What do we mean when we say that substance matters?

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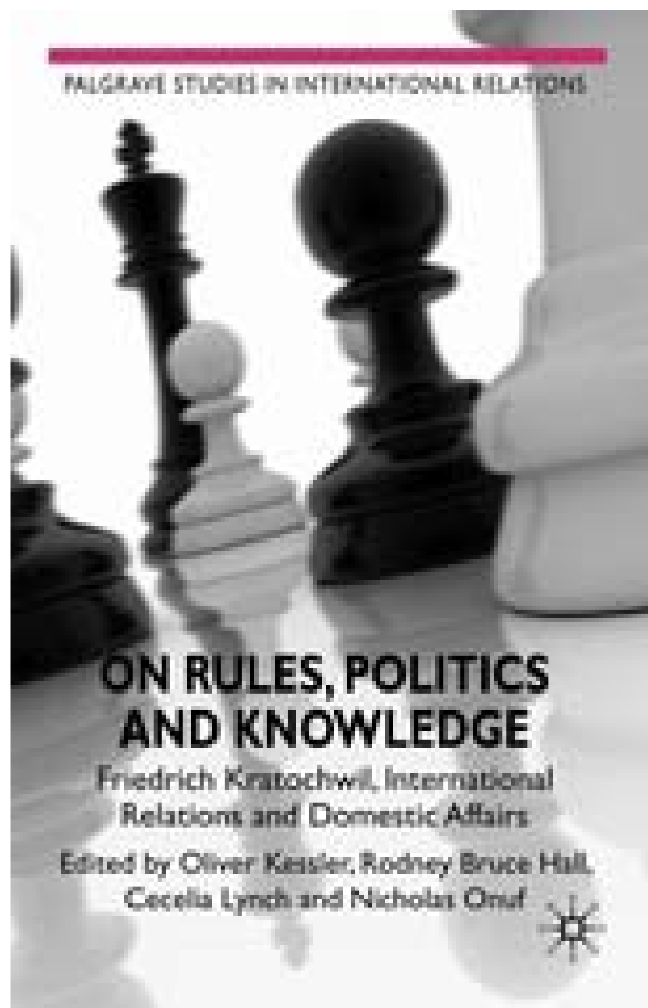

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As disciplinary debates run their course, calling for a return to substance is a wildcard. It never fails as a discursive move. Commonsense opinion has it that substance matters more than rhetorical, formalistic, procedural, or other subtleties. Therefore, the call for a return to substance will go unchallenged. Interlocutors will nod their heads, and may even thank you for the reminder. After some embarrassment, however, the debate is likely to linger on unaltered. One reason for this is that you have failed to explain what you mean by "substance." This begs a more general question: What do we mean when we say that substance matters?

In various debates, Fritz Kratochwil has come down in the defense of substance. Not only when discussing legal theory, where he has emphasized that formal or procedural subtleties should never eclipse substantive considerations (Kratochwil 1989a: 9–10, 16–17, 143, 244–5, 2006d: 202–3), but also when engaging mainstream social science, where one of his mantras is that substantive problems should come first and methodological finesse second (Kratochwil 1998: 193, 196). In addition, Kratochwil has declared a predilection for substantive problems rather than trivial definitions, and a preference for a substantive over a power-based understanding of politics (1998: 198, 200).

Even when it comes to constructivism, Kratochwil has emphasized the irreducible importance of substance (2001a, see also Zehfuss 2001). This is somewhat surprising from a constructivist of the radical sort. The kind of constructivism Kratochwil espouses assumes that the social world is fundamentally "of our making" (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Onuf 1989; Kratochwil 1989a). It opposes the assumption of a social "world out there." Radical constructivists are therefore wont to dismiss "substantialism" (or essentialism, or realism) as an unwarranted obsession

with ontological primitives (Abbott 1995; Rescher 1996; Jackson and Nexon 1999).

In fact, philosophers in the tradition of Aristotle have highlighted the unalterable qualities of substance. Here the fundamental idea is that phenomenal change could not take place, or not be understood, without a transcendental substratum (ὑποκείμενον) or substance (οὐσία), to which ephemeral change (γένεσις καὶ φθορά) can be related. Thus understood, substances can be both inanimate objects and organisms, or even human beings and God(s). Enduring substances are thus distinguished from accidental features such as properties, events, or actions (Jolivet 1929; Hoffmann and Rosenkrantz 1997; Wiggins 2001).

