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Between philosophy and social science: Harm and its object in International Relations

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Abstract

As a discipline, IR returns repeatedly to the 'problem of harm'; debating what harm is or should mean. Exploring the discipline through this lens allows us to understand it as contributing to a broader process of negotiation centred on harm as a principle of restraint. However, existing accounts of what harm means for IR are challenged by the scale and visibility of large-scale harm. This article attempts to push beyond recent accounts of harm by Linklater and Mitchell by examining their respective framings of the relationship between harm and its explanation in IR. Building on their limitations, I propose a framework centred on arguments for ontological realism and structure as a focus for explanation. The resulting ontology sustains the concerns of both while: (a) more fully characterising the relationship between explanation and values in IR; and (b) providing a more adequate account of the role of abstraction. In developing upon existing accounts, this article seeks to provide a stronger ground for the analysis of harm in IR. More broadly, it contributes to contemporary debates centred on the relationship between ontology and values with a view to clarifying the nature of explanation in IR as a social science.

Keywords

International Relations Theory; Harm; Ontology; Philosophy of Science; Structure; Critical Realism

Introduction

While fragmentation across different schools and approaches has been a recurrent feature of International Relations (IR), recent work has sought to highlight its worldly quality by noting its consistent engagement with the concept of harm in its many forms.[1] That IR is engaged in a normative practice is, at least since Robert Cox's dictum concerning the purposive nature of theory, widely accepted.[2] Engagement with the concept of harm by authors such as Andrew Linklater and Audra Mitchell, however, demonstrates that while the link between explanation and normative import is a key disciplinary focus, the link between the two remains contentious. Both suggest that IR is concerned with providing more adequate explanations of the world *and* with producing substantive ethical understandings of harmful practices; that the practical implications of knowledge

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[1] Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Audra Mitchell, 'Only human? A worldly approach to security', *Security Dialogue*, 45:1 (2014), pp. 5–21.

[2] Robert Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders: Beyond International Relations theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10:2 (1981), pp. 126–55.

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produced by IR might serve to inform ethical deliberation concerning new forms of harm.[3] Examining each, I argue that their respective formulations of the problem that harm poses for the discipline defer engagement with the contributions of the other. Furthermore, a synthesis of their virtues can be developed through the philosophy of science, and specifically Critical Realism (CR).

This article begins in agreement with Linklater by adopting a sociological view, providing a reading of the discipline through its relationship to what he terms the 'problem of harm'. This view casts IR as an ongoing debate centred on what should, and what should not, count as harm that cannot be reduced to analyses of isolated viewpoints. Rather, theoretical debate can be understood as a dialogue centred upon an object of ethical concern towards which the concept of harm is oriented, with contributions from feminism, green theory, and postcolonialism serving to broaden the objects and dynamics to which the concept of harm can be associated. Turning Linklater's sociology towards the wider discipline, I argue that the fact of ethical concern remains even where the object of specific theories may vary. Centred on the relationship between the concept of harm and its object, the problem of harm is a point of convergence for the varied explanatory and ethical practices that constitute IR as a social science.

This perspective allows us to understand how the approaches of Linklater and Mitchell develop harm as a principle of restraint in our engagement with the world, and to harness this principle in the explanation of newly emergent forms of large-scale harm in particular.[4] However, their strategies differ; while Linklater develops a sociology of harm conventions that aims to account for historical emergence and change in ideas of harm, Mitchell proposes a concept of worldly harm – mundicide – that is focused on developing harm beyond philosophical conservativism and anthropocentrism. Each therefore develops a future-oriented understanding of harm's conceptual and normative promise. However, a shared tendency towards empiricism grounds their failure to consolidate the relationship between explanation and normative engagement that satisfies the role of harm in situating IR between philosophy and social science. Formulating this relationship, I suggest, can ground the problem of harm as demanding in both explanatory and ethical terms within the practice of social science, and in a way that is sensitive to emergent forms of large-scale harm that are likely to be a significant feature of IR in the future.

In addressing this relationship I propose a framework that draws upon Critical Realism (CR) to generalise the link between ontological and ethical questions that is core to an IR oriented towards the problem of harm. Moreover, it does so by broadening the discipline's explanatory vocabulary in ways that are significant for IR as it turns towards large-scale global challenges while no longer being able to depend upon inherited objects of disciplinary concern. In drawing upon realist analyses of abstraction and explanation, it becomes possible to reconstruct the work of Linklater and Mitchell such that IR, and its potential contribution to the explanation of new forms of harm, can be understood as a site of historical labour centred on the structures that underpin harm. Abstraction, in this case understood as concept formation between harm and its object, becomes an ethically necessary and productive relation to the world that recognises harm's objectivity. This formulation, I argue, is able to sustain the concerns of each author while also more fully characterising the position of IR between philosophy and social science, as a practical and worldly mode of reflection on the challenges that harm poses.

[3] Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, p. 23; Mitchell, 'Only human?', p. 15.
[4] Ibid., p. ix; Mitchell, 'Only human?', p. 6.

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The problem of harm in International Relations

While few authors in IR have engaged with the problem of harm explicitly, a peculiar disciplinary combination of ethical reflection and explanation suggests that a concern with harm can be understood as one of its key features. Undergraduate courses in IR begin, in many cases, with the problem posed by war as an archetypal form of harm to states or people, a point around which the discipline consolidated before proceeding to engage with broader objects of ethical concern such as gender, colonial expropriation, or the environment. On this reading, the emergence of the third debate opened up questions surrounding the normative presuppositions of scholars in IR and the consequences of their work, consolidating the idea of a link between scientific enquiry and normative reflection.[5]

However, to focus on the novelty of this link is to ignore the fact of value-laden work by Carr, Morgenthau and others. Despite concerns over the accuracy of the 'debate' between idealists and realists, its status as the founding myth of disciplinary integration ensures its continued relevance.[6] Centring on the way in which realists and idealists understood the role of international institutions in mitigating war and violence; lecture-hall retellings of the First Debate portray a close link between explanations of international life and possibilities for ethical action. While idealists argued for the restraining potential of international institutions, realists criticised this line of thinking for misunderstanding the fundamental character of the international order.[7] Fundamental to this concern were the modes of explanation underpinning the proscriptions of each approach; in particular the value placed on the powers and tendencies of the various dimensions of international life. In short, a commitment to informing *practical* conduct in the sphere of international politics ensured that different explanations of the problem posed by war, as an archetypal form of harm, result in different lessons for ethical practice in the international sphere.[8]

Decades later, IR continues to engage with this dynamic. Indeed, emerging challenges to the hegemony of realism can be read not just as proposing a fundamental logical or explanatory error in its assumptions, but one that is political and articulated in terms of its relation to those that fall outside of the great game of states.[9] Against an image of the state as the object of primary concern, such approaches have drawn attention to the neglected constituents of international order in order to highlight the violence upon which statism rests. This ethical progressivism suggests that the development of analyses focused on gender, the environment, or colonialism do not merely add to the explanatory power of theory, but also contribute to changes in the shifting terrain of ethical enquiry. In doing so, the discipline incorporates new forms of harm and resituates the old.

Approaching the development of knowledge in IR synthetically suggests that the processes through which the discipline is negotiated and revised is one that reveals close ties between patterns of

[5] Scott Hamilton, 'A genealogy of metatheory in IR: How "ontology" emerged from the inter-paradigm debate', *International Theory*, 9:1 (2017), pp. 136–70.

[6] Lucian Ashworth, 'Where are the idealists in interwar International Relations?', *Review of International Studies*, 32:2 (2006), pp. 291–308.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Hedley Bull, 'The twenty years' crisis thirty years on', *International Journal*, 24:4 (1969), p. 627; Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (3rd edn, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

[9] Richard Ashley, 'The poverty of neorealism', *International Organization*, 38:2 (1984), pp. 225–86; Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (new edn, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Andrew Linklater, *Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations of the Post-Westphalian Era* (London: Polity Press, 1998).

