The promise of foundational prudence: a response to our critics

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In our article 'International Relations (IR) and the False Promise of Philosophical Foundations' (Monteiro and Ruby, 2009; henceforth, 'False Promise'), we argued that the search for a single foundation for a 'scientific' IR is both misguided and counterproductive. Misguided, because in the search for secure foundations, IR looks to the Philosophy of Science (PoS) for answers that it cannot definitively give. There are at least three well-supported foundational positions – Instrumentalism (INS), Social Constructivism (SC), and Scientific Realism (SR) – and none of them has produced consensus among philosophers. Counterproductive, because importing competing positions from the PoS as if they are supported by a philosophical consensus divides IR along foundational lines. Indeed, the 'great debates' spawned in IR by foundational questions have no philosophical basis for resolution. Predictably, the fissures exposed and created by such foundational debates remain open long after the heat of debate has dissipated.

The contributors to this symposium broadly agree with our diagnosis of the problem – that the foundational debate in IR is stuck and counterproductive – and, like us, share a motivation to move beyond the foundational debate while retaining IR's status as a scientific discipline capable of making meaningful claims about the course and conduct of international politics. Where we disagree is on the best way to accomplish this goal.

In 'False Promise', we proposed that the discipline abandon the quest for secure foundations and instead adopt a prudent attitude toward foundational arguments, acknowledging their strengths and limitations.

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IR needs to recognize that no secure philosophical foundation for science exists. Period.

Foundational prudence asks IR scholars to adopt an open-minded attitude toward foundational positions. An 'attitude' is distinct from a 'position' in that it recognizes the value of philosophical reflection on the foundations for knowledge – both epistemological and ontological – while at the same time averting the imposition of any single position from the PoS on the discipline as a whole. Because, it explicitly recognizes the inherently shaky nature of philosophical foundations for knowledge, foundational prudence forecloses the *a priori* dismissal of scholarship solely on foundational grounds. Given the plurality of available positions and the absence of any philosophical basis to mandate one PoS over another, we argue that a prudent attitude toward the question of foundations is the only way to go.

Ours is, admittedly, a strong view on foundational matters. But our purpose in writing 'False Promise' was not to have the final word on the role of the PoS in IR. To the contrary, as we argued, a dialogue on what role PoS arguments do, can, and should have in guiding IR research is an important part of keeping the strengths and limitations of such arguments in perspective ('False Promise': 40). We hoped to spark a dialogue and, as the contributions to this symposium abundantly show, in this we were not disappointed.

The contributors to this symposium raise serious questions that get to the heart of the foundational debate and the prospects for pluralism in IR. Specifically, they question whether adopting an attitude of foundational prudence would, in the end, live up to its promise to foster a plural and 'scientific' IR. Patrick Jackson, Fred Chernoff, and James Bohman argue that foundational prudence fails on its own terms as a post-foundational way out of IR's science debate – either because foundational prudence is itself foundational (Jackson), because it is anti-foundational (Chernoff), or because it lacks a sufficient appreciation for practical motivations for inquiry (Bohman). Perhaps, as they suggest, a PoS position can still be found that supports pluralism in IR research while not abandoning philosophical justification for science. Could it be that Social Constructivism (Jackson), 'Causal Conventionalism' (Chernoff), or Pragmatism (Bohman) is a better way to go? After all, would not an IR without philosophically warranted credentials, as Raymond Mercado suggests, be more akin to 'horse sense' than to science? Finally, does our attempt to move beyond foundational debates leave IR, as Milja Kurki suggests, blinded to the important connections between foundational and political commitments?

In the remainder of this reply, we address our critics' concerns, using this opportunity to strengthen our case for an attitude of foundational prudence.

A prudent and genuinely post-foundational attitude

Jackson (2009b) presents the strongest challenge to our claim that foundational prudence is genuinely post-foundational. If it can be shown that a prudent attitude toward the foundational debate entails its own maximalist philosophical commitments (foundational, anti-foundational, or otherwise), then our critics would be right to be skeptical about our claim that such an attitude can dissolve the foundational debate. But, as we will show, foundational prudence does not entail such commitments.

