

The state as person in international theory

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To say that states are ‘actors’ or ‘persons’ is to attribute to them properties we associate first with human beings – rationality, identities, interests, beliefs, and so on.¹ Such attributions pervade social science and International Relations (IR) scholarship in particular. They are found in the work of realists, liberals, institutionalists, Marxists, constructivists, behaviouralists, feminists, postmodernists, international lawyers, and almost everyone in between. To be sure, scholars disagree about which properties of persons should be ascribed to states, how important state persons are relative to other corporate persons like MNCs or NGOs, whether state persons are a good thing, and whether ‘failed’ states can or should be persons at all. But all this discussion assumes that the idea of state personhood is meaningful and at some fundamental level makes sense. In a field in which almost everything is contested, this seems to be one thing on which almost all of us agree.

Indeed, it is not just in social science that state persons are pervasive, but everyday life as well. Ordinary citizens, the media, and policymakers all systematically personify the state. It need not be so. The idea of corporate ‘personality’ is of medieval origin, its application to states was not routine in the West until the eighteenth century, and it is still not routine in some places today.² But in the modern world this is how most of us, most of the time, think about the state in world politics.

Despite our state-centric world, however, if pressed on whether state persons are ‘real’, in my experience most IR scholars will back away. States are not *really* persons, only ‘*as if*’ ones. State personhood is a useful fiction, analogy, metaphor, or shorthand for something else. That something else, what state persons really are, is the behaviour and discourse of the individual human beings who make them up.³ To attribute reality to state persons *per se* would be to reify them and therefore metaphysical. In philosophical terms, then, this would make most IR scholars reductionists rather than holists about state persons; states are nothing but the structured interaction of their members. And as Colin Wight points out, that would

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¹ I take ‘actor’ and ‘person’ to be synonymous, since the attributes routinely applied in IR to state actors are those of persons; whether there are other kinds of actors I shall not address. ‘Person’ is more common in philosophical discourse and for that reason I shall use it here.

² The nature and causes of this variation are interesting questions in themselves.

³ The organisations and bureaucracies of which state persons are most immediately composed face the same reality question, and would themselves need to be reducible to individuals.

in turn make most IR scholars instrumentalists rather than scientific realists about state persons.⁴ The concept of state personhood is a useful instrument for organising experience and building theory, but does not refer to anything with ontological standing in its own right. Even a *political* realist, Robert Gilpin, is an anti-realist in this scientific sense, concluding that ‘the state does not really exist’.⁵

It must be said that to the modern scientific mind, the notion that states are only ‘as if’ persons is intuitively very compelling, so much so that the burden on the realist view seems overwhelming. An important reason for this is that most of us at least tacitly accept an ontology of physicalism, or materialism, which is the view that, ultimately, reality is made up of purely physical stuff (matter). Physicalism is a foundation of the modern scientific worldview and a solution to the mind-body problem in particular, namely that whatever the mind is, it must be reducible to or otherwise exhausted by the body.⁶ Physicalists disagree among themselves about how precisely this dependence is to be conceived, but they share the assumption that matter is ontologically primitive and thus prior to mind. In this belief they are opposed to non-materialist ontologies like Cartesian dualism, idealism, and panpsychism, which see mind as equally fundamental.

The connotations of physicalism for state persons seem clear: since states are not physical objects but social constructions of the mind, they cannot be anything more than the material facts (brains) that constitute them. From this standpoint, the realist view of state persons seems ‘meta’physical indeed.

Yet we are then left with a puzzle. If state personhood is merely a useful fiction, then why does its attribution work so well in helping us to make sense of world politics? Why, in short, is the concept so ‘useful’? If it were merely a fiction, then one might expect a more precise, realistic concept of state to have emerged over time, but it has not.⁷ This suggests a ‘miracle argument’ for a realist view of state personhood: as with other unobservables like atoms and preferences, given how well theories based on state personhood work, it would be a miracle if it did not refer to something real.⁸ But then how to reconcile this reality with physicalism? The state is reducible to the brains that constitute it, but its personality helps us explain the world? It seems the more we probe our practice of personifying the state, the more confusing the practice becomes.

Given all this, one might expect state personhood to be the subject of considerable IR scholarship, but Arnold Wolfers’ classic 1959 essay long remained the

⁴ Colin Wight, ‘State Agency: Social Action Without Human Activity?’, this issue. Note that the realism in question throughout this article is *scientific* realism, not political realism. On instrumentalism and realism see Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 2, and Fred Chernoff, ‘Scientific Realism as a Meta-Theory of International Politics’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 46 (2002), pp. 189–207.

⁵ Robert Gilpin, ‘The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism’, in Robert Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 301–21, at 318.

⁶ See Jeffrey Poland, *Physicalism: The Philosophical Foundations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). For an early, positivist view of physicalism’s implications for social science, see Otto Neurath, ‘Sociology and Physicalism’, in A.J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959), pp. 282–317.

⁷ See Erik Ringmar, ‘On the Ontological Status of the State’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 2 (1996), pp. 439–66, at 443, and Wight, ‘State Agency’, this issue.

⁸ Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 64–67.

only sustained modern treatment of which I am aware.⁹ Recently several other relevant contributions have been made, although none focuses on state personhood as such.¹⁰ So we should be grateful to Patrick Jackson for organising this forum, and to him, Iver Neumann, and Colin Wight for writing such thought-provoking articles. Our discussion is only a beginning, but hopefully it will encourage others to refine, revise, or reject our arguments, rather than continue to neglect an issue so foundational to our field.

My objectives are threefold. Given that state personhood is uncharted territory in IR, the first is simply to distinguish several questions one might ask about it and to identify some scholarship that bears on them. In this respect the article is part road map and part bibliographic essay. Much of the work to which I refer is by philosophers and social theorists, whose concerns might seem far removed from world politics. However, since they have lately paid considerable attention to the question, their thinking provides a good starting point for our own.

My second purpose is to expand on my earlier realist argument that 'states are people too'.¹¹ Against Jackson, Neumann, and Wight, I argue that state persons are real in at least one important sense: they are 'intentional' or purposive actors. Importantly, I defend this claim on broadly *physicalist* grounds, drawing on recent philosophical efforts to articulate a 'non-reductive' physicalism that is compatible with the idea that collective intentions are real. Since intentionality is the primary quality of persons that scholars today typically attribute to states, this argument effectively justifies current IR practice.

Finally, I explore how far a realist view of state persons might be pushed, even if this means leaving physicalism behind. Intentionality is a thin criterion of personhood, and correspondingly easy to show. But there are two other, more radical senses in which states might be persons: they might be *organisms*, understood as forms of life; and they might have collective *consciousness*, understood as subjective experience. These are hard cases for the realist view, and indeed within IR theory states are never explicitly treated even 'as if' they are organisms or conscious. This reluctance to give states full personhood is justified by physicalism. I argue that as long as we accept a physicalist ontology, even a non-reductive one, states can at most be superorganisms (like beehives) rather than organisms, and cannot be conscious at

⁹ Arnold Wolfers, 'The Actors in International Politics', reprinted in Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), pp. 3–24. Also see Christopher Achen's useful paper, 'When is a State with Bureaucratic Politics Representable as a Unitary Rational Actor?', presented at the 1989 meeting of the International Studies Association, London, England.

¹⁰ See Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991), 2nd edn.; Ronen Palan and Brook Blair, 'On the Idealist Origins of the Realist Theory of International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 19 (1993), pp. 385–99; Ringmar, 'On the Ontological Status of the State'; Jens Bartelson, 'Second Natures: Is the State Identical with Itself?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4 (1998), pp. 295–326; Cynthia Weber, 'Performative States', *Millennium*, 27 (1998), pp. 77–95; and Ola Tunander, 'Swedish-German Geopolitics for a New Century: Rudolf Kjellen's "The State as a Living Organism"', *Review of International Studies*, 27 (2001), pp. 451–63.

¹¹ Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 215–24. I shall not address the related question of how we should define the state. Although the details of our understanding of state persons may be sensitive to different definitions of the state (Liberal, Weberian, Marxist, and so on), the issue poses a problem for all such definitions, which state theorists have all too rarely taken up. For exceptions to the latter, see Hans Kelsen, *General Theory of Law and State* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), and David Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

all. The superorganism claim itself is suggestive, but to go further with a realist view of state persons would necessitate giving up physicalism, and thus a larger, ‘meta’-physical argument than I can make here.¹² However, before we accept only a limited realism about state persons, we should at least consider what a more robust one might look like.

Although the discussion below is philosophical, something very concrete rides on it, namely a practice – personifying state persons – in which almost all of us engage. The stakes are high on both explanatory and normative grounds.

The explanatory issue is whether a discourse of state persons is theoretically necessary to explain important aspects of contemporary world politics.¹³ The ‘as if’ view suggests it is not. If state persons are mere fictions, then we would not lose any explanatory power by getting rid of the concept and adopting an equivalent, reductionist discourse instead. Indeed, that would be preferable, since it would better reflect what state persons really are. The discourse of state persons may be convenient, but it is imprecise and in principle eliminable. On the other hand, if it is not possible to reduce state persons to their members, then to give up this discourse would result in a significant loss of social scientific knowledge. There simply would *be* no equivalent, reductionist discourse, making a concept of state personhood theoretically necessary for IR scholarship. Only a realist view can explain this necessity, and with it justify epistemically the many IR theories in which state persons currently appear.

Normatively, an important attraction of the reductionist, ‘as if’ view of state persons is that it provides a metaphysical basis for liberalism. If states are reducible to their members, then it seems to follow that individuals should be the ultimate bearers of rights and responsibilities. Like most of us I have no wish to overturn that principle. However, we should want liberalism to be lucid and ontologically sound, and here the realist view of state persons poses a challenge. If state persons in fact cannot be reduced to their members, then we cannot rely on physicalism as a metaphysical firewall against non-liberal politics, and in particular against normative claims on behalf of state persons themselves, or *raison d’etat*. The potential costs of such claims – fascism, genocide, and war – are high and well-known, which is one reason that organismic thinking about the state has long been rejected by social scientists. But if states really are people too, then we need some other, non-metaphysical way to justify liberalism, which may force us to confront possibly uncomfortable truths.