This is heavy metaphysical stuff, and it is clearly incompatible with the tenets of radical constructivism. But is it really what people like Kratochwil have in mind when they come down in the defense of substance? If not, what do they have in mind? Here is my response. The term substance is usually employed as a marker to indicate what should really matter to us. To call for a return to substance is simply another way of saying that we should return to whatever happens to be the fundamental point. Far from implying the assumption of an objective "world out there," it aims at bringing us back into focus. Whenever the fundamental point of something has been sidetracked, it is necessary and justified to call for a return to substance.[1]

Substance in discursive context

Following Wittgenstein's exhortation to look at language games rather than stipulating lexical definitions, let us examine contextual usages of the term substance. It quickly turns out that substance is one of those terms where a polar opposite is always intended, either explicitly or implicitly. Table 5.1 lists five discursive domains where substance is opposed to something else. The list is by no means exhaustive.

Table 5.1 Polar oppositions

	Substance	Nonsubstance
People	Personality	Public image
Food	Nutritional value	Taste
Poetics	Plot	Genre
Law	Substantive law	Procedural law
Politicies	Outcomes delivered	Popular appeal

In everyday life, we draw a distinction between who we are as personalities (substance) and our public image (nonsubstance). People are often more concerned with their image than with their personalities. For example, a model may be more worried about her public image than her mental stability. But this can backfire. The model may become anorexic and ultimately ruin not only herself but also her career. Somebody may therefore warn her not to forget that she is a human person after all.

Similarly, we discern the nutritional value (substance) and taste (nonsubstance) of our food. Wealthy consumers may have a tendency to prefer taste over nutritional value. For example, we enjoy chocolate truffles not for their nutritional value but for their delicious taste. But of course we know all too well that, no matter how it tastes, food sustains us physically by its nutritional value. Nutritional scientists remind us that we should concentrate our efforts on eating a balanced diet.

In poetics, the plot of a story is distinguished from the rules of the genre. The genre may be an important concern to the man of letters, but the public is moved to tears by the plot. Nobody experiences fear and pity when reading Aristotle's poetics, but some people do when following a tragedy in the theater. An author who fails to understand this will never touch his audience. He may be reminded by a critic or well-meaning friend that creative writing is all about substance and not art for art's sake.

Another familiar distinction is that between substantive and formal or procedural law. Legal professionals are often very concerned with formalities and procedural rules. Lawsuits are sometimes won or lost because of such machinations. Nevertheless all of this hardly touches the sense of equity and justice of the layman. Most people feel that for justice to be done it takes substantive prescriptions. If legal professionals fail to understand this, their jurisprudence is in danger of losing legitimacy.

Citizens are wont to differentiate between the popular appeal of certain policies on the one hand and outcomes delivered on the other. In the short run, the policy of subsidizing jobs is popular. However, this may backfire in the long run if the policy increases the public deficit and does not lead to higher employment. Elections are often won for reasons of popular appeal. But the next election may be lost for a failure to deliver outcomes. Politicians, one might argue, should therefore never take substance too lightly.

The bottom-line is that it is only by virtue of substance that things really matter. Nevertheless substantive issues are often pushed into the background. The tail sometimes does wag the dog. This is typically the case when a certain level of cultural sophistication has been reached (anorexic divas, chocolate truffles, art for art's sake, quirky lawyers, phony politicians). The result is a risk of a backlash against over-sophistication, at some point leading to the understandable call for a return to substance.

Substance in the social sciences

With that in mind, let us now turn to the social sciences. Here we can identify three ways by which substance is often lost to secondary aspects:

1. Problem-driven research is displaced by theoretically or methodologically driven scholarship.
2. The discussion of socially relevant problems is displaced by the discussion of problems relevant only to like-minded scholars.
3. The specificity of social life as the realm of intersubjective meaning is sacrificed on the altar of "scientific objectivity."