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explanation and normative evaluation. To turn Linklater's 'problem of harm' towards the discipline itself, it allows us to see IR as expressing one side of a broader process of social negotiation with a normative character, whose focus on 'encounters between difference across boundaries' ensures that harm is a constant feature of the disciplinary horizon.[10] The process of contestation that has led to the gradual incorporation of gender-based violence, colonial expropriation, and environmental exploitation into the problem-field of the discipline can, therefore, be understood *both* as a development in scientific or object-adequacy as well as a change in the self-understanding of a discipline with an irreducibly ethical character.

If IR both draws upon and contributes to the problem of harm, then its further development must engage with the way in which harm is changing; how might the discipline engage with newly emergent or recognised forms of harm, and large-scale harms in particular? Clarificatory exercises of this type are necessary given the need to incorporate new thinking on the complex consequences of localised activity, whether climate change or economic development. Such thought suggests that global interconnection and the harms that arise from it constitute a qualitative shift, potentially revitalising marginalised concepts of interconnection in light of the historical contingency of IR as a discipline. It is not merely that humans impact on their environment more than ever before, one argument suggests, but that our interpenetration with *Gaia* makes a new concept of the anthropocene necessary.[11] Indeed, in seeking to explain harm through processes of climate change or planetary capitalisation, the fundamental explanatory and ethical challenge for IR lies in abstracting concepts that can account for and transcend traditional units such as the state.[12] Such a problem aligns with English School analyses of the tension between international and global/world society that pose a problem of irreducibility for IR as a social science. The emergence of the international as a site of complex interconnection may not yet produce subjects capable of reflecting upon it in its totality.[13]

Recent engagements with the problem of harm in the context of interconnection can be found in two forms, the historical sociology of Linklater and the posthumanist ethics of Mitchell. In examining each of these attempts to grasp the problem harm poses for the discipline, the aim is to understand how they address the relationship between the explanation of harm and its normative consequences, and how this process might best respond to harm in newly emergent or recognised forms which radically overreach many of those which have been central to the discipline thus far.

Linklater's sociology of harm conventions

Linklater's development of a 'sociology of harm conventions' has sought to address the developing concept of harm over long-term historical processes with a view to investigating the possibility of more inclusive and responsive formulations of the harm conventions that underpin any society that exists over time.[14] Contrary to the *a priori* formulations found in philosophy, Linklater puts his approach forward less as an attempt to perfect our concepts of harm and more as an empirical

[10] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, 'Must international studies be a science?', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:3 (2015), pp. 942–65.
[11] Bruno Latour, 'Facing Gaia: a new enquiry into natural religion', *The Gifford Lectures* (2015).
[12] Richard Beardsworth, 'The future of critical philosophy and world politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 34:1 (2005), pp. 201–35.
[13] Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
[14] Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, p. 29.

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project concerned with the ways harm has been articulated as part of broader moral and political frameworks. For Linklater, harm is an umbrella under which non-identical words perform similar enough functions for comparisons to be useful. Arguing that the experience of suffering is central to the concept of harm, he suggests that it might act as a point from which such an exercise can be conducted with a minimal 'labour of translation' between contexts.[15] Suffering is not identical between subjects; indeed, it is precisely the irreducibility and privacy of suffering that makes it the foundational element from which the recognition of harm can begin.

Placing suffering at the core of attempts to explain and understand harm allows Linklater to ground the possibility of ethical action in common interests, raising the possibility that IR can contribute to a process of reflection on suffering as a common point of reference in negotiating the problem of harm with others. This forms the basis of harm conventions; social agreements and institutions that intercede between the ability to harm and shared vulnerabilities.[16] They thereby provide a starting point for posing questions that rest on the normative status of historical and institutional inheritances. New ideas of harm, for Linklater, rely on reflective human agency even when their object is not necessarily human, suggesting that the social sciences have an important role in managing the distinction between nature and society and opening up the problem of harm to a concern for new – or newly recognised – objects.[17] While historically we might begin with normatively and emotionally involved concepts, Linklater's approach sets out the problem of harm as an empirical, rather than purely normative, issue. IR might contribute to knowledge of the world that is less subject to emotional involvement, thereby providing a means of orientation and an improved ability to ground normative questions.[18]

Framing the importance of harm for the discipline in terms of this interplay, I argue, allows us to understand the position of IR in terms of its contribution to a broader societal debate; one centred upon the construction of accounts of global life that fulfil the role that Linklater envisages for the sociology of harm conventions. If this is the case, then Linklater's move from the *concept* to the *problem* of harm can underpin a disciplinary synthesis centred on the activity people undertake when they engage in the question of how to live while minimising the harm they do to each other. Moreover, it provides a lens through which ideas of harm are understood as deeply implicated in processes of social change, and a history of power and morality developing together 'as part of the reconfiguration of social bonds'.[19]

Linklater's formulation of the sociology of harm conventions is aimed at developing upon classic works of the English School but draws upon, and is framed in terms of, the process sociology of Norbert Elias.[20] Elias's sociological framework places particular focus on the kinds of affective and embodied relationships that Linklater argues are core to the problem of harm, in particular the social

[15] Ibid., p. 181.
[16] Andrew Linklater, 'Citizenship, humanity and cosmopolitan harm conventions', *International Political Science Review*, 22:3 (2001), pp. 261–77.
[17] Richard Kilminster, 'Norbert Elias's post-philosophical sociology: From "critique" to relative detachment', *The Sociological Review*, 59:1 (2011), pp. 91–116.
[18] Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, p. 40.
[19] Ibid., p. 187.
[20] Andrew Linklater, 'The problem of harm in world politics: Implications for the sociology of states-systems', *International Affairs*, 78:2 (2002), pp. 319–38; Andrew Linklater, 'Norbert Elias, the "civilizing process" and the sociology of International Relations", *International Politics*, 41:1 (2004), pp. 3–35; Andrew Linklater, 'Towards a sociology of global morals with an "emancipatory intent"', *Review of International Studies*, 33:1 (2007b), pp. 135–50; Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*; Andrew Linklater, 'Process sociology

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functions of emotions.[21] Moreover, Elias was uncommonly sensitive to the historical development of the international and the relationships between communities. In particular for Linklater, Elias's model of 'open persons' is suited to the complex empirical object of IR, particularly now work in historical sociology has undermined the myth of the autonomous sovereign state.[22] The promise of Elias's framework lies in its adaptability to global interconnection and processes beyond dichotomous reductions such as 'structure' and 'agency'. His reliance instead on dynamic nexuses of interdependencies – figurations – suggests a sociology that might better account for the complex intersection of the international with other forms of social life.[23]

Linklater's adoption of an Eliasian framework allows him to focus the the sociology of harm conventions on long-term changes in conduct and restraint over generations or longer, with the social sciences adding to the stock of knowledge that might better orient us towards the problems posed by interconnection. Such an approach underlines a developmental but non-teleological reading of the discipline; the possibility of decivilising, as well as civilising processes has been expounded upon at length both by Linklater and the broader Eliasian literature.[24] The concepts developed by the social sciences must be processual and sensitive to temporal change. In this sense, the sociology of harm conventions allows us to reflect on the problem of harm in newly emergent contexts, including the highest levels of interconnection and interdependence that humans have yet achieved.[25] While human or natural historical 'outsiders' have rarely been considered with the same concern as those inside moral communities, the social sciences may yet prompt a transformative form of moral reflection and a starting point for a cosmopolitan ethic.[26]

In line with critical-theoretical arguments in IR, the social science that emerges from the Eliasian framework is part of society, subject to emotional balances of involvement and detachment that may preclude accurate knowledge.[27] In this regard, the social sciences have trailed behind the natural sciences.[28] An emphasis on empirical testability, however, may allow a move towards a greater level of detachment and a synthesis of empirical and theoretical research. This focus on object-adequate knowledge suggests that the ethical upshot of social science is best pursued following a 'detour via detachment' that reduces the proliferation of involved or heteronomous evaluations.[29] Developing IR as a site of reflection on the problem of harm rests on its practitioners' ability to develop this capacity for progressive empirical testing, best characterised by Elias's studies into the relationship between emotional reaction and object-adequate response.[30]

and International Relations', in *Norbert Elias and Figurational Research: Processual Thinking in Sociology* (London: Blackwell, 2011).