What is a person?

Our answers to the question of whether the state is a person will depend first on how we conceptualise persons, which is equally contested.¹⁴ In this section I identify

¹² See Alexander Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science*, manuscript in preparation.

¹³ Note that this does not make it the *only* explanatory discourse we need in IR scholarship, since NGOs and MNCs are also important persons in contemporary world politics. By the same token, however, the issues in this article pertain equally to them.

¹⁴ The philosophical literature is extensive. Good places to start are Lynne Rudder Baker, *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes (eds.), *The Category of the Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

some contours of this debate and then say more precisely what I will be talking about.

Mapping the debate about personhood

At least two distinctions are important in defining persons. The first is between two ways in which persons are constituted, from the inside and from the outside. Inside constitution refers to the role of structures and processes within the body of a person. For example, all healthy adult human beings have, in virtue of their internal biological and cognitive structure, the ability to be persons. Cats and dogs do not. Outside constitution, in contrast, refers to the role of social recognition in making persons. The key here is social convention: is an individual considered a person in her society? If so, then she will be accorded all the rights and privileges of that status; if not, then not. Note that even though social recognition is conventional, the result is not merely an ‘as if’ person. If Jane is considered a person by her society, then she really is a person in that society, with all its material consequences. As Wight points out, whether someone is a real or merely fictional person makes a big difference to their life chances.¹⁵

The inside and outside determinants of personhood are only contingently related. Someone can be constituted from the inside as a person even if this is not socially recognised, a situation we have seen throughout history when certain people – women, racial Others, and so on – were deemed intrinsically incapable of the cognitive functions necessary for personhood. Similarly, someone can be constituted from the outside as a person even if they lack the capacity to understand or act on that status. In medieval Europe, for example, it was common to put animals on trial – literally, in courts, with juries, punishments, and all – for crimes against God, man, or beast.¹⁶ Animals were therefore persons *for us*, even though they could not understand or appropriate that personhood themselves. As such, outside constitution can potentially create a much larger class of persons than inside constitution. Almost anything can be a person by social convention, but only some can be a person by nature.

Of course, being only contingently related does not mean the inside and outside sources of personhood are not related at all. The fact that women and racial Others are no less intrinsically capable than white males of intelligent rational action is an important justification for recognising their personhood, and the fact that animals are not capable of such action is one reason they should not be so recognised. Similarly, human beings are not constituted with the cognitive requirements of personhood at birth, but only acquire them through a long causal process of socialisation. But none of these connections changes the fact that there is a difference between the inside and outside constitution of personhood. Being socially recognised as a person does not mean you are capable of intelligent rational action, just as not being recognised does not mean that you are not. Neither can be reduced to the other.

¹⁵ Wight, ‘State Agency’, p. 272.

¹⁶ For a fascinating discussion see Peter Dinzelbacher, ‘Animal Trials: A Multidisciplinary Approach’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32 (2002), pp. 405–421.

The traditional distinction in IR between internal and external sovereignty is a good example of these two processes at work. Internal sovereignty refers to a state's ability to exercise *de facto* political control over its territory, external sovereignty to its recognition as a *de jure* member of the society of states.¹⁷ These are historically related, since in the Westphalian system internal sovereignty was a precondition for external, but they are not the same. Some states with clear internal sovereignty are not recognised as sovereign (Taiwan), while other, failed states without internal sovereignty are recognised (Somalia). In deciding whether states are constituted as people too, therefore, we need to be clear on what kind of constitution we are talking about.

Second, we also need to distinguish between three kinds of persons.¹⁸ *Psychological* persons possess certain mental or cognitive attributes; *legal* persons have rights and obligations in a community of law; and *moral* persons are accountable for actions under a moral code. While often related in practice, these kinds are different. In modern societies infants are legal persons but not psychological or moral ones; women are psychological persons, but historically often not legal or moral ones; corporations can be moral persons even if they are not psychological ones;¹⁹ and so on.

The three kinds of persons also vary in their relationship to inside and outside constitution. Law and morality being social conventions, it seems clear that legal and moral persons are constituted entirely by social recognition.²⁰ Societies may impose internal tests on these categories, but what those tests are is socially defined. In contrast, the relationship between inside and outside in the constitution of psychological persons is more ambiguous, as we see in the liberal-communitarian debate.²¹ Liberals may doubt that psychological persons are constituted at all from the outside. I have argued to the contrary elsewhere, and so will not address this issue here.²² Communitarians, in turn, may doubt that psychological persons are constituted at all from the inside. Jackson, for example, argues that persons are constituted 'relationally', by practices whose meaning is given by a social context.²³ Rather than look to the essence of persons, he emphasises the processes of 'personation' by which they are constituted as actors with certain properties. If Jackson means by this only that persons are processes whose existence depends on the maintenance of boundaries with the outside world, then he is clearly correct. However, he seems to have in mind something more, that persons are socially

¹⁷ See, for example, Michael Fowler and Julie Marie Bunc, 'What Constitutes the Sovereign State?', *Review of International Studies*, 22 (1996), pp. 381–404.

¹⁸ See Andrew Vincent, 'Can Groups be Persons?', *Review of Metaphysics*, 42 (1989), pp. 687–715.

¹⁹ See Peter French, 'The Corporation as a Moral Person', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (1979), pp. 207–15, and Hans Geser, 'Towards an Interaction Theory of Organizational Actors', *Organization Studies*, 13 (1992), pp. 429–51. Geser (p. 436) actually argues that organisations can be *more* moral than individuals, because it is harder for them to claim ignorance or human frailty.

²⁰ For a good overview of the debate about what constitutes legal personality, see Ngairé Naffine, 'Who are Law's Persons?', *The Modern Law Review*, 66 (2003), pp. 346–67.

²¹ See, for example, Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

²² See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, ch. 4.

²³ Patrick Jackson, 'Hegel's House, or "People are States Too"', this issue. Cf. Ian Hacking, 'Making Up People', in T. Heller, et al. (eds.), *Reconstructing Individualism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 222–36.

constituted ‘all the way down’. That doesn’t seem right. Recall the animal victims of medieval justice. To say that psychological persons are relational all the way down implies they were persons *in every sense*, which neglects their intrinsic lack of a suitable ‘inside’. Psychological persons have a self-organising quality which cannot be reduced to their social context.²⁴

In sum, how we address whether states are people too will depend on two choices – whether to focus on their legal, moral, or psychological personhood, and on their inside or outside constitution. For the first, although all three kinds raise important issues, here I shall deal with states only as psychological persons, since this is how they are treated in most IR scholarship. (As such, whenever I refer to ‘persons’ below I shall mean psychological persons). For the second, I shall explore only the inside constitution of state persons, since this is the hard case for a realist view. After all, it seems self-evident that when we constitute states socially as persons, they become real *for us*. Most of the scepticism toward the realist view centres on whether states are also constituted from the inside as persons, and thus are real for themselves. I aim to show they are.

Defining persons

As a baseline for thinking about the psychological personhood of states we first need to define it at the individual level. A useful starting point here is the most familiar model of persons in IR scholarship today, the rationalist, which is instructive both for what it includes and for what it leaves out.

‘Rational actors’ have four main properties: (1) a unitary identity that persists over time; (2) beliefs about their environment; (3) transitive desires that motivate them to move; and (4) the ability to make choices on a rational basis, usually defined as expected-utility maximisation. These properties mean that persons are above all intentional – purposive or goal-directed – systems. This claim needs to be supplemented a bit, however, since in experiments the rationalist model of ‘man’ (sic) has been used successfully to explain the behaviour of nonhuman animals, which might also be said to have intentionality.²⁵ It turns out that it is not obvious how to distinguish human from animal intentionality, although various criteria have been proposed: acting for rather than just with reasons; adaptability in the face of changes in context; an ability to monitor and change one’s intentional states; and so on.²⁶ Rather than get into this question here, however, I will simply assume that intentionality means human or ‘intelligent’ intentionality, whatever that precisely is.

²⁴ For discussion of self-organisation in world politics, see Wendt, ‘Why a World State is Inevitable’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 9 (2003), pp. 491–542.

²⁵ On animal intentionality see Susan Hurley, ‘Animal Action in the Space of Reasons’, *Mind and Language*, 18 (2003), pp. 231–57.

²⁶ For these and other possibilities see Harry Frankfurt, ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 68 (1971), pp. 5–20; Thomas Schelling, ‘Self-Command in Practice, in Policy, and in a Theory of Rational Choice’, *American Economic Review*, 74 (1984), pp. 1–11; Fred Dretske, ‘Machines, Plants and Animals: The Origins of Agency’, *Erkenntnis*, 51 (1999), pp. 19–31; and Lukas Bööck, ‘Towards a Theory of Reflexive Intentional Systems’, *Synthese*, 118 (1999), pp. 105–117.

The rationalist model of personhood has been criticised in many ways, but its assumption that human beings are intentional is hardly ever called into question. This is not surprising, since intentionality is a basic premise of folk psychology, of which both rationalist and non-rationalist models of man are simply formalisations. Let us stipulate, then, that one inside requirement for personhood is intentionality.

But folk psychology also points to two other requirements. One is being an organism. Interestingly, this is not required by the rationalist model, which is applicable not only to animals but machines, and indeed is rooted historically in an analogy to the latter.²⁷ This shows that intentionality is substrate neutral and as such not sufficient to constitute full-fledged persons. An intentional actor must also be an organism.

A third requirement for personhood is consciousness, by which I mean a capacity for first-person, subjective experience.²⁸ The intentional states of persons are not just computational but phenomenological, emotional as well as cognitive. In Thomas Nagel's much cited phrase, 'there is something that it's like' to be a person, which only by being that person could we fully know.²⁹ It is partly for this reason that most of us would probably say machines could never be persons. They may someday be as smart as we are, but it seems unlikely they will ever feel it. Like being an organism, consciousness too is not required by the rationalist model. The desires and beliefs it attributes to actors are functional states, programs for the human machine, not experiential ones. As such, it makes sense to treat the possession of consciousness by states as a distinct question.

