, of course, is where constructivism comes in. Not every individual or group perceives the world and the efficacy or desirability of responses to that perceived world the same way. There is an enormous amount of subjectivity involved, yet there is an objective dimension as well. The “real” world “out there” can still bite us or (more to the point here) public or private policymakers if they “read” their respective external universes wrong. My favorite of Wendt’s (1999:56) examples is Emperor Montezuma’s unfortunate initial assumption that the Spanish *conquistadores* were gods, which error soon proved fatal both to him and the Aztec Empire. But where do such observations get us in terms of broader understandings about global politics? We can analyze the speech and actions of individuals and groups better to understand what they think they are doing; however, it is difficult to move beyond case-by-case accounts. Furthermore, there are *at least* two rather different streams of constructivism,<sup>5</sup> one (Wendt 1992, 1999) that is concerned primarily with state actors and the other (for example, Ruggie 1983; Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989, 2013) that emphasizes the construction of international order through the evolution of rules and institutions.

While the contests among traditional approaches have continued, the world itself has been changing at what appears to have been an accelerated pace, with rapid but highly uneven globalization, the increasing prominence of nonstate actors, growing concerns about human rights and environment, shifting identities, widespread crises of authority, and cycles of integration and disintegration. Yet another “school” of IR theory, postinternationalism (for example, Rosenau 1990, 1997, 2003; Ferguson and Mansbach 2004, 2008, 2012; Cerny 2010),<sup>6</sup> has attempted to analyze and articulate the dynamics of just such a partially global-

<sup>5</sup>Labels like “constructivism” and its “streams” are arguable from the start. For instance, Wendt (1999:3–4) mentions three strains thereof that preceded his own: a “modernist” strain associated with John Ruggie and Kratochwil, postmodernism, and feminist theory. I prefer to regard the last two as separate “schools,” different from “critical” theory, which admittedly is yet another debatable category. Such categories are like wide tents; which theorists are or are not under the canvass at any given time is far from clear.

<sup>6</sup>Cerny terms his approach “transnational neopluralism.”

ized and “complex” world. A key observation has been that globalization is an evolutionary, multidimensional, non-unilinear process that has ebbed and flowed (according to Ferguson and Mansbach) since the earliest human migrations and trade. Another theme is that integration and disintegration are closely linked, in that broader currents of human activity have always tended to engender efforts to preserve the traditional and/or local. Friedman (2012) neatly captured this connection in his book title, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, and Benjamin Barber, in his *Jihad vs McWorld* (1996). Frequently, the consequence is “glocalization” or the “embedding” of the global in the local and resultant hybrid forms (for example, Sassen 2006). Postinternationalism as an approach is naturally more appealing in times when globalization is proceeding apace, rather than a period of economic instability and greater introspection such as the world has been experiencing since the 2008 onset of the global financial crisis. Globalization in some dimensions is continuing and even growing—for example, the spread of new technologies—but nonetheless, Mansbach and I did deem it appropriate to subtitle our 2012 book globalization *The Return of Borders to a Borderless World?*

There is, of course, much more to the story of ever-greater diversity in IR theory. Consider increasing interest in normative and also “critical” theory, which might possibly be considered to be two sides of a similar coin. Normative theory (for example, Frost 1986; Cochran 1999) has its intellectual roots in the long history of (especially) Western thought about values in political and social life. It seeks to discern normative choices and frequently goes so far as to suggest which are the best choices. Critical theory (for example, Edkins and Vaughn-Williams 2009; Weber 2010; Bronner 2011; Nickel 2012) specializes in exposing and critiquing the assumptions and values that underlie both theory and practice. Both normative and critical theorists make a valuable contribution by highlighting an important dimension of IR that “scientists” and classical realists prefer to downplay. Yet they may do so from a self-styled Olympian position that runs the risk of appearing “holier-than-thou.” Some critical theorists are neomarxists or at least strongly anticapitalist and opposed to “liberal interventionism” and the use of force generally. Thus, they are as protective of sovereignty and condemnatory of human rights activism or humanitarian “do-good” projects as any hard-core classical realist.

This perforce brief survey also could not fail to mention postmodernism (post-structuralism) (for example, Der Derian and Shapiro 1998; Der Derian 2009a), feminist theory (for example, Ackerly, Stern, and True 2006; Steans 2006; Shepherd 2010; Tickner and Sjoberg 2011), and postcolonial IR (for example, Seth 2012). As is now well known (no irony intended), postmodernists have emphasized the problem of “meaning” with respect to language and concepts, which pushes the element of subjectivity inherent in scholarship and practice even farther than constructivist thought. If scholars, policymakers, and attentive publics are simply incapable of “understanding” what anyone is saying, where are we except nowhere? I am especially appreciative of Der Derian (2009b, 2002), not least his insightful analyses of the role of the media in shaping (virtually) our “knowledge” of the “real world” of violent conflict. Feminist and postcolonial theorists, for their part, seek to correct whatever biases in IR theory may be reflective of, respectively, males and white Westerners. All very well and good, in my white male Western opinion; but IR feminists face a continuing challenge of demonstrating that female perspectives and behavior really do differ all-that-much from males and the major importance of any differences observed. They are on much firmer ground when dealing with the likes of human rights issues affecting women. Moreover, however laudable the aspirations of non-Western IR theorists may be, they most often appear to be in obsessive conversation with Western theory and have yet to develop coherent alternatives (see Horsburgh, Nordin, and Breslin 2013). A focus on “Asian values” and China’s “peaceful rise,”

for example, may be little more than a thinly veiled apology for old-fashioned authoritarianism and budding imperialism.

