



Introduction to International Relations

Chapter Notes: Introduction

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Introduction:

Analytical tools in international relations

Chapter Overview

The introduction familiarizes students with some of the tools used in the analysis of international affairs, namely perspectives, methods, levels of analysis, and judgment. It introduces three “perspectives” —realism, liberalism, and identity—while explaining the need for ideal types in international relations. It presents the two primary methods, rationalism and constructivism, and students are shown the distinction between sequential and mutually constitutive explanations. It explains the necessity of levels of analysis, delineating between the individual, domestic, and systemic levels. Finally, the introduction highlights three different moral approaches: relativism, which holds that there are no universal ethical standards; universalism, which believes that some moral truths are absolute; and pragmatism, which calls for a practical approach to international affairs.

What are perspectives?

- They are “ideal type” explanations.
- They help us emphasize certain facts over others.
- They allow us to describe, explain, and predict phenomena in international relations.

Realist Perspective

- It sees world as a struggle for power.
- It maintains that power is decentralized.
- Decentralized power demands that states protect themselves.

Liberal Perspective

- It emphasizes relationships and negotiations between actors.
- It believes that relationships are regularized by institutions.
- It supports common rules for all actors.

Identity Perspective

- It stresses the importance of ideas that define actors’ identities.
- Actors with diverging identities are more likely to be antagonistic.
- Actors with converging identities have greater chance for cooperation.

What are levels of analysis?

- This tells us which direction a cause comes from.
- Three primary levels are individual (examines specific people), domestic (examines state-wide factors) and systemic (examines the international system as a whole).

What are methods?

- Methods provide rules for testing theories.
- The rationalist method views labels as relatively objective and causation as sequential.
- The constructivism method views labels as subjective and causation as constitutive.

What is judgment?

- Judgment is guided by ethics and morality.
- It deals with standards of right conduct and what we ought to do.
- In international relations, three broad views on ethics exist.

Relativism

- It holds that all truth is relative.
- There are no universal moral principles that apply to all people at all times.
- Each culture or religion is entitled to its own view of truth.

Universalism

- It rejects relativism.
- It argues that some moral principles apply to all people at all times.
- It leads to the question: How do we decide whose standards are the universal ones?

Pragmatism

- It does not reject universal morality but opposes its application at all times and in all places.
- It bases questions of morality on certain practical requirements.

Thought Questions:

1. Why are perspectives necessary? Which perspective do you favor?
2. What are possible advantages and disadvantages of each perspective? What can policymakers do to overcome the drawbacks of the various perspectives?
3. Which of the three moral philosophies best captures your beliefs? Which should motivate policymakers? Why?
4. Recall the three primary levels of analysis. Do you think that one is generally more useful than the others in the pursuit of describing, explaining, and predicting international affairs? Why or why not?

5. Can you think of events or phenomena in international affairs that would demand the constructivist method in describing its root causes?