Jackson argues that foundational prudence, in calling for scholarship motivated by empirical evidence and external validity, retains a commitment to a mind-independent world and is therefore foundational, not post-foundational. According to Jackson, the search for secure foundations for knowledge emerged in response to the strong desire among philosophers and scientists to bridge the gap between subject and object – mind and world – in order to ground knowledge as objective and true (2009b: 456–458). This desire led to the emergence of 'dualist' PoS foundations, of which INS and SR are representative examples. SC, however, rejects dualism and, with it, the foundational project. In Jackson's terms, SC is 'monist,' taking as its object the practices of agents without imposing any *a priori* conditions on whether the beliefs of those agents correspond to the world in any meaningful way (2009b: 462). To be genuinely post-foundational, Jackson argues, IR must accommodate both dualist (INS, SR) and monist (SC) positions. Thus far, we are in more-or-less complete agreement.

But we disagree with Jackson's subsequent interpretation of foundational prudence as leaving no room for monism, which would preclude it from being truly post-foundational (2009b: 460–461). Nothing about our reference to empirical evidence and external validity *necessitates* dualism. For foundational prudence, the understanding of empirical evidence is, perforce, very broad. It includes, among a wide array of possibilities, the observation of 'practices' that Jackson rightly identifies as central to monist SC (2009b: 460). Similarly, external validity only entails that theory aspire to meaningful claims about the world of international politics, not that theory mirrors the world in any kind of philosophically foundationalist way. Thus, what we understand by externally valid empirical evidence can accommodate a wide range of claims drawing on, or inspired by, different PoS positions – from pure dualism to pure monism – without being determined by any one of them.

That is why we find it puzzling that Jackson strongly implies that SC is itself post-foundational. Drawing on Pouilot, he argues that a post-foundational IR would 'sidestep the issue of philosophical foundations by *bracketing* the validity or invalidity of foundational commitments in favor

of an empirical analysis of what the commitments do in practice' (2009b: 462–463, Jackson's emphasis). This is remarkably similar to Jackson's presentation of SC, which, he claims, has the virtue of providing an 'empirical account' of the practices of IR 'without generating philosophical foundational accounts of the outcomes' (2009b: 460, 462). Here, we think Jackson is conflating SC as an approach to 'how particular claims come to be regarded as true' (an investigation that Jackson concedes 'must be empirical rather than conceptual') with the underlying foundational claim that all knowledge is social and that, as a result, a claim's 'ultimate worthiness' is beyond the scope of scientific knowledge (2009b: 460).

In fact, for SC to be post-foundational by Jackson's own standard of not unevenly taxing the proponents of each foundational position, it must make equal room for monist and dualist approaches. It is difficult to see, however, how SC would make room for any dualism, since its purpose is precisely to reject it. Contrary to Jackson's claim that SC 'says *nothing* about any philosophical foundations that (knowledge-claims) might (or might not) have,' (2009b: 461, Jackson's emphasis) SC's commitment to monism precludes approaches motivated by a belief in a mind-independent world. At the end of the day, monist SC rejects SR's and INS's dualism, and therefore logically excludes them – failing to serve as the ecumenical platform Jackson advocates. In short, SC, like its closely related PoS cousin Pragmatism (more on which below), is anti-, not post-foundational.

Foundational prudence, foundations, and foundationalism

But given that foundational prudence itself demands the recognition that foundational questions are inherently undecidable on philosophical grounds, is it perhaps *also* anti-foundational?

According to Chernoff's contribution to this symposium, the central flaw in our argument is that we mistakenly conflate 'foundations' with 'foundationalism', and that therefore our reservations about the value or truth of any foundational position are overstated (2009: 468–469). Specifically, Chernoff claims we are wrong in asserting that foundational positions 'require "unshakable premises" and "indubitable beliefs" on which to build a structure of theory' (2009: 467). For Chernoff, (good and necessary) 'foundations' are the basic logics of argumentation that make debate possible. They do not entail (bad and unnecessary) 'foundationalism', the doctrine that knowledge must be grounded on unshakable premises.

