

Defending foundations for International Relations theory

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In their recent paper in this journal, Nuno Monteiro and Keven Ruby (2009) argue that debates over philosophical foundations (PF) for International Relations (IR) theories can and should be avoided because no consensus on them has emerged, they needlessly divide the field and, because they are not provable, no proper choice among them is possible. In their view, IR should instead embrace methodological pluralism and tolerance of differing approaches. Foundational principles may be used only on a ‘personal’ basis (2009: 36), not as a way to show that one theorist’s overall position is better than the competition. Monteiro and Ruby allow PF discussion only to determine whether an author’s foundational principles are inconsistent with her substantive theory (2009: 36). For Monteiro and Ruby, then, one sort of knowledge in IR, which authors have pursued in order to strengthen their overall positions, is now off limits to IR debate.

One must have a good reason to accept the limitations on the search for knowledge. Does this limitation pay off with beneficial consequences? Or is Monteiro and Ruby’s argument so solid that it clearly justifies limitation of debate? This paper answers both questions in the negative. First, eschewing PF debates has the advantage of ‘opening the door to methodological pluralism’ (2009: 37). However, many authors (including myself) defend methodological pluralism without limiting IR debate. Moreover, the divisions in IR that they cite would be unaffected by the acceptance of their conclusion. Second, their argument is not persuasive. It contains numerous inconsistencies; equivocates on the central concept of ‘foundations’, which leads to a straw man opponent (by excluding many serious pluralistic PF in IR); and poses a false dichotomy. Thus, this paper argues that limitations they impose are not justified by benefits or persuasive argument, wherefore Monteiro and Ruby’s paper constitutes

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a distraction from potentially fruitful debate about how to develop and support the strongest IR conclusions.

Monteiro and Ruby's argument

Monteiro and Ruby's argument has the following structure:

1. Many IR scholars believe that the methodologies they employ must be supported by foundational arguments (2009: 15).
2. Scholars seek PF among the wide variety of competing foundational views in the philosophy of science (2009: 22, 23).
3. PF require 'unshakable premises' and 'indubitable beliefs' on which to build a structure of theory (2009: 25).
4. Numerous PF exist in the philosophy of science because there is no consensus and no progress; doctrines continue to live on like vampires (2009: 16, 26, 42, 43).
5. Progress in the foundational debate is lacking because PF positions rely on *a priori* claims, and, as such, cannot be proven true or false (2009: 26).
6. Any intellectual starting point, even deductive logic, requires further foundations, producing an infinite regress (2009: 25).
7. Thus, the acceptance of any foundational positions requires one or another equivalent 'leaps of faith' (2009: 15, 32–35).
8. IR does not require extradisciplinary foundations; it can and should proceed simply by 'doing IR' (2009: 37).
9. Adoption of the 'foundational prudence', derived from Fine's The Natural Ontological Attitude (NOA), eliminates the need to choose one particular foundational position (2009: 39).
10. Foundational debate seeking to show one position is better than another should be eliminated. Foundations may be accepted only as 'personal' beliefs to clarify the relationship of foundations to theory (2009: 36).
11. There is no hope for ascertaining the truth of any of the 'imperial' projects that seek foundations for 'all of IR;' the alternative – NOA-inspired 'foundational attitude' – does not require such proof (2009: 40).

Therefore,

12. it is best to adopt the foundational NOA.

In defending the value of foundational discourse, the sections that follow examine Monteiro and Ruby's reasoning and use of concepts (which is the appropriate form of analysis given that their paper discusses neither substantive IR theories nor observable behavior of states or systems). It will be argued that their argument is flawed, especially steps 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, and 11.

Equivocation: ‘PF’ and ‘foundational epistemology’ are completely different concepts – Step 3

Monteiro and Ruby argue against the possibility of finding the sorts of PF that IR scholars seek for their theories by claiming that the former by nature require ‘unshakable’ and ‘indubitable’ principles. Since they say that PF necessarily make such claims, their argument stands up only if all attempts at PF fit the characterization. Monteiro and Ruby cite several examples of authors who seek PF (see discussions of Step 11 below), but primarily support their characterization by a dictionary definition. Unfortunately, the definition that they cite is of the wrong term.

