Interpretivists in the English School: Aren’t we all?

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Abstract
This article is a reply to Bevir and Hall, who recently argued in this journal that the English School needs to reflect more on its philosophy. They are right. Yet, their preferred distinction between a structural and an interpretivist strand of the School is not a constructive way forward. This is because their distinction between a structural and an interpretivist strand of the School is too stark, their chosen dimensions for sorting through the School are arguably not the most fruitful, and the inclusion of the English School’s normative agenda must remain independent of whether one is inclined to start from structure or from agency. After elaborating these points, the article moves on to suggesting a number of other philosophical issues which would be more relevant for the English School to work through. It ends with an empirical illustration of what an integrated English School approach, inspired by structuration, could look like.

Keywords
English School, interpretivism, philosophy of science, structuration

‘[E]ven insiders sometimes find it hard to describe, let alone spell out [the English School] approach to the field’ (Bevir and Hall, 2020a: 121). How, indeed, can we philosophically make sense of a theoretical tradition, the earliest proponents of which chose formulations such as this one: ‘Assuming, if we must, that for the purpose of internal domestic social thinking the state, though theoretically a reality, is in reality no more than an idea – what now is its status in the context of its inter-relatedness with other states’ (Manning, 1962: 27)? Dunne (1995: 379) in the mid-1990s categorised the English School as constructivist and structurationist. In principle, we have moved on since then. Yet, as Bevir and Hall (2020a) have argued recently in this journal, the English School still needs to reflect more on its philosophy. They have a point, but their preferred
distinction between a structural and an interpretivist strand of the School is overstated. In addition, integration rather than division is characteristic of the English School, and also a more fruitful strategy when it comes to advancing its particular research agendas, as well as the study of international relations overall.

To put my discussion of the English School into context, I want to start this article with a word on what the English School is not. It is not exclusively a history of thought. Although the study of past thinkers and their approach to world issues is an important and integral part of the School, its primary concern is with understanding world affairs, current and historical. The ideas which it studies are therefore primarily those of the practitioners of international politics, not those of the observers. Now, to some extent these will necessarily overlap, and more so the further back in history we look, but the distinction is nevertheless important to uphold in engaging with Bevir’s and Hall’s rather far-reaching suggestions of how to refurbish the School. I take care to point this out, both because Bevir and Hall have previously published extensively on the history of thought (Bevir, 1999; Hall, 2012; Hall and Bevir, 2014); and because there are some indications that those levels converge in their argument about the English School (Bevir and Hall, 2020b: 157–160).

To this, Bevir and Hall may want to reply that their hermeneutic approach to analysis does not accept the separation of observer and observed (Finlayson, 2007: 548); and that the suggestion of differentiating between the two levels is what actually marks a ‘modernist social science’. But it is a difference which has at least sometimes been upheld by the authors themselves (Hall, 2017), and which is mainly upheld within the English School. For instance, in the same special issue that Bevir and Hall edited, O’Hagan makes clear the inherent differences in studying apples or oranges; or in studying statespeople or what thinkers and analysts have previously thought about statespeople: ‘This article does not focus on the role of civilization at the level of the practices and utterances of actors. Rather, it employs an interpretivist approach to explore how English School scholars themselves engage with the concept of civilization to render the narrative of the globalization of international society’ (O’Hagan, 2020: 204). Similarly, Jackson’s (2020) contribution is a history of thought. Both of these articles focus on what previous generations of English School scholars have written, not on understanding dilemmas or traditions faced by practitioners (although Manning admittedly straddled the line, Jackson’s critique clearly engages with Manning as a scholar). Navari’s (2020b: 257) contribution is a more straightforward intervention on how the English School works, or perhaps should work, but still contains an important history of thought component, including the dilemma Bull probably faced when moving from Australia and India back to the UK, which led him to re-evaluate his views on international society.

The conflation of political analysis with history of thought affects Bevir’s and Hall’s substantial arguments about the English School. First, their suggestion to replace what the English School often calls ‘structures’ with traditions works for the history of thought in the School, but not as easily for political analysis. This becomes clear when reading some of Bevir’s and Hall’s previous work on international thought. ‘Traditions’, they write, ‘live on, change, or die, in the minds of individuals’ (Hall and Bevir, 2014: 828). Then, these individuals may encounter a dilemma, which forces them to ‘re-evaluate their inherited beliefs’ (Hall and Bevir, 2014: 829) and change their minds. But this all
happens at the level of the observer, and it is decidedly individual: each thinker revises his or her own thinking in a very personal process. In the English School, the main object of analysis is not individual thinkers but intersubjectively shared understandings, primarily among practitioners. These may, of course, be modified by particularly influential agents’ individual processes, but more probably, they are modified by common reassessments and reactions to both internal and external prompts.

Yet, if we take Bevir and Hall’s intervention at face value and really engage with their argument as if they want the English School to study practitioners’ thoughts and acts, rather than observers’, there are several outstanding issues which they raise and which merit addressing in this article. The first part of this article details the problems in Bevir and Halls bifurcation of the English School into an interpretivist and a structural wing, arguing that we are all interpretivists, although perhaps not exactly in the sense which Bevir and Hall would prefer. The piece continues with drawing out the implications, primarily for the English School but with a wink to non-positivist IR at large, of accepting Bevir and Hall’s construction of the field, and outlines some other unresolved philosophical issues that would arguably be more worth the while to discuss as we take the English School forward. The article ends with an attempt to illustrate the interactions of structures and agents in English School analysis. For clarity, and in order to make the discussion more concrete, this part draws on (the primary institution of) trusteeship. Arguably, it integrates exactly the points that Bevir and Hall highlight to sustain their argument: the preoccupation of what they call the structural wing of the School with institutions, and the careful empirical investigation of paper-trails by what they call the interpretivist wing. The illustration serves to show that although there is some division of labour in the School, where institutional theorising starts from an aggregate level, and historical interpretation starts from the level of statespeople, these two levels can, and often should, be usefully integrated in English School works.