[21] Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, p. 211.

[22] Linklater, 'Norbert Elias, the "civilizing process" and the sociology of International Relations', p. 4.

[23] Norbert Elias, *What Is Sociology?*, trans. Stephen Mennell and Grace Morrissey (London: Hutchinson, 1978), p. 71.

[24] Stephen Mennell, 'Decivilising processes: Theoretical significance and some lines of research', *International Sociology*, 5:2 (1990), pp. 205–23.

[25] Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, p. 235.

[26] Linklater, 'Towards a sociology of global morals'.

[27] Linklater, 'Andrew Linklater reviews Stephen Mennell', in *Figurations: Newsletter of the Norbert Elias Foundation*, 29 (Amsterdam: Norbert Elias Foundation, 2008), pp. 3–6; Norbert Elias, 'Problems of involvement and detachment', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 7:3 (1956), pp. 226–52; Kilminster, 'Norbert Elias's post-philosophical sociology'; Andre Saramago, 'Problems of orientation and control: Marx, Elias and the involvement–detachment balance in figurational sociology', *Human Figurations*, 4:2 (2015).

[28] Stephen Mennell, *Norbert Elias: An Introduction* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998).

[29] Eric Dunning and Jason Hughes, *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology: Knowledge, Interdependence, Power, Process* (UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), p. 14.

[30] Elias, 'Problems of involvement and detachment'.

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While cleaving closely to Elias's position on a variety of sociological issues, Linklater's work stands out among figurational sociologists in arguing for the necessity for a critical wing of that enterprise.[31] Such a demand arises from IR's fundamentally practical orientation towards the problem of harm. Elias himself was averse to partisan enquiry, but nonetheless maintained that the detour via detachment would involve a revision of existing normative standpoints. However, the 'return to secondary involvement' remains, for now, a promissory note on the part of a future social science that requires further elucidation lest a long-term focus detract from the ethical demands of particular situations. IR, in this sense, has a long way to go both empirically and normatively if it is to understand the range and scale of the objects that might confront it in an era of 'global threats and challenges'.[32] While the discipline might work towards more empirically adequate, process-focused and historical accounts of the problem of harm, the normative interest that might inform such an enterprise remains less certain in its formulation. Furthermore, this view of the social scientific enterprise, we shall see, is increasingly challenged by viewpoints that would radically decentre the interest in suffering that underpins Linklater's critical impulse.

Beyond humanism: Mitchell's concept of mundicide

While a progressive IR might seek to account for a proliferation of objects by drawing on harm as it is increasingly recognised in different sectors of society, recent challenges have sought to overcome the anthropocentric root of such formulations through a radical reformulation of the grounds for ethical concern. Mitchell has attempted to develop this argument through a critique of the humanist fascination with suffering, focusing on harm as a function of worlds, rather than subjects.[33] In doing so, she attempts to frame a posthuman ethics that becomes possible as global interconnection is understood in relation to objects that exist beyond the intentions of human subjects.[34] This grounds a form of ethical reasoning that is responsive to large-scale global interconnection and which was not fully articulated in Linklater's work; if not a return to secondary involvement, then a tentative step along the way. By 'worlding' harm we gain the ability to recognise how harm, and large-scale harms in particular, are fundamentally omitted through anthropocentrism; that they threaten 'not only certain beings, but rather whole worlds – that is, irreducible, heterogenous forms of collective being'.[35]

This argument seeks to open a disciplinary interest in previously excluded objects on IR's disciplinary horizon – colonised populations, gender or the Anthropocene – among others, reformulated upon ontological grounds as irreducible objects of concern. It also provides new dimensions for engagement with familiar forms of harm, such as collective action problems and the unintended consequences that may result. The explanations that IR provides of these complex encounters have implications for framings of ethical action that hark back to the early history of the discipline. Wheeler, for instance, has argued that our approach to the moral standing of 'distant strangers' has consequences for our approach to humanitarian intervention.[36] The concept of externalities in

[31] Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, p. 23; Linklater, 'Andrew Linklater reviews Stephen Mennell'.

[32] See the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility* (2004).

[33] Mitchell, 'Only human?', p. 7.

[34] Ibid., p. 8.

[35] Ibid., p. 5.

[36] Andrew Linklater, 'Global civilizing processes and the ambiguities of human interconnectedness', *European Journal of International Relations*, 16:2 (2010), pp. 155–78; Nicholas Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002).

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economics suggests that our knowledge of harmful consequences does not immediately lead to normative motivation unless grounded in an explanation of why this should be so.[37] Moreover, as interdependency has broached wider consciousness, approaches such as green theory have argued for the need to address abstract forms of harm that may not have a singular referent; a problem that finds support in Mitchell's account of the breaches in ethical frameworks provoked by marine plastic.[38] Approaching these issues, Mitchell suggests, involves a move beyond liberal notions of responsibility that 'make it difficult to conceptualize harm in terms of the ontological and ethical categories required to coordinate large-scale responses to acute events'.[39]

Mitchell's intervention rests on the close link between description, explanation, and ethical reflection that we identified above. The concept of harm has thus far been limited by a historical focus on humanity. Renegotiating the ontological ground of problems involving human action opens IR's objects of enquiry to a context of complex interconnection with diverse beings while not giving up on the possibility of ethically motivated strategic action. For Mitchell, Linklater's own attempt at this revision is insufficient due to its link between empirical and normative claims being grounded in human suffering.[40] This suggests that addressing large-scale harm rests on the development of a suitably complex and permissive ontology from which IR can begin. In effect, Mitchell is proposing a revision of the grounds of explanation itself, a model of the future social science that figurational sociology hints at and which draws upon developments in climate science among others.[41] Such accounts need to begin with the idea that radical alterity is just another way of saying reality.[42]

Mundicide, or worldly harm, is intended to prompt an awareness of contingency and interconnection that can underpin engagements with harm in a situation of global complexity. In developing worldliness as a reflexive category, Mitchell develops upon a phenomenological understanding of 'world', which draws on a milieu of philosophical work at the intersection of new-materialist ontology and posthuman ethics. With this, the problem of harm becomes focused on the interpenetration of humanity, nature, and technology, destabilising conventional accounts of scientific reason.[43] Displacing human 'being' with a wider analysis of 'being-with', such viewpoints provide an insight into the trajectories, encounters, and relations that co-constitute the particular historical existence of people and other objects, undermining the correlationist assumption that objects exist for us. The challenge, then, lies in how we might respond to the problem of harm with a relational ontology in mind.

New understandings of the relationship between humanity and nature, among other objects, suggest that dispositions towards harm in IR must begin with an acceptance of radical contingency that militates against humanist or instrumental framings of causation by placing them in a far broader context. The ethical progressivism of Linklater and others, Mitchell argues, operate through the

[37] Ibid.
[38] Matthew Paterson, *Understanding Global Environmental Politics: Domination, Accumulation, Resistance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Audra Mitchell, 'Thinking without the "circle": Marine plastic and global ethics', *Political Geography*, 47 (July 2015), pp. 77–85.
[39] Mitchell, 'Only human?', p. 4.
[40] Ibid., p. 7.
[41] Anthony Burke et al., 'Planet politics: a manifesto from the end of IR', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 499–523.
[42] David Graeber, 'Radical alterity is just another way of saying "reality": a reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5:2 (2015), pp. 1–41.
[43] Mitchell, 'Only human?', p. 7.