The fallacy of equivocation

Monteiro and Ruby say, ‘Foundational arguments posit that “knowledge of the world rests on a foundation of indubitable beliefs from which further propositions can be inferred to produce a superstructure of known truths” (Honderitch [sic.], 1995b)’. While attempting to clarify PF, as their bibliography shows, they erroneously use the definition of a completely different concept, ‘foundational epistemology’.¹

The damage from this error would be reduced if the pursuit of PF committed one to the doctrine of epistemic foundationalism. But, it does not. Virtually all *opponents* of epistemic foundationalism, from coherentists to pragmatists to sceptics, employ a *rational foundation* of philosophical argument to support their conclusions. If the use of PF committed one to epistemic foundationalism, it would be incoherent to say that pragmatist or other non-foundationalist accounts of ‘knowledge’ – and *a fortiori* sceptics – build their arguments using rational foundations for their conclusions. The concept of ‘foundations’ for a position is entirely distinct from the concept of ‘foundationalist’ epistemology. Monteiro and Ruby’s mistaken depiction of what a philosophical foundation requires *opens the way for them to construct a straw man opponent*.

The fallacy of the straw man: how the equivocation undermines the argument for prudence

Monteiro and Ruby hold that PF by their nature (i) claim imperial reach across all of the IR enquiry and (ii) demand indubitable status (the latter set up by a wrong definition). Does this reflect the way IR scholars

¹ One would expect Monteiro and Ruby to recognize that there is no such implication, since they cite a paper of mine in which I distinguish the two concepts explicitly (Chernoff, 2002: 201).

characterize PF? If not, then Monteiro and Ruby have to set up a straw man opponent.

Monteiro and Ruby cite several foundational positions throughout their paper, my own among them (Monteiro and Ruby, 2009: 21, 22, 32 n.25). They say, ‘...advocates of each PoS position ... then deploy them as a legitimating warrant – not only for their own approach, but as *the* proper foundation for IR *as a whole* (22; italics in original). This is a straw man depiction because it is not necessary and does not hold of all PF doctrines. For example, the causal conventionalist position I have developed specifically acknowledges interpretive and moral–normative enquiry as legitimate, and carefully restricts causal conventionalism, *qua* foundations, to causal enquiry (Chernoff, 2002: 205; Chernoff, 2005: 25, 30, 31, 216, 217; Chernoff, 2007a; Chernoff, 2009a, b). Thus, Monteiro and Ruby are wrong to characterize all authors – even all those whom they cite – as presenting foundational theories that, by their nature, are ‘imperialistically for IR as a whole’.

If Monteiro and Ruby’s characterization is wrong, then what do scholars actually mean by PF? There is of course variation. But, for the most part, foundations offer scholars a means of rendering their substantive positions more secure or persuasive – with no connotation of ‘indubitability’ or ‘mathematical certainty’. This account fits comfortably with the core metaphor. A building’s foundations aid its ability to withstand foreseeable storms, seismic activity, etc., without providing an absolute guarantee against all conceivable challenges, for example, massive and unprecedented earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, or meteor strikes. To say that a proposition rests on a firm foundation of argument does not in any way imply the indubitability of the premises.

Inconsistent standards of judgment and confusion about the truth value of *a priori* propositions – Step 5

In Step 5, Monteiro and Ruby present a key reason for excluding PF from IR debate, namely, that they are *a priori* and cannot be proved true or false.² They say that foundational efforts must fail because, “‘foundations’ are themselves necessarily without foundations. They are by definition constituted by *a priori* knowledge and, therefore, their truth-status is unascertainable; they cannot be proven true or false’ (Monteiro and Ruby, 2009: 26). The problems here are substantial. Let us note two. First, Monteiro and Ruby are wrong about whether *a priori* statements

² Any PF position, which is a conjunction of *a priori* and *a posteriori* set of statements will thereby be falsifiable.

are ‘unprovable’ and, second, they apparently are unable to tell which statements are *a priori* and which are not. Regarding the first problem, we note that mathematical theorems are a paradigm of the *a priori*; yet, they are provably true and are have considerable significance, as the natural sciences rely on them extensively, have accomplished much.

