

The ontological question in International Relations:
towards a generic description of the unit, with reference to
the case of the Islamic caliphate

**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New
England. November 2008**

Kenneth Crawford Fraser

BA (Hons.) International Relations

University of New England 2005

Student Number: 201113109

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.

Signature

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	6
Introduction	7
Approaches to better specification of the actor in International Relations	13
A post-constructivist approach to ontology? Evolutionary International Relations	16
Case: the Islamic caliphate.....	22
Outline	25
Chapter One - On the antiquity of us: conceptions of collective identity in International Relations. .	30
Introduction	30
Classical Realism: morality and the state.....	33
‘Human nature’	35
Morality and ontology	37
Neorealism: anarchic structure	45
Repetitive patterns of polity-formation, universal anarchy, and establishment of institutions ..	47
Liberalism, cosmopolitanism and neoliberal institutionalism	49
World and state system theory and the English School	50
Reproduction requirements of entities and systems other than states.....	51
Critical theory and postmodernism: language, narrative and boundaries.....	53
Constructivism: identity	56
Constructivism’s more detailed description of international institutional systems: foundational values as generic capacities	59
Agency and its relationship to structure.....	61
Identity and rationality as drivers of politics	64
After constructivism: emotion, motivation and evolution	65
Emotion, contestation and sources of legitimacy.....	66
Evolutionary theory applied to ontology in IR	69
Conclusion: Ontology as politics	72
Chapter Two – Transdisciplinarity in International Relations: incorporating insights.....	76
Introduction	76
Searle	79
Collective intentionality and status-function.....	80
Subjectivity, objectivity and reality in the absence of function.....	85
The Background, capacity and experience	88

Gilbert	90
Common knowledge and social ontology	91
Institutional rationality and ontological security	93
Darwin, teleology and evolutionary functionality	98
Evolutionary International Relations	98
Driving teleology out.....	101
Two-step causality and Darwinian selection	103
The problem of reification	105
Conclusion.....	106
Chapter three - Warp, weft and Wight: context, action, behaviour and the ontological sidestep	109
Introduction	109
The “problem”	113
Structure: context and construction.....	114
Levels of analysis.....	115
Anarchy and institutions	117
Material, ideal and identity.....	122
Chances are: opportunity structure.....	124
Agency and action.....	126
Intentionality, action and behaviour	126
Three types and three elements of agency	128
Structure as actor and/or client.....	132
The ontological solution and the next step	134
Conclusion.....	136
Chapter four – ‘The mirrors of princes’: Collective identity, motivation and ontology	137
Introduction	137
The idea of identity: objectification, attachment and emotion	140
Conceptions of collective identity.....	144
The state as person	149
Conflict and motivation	151
Intuition, legitimation and rational interest	152
Global politics and geostrategy.....	156
Conclusion.....	158
Chapter Five – Case study: The Islamic caliphate and the movement for re-establishment	160
Introduction	160

Proposition revisited	162
Mundane or divine?	164
Part One: History of the caliphate to abolition.....	165
Mutation and innovation: Creation of the Muslim community and the first caliphate	165
The Prophet.....	168
Khalifah al-Rashidun	172
‘Umayyad, Abbasid and other iterations: from development to evolution	174
Merging with the Ottoman Sultanate: adaptability and continuity	178
Abolition.....	181
Part Two: Behaviour of the caliphate since abolition.....	187
Adaptation through idealisation	187
Action on behalf.....	189
Institutional change in individual heads	191
Idealised entity as source of legitimacy.....	194
Institutional abstraction as goal and motivator: spontaneous support	196
Affirmation	197
Material effects.....	199
Conclusion.....	200
Conclusion.....	203
Facets of the diamond	205
References and bibliography	217
Appendix: the caliphs, caliphates and imamates.....	262

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A great many people have contributed in various ways to this thesis. First and foremost, Dr Karin von Strokirch and Dr Graham Young, my supervisors at the University of New England, have read endless drafts and provided me with guidance and support without which I could not have completed the work.

Some of the important theoretical work, especially regarding agency, was carried out during several weeks I spent as a departmental visitor at the Department of International Relations at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. This was accomplished with funding from a Keith and Dorothy Mackay Travelling Scholarship awarded by UNE. I would very much like to thank everyone involved, especially Dr Jacinta O'Hagan, who provided provocative and stimulating supervision at the ANU, and Professor Christian Reus-Smit, who agreed to the department hosting the visit, and for providing me with assistance, support and supervision.

Parts of this work have appeared in refereed conference papers published by the Australasian Political Science Association (APSA) Conference at the University of Otago, New Zealand in September 2005 and the Oceanic Conference on International Studies (OCIS) at the University of Melbourne in July, 2006. Parts have also been published as an article in the journal *Global Change, Peace and Security*. Details are in the bibliography. I have presented papers on various aspects of the work at other OCIS and APSA conferences, and at the British Political Science Association Conference in Bath, UK, in 2007. This last was made possible with funding from both APSA and UNE, for which I am grateful.

Several colleagues – Jo Leoni, Zahid Ahmed, Habib Zafarullah, and Steven Haigh – have read chapters and assisted me with style and factual accuracy. Any errors that remain are entirely my own responsibility.

My partner, Liz Steele, has supported me in a multitude of ways, and my son Harley, did he but know it, has provided a powerful motivating force. Many other members of my family and friends have helped with discussion, encouragement and, perhaps, forbearance, which I will never forget.

