

Introduction

“If we keep our eyes on what is actually happening in the world and on the requirements of reliable knowledge, we may be able to avoid the dangers of the replacement syndrome, faddism, and extreme theoretical and methodological relativism—that is, of an intellectual life without standards,”

K. J. Holsti¹

In recent times epistemology has taken on a more prominent role in International Relations (IR) theory. Its appearance can be roughly traced to when the discipline enters into what has been called a “reflective” or “self-conscious” period,² commonly known as a “great debate.”³ In general, these debates are characterized as periods when IR scholars examine the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the discipline, and engage each other in discussions over disciplinary focus,⁴ methodology, and epistemology.⁵ Since the 1920s there have been three great debates in IR, but epistemology did not enter until the late 1960s,⁶ and was not really prominent until the late 1980s, where it has

¹ K. J. Holsti, “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Which Are the Fairest Theories of All?” *International Studies Quarterly* 33, (1989): 261.

² Numerous authors have commented on this self-reflexivity, particularly in the context of the third, present debate; see Joseph Lepgold, “Is Anyone Listening? International Relations Theory and the Problem of Policy Relevance,” *Political Science Quarterly* 113, no. 1 (1998): 45; Fred Halliday, “International Relations and Its Discontents,” *International Affairs* 71, no. 4 (1995): 736-7; Michael Brecher, “International Studies in the Twentieth Century and Beyond: Flawed Dichotomies, Synthesis, Cumulation,” *International Studies Quarterly* 43 (1999): 214.

³ Not to be confused with the “inter-paradigm” debates, a topic not discussed here. For brief descriptions of the great debates, see Ole Wæver, “The Rise and Fall of the Inter-Paradigm Debate,” in *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, eds. Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 150.

⁴ Specific to the first debate. Steve Smith, “Positivism and Beyond,” in *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, eds. Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12.

⁵ The second debate was primarily methodological, although implied epistemology, and the third tends to be primarily epistemological. Yosef Lapid, “The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era,” *International Studies Quarterly* 33 (1989): 236-8.

⁶ See Hedley Bull, “International Theory: The Case for a Classical Approach,” in *Contending Approaches to International Politics*, eds. Klaus Knorr and James N. Rosenau (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 20-38; J.

continued to crop up in various discussions of IR theory.⁷ The statement above by Holsti, for example, is taken from the context of the third debate, explained below, and demonstrates the type of attitude typical to this debate that takes place in what I will call competing epistemological positions. The dynamic usually followed by a competing epistemological position is of a mainstream position being defended against new, more radical position(s), and both sides are likely to view the other as being irrelevant, irresponsible, or too limited in scope.⁸ Exchanges like this are still carried out in IR theory (on a small scale),⁹ although currently the positions are not so much radical as they are rehearsals of well-established parts.¹⁰

Specifically, the epistemological discussion of the third debate concerns the perceived decline of the empiricist, or positivist, epistemology that is taken for granted by mainstream IR theory.¹¹ In a seminal article, Lapid notes that, following trends from other social sciences, IR followed suit and saw a “shared recognition that the third debate marks a clear end to the positivist epistemological consensus” and is “expected to facilitate trailblazing ideas about the nature and progression of knowledge in the international relations field.”¹² While this implies numerous ideas, I focus in this thesis

David Singer, “The Incomplete Theorist: Insight without Evidence,” in *Contending Approaches to International Politics*, eds. Klaus Knorr and James N. Rosenau (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 62-86.

⁷ Smith, “Positivism and Beyond,” 12.

⁸ The mainstream attitude is brought out clearly in Robert Keohane, “International Institutions: Two Approaches,” *International Studies Quarterly* 32 (December): 279; D. S. L. Jarvis, *International Relations and the Challenge of Postmodernism: Defending the Discipline* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000). For the alternative challenge to the mainstream, and to Keohane in particular, see Smith, “Positivism and Beyond,” 11-44.

⁹ See the Forum edited by Gunther Hellmen “Are Dialogue and Synthesis Possible in International Relations?” *International Studies Review* 5 (2003): 123-53.