The problem: A Broad Church in need of philosophical order?

The English School, having, according to the conventional story, eagerly defined itself in terms of the first debate (as neither realist nor idealist) and second debate (as the classical approach), has arguably not engaged sufficiently with the third debate, the one on meta-theoretical positions. The meta-theoretical underpinnings of the School remain remarkably unclear. Bevir and Hall are right about this; however, I will maintain that the philosophical direction that they suggest for the School is not optimal. In particular, three parts of Bevir and Hall’s argument are problematic for the English School. First, their distinction between a structural and an interpretivist strand of the school is overstated. Second, their suggested dimensions on which to separate the strands are largely misconstrued. Third, the inclusion of the English School’s normative agenda is an important part of the School’s DNA and must remain independent of whether one is inclined to start from structure or from agency. The main thrust of the argument is that the English School already does interpretivist work, so that Bevir and Hall largely end up beating a dead horse. Yet, if their intervention indeed leads to a reinvigorated debate about philosophical commitments in the School, this will doubtlessly be beneficial to its agenda.
Structural ES as a modernist social science

Bevir and Hall (2020a) suggest that ‘interpretivists think of “society” as a kind of tradition into which individuals are initiated, not as some kind of structure in which they are held’ (p. 125). The tradition affects people’s thinking, including their actions, but there is nothing inevitable about it, and people may well change their minds over time. Bevir and Hall posit that those they see as structuralists may take issue with their way of thinking about society as a tradition in which people are socialised, for three reasons.

First, they think that structuralists ‘often conceive the ideational and material as contrasting facets of international affairs’ (Bevir and Hall, 2020a: 125). This is in principle acceptable: it is possible to separate the cannons from the idea of the cannons. As Wendt (1995: 78) once pointed out, it will of course matter to our perception of threat or security who has the cannons, but the cannons themselves seem to be a stable material fact, which can be analytically separated from the meaning and interpretation which surround them. This acceptance, however, does not exclude that there is an ideational aspect to the cannons, which might indeed be more important than their physical and material incarnation. This recognition is, arguably, what distinguishes the common philosophy of science of most in the English School from naturalism. Recognising a material aspect to something does not have to amount to denying its ideational aspect, or to give the material aspect precedence, analytically or otherwise. Those aspects do not have to be contrasting but may very well be complimentary.

Second, Bevir and Hall (2020a) point out that ‘structuralists sometimes treat social concepts as if they captured fixed kinds’ (p. 125). To some extent, this depends on the time frame. In the longue durée universe of English School analysis, some social kinds may well be sticky and remain seemingly constant for a certain time: a few years, a few decades or even maybe sometimes a century. But that does not mean that they are fixed in principle. The social world changes, and even those classified as structuralists by Bevir and Hall see social kinds, like the institutions of international society, as evolving (Buzan, 2004; Friedner Parrat, 2017; Holsti, 2004; Knudsen and Navari, 2019; Spandler, 2015). Inspired by Abbott (2001), I have explicitly argued that what looks like stability in social kinds such as nation-states or institutions of international society is really reproductive work performed by agents (Friedner Parrat, 2017: 628).

Bevir and Hall (2020a: 126) explain: ‘structuralists might treat social concepts as natural kinds precisely because they think of them as referring to a material part of the social world that is not constructed in part by ideas and theories’. Let us explore this with a social concept of common purchase in the English School such as the institutions of international society. These institutions consist, according to researchers placed on the structural side of Bevir and Hall’s division, of reproductive practices and some combination of norms, beliefs, ideas, expectations and principles (Holsti, 2004: 21–22; Knudsen, 2019: 30–31). There is not much of material quality in this conceptualisation, even though certain of them may over time take on formal overcoats, including material aspects such as buildings, employees and ceremonial gear. The interrelation between institutions and their formal anchoring in international organisation is the topic of Knudsen and Navari’s (2019) edited volume International Organization in the Anarchical Society. Bevir’s and Hall’s assertion is simply not true. Not even the staunchest of ES
institutionalists think of social concepts as ‘referring to a material part of the social world’. Rather, they all acknowledge the social world as ‘constructed in part by ideas and theories’. This assertion thus refers to a straw-man.

Third, Bevir and Hall (2020a: 126) claim that ‘structuralists sometimes equate social explanation with the more general explanations of natural science. They suggest that we can explain social phenomena by reference to the causal properties of structures or other such social facts’. This seems far-fetched given that many researchers in the English School tradition have rather sought to avoid causal explanation at all costs (Navari, 2009). One could even argue that a lot of the methodological opacity of the English School comes down to a refusal to even discuss methods and scientific standards because of the inapplicability of the available vocabulary, defined by the positivist other (for a rare exception, see Suganami, 1996, 1999, 2008, 2011).

Causality, or wider causation, has never been a prime concern for the English School, a circumstance which has often been rehearsed by its more positivistically inclined critics (Copeland, 2003; Devlen et al., 2005; Jones, 1981). Rather, the English School project is one of ‘ontological theorising’ (Guzzini, 2013: 534), a relentless questioning of ‘what is’, perhaps most easily translated to positivists as ‘thick description’ (cf. Jackson, 2020: 140). Yet, this classification of the world into analytical categories may in itself be a performative action, so that researching and teaching about international society in extension makes practitioners act as if it were there, and in that sense influence their thoughts and actions (Friedner Parrat, 2020: 768). Note that this is one of the instances where observers and observed meaningfully converge.

