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Article

Explanatory Games in International Relations

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Abstract

Explanation plays a central role in international relations (IR). However, as different conceptions of explanation inform our conduct of practices in IR inquiry, such centrality is far from being a settled matter in the discipline. These conceptions tend to be subsumed under broad dichotomies—such as explanation vs. understanding, constitutive vs. causal explanation, and positivism vs. interpretivism—which, in turn, generate a sense of a perennially divided discipline, obfuscating in this process the explanatory pluralism that characterises IR research. In this paper, I argue that different approaches to explanation coexist in IR, with different explanatory games being played by scholars in various fields of international inquiry. Explanatory games are characterised by constitutive rules, rules of representation, rules of inference, and rules of scope, all of which provide the basis for tailoring explanations. Scholars play the game that works best for their explanatory puzzles, following a specific set of rules that validate their form of explanation and thus achieve their research goals. Ultimately, explanation in the discipline is inherently plural. Examining this explanatory pluralism, therefore, requires investigating the rules of our explanatory games.

Introduction

Explanation is central to science and scientific knowledge. Scholars in virtually all disciplines attempt, at some point in their research endeavours, to provide explanatory accounts of real-world phenomena. However, the various ways of producing explanations have generated profound debates about the nature of explanation and the possibility of reaching a universal theory in that regard.[1] Philosophers have hence engaged in the enterprise of

[1] Alan Garfinkel, *Forms of Explanation: Rethinking the Questions in Social Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Collin Rice and Yasha Rohwer, "How to Reconcile a Unified Account of Explanation with Explanatory Diversity," *Foundations of Science*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2021), pp. 1025–47.

understanding the plurality of explanatory models, their characteristics, and limitations.[2] Consequently, the picture we currently see is far from that of a unified theory of explanation, but rather a kaleidoscope of different explanatory accounts that share similarities, as well as fundamental differences.

In the absence of a unified theory or model of explanation, such explanatory diversity cuts across disciplines and fields, mirroring the multiple scientific practices, research strategies and goals, and, ultimately, perspectives in regard to how to approach real-world phenomena. In recent years, debates in international relations (IR) about the nature of explanation of international phenomena have polarised scholarly attention. A focus on causation, in particular, has animated discussions on what cause and causal explanation mean beyond the statistical interpretation that certain scholars have advanced.[3] In this process, meta-theoretical and philosophical investigations have necessitated a deeper dive on the part of the discipline's different fields into the theories of explanation and their distinctive mobilisations.[4]

Nevertheless, the perennial quest for explanation continues to engender controversies regarding the functioning of IR research. Although some quarters of the discipline acknowledge explanatory pluralism—especially after mainstream views have been scrutinised and questioned in IR scientific practice—clashes, wherein researchers talk past each other when expounding on how they conceive of and generate explanations, remain common.[5] This, in part, reflects the diverse practices of different fields in the discipline whose criteria for explanation do not converge to a single unified explanatory model.[6] It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the persistent divides between positivists and interpretivists continue to guide epistemological and methodological discussions in the discipline.[7]

These divides, however, have no bearing on the central issues concerning explanation. Recent attempts to tackle the explanation conundrum define the explanatory enterprise as one that "imparts an understanding."[8] Although this aligns with the philosophical discourse on explanation[9]—that of moving beyond the traditional dichotomy of explanation vs. understanding—it does not make appropriate sense of the discipline's different explanatory enterprises. Furthermore, subsuming its diversity of explanatory practices under broad

[2] Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Theory and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, 2nd Edition (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2021); Harold Kincaid, *Philosophical Foundations of the Social Sciences: Analyzing Controversies in Social Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[3] Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, 2nd Edition (London: Routledge, 2016); Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sydney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, New Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Milja Kurki, *Causation in International Relations: Reclaiming Causal Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Richard Ned Lebow, *Constructing Cause in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Michael Nicholson, *Rationality and the Analysis of International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Heikki Patomäki, "Praxis, Politics and the Future: A Dialectical Critical Realist Account of World-Historical Causation," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2017), pp. 805–25; Hidemi Suganami, *On the Causes of War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[4] Fred Chernoff, *Explanation and Progress in Security Studies: Bridging Theoretical Divides in International Relations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, "Causal Claims and Causal Explanation in International Studies," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2017), pp. 689–716.

[5] Colin Wight, "Philosophy of Social Science and International Relations," in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons, eds., *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2006), pp. 23–51.

[6] Chernoff, *Explanation and Progress in Security Studies*.

[7] Richard Ned Lebow, *The Quest for Knowledge in International Relations: How Do We Know?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 403, fn. 2.

[8] Milja Kurki and Hidemi Suganami, "Towards the Politics of Causal Explanation: A Reply to the Critics of Causal Inquiries," *International Theory*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2012), p. 403, fn. 2; Hidemi Suganami, "Narrative Explanation and International Relations: Back to Basics," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2008), p. 328.

[9] Rice and Rowher, "How to Reconcile a Unified Account of Explanation with Explanatory Diversity."

philosophical traditions (such as positivism or interpretivism) does not do justice to the discipline's concrete criteria and rules for tailoring explanations. Much to the contrary, it risks crystallising important aspects of the discussion into epistemological and (more prominently) methodological debates. To fathom the distinct rules that inform IR scientific practices, therefore, a different framework of explanatory enterprises is needed. More precisely, we may benefit from an understanding of the discipline as that characterised by explanatory games, whose distinctive rules determine how an explanation is produced.[10] The idea of explanatory games unpacks the workings of the different practices entailed in any explanatory enterprise. Explaining is a human activity that follows a set of rules that "incorporate the normative standards that guide the processes of discovery and justification of explanations as well as the modes of their communication, dissemination, and adoption."[11] These rules assume different forms, which the research communities of each field recognise as guiding their practices and define what counts as an explanation. In other words, explanations result from the playing of explanatory games, rather than from an overarching, unified model of explanation.

Seeing IR as a discipline wherein different explanatory games are played serves two goals: firstly, it acknowledges the variegated explanatory enterprises of IR scholars and, secondly, focusing on explanation itself enables us to move on from persistent philosophical dichotomies—which often suffer from the problem of "-isms"[12]—and to appreciate the discipline's wide range of explanatory practices. Explanatory games, thus, provide an understanding of explanation that simultaneously makes sense of explanatory pluralism without falling into the "anything goes" trap. More importantly, I argue that the explanatory games framework offers clear criteria whereby to identify types of explanation and assess their quality, which is paramount to advancing the current philosophical and meta-theoretical debate about explanation in IR.

I proceed, in the first section, by briefly rehearsing the core debates in IR about explanation, whose focus, since the turn of the millennium, has been on the idea of causal explanation. In the second section, I discuss the different models of explanation in philosophy, arguing that instead of observing a unified theory of explanation, what we see is a landscape of various explanatory accounts, i.e. explanatory pluralism. In the third section, to make sense of the explanatory debates in IR, I utilise Mantzavinos' notion of explanatory games to delineate an alternative framework. In specifying concrete types of rules, this framework enables us to appreciate the different accounts of explanation that IR scholars have mobilised in their works. Finally, I discuss how, by analysing two radically different research agendas (namely, audience costs and feminist inquiries into gender-based violence), the explanatory games framework presents a different picture of IR and how the discipline generates explanations.

Explanation in IR

Initial engagements with the philosophy of explanation have orbited around debates about positivism—broadly understood as a philosophy of science—and its critiques, more recently subsumed under the label of interpretivism.[13] Positivism, in its various interpretations, has

[10] Chrysostomos Mantzavinos, "Explanatory Games," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 110, No. 11 (2013), pp. 606–32; Chrysostomos Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[11] Mantzavinos, Explanatory Pluralism, pp. 33–4.

[12] Keith Dowding, *The Philosophy and Methods of Political Science* (London: Palgrave, 2016).

[13] Mary Hawkesworth, "Contending Conceptions of Science and Politics: Methodology and the Constitution of the Political," in Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, eds., *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, 2nd Edition (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 27–49; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, "Making Sense of Making Sense: Configurational Analysis and the Double Hermeneutic," in Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, eds., *Interpretation and Method*, pp. 267–83; Lebow, *The Quest for Knowledge in International Relations*; Milja Kurki and Colin

been central to theoretical and methodological debates in IR, to the extent where the history of the discipline is framed according to how scholars respond to it, at different moments in time, with alternative philosophies of science and social science.[14] This approach to the issue of explanation has implications that extend far beyond the philosophical divide between positivist and interpretivist scholars. Certain consequences relate to IR dialogues with contemporary debates about the nature of explanation, its different types (which I shall discuss in the next section), and how they are manifest in the discipline. In this context, it is worth rehearsing some of the discussions about explanations that inform IR's academic and scientific practice.