If this were to be the case, we would be living in a world in which the quest for foundations is a force for good, a plausible, fruitful effort to place IR on firmer ground. Chernoff would thus be right in accusing us of tossing the foundational baby out with the foundationalist bathwater. It would follow that, by rejecting all foundations as untenable and undesirable (even those that make possible a common understanding among IR scholars), foundational prudence would itself be anti-, not post-foundational – and much of our argument would collapse.

But we think Chernoff is mistaken, on two counts.

First, and as we made explicit in 'False Promise', the problem we are addressing in IR is one about foundationalism – a debate in which IR scholars deploy philosophical arguments about how a theory is 'true', or 'valid', or 'useful', or 'acceptable', or whatever, because it is consistent with a certain view of knowledge and the process of its production. It is this specific type of philosophical justifications for knowledge – *not* all justificatory arguments – we want to move beyond. In short, Chernoff may be right about the need for foundations broadly conceived (in a non-foundationalist way), but this is not what foundational prudence is about.

Second, even if we could be accused of running roughshod over important distinctions among foundations, foundational prudence does not entail their outright rejection. As we pointed out in 'False Promise' (18, fn. 5), such an anti-foundationalist stance requires an Archimedian point from which to reject foundationalist arguments. Anti-foundationalism is thus logically dependent on *a priori* and therefore unascertainable claims, making it as foundationalist as foundationalism itself, and ultimately self-contradictory (see also Jackson, 2009b: 462). Instead, foundational prudence encourages scholars to step back and accept the inherent insecurity of foundations, putting commitments about what exists and how we can know it in perspective as competing arguments about the best way to address substantive questions in IR, while rejecting their use as legislative tools to discipline IR. Foundational prudence is therefore not anti- but post-foundational.

Indeed, Chernoff writes that 'Monteiro and Ruby are right to oppose claims of a single foundation for IR as a whole', but then wrongly concludes that foundational prudence is a distraction from 'potentially fruitful debate about how to develop and support the strongest IR conclusions' (2009: 467). As we argued in 'False Promise' (39–40), a prudent attitude toward philosophical foundations does not reject their potential contributions, only the pretense that they provide a definitive statement on science – what it is and how it is to be done. There is a multiplicity of

reasons why IR scholars turn to the PoS. But to the extent that PoS arguments are offered as foundational justifications for a claim about international politics, they invite rejection on the logic of competing PoS grounds – sliding down a slippery slope that has divided IR in unproductive ways.

In this vein, Chernoff's 'Causal Conventionalism' might (or might not) help scholars answer questions relevant to the discipline, but we see no *philosophical* basis on which to recommend it, however, much support it might have among philosophers of science. Moreover, Causal Conventionalism can only become an alternative foundation for IR scholarship – even if, as Chernoff admits, it is not meant to apply imperially to the discipline as a whole – *only* if we have previously established the possibility of moving beyond foundations *qua* global claims about science that would otherwise be rejected out of hand. In other words, it depends on an attitude of foundational prudence.

And not Pragmatism, either

In his essay, James Bohman argues that foundational prudence, because it is agnostic with respect to policy relevance for scholarship in IR, cannot be properly post-foundational, as it undervalues 'practical forms of verification' and therefore fails to appreciate 'an important alternative view of the practice of IR, that of pragmatism' (2009: 490).

Indeed, Pragmatism is getting a great deal of attention in IR's ongoing foundational debate.[1] Like us, proponents of Pragmatism recognize the failure of the PoS to secure foundations for knowledge. Unlike us, however, they turn to a recognized position in the philosophical debate about foundations – Pragmatism – to justify their move. But, while Pragmatism has as its principal virtue a call for a pragmatic approach to knowledge, we argue it has as its principal vice a hook into the PoS foundational debate that undermines its potential to ground pluralism in IR.