In sum, given all the “turbulence” (Rosenau’s term) in world affairs over the past several decades, it is hardly surprising that IR theory too has been in rapid flux. Mainstream theories have themselves been evolving, for example, classical realism into a much more nuanced version that Sterling-Folker and others (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009; Toje and Kunz 2012) describe as neo-classical realism. Earlier, power transition theory emerged to address the dynamics of change in global structures that some argued was missing from neo-realism. ES stalwart Bull’s notion of *The Anarchical Society* (1977) was one inspiration for Wendt’s (1992, 1999:3, 253) assertion that “anarchy is what states make of it,” even as Bull’s speculation about the possible emergence of a “new medievalism” (1977:264–76) seems almost to have prefigured postinternationalism’s emphasis on a fragmented world with competing actors of various types. As Berenskoetter (2012) has observed: “[T]he ‘isms’ are not closed, static paradigms with clear arguments set in stone. Everyone who has ever tried to comprehensively survey an ‘ism’ knows they are diverse and dynamic bodies of thought. And they are not owned by anyone, least of all those generally cast as representatives.” IR theory has become more and more multidisciplinary and “global,” and variations on familiar theories and substantially new approaches have arisen to help fill in some of the many gaps. Berenskoetter again: “There is no lack of theorizing among junior scholars whose background and outlook is arguably less American than that of previous generations, and whose conceptual work draws on political theory, philosophy, sociology, history, psychology, religion, geography, media studies, literary studies, etc.—the list goes on. These creative endeavors offer fresh angles on world politics, its very conception, and how to study it. The question is, do the authors still identify with ‘IR’ as an intellectual home?”

Whether they do or not, that IR home is constantly being renovated and even drastically remodeled. IR is slowly but surely moving away from what once was an *almost exclusive* focus on states and interstate relations, rational decision making, the West, and white males. We now are much more aware of the reflexive side of things, including the fact that subjectivity and normative assumptions are inevitably part of both scholarship and practice. It is crucial and should be humbling to recognize that *all theories and methodologies are themselves constructions*. Vasquez reminded us at the Edinburgh meeting that scientifically oriented scholars do earnestly strive to produce “facts” within the carefully drawn parameters of their studies that are in a sense “proven” and potentially subject to cumulation. However, the choice of topics investigated as well as the theoretical framework, definition of terms, data sets, and methods for manipulating data that are employed plainly involve important subjective decisions.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, game and rational-choice theorists determine the rules shaping actors’ options and have a penchant for projecting from small controlled studies the behavior of actors in much larger contexts. Physicist Hawking (quoted in Ferguson 2012:331), for example, speaks of “model-dependent realism”: “Our perception—and hence the observations upon which our theories are based—is not direct, but rather is shaped by a kind of lens, the interpretative structure of our human brains.” Vasquez himself brilliantly demonstrated elsewhere that much of the empirical/quantitative work over the years on *The War Puzzle* (1993) had come to little because it rested squarely on questionable realist assumptions.

<sup>7</sup>For instance, Hansen and Porter (2012:410) maintain that even numbers “have distinctive properties that have particular significance for governance.” They “are not simply representations of an external reality but also produce actors, objects, and relationships, including relationships of power.”



At the end of the day, perhaps the best argument for diversity and acceptance of pluralism is that the more we seem to know, the more it is apparent how much we still do *not* know and the daunting complexity of the countless puzzles that remain. As Mearsheimer and Walt (2013:449) put it: “Given how little we know, and how little we know about how to learn more, overinvesting in any particular approach seems unwise.” All of us theorists live in glass houses, with numerous design flaws and little protection against the slings of others. A large dose of humility and tolerance and even serious appreciation of the efforts and ideas of our scholarly peers is required. At one level, all of us are not unlike the blind individuals trying to describe an elephant by feeling part of its tail or foot. Or consider a cubist painting, where the subject may seem all the better revealed by viewing it from different angles and perspectives.

IR students are sometimes warned about the dangers of mixing theoretical perspectives in their work. In my view, that advice is almost always dead wrong, although it is wise enough to caution against *confusing* such perspectives. I tell my students they need to be conversant with a wide range of theories so they can recognize them when they are being employed and also use them as a sort of checklist to go down when developing a research subject or explanations for patterns observed. Typically, investigators will rather quickly find that some theories are more helpful for their particular project than others. Pragmatists seem to adopt much the same position when they write that: “Viewing different theories as different tools and instruments for dealing with the social world [makes] possible different research agendas and designs, perhaps not so much concerned with showing that a given theory is wrong per se, but with arguments that it is not of much use when applied for the purpose *x* to a problematic situation *y*, where this or that theory might be of more use (Franke and Weber 2011:686; see also Hellman 2009)”. Much the same could be said for arguments about methodology. For instance, the utility of quantitative methods depends *mainly* on the quality and suitability of the underpinning theoretical structure as well as the data available. Sil and Katzenstein (2010:205) ask us to go a step further with “eclectic analyses”: to explore “how concepts, logics, mechanisms, and findings associated with various paradigms might be selectively integrated to shed new light on substantive problems that are of interest to both scholars and practitioners.”<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, it is inevitable and no doubt a good thing for debates about theory to continue, but we need to eschew paradigm wars, keep the conversation friendly, and assure that it is constructive (in the broadest sense). Rodney King, whose vicious beating by police sparked the devastating Los Angeles riots of 1991, as it happened, died only shortly before our BISA/ISA Edinburgh meeting. We IR theorists would do well to heed his sage advice. He appealed to his television audience: “People, I just want to say, can we all get along? Can we get along?”

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<sup>8</sup>Christian Reus-Smit (2013:589) insists that analytical eclecticism is “exclusively” an “empirical-theoretic project” that “cannot accommodate” “normative forms of reasoning.” I disagree. There is no reason why normative theory cannot be part of the mix—and it should be.

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