In the sense of naturalist explanation, social facts such as institutions do not cause anything. What Bevir and Hall may refer to is instead the widespread idea that social facts, such as international society and its institutions, in the minds of some English School scholars constitute things. For instance, sovereign states, and sovereignty as a principle, is sometimes understood as relational creatures (Jackson and Nexon, 1999; Nexon, 2009), and in that sense, international society constitutes sovereign states. The way to be recognised as a sovereign state is to be accepted as such by the other states. Yet, even in this limited sense, structures do not cause anything, but agents, working within the limits of what they understand as possible and desirable, do the actual acting. This understanding of structure, which I would claim is commonplace in the English School, is not too far removed from Bevir and Hall’s preferred ‘traditions’; still, the category mistake of conflating the political analysis of the English School with the history of thought makes a direct translation between ‘tradition’ and ‘structure’ impossible. The structure that constrains and enables statespeople can in principle not be re-evaluated and changed by individual agents, as can inherited traditions by individual thinkers. Since this direct translation between tradition and structure does not work, Bevir and Hall seem to place what they take to be the structural strand of the English School in a naturalist conception of science. That is largely overstated. But how do they get to that idea?

Is structuralism versus interpretivism really the central query?

Bevir and Hall arguably use the label interpretivism in an unconventional manner, when applied to political analysis. As the categories are set up in this article, the researcher’s
choice seems to one of either naturalism or interpretivism. This might work in the history of thought, but in political analysis, there is more to this distinction. Drawing on the usual canon of IR meta-theory, one may want to split IR into some version of an interpretivist category and a naturalist category (Guzzini, 1998; Hollis, 1994; Hollis and Smith, 1990; Moses and Knutsen, 2007; Wendt, 1999). Additionally, those categories can be split into a holist and a monist compartment. Regardless of whether one starts from a naturalist or an interpretivist philosophy of science, one might want to study IR either from a holist perspective where the whole somehow influences the parts, or from a monist perspective where the parts somehow make up the whole. This second move seems distorted in Bevir’s and Hall’s conceptualisation of the English School, leading to a very simplified idea of international society and its institutions as (quasi-) naturalistic objects.

The upper left corner of the resulting matrix, which is where Bevir and Hall place the ‘structuralist modernist’ strand of the English School, is decidedly naturalist and holist in nature. Yet, few if any, of the researchers whom Bevir and Hall place in that corner would accept being categorised as naturalists. They do not stress ‘the inevitability or unavoidability of certain systemic logics, or, at the very least, [. . .] their power over states and individuals’ (Bevir and Hall, 2020a: 124). Rather, what we might understand as structures consist of reproductive practices associated with norms, beliefs and expectations, meaning that individuals act as they see fit or best in the circumstances within which they find themselves. They may recreate a practice, but they may also opt to modify or adapt it, in a way rather similar to Hall and Bevir’s (2014) understanding of how dilemmas lead agents to reconsider the beliefs they have received from the tradition to which they belong. The difference is that statespeople in the English School must do this collectively, if it is to have any effect on the practice. Even international anarchy is, to paraphrase Wendt (1992), what (agents of) states make of it (for instance a society, with common institutions). Either way, statespeople’s understanding of the situation in which they find themselves, and the sense they make of its constraints and possibilities, guide their actions. There is nothing inevitable or unavoidable in this, although it can be sticky and sometimes utterly resistant to (agentially induced) change.

The conventional placement of the English School is thus in the upper right corner of the naturalist/interpretivist and holist/individualist matrix (Dunne, 1995; Navari, 2020b; compare Wendt, 1999). It is interpretivist in the sense of caring about meaning and human reflexivity, but at a holist level rather than an individual level. Concepts such as society show that it is about shared meaning (sometimes also shared over time, which is what makes some social kinds sticky and durable), and not about individual meaning. For instance, in Bain’s book (2003) about trusteeship, he follows practitioners’ paper trail from a British debate over how to govern India, through discussions among the European colonial empires at the Berlin Conference in 1885, the post-war settlements at Versailles and San Francisco, and finally to decolonisation. Bain’s account is agential, and he does not claim that trusteeship is a fixed or natural kind. Yet, it is completely doable to argue that trusteeship can be understood as a primary institution of international society, as agents’ intersubjective beliefs about it, and actions in its name, had ordering functions at the time studied by Bain. For the peoples categorised as ‘childlike’ and in need of guidance from trustees, the constraining ordering function of trusteeship
was undeniable. On that receiving end, it was experienced as a structure which was definitely rather hard than soft, and which legitimised their subjugation. Nonetheless, over the space of a few decades, it came completely undone as agents struggled to invalidate it, and finally, even the practitioners in the colonial empires withdrew their support from it. The legitimising and reproductive work stopped being performed, and the structure collapsed.

**Can only interpretivists be normative?**

Buzan (2004) arguably formalised a split in the English School between a normative wing and a structural wing in his *From International to World Society*. He was not the creator of that split, however, as it had for some time been a common procedure to separate normative inquiry from analytical ditto (as Bevir and Hall are clearly aware, see Bevir and Blakely, 2018: 431). The positivist and naturalist ideal of social science certainly dictated that IR should be analysing international relations, not having normative opinions on it. At any rate, Buzan’s formulation at the face of it harmonises quite well with Bevir and Hall (2020a: 122), who place Buzan and all his adepts on the ‘structural’ side of their construction of the English School, and reserve normative thinking for the ‘interpretivists’ on the other shore. ‘Escewing both intellectual and diplomatic history on the one hand, and normative concerns on the other, they have advanced what might best be termed a structural account of international society that borrows heavily from what we term the “modernist” social sciences’ (Bevir and Hall, 2020a: 121). Yet, in Buzan’s formulation, this does not say that the ‘structural’ wing cannot work with agency, but only that it does not prioritise prescriptive normative theory. In terms of the meta-theoretical matrix alluded to in the previous section, Buzan’s split is within the upper right square, whereas Bevir’s and Hall’s is vertical, between naturalism and interpretivism. It is also worth noting that Buzan (2014: 24) retreats from the split in a later book, claiming that ‘in more recent times the mainstream view is that the normative and structural sides of the argument should not, and cannot, be separated’.