INTRODUCTION

... and when the catastrophe [war] comes upon us in spite of the universal desire to avoid it, we fall back on explanations that are perhaps more sophisticated but no more satisfactory: the irrationality of human nature, the will of history (Groce's phrase), the will of God or even pure accident - and in the last analysis these explanations are just as metaphysical as Homer's gods.

Bernard Knox

Introduction to the Folio Society edition of The Iliad p.lix

Over recent years evidence has appeared in the literature on International Relations theory of a desire for a clearer specification of the collective actor. Discussion surrounding collective actors and their relationship to structure connects three important areas of scholarly debate about global politics:* the question of the relative weight given to ideational and material considerations; the agent-structure problem; and, the levels of analysis question.

Formerly, the easy assumption was made that states were the actors in global politics. This axiom served to restrict and define the field of International Relations, but was always more of an arbitrary decision than a rigorous conclusion. In more recent times a range of circumstances has caused scholars to question this simple schema. Other ways of dividing up the world have gained influence.

Globalisation and the free-market model have allowed commercial enterprises, for example, to play an influential role in world affairs. Some scholars see a 'plausible future' for the world with boundaries redrawn along non-territorial, commercial lines, leading to a 'need to reconceptualise the basic units of analysis' in the discipline of International Relations. These scholars stop short of predicting such a future, but argue that its plausibility makes it a useful heuristic device (Bernstein et al. 2000:69).

*The discipline is called International Relations, and so I retain the term international, but use it in its broadest sense, meaning global or inter-polity politics, diplomacy and grand strategy, rather than its more specific meaning of relations between nations.

Another plausible future is the 'clash of civilisations' scenario, in which the world is reorganised along large-scale cultural borders (Huntington 1993). There are other forces in play, among them a cosmopolitan incrementalist movement, and very strong support for the national state-based *status quo*. These both involve retention of the state system, but also incorporate other non-state actors such as international institutions, non-government organisations and social movements.

Then there is the proposed re-establishment of the Islamic caliphate, which is not necessarily incompatible with a system of nominally sovereign states, but would legitimise them through the overarching office of the caliph, under a system of Islamic law. The caliphist movement has a global aim of replacing non-religious state-recognition systems. It has a wide support-base and many disparate organisations and individuals work towards the same goal, using a range of techniques from public conferences to terrorism.

These trends, among others (see Cox 1981:149-151), pose a challenge to the state system because they shift the means of collective political affirmation and identification away from the national state and from international institutions, specifically the United Nations. They have the potential to replace the current global international system with an alternative particularist moral and/or economic order, in which states, if they exist at all, no longer derive their legitimacy from nationhood.

Christian Reus-Smit has this warning for theorists:

The more concerned [theory] becomes with grand tectonic transformations, ... the more structuralist it tends to become, and human agency tends to drop out of the story. Ideas change, norms evolve, and culture transforms, but these seem to move independently of human will, choice or action. (Reus-Smit 2005:201)

Many theorists restrict human will, choice and action to individuals, but even if this is the case, individuals often exercise their will on behalf of other entities, whose nature is therefore of concern to theorists.

Evidence of the changing nature of strategic actors points to the need to define them. The idea that actors act on behalf of collective entities would seem to imply that those who act for states and state systems, and those who act for alternative political arrangements like the caliphate, should have something in common.

This acting-on-behalf notion also presupposes some kind of client. If the institution of the Islamic caliphate, for example, can have such a profound strategic effect in terms of day-to-day, corporal human affairs, the question must be asked: what is it? This is a question of global political ontology.

Ontology cannot restrict itself only to discussion about units. It must also take into account the institutional or structural context in which the units interact. In some cases, crucially, this context can be seen as a distinct entity in its own right, which also needs to be better theorised. As Colin Wight puts it: 'We can talk of "interpenetrated contexts" whilst recognizing that we need to think clearly about the properties of the entities said to be interpenetrating each other' (2006:111). The question of whether these kinds of institutional structures are themselves actors could be better thought out.

It is not quite clear in the discipline, then, what is meant when theorists write about "the actor" in global politics. Christian Reus-Smit suggests the debate now 'revolves around the nature of social agency,' (Reus-Smit 2005:202). This is true, but whatever we might decide social agency is, it can never be more than an attribute or feature of some social entity. This entity is what needs to be better specified in the International Relations literature. Clearly, in some cases at least, it displays agency. This should be a clue to its nature.

This thesis will examine whether some useful resources for the task may be found outside International Relations. Potentially fruitful areas lie in the work on social reality led by John Searle, in sociological ontology, a good representative being Margaret Gilbert's work, and in evolutionary theory. Scholars have begun to apply ideas from these fields to International Relations. This thesis adds to that work. It emphasises the relationship of Searle's thinking to the workings of evolution, and seeks to apply this

insight to global political ontology and to a particular, practical question of grand strategy, involving a challenge to the global system of states.

Causation is obviously important to this argument. As Emile Durkheim put it regarding suicide, individual action cannot, logically, be the only driver; there are 'causes of another sort' at work (Durkheim, quoted in Wendt, A.E. 1987:348). These causes are located in the collective, Durkheim showed. If the suicide rate among Italians is consistently different from the suicide rate among the French, it must be something about these collectives that causes this. This is not to take away from the individual agency of those who decide to commit suicide, but merely to recognise that there is some influence upon them that seems to be exogenous to them as individuals. This kind of insight has been part of the 'sociological turn' (Katzenstein, Keohane & Krasner 1998:675) in International Relations over the last couple of decades.