By shifting attention to the explanatory enterprise of IR scholarship, Hollis and Smith's[15] now seminal book made an influential meta-theoretical contribution to the discipline. They hold that two distinct sets of philosophical commitments inform IR research, each one advancing particular ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, namely, those of explanation and understanding. Explanation, in Hollis and Smith's view, is economical in regard to metaphysical and ontological commitments in adopting an approach whose primary focus is on the epistemic value of regularities—either as descriptions of patterns in the world whose expectability our theories would be able to predict or in line with inferential forms of knowledge that use some version of causal language solely to demonstrate that the target phenomenon was expected. The democratic peace literature clearly illustrates the workings of research in this vein. The observed regularity whereby democratic dyads do not wage war against each other, verified in numerous statistical studies, has led to IR scholars' declared existence of a law-like maxim which holds that "democracies do not fight each other."[16] Understanding, in contrast, encompasses all endeavours related to interpreting meanings and symbols that permeate the international arena, informing how agents operate according to certain ideas, motives, and social constructs. To understand is hence to delve into patterns of signification that are constructed through the manipulation of intersubjective resources,[17] such as cognitive frames of reference, interests, discourses, and identities, to name just a few.[18] Therefore, and following Lebow's example,[19] understanding the Asian economic crisis of 1997 would entail the adoption of a bottom-up approach, whereby analysing individuals' decisions and the subjective judgement underlying decision-making processes is essential to producing an understanding of the crisis. Focusing on material indicators would not only miss the point of providing an account of the particular decision-making processes of this crisis but also be uninformative as to how individuals in the real world of politics confront such crises.

Throughout much of the 1990s and early 2000s, the explanation–understanding divide informed the ways that IR theorists interpreted (and advocated for) their theories.[20] As compelling as this divide may sound to some sectors of the discipline, it masks the complementarity of both explaining and understanding, so creating a false dichotomy that places

Wight, "International Relations and Social Science," in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theories: Disciplines and Diversity*, 5th Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 13–32.

[14] Yosef Lapid, "The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in A Post-positivist Era," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (1989), pp. 235–54; Brian C. Schmidt, "On the History and Historiography of International Relations," in Carlsnaes, Risse, and Simmons, eds., *Handbook of International Relations*, pp. 3–22; Steve Smith, "Positivism and Beyond," in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski, eds., *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11–44; Ole Waever, "The Rise and Fall of the Inter-paradigm Debate," in Smith, Booth and Zalewski, eds., *International Theory*, pp. 149–85.

[15] Hollis and Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*.

[16] Chernoff, *Explanation and Progress in Security Studies*.

[17] Jackson, "Making Sense of Making Sense."

[18] Lebow, *Constructing Cause in International Relations*.

[19] Lebow, *The Quest for Knowledge in International Relations*, pp. 54–5.

[20] Kurki and Wight, "International Relations"; Lebow, *The Quest for Knowledge in International Relations*; Wight, "Philosophy of Social Science and International Relations"; see also King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, where this divide takes a methodological form.

causation under the epistemological and methodological umbrella of explanation, whilst depriving understanding of any meaningful engagement with alternative conceptions of cause.[21] Responding to that divide, Wendt[22] called for a reconfiguration of explanation as constitutive and causal: constitutive explanations refer to the properties of things with respect to the structure by virtue of which they exist (e.g. the properties of the political system known as the European Union[23]) and causal explanations refer to the Humean notion of cause and effect as a relation between events X and Y, where X is independent of Y, precedes Y, and hence whose non-occurrence leads to the non-occurrence of Y (i.e. counterfactuality) (e.g. the causes of nuclear proliferation, such as the role of external threats, technological capabilities, nuclear assistance, and regime type, to name just a few[24]). Wendt's attempt to reframe the debate was aimed at bridging the gap between IR meta-theoretical debates and philosophy of science since the explanation–understanding divide was detached from philosophical discussions about explanation.[25]

In the early 2000s, a group of scholars inaugurated new philosophical reflections on explanation by drawing insights from Roy Bhaskar's critical realism.[26] Patomäki and Wight introduced a critical realist perspective that pinpointed the "underlying structures, powers, and tendencies" of international phenomena.[27] Further developments of the critical realist critique in IR involved discussions about the meanings of causation beyond the Humean model of constant conjunction, drawing attention to the ontological status of causes in the world.[28] Kurki summarises the philosophical tenets of critical realism regarding causation as follows: (1) ontological priority to causes, which exist as real forces in the real world; (2) causes are often unobservable, rendering empiricist methods inadequate to unravel causation; (3) causes operate in a complex network of interactions, never in isolation or in an X-causes-Y fashion; and (4) causes assume many forms, material and immaterial ones (e.g. ideas, norms, reasons, social constructions, and structures).[29] Causal explanation, under this perspective, is far more complex than the regularity model presupposes because our world is an open system pervaded with non-linear phenomena that cannot be subsumed under the usual method of mapping correlations between events X and Y.[30] More importantly, by conferring ontological priority to causes, critical realists sparked a debate about explanation extending beyond the confines of epistemology and methodology: instead, they demonstrated that our ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments are intertwined in the course of explaining and that when it comes to causal relationships, identifying causes in the real world signifies identifying the causal powers and tendencies which

[21] Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations*, Ch. 7; Jackson, "Making Sense of Making Sense."

[22] Wendt, "On Constitution and Causation in International Relations."

[23] Ibid., p. 105.

[24] Mark S. Bell, "Examining Explanations for Nuclear Proliferation," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2016), pp. 520–1.

[25] Suganami, *On the Causes of War*, Ch. 4. Nonetheless, as a result of the explanation–understanding divide, explanation has taken a particular form that associates explaining with causal claims: to explain international phenomena is to shed light on causes and effects, broadly understood, whereas understanding has become associated with the hermeneutic turn and the quest for meanings and patterns of signification. See Jackson, "Making Sense of Making Sense"; Kurki and Wight, "International Relations and Social Science."

[26] Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso, 2008).

[27] Heikki Patomäki and Colin Wight, "After Postpositivism? The Promises of Critical Realism," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2, (2000), p. 223.

[28] Kurki, *Causation in International Relations*; Patomäki, "Praxis, Politics and the Future"; Heikki Patomäki, "The Promises of Critical Realism in the 2020s and Beyond," *Teoria Polityki*, Vol. 3 (2019), pp. 189–200; Wight, "Philosophy of Social Science and International Relations."

[29] Milja Kurki, "Critical Realism and Causal Analysis in International Relations," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2007), p. 364.

[30] Patomäki, "The Promises of Critical Realism in the 2020s and Beyond"; Patomäki and Wight, "After Postpositivism?".

generate international phenomena.[31] Therefore, for critical realists in IR, the question of explanation reflected the stance of "explanatory realism" as described by Kim: "A realist about explanation believes that some objective relation between the events underlies, or grounds, the explanatory relations between their descriptions … One strong traditional favourite [relation] of course is the causal relation."[32]

The philosophical engagements with scientific realism and critical realism produced invaluable reflections regarding the nature of explanation, but they were concerned mostly with causation, which did not necessarily reflect the discipline's diversity of explanatory practices (for instance, interpretivists still see their way of generating explanations as a different sort of causation,[33] or as not totally represented in the aforementioned philosophical engagements[34]). Chernoff's[35] work on the progress of security studies remedies the problem of explanatory pluralism. In order to assess whether or not studies on nuclear proliferation, balance of power, and democratic peace have progressed, Chernoff maps the criteria of explanation utilised in these subfields of security studies. In his assessment, the different types of explanatory enterprises that coexist in security studies lead to a more diverse picture of the field. Multiple explanatory criteria are mobilised within the same research, and scholars are usually oblivious to the explanatory underpinnings of their works. More important to the present discussion is Chernoff's cartography of explanations in the natural and social sciences, because not only is it founded on a deeper engagement with the philosophy of explanation, but it also moves beyond the explanation–understanding divide. Chernoff's list of explanatory criteria summarises copious debates about IR's explanatory enterprises, especially the lexicon of empirical adequacy, falsifiability, prediction, causality, mechanisms, imparting understanding, and counterfactuals.[36] These criteria are in tune with more recent discussions on explanation in the philosophy of science.