The state as intentional system

We have then three inside tests for full-fledged psychological personhood: being an intentional actor, being an organism, and being conscious. IR scholars typically see states as passing only the first, and so the sense in which we treat states as persons in our work is actually quite thin. However, given the reluctance of most IR scholars to endorse a realist view even of state intentionality, there seems to be *no* sense in which we really take state personhood seriously; it's 'as if' all the way down. I suggested above that a physicalist worldview motivates this scepticism, seeming to make the idea of intentionality at any level above the individual inherently metaphysical.

Thus it may come as a surprise that many contemporary physicalists think of group intentionality as a real, irreducible phenomenon. This is a change; for many years it was viewed with hostility by individualists and holists alike.³⁰ But the balance of opinion about personifying groups has shifted, in part because of its

²⁷ See Philip Mirowski, *Against Mechanism* (Totawa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988).

²⁸ Not all definitions of consciousness emphasise first-person experience; see Guven Guzeldere, 'The Many Faces of Consciousness: A Field Guide', in Ned Block, et al. (eds.), *The Nature of Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 1–67. My thinking about consciousness is especially indebted to David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁹ Thomas Nagel, 'What is it Like to be a Bat?', *The Philosophical Review*, 83 (1974), pp. 435–50.

³⁰ David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 123.

strong explanatory power: it generates reliable predictions of behaviour with relatively little information about individuals, can reveal new macro-level regularities and counterfactuals, and permits a quick averaging of constraints on group members.³¹ In view of this explanatory success, the realist draws the natural ontological inference, that it would be a ‘miracle’ if group intentions did not refer to something real. As Daniel Dennett puts it, if the behaviour of a system ‘is reliably and voluminously predictable via the intentional strategy’, then it is an intentional system.³² But how could this be compatible with physicalism? To see this let me first define ‘group’ intentions, which are a subset of ‘collective’ ones.

Collective intentions exist whenever people do things together. In John Searle’s view all social facts involve collective intentions.³³ Money is a collective intention, since it is only in virtue of joint acceptance that pieces of paper have value for exchange. And more strikingly so is war, since it requires the cooperation of the combatants in fighting. If one side refuses to fight – surrenders – then the war is over. The examples of money and war show that collective intentions can exist on a large scale, and have important, real effects on the world. However, even though they are ‘intentions’, they do not imply collective *agency* or personhood.³⁴ Collective intentions need not involve feeling part of a single group, or the joint pursuit of a common goal. The sense of ‘doing something together’ in them may be suppressed or purely behavioural.

Group intentions, then, are those collective intentions that involve collective agency. In the literature they come in two basic types, varying in their formality and degree of centredness.³⁵ What Margaret Gilbert calls ‘plural subjects’ are the most elementary.³⁶ Plural subjects exist whenever people see themselves as part of a group in pursuit of a shared goal, but make collective choices in a decentralised fashion, so that their intentionality is plural rather than unitary. As such, plural subjects are typically small and voluntary. Gilbert’s example is a poetry reading group; some terrorist groups might also fall here. ‘Corporate’ intentions, in contrast, are possessed by groups with a centralised authority structure capable of imposing binding decisions on their members.³⁷ Like plural subjects, corporate actors involve members who see themselves

³¹ See Todd Jones, ‘What CBS Wants: How Groups Can Have (Difficult to Uncover) Beliefs’, *The Philosophical Forum*, 32 (2001), pp. 221–51, at 233–5, and Jones, ‘The Virtues of Nonreduction, Even When Reduction is a Virtue’, *Ibid.*, 34 (2003), pp. 121–40.

³² Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 15. For an application of Dennett’s approach to corporate actors, see Austen Clark, ‘Beliefs and Desires Incorporated’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 91 (1994), pp. 404–25.

³³ John Searle, ‘Collective Intentions and Actions’, in P. Cohen, et al. (eds.), *Intentions in Communication* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 401–15, and *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995). For a good discussion of the connection between Searle’s ideas and IR see John Ruggie, ‘What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge’, *International Organization*, 52 (1998), pp. 855–85.

³⁴ One might then reasonably ask why they are called ‘intentions’ at all, but the philosophical definition of intentionality is wider than agency or purposeful behaviour, requiring only a ‘directedness’ of belief toward an object. See Charles Siewert (eds.), ‘Consciousness and Intentionality’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2002 edn.). <URL=<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2002/entries/consciousness-intentionality/>>

³⁵ On the latter point, see Jose Mauricio Domingues, ‘Social Integration, System Integration and Collective Subjectivity’, *Sociology*, 34 (2000), pp. 225–41.

³⁶ Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), and *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

³⁷ See Peter French, *Collective and Corporate Responsibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

as part of a group in pursuit of shared ends, but they are typically institutionalised and hierarchical. Most of the important actors in contemporary world politics – states, MNCs, and most NGOs – have corporate intentionality. But some – IOs, say, or the EU – do not, making them a mixed case, institutionalised but decentralised, and thus less capable of agency.

Although there are important differences between plural subjects, corporate intentions, and collective intentions writ large, the fundamental question is the same for each – what is the relationship between the putative intentionality of a collective and the intentionality of its constituent members? Since this is also the fundamental question of state personhood, in discussing group intentionality I shall draw on literature about all three.

The ontology of group intentions is today the object of intense debate, but all sides would agree with Wight that they are dependent on the structured interaction of individuals.³⁸ In the same physicalist way that the mind is thought to be dependent on neurons in the brain, there can be no group intentions without individuals to carry them on their backs, which means they are always subject to renegotiation, as we saw in the collapse of the Soviet Union. But this consensus is only a beginning, since physicalists disagree about whether group intentions are anything *more* than the structured interaction of individuals. The debate has not settled down into well-defined camps, but I see three basic approaches, which I shall call reductionist, supervenient, and emergent.³⁹ Reductionism leads to an ‘as if’ view of state persons, whereas supervenience and emergence support realism; thus my claim that states are people too depends on one of the latter being true. Within this debate Wight’s position is an interesting hybrid: he makes a compelling realist case that *states* cannot be reduced to their members, but argues that their *intentions* are reducible. I aim to show that the latter is not the case.

Reductionism

Reductionism about group intentions finds perhaps its most sophisticated expression today in the work of Michael Bratman,⁴⁰ who argues that they can be reduced without loss of meaning or content to the properties and interactions of their constituent members. As such, reductionism takes a ‘summative’ or ‘aggregative’ view of groups.⁴¹ Although the details vary in reductionist proposals, two requirements for group intentions stand out. The first is that some or all members of a group must personally share its intention. In the case of the state, for example, individuals would have to share an ‘idea of the state’ as an actor with particular interests.⁴² But shared

³⁸ Colin Wight, ‘State Agency’, this issue.

³⁹ Cf. Deborah Tollefsen, ‘Organizations as True Believers’, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 33 (2002), pp. 395–410, at 395–6.

⁴⁰ Michael Bratman, *Faces of Intention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Also see Jon Elster, *Solomonic Judgements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. IV, although his reductionism is ultimately ambivalent; see Peter Stone, ‘The Impossibility of Rational Politics?’, *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, 2 (2003), pp. 239–63.

⁴¹ Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, pp. 257–88.

⁴² See Buzan, *People, States and Fear*, pp. 69–82, and Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 218–19.

beliefs are not enough, since if they are only privately held then it would not be rational for individuals to act on them collectively. A second requirement, common knowledge, must therefore also be met: members of a group must believe that other members share their belief about the group, believe that others believe that they share it, and so on. Common knowledge gives groups enough structure for their members to act rationally on collective intentions. Yet, on this account, these structures are ultimately reducible to individuals: We-intentions are *nothing but* interlocking I-intentions toward a group. References to group intentions are therefore strictly speaking false and could in principle be eliminated.⁴³ As such, this may be what most IR scholars have in mind when they take an ‘as if’ view of state persons.

Of the three approaches, reductionism is the most physicalist in spirit. If everything is ultimately physical, then it seems group intentions must somehow be reducible to individuals. Nevertheless, reductionism about group intentions has lately taken quite a beating. At least five major criticisms have emerged.⁴⁴

One is that reductionism is circular, with unreduced groups figuring implicitly in its accounts of we-oriented I-intentions. Think of the set of individuals to whom a state person would have to be reduced – its citizens, whose identity as citizens presupposes a group. A second problem is posed by a number of philosophical counter-examples showing that groups can intend things that none of their members intend. This can happen if individuals act on a group intention for reasons other than the fact that they themselves intend it – for example, they participate in a policy not because they want to but because of a desire to avoid conflict, coercion, feelings of solidarity, or collective decision rules.⁴⁵ A third issue is the ‘multiple realizability’ of group intentions. Just as a variety of brain states may realise the same mental state, a group intention, such as the US invasion of Iraq, may be relatively insensitive to which of its members hold it. Moreover, the identity of group intentions, such as state persons, can persist over time despite a 100 per cent turnover in their membership. A fourth, arguably decisive, problem is that groups can do things individuals cannot, making some group intentions ‘indivisible’. Sanctions, war, and humanitarian intervention are all highly complex social practices that no individual can perform by herself. This highlights a final difficulty, which is that in order to have an intention to do X, X must be something an actor can control, and individuals cannot control the actions of a group. Given these problems, many students of group intentionality have concluded that however desirable in theory, reducing group intentions to individuals is often impossible in practice.

⁴³ Deborah Tollefsen, ‘Collective Intentionality in the Social Sciences’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 32 (2002), pp. 25–50, at 27.

⁴⁴ One or more of these criticisms are made by Gilbert, *On Social Facts*; Searle, ‘Collective Intentions and Actions’; J.K. Swindler, ‘Social Intentions’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 26 (1996), pp. 61–76; Annette Baier, ‘Doing Things with Others: The Mental Commons’, in Lilli Alanen, Sara Heinamaa, and Thomas Wallgren (eds.), *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), pp. 15–44; Frederick Stoutland, ‘Why are Philosophers of Action so Anti-Social?’, in Alanen, et al. (eds.), *Commonality and Particularity*, pp. 45–74; Robert Sugden, ‘Team Preferences’, *Economics and Philosophy*, 16 (2000), pp. 175–204; Paul Sheehy, ‘On Plural Subject Theory’, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 33 (2002), pp. 377–94; Philip Pettit, ‘Collective Persons and Powers’, *Legal Theory*, 8 (2002), pp. 443–70, and Tollefsen, ‘Collective Intentionality in the Social Sciences’.