Differences in the intensity of this apparently exogenous influence might be used to characterise particular collectives: the French commit suicide more often; the French collectivity has a higher suicide rate (Durkheim 1952:50). For us to be able to say this, there must be a thing which France, or 'the French' is an instance of (Durkheim 1952:299). What is this generic thing, what does it do or need, and what other kinds of examples of it are there?

The subtitle of Colin Wight's recent seminal contribution, *Agency, Structure and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Wight, C. 2006) identifies the central issue. What is required is a better description of the interacting units in international relations; a description of the collective entity which encompasses the associations between identity, legitimacy, emotion and motivation, and between agency and structure.*

Wight, however, shies away from accepting the existence of a collective-unit, possessing agency, as opposed to a group of individuals exercising collective agency. compensating

* The agenda might be extended in future work to include economic and other boundaries.

by placing more emphasis on the competing conceptual ontologies embraced by individuals. I do not disagree with Wight when he states that:

The causal power that does emerge as a result of the cooperative practices of collectives can only be accessed by individuals acting in cooperation with others. This might be considered to be a vicarious form of agency... As such this type of activity is always the activity of each individual taken in his or her concrete singularity as the agent that acts, even if the action is carried out on behalf of another entity (2006:189).

Where I respectfully take leave of Wight is in the suggestion that this is the end of the story. He goes on to say, however, that 'state action, then, is only as good as the individual action *it mobilises*' (2006:189 emphasis added). Surely this mobilisation of action-on-behalf is action in itself, or at least evidence of agency. As such it looks like a further clue to the nature of the client entity. It seems that regarding the collective entity in International Relations, more effort is put into avoiding the need for it than is necessary to accept it.

The state, or other collective entity, significantly shapes the very nature of individuals. The best example of this kind of dynamic would be state legislative bodies, which do indeed "act" in both a legal and social way, and which also provide contexts in which their constituent members – as members, not the human beings – are shaped and defined. The argument being tested is that the legislature acts *and* individuals act on its behalf. This is the definition of a proxy relationship, implied by use of the term, "on behalf of". It is not necessary to demonstrate that the collective body acts *without* individuals acting on behalf of it, because the legislature acts *through* the individuals. Note the wording, the legislature *acts* through the individual office-holders. Individuals act and, through them, the parliament and state act. In other words, *both* the state *and* the individual act. It is the same action. Similarly with agency.

Surrounding the ideational/unobservable and the material/empirical worlds, agency and structure, and levels of analysis debates are implicit assumptions which hold clues to a more specific ontology of International Relations. In these assumptions the silhouette, or some attributes, of an entity which is yet to be fully described in International Relations might be discerned. This statement is the extent of the argument

I seek to test in this thesis. Hence, I do not attempt to define such an entity, only to suggest that it may be something worth looking for and examining, because, I believe, it has the potential to shed light on some of these prominent debates or unresolved questions in International Relations.

Consequently, this thesis will explore issues involved in the possibility of defining a generic political unit, without attempting actually to define one. Some features of such a thing may become clearer under further examination, however, raising questions regarding whether such an entity has the capacity for providing motivation for its members to be members, and to act on its behalf and in its interests. It may turn out that this motivation, based in the social psychology of the individual, is constitutive, or ontologically significant, since one of its most important effects would seem to be to constitute collective subjects and common objects.

Wight is confident that 'there will never be a moment when we achieve a full account of the identity of the state', because 'in common with most social objects, the state has a dual existence: it has both its concrete and its discursive form' (Wight, C. 2006:221). Such an account may indeed be beyond the reach of social science, but I suggest this would be more due to the indeterminacy of the state than to its expression in various forms. It may be more precise to call them concrete and discursive expressions, aspects or features, rather than forms. If there were both a discursive and a concrete *form* of the state, they would not both be the same thing. In that case we should not call them both states.

Divisions in the discipline, Wight argues, 'are real, but ... their source is ontological, not epistemological or methodological,' (Wight, C. 2006:2). I agree that the focus on ontology is useful, because this is where the differences lie. Theoretical differences are significant, but might be reconciled by a fuller specification of the interacting units in global politics, if this turns out to be possible.

Approaches to better specification of the actor in International Relations

The question of what constitutes a political actor has been neglected in International Relations. While the focus has been on particular actors, in particular the state (Hall 1999) the generic has been under-theorised. Hall makes his argument in linear fashion, urging greater attention to the nation as a precursor of the state. But nation is a notoriously fluid notion, while at the same time being too particular to be useful for a general theory of world politics.

As will be discussed in Chapter One, Reus-Smit has described some generic structural elements of state systems, and social movement theorists have a specific understanding of a type of political unit, but they don't call them actors. Thus the way forward might be seen as problematising the distinction between actor and structure and the passive conception of the latter, since much cannot be explained 'within a theoretical framework that is committed to a conception of structure that is largely static, or in which structure merely constrains action' (Hall 1999:5). His argument in this work, while compelling, remains linear. He suggests, for example, that 'communities of shared identity construct states to serve their needs as 'nations'' and fails, to address the non-existence of the true national state. The nation-state is an ideal type. Hall's is a historical-development analysis, useful for nationalism and transformational analysis, while what I am considering here is a less time-bound perspective, in which emergence and establishment may be thought of as aspects, rather than forms, of global political entities.