Bohman argues that IR should endorse Pragmatism, a PoS that holds that 'a theory be judged in light of its practical consequences', that is, how it contributes to 'identifying and solving problems', while remaining open-minded about how 'knowledge can work toward these ends' (2009: 4). He makes his case drawing on a practical example: improving democratic

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[1] See the special issues on Pragmatism in IR in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 2002, **31**(3); *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 2007, **10**(1); *International Studies Review*, 2009, **11**(3). See also Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009).

practice, whereby the goal of inquiry becomes the basis upon which the utility of inquiry is judged (2009: 491–497).

Bohman objects to foundational prudence because it makes the commitment to external goals optional, with, as he puts it, 'no systematic place' in defining the scope of scientific knowledge (2009: 497). Pragmatism, he argues, overcomes this limitation by placing internal and external criteria 'on a continuum', concluding that 'it is better for diversity to be *antifoundational* rather than postfoundational' (2009: 498, emphasis added).

Since practicality is, in this line of reasoning, the basis for theory choice, it follows that, for a pragmatist social science, some explicit normative goal must always be present and acknowledged for inquiry to be 'scientific' in a practical sense. Pragmatism would thus commit IR to rejecting the epistemological skepticism at the heart of both INS and SC. We should, to quote Friedrichs and Kratochwil's (2009: 706) endorsement of Pragmatism for IR, be 'epistemological instrumentalists' – that is, we should do and trust what works. For Bohman, and for pragmatists more generally, pluralism in IR is best served by focusing on a shared commitment to external goals (e.g. improving democracy) while rejecting any *a priori* foundational limitations on the nature of research toward that end. At the same time, we should reject SR's ontological optimism about access to a mind-independent world as a basis for theory choice, since all knowledge is for some purpose, and that purpose is not an independent property of the world.[2]

And herein lies the central flaw of advocating Pragmatism as a way out of the foundational debate. As we argued in regards to Chernoff, antifoundationalism is itself a foundational position, and a controversial one. It demands certainty that foundations are flawed. In other words, it requires an Archimedean point from which we can deny the possibility of Archimedean points in general – a position that is at least as problematic as foundationalism itself.

We are broadly sympathetic with how Pragmatism in its various guises *describes* how IR could function in the absence of epistemological and ontological blinders. But we reject Pragmatism as a *prescriptive* framework precisely because it enjoins IR scholars to take a stand in the PoS

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[2] According to Jackson (2009a: 658), 'The philosophical mind-world monism of a pragmatic stance ensures that scholarship is less about a presumptive effort to grasp an externally existing world, and more about a disciplined effort to envision what the world would look like if explained and understood according to some ideal-typically elaborated set of value-commitments'. Pragmatism's monism is at the heart of Colin Wight's (2007) critique of Pragmatism's foundationalism.

debate – on the side of a consensus theory of truth.[3] Thus to recommend that IR should be guided by Pragmatism is to recommend a general acceptance of Pragmatism's consensus theory of truth, which, as Colin Wight rightly argues, cannot be viewed as 'anything other than a form of foundationalism … that is generalized across all sciences' (Wight, 2007: 47–48). We therefore doubt that Pragmatism can resolve the foundational debate in IR – for the same reasons that INS, SC, or SR cannot as well.