⁴⁵ For a particularly good discussion of the latter, see Pettit on the ‘discursive dilemma’, in ‘Collective Persons and Powers’; also see Tollefsen, ‘Collective Intentionality in the Social Sciences’.

The perceived failure of the reductionist account of group intentions is a problem philosophically, because the question then arises how to provide a non-reductionist account of them that is consistent with physicalism, which is not at all clear. Two broad forms of ‘non-reductive’ physicalism have emerged, supervenience and emergence. Both purport to reconcile physicalism with realism about group intentions, but the emergence approach in particular stretches the spirit of physicalism in important ways and as such is the more radical argument.

Supervenience

Supervenience has become a favoured response to the perceived failure of reductionism in the philosophy of mind, but its definition and applicability are general.⁴⁶ One phenomenon (usually a macro state) supervenes on another (a micro state) when sameness of the latter implies sameness of the former. The mind, for example, is said to supervene on the brain because two people who are in the same brain states will be in the same mental state. Similarly, state persons would supervene on their members because two states whose members had identical intentions would have identical state intentions. In both cases the supervenience ‘base’ fixes or determines, in a constitutive rather than causal sense, the ‘superstructure’. This asymmetric, one-way dependence captures the physicalist sensibility. But, importantly, the upward determination in supervenience is not strict or 1:1, since it allows for the possibility that the same macro state could be realised by many different micro states (multiple realisability). The constraint is only that when micro states are the same you get the same macro state, not *vice versa*. This means that even though the intentions of a state person at any given moment are ontologically dependent on its constituent members, its intentions are not dependent on any *particular* members. It is this ability to reconcile dependence on the physical with non-reductionism that has made supervenience such an attractive concept.

A supervenience approach describes two of the most prominent recent accounts of group intentionality, those of Gilbert and Searle.⁴⁷ Gilbert accepts much of the reductionist approach. She conceptualises group intentions *via* the mental states of individuals, emphasises the importance of common knowledge, and views groups as plural rather than singular subjects. However, in pursuit of a non-summative theory of groups she also departs from reductionism in an important way. Rather than

⁴⁶ Supervenience can take different forms, which may matter for this argument; see Jaegwon Kim, *Supervenience and Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For applications of supervenience to social science see R. Keith Sawyer, ‘Emergence in Sociology: Contemporary Philosophy of Mind and Some Implications for Sociological Theory’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 107 (2001), pp. 51–85; Shaun Le Boutillier, ‘Theorising Social Constraint: The Concept of Supervenience’, *Sociology*, 35 (2001), pp. 159–75; and Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, ch. 4.

⁴⁷ See Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, and Searle, ‘Collective Intentions and Actions’, and *The Construction of Social Reality*. Also see Raimo Tuomela, *The Importance of Us* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 256–68; Sugden, ‘Team Preferences’, p. 197; Pettit, ‘Collective Persons and Powers’, p. 460; and Tollefsen, ‘Collective Intentionality in the Social Sciences’, p. 42.

actually having group beliefs or intentions themselves, the members of a group need only be 'jointly committed' to them, by which she means that they accept an obligation to act on the group's intentions for which others can hold them accountable, and not to withdraw this commitment unilaterally.⁴⁸ Thus, once a joint commitment exists group members are subject to the same constraint on their reasoning, 'collective reason',⁴⁹ whereas in the reductionist account each member acts for their own reasons.⁵⁰ In virtue of this common constraint individuals can be said to act on a group's intentions, even if they do not share them. Ultimately, then, it is still individuals who are doing the acting, which makes group intentions different to individual ones; different parts of the brain do not act on behalf of individual intentions in an analogous way, which is one reason Gilbert treats groups as plural rather than singular subjects.⁵¹ But by showing that We-intentions are not reducible to I-intentions she is nevertheless able to conclude that group intentions have a reality distinct from that of their members.

Searle too believes that group (in his case specifically collective) intentions cannot be understood in summative terms, but his argument is different in two ways. First, he emphasises the role of behavioural cooperation.⁵² For collective intentions to exist it is not enough that people have common knowledge – they must also act on it. Thus, unlike individual intentions, which seem to exist in the head, group intentions exist only in action.⁵³ Second, to explain the willingness of individuals to act on collective intentions Searle invokes what he calls the 'Background', a 'set of non-intentional or preintentional capacities that enable intentional states to function'.⁵⁴ Unlike Gilbert, therefore, his theory comes to rest not on individual intentions but on a pre-intentional, almost biological sense that another individual is a good candidate for cooperative activity. Nevertheless, he also concludes that collective intentions are real and irreducible to individuals.

Importantly, Gilbert and Searle are both physicalists, and in particular reject any suggestion that the mind extends beyond the body (see below). As such, their realism about group intentions is not metaphysically mysterious, and perhaps for that reason not very controversial politically. Because the constitutive relationship between groups and individuals is one-way and bottom-up, even if multiply realisable, individuals can still be seen in liberal terms as the basic building blocks of society. In short, it seems that with supervenience realists about state personhood can have their cake and eat it too.

⁴⁸ Also see Raimo Tuomela, 'Collective Acceptance, Social Institutions, and Social Reality', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 62 (2003), pp. 123–65, and Elias Khalil, 'Is the Firm an Individual?', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 21 (1997), pp. 519–44.

⁴⁹ Pettit, 'Collective Persons and Powers', p. 457.

⁵⁰ Gilbert, 'What Is It for Us to Intend?', in *Sociality and Responsibility*, pp. 28–9; Sheehy, 'On Plural Subject Theory', p. 380.

⁵¹ On these differences see K. Brad Wray, 'Collective Belief and Acceptance', *Synthese*, 129 (2001), 319–33.

⁵² Searle, 'Collective Intentions and Action', p. 406. Remember that for Searle, cooperation can include conflictual behaviour like a prizefight or a war; p. 413.

⁵³ Cf. Geser, 'Towards an Interaction Theory of Organizational Actors', p. 432. One is reminded here of 'performative' models of agency, although Searle does not make his argument in these terms; see Weber, 'Performative States'. A comparison would be useful.

⁵⁴ Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, p. 129.

Emergence

This happy result notwithstanding, some believe the supervenience approach does not go far enough in acknowledging the nature and reality of group intentions.⁵⁵ Critics have focused particularly on its commitment to, or at least interpretation of, physicalism, which it shares with reductionism. As a result of that common ground, Annette Baier argues that despite some differences, Searle's theory is only 'superficially different' from Bratman's.⁵⁶ Since physicalism is what ultimately motivates anti-realism about state personhood, even though the latter's reality is already implied by the supervenience argument, it may be useful to explore a thicker or stronger form of realism that calls physicalism more into question. This emergentist approach points to the possibility that states have group minds.

Traditional physicalism makes two basic claims: that we should use physical criteria to define the elementary units in our ontology, and that the mind is located wholly within the body. Baier casts doubt on the first by reminding us that we all began life as literally part of our mothers, and only became individuals later.⁵⁷ And in the next section I raise further questions by suggesting that states are super-organisms whose identity is constituted not physically but by thought. But here let me address only the second claim. Although the idea that the mind is imprisoned in the body may seem to be on the point of banal, two prominent bodies of scholarship suggest otherwise.

The first is 'externalism' in the philosophy of mind, which opposes 'internalism'.⁵⁸ The issue in their debate is whether the contents of our minds, our intentional states, are constituted solely within our bodies or also in our environment. Internalists take the commonsense, Cartesian, view that intentional states are constituted individually, within the body, such that 'thought is logically prior to society'.⁵⁹ Significantly, this is compatible with the supervenience model of collective intentions, since the individual intentions upon which collective ones supervene are ontologically primitive, rather than themselves dependent on a collective. Indeed, both Gilbert and Searle are internalists. Against this view, externalists argue that compelling thought experiments show that intentional states cannot be defined independent of the context (natural or social) that gives them meaning. If the content of the same belief

⁵⁵ See especially Baier, 'Doing Things With Others'; Stoutland, 'Why are Philosophers of Action so Anti-Social?'; Sheehy, 'On Plural Subject Theory'; Tollefsen, 'Collective Intentionality in the Social Sciences'; Dan Fitzpatrick, 'Searle and Collective Intentionality', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 62 (2003), pp. 45–66; and Anthonie Meijers, 'Can Collective Intentionality be Individualized?', *ibid.*, pp. 167–83.

⁵⁶ Baier, 'Doing Things With Others', p. 21. Paul Humphreys argues that supervenience contains a 'strong residue' of reductionism; see 'Emergence, Not Supervenience', *Philosophy of Science*, 64 (Proceedings, 1997), S337–S345, at S338.

⁵⁷ Baier, 'Doing Things With Others', p. 43.

⁵⁸ See the discussion and references in Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 173–6. Perhaps confusingly, this debate does not map neatly onto the distinction above between the 'inside' and 'outside' constitution of persons, although there is some overlap. Both internalists and externalists are concerned with the inside constitution of persons; the question is whether the outside plays a role in this process.

⁵⁹ Gilbert, *On Social Facts*, p. 58. For further discussion see Robert Wilson, *Cartesian Psychology and Physical Minds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

in the mind can vary across contexts, then it is the community rather than the individual which ‘owns’ it. This leads to a social holism about intentional states, in which thoughts in the head are intrinsically dependent on society, not *vice versa*. The debate continues, but the force of the externalist critique has been widely acknowledged, and much recent work has sought to combine it with internalism. Its importance here is that it undermines the physicalist presumption that the first-person singular (‘I’) is obviously more fundamental than the first-person plural (‘We’), and with it the assumption that individuals are an unproblematic bedrock for analysing state persons.

By itself externalism does not justify talk of group minds, since the role it gives to groups in constituting the intentional states of individuals is essentially passive. Groups might enable individuals to think the thoughts they do, but that does not mean groups themselves are thinking.⁶⁰ However, a second body of work, on collective cognition, enables us to reach that conclusion. Collective cognition takes as its starting point the current orthodoxy in cognitive science that cognition is computation – that the mind is essentially a computer. Such an assumption may be challenged for its failure to explain consciousness (see below), but if we adopt it then it is but a short step to group minds.