Arnold Wolfers set out part of the problem neatly in 1962:

If the nation states are seen as the sole actors, moving or moved like a set of chess figures in a highly abstract game, one may lose sight of the human beings for and by whom the game is supposed to be played. If, on the other hand, one sees only the mass of individual human beings of whom mankind is composed, the power game of states tends to appear as an inhuman interference with the lives of ordinary people. Or, take the diplomat who sees himself as accredited to an entity called Indonesia or France: he may behave quite differently from the diplomat who considers his mission addressed to specific individuals or to ruling groups or to a people. A statesman accustomed to analyzing international politics

in terms alone of state behaviour will treat the United Nations differently from one who believes in the rise of international organizations' (Wolfers 1962:3)

In calling for more empirical attention to be paid to this issue, 'penetrating to the minds of [individuals] and their manner of choosing one course of action over another', Wolfers pointed out the inadequacies of the 'billiard ball' model (1962:24). The idea of unitary states with clear conceptual borders bouncing off each other in a predictable manner could not account for 'overlapping authorities, split loyalties and divided sovereignty' (1962:24).

By 1981, Robert Cox could complain that there 'ha[d] been little attempt within the bounds of international relations theory to consider the state/society complex as the basic entity of international relations' (Cox 1981:127). And in a special issue of the *Review of International Studies* devoted to the 'state as person', Patrick Thaddeus Jackson regrets that, since Wolfers' chapter, 'almost no one seems to have heeded his advice' (Jackson 2004a:255). That issue of the *Review* went a good way to addressing the ontological problem with regard to states, although in more of a theoretical than empirical manner.

This lack of attention to the generic description of units in the international system is surprising, given International Relations theory's focus on collective actors and the niceties of agency. For a long time, this focus was firmly on states and state action, and on the international structures that result from it. Thus the agent-structure problem was born and became a bone of contention.

Post-September 11, the importance of non-state actors in raw strategic terms has attracted a good deal of attention. This is not a new phenomenon, however. Since WWII at least and accelerating after the Cold War, an expanded range of international actors in the form of international institutions, non-government organisations and strategic players has appeared on the scene, along with a commensurate degree of attention from International Relations theorists. There has also been an expanded interest in social movements.

Some of these collective entities are established, some are emergent. There is in the literature a distinction between these two types of entity, but I want to argue that they have more in common than distinguishes them. The caliphate, as we are about to see, is an example of this kind of continuity, having been an established political entity, and now more resembling an emergent one. This reversal of the usual course is evidence of fundamental continuity.

A prominent example of a social phenomenon which is also a political and strategic player is the movement for re-establishment of the Islamic caliphate which, while it should not be overstated, is an important branch of the more general resurgence of political Islam. It is significant theoretically because it appears to have an important influence on international politics and strategic affairs, while at the same time it is not a state, nor is it even an established polity. The nature of the movement is not clear, and the nature of its object, the caliphate itself, is even less so.

Alexander Wendt points out the fascinating conundrum that, even though the group unit – in this case the state – ‘at any given moment [is] ontologically dependent on its constituent members, its intentions are not dependent on any *particular* members’ (Wendt, Alexander 2004:300). A good example of what Wendt means is the Islamic caliphate, which has been occupied and supported by myriad individuals, and has lasted many lifetimes. This does appear to indicate *some kind* of existence, if not wholly independent, then at least prior to the existence of its current supporters.

This thesis is intended as a contribution to this general debate. Its value lies in part in its focus on the generic. The case has been carefully chosen specifically because of the indeterminate nature of the caliphate, which allows us as theorists to consider a range of possibilities. Doing so uncovers aspects of the unit which, I believe, are pointers to a richer understanding of ontology in International Relations.

The Islamic caliphate is a live issue in global politics at the moment. Yet nearly every question on the subject is answered in contingent terms: it depends what you mean by caliphate. For such an important object in the strategic arena, this lack of precision in its

ontology is a significant drawback to strategic and geopolitical analysis. As Brooks and Wohlforth put it, “[w]ith the right measures, a much broader conception of power [than that of realists’] and, hence, of structure can be employed that nonetheless treats power as a resource states use to pursue their ends’, (Brooks & Wohlforth 2008:46) This also points the way toward a more constructivist realism, still concerned with power and its pursuit, but conceiving of it in a more subtle and social way.

A post-constructivist approach to ontology? Evolutionary International Relations

In proposing a case whose merits can be assessed I explore ways in which these ideas might be useful to the field of International Relations. A post-constructivist approach is proposed which involves a greater focus on the relationship between constructed social objects, their evolutionary dynamics, and strategic motivation. This involves a focus on ontology and on strategy because the answer to the question of what it is that conducts strategy. It might be answered that many different types of social entity conduct strategy, and I counter by pointing out that all these must, by definition, have something in common: a capacity to conduct strategy. A post-constructivist approach is proposed which involves a greater focus on the relationship between constructed social objects, their evolutionary dynamics, and strategic motivation. This involves a focus on ontology and on strategy because the answer to the question of what it is that conducts strategy involves a description of how such a thing might be constructed and some exploration of its motive engine. It might be answered that many different types of social entity conduct strategy, but this may be countered by pointing out that all these must, by definition, have something in common: a capacity to conduct strategy. A post-constructivist approach is also concerned with the individualist/structuralist debate and the agent-structure problem, because these kinds of irresolvable dichotomies are clues to the fundamental structure of the political universe. At least, they point to those areas where our conceptualizations may be inadequate to the task.

There are three parts to the proposition to be explored. One is that collective entities are endogenous to individuals as far as their conceptual or ideational aspects are concerned, even though they are corporal entities as well. Along with this goes the idea

that such conceptions are more affective than cognitive, at their most basic level, even though they may be expressed as formalised constitutions, or as positivist ideas about rationality or interest.