Models of Explanation and Explanatory Pluralism

The advent of modern science, with its sets of institutionalised practices for conducting scientific inquiry, established the basis for formulating and answering puzzles, often by proposing solutions fashioned according to the scientific procedures of a given time and field of knowledge.[37] Explanation eventually came to occupy a central role in virtually all sciences, as a consequence of which philosophers set about providing more solid and sometimes formal understandings of it.

Devising a theory, or models of explanation, has been a perennial and contentious issue in the philosophy of science. Although initial attempts go back to ancient times, it was in the 20th century that philosophers began to entertain different conceptions of explanation and how it should be understood. Logical empiricists were among the first to architect a formal model of explanation, namely, that of the deductive–nomological (D–N) model, aimed at bringing clarity and precision to such previously hazy accounts as Hume and Mill's

[31] Kurki, *Causation in International Relations*.

[32] Jaegwon Kim, "Explanatory Knowledge and Metaphysical Dependence," *Philosophical Issues*, Vol. 5 (1994), p. 57.

[33] Jackson, "Making Sense of Making Sense."

[34] Lebow, *The Quest for Knowledge in International Relations*.

[35] Chernoff, *Explanation and Progress in Security Studies*.

[36] Keith Dowding and Charles Miller, "On Prediction in Political Science," *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (2019), pp. 1001–18; John Gerring, "Qualitative Methods," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 20 (2017), pp. 15–36; King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*; Kurki, *Causation in International Relations*.

[37] Godfrey-Smith, *Theory and Reality*; Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism*; see also James Ladyman et al., *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

investigations of cause and explanation.[38] Originally proposed by Hempel and Oppenheim,[39] the D–N model illustrates the logical positivist endeavour to establish the logical basis of explanation. According to this model, explaining a certain event (explanandum) requires identifying the initial set of premises whereon the implicit covering law (explanans) demonstrates that the event was expected.[40] The originality of this model earned it pride of place across many disciplines, its having become a central account of explanation in various sciences.

The serious challenges that the D–N model encountered after its original formulations, however, eventually undermined its quest to provide a logical basis for explanation. Other attempts, ensuing from this model's demise, to formulate a theory of explanation resulted in a wide range of approaches to the explanatory enterprise. One of the solutions developed in response to the failure of the covering law theory of explanation was that cemented in the critique whereby explanation requires specification of the causal network and processes leading from one event to another, i.e. the cause to an effect.[41] In their search for causes, therefore, scientists are expected to demonstrate how events are connected to each other and to fashion these links into a causal explanation that specifies the directionality of the relationship between these events. Because events are asymmetrically connected—i.e. there is one direction for the connection between two events which cannot be reversed—causes cannot be effects nor vice versa. The classical example of the flagpole's height—which explains the length of the flagpole's shadow by virtue of the sun's position, yet the reverse, though possible, does not count as an explanation—not only posed a serious challenge to Hempel and Oppenheim's model but also demonstrated that a successful explanation of this problem requires a causal account.[42] Currently, a plethora of models of causal explanation coexist, including the kairetic[43] and manipulationist[44] models.

An alternative model that emerged in response to the Hempelian project was that of the unificationist approach to explanation. The central tenet of unification consists in subsuming diverse facts into a basic set of principles and patterns because scientific understanding, comprising as it does theoretical structures that unify various phenomena, is global.[45] Kitcher exemplifies this unifying goal through Newtonian physics, which extended the patterns of mechanics to unify the understandings of other related phenomena (e.g. celestial revolution) and Darwin's evolutionary theory, whose central argument rests in natural selection as a unifying explanation of a wide range of biological phenomena. In both cases, patterns of arguments serve to unify a broad range of different phenomena under a single, unified explanatory structure. The arguments entailed in the explanation, according to Kitcher, instantiate the pattern that ultimately brings all different phenomena under a unified understanding.

As central as they are to philosophical debates, the unificationist and causal accounts of explanation—as well as the covering law model—have responded to the divisions within

[38] Philip Kitcher, "Explanatory Unification," *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (1981), pp. 507–31.

[39] Carl G. Hempel and Paul Oppenheim, "Studies in the Logic of Explanation," *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1948), pp. 135–75.

[40] Aurelio Madrid, "…Explaining Things," 13 June 2013, https://aureliomadrid.wordpress.com/2013/06/13/explaining-things/.

[41] Wesley Salmon, *Scientific Explanation and the Causal Structure of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); see also Dowding, *The Philosophy and Methods of Political Science*; Godfrey-Smith, *Theory and Reality*.

[42] Angela Potochnik, "Causal Patterns and Adequate Explanations," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 172, No. 5 (2015), pp. 1163–82.

[43] Michael Strevens, *Depth: An Account of Scientific Explanation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

[44] James Woodward, *Making Things Happen: A Theory of Causal Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[45] Kincaid, *Philosophical Foundations of the Social Sciences*; Kitcher, "Explanatory Unification"; Andrea I. Woody, "Re-orienting Discussions of Scientific Explanation: A Functional Perspective," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 52 (2015), pp. 79–87.

Table 1. Contemporary Accounts of Explanation

Model of Explanation	Core Features	References
Covering law	To explain means to describe the initial conditions and the laws that make a certain explanandum expected.	Hempel and Oppenheim (see footnote 39)
Causal explanation	To explain is to describe the causal history of an event, i.e. to specify the causal event that precedes an effect.	Cartwright[b] (see footnote 64)
Manipulationist/ interventionist model[a]	To explain is to rely on invariant generalisations that allow one to make counterfactual-dependent claims of the nature "what if things had been different," i.e. what would happen to a given explanandum should conditions change (counterfactuality).	Woodward (see footnote 44)
Kairetic model[a]	To explain is to find the causal influences that are relevant to the occurrence of a given phenomenon (i.e. difference-making factors), tying them into a causal web with no missing parts.	Strevens (see footnote 43)
Causal patterns[a]	To explain is to identify causal patterns that contain properties of the system upon which a given explanandum depends and that communicate information on the scope of that dependence.	Potochnik (see footnote 42)
Mechanistic explanation	To explain is to describe the components, interactions, and processes—i.e. the mechanisms—operating to generate a certain event.	Machamer, Darden, and Craver[47]
Unificationist explanation	To explain is to subsume different phenomena under a set of patterns and principles.	Kitcher (see footnote 38)
Equilibrium	To explain is to show that a particular system, by virtue of its structural elements, reaches an equilibrium state.	Rice and Rowher (see footnote 1)
Mathematical explanation	To explain is to appeal to mathematical axioms and structures.	Lange[48]
Statistical explanation	To explain is to appeal to the underlying statistical laws operating in a system.	Ariew et al.[49]

Source: Author's elaboration based on Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism* (see footnote 10), and Rice and Rohwer (see footnote 1).
[a]The kairetic, manipulationist, and causal pattern models are types of causal models of explanation.
[b]Cartwright investigates various causal accounts, demonstrating, in this process, how the ideas of causation are intrinsically diverse. See Nancy Cartwright, *Hunting Causes and Using Them: Approaches in Philosophy and Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

philosophy and science regarding explanation.[46] Scientific practice, however, is cemented in a far broader spectrum of explanatory accounts, which are more complex and refined than the aforementioned overview presupposes. Contemporary discussions on explanation build on these debates but offer new insights whereby to understand the explanatory enterprises in science and its various subfields. Table 1 introduces a non-exhaustive list of recent accounts of explanation which demonstrates that the explanatory talk is far more diverse.

[46] Kincaid, *Philosophical Foundations of the Social Sciences*; Chrysostomos Mantzavinos, "The Plurality of Explanatory Games," in Gianluca Manzo, ed., *Theories and Social Mechanisms*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Bardwell Press, 2015), pp. 325–35.
[47] Peter Machamer, Lindley Darden, and Carl F. Craver, "Thinking about Mechanisms," *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2000), pp. 1–25.
[48] Marc Lange, *Because without Cause: Non-causal Explanations in Science and Mathematics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[49] André Ariew, Collin Rice, and Yasha Rohwer, "Autonomous-Statistical Explanations and Natural Selection," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (2015), pp. 635–58.

In view of this explanatory diversity, Rice and Rohwer conceive of explanation as a cluster concept. The aforementioned accounts share a certain subset of sufficient features that are crucial to making them epistemically valuable to science, even if a particular explanation does not share all the features that each type displays. The authors are agnostic about the meaning of "epistemically valuable." Exactly what a certain account values is defined by the account itself, which serves the interests and goals of the researchers tailoring that kind of explanation, i.e. "the reason explanations are valuable is not because they all provide the same types of information, but because the different types of information they provide are able to satisfy the varying interest of practicing scientists."[50] In so doing, they reject the philosophical tradition that attempts to impose sets of necessary conditions for explanations because this is precisely what creates disagreement, especially in view of the fact that finding counterexamples to each of the accounts listed in Table 1 is always possible.