In 'False Promise', we argued that there is no foundational solution to IR's foundational debate – not even anti-foundationalism. Nor do we think it necessary to burden the discipline with yet another philosophical framework to make sense of what scientific knowledge is. Pragmatist research strategies as outlined by Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009: 708–711) – theory synthesis, analytic eclecticism, and methodological abduction – may be perfectly good strategies, but not because they can be demonstrated to conform to a particular view of knowledge propounded by philosophers, however, pragmatic in orientation.[4]

We share Bohman's aim of making IR safe for a diversity of approaches but disagree on how best to get there. Only foundational prudence can serve as the condition of possibility for our shared vision of an ecumenical science of IR, where foundational positions are treated, to use Jackson's felicitous turn of phrase, 'as working assumptions, or *wagers*, and evaluated for their analytical productivity rather than in terms of their ultimate philosophical validity' (2009: 463, Jackson's emphasis). When compared with any foundational PoS position, maintaining an attitude of foundational prudence is better able to accommodate diversity and, in our view, has the potential to do a much better job of fostering mutual understanding among scholars whose pursuit of knowledge about IR may derive from a diverse set of PoS leanings.

Foundational prudence and the boundaries of science

Another major concern among our critics is that adopting foundational prudence either deprives IR of its dignity as a science or it smuggles foundations back in via philosophically unjustified (and unreflective) criteria summarized as 'disciplinary relevance'. If foundational prudence

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[3] Friedrichs and Kratochwil sum up the pragmatist position nicely: for pragmatists, 'social scientific knowledge rests on two prerequisites: a particular form of consensus within and across communities, and a particular kind of intellectual and/or practical purpose' (2009: 706).

[4] There is thus a contradiction between Pragmatism's commitment to a consensus theory of truth and the desire of Friedrichs and Kratochwil to 'avoid staging yet another epistemological debate' (2009: 707).

does not offer an explicit set of rules that define IR as science, what makes a post-foundational IR any different from practical knowledge or conventional wisdom? Does foundational prudence, as Raymond Mercado argues, mean IR has 'surrendered the last shred of its dignity as science' and cannot 'lay claim to any more respectability than the political insights of a Churchill, a Kissinger, a Kennan' (2009: 482)?

In 'False Promise' (37), we made a conscious choice not to speculate as to what, in a specific sense, accepting foundational prudence would mean for answering questions about goals and standards. We instead argued that goals and standards already exist and operate in IR – and that whatever goals and standards we have do not get a validity boost by being hooked into a specific position in the PoS. Goals include (but cannot be limited *a priori* to) explaining, describing, and critiquing matters relevant to IR as a discipline – where by 'relevance' we mean bearing in some way on the subject and practice of international politics. Standards may vary with goals, but there is no single philosophical formula to suggest specific goals or the relationship between goals and measures of progress toward them. So we wholeheartedly embrace Bohman's suggestion of the improvement of democratic practices as a possible goal for IR, *among others*. Likewise with policy relevance more generally, which appears to us a perfectly reasonable goal for some IR scholars to endorse, but an impossibly narrowing one if imposed on the entire discipline.

These are *not*, however, foundational claims. Rather, they are sociological observations about how IR operates, subject to analysis, criticism, and challenge on non-foundational grounds. IR as a discipline will have many reasons for favoring some questions, arguments, and approaches over others. For example, the fact that research on UFOs does not feature prominently in the discipline, or that astrology or string theory have little impact on inquiry in IR, is not decidable by philosophical *fiat*. Nor does foundational prudence mean that advocating for an expansion of the questions and approaches relevant to the discipline is off-limits. Indeed, as we pointed out above, foundational prudence is in many ways a precondition for introducing new questions, methods, and approaches, not a limitation on them.

Our purpose is to take conformity to specific philosophical foundations out of the repertoire of reasons based on which specific arguments and entire approaches can be summarily rejected. Foundational prudence is thus purposefully fuzzy about standards and goals for IR. A prudent attitude entails little need for, or validation from, philosophical elaboration on what they are. What it does have to say is that importing goals and standards from the PoS based on the (erroneous) assumption that it knows better how to delimit the scope and possibilities of IR as a science

arbitrarily stifles IR's potential. In sum, we do not think that having a foundation –however supported by prominent philosophers of science – makes IR's goals more relevant or guarantees that its scholarship is more scientific.

But if PoS foundations do not guarantee IR as science, that does not mean they are useless. It would be tempting to (mis)read our argument as saying that IR as a discipline should ignore philosophy and what it has learned about science as practice and process. That is not what we argue at all.