The second part of the proposition is that subjectivity and objectivity are among the attributes of collective entities. Subjectivity enables agency, objectivity provides the conceptual basis for organisational structure. If this were correct, other attributes should be discernible.

The third part is that evolutionary forces operate on these collective entities, meaning that some are “fitter” than others. These forces are probabilistic, rather than deterministic, but nonetheless powerful for that. As Brooks and Wohlforth explain it, structurally, ‘the distribution of power as a variable makes certain kinds of outcomes highly likely or unlikely, rather than inevitable or impossible’ (2008:46)*. The actuarial aspect of international ontology cannot be ignored. Individual human beings are much harder to predict than human beings en masse, in percentage terms.

The concept of fitness follows, and is also important. With regard to the case being developed and tested here, fitness can be fairly well described. In general fitness means the ability to survive and to perpetuate one’s line, or to maximise reproductive capacity. Fitness ‘relates to the selection of the fittest ... understood as being the best adapted to the environment’ (Brachthäuser 2004:4). Fitness is also a ‘comparative measure of success’ (Farkas 1996:351; see also Florini 1996:368). For political group-units, fitness may be explained in terms of the extent of their ability to encourage or coerce individuals into accepting and/or supporting them. They may do this by providing a selective environment which produces individuals who best suit the environment’s reproductive requirements.

In restating this part of the evolutionary principle as it enters the argument here, I emphasise its importance as a clue to the nature of global political units. If a particular

* It could be argued that, given time, highly likely outcomes become inevitable, which would lead to a debate over the utility of the concept of outcomes.

conception of collective identity is able to provide the necessary affective resonance for individuals to derive both a sense of connectedness to something greater, and – if they are lucky - a sense of rightness, seemliness or moral rectitude from it, it will be fitter than one less able. The success or otherwise of long-term grand strategy may be measured in similar terms. This does not preclude the possibility of contestation of the nature of particular conceptions. On the contrary, this contestation enriches and facilitates the process, particularly of constitutional legitimation.

This idea, that affirmation of conceptions of collective identity is a constitutive motivator in global politics and grand strategy, may be useful in a metatheoretical way, since it holds out the possibility of agreement between the constructivist/idealist and the realist/materialist conceptual camps. It may also be useful in terms of strategic analysis, since it could provide a clear measure of the success or otherwise of policy.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore in detail the theory's applicability to strategic situational analysis. Such analysis, however, and the policy recommendations that might flow from it will be touched on at times, since this is an important pointer toward future research. If some generic aspects of strategic players can be identified – particularly with regard to motivation – it follows that these may be usefully applied to particular actors as part of the process of contingency planning, for example. The old imperative, “know thine enemy”, may thus be systematically approached.

Exploring the validity of this collection of claims requires a consideration of the nature of human collectivities, in particular the nature of actors and agents, and their relationships to structures of various types. The question of the state as person is taken as a particular instance of a more general consideration of the relations between actors, institutional structures and anarchy. The distinction between state as institutional structure and government as actor* exemplifies a broader ontological point about strategic players and the contexts in which they compete. These insights may then be applied to non-state strategic actors, and more broadly still, reflecting one of the

* A distinction pointed out to me by Christian Reus-Smit. Personal communication, Australian National University, 29 March 2007. See also (Wight 2004)

seminal debates in sociology. The difference between Emile Durkheim's and Max Weber's perspectives on the question of the existence or otherwise of collective social entities could not be more relevant for the agent-structure and levels-of-analysis questions. Weber suggested that individuals, engaged in social action – that is, action associated with other individuals – were the sum total of society. Weberian sociology is reductionist in that it reduces all social activity to individual activity (Gilbert 1989:6).

Durkheim, on the other hand, argued forcefully that collective entities were the proper focus of sociology:

collective tendencies and thoughts are of a different nature from individual tendencies and thoughts ... How can this be, it is objected, since there are only individuals in society? But, reasoning thus, we should say that there is nothing more in animate nature than inorganic matter... To be sure, it is likewise true that society has no other active forces than individuals; but individuals by combining form a psychical existence of a new species, which consequently has its own manner of thinking and feeling. Of course the elementary qualities of which the social fact consists are present in germ in individual minds. But the social fact emerges from them only when they have been transformed by association... When the consciousness of individuals, instead of remaining isolated, becomes grouped and combined, something in the world has been altered... phenomena appear whose characteristic qualities are not found in the elements composing them' (Durkheim 1952:310).

Similarly, some International Relations scholars argue that only individuals have interests. Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, for example, argues that only individuals, or – he quotes Gilpin – 'individuals and individuals joined together into various types of coalitions' can be said to be actors (Jackson 2004a: abstract). A closer examination of the interests of individuals, however, seems to suggest that these interests are often almost indistinguishable from those of the larger institutional environment. It might be, then, that a unit-level interest in attachment is an ontological force, serving to constitute larger entities. This is a vital part of my thesis.

Here is the origin of the point of contention that now dominates ontology in International Relations. Empiricists argue that there is no such thing as the group unit, a human entity that is not an individual. We cannot measure the state, they say, therefore it cannot be said to exist as anything other than a concept. Scientific realists counter by arguing that, since the state, even if it is only a concept, has measurable

effects, and therefore it is a real thing, even if it cannot be directly measured. Since empirical legitimacy might, in principle, be measured, scientific realists would argue that this indicates the existence of some thing. A plausible resolution can come from proposing that measuring empirical legitimacy – that is, the amount of affective attachment devoted to a particular group unit – one is not simply measuring an effect of the thing but the thing itself.