Explanation is both a logic enterprise and a social one, where scientific practitioners, organised within scientific communities and institutions, establish what counts as a proper explanation.[51] A large part of training in scientific inquiry consists in inculcating the patterns of reasoning that inform how explanations must be constructed. These patterns are specific not only to disciplines but also to subfields within a given disciplinary domain. The coexistence of different accounts of explanation within the same discipline hence demonstrates that "explanations encode the aims and values of particular scientific communities, telling practitioners what they should want to know about the world and how they should reason to get there."[52] Attempts to build a unified theory of explanation capable of serving the interests of all sciences, therefore, do not reflect the social practices that inform the various and specific ways of explaining real-world phenomena in each scientific field. Thus, because science is diverse, explanation must be plural in order to fulfil the different goals set by different scientific communities.

At this point, certain caveats are in order. The diversity of explanatory models' practices does not signify that anything counts as explanation, nor that different fields do not talk to each other. Much to the contrary, fields—and ultimately scientific disciplines—interact and exchange ideas, methods, and explanatory practices. The intelligibility and commensurability of explanatory models thus impose constraints on diversity which preclude the "anything goes" trap.[53] Scientific practice within fields and disciplines follows a wide range of rules that, by setting guidelines for reasoning and producing explanation, limit the kinds of explanatory discourses that can be generated and advanced.[54]

This does not mean, however, that explanation does not rely on logical aspects. Although scientific communities set the rules for tailoring explanations, explaining a given phenomenon nevertheless entails considerations of logical order which extrapolate a doxastic notion of scientific knowledge. Woodward[55] argues, in the context of invariance, that the invariant aspects of an explanation constitute a non-epistemic notion, i.e. one that is not subject to the contingent beliefs of a given scientific community at a given moment in time. His defence of invariance should not eclipse his argument regarding this aspect of the explanatory enterprise, however, as it also prevents the "anything goes" approach to explanation. In a sense, explaining does indeed follow rules set by the scientific community, but that is not to say that explanation must be a matter of agents' beliefs; much to the contrary, all the explanatory models in Table 1 attempt to formalise the types of explanation to which

[50] Rice and Rohwer, "How to Reconcile a Unified Account of Explanation with Explanatory Diversity," pp. 1038–9; see also Woody, "Re-orienting Discussions of Scientific Explanation."
[51] Ladyman et al., *Every Thing Must Go*; Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism*.
[52] Woody, "Re-orienting Discussions of Scientific Explanation," p. 81.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Mantzavinos, "Explanatory Games"; Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism*.
[55] Woodward, *Making Things Happen*, p. 299.

they refer. In so doing, they constrain scientific practice by setting parameters that inform the ways whereby we generate explanations.

Acknowledging that, no matter how diverse explanations may be, they must reflect relations existent in the real world, is another way of addressing the logical problem of explanatory pluralism.[56] Philosophers aligned with this ontic view assume different stances on what these relations might look like, but nevertheless agree that they represent ontological dependencies that "identif[y] both the object of the explanation and the explanation itself with facts."[57] This form of explanatory realism mobilises certain kinds of phenomena (individual events, states, facts, properties, and regularities) in the course of its explanatory endeavour that engender explanations capable of tracking dependence relations.[58] There is, therefore, an ontological dimension to explanation that cannot be subsumed under a mere epistemic device used by agents to make sense of the world. To make sense is to pinpoint relevant relations that constitute a genuine answer to a genuine question, thus preventing the relativism of the "anything goes" trap.[59] However, in order to avoid the standard approach of assuming that one form of explanation is the only form possible for pinning down real-world relations, caution must be exercised in regard to ontological dependence. As each model in Table 1 clearly demonstrates, different types of explanation depart from a different subset of criteria to identify dependence relations. Ontological priority given to dependence, therefore, requires an investigation of how these criteria operate to produce a given explanation. This is precisely why we need the idea of explanatory games.

Explanatory Games

The concept of games, whenever invoked, is frequently associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein's language games, as developed in his *Philosophical Investigations*.[60] In IR, certain authors have mobilised the concept of language games to describe explanation[61] and that of norms as types of games.[62] Common to these approaches is the underlying understanding that the rules of the game are governed by the practices of a broader community which plays that specific game. The matter at hand, however, is to define exactly what these rules are and how they operate in a given game. This is precisely how Mantzavinos' explanatory games framework illuminates this issue.[63]

As a collective enterprise, explanatory endeavours are conducted according to various rules set and regulated by formal and semi-formal scientific structures, which establish objective and normative standards for tailoring explanations. Scientists engage in games whose main goal consists in generating explanations according to certain rules. More precisely, the rules of the game divide the, in principle, innumerable possibilities for providing explanations into those that can be undertaken and those that cannot. The rules of the game define the means that the players can use to represent the phenomena that they want to explain as well as the class of explanatory strategies that the players are allowed to undertake. They structure the interaction between the players and shape the way that the explanatory game is played over time.[64]

[56] Christopher Pincock, "Accommodating Explanatory Pluralism," in Alexander Reutlinger and Juga Saatsi, eds., *Explanation Beyond Causation: Philosophical Perspectives on Non-causal Explanations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 39–56; Philip Kitcher and Wesley Salmon, "Van Fraassen on Explanation," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 84, No. 6 (1987), pp. 315–30.

[57] Pincock, "Accommodating Explanatory Pluralism," p. 40.

[58] Kim, "Explanatory Knowledge and Metaphysical Dependence," p. 68.

[59] Rice and Rowher, "How to Reconcile a Unified Account of Explanation with Explanatory Diversity."

[60] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

[61] Chernoff, *Explanation and Progress in Security Studies*, Ch. 2.

[62] Friedrich Kratochwil, *Praxis: On Acting and Knowing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), Ch. 5.

[63] Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism*.

[64] Mantzavinos, "Explanatory Games," p. 619.

Table 2. Rules of Explanatory Games

Rules	
Constitutive	What counts as an explanandum? What are our given assumptions? What are our metaphysical presuppositions?
Representation	How do we represent our explanatory activities (e.g. formal models, graphs, computer simulations, images, and narratives)?
Inference	How do we formulate predictions or construct arguments (e.g. laws, regularities, and patterns)?
Scope	What are the specifications necessary to apply the explanatory game? How to dock one explanatory game into another (i.e. nestedness)?

Source: Author's elaboration based on Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism* (see footnote 10).

Different players take part in a game, none of whom perform all of the explanatory endeavour's activities (namely, providing intuitions, bridging theoretical claims, unifying phenomena, defining the means of representation, and testing and experimenting), which renders it a process rather than an outcome.[65] According to Mantzavinos, four types of rules can be identified in explanatory games. They are constitutive rules, rules of representation, rules of inference, and rules of scope. Constitutive rules determine what counts as an explanandum, the background knowledge, and the metaphysical assumptions entailed in the explanatory toolbox. Rules of representation determine the artefacts, such as oral stories, graphs, and mathematical models, that one can use to represent reality. Rules of inference comprise all inferential strategies to explain phenomena, such as general laws, and logical and formal statements. Finally, rules of scope define the frontiers delimiting how an explanatory game ought to be played (i.e. the scope of phenomena—old and new, known and unknown). Table 2 summarises the central questions behind each type of rule. All rules result from an iterative process of discussion, criticism, persuasion, and validation, one which, in the particular case of scientific explanation, is encapsulated in the institutional dynamics of science.[66] This means that science as an institution regulates all the various explanatory games in town, not only determining the nature of their rules but also overseeing their evolution.

Seeing the explanatory enterprise as a game (or as multiple games played by different groups within a given scientific community) should not cause any awkwardness; that explanation is premised upon different criteria defined by science practitioners and has long been debated within science and philosophy.[67] Each scientific domain relies on specific explanatory models to produce a comprehension of phenomena of interest, and what comes to be defined as "interest," indeed, pivots on the agreement of the members of that scientific community. As the explanatory games each community plays are cemented upon specific rules, understanding how explanations are generated entails investigating the precise nature of these rules.