Our view on the role of the PoS in IR can be put in a nutshell: philosophical arguments are OK; foundationalist ones are not. Whereas the former may be useful to illuminate the problems and possibilities of specific questions, theories, methods, evidence, etc.; the latter go beyond that informative role to assume a legislative role, which we oppose. Put differently, we should deploy philosophical arguments the same way we deploy theoretical, substantive, methodological, and empirical arguments.

In order to make informed scientific choices, IR scholars should be trained in the full range of theories of science, encouraging reflection on the presuppositions and limitations of any given approach to IR scholarship. Therefore, foundational prudence is entirely compatible with Jackson's view that philosophical arguments must remain a focus for scholarly debate and training, even in the absence of any foundational position achieving disciplinary consensus (2009b: 463). Indeed, one of our central purposes is precisely to raise awareness of foundational issues in IR and the inherent uncertainty of all knowledge. But such arguments cannot be justified on the basis of foundational claims. Instead, they must prove their worth on substantive grounds, that is, how a certain conception of relevance does or does not fit IR. Thus, to address Mercado's concerns regarding IR's authority to speak about international politics, any dignity IR derives from the PoS is based on false pretense.

The politics of foundations (and of foundational prudence)

Finally, we address the role of politics in foundational disputes. Perhaps the most important aspiration of 'scientific' IR – in particular, of the 'positivist' orthodoxy – has been to believe in the possibility of studying (international) politics in an apolitical way. A perverse effect of this attempt to make IR apolitical has been to push down political debate to the foundational level. This is at the core of Milja Kurki's argument in this symposium.

Like us, Kurki argues that PoS positions are too often presented out of context – as a-historical and a-political, divorced from the context in

which these arguments emerged in the PoS (2009: 441–442). Unlike us, however, she thinks the state of the often-times acrimonious foundational debate in IR is a good thing because it exposes underlying political views that would otherwise be stifled by a hegemonic politics masked as scientific orthodoxy. What we identify as divisions about how to conduct science, Kurki identifies as simply politics: debate on how liberalism, Marxism, and, in general, ideologies naturalized by PoS foundations contribute to – in IR as in the world at large – who gets what, when, and where.

When we argued in 'False Promise' (39) that deploying foundational arguments to justify specific approaches to IR is fighting politics by proxy, we had something narrower in mind. Specifically, we saw the search for a single foundation playing a predominantly *intra* disciplinary role – that of producing justifications for research funding, access to publications, and jobs. Kurki adds to that intradisplinary role a more conventional (but no less important) political dimension by arguing that political concerns about the world of IR – not just that of IR – motivate foundational claims as well.

If Kurki is right – and we believe she is – foundational arguments can play a role in two fights: they are deployed as disciplinary mechanisms in IR, seeking to bound (and challenge) the scope of legitimate work; and they are deployed in support of specific political ideologies and objectives in IR. We agree with Kurki that these two roles can be intertwined – for instance, when research agendas in IR implicitly promote specific political goals in IR.[5] But, as Kurki concedes, there is no necessary connection between specific foundations of science and specific political ideologies (2009: 450–451).

We therefore do not see how the merits of specific political positions – in the world as in IR – should be discussed by making foundational claims on the scientific character of IR. One might have concerns about, say, the hegemonic language of liberalism. One might, further, be concerned about how a certain way of doing IR leads to the production of scholarship that naturalizes liberalism. One might even worry about how a certain view of science leads to a certain way of doing IR that, in turn, naturalizes liberalism. But in order to justify discussing politics at the foundational level, one must also accept that the putative problems with liberalism necessarily flow from a specific view of science. And this last claim seems to us overstated. It amounts to claiming that sharing PoS foundational positions is a precondition to sharing political views. It is not.

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[5] Kurki's argument can be seen as a cautionary note to Bohman's optimism about Pragmatism, for there is nothing about practical verification to ensure that the goals of science are put to ends that might be generally recognized as good.

