Chapter 1

The Sixth Great Debate in International Relations Theory Revolves Around Clarity:
Ontology in Statu Nascendi as a Cutting-Edge Tool for Conflict Management

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ABSTRACT

As we anticipate the emergence of the sixth great debate in IR theory, ontology in statu nascendi stands ready to guide IR theorists in addressing pressing issues such as new technologies, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, pandemics, and the evolving nature of conflicts. Its relevance extends to the forefront of contemporary concerns, including autonomous weapons systems, asymmetric warfare, climate change, and societal inequalities. Ontology in statu nascendi has evolved into a mature framework, uniquely structured to navigate the complexities of our dynamic global landscape. Its integration signifies a pivotal step in the advancement of international relations (IR) theory, offering a robust foundation for collaboration to address the challenges of the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter argues that International Relations (IR) theory must revamp its methodology to increase accessibility for everyone, regardless of their background. While our discipline wasn't explicitly designed for resolving international conflicts, the development and application of IR theories have profound implications for both the sub-disciplines of conflict management and, if it still exists, conflict resolution, as the new rule of thumb suggests that managing international conflicts is good enough (Byman, 2022). Still, the inseparable link between theory and practice remains evident, with policymakers, diplomats,

and various field practitioners relying on our theoretical approaches and paradigms. Over the past 105 years since the inception of our discipline in 1919 at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, five great theories have been instrumental in shaping responses to conflicts. Consequently, we should anticipate that the field of conflict management will witness debates that are as impactful as those ongoing within IR theory. Moreover, IR theory is undeniably influenced and enriched by the surging interest in metaontology—a self-reflexive approach and critical examination of the ontological foundations that underpin various theoretical approaches within our tradition (Berto & Plebani, 2015, pp. 2-3).

As of December 2023, the emergence of the seventh, eighth, or ninth great debates in international relations is still ahead of us. However, this study projects that the introduction of ontology *in statu nascendi*, the new compartmentalization of IR theory, can trigger the sixth great debate. Several theoretical and practical reasons support this claim. Firstly, despite collective efforts to prevent war from recurring, we repeatedly find ourselves in a situation where the global architecture of power exhibits a genuinely anarchic structure. In this structure, international actors, such as the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, appointed to protect global peace and security, tend to behave like uncontrollable bullies, projecting their hard power and engaging in hybrid warfare at all costs to achieve their political goals and objectives. Under such circumstances, our theory, which overlays static, positivist, and predefined mega-compartmentalization, fails to describe or adequately predict such anomalies. It also struggles to define the potential consequences of the absence of a global authority capable of resolving contemporary regional conflicts of global importance. In the end, we inhabit an increasingly interdependent world where events in one region can trigger reactions in distant zones. Under such conditions, conflicts in Ukraine, Ethiopia, Nagorno Karabakh, and the Middle East have the potential to escalate tensions in the South China Sea, prompting more assertive postures by China towards Taiwan and other countries in the region, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Pietrzak, 2024b). This may drive countries like France to actively maintain assertive postures towards African states striving to liberate themselves from still-existing French imperialism (Sylla & Pigeaud & Dite, 2021), and, paradoxically, accidentally fall into the orbit of the Kremlin (Ramdani, 2023).

Naturally, this is just one layer of the current debate; other aspects under consideration relate to the way our discipline responds to the profound impact of new technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), and challenges in cybersecurity. The debate touches on critical topics such as the rapid development of autonomous weapons systems, potential post-COVID-19 pandemics, challenges related to climate change, deforestation, water shortages, environmental degradation, increasing inequality, the militarization of space, insecurity, the rise of non-state actors, asymmetric warfare, and matters related to evolving conflict dynamics, including the utilization of hybrid tactics. Therefore, we need to have a clear and reliable methodology applicable under every circumstance.

In this context, ontology *in statu nascendi* is put forward as a study that can help supplement existing IR theory with tools that can help bridge the division between the main conceptual, methodological, and analytical differences among a collection of rival paradigms, approaches, theories, traditions, and schools of thought. The primary goal of this new ontology is to address modern conflicts of regional and global importance by reinforcing empirical bridges of mutual understanding between our sub-disciplines and multiplying approaches, providing essential tools to attain this objective. This new compartmentalization aims to embrace a more inclusive, systematic, interdisciplinary, and contemplative mode of IR-related deliberations concerning those existing and emerging new paradigms, approaches, theories, and schools of thought (Pietrzak, 2021a, p. 64-66, 147, 179, 223).

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