

# Big Pictures – IR’s Cosmological Turn

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Bentley B. Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 338pp. ISBN 978-1-108-40400-6 HB£75, PB, £21.99)

William Bain, *Political Theology of International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 254pp, ISBN 978-0-19-8859990-1, HB £65)

Milja Kurki, *International Relations in A Relational Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 216pp, ISBN 978-0-19-885088-5 HB £65)

Cosmology is the study of the physical universe, nowadays an active area of physics and astronomy. Its findings have implications that go far beyond those disciplines; as Christopher Smeenk and George Ellis persuasively argue, cosmology was until recently seen as a branch of philosophy, and still has major philosophical importance and importance for the human sciences taken as a whole.<sup>1</sup> This is because, first, the uniqueness of the universe means that cosmology is necessarily a historical science and, second because cosmology ‘deals with the physical situation that is the context in the large for human existence’.<sup>2</sup> The three books examined in this essay run with this thought, and between them, provide a wide variety of ways in which cosmology informs, influences, or perhaps determines the way in which we think about both the subject matter and the discourse of international relations. After looking at each book in turn I will explore what this putative turn towards ‘big pictures’ tells us about the current state of the art, using as a reference point Justin Rosenberg’s influential essay ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’.<sup>3</sup>

These three books are very different in scope and style, ranging from a conventional study which fits easily within the International Relations discourse (Bentley B. Allan) via a work of political theology (William Bain) to a call to reorder all the social and

1. Christopher Smeenk and George Ellis, ‘Philosophy of Cosmology’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/cosmology/>. Last accessed October 27, 2020.
2. Ibid.
3. Justin Rosenberg, ‘International Relations in the Prison of Political Science’, *International Relations* 30, no. 2 (2016): 127–53.

natural sciences (Milja Kurki). Does it make sense to think of them as engaged in, if not the same enterprise, at least similar projects? This is, in the end, an open question but it is worth noting that the three authors cite each other identifying cognate ambitions, and I think there is enough to this process of mutual recognition to allow us provisionally to see them as participants in the same, broadly defined, story.

As just noted, Allan's *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders* (2018) is the most conventional of the three volumes both in terms of content and general methodology. Allan's central thesis is that the dominant cosmology of an age feeds into the purposes of the state and, via the state, the international order, such that changes in the cosmological picture of the world produce changes in the nature of international order. In his central chapters he traces three such changes. The first such is the early-modern shift towards a mechanical understanding of the universe which culminates in Newton's laws and is reflected in what he calls balance of power Europe, 1550–1815. Second, changes in the historical understanding of the universe and its peoples, summarised inadequately by Darwinism, leads to the notion of development which dominates the British Colonial Office and then the League of Nations between 1850 and 1945. Then, finally, cybernetic understandings of the universe lead to the focus on growth of the World Bank and the post-war international order 1945–2015. The key terms here are 'balance', 'development' and 'growth' – Allan argues that the dominant understanding of the purposes of political rule determines the nature of international order and is itself determined by the prevailing cosmological conception of how the universe works, conceptions that are summarised by these three words.

Some elements of this analysis are, on the face of it, reasonably familiar. For example, Christian Reus-Smit has argued cogently that the moral purpose of the state shapes the international order, Andrew Phillips developed this position and Daniel Nexon, amongst many others, linked the emergent European balance of power system to new thinking about celestial mechanics.<sup>4</sup> Allan acknowledges these sources, but claims to be saying something rather different; that the purpose of the state is actually determined by cosmology in the sense that cosmological thinking permeates the discourse of the ages in question in such a way that the relationship between e.g. the new mechanics and the balance of power system is causal rather than simply a matter of analogy. This, incidentally, is a position common to all three works under discussion here, each rejects the idea that they are simply using cosmology as a source of analogies. Allan makes the strong claim that his approach is dynamic as opposed to what he sees as the static approach of Reus-Smit. His argument is that 'cosmological elements arising from the Western scientific tradition made possible and desirable a transformation in the discourse of state purpose underlying international orders' (p. 20). The aim is to move from cosmological discourse to meso-level mechanisms of change into a macro-level of transformation which he terms *recursive institutionalisation*.

