

Preface

DOES THE STUDY of international relations (IR) and security lead to knowledge? If so, why has there not been more progress in the ways that we ordinarily associate with the natural sciences? Progress has several elements, including the cumulation of knowledge over time, predictiveness, and, when disputes arise, patterns of approach-to-consensus on the best theoretical explanation. This book asks about scientific progress by focusing specifically on the latter, approach-to-consensus.

A clear obstacle to this sort of progress in the social sciences is that, for disputing scholars to approach a consensus, some of the disputants will have to accept that they were wrong. Given that academics, no less than civilians, would rather be right all the time, a crucial question is whether, at some point after sufficient debate, one side will be shown to have the better answer, or whether those on all sides of an issue can just continue to insist that they're right. In other words, is there a point at which social scientists ever have to admit that they're wrong?

Some of the central questions in IR and security studies have been debated for centuries without agreement as to the best answer. In contrast, natural scientists over time come to agree on facts and explanations; we do not find natural scientists continuing to claim that fire is better explained by phlogiston than oxidation or that Earth is flat rather than oblate ellipsoidal. One of the reasons we regard the natural sciences as producing genuine knowledge is the very fact that those on the losing sides of the debates eventually adopt the winning position, or at the very least, cease claiming that they were right. Although this

pattern of approach-to-consensus is not the norm in IR and most social sciences, it is important to know if it is at least possible, with some improvements, to approximate more closely the natural sciences. To that end, this book asks, Is it possible that one of the reasons consensus explanations have been so hard to come by in security studies is that researchers evaluate their explanations using criteria different from that of their opponents? If so, then we must ask, Is it possible that closer attention to which criteria scholars use will improve scholars' ability to engage directly with one another and to reach agreement on the best explanatory answers? The chapters that follow argue for an affirmative answer to both questions.

This book defends three closely related observations. First, natural scientists have recourse to a variety of criteria of evaluation when they argue about which explanatory theory is best (Chapter 2). Second, within criteria that are generally accepted in the natural sciences, there are disagreements among scientists and philosophers as to which criteria are more important than which others (Chapter 2). Third, in advancing their positions, security studies authors rarely identify the criteria they use, and they never identify the criteria their opponents use (Chapters 3–5). From these building blocks, the book argues that if scholars were to adopt the practice of explicitly acknowledging the criteria they use to advance their explanatory answers, significant improvements would be possible in their ability to move toward the best available explanations.

An inquiry into whether the study of international security produces genuine “knowledge,” and whether that knowledge advances over time, has consequences for policy as well as theory. The ability to develop better explanations of international politics provides us with an enhanced ability to identify which causal factors are most strongly connected to which effects. This is essential for effective policy making, since policies based on flawed or inadequate understandings of key connections are unlikely to bring about the hoped-for outcomes. Furthermore, if current methods of study do not produce real knowledge, then it is important to explore whether there are better ways to go about studying IR.

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