Explanatory enterprises should be assessed, therefore, according to the quality of the rules followed, rather than the usual procedure of assessing the quality of outcomes whilst ignoring the underlying processes leading to it.[68] As each model of explanation has its own specific rules, establishing a general model to evaluate all types of explanation misses the point of judging the quality of an explanatory activity by virtue of following its specific

[65] Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism*, Ch. 5.
[66] Ladyman et al., *Every Thing Must Go*.
[67] Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[68] Mantzavinos, "The Plurality of Explanatory Games."

rules. This has, however, been the common approach of many fields of scientific activity to assessing the quality not only of an explanation but also of the research enterprise as a whole. This is reminiscent of logical positivism, whose principles of analytical logic and explanatory reductionism still echo in IR.[69] But if we understand that explanations are generated in the context of games—whose rules are specific to certain fields and subfields—we will be able not only to appreciate the diversity of approaches to explaining real-world phenomena; but also to acknowledge the social/institutional element behind scientific activity that is responsible for adjudicating between good and bad explanations, on the basis of how the rules of the game have been followed. Projecting a single model upon all sorts of explanations negates the various possibilities for engagement in explanatory activities and hence precludes our appreciation of their effectiveness in achieving research goals.[70]

The Games We Play in IR

As attested by the historiographical and meta-theoretical debates previously discussed, IR, as a discipline, has been characterised by the coexistence of different types of explanation. Upon surveying, with hindsight, the development of IR, we observe disputes about theories and methodologies,[71] but also less visible confrontations between the rules of explanatory games. This is attributable to IR scholars' reliance in their work on multiple criteria of explanation,[72] but also to their departure from different types of explanation seldom explicated in the course of the research design.

Shedding light on how explanatory games are constituted and, more importantly, how they evolve as knowledge accumulates, however, constitutes another way of observing and keeping pace with historical and meta-theoretical IR debates. This does not imply any intent to replace the discipline's usual conceptions and self-images,[73] but rather to supplement them by focusing on what is a crucial aspect of scientific inquiry, i.e. producing explanations. It is also a step in the process towards shifting attention from the causal explanation debate that has informed more recent meta-theoretical interventions in the discipline,[74] whose explanatory enterprise—authors' acknowledgement that other forms of explanation coexist in the discipline notwithstanding—tends to be subsumed under issues of causality. Causal explanation is just one type of explanatory game that IR scholars play among many other alternatives, none of which necessarily utilises causal language to impart understanding.[75]

[69] Wight, "Philosophy of Social Science and International Relations."

[70] Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism*.

[71] Schmidt, "On the History and Historiography of International Relations"; Smith, "Positivism and Beyond"; Waever, "The Rise and Fall of the Inter-paradigm Debate"; Ole Waever, "Still a Discipline after All These Debates?" in Dunne, Kurki, and Smith, eds., *International Relations Theories*, pp. 322–43.

[72] Chernoff, *Explanation and Progress in Security Studies*.

[73] Although it is imperative to interrogate them in light of the specificities of local IR academia, for now the discipline is a global one rather than a Euro-American discipline. For further details on this discussion, see Amitav Acharya, "Global International Relations," in Dunne, Kurki, and Smith, eds., *International Relations Theories*, pp. 304–21.

[74] Stefano Guzzini, "Power and Cause," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2017), pp. 737–59; Adam R. C. Humphreys, "Causation, Complexity, and the Concert: The Pragmatics of Causal Explanation in International Relations," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2017), pp. 717–36; Jackson, "Causal Claims and Causal Explanation in International Studies"; Kurki, *Causation in International Relations*; Ludvig Norman, "Rethinking Causal Explanation in Interpretive International Studies," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2021), pp. 936–59; Patomäki, "Praxis, Politics and the Future"; Suganami, "Narrative Explanation and International Relations."

[75] But by no means does this attitude diminish the value of debates on causality. The reflections advanced by IR scholars were paramount to re-signifying the meaning of causation beyond the Humean and Hempelian models that seemingly dominate the mainstream. On the contrary, these debates revealed that the causal explanatory enterprise is far more diverse, involving ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments that cannot be reduced to a single conception of causation. Hence, causal explanation, in itself, constitutes an explanatory game. Various conceptions of

To illustrate how explanatory games are played in the discipline, I examine in the remainder of this section two bodies of literature, and how they generate explanations according to specific rules. These examples comprise different areas of IR inquiry. They are audience costs and feminist approaches to gender-based violence. The audience costs literature revolves around a particular mechanism, frequently formalised via mathematical models and tested via statistics. This modus operandi follows the criteria of mathematical and statistical explanations (Table 1), but also treats explanation in ways that resemble other types (e.g. covering law and causal explanation). The literature on gender-based violence revolves around the concept of gender, which is constitutive of social relations and capable of bringing about (i.e. causing) certain phenomena in the world.[76] Different types of explanatory enterprises in this literature highlight both the epistemological and methodological divides in feminist IR and the ontological status of the explanations that feminists have produced.

Although these bodies of work are strikingly different in many ways, they nevertheless demonstrate how explanatory games are played in the discipline's various fields, whilst allowing us to draw comparisons within each field of inquiry as well as between them. By using Mantzavinos' framework to examine the rules of the explanatory games in each of these literature studies, we can assess the diversity in IR of explanatory enterprises, and how different games may answer similar questions, especially within the same field of inquiry.

Explanations of Audience Costs

Fearon's[77] formal model of international crises inaugurated a new research agenda whose focus is the concept of audience costs. In his original formulation, audience costs emerge from the leader's performance amid a given international crisis and refer to how internal audiences react to the decisions made during that crisis—more precisely, "audience costs as the (dis)utility a country receives from backing down in an international dispute before its opponent."[78] Fearon represents the setting of the dispute through a relatively simple framework: during a crisis, leaders have three possible strategies. They are attack, back down, or escalate the crisis. This iteration continues up to the time horizon where any of the leaders involved in the dispute chooses to attack. In the game of international crises, Fearon defines a set of variables in the formal model that represent the dispute. The maths of the model is then solved, generating a host of propositions that constitute the game's solution.[79] Figure 1 depicts the general approach of Fearon's model.

Further developments of Fearon's model followed two paths that interconnect at different points. One path focuses on testing the propositions of the model through statistical models and social experiments, collecting evidence from various international disputes, and mobilising different variables to measure audience costs.[80] The other path refines Fearon's

cause and causation coexist, drawing insights from philosophical realism, naturalism, and interpretivism, each of which display specific rules for constructing causal explanations.

[76] Sally Haslanger and Ásta, "Feminist Metaphysics," in Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, eds., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, August 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-metaphysics/.

[77] James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (1994), pp. 577–92.

[78] Casey Crisman-Cox and Michael Gibilisco, "Audience Costs and the Dynamics of War and Peace," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (2018), p. 567.

[79] For a detailed assessment of Fearon's original model, see Enzo Lenine, "Models, Explanation, and the Pitfalls of Empirical Testing," *Estudos Internacionais*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2018), pp. 82–97; Enzo Lenine, "International Conflict and Strategic Games: Challenging Conventional Approaches to Mathematical Modelling in International Relations," *Carta Internacional*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2019), pp. 80–102.

[80] Crisman-Cox and Gibilisco, "Audience Costs and the Dynamics of War and Peace"; Joe Eyerman and Robert A. Hart, Jr., "An Empirical Test of the Audience Cost Proposition," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (1996), pp. 597–616; Christopher F. Gelpi and Michael Griesdorf, "Winners or Losers? Democracies in International Crisis, 1918-94," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (2001), pp. 633–47; Joshua D. Kertzer and Ryan Brutger, "Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience into Audience Cost Theory," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2016), pp. 234–49; Peter J. Partell and Glenn Palmer, "Audience Costs and Interstate Crises:

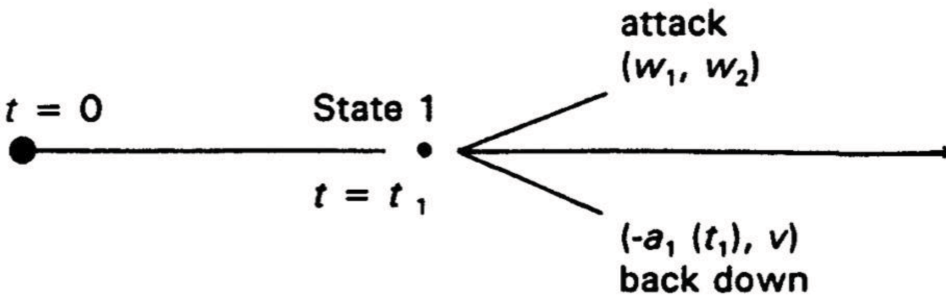

Fig. 1. International Crisis Model

Source: Fearon (see footnote 74).Notations: *t*, finite time; w_i, expected utilities for military conflict for state *i*; a_i, audience costs suffered by state *i*; *v*, reward.

model by reflecting upon the nature of audience costs and their workings in international disputes.[81] The first path follows the usual procedures for testing the result of formal models, i.e. by deriving hypotheses from the theorems and propositions entailed in Fearon's model, scholars attempted to track the effects of audience costs in real-world crises, using, in this process, a variety of proxies to measure such costs.[82] At a certain point, the quest for audience costs required conducting social experiments to assess how real-world audiences react to international disputes, so responding to critiques regarding the theoretical existence and implications of audience costs.[83] The second path of model refinement emphasises the mathematical component of the formal model and how it can be enhanced by incorporating new and innovative measurements of audience costs and rearranging them in the game setting. It also revolved around an ontological refinement concerning the properties of audience costs, and how they manifest themselves in crises. Figure 2 illustrates two models that further refine Fearon's original proposal.