First is the drift from problem-driven research to theoretically or methodologically driven scholarship. In disciplinary science there is an unavoidable division of labor between those working on substantive problems on the one hand and those providing theoretical and methodological guidance on the other. Intellectual kudos tends to go to the latter, and rightly so. The availability of applicable theories and methods is invaluable to the scientific community at large. However, this intellectual imbalance bears a serious risk. Scholarship may become driven by theories and methods to such an extent that the available "lenses" and "tools" end up determining the research problems to be contemplated or fixed, and not vice versa (Shapiro 2002).[2] Theoretical and methodological sophistication may thus displace concern with substantive research problems. The remedy is to subordinate theories and methods pragmatically to more substantive concerns (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009c).

Second is the drift from socially relevant problems to esoteric scholarly debates. In disciplinary science it is unavoidable that peer recognition is an important yardstick for academic success. In specialized academic disciplines, "the requirements for entry become so elevated that producers have their rivals as their only possible consumers" (Bourdieu 1991: 15). Unfortunately, this drift leads to a serious danger that the discussion of socially relevant problems is displaced by the

discussion of problems that are relevant only to like-minded scholars. Such scholarly self-encapsulation is particularly deleterious in scientific disciplines that claim to be about society. Fortunately, there is a remedy. There should be a continuous effort to make social scientific knowledge resonate with the human "objects" of analysis, with other academic disciplines, and with society at large. To the extent that scholarly consensus is meaningful and communicable to outsiders, we may be confident that substantive social relevance has not been lost in the process of esoteric scholarly debates.

Third is the drift from the intersubjective quality of social life to "scientific objectivity." Social facts have a specific quality that differentiates them from the brute facts of "nature," and a social science therefore requires a social ontology.[3] As Max Weber emphasized, the social world is constituted not by physical objects but by intersubjective meaning and "value relations" (*Wertbeziehungen*). This ontological distinctiveness of the social world has the epistemological implication that social scientific knowledge is based as much on *verstehen* as on *erklären* (Weber 1994, 2004a, 2004b). Weber was not opposed to causal explanation, but saw "explanatory understanding" as the comparative strength of social science.[4] Nevertheless the intellectual hegemony of "natural science" has made it tempting to reduce social facts to the status of brute facts. The price has once again been a loss of substance. Insofar as intersubjective meaning is the very stuff the social world is made of, it is unwise to sacrifice it on the altar of scientific objectivity. A renewed emphasis on the intersubjective quality of social life therefore means a return to what makes the social sciences substantively distinct.

Substance in Political Science

At the most general level, politics is about obligatory voluntarism in the conduct of common affairs (my claim). The idea is that after a moment of choice political decisions become binding on society. Since both "obligation" and "voluntarism" have negative connotations, my oxymoronic formula may not go down smoothly. However, a perusal of classical conceptions of politics shows that obligatory voluntarism is indeed the common denominator. We can take as a starting point the tough-minded views of conservative thinkers that the essence of politics is coercive decision-making (Schmitt 1932; Ritter 1947). We can pass from there to the more edifying views of liberal authors that politics amounts to the authoritative allocation of values in pluralistic societies (Easton 1971: 125–48). Or we may consider the republican view that politics

takes place whenever free citizens meet in the public and struggle about the common fate (Pettit 1997). Whatever our specific understanding of politics—pluralism, elitism, class struggle, and so on—we will always find that politics is about obligatory voluntarism, that is, combines some form of voluntarism with the notion of binding decisions.

As any other social scientific discipline, political science has to struggle with the problems discussed in the last section. In addition, it has to struggle with the problem that obligatory voluntarism is constantly challenged in modern societies. The secular advance of formal-legal rationality, as well as the ascendancy of economic rationality, undermines the voluntarism of political decision making and the acceptance of communal obligations on the part of those subject to such decision making. Almost a century ago, Max Weber pinpointed the threat to politics posed by bureaucratization as part and parcel of modern rationalization processes (Weber 1994). In fact, the scope for political decision making is severely limited by the "dumb" power of bureaucracies, the decisions of which tend to be reached and followed not in a spirit of obligatory voluntarism but on the basis of formal-legal rationality.

Today, more than ever before, this is compounded by the ascendancy of economic rationality. The epitome is the now-familiar imagery of globalization and global governance. Regardless of whether globalization is understood in purely economic or in broader socioeconomic terms, it is usually represented as the hammer and politics as the anvil. The logic of the market, as it were, forces itself upon political actors. Political jurisdictions are seen as competing for vital investment. In addition to impersonal market forces, networks of nongovernmental associations are seen as imposing their will upon political decision makers. Thus powerful lobbies of economic stakeholders and societal activists set the agenda for the domestic, national, and international political process. If political elites struggle against these forces, they will be punished by the market and/or societal actors.