However, Buzan’s partition of the School into a structural and a normative wing was no more fruitful than Bevir and Hall’s partition of it into an interpretivist and a structural strand. Of course all individual researchers do not have to do it all, but can start where their own talent and interest take them, but for the School as a whole it is completely doable, and often done, to match a holist starting point with a normative outlook (Williams, 2011). Arguably, prescriptive normative theory is vital to the English School analysis of change, and one of its distinctive features. Given ‘the performative quality of the subject matter’ an attitude of possible improvement is also called for (Friedner Parrat, 2020: 770) – not least to avoid the trap of mixing categorisation with recommendation, or *is* with *ought*, pointed out by Jackson (2020). Alleged structuralists are also interpretivists, and their work is open to normative considerations, although not everybody might choose to take up that challenge.

In addition, the School cannot, and should not, ‘absolve’ the scholars whom Bevir and Hall call structuralists from the responsibility of being normatively sensitive. Whether one wants to call the norms, beliefs and expectations that surrounds us, and that to some extent influence our choices, structures or traditions, those received ‘truths’ should be
subject to normative scrutiny. Since English School researchers do not treat their structures as determining agents’ behaviour, there are ethical arguments to make about which practices agents recreate and which they endeavour to modify. Obviously, there are important questions to ask about the normative effects of defining war ‘in the strict sense’ (Keal, 2017; Pejcinovic, 2013), as well as whose work is omitted when scholars reproduce and teach traditions, including English School theory (Costa Buranelli and Taeuber, 2022; Friedner Parrat et al., 2020). Moreover, there is a quiet normative loading in the traditional English School understanding of institutions (Schmidt and Williams, 2023). The institutions that maintain international society contribute to upholding order (Bull, 1977), and so the is easily slides into an ought. The question of whether that order is worth upholding, and in that case for whom, should not be swept under the carpet.

Yet, the ebb and flow of engagement with normative theory in the School is worth pointing out. Much of it has been channelled into the debate between solidarists and pluralists, which originated in Bull’s distinction between enough norm-convergence between states to enforce international law, solidarism and a pluralism of interests and norms, which was not conducive to common enforcement (Bull, 1966b). Over time, this distinction turned into a partly empirical, partly normative, debate over what degree of norm-convergence could be detected in international society (Jackson, 2000; Mayall, 2000; Weinert, 2011; Wheeler, 2000; Wheeler and Dunne, 1996). It is arguably now becoming established that these positions are normative rather than empirical, concerned with whether solidarism (increasingly conceptualised as universalism of liberal norms) or rather more toleration of differences, as in pluralism, is more desirable (Buzan, 2014; Williams, 2005, 2011).

Bevir and Hall are right that philosophical choices influence the English School’s possibility of advancing normative theory, but not quite in the sense they claim. Buzan’s split between ‘structural’ and ‘normative’ for a while contributed to establishing ‘solidarism’ and ‘pluralism’ as empirical, rather than normative markers: ‘[P]luralism describes “thin” international societies where shared values are few, and the prime focus is on devising rules for co-existence within a framework of sovereignty and non-intervention. Solidarism is about “thick” international societies in which a wider range of values is shared, and where the rules will be not only about coexistence, but also about the pursuit of joint gains and the management of collective problems in a range of issue-areas’ (Buzan, 2004: 59). In turn, a terminology of ‘solidarist’ and ‘pluralist’ institutions cropped up, with a clear tendency to see ‘liberal’ institutions as solidarist, and claiming for them a level of universalism that was perhaps rather desired than empirically justified. As Bevir and Blakely (2018: 430) put it: ‘There is a link between the expectation of a normal science of ethics and a vision of modernity as convergent on a final enlightened phase’. In the end, normative issues are part and parcel of English School analyses, and are arguably better discussed in terms of what is desirable than in terms of empirical markers, since those are anyway rarely conclusive (Friedner Parrat, 2020: 771).

In the study of trusteeship, it is possibly less challenging to keep track of the normative aspects when working through an institutional approach than through historical interpretation. For the direct study of the paper-trail, the normative questions must be kept at arms-length by a thorough contextualisation of the problem at hand. At the aggregate institutional level, acknowledging the effects of trusteeship on order and on justice
is more straightforward: it had a profound influence on the world as we know it, in a robustly unjust way that is still conditioning international affairs today.

The implication: What happened to non-positivist international theory?

In Bevir and Hall’s depiction of the English School, there thus seems to be two available philosophical positions. Either one is an interpretivist, working with hermeneutic methods, or one is a ‘modernist social scientist’, which seems to be a very broad category indeed. In its most extreme, it reads as naturalism, working with positivist methods. Such a construction of the field erases all space for any non-positivist social science, making the choice one about positivist social science or humanities. This conceptualisation of the field is a disaster, not only for the English School but for IR overall, as is impoverishes the discipline back to the 1980s at least. In particular, it jettisons the constructivist break-through, which relied heavily on English School works, understood as ‘the traditional approach’ (Bull, 1966a) to provide footholds in their struggle for recognition by the American mainstream (Der Derian, 1995). This break-through was a precondition for many of the disciplinary moves and turns taking place since then, including the ‘historical turn’ and the revival of the history of international thought (Hall, 2017). All of this, the move suggested by Bevir and Hall threatens to throw out with the proverbial bath water.

Embracing interpretivism, write Bevir and Hall (2020b: 164), would mean ‘returning the English school to the study of agents and to seeing “international society” as a contingent construct that exists in the minds of actors and observers, rather than some kind of structure [. . .]. It would not imply a complete turning away from interest in institutions, but it would involve affirming the early English school’s position that they are also contingent mental constructs, socially generated and sustained, reflecting the beliefs of engaged agents about their rules, usefulness and propriety’. This hints that the argument hinges on the ontology of social facts such as institutions. The English School should, in Bevir and Hall’s version, not think of international society or its institutions as something that actually exists, but solely as ideas in the minds of participants and/or observers. Perhaps this is the main point of contention between alleged structuralists and interpretivists of the kind Bevir and Hall want to see. But I maintain that it is a red herring. Rather, English School researchers are in general very accepting of the notion that changes come with agency.