The developments within the literature on audience costs demonstrate that explanatory games resort to statistical and mathematical explanations, whereby the appeal to mathematical axioms and statistical laws dictates the functioning and quality of explanation. More precisely, the bulk of audience cost literature is primarily preoccupied with generating explanations according to the tenets of formal modelling and rational choice theory, which in themselves constitute the rules of the explanatory game. Similarly, the strategies for testing formal models via statistical models also follow the rules of the explanatory game of formal modelling. These rules are summarised in Table 3.

The rules of the explanatory game of audience costs effectively rely on mathematical and statistical elements to generate explanations. To impart an understanding of international disputes where audiences matter entails solving the formal model's mathematical equations.

An Empirical Assessment of Fearon's Model of Dispute Outcomes," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43 No. 2 (1999), pp. 389–405; Michael Tomz, "Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach," *International Organization*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2007), pp. 821–40.

[81] Scott Ashworth and Kristopher W. Ramsay, "The Accountability of Politicians in International Crises and the Nature of Audience Cost," *Political Science Research and Methods*, Vol. 12, No.1 (2024), pp.1–26; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "A Game of Domestic Imperatives: Audience Costs and Conflict Avoidance," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 40, No. 6 (2023), pp. 599–618.

[82] Lenine, "Models, Explanation, and the Pitfalls of Empirical Testing."

[83] Erik Gartzke and Yonatan Lupu, "Still Looking for Audience Costs," *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2012), pp. 391–7.

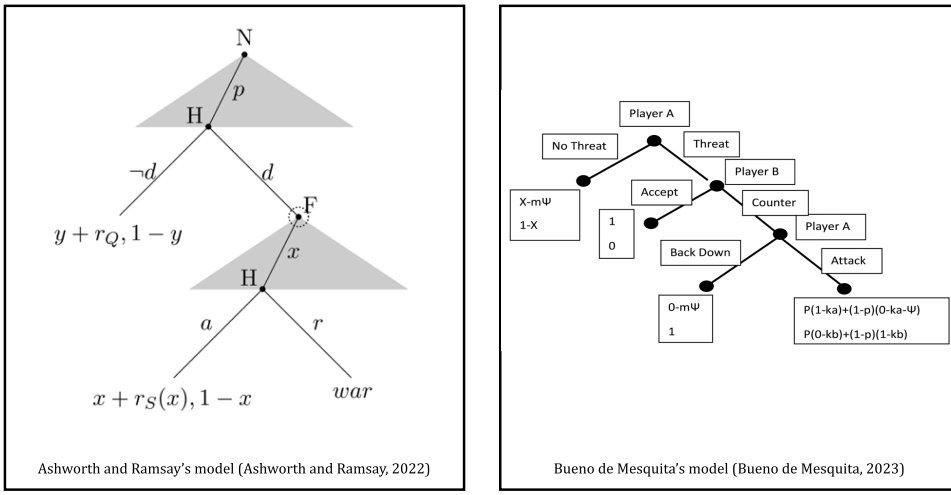

Fig. 2. Refined Versions of the Audience Costs Model

Source: Author's elaboration based on Ashworth and Ramsay (see footnote 78) and Bueno de Mesquita (see footnote 78).Notations in Ashworth and Ramsay's model: *H*, home country; *F*, foreign country; *d*, demand; *–d*, no demand; *x* and *y*, divisible unit of resource; *a*, accepting an offer; *r*, rejecting an offer. Notations in Bueno de Mesquita's model: ψ, audience costs; *m*, domestic policy incompetence; *X*, value of the *status quo* for player A; *p*, probability that A wins if A attacks B.

Table 3. Rules of the Explanatory Game of Audience Costs

Rules	
Constitutive	What counts as an explanandum? – International crises where state leaders make decisions facing audience costs. What are our given assumptions? – State leaders behave according to the tenets of rational choice models. – Crises are modelled via mathematical expressions. – Audiences affect the outcome of decision-making processes in international crises. What are our metaphysical presuppositions? – Audience costs are part of the structure of incentives and constraints that affect how state leaders make decisions during an international dispute. – Audience costs constitute the explanatory mechanism that reflects the ontological dependence of the target phenomena.
Representation	How do we represent our explanatory activities? – Primarily via formal models.
Inference	How do we formulate predictions or construct arguments? – Arguments are constructed via the theorems and postulates of the formal model.
Scope	What are the specifications necessary to apply the explanatory game? – The international dispute involves state leaders and audiences. Originally, the model focused on international security crises, but further readings now apply audience costs to other types of crises. – Fearon's model concentrated on audience costs in democracies. Further developments incorporated other types of regimes. How to dock one explanatory game into another (i.e. nestedness)? – The formal model generates predictions that are then formulated in terms of statistically testable hypotheses.

Source: Author's elaboration.

The model's solutions are themselves explanations providing predictions about the unfolding of the international crisis.[84] Statistical tests complement the formal model by translating the latter's propositions into working hypotheses that the former can model. The statistical test then assesses the explanations-as-predictions of the model vis-à-vis real-world data. However, it is worth noting that testing the formal model is not mandatory and does not necessarily have an impact on the explanatory game of the formal model. The focus of several works—including Fearon's—is on designing the mathematical model, so leaving statistical testing for other studies. There are, moreover, studies that do not rework the formal model, but instead test its propositions. This means that the two types of explanation imbue specific properties of the game that they entail, but that does not preclude them from the statistical game's nestedness into the mathematical/formal game. This is precisely how these different kinds of studies interact—as well as those that combine formal and statistical modelling.

Feminist Explanations of Gender-based Violence

Feminist studies on gender-based violence comprise a large set of works whose aim is to understand, broadly speaking, acts of violence targeting gendered individuals.[85] Gender-based violence "includes physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse committed through acts such as rape, intimate partner violence or domestic violence, forced pregnancy, forced prostitution, human trafficking, female genital mutilation, sexual slavery, and early and forced marriage, among others."[86] Its pervasiveness across virtually all societies has rendered it an issue of international politics, championed by countries and international organisations alike that aim to eradicate violence against gendered individuals (with a particular focus on women and girls).

Analysing this research agenda allows us to identify the explanatory games in town. From the outset, explanatory gender-based violence enterprises reflect the broader explanatory games of feminist inquiry in IR. Feminists have, since feminism's nascence, rigorously debated the ontological, epistemological, and methodological tenets that best guide their inquiries into the discipline. Since its advent, feminism in IR has been driven by critical epistemologies, such as standpoint feminism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism and decoloniality.[87] Hermeneutic methodologies, such as discourse analysis, oral histories, narratives, and ethnography, have pride of place among these epistemological approaches,[88] which has led to the prevalence of social-theoretically informed and interdisciplinary works in feminist IR.

In the early 2000s, however, feminist empiricism experienced a renaissance that sparked heated debates on critical epistemologies and hermeneutic methodologies.[89] Feminist empiricists advocated the use of quantitative methodologies to study international phenomena through a gender-sensitive lens, frequently testing hypotheses derived from

[84] Keith Dowding and Enzo Lenine, "Models, Conceptual and Predictive: A Response to Johnson's Models-as-Fables," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2023), pp. 254–63; Lenine, "Models, Explanation, and the Pitfalls of Empirical Testing."

[85] Jacqui True, *The Political Economy of Violence Against Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jacqui True, *Violence Against Women: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[86] Peace A. Medie, "Women and Violence in Africa," in Thomas Spear, ed., *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of African History*, July 2019, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.567.