Collective cognition is a special case of distributed cognition.⁶¹ Distributed cognition refers to processes in which computational tasks are spread across parts of a larger system. A simple example of the latter is doing maths problems with a calculator. Through its ability to store information and perform complex tasks, the calculator enables its user to think in ways she otherwise could not. Computation here is therefore ‘wide’ in the sense that the boundaries of the relevant cognitive system are not located wholly within the individual.⁶² Collective cognition, in turn, refers to distributed cognition in which the division of cognitive labour is distributed across not just artifacts but people, who jointly produce knowledge they could not have individually. In what has quickly become a classic in this literature, Edward Hutchins explains navigation aboard a US Navy ship in these terms.⁶³ And Karin Knorr-Cetina uses a similar framework to make sense of experiments in high energy physics involving hundreds of people, in which no one person is in charge or has all the experiment’s protocols in their head. Because the decisions in these experiments reflect the imperatives of producing scientific knowledge rather than the beliefs of any one individual, she argues that individuals are replaced as ‘epistemic subjects’ by the experiment itself.⁶⁴ Ronald Giere wouldn’t go that far, but he agrees that the

⁶⁰ Andy Clark and David Chalmers, ‘The Extended Mind’, *Analysis*, 58 (1998), pp. 7–19, at 9; also see Robert Wilson, ‘Group-Level Cognition’, *Philosophy of Science*, 68 (Proceedings, 2001), pp. S262–S273.

⁶¹ See especially Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); Andy Clark, *Being There* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); Clark and Chalmers, ‘The Extended Mind’; Ronald Giere, ‘Discussion Note: Distributed Cognition in Epistemic Cultures’, *Philosophy of Science*, 69 (2002), pp. 637–44; and Wilson, ‘Group-Level Cognition’. For a critique of the extended mind thesis from a self-described ‘common sense’ (internalist) perspective, see Fred Adams and Ken Aizawa, ‘The Bounds of Cognition’, *Philosophical Psychology*, 14 (2001), pp. 43–64.

⁶² Robert Wilson, ‘The Mind Beyond Itself’, in Dan Sperber (ed.), *Metarepresentations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 31–52, at 37.

⁶³ Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild*.

⁶⁴ Karin Knorr-Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

cognitive system in these experiments is not reducible to its members.⁶⁵ Andy Clark and David Chalmers call this an ‘active’ rather than passive externalism, and conclude provocatively that ‘certain forms of social activity might be reconceived as less akin to communication and action, and as more akin to thought.’⁶⁶

States are readily described in terms of collective cognition. Although they usually have one person in charge, leaders do not know everything their states know. States are characterised by a massive division of labour internally, the structure of which enables their members to operate as a single cognitive system. Consider the case of war. Modern war is a hugely complex practice, in which individuals perform very specific and functionally differentiated tasks, and none knows all there is to know about all the tasks. Yet states know how to practise war. Of course, this practice is impossible without the thinking of individuals, but (by supervenience) it is not reducible to the latter.

So do states have ‘group minds’? That depends on how one defines ‘mind’, but contemporary computational and functional definitions are quite compatible with group minds.⁶⁷ Much of the scepticism about the idea of group minds stems from an implicit assumption that to have intentional states a system must first have a mind, understood as a brain. Deborah Tollefsen argues this gets the matter exactly backwards: having a mind is a function of having intentional states, not *vice versa*.⁶⁸ That may be debated, but if the mind is nothing but computation then it makes sense. And since we have already established that states have intentions, they must also have minds.

I have called this an ‘emergence’ argument because it grants considerably more ontological autonomy to group intentions than does the supervenience argument, and as such it offers a strong realism about state persons. Unfortunately, the concept of emergence lacks an agreed definition, and indeed is often used interchangeably with supervenience. In part this is because they exhibit a lot of overlap. Both approaches posit realities – in this case state persons – that cannot be reduced to smaller parts, to which different behavioural laws may apply, and that may exert downward causation on their elements.⁶⁹ Thus, both accept (with Wight) the scientific realist assumption that reality is stratified into a hierarchy of levels. But where the emergence narrative goes further is with the idea that in constituting an emergent entity, the elements of a system lose some of their identity, which raises harder questions for physicalism.⁷⁰ Recall that in the supervenience approach, individual intentions are constituted solely at the individual level, making physical facts (brains) primitive with respect to groups. By contrast, in the emergence

⁶⁵ Giere, ‘Discussion Note: Distributed Cognition in Epistemic Cultures’.

⁶⁶ Clark and Chalmers, ‘The Extended Mind’, p. 18.

⁶⁷ See, for example, D.H.M. Brooks, ‘Group Minds’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 64 (1986), pp. 456–70; Daniel Wegner, ‘Transactive Memory: A Contemporary Analysis of the Group Mind’, in B. Mullen and G. Goethals (eds.), *Theories of Group Behavior* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1987), pp. 185–208; Clark and Chalmers, ‘The Extended Mind’; Rodolfo Llinas, ‘The Collective Mind?’, in *I of the Vortex* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 247–66; Wilson, ‘Group-Level Cognition’; and Tollefsen, ‘Collective Intentionality in the Social Sciences’.

⁶⁸ Tollefsen, ‘Collective Intentionality in the Social Sciences’, pp. 29–30.

⁶⁹ On downward causation see Wendt, ‘Why a World State is Inevitable’.

⁷⁰ See Paul Humphreys, ‘How Properties Emerge’, *Philosophy of Science*, 64 (1997), pp. 1–17.

approach individual intentions are constituted by the shared meanings in which they are embedded, making the relationship between individual and group intentions *mutually* constitutive rather than asymmetric. This at the very least creates considerable strain with the physicalist requirement that only physical criteria should be used to define the elementary units in our ontology, and so the jury is still out on whether physicalism and emergence are compatible in the end.⁷¹

Be that as it may, the point of this section for IR is that even if we reject the strong, emergentist variant of non-reductionism, the weak, supervenience variant alone justifies a realist view of state persons.⁷² Perhaps we should reject even supervenience, but we are then left with having to defend a reductionist, ‘as if’ approach to state persons that is highly problematic. I leave it to others to make that case.

The state as organism

If the argument of the previous section is accepted, then the main purpose of this article has been accomplished: to justify as real rather than just ‘as if’, the relatively thin way in which most IR scholars treat states most of the time, as intentional actors. That in turn provides an ontological basis for those IR theories in which such persons appear, and also raises normative questions about how we should balance state intentions against individual ones.⁷³ However, there are two further, thicker ways in which states might be persons, as organisms and as conscious subjects. These possibilities are independent of state intentionality, and can be rejected without damage to the latter. But they are worth exploring, because if they are true, they might suggest new ways of theorising about states that go beyond corporate intentions, such as seeing them as forms of life or as having emotions, and may raise additional normative questions as well.

Prior to the twentieth century, many of the greatest political and social theorists of the day conceived of the state as an organism, including – in different forms – Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, Spencer, and Durkheim, and in IR it played a key part in the consolidation of classical realism.⁷⁴ Yet today organismic thinking about states is anathema. Despite the widespread practice of treating states as persons, and even occasional references to state ‘death’, modern IR scholars never treat states as

⁷¹ Specifically, whether emergence is compatible with anything but a complete redefinition of the physical in quantum terms. See *ibid.*

⁷² My personal view today is that emergence is the better approach, but I won’t defend that here; in *Social Theory of International Politics* I went with supervenience.

⁷³ For a good discussion of the latter, see Klaus Dieter-Wolf, ‘The New Raison d’Etat as a Problem for Democracy in World Society’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 5 (1999), pp. 333–63.

⁷⁴ On the latter, see especially Palan and Blair, ‘On the Idealist Origins of the Realist Theory of International Relations’. For overviews of the organism metaphor more generally, see Karl Mannheim, ‘The History of the Concept of the State as an Organism’, in *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 165–82; Donald Levine, ‘The Organism Metaphor in Sociology’, *Social Research*, 62 (1995), pp. 239–65; and Pheng Cheah, ‘The Rationality of Life: On the Organismic Metaphor of the State’, *Radical Philosophy*, 112 (2002), pp. 9–24.

organisms – and perhaps for good reason. The appropriation of organismic thinking by social conservatives and fascists has led to its association with irrationalism and authoritarianism,⁷⁵ and the rise of methodological individualism in social theory has led to a view of such thinking as intrinsically metaphysical.

Whether organismic thinking about the state tends toward authoritarianism is obviously a big and important question, which I am unfortunately in no position to take up here. Suffice it to say that, as Pheng Cheah usefully reminds us, the idea of the state as an organism was originally part of the liberal, Enlightenment project, and as such it does not seem *necessarily* tied to irrationalism or authoritarian politics.⁷⁶

Yet, prior to the normative question is an ontological question of whether states are organisms at all. If not, then organicist politics have no philosophical legs to stand on, and the normative question is moot. Yet, with the welcome exception of Neumann's contribution to this forum, in IR the philosophical argument against organicism is usually just assumed rather than argued.⁷⁷ So, since he has outed me as a 'dated Durkheimian', in this section let me take the bull by the horns and explore the possibility of an updated theory of the state as an organism. I first show that in many respects states are like organisms, but they also exhibit important differences. In response to the latter I then propose that states are superorganisms rather than organisms.

The state as organism

First we need to define what we mean by an organism, or life, about which unfortunately there is no consensus among biologists. One of the most widely used definitions today is NASA's: 'life is a self-sustained chemical system capable of undergoing Darwinian evolution'.⁷⁸ But this is subject to various counter-examples, some simple (mules are not capable of Darwinian evolution), others technical. Other definitions fare no better.⁷⁹ The problem ultimately is theoretical: we lack an adequate explanation for life, and so are reduced to trying to define it by its observable features, much as early scientists were in defining water before they knew about H₂O.⁸⁰ The issue is so muddled that most biologists have given up trying to define

⁷⁵ See Mannheim, 'The History of the Concept of the State as an Organism', and Vincent, 'Can Groups be Persons?'

⁷⁶ Cheah, 'The Rationality of Life'. On this point also see Avital Simhony, 'Idealist Organicism: Beyond Holism and Individualism', *History of Political Thought*, 12 (1991), pp. 515–35, and Brooks, 'Group Minds', at pp. 468–70.