¹⁰ A comment suggested by Geller and Vasquez about the forum cited above, as well as Richard Ashley’s opinion about the whole third debate. See Daniel S. Geller and John A. Vasquez, “The Construction and Cumulation of Knowledge in International Relations: Introduction,” *International Studies Review* 6 (2004): 2; Richard Ashley, “The Achievements of Post-Structuralism,” in *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, eds. Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 240-53.

¹¹ Lapid, “The Third Debate,” 236.

¹² Lapid, “The Third Debate,” 238-9.

on one of the more prominent sources of such ideas, postmodernism.¹³ The third debate has therefore advanced on one specific front, which can be characterized in the following, very cursory, form: the epistemological consensus in question here is roughly the empiricist belief that knowledge is gained from the senses from a world that is external and independent of us. The challenges put forth from postmodernists aim to show how language or discourse is manipulated into making us think that we are gaining knowledge of the world around us, when in fact these are constructions maintained by those in power.¹⁴ These challenges are taken to undermine empiricism, in effect, putting an end to mainstream IR epistemology.

While much work has gone into showing why we should not accept empiricism's foundations, I am not convinced by the supporting arguments. These focus on the nature and use of language, and affirm (roughly) that mainstream language consists of a metaphysical system that imposes meaning by excluding other possible interpretations. When this system is advanced (as in a theory), it sets the limits for what is possible, therefore creating reality. I believe an equally valid question may be asked: are these good reasons to abandon empirical epistemological foundations? As I mentioned above, a resolution to this problem is difficult, and I believe that this is because the discussions are, for the most part, motivated by non-epistemic (read political) reasons that tend to be

¹³ For an excellent overview of other views prominent in the third debate, see Lapid, "The Third Debate," 235-54; and Steve Smith, "Positivism and Beyond," 11-44.

¹⁴ At this point I believe it would be helpful to clarify the postmodern position that I have in mind in order to avoid over-generalizing. I have in mind a Motif of postmodernism, according to Darryl Jarvis, that is called "subversive postmodernism." This type of postmodernism, motivated by "politics of inclusion," and by means of deconstructive practices (explained below), "attempt[s] to dismantle organonist knowledge systems that, by and large, have been the hallmark of the Western intellectual tradition. In this sense the project repudiates epistemology and attempts instead to establish a postfoundationalist view of the world." This is to distinguish it from other Motifs of postmodernism, which do not hold such radical views on knowledge and reality, but are still motivated by the so-called politics of inclusion. All of this will be returned to in Chapter one. Jarvis, *International Relations and the Challenge of Postmodernism*, 76. Also helpful is the previously cited, recent forum edited by Gunther Hellmen that highlights the different facets of this question from both sides of the debate.

masked in epistemological terms.¹⁵ This suggests that a reconsideration of mainstream epistemology is important in IR theory, though a different approach is needed, an approach that places a stronger emphasis on the foundational elements of epistemology itself. In addition, it invites a closer look at the arguments given against it. That is the general problem to which this thesis is directed. I will now define a few of the theoretical terms involved, which will also help to specify the problem.

The first step is to introduce a concept that will focus the discussion to be used throughout this thesis. This is the concept of competing epistemological positions, which is common to discussions of the type addressed by this thesis.¹⁶ A competing epistemological position can be roughly defined as a position that makes certain claims about the world (truths), but that is backed up by a particular justification, and aspires to establish that justification as *the* justification in its discipline.¹⁷ These justifications should be different enough so as not to overlap, in the sense that those claims that they do reach are incompatible with each other.¹⁸ One advantage of using this type of classification is that it broadly indicates three areas that are important to my discussion. First, it points out that competing epistemological positions differ in their conception of reality, which indicates a metaphysical, or ontological, difference. Second, competing epistemological positions differ in terms of their views on the justification of knowledge,

¹⁵ Steve Smith concludes, for example, that such discussion “is unavoidably political,” which leads him to understand all of what postmodernists and mainstreamers do as falling under political action. Although I do not take a stand on this, I show some harmful consequences of this, in theoretical as well as practical terms, in the conclusion. Steve Smith, “Singing Our World into Existence: International Relations Theory and September 11,” *International Studies Quarterly* 48 (2004): 504.