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extension of existing categories, thereby maintaining an untenable distinction between different kinds of beings and purifying human action of the objects and intermediaries it relies upon.[44] Engaging with a new-materialist ontology, Mitchell suggests, can serve to sensitise us to our exclusion of 'dull matter', prompting an appreciation of the vital, lively, and quasi-agential nature of the beings that co-constitute worlds and a starting point for a posthuman ethics.[45] Rather than understanding objects as colliding 'billiard balls' in line with Hume's model of causation, we should strive towards an understanding of complex assemblages and their relations, raising the possibility of a newfound respect for interpenetration and intra-action that can further ground ethical reasoning. It may be the case that a greater appreciation of human-non-human assemblages can build on past concepts of harm in developing new ideas of political community.[46]

A focus on complexity and particularity leads, as Mitchell recognises, to the possibility of ethical indeterminacy.[47] Core to the issues raised by the problem of harm are explanatory problems centred on scale and visibility; while a consumer dropping litter and an executive making decisions on packaging are prima facie not responsible in the same way, they nonetheless contribute to the same structural problem of climate change. The question is how each of these factors can be comprehended in relation to each other. Abstraction, despite in some regards predetermining the categories of ethical response, is not without strategic utility here in highlighting the relations that link together causal complexes. Indeed, as Mitchell notes, some engagement with abstraction is key to formulating the kind of large-scale strategic action that is capable of addressing climate change.[48] The question then centres on the relationship between the ethical sensibility that Mitchell sets out and the social scientific enterprise laid out above, which in turn relies on an account of the relationship between particularity and generality in the process of explaining harm.

While Mitchell's critique of Linklater's ethics is well grounded, it ultimately stages the same debate from an opposing standpoint. In the case of the sociology of harm conventions, Linklater's development of the Eliasian framework leads to detailed historical and empirical work with a focus on scale and process, but at the expense of a deferral of ethical questions. Mitchell's complex account of inter-objective ethical response, meanwhile, relies on the attainment of a suitably post-human ethical sensibility but can only conceive of explanations – particularly in the case of large-scale harm – as illicit generalisations from particular experiences of becoming. Each is, I argue, able to make contributions in their own sphere by significantly decentring received accounts of the knowing subject and the object known, but do so by neglecting a concrete link to the other side of the enterprise; a link which is essential to harm being rendered internal to the explanatory practice of IR. This being the case, then the problem of harm as a core focus of IR, demanding in *both* explanatory and ethical terms, as yet remains out of reach.

Between philosophy and social Science

In disciplinary terms, the argument here centres on how detailed empirical work of the type that Linklater proposes might buttress and be buttressed by reflection on the ethical-explanatory categories that IR employs as with Mitchell. While ultimately coming to rest on different ends of the problem, both

[44] In line with Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993).
[45] Drawing on Bennett's vitalist ontology. Ibid., p. 12.
[46] Ibid., p. 13.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Mitchell, 'Only human?', p. 11.

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frameworks are rightly characterised by the uncertainty of those who know full well that they might in future be considered what Elias termed 'late barbarians'.[49] Beyond this, as IR turns to the future and a concern for large-scale harm, a concern with positionality inside developing networks of inter-dependence and existential threats forces each to emphasise the partiality of explanation.[50]

This shared uncertainty ensures that both offer valuable insights in sensitising us to what Linklater has termed the 'ambiguities' of global interconnection, and reflecting on IR's place within this problem field.[51] However, I argue here that each is limited to the extent that, in different ways, they adopt empiricism as the cornerstone of their respective epistemological strategies while simultaneously maintaining that harm is not reducible to empirical phenomena. Both therefore depend on philosophical realism as a way of grounding this distinction while arguing for empiricism in the process of social scientific explanation. This results in an inability to balance these poles when addressing the problem of harm as a practical issue to which IR might contribute.

While Mitchell aims to move beyond this in her critique of Linklater's anthropocentric model of suffering, her later argument for reconciliation incorporates embodiment as the starting point for an affective relationship with other beings in a 'weak' anthropocentrism.[52] This arises from the practical call that the problem of harm represents; mundicide operates as a sensitising tool that may render harm more visible, retaining 'categories of ethical responsiveness … without determining the beings to which they applied'.[53] Through this, human subjectivity and vulnerabilities are contextualised, 'entwined with those of other beings, not distinct from them'.[54] However, once we ask how the social sciences produce knowledge, some form of anthropocentrism is admitted regardless. While Linklater can undoubtedly be understood as an 'extension of humanity' theorist, the historical situation of IR makes this true for any attempt to make the link between philosophy and social science that the problem of harm requires.

Taking mundicide as a spur to empirical work beyond philosophical reflection leaves us to a position not so far removed from that of the Eliasian approach employed by Linklater. Indeed, his focus on embodied suffering marks the sociology of harm conventions as qualitatively distinct from an abstract liberal-juridical position, and the wider Eliasian literature exhibits a concern with many of the issues Mitchell raises, albeit in a specifically social-scientific mode. The vision of a higher synthesis for the sciences remains a key driving force of process sociology, driven by a model of 'open persons' that runs counter to liberal atomism.[55] Furthermore, the Eliasian approach is intensely preoccupied with the social sciences' historical role in producing knowledge 'for us', subject to multiple complex forms of entanglement.[56] In this sense, process sociology suggests a framework for empirical research that works with precisely the tensions and space for contingency that Mitchell describes.

[49] Norbert Elias, *The Symbol Theory* (London: Sage, 1991), p. 146.
[50] In political terms, this has centred on the lack of a global subject that might gain any purchase on irreducibly global problems. See Richard Beardsworth, 'Towards a critical concept of the statesperson', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 13:1 (2017), pp. 100–21.
[51] Linklater, 'Global civilizing processes and the ambiguities of human interconnectedness'.
[52] Mitchell, 'Only human?', p. 15. Mitchell's has also attempted to address this in the context of what Iain M. Banks has termed 'outside context problems'. See Audra Mitchell, 'Is IR going extinct?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:1 (2016), pp. 3–25. Also see Iain M. Banks, *Excession* (London: Orbit, 1997).
[53] Mitchell, 'Only human?', p. 16.
[54] Ibid., p. 13.
[55] Mennell, *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*
[56] Richard Kilminster, *Norbert Elias: Post-Philosophical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2007).

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Each attempts to reach a respectful disposition towards the gap between human knowledge and a variety of broader frames of reference, emphasising the uncertainty of scientific knowledge, with the Eliasian figure of detachment emphasising the tendency to impute human dispositions onto non-human objects while Mitchell's arguments for the ethical limitations of explanation rests on its cognitive limits with respect to large-scale harm. This develops on arguments from a wide variety of anti-positivist positions that rest on the insufficiency of empirical testability in capturing the nature of objects, particularly in the social sciences. This negative approach, however, does not necessarily build a positive case for what *is* being talked about in social scientific explanation.

In developing upon the Eliasian toolkit, Linklater's approach is well equipped to contest a wide variety of static or process-reducing ideas of scientific activity and explanation. In particular, a focus on historical investigation and the empirical testability of mid-range theories – of which the Civilising Process provides a key model – radically undermines atomistic models of social explanation. However, it does so by defining processes in empirical rather than causal terms. While it is clear that processes are key to the explanations that process sociology seeks to provide, emphasis is placed on the extent to which these are non-teleological, subject to reversals, and primarily applicable over very long time periods. This formulation is able to fulfil one of its primary aims – the destruction of myths of social autonomy and present-centeredness – but does so in a correlative manner; it does not engage deeper with questions of social action by analytically separating the appearance of social processes from the actual causal interactions that underpin social life.[57] Such a separation, in practical terms, is essential in understanding the complex ways in which individual action becomes implicated in processes of large-scale and unintended harm.

