

Preface

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Few living scholars have had as much impact on the field of International Relations as Alexander Wendt. His breakout 1999 book, *Social Theory of International Politics*, established constructivism as a true peer competitor paradigm to realism, liberalism, and Marxism.¹ He easily topped the 2014 TRIP survey as the scholar generally regarded as having had the greatest influence on the discipline over the previous 20 years.² And he was a founding editor of what we, at least, like to think of as the premier journal in international theory.

In 2015, Wendt published his second book, *Quantum Mind and Social Science*.³ Although not a study of International Relations *per se*, the book tackled what Wendt believed to be two of the deepest and most profound questions animating any and all social science: How is consciousness possible? What explains free will? These, in turn, led to further questions about what it means to be human and how humans interact in society. The answers, Wendt argued, lay, as the book's subtitle suggests, in 'unifying physical and social ontology' – or, more specifically, in conceiving of consciousness as 'the subjective manifestation of wave function collapse in the moment' (p. 139) and of free will as a function of the indeterminacy of quantum brain systems. With such a unified ontology, Wendt argued, social science could finally be put on firm (panpsychist and vitalist) foundations.⁴

Wendt's opus elicited reactions generally ranging from quizzical to skeptical to outright dismissive.⁵ It also led to a lively roundtable in a packed ballroom at the 2016 annual meeting of the International Studies Association in Atlanta, Georgia, that inspired the exchange that follows. Like the roundtable itself, it begins with Wendt making his case and throwing down a series of gauntlets. Social scientists, Wendt insists, have no choice but to come to terms with the problems of consciousness and will. Classical ontologies are not up to the task. Quantum physics is. In view of the fact that quantum is the only game in town, the burden of proof falls not on its proponents, but on its critics. And so forth and so on. The critics then have at him, sometimes taking up his challenges, sometimes rejecting them; firing at targets he offers, and at others in defilade; and occasionally trying to steer the

¹Wendt 1999.

²TRIP 2014.

³Wendt 2015.

⁴For an accessible entrée, we recommend the University of Sydney Project Q website, which includes an engaging presentation by Wendt (<https://projectqsydney.com/multimedia/alexander-wendt-on-quantum-mind-and-social-science/>) as well as an excellent interview with Wendt by the project's Director, James der Derian (<https://projectqsydney.com/multimedia/alexander-wendt-the-interview/>).

⁵Albert 2015; Donald 2018; Little 2018; Michel 2018.

conversation in a different direction altogether. When the dust settles, Wendt takes the floor again – frustrated and bemused, perhaps, but clearly unbowed.

We trust readers will find this exchange not merely entertaining – although it certainly is that – but thought-provoking as well, complete lack of closure notwithstanding. We imagine most will find themselves sympathizing with some contributors more than others, but that all contributors will have their cheering section. Such is the diversity of our discipline. But the issues here are real, and they are important. Does the field require ontological foundations at all, let alone agreement on them? Should social science be in thrall to, or dependent upon, natural science? What is it to ‘know’ or to ‘explain’ how the social world works?

This is not, in sum, a symposium only on Wendt’s quantum theory of the mind. It is also a symposium on the proper way(s) to do what all of us do when we do international theory. And that is something that we should reflect upon at every opportunity.

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