¹⁶ Paul A. Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72-3.

¹⁷ My conception of a competing epistemological position is very close to what Donald Davidson calls a “conceptual scheme,” briefly described as “ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation,” and may be particular to individuals or groups. But my discussion of how these come into contact with one another, and how to rationally choose between them comes from Boghossian’s discussion of epistemic systems. Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 183-98; Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 72-3.

¹⁸ Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 72-3.

indicating an epistemological difference. Finally, they hold contrasting views on how knowledge should be justified, meaning that they have a different normative standard of justification. Each of these areas is important to the competing epistemological positions—or simply, the mainstream position or the postmodern position, as I will refer to them—that are discussed in this thesis. Another advantage is that discussion is focused on the foundational elements, allowing me to sidestep issues pertaining to widely varied subject matter.

My next step is to define the mainstream position, which will cleave to the basic features just indicated. Put this way, there are two assumptions that are taken for granted by most mainstream IR theorists. The assumptions are first, that reality exists independently of human minds and actions, and second, that one can know this reality (through empiricist epistemology).¹⁹ In terms of the first assumption, mainstream theorists as varied as Dessler, Morgenthau, and Vasquez agree that whatever exists in the world does so regardless of our attitudes and opinions of it.²⁰ That is to say, their views on reality are that it is an independent yet knowable basis on which all our theories are about, but that these theories are not identical to it. Reality exists, rather, to judge whether theories represent it correctly or incorrectly, and only it can confer truth upon these theories. This combines two metaphysical views: realism, which holds that reality exists independently of us; and objectivism, which holds that reality makes statements true or

¹⁹ For the first assumption, see Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 4; For the second assumption, the relevant aspects of empiricism are: that knowledge is justified by appeal to evidence from our senses (typically observation), and by logical inferences from (previously justified) knowledge. See Michael Nicholson, “The Continued Significance of Positivism?” in *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, eds. Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 128-45.

²⁰ David Dessler, “What’s at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?” *International Organization* 43 (Summer 1989): 445.

false.²¹ Chapter one elaborates upon this aspect of the mainstream position in much greater detail.

The second assumption deals with the mainstream's epistemological view. Roughly, this is equal to that of contemporary epistemology, meaning that it accepts knowledge defined as justified true belief, and places a greater emphasis on the justification of knowledge.²² Their position on justification is empiricist, a view that counts knowledge as valid only if it is gained from information of direct sense experience, mainly observation, and also that differences in this information should be expressed by "knowable differences in experience."²³ To help understand what this means, it is useful to break empiricism down into primitive principles of belief "generation" and belief "transmission."²⁴ Belief generation is "a justified belief [generated] on the basis of something that is not itself a belief but rather a perceptual state," e.g., the mental state one has while looking at a cat. Transmission principles are "principles that prescribe how to move from some justified beliefs to other justified beliefs," i.e., describing such a state, and other beliefs that allow you to infer a belief.²⁵ (For example, "I am seeing a cat with certain features, the light in the area is sufficient, I remember seeing a cat with similar features last week, so I believe this is the same cat.") Most commonly and specific to the general empiricism I will defend, generation principles are observation or experience; and transmission principles deductive and

²¹ Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002), 73.

²² See David Dessler, "Constructivism within a Positivist Social Science," *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 124.

²³ Bruce Hunter, "Empiricism," in *A Companion to Epistemology*, eds. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 110.

²⁴ These principles may differ in terminology, but are similar in terms of the processes they describe. Here I am using Boghossian's formulations of these principles, Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 65.

²⁵ Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 65.

inductive reasoning.²⁶ An important point to note is that we operate according to these principles, they are “*implicit* in our practice, rather than explicit in our formulations,”²⁷ so in this sense, certain non-epistemic reasons, like pragmatic reasons, are eliminated from consideration. This discussion will be returned to in chapter two.