An alternative way of understanding international society and its institutions is that they get ontological existence because observers and practitioners believe in them, find them useful or act as if they were there. Moreover, when people like Manning, Wight or Bull moved between the academy and the British Foreign Office or larger policy world, they brought ideas with them in both directions. Those ideas were subsequently spread to their students through their teaching, and in larger circles through their commentary and authorship. There is some support for this notion of performativity also in the British Committee works that Bevir and Hall reference; for instance, Butterfield (1966: 132–133) argues that earlier international societies (before seventeenth century Europe) did not have a balance of power, because they did not think of it as such. And Manning’s (1962) work is of course replete with references to ‘notional” entities which exist ‘in effect’.
Buzan (2004: 12–14) suggests that three versions of international society can be distinguished: a set of ideas in the minds of practitioners, a set of ideas in the minds of theorists (like Wight’s three traditions), or a set of concepts imposed by external observers. He, moreover, points out that among those who see international society as ideas in the minds of theorists, ‘there is some tendency [. . .] to treat the English School as part of the history of ideas, and therefore as essentially a philosophical debate, as opposed to a discussion about the condition of the real world’ (Buzan, 2004: 13). Here, the difference between doing history of thought and doing political analysis resurfaces. A historian of thought would obviously be interested in the ideas in the minds of theorists and, to some extent, practitioners. Meanwhile, the political analyst is more focused on the ideas of the practitioners, and analyses them with the help of externally imposed concepts or ideal-types (perhaps derived from the work of the intellectual historian), which may or may not harmonise with the vocabulary of the practitioners themselves. In the case of the English School, arguably, the analysts’ concepts harmonise rather well with the practitioners’, which is related to the above argument about performativity.

Yet, international society could very well exist in all of the versions above, especially if we historicise its evolution. As an idea in the minds of statespeople and political thinkers, as well as an analytical tool for observers, it can have performative effects, which over time makes it ontologically real (Friedner Parrat, 2019: 84–86). In a thumbnail sketch, a concept, which originated as an idea by legal thinkers in early modern Europe, can find its way into practitioners’ own understanding of how they are managing their relations within *la famille des nations*, be taught to generations of students by teachers like Manning, and eventually become an established truth for both statespeople, analysts and the general public.

**Outstanding philosophical issues in need of discussion**

Despite claiming that Bevir’s and Hall’s critique of the English School grounds in the category mistake of conflating the history of thought with political analysis, rebutting a number of their arguments, and declaring one of their overall messages to be a red herring, I nevertheless agree with Bevir and Hall that there are unresolved philosophical issues in the English School. I will not argue for a list of priorities, but simply point to a selection of three philosophical queries which could use some sustained reflection.

First, one of them decidedly concerns the distinction between material and ideational realities. Drawing on Wendt’s argument about cannons above admittedly amounted to taking a shortcut, since the material side of cannons is usually not really questioned by anyone. The material incarnations of cannons would typically be at least provisionally accepted as natural facts – even by those who do not buy into the idea that anyone can verify their existence with their senses – because of their lethal effects which some unhappy souls are made to experience. But what about the possible material parts of social facts? Can they have material components at all? Social facts, such as the institutions of international society, sometimes take on ‘formal overcoats’ as mentioned above. This mainly implies secondary institutionalisation in international organisations, and then brings with it material attributes such as buildings, staff and ceremonial gear. But what exactly about that is material? The stones of the building of the old Palais des
Nations in Geneva definitely are, but not the functions it contains or the awe it sometimes inspires. Likewise, the UN staff are real people who exist in a material sense, but their roles are at least in part ideational. Yet, drawing the line is tricky, as the everyday business of accountants or bureaucrats is not necessarily what one envisages as an ideational occupation. Finally, ceremonial gear such as red carpets or monuments most definitely have material incarnations, but their importance resides almost exclusively in their symbolic value; that is, in their ideational component. To agree with Bevir and Hall: the material part of it does not cause, or explain, anything. But does that make it irrelevant?

Navari argues that there are two basic philosophical positions in the English School with regard to the ontology of social facts: philosophical idealism and philosophical realism. She defines the idealist position as one allowing ‘the creation of institutions on the basis of sentiment, hope, and invention’, and the realist position as one ‘which accepts the necessity of grappling with a recalcitrant reality’ (Navari, 2019: 13). Yet, both of these positions seem overstated: for anything to change, there must surely always be some sort of wilful action within the bonds of what harsh reality dictates? Perhaps the function of the buildings of the Palais des Nations can change (this has happened, as the buildings went from being the League of Nations headquarters to becoming the UN headquarters in Europe) without altering the buildings. More probably, however, this would be, and has been, a process that entailed material alterations such as refurbishments and renovations. Moreover, the UN headquarters were built in New York City to replace the Palais des Nations, not only to reflect the migration of hierarchy across the Atlantic, but also because the Palais des Nations ‘had become a symbol of failure’ (Mires, 2013: 85) and as such a reminder of a dated world order. Adding a time component, what seems to be hard, material reality can over time be reinterpreted in new ideational light, which subsequently may motivate a change in the material reality. It seems that this distinction, too, could thus be overcome by integration along lines similar to structuration.