In other words, governance rather than government has become the name of the game. Politicians have no choice other than to undergo the imperatives of the market and to accommodate demands from civil society. While there may be some truth in this, obligatory voluntarism is almost entirely absent from "governance without government" (Rosenau and Czempiel 1992). As a corollary, the substance of politics is in jeopardy. Insofar as politics is about obligatory voluntarism, the possibility of swimming against the tide and/or setting in motion new chains of events is the whole point about engaging in politics. Real politicians are therefore committed to a professional ethos that

upholds politics as an autonomous sphere of action and thus preserves the scope for obligatory voluntarism. For the same reason, real citizens are committed to an ethics of communal duty. As the 2008 financial crisis shows, at the end of the day societies and markets are the last to forgive politicians their failure to regulate socioeconomic intercourse.

If we recognize obligatory voluntarism as the substantive raison d'être of political practice, then this has moral implications for the discipline of political science (see Lynch, Bukovansky, and Rengger in this volume for further discussions of the moral implications of theorizing). Insofar as the idea of obligatory voluntarism that is enshrined in political practice represents, at the group level, the ideal of self-determination and freedom that make life worth living, political science has a responsibility for the provision of the conceptual tools and an adequate language to uphold politics as an autonomous sphere of action. To this end, political scientists should try to defend their discipline against colonization by other disciplines (especially economics), just as politicians should try to uphold their autonomy vis-à-vis the economy and society.[5] As political scientists we ought to elucidate where and how collective action is possible, even against all odds, lest our discipline lose its substance.

Substance in International Relations

As we have seen, politics understood as obligatory voluntarism risks losing its substance under the double strain of formal-legal and economic rationality. The academic discipline of International Relations (IR), by contrast, was originally defined by the absence of politics thus understood and has struggled ever since to find its proper substance. Unless one is ready to defend the hackneyed view that IR is defined by the state as the main international actor, and state power as the central analytical category, it is impossible to deny that the substance of the discipline is extremely evanescent. From IR's inception, scholars have therefore had serious difficulties in defining the substance of their study.

When IR was established after World War I, the dual credo was "peace through law" and "peace through commerce." After the "war to end all wars," liberal IR scholars advertised internationalism as a sort of politics to end all politics. Under liberal internationalism, the ultimate objective of international law and international organization was to get rid of state-based power politics and replace it by positive law and functional bureaucracy in the framework of the League of Nations. The hope was

that formal-legal rationality and bureaucratization would put an end to the vagaries of international politics and particularly to the scourge of war.

When the liberal internationalist project came to naught in World War II, political realists such as Morgenthau redefined IR in a paradoxical way (Morgenthau 1948). On the one hand, they declared that war and power were fundamental facts of life and defined IR as "politics among nations" and thereby formally placed it within Political Science. On the other hand they insisted that, in the absence of world government, international relations were qualitatively different from domestic politics.[6] International anarchy was seen as reducing the scope for voluntarism, and the security dilemma was taken to imply that states could retract their obligations any time. IR was thus negatively defined by the absence of politics as conventionally understood.

As a consequence of this realist gambit, IR after World War II became a discipline in constant search of its substance. Because the substantive links with politics were so tenuous, it is understandable that beginning with the Cold War, IR scholars went shopping for substance in other places. Following are just a few examples.

Early in the Cold War, transnationalism harked back to sociology and emphasized the importance of cross-border transactions between societies (Deutsch 1954). Critical peace research relied on social psychology and stressed that peace is less the absence of hostilities between countries than the outgrowth of positive relationships between people (Burton 1962). Liberal scholars borrowed from economics and highlighted the direct and indirect effects of asymmetric interdependence (Keohane and Nye 1977). The search for substantive anchorage was accelerated after the end of the Cold War. Rules and regimes were rediscovered as the defining characteristic of international life (Kratochwil 1989a; Rittberger and Mayer 1993). Global governance was proposed as a paradigmatic alternative to international politics (Rosenau and Czempiel 1992). And the republican legacy of political thought was applied to the unlikely field of IR (Onuf 1998b; Deudney 2007).