This thesis is supported by detailed historical studies of the three eras with which he is concerned. These are impressive but I still feel that the argument here is somewhat overstated, not so much in terms of the first of his three terms but with regard to the second and third of his key words. As he demonstrates, plenty of examples can be found of

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4. Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Daniel Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Andrew Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

statesmen and women and bureaucrats using these terms, but I'm not convinced that the overall view of the British Colonial Office was oriented towards development much before the interwar-war period (if then). In any event, the British Empire although the largest was by no means the only European Empire. Again, growth was for sure an important consideration post-1945 but until the late 1980s the struggle between East and West was at least as important, if for no other reason than the fact that growth was defined so differently across the divided world. For that matter, this latter point is still important – contests over the meaning of growth testify to the importance of the term but also tell against the idea that growth can be understood via cosmology.

William Bain's *Political Theology of International Order* (2020) shares with Allan the central idea that cosmology drives conceptions of political order, and his account of the importance of Newtonian physics also reinforces that dimension of Allan's position. However, as his title suggests, he traces the origins of the cosmology that underpinned Newton's work to medieval theology. The understandings of the universe that came into play in the early modern period and the orders that emerged from them did not, on his account, constitute the sort of break with the medieval past that much conventional thought assumes. The figures who are usually credited with that break – Newton, Descartes, Locke in the realm of natural science and philosophy, Luther, Grotius, Hobbes in the realm of political philosophy – are themselves the product of debates and contestations that are visible in the twists and turns of medieval theology. The influence of these debates lingers on today, in a world which no longer recognises the origin of some of its most important ideas.

After establishing that international order has to be understood as an outcrop from the broader notion of order in the world, Bain sets out to understand the source of order based on two different accounts of God's role in the creation and sustaining of the universe, two different combinations of reason (here associated with Athens and classical philosophy) and revelation (truths about the personal God of the Old and New Testament revealed by faith, with Jerusalem as the corresponding metonym). On one account, that of Immanent Order, creation is a logical, rational process and the laws which govern it, physical as well as ethical, can be explored by human reason. On this account, the classical philosophers, Platonists and Aristotelian, got some things wrong, assuming, for example, that there was no beginning or end to creation, but Augustine, Aquinas and others were able to take up their thought and make it consistent with Christian revelation, Athens and Jerusalem reconciled. The alternative notion, of Imposed Order, rejects the idea that God worked through rational systems; instead, the emphasis is on creation as an act of God's will. Key here is the rejection of the idea that there are 'intelligible universals that inhere in individual things, such as Plato's forms or Aristotle's divine ideas' (p. 46). It is God's will that creates order not God's intellect – we live in a contingent universe, things are as they are not because they fit into some rational scheme (although, for the most part, they can be made to do so), but because this is how God wants things to be. God's freedom cannot be restricted by reason, Athens and Jerusalem are, ultimately, unreconcilable.

The central thesis of *Political Theology of International Order* is that the standard conceptions of international order which have emerged over the last few centuries rest on this notion of Imposed Order. 'The idea of independent states in a condition of anarchy is a political analogue of the radically contingent world, composed of isolated things, which God willed into existence without any necessary reason' (p. 53). Political contracts and

the notion of international society assume the same world composed of individual things, to be understood empirically by a focus on efficient causes. Liberal, realist and English School theories of order all work with these same basic elements which are underpinned by the notion of Imposed Order. The theory of Immanent Order, represented by notions such as natural law, continues to exist alongside these conceptions of international order but as a kind of standing critique of the politics created by Imposed Order. Although we live in a world where we are no longer comfortable with the idea that theology provides the underpinning to order, it is 'Jerusalem' rather than 'Athens' that governs our thinking of how the world works.

The rest of *Political Theology of International Order* consists of an extended defence of this thesis, first focusing on some key thinkers – Luther, Grotius and Hobbes – then on the Political Theology of systems and society and on the implications of the contemporary absence of God. These are readings based on a deep understanding of the writers and issues concerned. One of the more depressing features of a great deal of contemporary international political theory is the way in which important thinkers are mined for their insights, reduced to a CliffsNotes version and employed in discourse in a 'fire and forget' manner – this week Aristotle, next week Kant. This approach to scholarship perhaps reflects the pressures of building a career in the neoliberal university, where internal and external forces encourage over-hasty judgement and publication. In any event, as will be immediately apparent to the reader, Bain has put in the work necessary to defend his sometimes controversial arguments and interpretations. There is a depth of engagement here with primary and secondary sources which is deeply impressive – this is scholarship of the highest order, and that stands whether or not one is convinced by the argument.

Both Allan and Bain are concerned with the stories that we tell ourselves about the nature of our world and with the way these stories are shaped by ideas that we are barely, if at all, conscious of. For Allan, these stories emerge as second- or third-hand reflections of ways in which we conceptualise the universe. For Bain, these stories rest on theological foundations that we no longer recognise or understand. Both authors deconstruct the stories they tell so that we can see the assumptions on which they rest, but in neither case can we see a way of liberating ourselves from their power.