Mitchell's critique presents a more forceful objection to the Eliasian project when it highlights the role of knowledge production *for* human subjects as core to the kinds of accounts that Linklater provides. This has arisen in debates centred on the nature of the 'control' that constitutes one of the deferred aims of sociological knowledge fully formed.[58] In short, while the Eliasian framework is far from committed to anthropocentrism on the basis of ontology, it may be on the basis of underlying normative priorities. *Contra* instrumentalism, Elias's suggestion is that sociological knowledge might sensitise us to interdependency in the way Mitchell hopes.[59] However, this process remains indeterminate as part of broader social processes as 'we may not know where the detour via detachment will take us' and have to assume that we do not 'get lost along the way'.[60] Rather than the reduction of explanation to problems of moral philosophy, or the transcending of ethical problems through scientific means, this suggests the continued importance of negotiating a position between philosophy and social science with regard to a discipline that places claims on both. The tension cannot be removed, but the ambiguities in each account suggest that it can be clarified with a view to making it more productive. This task, I suggest, can be undertaken through the lens of Critical Realism (CR), a philosophy of science that attempts to address the relationship between explanation and values that lies at the core of IR.

[57] Elias, *What is Sociology?*.
[58] See the debate between Dunne and Kilminster in *History of the Human* Sciences, 27:3 and 27:5 (2014), and between Walsh and Kilminster, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 44:2 (2014) and 45:44 (2015).
[59] Elias, 'Problems of involvement and detachment'; Saramago, 'Problems of orientation and control'.
[60] Dunning and Hughes, *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology*, p. 14.

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A realist foundation for the problem of harm

Through each approach, the problems that harm raises for IR are formulated within a similar problem field that goes to the core of how we understand the role of the social sciences. In short, an insistence on empiricism underpins a sceptical attitude towards the adequacy of explanations to the richness and heterogeneity of the objects to which harm refers. In Linklater's case, the gap between empirical and real processes is characterised as a failure of detachment; if this is the case, the revaluation of harm must be deferred until the detour via detachment is concluded. Mitchell's commitment to complexity and co-becoming operates concurrently with, but not internally to, the process of social science. In each case the relationship between explanation and values is a negative one, diagnosing IR's inadequacies in addressing the problem of harm while deferring the positive case for the discipline's future contribution. We find ourselves stuck between philosophy and social science, unable to bridge the two and despite the promise to do so, particularly when confronted with the pressures on explanation presented by global challenges.[61]

Contrary to this consensus, I argue that a re-examination of the problem of harm through the lens of CR can take advantage of its unique account of the relationship between empirical-historical research and ethical enquiry. As such, it presents a way of resituating the insights of each author while providing grounds for an engagement with the new challenges that harm poses for the discipline. Such meta-theoretical enquiries are well developed in IR, with thinkers drawing on a wide variety of traditions in the philosophy of science as a way of arguing for the disciplinary implications of philosophical debates.[62] The focus here, however, lies primarily with arguments for a broadening of the concept of causation and a concomitant expansion of IR's ethical-explanatory vocabulary with regard to large-scale harm. In this vein, the aim is to develop a perspective that can sustain the insights of Mitchell and Linklater while: (a) developing a link between values and explanation *within* the process of scientific explanation; and (b) contributing an account of the role of abstraction that can ground future work into the structure of global challenges.

A starting point for this reconstruction can be found in both authors' essentially realist orientation towards the problem of harm. While the definition of harm is socially negotiated, the object of harm is not reducible to this discourse for either. This realism is key to the tension outlined above in allowing for partiality or inadequacy in concepts of harm. For both, however, this insight rests on a philosophical rather than a scientific ontology. Regardless of normative concern, science remains caught within the sceptical problem field that is Hume's legacy in arguing that causation can only be inferred, not directly observed. The problems of scientific explanation are formulated, on this view, in primarily epistemological terms.

Both supplement this empiricist framework with substantive sociologies of knowledge in arguing for the origins of partiality. Linklater's deployment of Eliasian arguments concerning the centrality of detachment in the natural sciences and the failure of the social sciences in following this path suggests a core of realism that has not yet been developed at the level of complexity that could underpin explanations of social life.[63] While Mitchell rejects the extension of arguments for the withdrawal of

[61] Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, trans G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer, and John Torpey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

[62] See the *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 20:4 (2017); Colin Wight, 'A manifesto for scientific realism in IR: Assuming the can-opener won't work!', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 35:2 (2007), pp. 379–98.

[63] Kilminster, *Norbert Elias: Post-Philosophical Sociology*, p. 132; Linklater, 'Towards a sociology of global morals', p. 138.

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objects to a metaphysical level (as in the work of Morton and Harman), the sociological thrust of the Deleuzian-Latourian nexus that characterises the current wave of Science and Technology Studies (STS) prompts an emphasis on contingency and an attempt to reclaim a vitalistic aesthetic.[64] By contrast, I show first that a scientific rather than abstract philosophical realism is possible, and second that linking harm and its object *within* IR provides insights into how the discipline might orient itself towards large-scale harm in ethical and explanatory terms.

This argument begins with Roy Bhaskar's analysis of experimental activity in the natural sciences, which restages the distinction between the objective causal interactions that occur in experiments and the conceptual schema that informs explanation.[65] However, rather than framing this epistemologically, CR emphasises how contingency in open systems demonstrates the practical and causal implication of the controls scientists impose when enacting the conditions of experimental closure. Science in this sense has a practical dimension that presupposes the reality of causation and the objects to which explanations refer. If this is the case, then causation is more than just perception or inference, and must inhere in objects and their relations. More generally, this grounds a distinction between the actualisation of causal mechanisms under experimental conditions and the complexity of causal interaction in open systems such as society.

The resulting depth ontology is nested, with the domain of empirical experience and explanation being overreached by the domain of actual events, which in turn is overreached by the potential of causal mechanisms in open systems.[66] This sustains the insights of Mitchell and Linklater in arguing for epistemic relativism, but does so while preserving a route past scepticism that centres on the practical development of scientific explanation. On this view, the causal mechanisms that science engages are not reducible to the conceptual schema of the scientist. This serves to reframe Linklater's argument for detachment in two voices; the sociological in accordance with Eliasian insights concerning emotional involvement, and the ontological through which explanations of objects become less dependent on conditions of experimental closure. In doing so, it becomes possible to find a place for ontological realism alongside epistemological scepticism.

Here we also find the rational kernel of the arguments deployed by Mitchell. To say that we can never know the entirety of an object does not mean we cannot know it at all; that explanations are able to refer to (and inform the actualisation of) real causal mechanisms demonstrates that realism in the sciences is warranted. This is more complex as we move from laboratory closure to global processes, but the difficulties involved do not lead directly to an assumption of scientific objects being inaccessible, as Mitchell acknowledges but does not further develop.[67] In accordance with the interventions above and buttressed by the ethical concern that the harm provokes, the relationship between harm and its object in IR constitutes a pressing – but nonetheless practical – problem.

Enquiring into the causal mechanisms that underpin particular historical objects makes possible an engagement with the emergence, causal powers, and tendencies of structures as a key referent in explaining the emergence of forms of harm.[68] In empirical enquiry, that objects emerge from a

[64] Mitchell, 'Thinking without the "circle"'.
[65] Roy Bhaskar, 'Forms of realism', *Philosophica*, 15:1 (1975), pp. 99–127.
[66] Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 47.
[67] Mitchell, 'Thinking without the "circle"'.
[68] Margaret Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Walsh, 'Is a post-philosophical sociology possible?'.