Regarding the second problem, their inability to identify which statements are *a priori*, consider three examples from their discussion of foundational prudence section (2009: 35ff). (i) ‘Our argument for foundational prudence is built on two empirical planks’ (2009: 35). But, the first one that they describe (‘that each of the three major philosophies of science ... requires at least one leap of faith’), is entirely *a priori*, as it consists exclusively of an analysis of the concepts employed. (ii) ‘... our argument entails the rejection of any *a priori* universal or essential criteria for theory choice’ (2009: 36).³ But, later in that same paragraph they say, ‘Like theories, methods ... should be chosen for their contribution to our substantive understanding of international politics’ (2009: 37). While the latter asks for *a posteriori* results, the criterion itself is purely *a priori*. And (iii) ‘... there is no *a priori* basis on which to recommend one [foundational commitment] over the other’ (2009: 36). Yet, in the very next sentence, they offer precisely such an *a priori* basis: ‘The only plausible criterion is that of reflecting upon how such commitments contribute to our understanding of international relations’ (2009: 36). Again, on the next page, they give another *a priori* criterion that a theoretical argument must be ‘internally consistent and externally valid’ (2009: 37).⁴

Monteiro and Ruby thus appear to be unable to distinguish between statements that are and are not *a priori* and appear confused about the nature of *a priori* statements, for example, calling them unprovable. Since the *a priori* nature of PF positions is key to their rejection of PF debate, Monteiro and Ruby’s confusion seriously undercuts their attack.

Not all starting point ‘leaps’ are equal – Step 7

Monteiro and Ruby argue that, because each of the major philosophical positions requires further foundations, none is a final step in securing a foundation. Consequently, accepting any PF position requires a ‘leap of

³ The most widely accepted criteria of theory choice, including that of the internal consistency, are *a priori*.

⁴ Here, as elsewhere, Monteiro and Ruby – despite protestations to the contrary – take a substantive foundational position. Any debate with those who deny the meaningfulness of ‘external validity’ would clearly constitute foundational discourse.

faith'. They conclude that IR scholars should learn to 'do IR' without relying for additional support on PF.

The claim that all three positions require a leap of faith does not entail that all PF positions are equally 'shaky' (2009: 35).⁵ Upon analysis, some might be seen to have premises that are more likely to turn out false than others. In general, the argument with premises less likely to turn out to be false is the stronger argument. Suppose we have two arguments for conclusion R and are uncertain of the truth-value of the (fallible) premises. If argument A1 derives R from premise P and A2 derives R from premises P and Q, then A1 is the stronger argument, since there is more chance that either P or Q will turn out to be false than that P alone will. Similarly, even if all foundational arguments have fallible principles, some may nevertheless be stronger than others in this standard sense (see Chernoff, 2002, 2009b).

'Just doing IR' still requires unavoidable foundational choices – Step 8

Monteiro and Ruby tell us that IR theorists should simply 'do IR' without engaging in foundational debate. However, doing IR requires choosing theories, which in turn requires appraisals and comparisons, which themselves require that we know things like whether theories may legitimately involve moral concepts, whether they may refer to unobservable entities, and how we determine when one theory is superior to its rivals. Answers to these questions come only from foundational debates.