Second, another important question, which arguably fudges a lot of conversation in the School, is the one about the state. In some ES work, the state is treated as an actor, whereas in other authors, it is clearly a setting which enables and constrains agents working within it; that is, in common ES parlance, a structure. In the second understanding, order is made through states (rather than by states). Consequently, authors who treat states as actors can be interpreted as using a convenient shorthand for the individual agents who do the actual work within the web of possibilities and limitations that they manoeuvre. It should be duly noted that for instance Buzan (2004: 25–26) can be read both ways. He attempts clarify his stance on this by describing international society as a second-order society, ‘where the members are not individual human beings, but durable collectivities of humans possessed of identities and actor qualities that are more than the sum of their parts’. This entails understanding states as settings that are both constraining and enabling for the statespeople attempting to act through them. For instance, Barak Obama, Angela Merkel and Tony Blair are all simultaneously freer to act, and have a much more limited capacity to do so, now that they are out of office than they were as world leaders. Yet, Buzan’s statement could also be read the other way around, to describe the state as an entity with actor qualities. Accordingly, this states-as-actors shorthand may lead readers’ thought to a world-view where states are understood as actors in their own right.
In Navari’s account, ‘the dynamic elements in ES accounts of international life are either collective or individual agents who hold institutional positions. They are states, state leaders, non-governmental organizations, development officers, agency bureaucrats, and so on’ (Navari, 2020a: 467; my emphasis). Navari thus identifies the state as a possible agent. Yet, other thinkers have rather treated the state as an institution, notably Holsti (2004: 28–72) and Bull (1977: 68). Arguably, the structuration framework should allow these two intuitions to coexist so that international politics happens through states, but the exact mechanics of this are still not clear. Bevir’s and Hall’s suggestion to focus more on agency is probably helpful here. This leads on to another unresolved issue.

Third, the confusion surrounding the status of the state fudges discussions of structuration. If one thinks of states as actors, and international society as a structure, one sort of agent-structure problematic follows. But if one thinks instead of statespeople as the agents, affecting their own state, and the others, and sometimes international society as a whole, in their sometimes skilful manoeuvring to recreate and modify international practices, norms and rules, a different sort of structuration follows, with at least three levels. Double this up with more English School concepts, such as world society, and yet another type of structure-agent problematic in the interaction between these two domains might result (Troy, 2022).

Then a fourth floor needs to be added to the integrated analytical warehouse.

Finally, what easily washes out in all of these discussions seems to be history. I have previously argued that the English School should reject all kinds of determinist history (both liberal/progressivist and realist/cyclical) and stick to a contingent conception of history in which matters could have been otherwise (Friedner Parrat, 2020: 765–767). This argument builds on a long tradition of English School thought, starting from Butterfield (1931). Yet it is one that is sometimes not factored into our analyses, which instead, unreflectingly, tilt into one of the determined views, either of continuous progress or of cyclical repetitions. In plain text, the insight about contingent history means that all our efforts to schematically tease out what is what among structures, constraints, enabling circumstances and agential creativity and wilfulness can only be meaningfully demonstrated in historical context. It is only by historicising the contingent evolution of institutions that the twists and turn they take can be understood, along with the limits and possibilities they impose on statespeople’s actions today. This was recognised by the members of the British Committee in both of their edited volumes (Bull and Watson, 1984: 9; Butterfield and Wight, 1966: 12), and it is emphasised by Bevir and Hall (2020b: 154), although more in relation to the history of thought than to institutional analysis.

This historicisation, in turn, is arguably best done by a careful attention to agents’ actions and arguments within their own context, where ‘situated agents constantly react against, support or renovate the institutions within which they act’ (Navari, 2020b: 264). The context and the actions of the agents within that context can be treated as two sides of the same coin. I now turn to illustrating this very process of integration in the next section.

**Soft structures and wilful and creative agents in historical context**

Approaching English School theory as historicised structuration places it well for the study of change and continuity. The idea of thinking and creative agents, acting for what
they consider to be desirable and possible within their understanding of their own context, leaves room for contingent and gradual modification of that context. For this to work, international society needs to be understood as processual and relational. Agents are constituted (as agents) and empowered as well as constrained in and through interaction. This can be studied empirically. In this respect, English School scholars could very well be inspired by other interpretivist inquiries. As pointed out by Hay (2011: 173), interpretivists have generally very high ambitions for their empirical studies, working inductively using essentially ethnographic methods. Methods similar to these are sometimes employed in the English School (Costa Buranelli, 2020; Spandler, 2019), or more often, using detailed historical analysis (Schouenborg, 2022; Yao, 2019).

Below, I offer a brief illustration of what an integration of work that Bevir and Hall call interpretivist and structuralist could look like. The point of departure is Bain’s work on trusteeship, which lies close to the history of thought approach favoured by Bevir and Hall. However, Bain argues for a slightly different view of history as a construction of the past for the present, inspired by Michael Oakeshott. ‘The past as such is gone and therefore has nothing to say; and whatever lessons are attributed to it are in fact statements of the desirability of particular conclusions, which are made in the present about the present’ (Bain, 2009: 160; compare Thompson, 2012). Bain (2009: 162) therefore does not study trusteeship to ‘deriv[e] a transcendental meaning of the institution, or to determine the conditions which may give rise to a condition of trusteeship, but rather to understand what it denotes in the context of international society’. This sensitivity to what agents’ thoughts and utterances do in international society as well as to the historical evolution of the issues at hand makes it well suited to illustrate how an agential starting-point and a structural approach may interact to make more sense of world politics.

In the following, I consequently apply an institutional top-down view to Bain’s work to demonstrate how institutional theorising and agent-centred history cross-fertilise each other through this story. If primary institutions consist of reproductive practices, coupled with discursive legitimation of norms, beliefs and expectations, then that discursive legitimation can be mapped using the ‘paper trail’ left behind by the multitude of agents involved in its creation and reproduction. In this vein, Bain shows how arguments about trusteeship developed, and norms emerged, through writings and speeches of statesmen, politicians and scholars. At the same time, it is possible to theorise how specific aspects of their context delimits the freedom of these agents to manoeuver; or in other words: what they take for granted.

An integrated approach to the evolution of trusteeship

New ideas of how the British India Company ought to rule India entered the public discourse in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century by the interventions of political figures and thinkers. Prime Minister Pitt argued in relation to his India Act (1784) that the success of the East India Company’s rule in India ‘must chiefly depend on the establishment of the happiness of the inhabitants, and their being secured in a state of peace and tranquillity’ (quoted by Bain, 2003: 37). These new ideas of how to rule others rooted in enlightenment thinking, and thus excluded traditional rights of conquest.
‘[T]he architects of empire during the eighteenth century had to confront the legacies of the American and French Revolutions in a way that the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the Americas did not. The rights of man and the idea of social contract disallowed all appeals to divine right, Papal blessing, and the right of conquest as justifications of dominion in Africa and Asia’ (Bain, 2003: 17). The British claim of a right to rule India thus came to depend on the assertion that Indians were incapable of ruling themselves and needed trustees to look out for them.