A subsidiary concern of this thesis, a fourth part of the proposition, is to test whether a post-constructivist approach could be developed along the lines described above. It could be called by many descriptive names: ‘realist constructivism’ (Barkin 2003), evolutionary international relations theory (Denemark 1999; Maxwell 1994; Ross 2006; Zehfuss 2002), poetic realism*. Whatever the label, it is clear that, since it describes constitutive mechanisms, and seeks to orient International Relations theory around this notion of institutional expressions of collective identity, ontology must be the next step in such an approach. It looks as though all these theoretical positions are really looking at different facets of the same diamond; the nature of the diamond remains uncharacteristically unclear.

This point calls for some clarification of what is meant by ontology and social and political ontology in particular. Ontology is essentially the study of what may be said to exist. Hence, in social, political and international theory, it manifests as the debate regarding what types of human entity might be said to act, display agency, or influence events in one way or another.

David Dessler places ontology at the foundation of political theory:

a theory's *ontology* (the substantive entities and configurations the theory postulates) is both the basis of its explanatory power and the ultimate grounding of claims it may have to superiority over rival theories (Dessler 1989:444).

* The term is taken from the history of cinema, in which poetic realism developed out of neorealism.

Theory cannot escape ontology, because without some postulated or implicit ontology, there is nothing to theorise about, but a difficulty arises because, without a theory, what exists cannot be described. Therefore ontology and theory are heavily linked.

Ontology is central to one of the major divides in the discipline, between scientific realism and empiricism. The debate between these two revolves around the grounds upon which some social or political entity can be said to be “real”. This debate will be explored in greater detail.

The ontological question in International Relations may be stated simply: what is the nature of the interacting units in global politics? This question has to be addressed, at least implicitly, by any theory of International Relations.

From this derives another question: what are the defining features of an appropriate unit of study in International Relations? To narrow the focus, the question is posed thus: is a universal driver of global politics to be found in the individual’s desire or need for attachment to his/her group and is this attachment constitutive of a definable entity? These questions have been addressed extensively with regard to nationalism, but could be applied more broadly. For help with further specification we may turn to sociology, the theory of mind and, in particular, evolutionary theory.

Understanding evolutionary functionality is essential to a grasp of evolutionary theory, since it allows the non-teleological nature of evolution to be understood. An individual creature might not desire survival, or even be aware of such a concept as survival, and yet survive. Particular traits, such as self-consciousness or a survival instinct, are functional if they have the effect of perpetuating themselves and/in the species, given the circumstances. In this manner traits, as well as species, evolve. It could be that the desire for survival, and therefore self-consciousness, itself is a trait, an emanation from the happenstance of evolutionary functionality.

One benefit of applying evolutionary principles to this theoretical approach is that it allows the theorist to plausibly ascribe “interests” to non-self-conscious entities. While

it must be remembered that such interests are dependent upon an observer making a judgment as to the value or desirability of survival, nevertheless they are a useful device, provided we make a distinction between the *subjective desire* of some entity for survival and its objectively ascribed *evolutionary interest* in longevity and propagation. Abdul Aziz Said calls politics as ‘essentially an ascriptive phenomenon’ (1979:64) and this is a most suggestive phrase with regard to the concept of state, or collective interests.

It follows that if we ascribe evolutionary functionality to concepts, and if we can discern traits which assist them to perpetuate themselves, such as an ability to facilitate the self-identification of individuals, then we are recognising that abstractions, including conceptions of collective identity, also evolve. The caliphate, as a formal representation of such an abstraction, exemplifies this mechanism. The caliphate desired by members of the re-establishment movement is not the same as the caliphate abolished by Attaturk in 1924. That Ottoman Sultan-Caliphate was utterly different from that of the *Khalifah al-Rashidun*, or Rightly Guided Caliphs, which followed the death of Mohammed. These are iterations.

The caliphate constitutes not only a strategic goal, but a system of social organisation, a source of legitimacy and motivation and a worldview. Its adherents work to weaken the abstraction of the self-determining national state and embedded liberal institutionalism, among other paradigms. This conflict has been going on for several lifetimes. It begins to look as though it is not only the people, but the abstractions, the paradigms, which are in competition. This is another restatement of the thesis to be explored.

Case: the Islamic caliphate

The example of the Islamic caliphate and the wider caliphist movement has been chosen because it is instructive in many ways. These should become clear as the thesis progresses, but relate to its indeterminate nature, its longevity, the endless contestation over it, and its role today as a strategic goal and rally-point for global political and strategic action.

The global strategic environment cannot be understood properly without reference to the Islamic caliphate. A famous article by Samuel Huntington (1993) claimed that conflict between civilisational groupings would be the most important feature of the post-Cold War world. He refers to the Islamic as one of these great civilisations. It is fair to say that at least a great many Muslims believe that Islamic civilisation should be formally constituted in a caliphate. A recent survey, by the Pew organisation, found solid support for the re-establishment of some form of caliphate in the Muslim world (Kull 2007). It is this bedrock of support for an alternative world politics on which organisations like Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Taliban and Al-Qa'ida are built.