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network of determinate and real causal mechanisms suggests that the social world is more or less structured across a variety of different timescales and modes of extension. Work done by authors in the realist tradition thereby offers a paradigmatic shift in explanation that incorporates a variety of distinct causal types.[69] While empiricist scepticism has focused on the epistemological uncertainty of efficient ('billiard ball') causation and the threat to contingency posed by teleological ('final') determinism, the fundamental explanatory contribution of CR from the point of view of this article centres on the role of material and formal causes in structural explanation.

Milja Kurki's analysis of causation suggests that in the analysis of harm, the conventional focus on 'active' or 'extrinsic' causes (efficient and final) can serve to underpin harm claims in ways that leads the discipline to focus on the interaction between particular events and normative expectations.[70] Such explanations return us directly to Humean scepticism in the first case, and normative relativism in the second; a strong limitation given the complexity of causal interaction and multiple normative contexts at the global level and one which profoundly limits any argument for the role of large-scale global structures in harm claims. By incorporating the 'constitutive' or 'intrinsic' (material and formal) causal dimensions, CR argues for the addition of both material distributions and the internal structuring of causal complexes. In doing so, it provides a language for explaining historical processes that are made in some way by people, but with materials that were given or transmitted from the past and which have trajectories and distributions that cannot be explained solely through the intentional activity of subjects.

This broadening of causation can, I argue, underpin a concept of structure that both Linklater and Mitchell look towards but do not reach, and which provides a starting point for IR's engagement with new forms of harm such as ecological crises. Indeed, Linklater notes that structural harm describes 'harms that have less to do with the intentions of particular people than with structural compulsions and imperatives'.[71] This suggests the possibility of an account of harm that is not reducible to cruelty, the point upon which liberal approaches to harm often rest.[72] However, while the concept of figuration and a focus on interconnection looks beyond the atomic or 'homo clausus' subject, processes themselves are not elaborated causally in process sociology and are subject to consistent qualification regarding the possibility of halts, inversions, or regressions.[73] This focus on empirical processes, in conjunction with the stabilising generalisations of a long-term focus, precludes causation and causal relationships – structure – across time as a key contribution to processes of ethical deliberation. The causal language of CR provides a decentring impetus that a focus on long-term processes may preclude.

Moreover, it provides an analysis of causal relations and implication that can substantiate Mitchell's argument for the importance of 'lively' matter as the excluded presupposition of IR's objects of concern.[74] While Mitchell's concerns may exceed this scientific reading, I suggest that within IR such a vocabulary can provide a starting point not from the ambitious concern for objects as such, but a

[69] Milja Kurki, *Causation in International Relations: Reclaiming Causal Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 220.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, p. 73.
[72] John Kekes, 'Cruelty and liberalism', *Ethics*, 106:4 (1996), pp. 834–44.
[73] Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell, 'Elias on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust: On the balance between "civilizing" and "decivilizing" trends in the social development of Western Europe', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 49:3 (1998), pp. 339–57.
[74] Mitchell, 'Only human?', p. 12.

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more modest and historically grounded concern with objects as they develop through causal relations of interrelation and individuation. To repeat; IR is not exhausted by this social-scientific form of enquiry but it is nonetheless an essential aspect of its future development. The aim, then, is to develop an explanatory strategy that can begin to engage with the questions of scale, distribution, and visibility that Mitchell notes while not falling into the trap of assuming a fundamental 'withdrawnness' that she rightly criticises as providing little analytical purchase for a discipline with irreducibly ethical concerns.[75]

That the object of social scientific explanation is constituted by real, structured causal powers provides two key principles that, I argue, are core to IR's engagement with large-scale harm and are at the core of its relationship to objects. The first consists is the theory of emergence, through which objects exhibit causal powers that cannot be explained purely by reference to their constituents, and the second rests on the distinction between internal and external relations. Within IR, the former can be seen in work on uneven and combined development, which has argued forcefully for multiplicity as both an emergent dynamic and irreducible property of the international and which is constitutive of IR's object of study.[76] Both Linklater and Mitchell draw upon notions of emergence in a pragmatic sense; for Linklater, power relations arise in ways which make reference to inter-dependent figurations while Mitchell's argument for the properties of marine plastic acknowledge its complex natural/social basis of production and irreducibility.[77] Setting out the ontological basis for such a concept, I suggest, provides a starting point for work that might investigate the causal powers and irreducibility of large-scale objects and frame future studies of large-scale and structural harm. Such a standpoint might account for both the great amount of practical work that goes into maintaining objects such as social structure while still maintaining subjects' inability to wish away historical inheritances, resources, or traditions.[78]

While the idea of emergence is not one of hierarchy, it does suggest that their historical relations and constitution can be understood as internal and external. The former are relations that are necessary for an object to be (or remain) what it is, while the latter are equally important but are, in broad terms, contingent.[79] Combined with a broader causal framework, a large amount of the work done in IR consists in working towards an understanding of the constitution, trajectory, and extension of internally related structural positions as a way of negotiating the real nature of objects with respect to the historically received concepts that are held to represent them. In this sense, a claim to harm (climate change) that is underpinned by a set of internally-related structural positions (global capital) is better understood as a whole – and in relation to subjects – than it is when articulated in individualist or structuralist terms, thereby grounding strategic action aimed at its amelioration. The synthetic role of IR, with respect to the broader societal negotiation of harm conventions, lies in

[75] Mitchell, 'Thinking without the "circle"'.

[76] Justin Rosenberg, 'International relations in the prison of political science', *International Relations*, 30:2 (2016), pp. 127–53.

[77] Linklater, 'Norbert Elias, the "civilizing process" and the sociology of International Relations'; Mitchell, 'Thinking without the "circle"'. This is not to reduce the various forms of co-becoming that both highlight to a purely scientific-realist frame, but rather that emergence is a key component in situating the objects a science frames as 'its' object. My argument is limited to a defensible social scientific core to an IR oriented towards the problem of harm and are intentionally minimalist in this regard. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

[78] Roy Bhaskar and Rom Harre, 'How to change reality', in Jose Lopez (ed), *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* (London: Athlone Press, 2001).

[79] Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, p. 42.

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revising the normative ambiguities of interconnection through this focus on emergent properties and relationships beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries.

The attributing of internal and external relations forms a key site for the fallibility and necessity that is a key characteristic of the problem of harm in IR. Fallibility has been concerned at length above. However, the oft-overlooked *productive* aspect of this process can be more clearly appreciated when put forward in a critical realist vocabulary. It charts, I suggest, a non-empiricist basis for explanations of interconnection and permeation as necessary or contingent factors in particular forms of harm.[80] As such, it provides a basis both for the qualitative distinction between objects that Mitchell argues for, but also a substantive role for IR in producing abstractions that can contribute to the problem of harm as a process of deliberation. Such a role develops from the emergence of real historical particulars in open systems.[81] History being open is not the same as suggesting that the 'materials' that constitute it are not pre-given or received in a determinate form. Rather, the relationship between potential and actual outcomes provides an openness from which concrete alternatives might be cultivated.

Such work provides a starting point for unsettling, in Linklater and Elias's terms, 'involved' knowledge but also counters reductionism; emergence is an ontological property, not merely a shift in frame of inference or level of analysis. Such accounts of the role of structure in harm are not determinist, but rest on a more generalisable claim that the structured internal relations of a given object provide a starting point for the explanation of large-scale harms expressed in terms of their causal powers. This resistance to empiricist reductionism rests on the tendency for such accounts to reduce the nature of objects to scientists' knowledge of them.[82] Such a reductionism might suggest that any number of people suffer under a given practice of environmental expropriation and that in each case this was caused by a multinational corporation, but not that this problem might have as its cause a *structured* system of global property relations worthy of investigation as a whole.