Monteiro and Ruby say that methodological choices must be made, but, not surprisingly, they omit any examples of how to choose. Examples would quickly show that making those determinations involves taking positions on many non-empirical PF claims. This is unmistakably evident in comments like 'Any approach to "doing IR" must prove its own legitimacy by demonstrating its ability to *further our understanding* of international relations not by asserting its superiority according to some foundational argument. Standards of scholarship should be defined within the IR community, based on *how a particular argument relates to the general topics deemed relevant* to the discipline and, given its relevance, how an argument is *internally consistent* and *externally valid*, that is, supported by empirical evidence. Philosophical foundations add nothing ...' (2009: 37; italics added). All three italicized phrases commit the authors to foundational choices. In the first, we note that any explication

⁵ There is no philosophical consensus that all three require a leap of faith. Space limitations prevent investigating whether identifying consensus among philosophers or social scientists is more valuable than trying to get right answers, however unpopular.

of ‘understanding’ requires foundational analysis that goes beyond substantive ‘doing IR’. Second, no purely empirical test can ‘deem the relevance’. Finally, the concepts of ‘consistency’ and ‘validity’ come from logic, not from experience. Clearly, all three criteria of theory choice that Monteiro and Ruby invoke here require them to draw upon *a priori* foundational principles.⁶

Having it both ways – Step 10

Monteiro and Ruby attack IR theorists’ use of PF. They say, ‘IR scholars deploy foundational arguments to show how their scholarship is “scientifically” superior to that of others’ (2009: 36), and this, they feel, should be banned. They wish to prohibit arguments for or against an IR position (presumably theory, method, paradigm, or research program) based on the considerations of PF alone.

They later offer a concession, seeking to divorce themselves from ‘dogmatic anti-foundationalism’ (2009: 36). They try to have it both ways by ‘recognizing the value of foundations’ (2009: 36). They say, ‘For individual scholars, personal commitments to foundational arguments are fine ...’ (2009: 36). Scholars are free to select ‘their individual foundational commitments’ (2009: 36). Examining such personal commitments has the benefit of highlighting potential ‘inconsistencies or even contradictions between ... such commitments and ... theoretical ... and methodological choices’ (2009: 36).

There are some difficulties in seeing how broad the ban is. But, however interpreted, the argument has major inconsistencies. For example, they applaud the rejection of Logical Positivist foundations, which was the basis for post-war IR empiricism (2009: 20–21, 35 n.25). Indeed, it would be hard not to. But, Logical Positivism *did not conflict with IR theories*. Rather, early empiricist IR was undercut by the PF arguments against Logical Positivism itself. This important development in IR appears to be just the sort that Monteiro and Ruby seek to outlaw, because it was based on the status of a foundational position. So, Monteiro and Ruby must either overlook Logical Positivism’s shortcomings or permit debates over foundations to support or undercut methodological and substantive

⁶ How did the authors choose these three criteria over others? In IR, some are nearly universally accepted, for example, internal consistency, coherence, falsifiability, consistency, concreteness, and breadth or range (Vasquez, 1998; King *et al.*, 1994). Some are widely, but not universally, accepted, for example, fecundity, degree of corroboration, and methodological conservatism (Chernoff, 2005: 79). Interestingly Monteiro and Ruby themselves invoke (without any support) a version of methodological conservatism in their discussion of ‘prudence’ (2009: 36, 37).

research projects. Similarly, if a theorist continually adds variables to her weak theory to account for every empirical counter-instance, the theory would rightly be regarded as deficient – even if she concocted a justifying methodology. There are good philosophical reasons, with or without Lakatosianism, to reject such a theory. But, as long as the methodology and odd-ball foundations are mutually consistent, it is not clear that foundational prudence permits proper criticism – because any criticism would be on PF grounds.

If Monteiro and Ruby's 'foundational prudence' merely claims that appeals to philosophers' arguments cannot settle IR debates, then few would disagree. But, if the claim is that foundational debate cannot strengthen methodological and theoretical positions, and that attempts should be banned from IR literature, then their position can be seen to contain important contradictions.

False dichotomy – Step 11

Monteiro and Ruby's equivocation leads to a straw man characterization of PF, which in turn leads to a false dichotomy. They assert that we must choose either among PF doctrines, which necessarily claim indubitability and imperial reach, or reject foundations entirely in favor of an 'attitude'. This is a false dichotomy that overlooks the many sophisticated PF positions in IR that assert neither indubitability nor imperial control.