There is no necessary relation between political views and foundational claims about the status of science. Surely, IR scholars make implicit and explicit political arguments, but we find it hard to fathom the benefits of debating politics at the foundational level – a level on which competing philosophical visions of the world slip all too easily into claims about living in fundamentally different worlds and thereby decreasing the prospects of fruitful political dialogue. But to the degree that the 'leaps of faith' entailed by commitments to specific foundational positions do 'enable the kind of social and political relations scholars see, how they analyze power relations, and consequently their views on desirable forms of political action', then foundational prudence should expose and denaturalize such affinities, however, 'elective' they may be, as inherently shaky and as an ultimately arbitrary basis for political action (2009: 451).

How we learned to stop worrying about foundations

By now, it should be clear that we think IR can no longer rest on the false promise of philosophical foundations. This, however, should be no cause for pessimism. IR as a discipline is made relatively coherent by a more-or-less shared sense of what are the relevant questions, methods, standards, etc., so that it can do well without the pretense of foundational certainty. To be sure, this sense is considerably fuzzier than that prescribed by the archetypal foundational positions in the PoS – and their advocates in IR. But there is nothing wrong with this. Indeed, foundational prudence seeks to transform such fuzziness into a virtue, recognizing the plural character of IR scholarship without regimenting pluralism based on an inevitably shaky and contested foundational position.

The question we have to ask is whether IR as a science needs a foundation to make scholarship authoritative and worth paying attention to, and whether any single position in the PoS – whether foundational or anti-foundational, dualist or monist – can fit the bill. While Pragmatism, for example, may describe what (at least some) IR scholars do, this does not warrant turning it into a philosophically justified normative prescription for how IR should work. That would be limiting. We do not reject the value of philosophical reflection on foundations for knowledge – indeed, foundational prudence entails just such reflection – but reject the imposition of any one such foundation as the basis for IR as a whole. For the discipline to resist such imperial projects, it is unquestionably essential to know something about those positions, their commitments, and what those commitments mean for an individual's research in relation to IR as a discipline loosely bounded by a common scholarly interest in the

workings (broadly defined) of all aspects of international politics, to include self-reflective (critical) research into the impact of IR on international politics, and, more narrowly, the politics of the discipline itself.

Some of our critics point out that, without foundations, we are skating on thin ice. This line of criticism highlights the original anxiety that prompted the foundational quest. As Mercado's forceful prose puts it, absent some consensual foundation, 'the knowledge left to us must be of a nonscientific, nontheoretical kind' (2009: 481). Our rejoinder is that the inevitably uncertain nature of knowledge means we have, alas, been skating on thin ice all along. In sum, foundations did not and could not have added any philosophical certainty to our past claims to know something about IR, so we should not be worried that we will have to manage without them in the future.

We end on a note of cautious optimism. Foundational prudence makes significant demands on those who endorse any foundational position. But what we ask of each of them is only that they continue to study IR the way they have thus far without, however, deploying their foundational commitments as disciplinary weapons against scholarship produced under different working assumptions.[6]

Genuine pluralism requires that IR scholars accept the diversity of possibilities for what constitutes science. Only an appreciation of the inherent limits of knowledge can put into perspective the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to studying IR. We believe that a genuine post-foundational IR is possible only once we, as a discipline, recognize the inherent uncertainty of knowledge and the value of multiple approaches in our common endeavor to study international politics. That is the promise of foundational prudence.

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[6] We would like to note that, for all of Mercado's fatalism about the prospects of an IR without foundations, he has put forth *no* philosophical argument to counter our point about the absence of an unshakable PoS foundation for IR. One might point out that, unless and until one such argument is conclusively presented, foundations cannot perform any philosophical role in securing knowledge. Indeed, in the absence of such argument, the only role foundations can perform is sociological – that is, a role in accounting for the formation of consensuses on certain substantive arguments. This would mean that SCs, not their opponents, have gotten it right.

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