The principle of internal relations provides one of the fundamental building blocks of any explanatory endeavour, and which underpins our ability to suggest that any given science can be defined by delimiting a collection of these relations as its object. The importance of explaining the structure of this object lies in formulating not just how the world is recalcitrant in the face of our goals or changing ethical dispositions, but how it is so in a particular way that makes reference to (and exceeds) its component parts. Systems and relations are never fully determined, but they are never entirely contingent either; they are influenced by both material and ideational inheritances that cannot just be 'defined away' through conceptual reform.[83] In this sense, structure is not a way of abstracting from the messiness of everyday life, but an irreducible component of explanation.

Explaining structure: Abstracting the problem of harm

CR goes some way to explain how IR gains knowledge of the real structures and objects that inform its accounts of the problem of harm. Furthermore, the principle of internal relations provides a key starting point for an engagement with the objective pressure of unintended consequences.

[80] Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 125. Necessity here draws upon Mackie's influential definition of INUS conditions, which constitute 'Insufficient but Necessary parts of a condition which is itself Unnecessary but Sufficient' for their effects. See J. L. Mackie, 'Causes and conditions', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2:4 (1965), pp. 245–64.
[81] Mitchell, 'Only human?', p. 13.
[82] Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, p. 133.
[83] Bhaskar and Harre, 'How to change reality'.

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However, this does not immediately suggest easy access to causal mechanisms. Rather, IR is reliant on abstraction, understood as concept formation, as a means of identifying and developing explanations of large-scale global structures. Developing on Mitchell's argument, a defensible account of the role of abstraction is necessary and can be grounded in a strategy that relates the generality of concepts to particular standpoints.[84] The aim in doing so is to locate the sensitisation process she identifies within the process of social scientific explanation.

In characterising knowledge as transitive, CR suggests that the social sciences are involved in the production of knowledge by means of knowledge in a historically-delimited context.[85] In moving from disparate particular cases to explanations of the structures that provide the conditions of their emergence, abstraction becomes essential in characterising their internal relations, tensions, and dynamics.[86] Rather than being arbitrary, I therefore argue that abstraction is a process of concept-formation that relates the explanatory concept of harm into a definite relationship to its object. Moreover, in building upon concepts or ideas it can be characterised as a form of production that takes an evaluative stance towards prior explanations. The positioning of abstraction in this way suggests that they have causal powers and are therefore real.[87]

This provides an understanding of abstraction that accounts for its practical value and which goes beyond critiques of abstraction as merely a limited mode of inference. Abstraction is a verb as well as a noun; rather than 'posing a question' to the object of explanation, IR is engaged in a reciprocal practice through which questions might be posed in an increasingly practically adequate form. This is the crux of the discipline's long engagement with the problem of harm, and of a role in engaging with newly emergent forms of large-scale harm in the future. While abstraction 'isolates in thought a one-sided or partial aspect of an object', the powers and tendencies – harm's object – to which it refers 'need be no less real than those referred to by more concrete concepts'.[88]

Bertell Ollman further identifies a variety of modes from which abstractions might be drawn, including the extension of the object, the timescale across which it persists, and the standpoint from which the abstraction is made.[89] This process frees causation from empiricist criteria, decentring the objects of scientific explanation from the experience of any particular scientist. In doing so, it further develops an ontology for the social sciences, which works with many insights made from the perspective of standpoint feminism the sociology of knowledge and science and technology studies while not abandoning the formation of concepts that is core to IR's claim to practical value.[90] In this regard, explanation forms a tendential and explanatory rather than teleological-predictive attitude. But by opening up structures to the problem of harm, IR can supplement critical engagements with historical inheritances and material distributions while maintaining the openness and contingency of political action. CR therefore broadens the scope of the debate, making it possible to debate whether

[84] Sandra Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology: What is "strong objectivity?"', *The Centennial Review*, 36:3 (1992), pp. 437–70.
[85] Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhakshar's Philopsophy* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 54.
[86] Tony Lawson, 'Abstraction', in Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson, and Alan Norrie (eds), *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (London: Routledge, 1998).
[87] Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (London: Macmillan, 1978).
[88] Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Science* (2nd edn, London: Routledge, 2010), p. 87.
[89] Bertell Ollman, *Dialectical Investigations* (London: Routledge), pp. 39–78.
[90] See the debate in *Feminist Economics*, vol. 5 (1999, nos 2/3) and vol. 9 (2003, No. 1). On new materialism, see Michiel van Ingen, 'Beyond the nature/culture divide? The contradictions of Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman*', *Journal of Critical Realism*, 15:5 (2016), pp. 530–42.

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someone or something was harmed, but also to do so in light of the many ways it could have been otherwise.

This approach goes some way to formulating an approach to abstraction that is sensitive to many of the concerns raised by Mitchell, who notes the tension between the rigid and partial picture that concept formation presents and their ultimate strategic utility.[91] Abstractions are, of course, only a starting point for further work. Regardless of specifics, addressing the problem of harm at a large scale requires us to understand interconnection less as a way of inferentially 'puzzling through' than as a way of making sense in the context of real objects.

Rather than an imposition of fixed categories, abstraction grounds an active and reflexive attempt to grasp interconnection. Indeed, Brown et al.'s addition to CR, systematic abstraction, provides a framework for this effort.[92] In proceeding from abstract forms, such as commodity production, to empirical cases such as environmentally destructive microbeads, systematic problems can be understood as structured, with emergent and qualitatively distinct causal powers, and processes understood as developmental.[93] This preserves the transformative potential of human agency through concepts in ameliorating harm while still maintaining the important insight that this does not exhaust the causal powers of objects. Second, it more fully satisfies the normative promise of Mitchell and Linklater by developing the partiality of scientific knowledge as an objective and practical issue. An ontology that is less confined to the empiricist problem-field, while still maintaining the value of social science, thereby provides valuable pointers towards a strategy for the explanation of large-scale harm.

The critical consequences of a reconstructed problem of harm

Characterising scientific practice as a form of production provides an insight into the preconditions of the Eliasian 'return to secondary involvement' as well as a characterisation of the *via media* between abstraction and phenomenology that Mitchell considers necessary.[94] By reformulating explanation as a practical problem based on a scientific realist ontology, CR is able to cash out both authors' insights concerning the partiality of explanation while nonetheless maintaining a practical vision of IR as it engages with the problem of harm. Engaging the philosophy of science in this way demonstrates, I argue, key opportunities for a broadening and deepening of IR's object of concern as it turns to face global challenges; the first through interrelation, and the second through emergence. Disciplinary debate in this sense constitutes a reflexive 'internal conversation' that can ground IR's social contribution to the problem of harm.[95]

The promise of this practical orientation culminates, as we have seen, in the promise of a simul taneously explanatory and ethical social science. For Linklater, this link between explanation and normative reflection is deferred, while Mitchell's corrective did not translate ethical insight into a scientific ontology. By contrast, the introduction of CR to the conversation here constitutes a prefigurative move insofar as it generalises the problem of harm beyond inherited objects of

[91] Mitchell, 'Only human?', p. 11.
[92] Andrew Brown, Gary Slater, and David A. Spencer, 'Driven to abstraction? Critical Realism and the search for the "inner connection" of social phenomena', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 26:6 (2002), pp. 773–88.
[93] Mitchell, 'Thinking without the "circle"'.
[94] Collier, *Critical Realism*, p. 54.
[95] Margaret Archer, *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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disciplinary concern – as global challenges require – while developing a picture of social science that is practically oriented towards real, developing, and historical objects rather than the limits of sense experience. It is because, rather than in spite of this practical orientation that IR is characterised by a scientific voice that is also normative. To isolate this effort is to remove a fundamental part of what IR is.