Kurki's *International Relations in A Relational Universe* (2020) poses a similar problem but rests on a different foundation. She acknowledges that writers such as Allan and Bain have identified the background to the stories we have told ourselves about the international and the social but contends that an approach based on scientific cosmology would be more than just another such narrative. Here we are not dealing with a narrative based on a particular understanding of the universe, which might have been the case had Kurki employed scientific cosmology as a source of metaphors but instead with an account of international relations, and social life more generally, as comprehensible only as part of the cosmos. Just as Alexander Wendt in *Quantum Mind and Social Science* holds that human beings are not just *like* 'walking wave-functions' but are 'walking wave-functions' so Kurki, although engaged in a different enterprise, agrees with Wendt that what we are concerned with is ontology, the nature of reality, and not just with a plausible analogy or metaphor.<sup>5</sup>

5. Alexander Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Scientific cosmology is an area of speculation much enlivened in recent years by the interaction between, on the one hand, the ongoing quest for a way of reconciling general relativity theory with quantum theory and, on the other, the copious information provided by the Hubble and other radio telescopes, and by experimental resources such as the Large Hadron Collider. As a result, there are a number of different scientific cosmologies on offer – in the first part of this book Kurki explores the menu of theories with helpful summaries of some very complex subjects, such as string theory and the multiverse. The cosmology she eventually commits to is the relational cosmology associated with the work of Lee Smolin and, in terms of its implications for the social, Roberto Unger.<sup>6</sup> Relational cosmology understands the cosmos as composed solely of relationships – on this account there are no ‘things’ in the sense of separate entities, and there is no background or environment, there are only relationships. The rest of her book consists of an elaboration of the implications of this challenging notion.

Relational cosmology has some connections both to the so-called ‘new materialism’ and to speculations about post-humanity. Certainly, the aim to unify physical and social ontology precludes any kind of special status for human beings, or, for that matter, for life in the wider sense, and this obviously poses problems for politics and, especially, ethics. Much of the second half of Kurki’s book consists of an attempt to think through these problems. Unkindly but not wholly inaccurately, one might argue that this constitutes an attempt to preserve humanistic, liberal values in a theoretical environment which actually has no space for values of any kind. In the event, a kind of cosmological cosmopolitanism is identified as ethically viable and consistent with the relational nature of reality, but it is difficult to see this as a wholly satisfactory solution to the dilemmas Kurki identifies.

There is, though, a more general problem with her approach. Relational approaches to international theory are already well established and have been since Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel Nexon’s seminal article ‘Relations before States’ in 1999.<sup>7</sup> Since then, Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory has also been incorporated into international relations theorising and the turn towards ‘practice’ more generally has involved strong relational elements.<sup>8</sup> None of these trends and turns brings together the social and the physical in the way that relational cosmology allegedly does, but, still, it is worth asking whether the value-added by making this step is worth the effort involved in achieving the level of competence that entitles one to express a preference for Smolin’s

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6. See most recently, Lee Smolin, *Einstein’s Unfinished Revolution: The Search for What Lies Beyond the Quantum* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019) and especially Roberto Unger and Lee Smolin, *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
  7. Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel Nexon, ‘Relations before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics’, *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3 (1999): 291–332.
  8. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and see for example, ‘Forum: “Actor-Network Theory” and International Relationality’, *International Political Sociology* 7, no. 3 (2013): 332–49; Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, eds. *International Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

relational cosmology as opposed to, for example, Sean Carroll's defence of the 'Many Worlds' interpretation or Brian Greene's advocacy of string theory.<sup>9</sup> Kurki has reached this level of competence, but I have not, and I am pretty sure neither will most of her readers. In effect, she is inviting us to either accept her version or to become sufficiently adept at reading the literature to make our own minds up – but it is not clear that the gains from such an investment of time outweigh the costs involved, given that non-cosmological understandings of relationalism are available.

So, not unproblematic but still a major work, challenging and thought provoking, and the same could be said of the other two books under review here. I hope enough has been said already to encourage the reader to investigate all three books, but now I'd like to ask what this putative turn towards cosmology indicates about the state of International Relations theory. All three authors signal their dissatisfaction with the current state of the art in IR theory; what is the problem and why might cosmology be the solution?