⁷⁷ Iver Neumann, 'Alex Wendt is a Dated Durkheimian – Discuss', this issue.

⁷⁸ Pier Luigi Luisi, 'About Various Definitions of Life', *Origins of Life and Evolution of the Biosphere*, 28 (1998), pp. 613–22, at 617.

⁷⁹ See Marc Lange, 'Life, "Artificial Life", and Scientific Explanation', *Philosophy of Science*, 63 (1996), pp. 225–44; Luisi, 'About Various Definitions of Life'; Kim Sterelny and Paul Griffiths, *Sex and Death: An Introduction to Philosophy of Biology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 173–5; and Carol Cleland and Christopher Chyba, 'Defining "Life"', *Origins of Life and Evolution of the Biosphere*, 32 (2002), pp. 387–93.

⁸⁰ Cleland and Chyba, 'Defining "Life"', p. 391.

life as pointless. Fortunately, however, they do have a workaday sense of their subject matter, which has produced some convergence on the features of organisms. Five stand out: individuality, organisation, homeostasis, autonomy, and genetic reproduction.⁸¹ We shall see that all but the last are shared at least in part by states.

Organisms are *individuals* in the sense of ‘spatiotemporally bounded and unique’ systems with ‘a particular history of interactions’.⁸² States clearly fulfil this criterion, since each is a distinct system with its own history. But in another sense of individuality states are not like organisms, which we might call ‘common life’.⁸³ The parts of an organism live and die together, and so are not individuals in their own right. The individuality of states is looser, since they are made up of people that can live on even if their state dies. True, they would lose that part of their individual identity which was dependent on recognition of their citizenship by their state, but identity ‘death’ seems very different to biological death. This difference comes down to the assumption of physicalism, and suggests that if states are to have organismic individuality it will have to be constituted in a non-physical way.

Organisms are *organised* in the sense of being totalities in which parts and whole are dynamically interdependent and mutually constitutive. Historically much of the concern in defining organisms was to differentiate them from machines, and it is on this dimension that a difference is particularly apparent.⁸⁴ The parts of a machine are separate from the whole; the properties of a piston do not depend on a car. While the ability of a piston to do work depends on a car, there is no sense in which the car constitutes the identity of the piston itself; the constitution here is all bottom-up, not top-down. By implication, a machine can be decomposed into its parts without changing their nature. In contrast, the parts of an organism are intrinsically dependent on the whole: not only their ability to do work, but their very being alive is constituted by the organism. Take a leg off a laboratory rat and by definition the leg dies; the constitution here is both bottom-up and top-down, and as such perfect decomposition into pre-existing parts is impossible.

In their organisation state persons are both like and unlike organisms. On the one hand, states and their members (citizens) are dynamically interdependent. The behaviour of citizens causally produces and reproduces states over time, and that behaviour is in turn shaped by states. And they are also mutually constitutive. A state only exists in virtue of citizens and their practices (bottom-up constitution), and the identities of those citizens and practices only exist in virtue of the state (top-down). On the other hand, unlike the parts of a biological organism, the fundamental identity of which as living depends on the whole, citizens have many identities that are not state-centric. Thus, the constitution of individuals by the state does not go all the way down, but only as far as the identities necessary to sustain the state form.

⁸¹ This modifies slightly the four-dimensional conceptualisation of Kepa Ruiz-Mirazo, et al., ‘Organisms and their Place in Biology’, *Theory in Biosciences*, 119 (2000), pp. 209–33.

⁸² Ruiz-Mirazo, et al., ‘Organisms and their Place in Biology’, p. 212.

⁸³ See H.J. McCloskey, ‘The State as an Organism, as a Person, and as an End in Itself’, *The Philosophical Review*, 72 (1963), pp. 306–26.

⁸⁴ The following draws on Ruiz-Mirazo, ‘Organisms and their Place in Biology’, p. 216. Also see D.C. Phillips, ‘Organicism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 31 (1970), pp. 413–32.

Organisms are *homeostatic* in the sense that they resist the inexorable tendency toward entropy or thermodynamic decay.⁸⁵ This is made possible by two things. One is a process of closure, defined as the production of an organisational boundary or 'cut' between the organism and its environment.⁸⁶ Without closure organisms could not sustain their identity as individuals. The other source of homeostasis is an organism's internal structure, which channels the behaviour of its elements toward the maintenance of its boundaries. This accounts for the functional aspect of organisms, the fact that their operation seems geared toward the purpose of survival. Closure and internal structure together constitute organisms as 'autopoietic' systems, whose 'primary effect is [their] own production'.⁸⁷

The homeostatic aspect of organisms describes state persons well.⁸⁸ States do not degrade relentlessly but actively resist entropy, often succeeding for hundreds of years. This is made possible, first, by a process of closure, of cutting a spatial and political boundary between a domestic inside and a foreign outside.⁸⁹ David Campbell calls this process 'foreign policy', understood as a 'boundary producing political performance'.⁹⁰ The fact that organismic thinking highlights rather than obscures processes of boundary construction suggests that Neumann is too quick to conclude that it necessarily privileges entities over relations.⁹¹ And second, states have an internal structure that channels the behaviour of their members toward the goal of state survival ('national security'). Crime is always a problem, but as long as it and other threats can be kept within tolerable limits the state will survive. Like organisms, in short, state persons are autopoietic systems.

Organisms are *autonomous* in the sense that their behaviour is determined partly independent of their environment.⁹² This goes beyond homeostasis, in that the identity constituted by closure serves as a point of reference for the interpretation of information crossing its boundary from the environment. Information relevant to survival becomes a basis for action, and irrelevant information is ignored. In effect, therefore, organisms are engaged in the constant production of subjective meanings out of objective contexts.⁹³ These meanings do not originate wholly within organisms,

⁸⁵ Erwin Schrödinger, *What is Life?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967 [1944]), p. 70.

⁸⁶ See Varela, 'Patterns of Life', pp. 73–7, and Ruiz-Mirazo, et al., 'Organisms and their Place in Biology', p. 217, for what follows. For a comprehensive overview of closure dynamics in a variety of domains see Jerry Chandler and Gertrudis Van de Vijver (eds.), 'Closure: Emergent Organizations and Their Dynamics', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 901 (2000), 1–349.

⁸⁷ Varela, 'Patterns of Life', p. 73.

⁸⁸ And perhaps other social systems; on autopoiesis as a basis for a 'new organicism' about society in general see Michael Hutter, 'Organism as a Metaphor in German Economic Thought', in Philip Mirowski (ed.), *Natural Images in Economic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 289–321. Cf. Mathias Albert, 'Observing World Politics: Luhmann's Systems Theory of Society and International Relations', *Millennium*, 28 (1999), pp. 239–265.

⁸⁹ R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁹⁰ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 69. Also see Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon, 'Relations before States: Substance, Process, and the Study of World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:3 (1999), pp. 291–332.

⁹¹ Neumann, 'Alex Wendt is a Dated Durkheimian', this issue.

⁹² See Varela, 'Patterns of Life', and Ruiz-Mirazo, et al., 'Organisms and their Place in Biology'.

⁹³ Hence the growing literature on 'biosemiotics'; for a good introduction see Jesper Hoffmeyer, *Signs of Meaning in the Universe* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

since they are prompted by information from outside. But what organisms make of this information depends on their identity, and as such is not wholly determined by the environment either.

States are clearly autonomous in this sense. Huge amounts of information cross their boundaries every day, most of which is deemed meaningless to their functioning. Even information that an objective observer might think is relevant to their security must be 'securitized', or made meaningful to national security, before it will be acted upon.⁹⁴ Again, this is not to say that information outside the state has no influence on meanings inside, but only that the latter cannot be reduced to the former.

The last characteristic feature of organisms, genetic reproduction, is where a difference from states is clearest. Genetic reproduction involves the creation of a new organism through the direct transmission of genetic information from two existing ones. States obviously do not reproduce in this way, and indeed, Kepa Ruiz-Mirazo and her co-authors use this feature specifically to distinguish organisms 'from other forms of collective organization, like colonies and societies, which may also show autonomous behaviour.'⁹⁵ This is not to say that states don't 'replicate'. As John Meyer and others have shown, what was at first a European organisational form has become universal, with states everywhere increasingly subject to global templates for their organisation.⁹⁶ But this replication is more like cloning than genetic reproduction.

In sum, with organisms states share substantial individuality, organisation, homeostasis, and autonomy, but they are also different in two key respects: states are composed of autonomous individuals, and they do not engage in genetic reproduction. Thus, in a strict sense states are not organisms. This might lead us to conclude that a realist view of states as persons should not be pushed this far. On the other hand, the many ways in which states *are* like organisms are intriguing, and given their potential explanatory and normative implications it is worth exploring them further. We can do that by conceptualising states as superorganisms instead.

The state as superorganism

A superorganism is 'a collection of single creatures that together possess the functional organization implicit in the formal definition of organism'.⁹⁷ The standard examples of superorganisms are colonies of social insects like ants, termites, and some species of bees and wasps, but the concept has lately been applied to human

⁹⁴ See Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, 'Security Analysis: Conceptual Apparatus', in their *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), pp. 21–47.

⁹⁵ Ruiz-Mirazo, et al., 'Organisms and their Place in Biology', p. 219.

⁹⁶ John Meyer, et al., 'World Society and the Nation State', *American Journal of Sociology*, 103 (1997), pp. 144–81.