The list could be continued ad infinitum, but the basic point is clear. IR is driven by a chronic lack of substance to constantly explore new avenues. Already during the Cold War, there were good empirical reasons to go beyond state-centrism and the realist obsession with power. Even more so, those who point to the obsolescence of traditional IR in the age of globalization and global governance do have a point. Economic and societal transactions are increasingly taking place in a transnational if not in a global context. For good and for ill, however,

the effect is that the substantive delimitation of IR is completely up for grabs. Virtually anything happening across or beyond the boundaries of territorial states comes within the bailiwick of IR or, more broadly, "international studies." Leading IR scholars are now getting away with unsubstantial hobbyhorses such as *Harry Potter and International Relations*, or "Sovereignty and the UFO" (Nexon and Neumann 2006; Wendt and Duvall 2008).

Of course this is not to say that the traditional conundrums of IR, from the reasons of conflict to the prospects for cooperation, have suddenly become irrelevant. But calling for a return to substance is of little avail because the discipline has not been built around substance in the first place. In the absence of tangible substance it is hardly surprising that, as much as (or even more than) any other social scientific discipline, IR experiences the usual diversionary moves: a drift from problem-driven research to theoretically or methodologically driven scholarship, a drift from socially relevant problems to esoteric scholarly debates, and a drift from the intersubjective quality of social life to false pretenses of "scientific objectivity."

It has been said that IR is pursuing an elusive quest for its theoretical foundations (Ferguson and Mansbach 1988). However, the quest for substance has been at least as elusive as, and arguably a driving force behind, the elusive quests for theory and methods, academic standards of scholarship, and scientific objectivity. The problem is structural. For the foreseeable future, there is no definitive solution. Individual scholars may find their refuge in substantively defined subfields such as area studies or conflict research. But as a disciplinary endeavor IR is condemned to continue its desperate search for the Holy Grail.

Conclusion

So what do we mean when we say that substance matters? I have argued that the term substance is simply a marker to indicate that we should revert to whatever happens to be our fundamental point. My claim was substantiated by examples from various discursive domains, including the social sciences in general and political science in particular. Unfortunately it lead to a negative finding in IR's case, which has been constituted in a paradoxical way: as a subdiscipline of Political Science defined by the absence of politics understood in the conventional meaning of the term. The result is disappointing for IR scholars (like myself), but disillusionment is perhaps better than the continuation of self-delusion.

Leaving aside the ailments of our beloved academic discipline, I would like to end this chapter by pinpointing a general discursive pattern in intellectual life. There seems to be a sort of cycle that starts with substance, shifts to a progressive emphasis on nonsubstance, and finally places substance back into focus. The earliest known example of this cycle started with the concern of pre-Socratic philosophers with the substantive origin (ἀρχή) of the phenomenal world. In reaction to such crude materialism, Plato extolled transcendental ideas and saw them as prior to concrete manifestations. In reaction to Plato's philosophy, Aristotle saw matter (ὕλη) as prior to form, and form as accidental to substance (τὸ ὑποκείμενον).

The example shows that, in the long run, the drift away from substance can unleash a sequence of dialectical moves that may turn out to be progressive from the viewpoint of intellectual history. At least in the short run, however, this is far from automatic. Intellectual life can be stuck in formalism for intolerably long periods of time. It is in such periods when the call for a return to substance is the most important.

Notes

1. This view has emerged in amicable discussion with Rosalba Fratini.
2. Sometimes this tendency has achieved programmatic status: "The content of 'science' is primarily the methods and rules, not the subject matter, since we can use these methods to study virtually anything. . . . The unity of all science consists alone in its method, not its material" (King et al. 1994: 9, quoting Pearson 1892: 16).
3. This requirement was already evident to Durkheim (1982), and later reconfirmed by Wittgenstein (1958) and Searle (1995).
4. We can rise above the mere registration of functional relationships and rules ("laws") typical of all "natural science" (where causal laws are established for events and patterns, and individual events then "explained" on this basis) and achieve something quite inaccessible to natural science: namely an "understanding" of the behaviour of participating individuals. (Weber 2004b: 322)
5. Totalizing notions of governmentality à la Foucault or systemic self-organization à-la Luhmann are particularly unhelpful in this regard, as they obfuscate the scope for political agency.
6. The same realist adage was reformulated in structural terms by Waltz (1979).