The caliph is defined by the famed fourteenth-century Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun as

a deputy of the lawgiver [i.e. of the Prophet Mohammed] in the defence of the faith and in the administration of this world. Now the Lawgiver was charged with a twofold responsibility – a responsibility, in regard to the Faith, to secure the observance of the Shari'ah ... : and a responsibility, in regard to the administration of this world, to secure the social welfare of his subjects (Toynbee 1927:26)

These duties are important because they emphasis the dual nature of the caliph, as an administrative and spiritual leader, evident in Haim's definition:

The Caliphate is not an end in itself but a means to an end; it is no more than a form of government instituted to secure the happiness of the Muslims, to administer justice, to protect the rights of the people and in this way to fulfill the principal aims of Islam (Haim 1965:216).

It is vital to be precise when discussing the challenge to the international system from political Islam. The contrast between western rhetoric regarding this phenomenon and its reality lends credence to Mohammed Ayoob's opinion that such views are expounded 'with a degree of self-righteousness that only the semi-educated can obtain' (Ayoob 2005:953-954). Islamism, as political Islam is otherwise known, encompasses a wide range of movements, many of which owe more to nationalism than Islam. Ayoob goes so far as to suggest that the vast majority of Muslims have 'internalised the notion that the international system is composed of multiple territorial states' (Ayoob 2005:954). This may usefully be seen in comparison with the misestimation of the importance of

international communism in what were essentially nationalist movements in Vietnam and elsewhere in the 1960s. Also, the caliphate is not irreconcilable with a system of multiple territorial states; indeed, it is one way to legitimise such a system.

Ayoob makes an exception, however, in the case of al-Qa'ida, and of some other groups, headquartered in London. These seek to replace the current ideal of nation-based sovereignty legitimised by recognition with a principle of sovereignty deriving its legitimacy from a re-established caliphate. Extreme fringe elements often get the spotlight, because of the spectacular nature of some of their operations, but they are part of a larger challenge to the foundations of the international system as it is currently composed.

It is fair to say that the core movement for a caliphate as an alternative world order is not highly influential. Calls for re-establishment, however, are common in the non-Western media. For example, Asim Salahuddin, in the online media outlet Kashmir Watch, argues that the caliphate (*Khilafah*) is the solution to Pakistan's problems of corruption and the legacy of colonialism.

Whilst [Islam's] rulings for individuals may be well known, due to the colonial attack of Western nations over the last century or so the societal or State aspect of Islam has become obscured. Indeed Islam has provided a solution as to how to organise the affairs of the State very clearly in the form of the Khilafah...

The Islamic Khilafah model is capable of solving the inherent flaws in the Pakistani political set up (Salahuddin 2009).

Another group with similar aims, but very different means, is *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, the Party of Liberation, a global organisation campaigning for reestablishment of the caliphate.

The points made here relate to the caliphate and the re-establishment movement. I will refer to these throughout to make specific points, and deal with the office and the movement in detail in the last chapter. This case has been chosen because the movement's driving intellectual forces have a clear and formal agenda, including the establishment of a formal institution, and this facilitates analysis. Evolution is more fluid, and less easily quantifiable. Even existing formal institutions might be seen as

functional illusions, never fully established, but nevertheless evolving in their own right in response to circumstances. Also, although most individuals belong to at least several institutional entities, many belong to only a few, or none at all, or are weakly attached. This is even more true of informal institutions, like those of cultural identity. Thus, what will be said in relation to the caliphate might equally be applied in a more fluid way, as perhaps a fugue is to a canon, to the *'Ummah* as a whole, and then in a more general way to the relationship between informal, subjective conceptions of collective identity and their imperative toward institutional formalisation.

The caliphate has been many things to many people. Unsurprisingly, given the motivations of politics, it has been made to serve a multitude of purposes. Its enemies portray 'a totalitarian Islamic empire', 'a violent political utopia ... ruled according to ... hateful ideology' (Bush 2006:par 10-11). On the other hand some of its proponents argue that no state can ever be legitimate in the absence of a caliphate, while others contend that the office is not necessary in Islam, since Islam is completed in the lifetime of the Prophet (Haim 1965:211). Still others accept the view that Islam enjoins *good* government, and the rule of shari'a law, not any particular *type* of government. Discontinuity, then, is easy to find, but surely all these versions must have something in common.

Outline

The current work, then, is intended as a contribution to the further specification of collective actors, or more generally units, in global politics. In particular, I hope to demonstrate the importance of the question of motivation, and to distinguish between basic and higher-order motivations. I agree with Bloom (1993), Mitzen (2006) and Steele (2007) on the existence of a basic, ontological motivation of collective actors and their members involving self-identification, attachment and affirmation. The thesis comprises five chapters, which successively narrow the focus and move from the abstract to the concrete.

Chapter One surveys some of the major theoretical themes in International Relations and several different approaches which have been taken to them. The focus is on

ontology and the chapter explores the question of whether some unification may be found in International Relations through a more thorough conceptualisation of the actor, or unit of interaction. After describing realist and neorealist approaches and assumptions regarding international political ontology, the chapter briefly addresses liberalism, neo-liberal institutionalism and cosmopolitanism, world and state system theory and critical theory before turning to a more detailed examination of constructivism. I have concentrated on realism in both its classical and structural guises and on constructivism because these seem to offer the most compelling possibilities of conciliation between schools of International Relations theory. Lebow, for example,

I will expand on and justify this focus further in later sections, but briefly introduce it here. Constructivism, in its earlier development in International Relations theory, concentrated on the constraints imposed on actors by norms associated with identity. In doing so it focused on what might be called positive norms, like restraint, rule-following and institutional worldviews. Realism, on the other hand, has as one of its foundational axia the ruthless pursuit of power, which may be restrained only by countervailing power. Realism is also focused on state behaviour, whereas constructivism is concerned with a broader range of collective and corporate actors, importantly including international institutions.