[87] Jennifer Heeg Maruska, "Feminist Ontologies, Epistemologies, Methodologies, and Methods in International Relations," in Robert A. Denemark, ed., *Oxford Research Encyclopaedias of International Studies*, December 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.178; Dan Reiter, "The Positivist Study of Gender and International Relations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 7 (2015), pp. 1301–26.

[88] Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True, *Doing Feminist Research in Political and Social Science* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[89] Mary Caprioli, "Feminist IR Theory and Quantitative Methodology: A Critical Analysis," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2004), pp. 253–69; Reiter, "The Positivist Study of Gender and International Relations."

Table 4. Rules of the Explanatory Game in Feminist IR

Rules	
Constitutive	What counts as an explanandum? – Local and international phenomena with a focus on individuals, especially women and feminised individuals. What are our given assumptions? – Gender hierarchies are structural and cannot be ignored in the course of research. Gender variables must incorporate gender hierarchies. What are our metaphysical presuppositions? – Gender is a social construction that intersects with other social cleavages (e.g. class, race, seniority, sexuality, and colonialism). – Gender is central to pinning down the ontological dependences that explain target phenomena.
Representation	How do we represent our explanatory activities? – Primarily via narratives, also images; empiricists focus on statistical models and indicators.
Inference	How do we formulate predictions or construct arguments? – Arguments are constructed primarily via patterns of signification and narratives. – Feminist empiricists formulate hypotheses and test them via statistical models.
Scope	What are the specifications necessary to apply the explanatory game? – International phenomena must be analysed through the ontology of gender. Initially, feminists' focus was on women (conflating women with gender), but as research agendas progressed, gender as a socially and structurally constructed category allowed the inclusion of a host of individuals and issues. How to dock one explanatory game into another (i.e. nestedness)? – Different strands of feminism combine to generate new explanations (e.g. postcolonial feminism (postcolonialism and feminism) and institutional feminism (institutionalism and feminism)).

Source: Author's elaboration.

non-positivist feminist approaches.[90] The empiricist turn, furthermore, contributed to the creation and systematisation of a wide range of gender studies databases,[91] such as the WomenStats Project and the Social Institutions and Gender Index.

Central to feminist disputes was the ways that explanations should be produced. This involved discussing the specific epistemologies and methodologies that could best realise feminist goals.[92] Both sides of the debate firmly defended their research modus operandi; consequently, few compromises (such as the ontology of gender, which should, to some extent, incorporate gender hierarchies specific to the context of interest in the research) were reached. Yet, the widespread prevalence of critical/hermeneutical approaches has implications for the explanatory games of feminist IR, whose central tenets are summarised in Table 4.

The feminist explanatory game reverberates in research on gender-based violence. Davies and True's article is representative of issues concerning the way in which explanations are (and should be) tailored in the study of gender-based violence in different contexts.[93] Their claim is that gender-based violence cannot be subsumed under the act of violence (such as rape) *per se*, arguing instead that "all acts of violence exist on a continuum of violence facilitated by a (further) breakdown in law and order, which is intimately related to society's

[90] Reiter, "The Positivist Study of Gender and International Relations."
[91] Valerie M. Hudson et al., *Sex and World Peace* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014).
[92] Maruska, "Feminist Ontologies, Epistemologies, Methodologies, and Methods in International Relations"; J. Ann Tickner, "What Is Your Research Program? Some Feminist Answers to International Relations Methodological Questions," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2005), pp. 1–21.
[93] Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True, "Reframing Conflict-related Sexual and Gender-based Violence: Bringing Gender Analysis Back In," *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 46, No. 6 (2015), pp. 495–512.

hierarchy of gender, ethnicity, political and civil rights."[94] Their criticism is directed towards causal studies, which, according to their argument, fail to interrogate the broader gendered structures that make gender-based violence possible in the first place. More precisely, Davies and True criticise the use of indicators to operationalise gender as a variable and conduct statistical tests. Alternatively, they advocate the combination of statistical models with contextual analysis because it allows us to unravel the intricacies of the gendered structures of inequality that "are part of the complex pattern of causation that gives rise to SGBV [sexual and gender-based violence] in particular contexts."[95]

Davies and True's piece depicts more broadly the operation of the explanatory game in feminist IR, particularly in gender-based violence research. Certain epistemological and methodological preferences dictate how explanation must be constructed in order to achieve recognition in feminist IR. Although they do not specifically deny the relevance of causal studies based on quantitative analysis, their push for contextual analysis of gendered hierarchies signifies the preference for a specific form of explanation. Such form has eclipsed the alternative explanatory game wherein feminist empiricists would play different rules, effectively relegating it to a less central place in feminist IR because "the decision to accept one set of alternative rules is always a decision to reject another set of rules."[96]

Assessment: What Can We Learn from These Explanatory Games?

The explanatory games discussed earlier reflect the practices of radically different fields of inquiry in the discipline. We have learned that scholars of audience costs produce explanations that philosophers such as Rice and Rohwer[97] would label as mathematical and statistical. Feminist explanations of gender-based violence, on contrary, draw insights from other types of explanations, such as causal explanation (broadly understood), but with particular emphasis on the gendered elements of reality that constitute patterns of signification (constitutive and hermeneutic explanation). What is more important than determining a specific type of explanation is to examine the rules of the explanatory games that scholars play in their respective fields.

IR scholars, such as scientists, are problem-solvers. Problem solving begins with the stating of a problem and the goal to be reached through a set of operators and constraints.[98] Solving the problem involves a trial-and-error process, which, in turn, follows the rules for reaching that solution. The explanatory activity, therefore, is the one where scholars solve problems by following certain rules that are born of trial-and-error processes.[99] This is why different scientific communities adopt different explanatory rules. Collectively, they reach agreements on which explanatory games they must play in order to explain the phenomena of their interest.

In the literature on audience costs, these rules have converged to mathematical and statistical types of explanation and the particular mechanism that tracks the dependence relations underlying crises. In feminist analyses of gender-based violence, the rules of causal and constitutive forms of explanation have acquired a privileged status in the explanatory game due to tracking constitutive dependence and causal dependence. Thus, in both cases, a certain degree of ontological dependence, vis-à-vis audience cost mechanisms and the

[94] Ibid., p. 501.
[95] Davies and True, "Reframing Conflict-related Sexual and Gender-based Violence," p. 507.
[96] Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism*, p. 153.
[97] Rice and Rohwer, "How to Reconcile a Unified Account of Explanation with Explanatory Diversity."
[98] Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism*, p. 108.
[99] Ibid., p. 123. Mantzavinos further claims that explanatory progress is measured in a relatively straightforward fashion: if the rules of the game move explainers closer to achieving their goal, then there is progress (if not, then not). See Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism*, p. 178.

concept of gender, was assumed as part of the explanatory enterprises. To be sure, as the explanations in both fields of inquiry must respond to real-world problems, the ontologies assumed in the explanations are hence expected to reflect the very operations of real-world phenomena.[100]

This brings to the fore the particular case of causal explanation,[101] which has come under the spotlight in recent meta-theoretical debates in the discipline. In regarding causal explanation as central to their explanatory enterprises, IR scholars admit to a certain degree of explanatory realism with respect to the causal relations they unravel in their works and their economic use of metaphysical language notwithstanding. Such willingness to make a more meaningful argument for how these relations cut across different cases makes the ontological dependence of causal relations inescapable. Scholars may disagree (as they do) about overtly deterministic causal claims (see, for instance, Jackson's[102] claim that causal relations unravelled in a given configurational analysis of one case may or may not operate in other cases and Beach and Pedersen's[103] discussion of causal mechanisms and their (de)activation across cases), but this does not mean that realism about causality is illusory; to be sure, it is equally present in both standard empiricist and hermeneutic research.

Given the preceding, one might ask: why should an account of explanatory games matter for IR? Answering this question requires considering different meta-theoretical, theoretical, and practical aspects of the study of IR. For the remainder of this section, I shall focus on the following issues: (1) the problem of competing explanations, (2) the explanatory value of different games, and (3) the diversity of explanatory enterprises in global IR.