These ideas of ruling India in a way which ‘contributed to the security and happiness of the native people’ (Bain, 2003: 43) subsequently came to limit what could and could not be done in India (or defended in public discourse). British colonial rule was publicly justified by people like James Mill, Charles Grant and Lord William Bentinck, based on the idea of trusteeship, stipulating that Indians, and later also other peoples under colonial rule, were ‘immature’ or ‘childlike’ and therefore needed to be ruled by others, who were deemed ‘mature’ or ‘adult’ (Bain, 2003: 43–50). Bain (2003: 50) takes care to point out that ‘the idea of trusteeship exerted a rather uneven influence on the policies adopted by the government of India’ but that it nevertheless shaped arguments about implementation or lack thereof, and in general about the obligations of power. The idea was finally so entrenched in the British debate as to be perceived as evident by its participants.

‘Trusteeship assumes that the fit, that is, the virtuous, shall rule on behalf of the incapable’ (Bain, 2003: 26). This idea of course presents its proponents with the task of deciding who is fit and virtuous, and who is incapable. One solution, embraced by thinkers like John Stuart Mill and James Lorimer in the mid-nineteenth century, was to think in terms of a ‘ladder of civilization’ and thus to distinguish between ‘savages, barbarians and civilized peoples’ (Bain, 2003: 74–76). As Keal points out, this categorisation of peoples was often used by Europeans to justify violent conquest in other parts of the world (Keal, 2017: 167–170; Pejcinovic, 2013). Yet, the idea of ‘civilization’ (Gong, 1984), including the implication that some had it and some did not, was ‘janus-faced’, in the sense that it was not only employed as a defence for empire by its proponents, but also as an argument against it by its critics (Phillips, 2012: 7).

The idea of trusteeship was institutionalised at the international level in connection with the Berlin conference in 1884–1885. Bain (2003: 53–77) again follows the evolution of trusteeship in the British debate, by people like Lord Lugard, over the colonisation of Africa and the partition of the continent between European colonial powers at that summit meeting, where Bismarck voice to the idea of trusteeship. Once the idea that Europeans, understood as ‘mature’ peoples, had a responsibility to rule other, ‘childlike’, peoples for their own good, had become established at the international level, it can be read as a structure. From the Berlin conference on, trusteeship was, among the European colonial empires, how dependent territories should be ruled. Its international acceptance (or institutionalisation) was an enabling circumstance for colonisers, and at the same time a constraint on action for their representatives, in the sense that deviations from the discourse of trusteeship would cost. So would at least the most striking violations of it in practice, notably the massive abuse in the Congo Free State (Bain, 2003: 68–74). In this sense, the institution of trusteeship now put limits to the level of exploitation that could be accepted. Those limits were clearly not hard enough to stop abuse and exploitation, but they were sufficiently substantial to inflict costs on offenders, which comes through
in the diplomatic clinch between Britain and Belgium that took place over the Congo Free State. Even more strikingly, however, trusteeship was an enabling structure for those representatives of European colonial empires who could use the idea that others were incapable of governing themselves to legitimate their imperial expansion and extraction of resources. Obviously, it was also a constraint for those who were put under tutelage and who would have wished to argue for their right of self-determination.

At this time, there was no perceived contradiction in the imperial states between seeking trade and gains from Africa, and caring for the development of Africans. Europeans could exploit Africa, but should not harm the indigenous populations. Bain (2003: 60–68) devotes considerable attention to Lugard’s ‘dual mandate’; that is, to showing how the economic theories of the time, which united free trade with all sorts of human progress, contributed to making African development, as well as abolishment of the slave-trade, conditional on the spread of free commerce. Bain (2003: 67) writes: ‘It is no doubt true that delegates to the Berlin Conference worked to increase the wealth of their own countries; and, in doing so, they concealed their effort to obtain greater access to the natural wealth of Africa for their traders and investors. However, they also went to great lengths to establish principles of conduct that were meant to protect Africa’s native inhabitants from the ravages of slavery and war, and to promote their advancement in the standards of civilization’. At the Brussels Conference, convened 5 years after Berlin, many of the same points re-emerged.

At the end of the First World War, the dominant understanding shared by representatives of the European empires was that those territories that had been colonies to the losing belligerents were still not ‘mature’ enough to rule themselves. They were not considered to be ready for independence, but would need to be put under the trusteeship of somebody else. To look at how this structure changed, we have to go back to the agents who continuously re-enacted and reinterpreted trusteeship in practice as well as in discourse. In Bain’s (2003: 90–94) study, an important agent is J. C. Smuts, a South African member of the Imperial War Cabinet, who wrote the first proposal of what became the League of Nations compromise relating to former colonies of Germany and the Ottoman Empire. Smuts managed to blend the American ideal of self-government for all peoples with the will of the colonial empires to keep their own empires intact, into an idea of mandates, administered by trustees but under international oversight. Those mandates would develop progressively and 1 day graduate into self-government. Yet, in formulating the new understanding of trusteeship which was to be included in the League of Nations Covenant, involved agents drew on older thinking, notably on the ladder of ‘civilization’ and Lorimer’s distinction between savages, barbarians and civilised peoples (Bain, 2003: 102). In the League of Nations, this translated as class A, B and C mandates, supposedly with different timelines and possibilities for future independence.