Monteiro and Ruby say, '... advocates of each PoS position ... deploy them as a legitimating warrant – not only for their own approach, but as *the* proper foundation for IR *as a whole*' (2009: 22; italics in original). Monteiro and Ruby are mistaken about this. Since Monteiro and Ruby hold that PF *necessarily* claim indubitability and imperial reach, one counter-example suffices to refute that position. As noted above, the causal conventionalist position I have developed is among those Monteiro and Ruby cite (2009: 21–22, 32 n.25). Causal conventionalism, as I have stated frequently, is a methodologically pluralist foundation for causal inquiry and not imperialist, as it recognizes that it *does not apply* to all of the types of questions that IR scholars pose.⁷ As I have said, 'the diversity of questions in IR demands different sorts of theories, [e.g.,] scientific, interpretive, normative, etc'. (Chernoff, 2005: 25). Causal conventionalism is offered as a foundation that specifically excludes application to interpretive, moral, or other non-causal areas of enquiry. And it allows a plurality of methods on the scientific questions, observing that 'Because the social world is complex

⁷ See also Chernoff, 2002: 205; Chernoff, 2005: 25, 30, 31, 216, 217; Chernoff, 2007a; Chernoff, 2009a, b.

and multifaceted ... [we] sometimes require orthogonal and cross-cutting theoretical approaches and methods' (Chernoff, 2005: 20). Thus, Monteiro and Ruby are wrong to say that PF positions, by their nature, claim imperial reach and demand to be accepted for IR as a whole.

Benefits not bestowed

Foundational prudence promises that if we eschew foundational debate, we will be able to reduce methodological divisions in IR and open the door to methodological pluralism. But, it does not deliver on the former and is unnecessary for the latter. The survey that Monteiro and Ruby cite (2009: 19) shows different methodological views among IR faculty. But, Monteiro and Ruby allow scholars to continue to maintain 'personal commitments' on PF that shape their methodology. So, universal acceptance of their view would yield the same results in any future survey, since the same scholars would self-describe as positivists, constructives, etc.⁸ The only difference would be that no one group may claim imperialist foundational dominance.

Monteiro and Ruby also say that banning foundational debate would 'open the door' to methodological pluralism. However, methodological pluralism is already widely accepted by IR. It is advocated in various forms by Robert Jervis (1985), Lisa Martin (1999), Stephen Walt (1999), Janice Bially (2000), Hayward Alker (2004), and Richard Little (2008), to mention a few of the more well-known scholars. My own work includes the recent chapter 'Methodological Pluralism and the Limits of Naturalism' (Chernoff, 2007a), and sections entitled 'Methodological Pluralism' in *The Power of International Theory* (2005: 216, 217) and *Theory and Metatheory* (2007: 181–184). Methodological pluralism has scores of defenders in the philosophy of social science. Giving up on finding foundational answers is in no way necessary to open the door to pluralism.

The value of philosophical foundations

Scholars in IR and other social sciences seek the most intellectually defensible theories they can muster. Good foundations help this process, as do good research designs and good empirical evidence. Research designs are not falsifiable and empirical claims are fallible. Yet, both can

⁸ What goals are the authors hoping to satisfy with their approach? Do they think it likely that there are *any* metatheoretical positions (foundational, post-foundational, or Fine's NOA) that will garner the support of all IR theorists, including rational choice modelers, post-structuralists, Marxists, or others? See also note 7 above and Fine (1984).

be rationally evaluated and both are essential to social science. Good foundational arguments, in a parallel way, not only strengthen theoretical conclusions but also contribute to the formulation of good research designs that help lead us to proper empirical focus.