Finally, the above discussion about justification brings out the fundamental nature of epistemic principles for epistemology,²⁸ but also brings out a second, more important point: that epistemic principles have something that spells out explicitly what is and what is not allowed in making a specific knowledge claim, whether in general or in a specialized field like IR. For example, this could be as simple as relying on generation principles such as present experience and memories to deduct a belief about a certain cat, as I demonstrated before. A common argument is that these principles aim at an epistemic virtue, e.g. true belief or knowledge,²⁹ and the fact that these principles guide us to that virtue indicates we are doing well in following them.³⁰ Or, to use Susan Haack’s phrasing, these principles “have succeeded strikingly well...they have earned a certain epistemic distinction.”³¹ It is from these general principles that the normative character of epistemology is taken, because in granting them such justificational status we are describing what one should do in a given epistemological situation.³² The

²⁶ Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 65.

²⁷ Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 65

²⁸ Here I am using Boghossian’s use of fundamental in that “By a ‘fundamental’ principle, I mean a principle whose correctness cannot be derived from the correctness of other epistemic principles.” This will have much to do with the point of normativity, especially Kim’s position on it. Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 67.

²⁹ Or power/knowledge, in the case of postmodernism, but this is jumping ahead. For now, it will do best to understand the discussion in the sense of contemporary epistemology, and in chapter three I will show how this can be expanded to include postmodernism. Alvin Goldman, *Pathways to Knowledge: Private and Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 51-70.

³⁰ Jaegwon Kim, “What is ‘Naturalized Epistemology’?” *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988): 382.

³¹ Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 105.

³² Kim, “What is ‘Naturalized Epistemology’?” 382.

normative aspect described here, though formulated by the mainstream, is important to both positions, and will be treated at length in chapter three.

This, in basic form, is the mainstream position. At this point I would like to clear up a point that is associated with the mainstream—positivism. Positivism is a term often used in abusive ways to describe the mainstream position I am defending. Yet it is rarely understood.³³ Michael Nicholson once commented that “the label ‘positivist’ seems to incite misunderstanding, so in an ideal world I would rather be without it.”³⁴ In this thesis I am taking his desire literally, and disavow the use of the term positivism. My reasons are as follows. Positivism principally describes a set of philosophical doctrines, which differ from author to author, that dominated analytical philosophy in the early and middle part of the 20th century.³⁵ Although there is no definitive statement of what positivism is, it comprises a few common beliefs. One is the veneration of “science”, as positivists wanted to axiomatize its foundations by construing them as expressions of modern logic, which creates the possibility of the unity of the sciences.³⁶ Another is empiricism, which was employed in their attempts to propose a theory of meaning that had its verification in experience only—the famous verification principle that the meaning of a sentence was its method of verification.³⁷ These, however, are the only significant qualities that were passed on to IR theory, and these only in their basic form.

My reason for declining to use the label positivism, then, is that while mainstream IR theory traditionally carries on the spirit of positivism in adhering to the scientific method that implies a form of empiricism, it in no way abides by this method to the letter. That is,

³³ Nicholson, “The Continued Significance of Positivism?” 129.

³⁴ Nicholson, “The Continued Significance of Positivism?” 129.

³⁵ Thomas Uebel, “Vienna Circle,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2006 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2006/entries/vienna-circle/> (accessed July 3, 2008).

³⁶ Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1937), xiii.

³⁷ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952).

the mainstream is empiricist, but it is not committed to specifying and defending the complex philosophical and logical doctrines that define positivism. This shows that the label is more suggestive than necessary.³⁸ As I see it, the labels ‘positivism’ and ‘positivist’ are interchangeable with ‘mainstream’ and ‘mainstreamer,’ as I have been using them, primarily because, as I have been characterizing these, they assume roughly the same metaphysical and epistemological basis of positivism.³⁹ This reflects a more careful conception of the mainstream, and frees me from defending the specious claim that the mainstream is always positivist. So in what we have seen, and in what follows, where positivism and its derivatives are seen, read “mainstream and its derivatives,” unless specifically noted.

With that out of the way, I now turn to the postmodern challenge. It will be recalled that postmodernists are not timid with their claims. According to Smith, postmodernist epistemology has as “its central tenet...one which seeks nothing less than the overthrow of virtually all preceding positions on epistemology.”⁴⁰ Assuming the mainstream as one of those positions, this statement can be broken down into a two-part challenge which I have appropriately named, the postmodern challenge.