While the case for a critical realist analysis of emergent large-scale harm has been made here at the level of philosophy, it develops concretely from the problem of harm as it has been debated through the history of the discipline. All signs point to the terms of this debate being insufficient due to the universality of climate change and the irrationality of planetary capitalisation, both of which confront IR as objective problems rather than subjective aspirations. Universality in explanation now takes on a different hue, as an always-late attempt to develop the depth and complexity of global interconnection in concepts. Such a move is not positioned deterministically against the recent turn towards particular practices, encounters, and events. Rather, arguments for structure come about precisely as a concern for the permissive conditions of experience, with realist principles of stratification and emergence being essential to their relative autonomy.[96] This emphasises the space within CR for the 'being with' characteristic of Mitchell's ethics while maintaining the conceptual productivity of a 'weak' anthropocentrism, characterising knowledge-production as an 'embrace' rather than being purely instrumental.[97]

Normatively, the argument is that CR provides a starting point for the explanation of large-scale harm within, as Richard Beardsworth has suggested, a necessarily general problematic of trans-border threats as such.[98] Developing from the fact of interconnection, IR takes on a critical role precisely insofar as it is able to articulate global challenges in a broader frame and subject to a broader range of interests. This is in line with recent work in feminism that has argued forcefully that the problem inherent to the positivist-empiricist nexus was precisely that of needing *more* objectivity, not less; that we might engage actively with the breadth of our causal implication with objects beyond political assumptions of atomism.[99] The radical edge of gender, postcolonial, and green theory, that their objects of concern are constitutive rather than merely conditioning, provides a starting point for forms of ethical engagement that are centred on the emergence of global challenges. Generalising this impulse to the discipline of IR as such is aimed at ensuring that new relationships between particularity and generality, of the citizen/humanity and state/religion problems that have dominated the history of universality in international thought, can be articulated in less particularistic terms.

By contrast to the frameworks of Mitchell and Linklater, however, the critical quality of the problem of harm is reformulated as internal to IR. By restoring the objectivity of the link between IR and its object, explanation once again becomes a way of relating to the world. Indeed, by both broadening and situating the emergence of static explanations, the development of process concepts by both Linklater (civilised/civilising) and Mitchell (being/becoming) can be understood as explanatory critiques that take an evaluative stance towards prior explanations, albeit one that is precluded in their work. From the perspective argued here, the practical orientation of IR towards the problem of

[96] Beardsworth, 'The future of critical philosophy', p. 223.
[97] Mervyn Hartwig, '"Orthodox" Critical Realism and the Critical Realist embrace', *Journal of Critical Realism*, 8:2 (2009), pp. 233–57.
[98] Beardsworth, 'Towards a critical concept of the statesperson', p. 112.
[99] Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology', p. 438.

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harm presupposes an equally practical approach to the causal powers of explanations. Reasons can be causes.[100] Indeed, if particular institutions or abstractions are involved in creating false beliefs about the real interdependence and interpenetration that constitutes the world – such as the autonomous subject – then explanation does not just force us to see this differently, but provides a ground upon which the IR's vocation pushes us to actively revise our relationship to the world.[101]

Furthermore, the critique of process-reduction in both authors' approaches is developed by the ontology here, from a critique of immediacy to a critique of appearance based upon the concepts of stratification and emergence. This is not to suggest that IR can go straight to the essence of things, but rather that an interest in the manifold exclusions that have characterised the history of the discipline is built into the understanding of social science that CR advocates for. By beginning with the presumption of non-identity between concepts and objects and developed as a practical problem, the relationship between harm and its object put forward here tends towards a deep concern for the problems presented by explanatory closure. Just as the general concepts of emergence and internal relations render such closures as a problem of explanation rather than a solution, so the specific orientation of IR towards the problem of harm in principle demands active reflection on the conditions and exclusions that constitute such knowledge.

Conclusion

Having argued that harm constitutes a disciplinary focus for IR, this article examined the relationship between the concept of harm and its object in order to understanding the potential it held for the explanation of newly emergent forms of large-scale harm. The vitality of harm lies in the way that it places normative demands on the discipline, holding a key position in IR's orientation towards practical value. However, this problem is also one of explanation insofar as changing patterns of global interconnection give rise to qualitatively new forms of harm that must be accounted for. The aim here was to consider the ways in which large-scale harm challenges the foundations of explanation in terms of, *inter alia*, disparities in spatio-temporal scale between the objects of explanation; the inadequacies of anthropocentric models of causation; and the non-empirical nature of large-scale structural processes. Drawing on Critical Realism, the analysis was to provide a series of explanatory principles that might underpin a shift towards the study of large-scale harm, and to clarify its vocational purpose in doing so.

An engagement with recent work on harm by Mitchell and Linklater provides key insights into the vitality of harm as an object of enquiry for IR; its normative value, ontological presuppositions, and explanatory range. Despite differences in their approach to the problem that harm poses, both authors develop engagements with harm that fail to fully elaborate on the relationship between the explanatory and critical or normative dimensions that each claims are necessary. The missing link arises from a shared interpretation of explanation and abstraction as limited by the problem of induction. While their substantial sociologies of knowledge differ, both therefore maintain an empiricist scepticism towards IR's ability to develop the link between scientific explanation and normative reflection. Mitchell's valuable insights into the ethical dilemmas of co-becoming are not supported by a defensible account of abstraction or social scientific practice, while Linklater's sociology defers an eventual 'return to secondary involvement' and its implications for the status of IR as a normative discipline.

[100] Collier, *Critical Realism*, p. 171.
[101] Neil Curry, 'Critical Realism: Beyond the Marxism/Post-Marxism divide', in *Critical Realism and Marxism* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 126.

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By contrast, CR offers a framing of the discipline that links explanation and critical reflection within the practice of social science itself. Resting on arguments for the importance of structure in explanation, it further provides accounts of causation and abstraction that are essential in addressing the problems posed by large-scale harm while maintaining the importance of contingent human practice. This constitutes a generalisation of critical arguments in gender, green, and postcolonial theory towards a broader problem-field of transborder threats. The upshot of this lies in offering a non-empiricist account of structure that can broaden the grounds of explanation in ways that are sensitive to the complexities of global interconnection and the forms of harm that result.

Several conclusions follow from this in light of IR's fundamental orientation towards harm. First, the normative orientation of IR arises from its historical position, one that positions the discipline practically towards harm rather than theoretically. This practical engagement is an inherently evaluative and critical exercise insofar as the discipline emerges from, and is constituted by, a concrete historical problem. Second, CR's reconstruction of causation offers an approach to explanation that is responsive to feminist insights concerning standpoint epistemology and the need for what Sandra Harding has called 'strong objectivity' while also incorporating recent contributions that focus on the constitutive role of *non*-human composite objects. Third, understanding abstraction as productive resituates our understanding of the potential of large-scale harm as an object of enquiry, raising the possibility that it may yet force the discipline to adapt and push beyond its own standpoint in the face of the ethical demands from which it emerged.

This argument is strategically minimalist in focusing on the relationship between explanation and reflection presupposed by an IR oriented towards the problem of harm; it has not sought to expand these values past this sphere. Empirical studies of the problem of harm will inevitably involve a deeper and more concrete engagement with complex and asymmetric structures of power.[102] However, in addressing the relationship between harm and its object at the level of philosophy, it has sought to prefigure future engagements with the breadth and complexity of global challenges including climate change and patterns of global inequality. Abstraction, in this sense, offers an essential tool in grounding explanations of objects that far exceed inherited conceptual frames by decentring humanity in explanation and reframing universality as an objective problem. As such, it offers a turn towards the structure of large-scale processes that the concept of harm, as a centre of gravity for the discipline, demands that we address.

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[102] Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, p. 229.

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