⁹⁷ David Sloan Wilson and Elliott Sober, 'Reviving the Superorganism', *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 136 (1989), pp. 337–56, at 341.

groups as well.⁹⁸ Superorganisms differ from organisms in both of the ways states do: they are made up of individuals who do not immediately die if the collective is destroyed, and they do not engage in genetic reproduction (at least in any straightforward sense). In every other respect, however, superorganisms are like organisms: they are individuals with their own spatiotemporal specificity; they are organised into mutually constitutive part-whole relationships; they are homeostatic systems; and they exhibit some autonomy from the environment.⁹⁹

Something like the concept of a superorganism has been around for centuries, but the consolidation of the neo-Darwinian synthesis in the mid-twentieth century seemed to offer decisive reasons for rejecting it. The problem is that superorganisms require natural selection to operate at the level of groups, which critics have argued is precluded by evolutionary theory. Genes are the unit of selection, and only organisms carry genes. For group selection to work individuals must sometimes be willing to sacrifice their own chances to reproduce in favour of the group. Even if the occasional altruist is so inclined, they will tend to get selected out of the system, eventually only leaving individuals with 'selfish genes'.¹⁰⁰

Notwithstanding this problem, within evolutionary theory there has lately been a revival of the idea of group selection, such that although it remains controversial, it can at least receive serious treatment in mainstream texts in the philosophy of biology.¹⁰¹ Much of this interest stems from the fact of altruism in nature and human society in particular. The continued presence of altruism is an anomaly for the reductionist version of natural selection, according to which it should be driven out of the system. But the new interest in group selection also reflects a conceptual problem in the very idea of individual-level selection, which is that organisms themselves are constituted by groups of genes which are selected, *via* their hosts, *as* groups! This calls into question the unproblematic status of individual organisms in evolutionary theory, and also raises the question, if genes can be subject to group selection, then why can't individuals?

⁹⁸ On insect colonies see Wilson and Sober, 'Reviving the Superorganism'; Robin Moritz and Edward Southwick, *Bees as Superorganisms* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1992); and Thomas Seeley, 'Decision Making in Superorganisms', in G. Gigerenzer and R. Selten (eds.), *Bounded Rationality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 249–61. On human groups as superorganisms see Karin Knorr-Cetina, 'How Superorganisms Change', *Social Studies of Science*, 25 (1995), pp. 119–47 (experiments in high-energy physics); Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd, 'Complex Societies', *Human Nature*, 10 (1999), pp. 253–89 (WWII armies); David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002) (religious groups); and for a more sceptical view, Sandra Mitchell, 'The Superorganism Metaphor: Then and Now', in Sabine Maassen, et al. (eds.), *Biology as Society, Society as Biology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995), pp. 231–47.

⁹⁹ In *Bees as Superorganisms*, Moritz and Southwick (pp. 5–6) offer an interestingly different list of superorganism attributes, more directly like states: usually 'sessile' (fixed in one place), homeostatic, well-armed, and containing large numbers of colony members.

¹⁰⁰ See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). The classic critique of group selection is by G.C. Williams, *Adaptation and Natural Selection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966).

¹⁰¹ For example, Sterelny and Griffiths, *Sex and Death*. Much of the revival of group selection is due to David Sloan Wilson and Elliott Sober; for a good overview of the controversy see their, 'Reintroducing Group Selection to the Human Behavioral Sciences', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 17 (1994), pp. 585–608, and the following open peer commentary. The full statement of their theory is, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Not all groups are superorganisms, and so the fact that states are groups does not in itself mean they qualify. The key question is the relative weight of selection pressures within and between groups. Group selection depends on competition within groups being sufficiently suppressed for the group to survive. We see this within individuals, where competition among genes is subordinated to the needs of the organism; indeed, when it breaks down, as in auto-immune diseases, the result may be fatal for the gene 'group'. Suppression of individual competition is also apparent in insect colonies, where many individuals are born sterile and thus incapable of competing to pass on their genes at all.

Group selection fortunately has not gone to that extreme in human societies, and indeed the fear that it could be used to justify the suppression of human rights has made this argument politically problematic. Yet, as an empirical phenomenon the existence of group selection at the level of states seems indisputable. At the domestic level there are numerous ways in which competition among individuals is subordinated to the needs of the state (think of law enforcement and care for the sick and elderly). And in IR there is the striking example of war, in which men and women in the prime of their reproductive years sacrifice themselves in droves in the name of the national interest.¹⁰² Political realists have long seen war as a mechanism of natural selection for groups,¹⁰³ from which conceptualising states as superorganisms seems to be a natural inference.

One important question remains, however, which brings us back to the issue of physicalism. What makes superorganisms individuals, in the sense of having a spatio-temporal identity, and thus potentially being persons? In the case of organisms the answer is physical, the skin. But this criterion won't work for superorganisms, since they are composed of physically separate beings. Picking up the discussion of group minds above, instead of a physical criterion we might use *thought* to define superorganism identity, constituting what Hegel called a 'thought organism' or *Geistesorganismus*.¹⁰⁴ The idea here is that it is the participation of individuals in a collective thought process (in this case, in a 'narrative of state'), whose boundaries are instantiated by the practices that produce and reproduce that process, which enables superorganisms to survive. It has been widely argued that collective thought constitutes insect colonies, which exhibit 'swarm intelligence'.¹⁰⁵ If even a beehive can be a superorganism by virtue of collective thought, then presumably so can a state.

The state as collective consciousness

Individual persons are not only intentional organisms, but conscious ones. We have subjectivity, experiencing the world from a first-person perspective, such that there is 'something it is like' to be us. This is more than just being intentional or an

¹⁰² See Doyne Dawson, 'Evolutionary Theory and Group Selection: The Question of Warfare', *History and Theory*, 38 (1999), pp. 79–100, and Richerson and Boyd, 'Complex Societies'.

¹⁰³ See Bradley Thayer, 'Bringing in Darwin: Evolutionary Theory, Realism, and International Politics', *International Security*, 25 (2000), pp. 124–51; cf. Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and its Competitors* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁰⁴ Hutter, 'Organism as a Metaphor in German Economic Thought', p. 293.

¹⁰⁵ See Eric Bonabeau, Marco Dorigo, and Guy Theraulaz, *Swarm Intelligence: From Natural to Artificial Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Seeley, 'Decision Making in Superorganisms'.

organism, which as currently understood do not imply consciousness. Yet intuitively consciousness seems essential to being a person, since without it we wouldn't know what it was like to *be* a person, which we do in fact know. Without consciousness we would be either machines or 'zombies', which philosophers define as organisms identical to ourselves but lacking subjective experience.¹⁰⁶ If we want to explore all the ways in which states might be persons, therefore, we need to ask whether they might have 'collective' consciousness. Is there something it is like, in short, to be a state?

Trying to make sense of collective consciousness is made harder by the fact that we do not understand even individual consciousness. As individuals we know we have subjective experience by, well, subjective experience. But after three centuries of hard work on the mind/body problem, science still has no explanation for this important fact. What David Chalmers has called the 'hard problem' of consciousness is both ontological and epistemological.¹⁰⁷ Ontologically, the problem is for physicalism: it is difficult to see how phenomenological states could ever be explained by purely physical ones, no matter how complex the latter. If mind is reducible to body then why is it necessary at all? And if it is not necessary, then it would seem to have low survival value, and thus not be clear how it could evolve through natural selection. Given physicalism, it seems we *should* be zombies. Epistemologically, the problem is for the objective, third-person perspective of modern science, between which there seems to be an irreducible 'explanatory gap' with the subjective, first-person perspective of conscious beings.¹⁰⁸ Hard problems indeed, which have led recently to the emergence of virtually a new discipline, 'consciousness studies'.¹⁰⁹

In contrast to consciousness at the individual level, however, which we at least know we have even if we don't know why, it is not clear that states even have it. True, IR scholars often refer to states as 'subjects', but we mean by this other things, like intentionality, performativity, or positions in a social structure – not that states literally have subjective experiences. A manifestation of this reluctance to attribute collective consciousness to states is the almost complete absence in IR theory of the emotions as objects of analysis; IR is overwhelmingly cognitivist in its view of states.¹¹⁰ But at least in this respect IR scholars are in good company. Contemporary philosophical defenders of group intentions and even group minds make a point of emphasising that they are not saying that groups have consciousness.¹¹¹ Even Durkheim, who for a time embraced the idea, said that collective consciousness was 'of a different nature from . . . individual consciousness', and did not involve a capacity for feeling.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ On the question of zombies in the philosophy of consciousness see Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Joseph Levine, *Purple Haze: The Puzzle of Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Also see Matthew Ratcliffe, 'Husserl and Nagel on Subjectivity and the Limits of Physical Objectivity', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 35 (2002), pp. 353–77.

¹⁰⁹ Chalmers and the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* are good places to start.

¹¹⁰ For exceptions see Neta Crawford, 'The Passion of World Politics', *International Security*, 24 (2000), pp. 116–56, and Thomas Scheff, *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism, and War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994). Neither, however, argues that states themselves have emotions.

¹¹¹ See McCloskey, 'The State as an Organism', p. 319; Roger Scruton, 'Corporate Persons', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 63 (1989), pp. 239–266, at 249; Wilson, 'Group Level Cognition', p. 271; Giere, 'Distributed Cognition in Epistemic Cultures', p. 642; and Tollefsen, 'Collective Intentionality in the Social Sciences', p. 44.

¹¹² Quoted in John Greenwood, 'Social Facts, Social Groups and Social Explanation', *Nous*, 37 (2003), pp. 93–112, at 106. Also see Denes Nemedi, 'Collective Consciousness, Morphology, and Collective Representations', *Sociological Perspectives*, 38 (1995), pp. 41–56.

Notwithstanding this almost universal scepticism in IR theory, however, in both academic and lay discourse we often refer casually to states ‘as if’ they have emotions and are therefore conscious. States are routinely characterised as angry, greedy, guilty, humiliated, and so on – all conditions that, in individuals at least, are associated with subjective experience. Think of the central role that the concept of ‘fear’ plays in IR scholarship. Is the fear that states experience (*sic*) in the security dilemma purely cognitive, with no irreducible emotional content whatsoever, and if so, is that really *fear*? Certainly at the individual level one would hesitate to say so. But perhaps for states, fear is indeed merely a useful fiction to describe the aggregate emotional states of individuals. That would make states either machines or zombies, and mark a clear limit to a realist view of state personhood.