The first aspect is the postmodern challenge to reality: the denial that there is a world “out there,” regardless of what we think.⁴¹ Reality *is created* by language in the form of theories, opinions, etc., which are guided by the interests of power.⁴² The way it is brought into existence is through discourse, and other elements which are not discussed

³⁸ Note, for example, Smith’s difficulty in establishing that the mainstream is positivist that does not rely on just assertion. Smith, “Positivism and Beyond,” 31-3.

³⁹ Moritz Schlick, “Positivism and Realism,” in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 82-107.

⁴⁰ Smith, “Positivism and Beyond,” 29.

⁴¹ Jim George, *Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994), 29-30.

⁴² Smith, “Singing Our World into Existence,” 504.

here. Discourse, according to Jim George “refers...to a broader matrix of social practices that gives meaning to the way that people understand themselves and their behavior...a discourse makes ‘real’ that which *it* prescribes as meaningful.”⁴³ Reality, then is typically argued to be discursively created, which Bradley Klein explains more detail, and leaves us with a clear idea of what this may be,

To be engaged in a discourse is to be engaged in the making and remaking of meaningful conditions of existence. A discourse, then, is not a way of learning “about” something out there in the “real world”; it is rather, a way of producing something as real, as identifiable, classifiable, knowable, and therefore, meaningful. Discourse creates the conditions of knowing.⁴⁴

Therefore the postmodern challenge to reality consists of showing *how* reality has been “brought into existence” by mainstream IR theory rather just existing in an ordinary, taken for granted sense. This challenge is elaborated in chapter one.

The second aspect is the postmodern challenge to knowledge. This is that empiricist mainstream epistemology is a power-created discourse, its methods of justification are discursively controlled, and knowledge is created, not “discovered.”⁴⁵ This characterization is seen in Jim George’s comment that “the process of discursive representation is never a neutral, detached one but is always imbued with the power and authority of the namers and makers of reality—it is always knowledge *as* power.”⁴⁶ That is to say, postmodernists tend not to think of justification in the cognitive and logical sense as the mainstream does, but rather apply discursive arguments to the objects of

⁴³ George, *Discourses of Global Politics*, 29-30.

⁴⁴ Quoted in George, *Discourses of Global Politics*, 30.

⁴⁵ Steve Smith puts this very nicely when he says of positivism, “its empiricist epistemology has *determined what could be studied because it has determined what kinds of things existed in international relations.*” Steve Smith, “Positivism and Beyond,” 11 [my emphasis].

⁴⁶ George, *Discourses of Global Politics*, 30.

knowledge, and by extension, justification. In this way these are identified as being manipulated and harmful. Their normative stance then, is that given these observations on how these discourses and methods are exclusionary and harmful, postmodernists reject mainstream epistemology completely.⁴⁷ In its place, methods which favor the diversity and variety of the human experience are preferred, a practice known as the politics of inclusion. These topics will be returned to in chapters two and three.

The problems for the mainstream position in IR theory now become clear—the postmodern challenge does indeed offer an interesting way of undermining it. I understand it as consisting of an *a priori* claim that any theory that accepts these assumptions is already mistaken: in every case, there is a denial of *a defining property* that mainstream IR theory purports to say something about reality, as well as *a fundamental relation* of mainstream IR theorists to their subject matter.⁴⁸ The postmodern challenge puts in doubt the very possibility of doing mainstream IR theory. But does it spell the end of mainstream epistemology?

Interestingly enough, within the third debate there is little that specifically answers this question. There are two reasons for this. The first comes from the mainstream and is that many see this problem as too abstract and distant from the real business of IR. Keohane has characterized the above as “a debate at the purely theoretical level...simply to argue about epistemological and ontological issues in the abstract...[which] would take us away from the study of our subject matter, world

⁴⁷ Steve Smith, “International Relations and International Relations: The Links between Theory and Practice in World Politics,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 6 (2003): 237.