When scholars attempt to provide explanations for a phenomenon of interest, it is only natural that, due to their dissimilar theoretical and methodological backgrounds, they may produce contrasting and sometimes competing explanations. Assessing which explanation fares best in imparting understanding of the target phenomenon has been a contentious puzzle in IR meta-theoretical debates. Some advocate a pragmatic view, focused on audiences targeted by a certain explanation, as they would then be capable of adjudicating between two accounts of the phenomenon.[104] Others maintain that it is the academic community's job to assess the explanatory power of each of the competing explanations.[105] Others still propose a wide range of criteria whereby to assess the quality of an explanation—especially one that is causal—in an effort that eschews incommensurability between competing versions and different types of explanation.[106] All these approaches reduce explanation in ways that fail to acknowledge the constitutive elements of the type of explanation to which a certain account belongs. As each explanatory enterprise is premised on specific rules,[107] and as

[100] Some quarters of the discipline might resist the ontological dependence argument due to its metaphysical commitment to the existence of explanatory relations in the real world. In this case, my response would be that our explanatory enterprises must reflect relations that exist in the real world; the entire scientific endeavour would otherwise be pointless. This is even more relevant to the case of causal explanation, which departs from a realist perspective of what exists in the world and how this existence is reflected in the causal structure of that world. See Denis Bonnay, "Scientific Explanation," in Anouk Barberousse, Denis Bonnay, and Miakël Cozic, eds., *The Philosophy of Science: A Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 3–52; Kim, "Explanatory Knowledge and Metaphysical Dependence"; Salmon, *Scientific Explanation and the Causal Structure of the World*.

[101] This does not imply that all explanations in IR are causal. Causal explanations are just one type of explanation, and causal arguments are advanced by various other types of explanation, such as mathematical, statistical, and narrative, to name just a few.

[102] Jackson, "Making Sense of Making Sense."

[103] Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*, 2nd Edition (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

[104] Humphreys, "Causation, Complexity, and the Concert."

[105] Kurki and Suganami, "Towards the Politics of Causal Explanation."

[106] John Gerring, "Causation: A Unified Framework for the Social Sciences," *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2005), pp. 163–98.

[107] Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism*.

researchers, in light of these rules, draw on a limited set of criteria to generate their explanations,[108] what seems in many cases to be a set of competing explanations is actually a set of different types of explanations, each of which is founded in specific rules of the explanatory game and the criteria entailed in it. In other words, comparing explanations only makes sense if one understands the rules of the explanatory game underlying those explanations in the first place. Therefore, unless we examine the rules of the game, we may end up talking past one another because of our preference for different forms of explanation.

But the purpose of acknowledging that IR scholars play different games does more than value diversity of explanation. Different explanatory games also contribute to the expansion of our understanding of international phenomena, both within a given field of inquiry and across different ones. Mathematical and statistical explanations in the audience costs literature contribute to our overall understanding of how this mechanism operates in international crises. The mathematical model postulates the existence of audience costs and how, given its ontology, it is supposed to operate in the real world. The mathematical expressions representing audience costs are not merely an epistemic strategy, but rather a set of relations reflecting the ontological dependence that the mechanism entails. But postulating a mathematical model is something quite different from testing it through an appropriate statistical model, and the bulk of the empirical literature on audience costs is aimed precisely at that. It not only tests the mathematical propositions of the audience costs model vis-à-vis empirical data but also proposes measurements of these costs in the real world. Ultimately, works that combine both models iteratively refine our understanding of what audience costs are and how they behave beyond the formal model.

In a similar vein, the ontology of gender—and how it interacts with epistemology and methodology in order to tailor explanations of international phenomena that are intrinsically gendered—is the starting point of feminist research. Different explanatory games, which superficially seem to revolve around epistemological and methodological issues hence contribute to the discipline's edifice of feminist knowledge. More specifically, different epistemologies and methodologies mutually inform hypotheses and understandings in ways whereby the analyses of one type of game also influence those of other games. The case of the quantitative–qualitative and empiricist–critical debates in feminism illustrates this point. Many of the hypotheses postulated by critical feminists have been productively tested by empiricist feminists, while critical feminists have used many of the findings of quantitative analyses to advance their claims regarding the persistence of gender hierarchies. More importantly, they all contribute to the edifice of feminist knowledge in the discipline and to our understanding of gender and its relational character in the real world.

That fields do not operate in isolation; rather that they exchange ideas, epistemologies, methodologies, and rules for generating explanations is another aspect to be valued in the explanatory pluralism of games. Many of the rules in the explanatory games of audience costs and feminist research are shared by scholars in other fields of inquiry. Rather than being a sign of scientific unification, what we see is the institutional character of science in play. That we learn from others operating in different fields is what allows us to share explanatory games. Our socialisation in a wide range of explanatory games contributes to the exchange of rules that do the explaining. Whether they delve into ontological, epistemological, and/or methodological commitments depends on the compatibility of a given game from a given field within the field that draws sufficient inspiration from that game to define its own explanatory games. Nevertheless, there is an advantage in this exchange because it integrates science into both the logical and sociological dimensions and overcomes the usual dichotomies that separate and isolate scholars within opposing sides.

Finally, the explanatory games framework also does justice to the different ways whereby IR scholars in different fields, and in different parts of the globe, generate explanations.

[108] Rice and Rohwer, "How to Reconcile a Unified Account of Explanation with Explanatory Diversity."

Recent debates about the trajectories of local IR academies emphasise the diversity of perspectives whereby to analyse international phenomena whilst denouncing the parochialism of Anglo-American IR,[109] the latter epitomised by its insistence on the logic of causal inference as the sole conduit whereby to generate explanations.[110] Assuming a prominently methodological stance on explanation (as scholars associated with this view seldom engage in serious philosophical reflections), Keohane defines the "basic method of social science" as follows: "make a conjecture about causality; formulate that conjecture as an hypothesis, consistent with established theory (and perhaps deduced from it, at least in part); specify the observable implications of the hypothesis; test for whether those implications obtain in the real world; and overall, ensure that one's procedures are publicly known and replicable."[111] This recipe for constructing knowledge in IR is meant to be universally applicable to all forms of inquiry in the discipline, thus leading to a single mode of generating explanations. Acharya condemns it because "[i]n IR theory and method, such universalism manifests as a way of much arbitrary standard setting, gatekeeping, and marginalising of alternative narratives, ideas, and methodologies."[112] Therefore, critics of Anglo-American parochialism advocate that local practices of theory building and empirical research hold different meanings in relation to mainstream IR so that reclaiming these practices thus becomes part of a larger recovery of local knowledge and the ways whereby one produces it. Part of this project requires, at some point, reassessing how explanations are generated by different IR communities around the globe. The explanatory games framework provides a means to reappreciate the diversity of the discipline because examining the rules of the games that IR communities beyond the Anglo-American axis play enables one to recover practices that have been lost or abandoned[113] due to decades of mainstream IR dissemination. In so doing, explanatory pluralism and diversity may be repositioned in the discipline.

Conclusion

I have argued throughout this paper that IR scholars play different explanatory games based on rules specific to the tailoring of explanations. This approach enables their appreciation of multiple types of explanations beyond the usual dichotomies underscored in meta-theoretical debates. The explanatory pluralism abundantly observed in the discipline reflects a wide range of practices that, instead of being constrained by certain ideals of what (good) explanation should look like, merit praise. What matters is the way in which IR scholars mobilise the rules of explanatory games to serve the various purposes of their scientific inquiries. Our focus, therefore, should be on the process of generating explanations rather than on the outcomes of the explanatory endeavour.

Although we use games in our explanatory enterprises, we are seldom aware of their rules and dynamics. As a meta-theoretical tool, explanatory games focus our attention on the details of what we mean by "explaining," which upon examination reveal just how complex

[109] Acharya, "Global International Relations"; Arlene B. Tickner, "Core, Periphery and (Neo)imperialist International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2013), pp. 627–46; Karen Smith and Arlene B. Tickner, "Introduction: International Relations from the Global South," in Arlene B. Tickner and Karen Smith, eds., *International Relations from the Global South: Worlds of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–14; Wiebke Wemheuer-Vogelaar et al.,, "The Global IR Debate in the Classroom," in Tickner and Smith, eds., *International Relations from the Global South*, pp. 17–37.

[110] King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*.

[111] Robert O. Keohane, "Beyond Dichotomy: Conversations between International Relations and Feminist Theory," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1998), p. 196.

[112] Amitav Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2014), p. 649.

[113] Some scholars speak of epistemicides of and epistemic violence towards local knowledge, see Smith and Tickner, "Introduction," whereas others speak of the voluntary preferences for the mainstream ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies of certain scholars in the Global South, see Tickner, "Core, Periphery and (Neo)imperialist International Relations."

explanation is, imbuing as it does rules for imparting understanding that are neither readily visible nor easily subsumed under a single set of criteria. We live in a world of explanatory pluralism, which, by embracing, we may also embrace diversity in IR inquiry.

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