The ‘causal conventionalist’ foundational account that I have advanced serves as a clear counter-example to Monteiro and Ruby’s contention that PF doctrines are imperialist and purport indubitability. Causal conventionalism avoids imperialism by supporting quasi-scientific methods for some, but – quite explicitly – not all, of the types of IR questions (Chernoff, 2005: 216, 217). And it avoids purporting indubitability in part by endorsing a fallibilist, non-foundationalist pragmatic account ‘knowledge (2005: 99, 100, 116). Causal conventionalism also includes a constructive empiricist account of theoretical terms, a pluralist view of methodology, and the principle of the conventionality of all science – that some conventional agreement is required for empirical science to progress and succeed.⁹ Causal conventionalism’ principles (2002, 2005, 2009a) and defenses against opponents’ criticisms (Chernoff, 2007b, 2009b) add force to various substantive IR projects, such as democratic peace (Chernoff, 2005: 189–203; Chernoff, 2004), while avoiding imperialism and indubitability.

Conclusion

Monteiro and Ruby are right to oppose the claims of a single foundation for IR as a whole (2009: 15). IR books and journals include investigations of diverse causal, interpretive, and moral–normative questions. Monteiro and Ruby are also right to be cautious about accepting any unnecessary (foundational or other) premises, which may turn out to be false. And they are right to question foundational positions that claim to have indubitable principles and to apply to all legitimate IR enquiry. But, it has been argued that all PF neither lack value for substantive theory, nor claim indubitability nor claim methodological hegemony.

The difficulties that Monteiro and Ruby encounter help to underscore the need for foundations by indicating some of the pitfalls in trying to develop a foundationally neutral plea to ban foundational debate. Their argument that we should just ‘do IR’ requires them to assert foundational principles, especially since ‘doing IR’ clearly requires endorsing specific that criteria of theory choice. The authors seek to eschew *a priori* statements, but repeatedly rely on them. Stark contradictions also arise from Monteiro and Ruby’s attempt to have it both ways – allowing foundations

⁹ On the last principle, see also Duhem (1954).

as a ‘personal’ choice, while banning debate, excepting only the noting of theory foundations’ inconsistencies.

There are foundational positions that avoid indubitable and imperial claims. So, if Monteiro and Ruby hold that all PF positions are necessarily indubitable and imperial, then they have constructed a straw man. If, when pressed, they should acknowledge that there are many PF accounts in IR that do not fit this mold, and debate on them is acceptable, then the ban will do little to change IR discourse – especially once actual contemporary PF works in IR are examined. In the latter case, their position says little more than that IR debates cannot be settled simply by appeals to philosophy journals. Yet, even that modest ban is questionable, since there are instances, such as Logical Positivism and IR empiricism, where many IR scholars, apparently including Monteiro and Ruby, rely on PF debates to evaluate IR research. In any event, the alleged benefits of banning foundational debate in IR – achieving methodological pluralism and the healing of divisions – are either already enjoyed without accepting their limitation on debate or not probable given their argument.

IR scholars present rival theoretical answers to questions, where each claims that her theory fares better than rivals on her chosen criteria of theory choice. But, not all criteria are equally appropriate or justifiable for all areas of study, for example, for empirical, interpretive, and normative enquiry. So, a scholar’s choices of criteria must be defended in advance – and outside – of substantive theory debates. Foundational discourse is a proper and valuable part of the study of IR.¹⁰

Scholars debate substantive IR questions, even though they conceded that their results are unlikely to produce consensus or indubitable conclusions. Yet, they do not regard these concessions to be sufficient to justify banning the search for the best theoretical knowledge attainable. Arguments for theories can be strengthened, and vulnerabilities to criticisms reduced, by accumulating good evidence, constructing sound research designs, and formulating well-defended, rationally justified, yet admittedly fallible, foundational principles.

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¹⁰ IR embraces many different kinds of question, and each has its own criteria for theory choice: ‘The appropriate methods for each [kind] of questions differ. Some...are clearly best answered by... an examination of many cases...some... by means of interpretive methods; and others by the analysis of concepts and the application of moral theory’ (Chernoff, 2005: 20; see also Chernoff, 2007a). This greatly helps justify methodological pluralism.

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