⁴⁸ Admittedly, there has been little in the way to demonstrate which particular IR theorists fit into these categories so far. The discussion in chapters one and two will leave a clearer picture of the IR theorist as someone meeting such a description.

politics.”⁴⁹ And Dessler acknowledges that IR theorists simply accept epistemological assumptions and are “happy to let philosophers work out” the details.⁵⁰ The second comes from the postmodernists and is that any attempt at meeting halfway is just another method of domination. Steve Smith, in a recent forum on whether dialogue and synthesis were possible in IR theory said,

the call for synthesis is mistaken because it assumes that we can find out the truth about the world out there by combining theories and approaches... Dialogue is not going to be easy, or even possible, in international relations until the discipline becomes less dominated by a narrow orthodoxy reflecting historically and culturally specific interests.⁵¹

The problem, then, is very much a live issue, albeit a little-discussed one.

Furthermore, the end of mainstream epistemology could be inferred from the fact that the postmodern position is better represented in the current literature that deals with the competing epistemological positions.⁵² Smith and George have here been presented as leading the attack, although authors such as Shapiro, Der Derian, Walker, Campbell, and Ashley are also important in postmodern contributions to IR theory. In my opinion, the reason is because they have more solidarity in their views. On the mainstream side, however, there have not been well-articulated responses to the specific epistemological challenges made by the postmodernists, although there are a few authors such as Holsti,

⁴⁹ Robert Keohane quoted in Jarvis, *International Relations and the Challenge of Postmodernism*, 90.

⁵⁰ David Dessler, “Constructivism within a Postivist Social Science,” 124.

⁵¹ Steve Smith, “Dialogue and Reinforcement of Orthodoxy in International Relations,” *International Studies Review* 5 (2003): 143.

⁵² Jim George, *Discourses of Global Politics*; Steve Smith, “International Relations and international relations: The Links Between Theory and Practice in World Politics”; Steve Smith, “The United States and the Discipline of International Relations: ‘Hegemonic Country, Hegemonic Discipline,’” *International Studies Association* (2002): 67-85. Der Derian, “Introducing Philosophical Traditions in International Relations”; Roland Bleiker, “Retracing and Redrawing the Boundaries of Events: Postmodern Interferences with International Theory.” *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Human Governance* 23 (Oct.-Dec. 98): 471-97

Moravcik, Dessler, and Jarvis who briefly touch upon epistemological themes.⁵³ This reveals a further weakness for the mainstream position: which is that in the scattered responses to postmodernism from a mainstream point of view, the philosophical subtleties are missing that are necessary for a proper defense of the deep challenges made. For those reasons, my contribution to the debate stands out by articulating those challenges, and then answering them on their specific grounds.

However, I believe the lack of interest or the unwillingness to enter into philosophical debate is no reason why mainstream epistemology cannot be defended. Because the postmodernism challenge has not been contested on its own terms it continues to perpetuate in IR theory, which leads to the lingering illusion that it is true. But I am not persuaded that this is the case. Without a doubt, postmodernism *stands out* for its challenges—but these do not hold up under scrutiny, and most importantly, despite postmodernism’s adamancy on ending mainstream epistemology, it holds onto many of its key assumptions. In other words, in addition to not being able to stand on its own, it contradicts itself. I will briefly show a few examples of this.

It is beyond doubt that postmodernists write about events that happen in the world “out there,” and argue that these have been brought into existence by the mainstream.⁵⁴ In particular, Smith has argued that the contents of mainstream theory helped bring about the events of September 11.⁵⁵ It must be immediately noted that this argument is invalid, because it relies upon accounts of causation that are nowhere to be found in any of his

⁵³ Holsti, “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall”; Keohane, “International Institutions: Two Approaches,” 279; Andrew Moravcik, “Theory Synthesis in International Relations: Real Not Metaphysical,” *International Studies Review* 5 (2003): 131-6; Øyvind Østerud, “Antinomies of Postmodernism in International Studies,” *Journal of Peace Research* 33 (1996): 385.