A useful starting point for this quest is Rosenberg's article which argues that International Relations underperforms and is underappreciated by comparison with, say, Geography, History, Sociology and Comparative Literature. Each of these discourses has latched on to one feature of social reality – spatiality and temporality respectively for the first two – and International Relations lacks such a central focus. Geography and History, Rosenberg argues, have taken possession of something that is general to the social world, and so can produce concepts of relevance across the human sciences. International Relations has developed no such hold on a particular facet of social reality because, Rosenberg argues, it emerged, and still is widely seen, as a sub-field of Political Science. The way out of this prison is to see 'societal multiplicity' as the facet of social reality that IR can claim to own, and, he maintains, multiplicity understood via the concept of 'uneven and combined development' is what the discipline has to offer to the human sciences.

For the most part, scholars have not taken up that concept as the key which unlocks IR's potential, but Rosenberg's diagnosis of the ills of the discipline has been more successful. The sense that the current state of play in the discipline of International Relations is unsatisfactory is widespread and it seems to me that the cosmological turn is a product of this dissatisfaction, but a product that goes in the opposite direction from that espoused by Rosenberg. Rosenberg's aim is to raise the status of the discipline by giving it a clear focus so that it can stand alongside with Geography, History et al., – this is a project to 'level-up' the discipline. The cosmologists, in their different ways, adopt the alternative strategy of envisaging an account of the social world in which *all* the disciplines that currently make up the human sciences are to be seen as by-products of their preferred all-encompassing views of the world. On this account there are no superior discourses for International Relations to emulate; instead, we have a level playing field in which the traditional discourses envied by Rosenberg are in as subordinate a position as International Relations itself. For Bain, the conceptions of order that all the social sciences employ, one way or another, are underpinned by the different ways in which God works in the

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9. Sean Carroll, *Something Deeply Hidden: Quantum Worlds and the Emergence of Spacetime* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2019); Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2010).



world, ways summarised by the notions of Immanent and Imposed Order. For Allan, the core cosmological notions of each age – balance, development, growth – act as master concepts shaping the particular conceptualisations employed by the individual human sciences. For Kurki, relational cosmology provides the underpinning for a post-human social world based solely on a multiplicity of different kinds of relationships.

So, in a way, the inferiority complex that some scholars of International Relations attribute to their discipline is recognised and validated but also contextualised – all the human sciences need to recognise their secondary status and prepare for the changes that a proper appreciation of cosmology will require. These changes are particularly acute from Kurki's understanding of what cosmology demands, but they are present in a less demanding way in the other two versions on offer. In any event, irrespective of the scale of the allegedly necessary rethink, International Relations scholars can find much that is reassuring in this new way of looking at the social world – while we may not have a well-founded stand-alone discipline neither has anyone else.

But is reassurance really necessary? Is there actually a problem to which the turn to cosmology is a solution of a sort or, as I suspect, is this alleged problem simply one more example of International Relations taking itself far too seriously? It may well be the case that Rosenberg and others are right that International Relations has not produced any major ideas which have been taken up by the other social sciences, but should this really be a source of concern? The purpose of an academic discipline is first and foremost to illuminate the particular aspect of social reality that it focuses on, rather than to provide ideas for other disciplines. The real issue is how good the discipline in question is at performing its primary task, in our case, of grasping the nature of the international.

The verdict here is, I suggest, a mixed one. International Relations scholars are pretty good at grasping the essentials of interstate conflict and co-operation, and at least the fundamentals of intersocietal relations and the politics of the international economy. But such scholars are not so good – although they are getting better – at grasping the importance of the global dimensions of religion, social class, race and gender. In short, while the report card for the discipline would include such classic comments as 'could do better' it would be generally positive and would reflect the progress of the discipline. After a period during the Cold War when the discipline was excessively focused on guns and bombs, in the last few decades we have picked up again the wider agendas of the 1920s and 1930s with a new (but actually old, because these were major concerns back then) focus on race, empire, religion, class and culture. In short, there is no reason to think that there is something fundamentally wrong with the discipline and its approach to the international.

None of this should be taken as undermining the importance of the studies under examination in this essay. Each of the three books is a source of important insights and each deserves to be on reading lists for advanced courses on International Relations theory. But I think we should reject the implicit invitation for the discipline to take a 'cosmological turn'. Certainly, big pictures are useful to have, but they don't always give us the kind of detail that is required if the key question is where next to go. After reading these studies we have had worlds revealed to us of which we were previously unaware and that, of course, is good. But if what we are interested in is for the report card of the discipline to show greater progress, we need to find a path from the world-revealing dimension of theory to the action-guiding, problem-solving dimension, and, for all their qualities, this is not something that the three books under consideration can offer.

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