Once the mandates system was in place at the League of Nations, we might again look at it as a constraining and enabling structure, delimiting what practitioners and observers in the context of trusteeship could do. It decidedly had ordering effects, and in this case, it even received material attributes, such as its venue at the Palais Wilson, and Secretariat staff to oversee the mandates system. With the Second World War, however, the colonial empires started to come apart. The efforts their representatives made to hold on to the
colonies looked very different from the American preference for independence for all dependent territories. This difference in outlook characterised the whole process of reorganisation of international affairs, from the Atlantic Charter, through the Yalta Conference and all the way to the creation of the United Nations in San Francisco. The controversy also led the British government to invest in the development of its colonies so as to show progress in order to hold on to its right to govern them, redefining its own status from that of trustee to that of partner (Bain, 2003: 115–116).

Yet, there was also agreement on certain points between Britain and the US. ‘For all their differences, the two sides were not divided on the basic assumption of trusteeship, namely that most colonial peoples were incapable of managing their own affairs and that their preparation for independence or self-government, whichever the case may be, would be a gradual undertaking’ (Bain, 2003: 120). It was thus not perceived by the winning coalition as an available option to provide these territories which independence straight away. The leaders of the war-time coalition decided at Yalta that trusteeship should be applied to the territories already in the mandates system, territories previously administered by enemy powers, and ‘any other territory which might voluntarily be placed under trusteeship’ (Bain, 2003: 121). This selection is also included in article 77 of the UN Charter. Although the language of the trustees as advanced nations is less outspoken in the UN Charter than in the League Covenant, it was still taken for granted that trust-territories need guidance from more advanced nations (Lyon, 1993: 102).

After extended struggle, the UN General Assembly voted to abolish colonialism in 1960. Bain (2003: 135) describes the ideational change thus: ‘[D]ecolonization abolished the distinction upon which the idea of trusteeship depended. There were no more “child-like” peoples that required guidance in becoming “adult” peoples: everyone was entitled by right to the independence that came with adulthood. Thus, it no longer made any sense to speak of a hierarchical world order in which a measure of development or a test of fitness determined membership in the society of states’. Wilful and creative agents, such as Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Julius Nyerere of Tanganyika and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, pushed against the constraints they faced, and employed the possibilities they saw to change a system that oppressed them.

The deinstitutionalisation of trusteeship as a primary institution is evident from both the invalidation of the practice, and from the rejection of the idea that some peoples needed others to rule on their behalf. The competing norm of equality of peoples, clearly expressed through the process of decolonisation, at that point in time proved much more powerful than the division between mature and immature peoples. General Assembly resolution 1514, Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, (1960) passed with no votes against and only seven abstentions. Most of the previously administered territories were independent by 1975, but a handful of them remained under international administration up to 1994. The Trusteeship Council consequently closed shop, and suspended its activities.

What we can read from the integration of Bain’s work with the institutional agenda is the interplay of agents and structures which the agents manage to change, but mostly slowly and incrementally, by pushing against the constraints they experience. Agents were the ones who formulated the arguments, convinced their audiences, negotiated the agreements and led the revolts against oppressive rules. Yet, when seen as an aggregate,
those acts and utterances amount to the evolution of a primary institution, which emerged, became institutionalised, provided (a sort of) order, and then was abandoned. These two views are not mutually exclusive, but complementary.

Conclusions

As has hopefully been demonstrated throughout this article, the ‘real’ misfit between Bevir’s and Hall’s brand of interpretivism and the English School does not lie so much in the difference between a naturalist understanding of structure and an agential understanding of normative changes, but rather in the difference between the work of the historian of thought and the political analyst. Bevir and Hall’s bifurcation of the English School into a structuralist and an interpretivist strand is largely a straw man. Although some in the School tend to start with individual agents, and some rather with a holist understanding of how various agents intersubjectively share meaning and let it guide their actions, both starting-points square with an imagined mainstream of the School. Naturalist ontologies are not well suited to the form of enquiries in which the English School takes interest, and pure individualism also falls outside of the School’s realm. There is, simply, no positivist other to turn against within the English School. Intersubjectivity is a common denominator, be it reflected or not, and whether we think about it as traditions, informing agents’ beliefs and indirectly their actions, or as enabling and constraining structures, guiding what courses of actions agents see as available, appropriate or desirable, does not really matter in actual research practice. In both cases, agents take their context into account when choosing their actions, and actively contribute to recreating or modifying that context.

What is clear is that Bevir and Hall reduce the space between their preferred version of interpretivist individualism and naturalist structuralism to almost nothing. There is cause for reclaiming that space, or rather: for rejecting the assertion that the available philosophical positions are either that of a naturalist structuralist or that of an interpretivist individualist. In order to advance the English School project, we need to hold on to notions of the performativity of intersubjectively constructed institutions. It is all about integration and locating middle grounds, not about pushing the extremes.

There are other philosophical questions in the English School, however, that beg for answers. I outline three of those, but more for pointing out the existence of unresolved philosophical queries than for suggesting constructive ways of addressing them. First, the relationship between material and ideational components of the social world is not really clear in the English School. Second, the question of whether the state should be theorised as a structure or as an agent is not settled, and how that decision plays into the sort of structuration which is most fruitful to English School theory also not clear. Third, how to steadily conceptualise history as contingent rather than determined remains to be discussed.

Finally, I demonstrate, through the example of how Bain’s detailed work on (the intellectual history of) trusteeship can be translated into a structuration approach, that working in the English School needs not be a question of either/or, but of how to integrate both into a fruitful whole. If this exercise has contributed to clarifying anything about the philosophical positions of the English School, thanks are due to Bevir and Hall for prompting it.
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Notes
1. Or fourth, depending on vocabulary. In this, I follow Lapid (1989).
2. As a footnote, it may be noted that ‘structures’, which Bevir and Hall now interpret as quasi-material objects with causal properties, are of common purchase in the constructivist vocabulary influencing much meta-theoretical reflection in the ES. It was once a permitted term also for Bevir and Hall, so the materialist/naturalist connotations therefore seem to be a rather new attribute to the concept (Bevir and Rhodes, 2005; Hall, 2014).
3. We may note that Jackson argues against categorising methods in this way (Jackson, 2011: 36, 2020: 137), but here I am referring to philosophical perspectives, as are Bevir and Hall.

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