⁵⁴ Richard K. Ashley, “Untying the Sovereign State: A Double Reading of the Anarchy Problematique,” *Millenium: Journal of International Studies* 17 (Summer 1988): 228-9.

⁵⁵ See above, note 52.

writings. For this argument to be valid it must establish exactly what *are* the causes for those effects, but this puts him in a double bind. First, if he does enumerate the various *actual* causes, in all likelihood this will force him into recognizing numerous independent entities, which would then force him to revert to mainstream assumptions to make the argument valid. Second, if he foregoes making such an analysis or denies that he must accept the invalidity of the argument, and still insists on referring to the effect (in this case, September 11), it is necessarily a mainstream conception. This argument can be equally applied to a more general formulation. Now given their metaphysical commitments, and taking into account the difficult requirements in successfully making such a claim about reality, why would postmodernists then rely upon making such references to the world “out there”?⁵⁶

Furthermore, while postmodernist epistemology can be shown to be a weak challenge to the mainstream (a task I undertake in chapters two and three), it can also be argued that it does not overthrow it at all, but assumes some of its basic features. Although their epistemology is strictly non-cognitive, barring similarity of belief generation principles, they seem to rely quite naturally on belief transmission principles and a version of normativity that function similarly to mainstream ones. That is, given that a belief does not conform to their version of a justified belief, i.e., it losing its justified status after being shown to represent a power interest, one is justified in reasoning that it must be rejected. If one reasons in this way, and given the postmodern goal of uncovering power expressions and creating spaces for suppressed subjects, it becomes apparent that one is following guidelines of normativity. It has been noted

⁵⁶ This is similar to doubts and criticisms offered against postmodernism by Rescher. Smith’s argument and my critique will be returned to in chapter one. Nicholas Rescher, *Objectivity: The Obligations of Impersonal Reason* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 206-7.

elsewhere that postmodernism cannot escape modern logic,⁵⁷ and here we see one consequence of that, namely that it assumes an epistemology that functions similarly to one it sets out to overthrow. Why postmodernism then?

In the end, it may be just the felt need to expand the analysis of IR theory to include non-traditional subjects, the politics of inclusion. If this is the case, and I believe it is, then the postmodern ambition is *actually helped along* more by traditional epistemology than by trying to end it. What I mean is that because the politics of inclusion are so closely linked to postmodernist epistemic principles that if the latter are rejected, the whole project suffers. Besides, who said that just because IR considers some questions more important than others that the *epistemological principles* have to be rejected? That radical conclusion may also explain the disinterest from the mainstream to take the postmodernist position seriously, leading to an out-of-hand rejection like Keohane's. At bottom, I agree with the postmodern ambition in challenging IR theory to expand its analysis,⁵⁸ but, like other mainstream authors, I cannot agree with their radical epistemological conclusions. This thesis thus goes a step further than mainstream works that merely disagree with postmodernism's views on epistemology, mainly in that it deals with their conclusions in a more complete manner. Consequently, I will be driven by a *general objective* for the thesis: to demonstrate the failure of the postmodern challenge by pointing out that in each case of a challenge, postmodernists rely on mainstream assumptions, despite their denial of them. This argument is more specifically expressed in my main hypothesis.

⁵⁷ Kate Manzo, "Modernist Discourse and the Crisis of a Development Theory," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 26 (Summer 1991): 8.

⁵⁸ Moravcik holds to this general opinion and offers a brief summary of postmodern-inspired work done by the mainstream. Moravcik, "Theory Synthesis in International Relations," 131-6.

For my hypothesis I will utilize the previously explained dynamic and dissimilarity of competing epistemological positions. My main hypothesis is that postmodernism cannot be maintained as a competing epistemological position because its own arguments imply self-contradictions. This hypothesis will be sustained by way of three sub-hypotheses. Sub-hypothesis one is that postmodernism argues for a discursive version of reality, when in fact it assumes an independent version of it, similar to the one it means to reject, resulting in self-contradiction. Sub-hypothesis two is that the postmodern justification of knowledge rejects mainstream epistemology but ignores important epistemic principles such as cognitive functioning and deductive and inductive reasoning. Rather, it views knowledge as a discursive construct created in the interest of a powerful source. But the reliance on this assumption creates a self-contradiction in that it is itself an empirical statement. Finally, sub-hypothesis three is that the normative elements in the postmodern position mirror those of the mainstream one. This means that postmodernists discredit the mainstream for their exclusionary epistemology, but were postmodern epistemology assumed, the mainstream would be similarly excluded.