Before we dismiss the possibility that states have collective consciousness, however, there are at least three reasons to consider the argument. First, there is the realist question of why our everyday discourse of state emotions is so useful, both in understanding and justifying foreign policy practices, if not because it refers to something real. Second, consciousness is thought by some to be a feature of all organisms, even if not the discursive, self-conscious kind of consciousness had by human beings.¹¹³ Now, strictly speaking states are not organisms but superorganisms, so perhaps this point does not apply. But given the many similarities between organisms and superorganisms, and how little we know about consciousness, who can say, *a priori*, that there is ‘nothing that it’s like’ to be a state? Finally, having consciousness might matter normatively for states. As individuals we value our consciousness a great deal, both for its own sake and because it is associated with self-determination.¹¹⁴ One might even say that consciousness is what makes life worth living, and thus is absolutely essential to our understanding of persons. As such, if our theory of the state as person does not recognise the existence of collective consciousness, then in the end what kind of person is the state, really? An impoverished and truncated one it would seem, an ‘artificial’ person without intrinsic value. If, on the other hand, the state were even in this respect a ‘natural’ person, then it might have more normative standing.

In trying to make a case for a realist view of collective consciousness a good place to start is with Erik Ringmar’s discussion of state subjectivity.¹¹⁵ Drawing on a well-established social theoretical tradition, Ringmar argues that even in individuals, subjectivity is a function of narratives, of stories that constitute our diverse experiences as those of a coherent Self. Importantly, on this view the Self is nothing more than a narrative; there is no entity or ‘homunculus’ hiding inside us to which the narrative refers. As Ringmar shows, this view of subjectivity is quite applicable to states. States are constituted by narratives of ‘We’ as opposed to ‘Them’, which define individuals as members of collective identities that are not reducible to individuals. Such narratives constitute collective memories, through which individuals

¹¹³ See Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966/2001).

¹¹⁴ See Charles Siewert, *The Significance of Consciousness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). As he points out (pp. 328–9), given the choice most of us would probably not choose to be zombified.

¹¹⁵ Ringmar, ‘On the Ontological Status of the State’.

can share the ‘experiences’ of their group.¹¹⁶ Todd Hall, in turn, shows how this approach might be used to make sense of attributions of emotions (in his case anger) to states.¹¹⁷ In a process analogous to securitisation, Hall argues that states get ‘angered’ through speech acts that violate the collective ego identity implicit within their narratives.

The narrative theory of state subjectivity offers a promising starting point for thinking about collective consciousness, but it faces an important, physicalist, limit. At the individual level subjectivity is more than just a narrative – it is also the *experience* of a narrative. Narratives *per se* are not conscious; after all, zombies could have narratives too. If consciousness were nothing but a narrative, then no animal other than human beings could have it, which seems counter-intuitive. How then is the experience of a narrative possible? We don’t yet know, but physicalists would point to the physical constitution of organisms. However, states are at most superorganisms, not organisms. Since superorganisms are not constituted physically but by thought, they would need a non-physical substrate for their consciousness, which the narrative theory of subjectivity does not provide. The significance of this limit becomes apparent in Hall’s argument, according to which the actual experiencing of state anger is done by individuals. Those experiences are made possible by the narrative of the state, but ultimately they are distributed among its members. This is unlike individual experience, which is generally unitary. In short, if physicalism is true, then it seems that states cannot be persons in the full, conscious sense. At most they have an *ersatz* subjectivity, in which individuals experience a state’s emotions on its behalf. There is certainly much interesting work to be done even with this distributed approach to state emotions,¹¹⁸ but it is not likely to justify a realist view of state consciousness.

Instead, to ground such a view we would need to challenge physicalism more directly. That is less quixotic than it may seem, since physicalism cannot even explain individual consciousness. Of particular interest here is a recent revival of panpsychist ontologies, which hold that consciousness is not reducible to physical properties, but in some sense goes ‘all the way down’ in nature.¹¹⁹ Intuitively this seems a more promising foundation for realism about collective consciousness than physicalism, but it would obviously require a more extensive discussion than is possible here.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ See, for example, James Booth, ‘Communities of Memory: On Identity, Memory, and Debt’, *American Political Science Review*, 93 (1999), pp. 249–63.

¹¹⁷ Todd Hall, ‘Getting Emotional: Towards a Theory of Emotions for International Relations’, MA thesis (University of Chicago, 2003).

¹¹⁸ For further discussion see Gilbert, *Sociality and Responsibility*; Kenwyn Smith and Stuart Crandell, ‘Exploring Collective Emotion’, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 27 (1984), pp. 813–28; Scheff, *Bloody Revenge*; and Jocelyn Pixley, ‘Finance Organizations, Decisions, and Emotions’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 53 (2002), pp. 41–65.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*; David Ray Griffin, *Unsnarling the World-Knot* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Shimon Malin, *Nature Loves to Hide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Christian de Quincey, *Radical Nature* (Montpelier, VT: Invisible Cities Press, 2002); and David Skrbina, ‘Panpsychism as an Underlying Theme in Western Philosophy’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 10 (2003), pp. 4–46.

¹²⁰ See Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science*.

Conclusion

Despite the importance and pervasiveness of state persons in contemporary world politics, the nature of their personhood has been almost completely neglected by IR scholars. In this article I have addressed only one piece of this puzzle, limiting myself to states' psychological rather than legal or moral personhood, and to how this personhood is constituted from the inside, rather than the outside. Thus, even with the other contributions to this forum, vast areas of this territory remain unexplored.

The neglect of state personhood in IR scholarship seems to stem from a widespread scepticism, and even hostility, toward the realist notion that state persons could be real. The scepticism is both philosophical and political. Philosophically, the physicalist ontology of modern science assumes that reality is made of purely physical stuff, and since states are not physical systems it seems to follow that, of course, they are not real. States are at most 'as if' persons, conceptual fictions we find useful in making sense of the world. Politically, realism about state persons seems to lead down the road toward fascism and collectivism, which have appropriated it in the past. In resisting such dangers physicalism is an important philosophical resource, since it seems to confirm the reductionist, liberal view that in the end only individuals are real. By taking physicalism for granted, therefore, we protect ourselves against both metaphysical superstitions and illiberal politics. Given these verities, there seems no need to raise the question of state personhood; best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Yet, notwithstanding its reductionist connotations, as we have seen physicalism may not lead to an anti-realist view of state persons. *Via* the doctrines of supervenience and emergence, many contemporary philosophers have tried to reconcile a non-reductive physicalism with a realist view of groups as intentional actors. Since this is the primary way in which IR scholars personify the state, scepticism about the reality of state persons is unwarranted. To be sure, the notion that states are intentional systems is a thin conception of personhood, but it is one whose effects in the world cannot be explained by pretending they are 'really' something else.

However, there are also two other, thicker, senses in which individuals are persons: we are organisms and we have consciousness. Along these dimensions, given physicalism it is much harder to defend a realist view of state persons. States are at most superorganisms rather than organisms, with conceptual rather than physical boundaries; and consciousness is difficult to square with physicalism even at the individual level, let alone the corporate. A defence of realism about state persons in these more radical senses would therefore require rejecting or substantially modifying physicalism. Short of that, we are warranted in not going much farther in personifying the state than we already do.

All this philosophical talk is surely edifying, but at this point IR scholars may be forgiven for wondering whether anything rides on it for understanding world politics. So *what* if state persons are real? The answer I think speaks to both the explanatory and normative foundations of IR as a social science.

On the explanatory side, if the 'as if' view of state persons is correct, then the concept and its associated anthropomorphic discourse are dispensable. In principle IR scholars could give them up to a reductionist account without compromising their ability to understand world politics. The concept of state personhood is useful

shorthand, but in the end optional for purposes of building theory. If, on the other hand, the realist view is correct, then no such reductionist account is available. In that case, giving up the concept of state personhood would result in a substantial loss of extant scientific knowledge about world politics. Insofar as IR scholars want to justify and retain this knowledge, therefore, realism about state persons provides an essential foundation. Either way, the question of the reality of state persons goes to the heart of IR's epistemic authority as a science of world politics.

The normative stakes are also large. On one level, the reality of state persons is merely an empirical question, about what kinds of social facts there are in world politics, and as such implies no judgment about their desirability. Even if we are opposed to the idea of state persons, it makes sense to treat them as real, today, for purposes of making sense of the world around us. However, that assumes a subject-object dualism – that the reality of state persons is separate from the observers who study them – which on another level cannot be sustained. Like any collective intention, state persons can only be real as long as individuals accept and participate in their existence. Among those individuals are IR scholars, who routinely treat state persons ‘as if’ they were real. Given IR's claim to authoritative knowledge about world politics, the continual performance of this narrative in IR theory contributes importantly to making this ‘fantasy’ a reality.¹²¹ To that extent, we are not objective observers of a separate reality, but part of that reality, and as such are at least indirectly responsible for its effects.

For even empirically-oriented IR scholars, therefore, there is a question of whether states *should* be persons. Relative to the alternatives, I believe that a strong argument can be made that they should, notwithstanding its potential costs: states help bring order, and yes, even justice to the world, and if we want to have states then it is better they take the form of persons rather than something more amorphous, because this will help make their effects more politically accountable.¹²² Rather than making that argument here, however, I will conclude simply by pointing to the importance of realism about state persons in putting this question on the table. It is only if state persons are real that we need to worry about their normative status.

This status may depend on how far down the reality of state persons goes. Politically, the idea of states as intentional actors seems relatively benign, while as superorganisms or as conscious seems more dangerous.¹²³ Indeed, I have hesitated to bring up the latter possibilities at all. But such ‘extreme’ theories may also be dangerous in a more positive sense, in that they unsettle the metaphysical firewall protecting us from uncomfortable challenges to liberalism. If states really are superorganisms or conscious, then we should want to confront that fact, even if in the end we reaffirm what we knew before.

¹²¹ See Weber, ‘Performative States’, and her remarks at the ISA panel from which this forum is derived. Weber has done more than anyone to help me see the nature and importance of this issue.

¹²² See Hedley Bull, ‘The State's Positive Role in World Affairs’, *Daedalus*, 108 (1979), pp. 111–23, and Pettit, ‘Collective Persons and Powers’, at pp. 463–8; cf. Mark Hager, ‘Bodies Politic: The Progressive History of Organizational “Real Entity” Theory’, *University of Pittsburgh Law Review*, 50 (1988–89), pp. 575–654. This might also be a reason to constitute the states *system* as a person, in the form of a world state; see Wendt, ‘Why a World State is Inevitable’.

¹²³ Though again, see Cheah, ‘The Rationality of Life’.