

# **On the Role of Metatheory in the Academic Discipline of International Relations**

Submitted by Lucas Grassi Freire to the University of Exeter  
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## THESIS ABSTRACT

**On the Role of Metatheory in the Academic Discipline of International Relations**

This thesis investigates in three parts the role played by metatheory in the discipline of International Relations (IR). Part one defines metatheory as 'systematic discourse about theory' and classifies it in a typology combining elements internal or external to the discipline with intellectual or contextual aspects of theorising. Each combination has particular functions. They also add to the roles played by several modes of metatheoretical inquiry (hermeneutical, evaluative, corrective, critical and historical). The typology offered in part one clarifies the general roles of metatheory as a constraining and enabling discursive mechanism. This is also discussed in part two, addressing how IR scholars portray metatheory's role in the discipline. Arguments against and in favour of metatheory are scrutinised, leading to a qualified defence of metatheoretical research in IR. Some of the negative impact of metatheorising in IR is acknowledged, but ultimately a stronger case attempting to eliminate it from the field cannot be sustained for analytical reasons. The merits of metatheory, therefore, will depend on how it operates in particular instances. A selection of illustration cases in part three further develops the argument. The first case stresses how metatheoretical directives shaped 17<sup>th</sup> century views of the Holy Roman Empire. It indicates that metatheory can frame theoretical claims even in a weak disciplinary context. A stronger disciplinary environment frames the second case, analysing a number of IR theories on the impact of the Peace of Westphalia in the European states-system. This discussion often alludes to the notion of hierarchy. The third case examines the interaction between metatheoretical directives and theories of hierarchy. These arguments are not necessarily compatible with the metatheoretical principles argued by their authors. As a mechanism, therefore, metatheory does not relate to theory in a deterministic way. Part three itself is, of course, a metatheoretical study that further illustrates the thesis.

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And further, by these, my son, be admonished:  
of making many books there is no end;  
and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

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