Now the theoretical framework that I will be using has been introduced and elaborated upon, I will now provide a brief summary of each of the chapters, and their relation to the hypothesis. Chapter one begins with a discussion of the ontological foundations for the mainstream epistemological position, and considers the metaphysical attitude taken towards these foundations. I contend that those taking mainstream position argue for the existence of a reality independent of our attitudes or representations of it, and regards that reality as being the basis of truth for our theories of it. Postmodernist arguments, on the other hand, deny any independent existence of reality but instead argue

that whatever is real is real because of its place in a discourse. While this may explain certain aspects of reality, it has serious limitations, and, in the end, cannot be understood without relying on some particular mainstream assumption. This is used to confirm sub-hypothesis one, which asserts the self-contradiction of postmodernism in terms of reality. This also begins the discussion taken up in chapters two and three, which concern justification and normativity, because these are concepts linked to the version of truth developed in chapter one.

Chapter two begins the discussion of justification, which, it will be remembered, seeks to link our beliefs to the truth. Specifically I discuss the epistemic principles that make up the mainstream competing epistemological position. The discussion then returns to the idea of discourse, or textuality, put forward by the postmodernists. From there the postmodern version of justification, which relies on discourse analysis and locating power/knowledge is explained as the challenging competing epistemological position. I then elaborate on the problem established above, mainly, does the postmodern position dispense with mainstream epistemology as it sets out to? I argue that it does not, mainly because the power/knowledge argument does not sufficiently disprove the epistemic principles the mainstream position relies on. In fact, the arguments they rely on assume empiricism, meaning that they contradict themselves. This should confirm sub-hypothesis two.

This same line of argument will then be extended to chapter three, which begins with a discussion of how the normative element arises from the epistemic principles, at least for the mainstream position. This is then formulated into a more general argument on how a normative argument can be derived from epistemic principles. It is then applied

to power/knowledge, which provides the normative considerations for the postmodernist position. I argue that power/knowledge can be formulated into a normative position similar to the mainstream, which will confirm sub-hypothesis three. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to showing how the general objective for the thesis has been met, which will illustrate another self-contradiction of the postmodern position.

In the thesis's conclusion, I will review each of the main steps in the argument that show how postmodernism contradicts itself. I will then take the argument one step further and argue that, in terms of its motivating factor of the politics of inclusion, postmodernism undermines itself. This is because it claims to be motivated by social concern, yet if social issues are addressed by the mainstream, postmodernists reject them. This implies that postmodernism is willing to reject its own starting principles. Were this to happen it would be disastrous for what it sets out to do, which is to open spaces to include a wider range of subjects within IR. Based on this reasoning I will argue that the postmodern goal would be better served if it is carried out under the mainstream epistemological position. This would facilitate debate among a wider range of potential theorists by solving some of the problems located within the competing epistemological positions, without necessarily limiting the content of the theories they are attached to.

To conclude this introduction and prepare us for chapter one, I want to return to Holsti's claim that opened the introduction, and offer a few preliminary reflections. First, in terms of the epistemological theme of this thesis, Holsti's attitude is still practiced by many mainstream IR theorists, in that they respect reality and knowledge. Although an explicit formulation of this attitude is lacking, this is not to deny its implicit status. However, another attitude stands out, which is that mainstream theorists are not

completely oblivious from what is going on in the world, which seems to go against the postmodernists' arguments to the contrary. Again, this seems to point to an openness in terms of subjects to be discussed despite disagreements on more abstract levels. This suggests an area of investigation that I can only hint at by inferences made from the limited area I am focusing on. Nevertheless, I remain firmly convinced that these abstract disagreements that presently stand in the way can be overcome, and I conceive this thesis as a starting point on how to approach some of the main areas of contention.