The question of the ontological status of non-observables is an important part of this debate, marking as it does one of the major conceptual dividing lines between empiricists on the one hand and scientific realists on the other. Wendt believes it is acceptable to 'posit unobservable entities to account for observable behaviour' (Wendt, A.E. 1987:353-354). This is called abductive reasoning:

Empiricists ... in effect subordinate ontology to epistemology – what exists is a function of what can be known experientially. In contrast to empiricists' rejection of abductive inference, scientific realists argue that such inferences are, in principle, justified if the entity in question can produce observable effects, or if its manipulation permits us to intervene with effect in the observable world (**Wendt, A.E. 1987:352 original emphasis**).

This last clause points to a research question concerning whether the behaviour of an unobservable – a conception of a mode of differentiation between collective entities, for example – can have concrete, strategic effects. Here is another measure of strategic success or failure. Furthermore, and most importantly, this may tell us something about the nature of the unobservable: whether it has more than one aspect. Later I will illustrate this question with reference to the case of the caliphate.

The intention of Chapter One is to show the importance of these theories' assumptions regarding the ontology of global politics. The bones of a post-constructivist approach ~~are~~ might be assembled along evolutionary lines, and the chapter concludes by assessing whether insights from other disciplines might provide pointers to questions, or suggest lines of enquiry. Chapter One argues for the importance of ontology for International Relations and outlines its implicit development in some main strands of International Relations thought.

Chapter Two opens by asking whether cognitive, social and biological factors drive ontological mechanisms. Ontological mechanisms are explained as those which are productive of units in International Relations – whatever they are. The chapter outlines ideas from the theory of mind, sociology and evolutionary theory, which may be usefully applied to International Relations.

The philosopher and linguist John Searle has had a significant influence in International Relations already, particularly among constructivists; Ruggie, for example, has 'found a relatively stable foundational footing' in his work (Ruggie 1998:13). His ideas about collective intentionality, institutional reality and status-function are particularly useful when it comes to the possibility of reconciling the singularist and collectivist positions.

Sociological work by Margaret Gilbert has also been referred to in the International Relations literature (Pacheco & Carmo 2003:148; Wendt, Alexander 2005:593). Wight explicitly disagrees with Gilbert 'that social entities can themselves be agents that possess mental states and perform actions' (Wight, C. 2006:201). In this section

Gilbert's ideas regarding the 'plural subject', 'common knowledge' and social ontology are set out, so they may be assessed against Wight's individualist ontology.

Evolutionary theory has been applied to International Relations in a number of ways: top-down; bottom-up; through socio-biology; and by applying the principle of coevolution (Falger 2001:30) (see also Florini 1996; Modelski 1996; Modelski & Poznanski 1996; Thayer 2000; Thompson 2001a). Bernstein, Lebow et al. argue that evolutionary biology is a more 'productive analogy for social science' than the predictive physical sciences (Bernstein et al. 2000:44-47). However, there is nothing to say that the processes of evolution cannot be applied outside biology, in which case their application to International Relations may well be more than an analogy (Modelski 2001:18-19).

Chapter Three then begins to apply these ideas to International Relations proper. It canvasses issues related mainly to the agent-structure problem. In particular it emphasises a theoretical distinction between action and behaviour. This is to further focus the argument for the following chapter. The first part of the chapter discusses structure in various guises, exploring dichotomies between universal and institutional anarchy, the material and the ideal or abstract, as well as opportunity structures and their relationship to evolutionary niches. A conclusion regarding informal conceptions of collective identity and whether they may possess an evolutionary interest in organisational establishment will direct and assist us towards a clearer ontology of International Relations.

Chapter Four focuses more specifically on motivation, legitimation and their influence on ontology. Part of the argument to be laid out concerns the relationship between the motivation of actor-subjects and the institutional entities which benefit from their actions. This relationship defines constitutive goals, and it will be my contention that the profound importance of the motivating force of collective affirmation is often overlooked. However, I will also contend that the idea is implicit in much of International Relations theory and, crucially, in the vernacular of practitioners, even when they are appealing to material or "vital" interests as justification.

This focus on the vernacular or rhetorical significance given to collectives by practitioners is emphasised not only by Gilbert but by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson in his recent book on the construction of 'Western civilisation'. Jackson 'concentrate[s] on intersubjective, observable articulations that shape possibilities' (Jackson 2006:ix) allowing him to elevate non-material motivations to the centre of global political analysis.

A key part of this motivation, or sense of purpose, lies in the conception of collective identity, which is a candidate for the generic ontological unit in global politics, but may in the end be simply another "facet of the diamond". The exploration reveals the silhouette of a possible theory of subjective political actors and their relationship to objective institutional structures. Once again I do not intend to fully describe the generic interacting unit in global politics, but to assess whether such a description is possible or desirable. Whether it is desirable depends upon its utility both in furthering our understanding of historical and contemporary international relations and in its potential for analysing and assessing strategic situations and policies.

Chapter Five brings the focus to the particular case of the Islamic caliphate. The chapter is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the history of the caliphate from its creation on the death of the Prophet Mohammed to its abolition in 1924. The second part deals with the movement for re-establishment which has been active since that date. Both parts use the case of the caliphate, for the reasons outlined above, to illustrate points made during the theoretical chapters. Finally, the thesis concludes by drawing these themes together and examining the degree to which this thinking has furthered our understanding of geopolitical ontology and strategic affairs.