TRADING OFF EXPLANATORY VIRTUES

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1. INTRODUCTION

The paper draws on Graham Allison's case-study of the Cuban Missile Crisis in which three different accounts are constructed from three different explanatory models, each situated at a different level of analysis. First, it is shown that each model produces genuine explanations which could not have been arrived at from one of the other accounts. With this prima facie case for pluralism in hand, the indispensability of the different models is then accounted for by linking the relevance of each model to different explanatory contexts.

2. THREE MODELS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The three models outlined by Allison(1999) are the Rational Actor Model (Model I), the Organizational Behaviour Model (Model II) and the Governmental Politics Model (Model III). For each model Allison elaborates an explicit theoretical framework which he then uses to analyse the Cuban Missile Crisis.

MODEL I: RATIONAL ACTOR MODEL
Framework: Within this model, international relations are made up of the interplay between unitary nation states that act on a rational basis, i.e. they strive for utility maximization. The selected action is the one with the best cost-benefit ratio.
Application: In response to the placement of missiles in Cuba the US picked the option of the blockade rather than an air strike or doing nothing, because that was the rational option, avoiding a quick escalation and leaving the USSR to make the next move.

MODEL II: ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESS MODEL
Framework: This model opens the black box of the unitary state as principal actor. Instead, international relations are seen as the result of the interplay between the myriad of organizations constituting the state. Primary inferences in this model follow the logic of organization instead of the logic of optimization. State output is no longer aimed at one clear goal, but is the common denominator of a whole set of forces, the result of which might well be something none of the organizations had called for. Furthermore, a typical feature of

organizations is that they always strive for bigger budgets. They are also cumbersome. As such they act on the basis of standard operating procedures (SOP) that were devised for earlier purposes instead of reacting on the basis of present challenges. Because of this slow response time, organizations have a strong urge to decrease uncertainty. The alternatives open to an organizational actor are severely limited by its repertoire of SOP's.
Application: After the US had detected the missiles, air strike had long been the most popular option within the 'Executive Committee' of senior advisors surrounding president Kennedy. However, the US Air Force strongly opposed the air strike because of the uncertainty associated with it. The Air Force could not guarantee that it would succeed in destroying all nuclear missiles at once and the SOP's at its disposal did not allow for the 'surgical' air strike president Kennedy had in mind, but only for extensive bombing. On the other hand, the US Navy disposed of an SOP for a blockade and already had considerable strength present in the field.

MODEL III: GOVERNMENTAL POLITICS MODEL
Framework: Allison's third model zeroes in on the actual people that make up states and organizations. The important explanatory concepts include personal power, individual networks, skills of persuasion, charisma and the 'fog of war', referring to people's awareness of their situation to be 'cloudy at best' (Allison, 1999; 382). Disagreement, miscommunication and misunderstandings are common occurrences. The idea of coherent and transparent state behaviour is totally abandoned in favour of international relations as a 'messy' collage of personal interests, feuds, ambitions, etc.
Application: Because of the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, Republicans in the U.S. Congress made Cuban policy into a major issue for the upcoming congressional elections later in 1962. Therefore, Kennedy immediately decided on a strong response rather than a diplomatic one. Although a majority of ExCom initially favored air strikes, those closest to the president - such as his brother and Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, and special counsel Theodore Sorensen - favored the blockade. At the same time, Kennedy got into arguments with proponents of the air strikes, such as Air Force General Curtis LeMay. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy also distrusted the CIA and its advice. This combination of push and pull led to the implication of a blockade.

3. THE CASE FOR PLURALISM

The models incorporate different units of analysis and different ways of making inferences. As such it's not immediately clear how to combine these models, so it might be opportune to try and eliminate some of them, or incorporate one into the other. For example the kind of methodological individualism as defended by Jon Elster leaves no room for other models than Model III, which takes the individual as basic unit of analysis:

> "The elementary unit of social life is the individual human action. To explain social institutions and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the actions and interaction of individuals. This view, often referred to as methodological individualism, is in my view trivially true." (Elster, 1989; 13)

However, there seems to be a prima facie case for the indispensability of each of the models:

- Model I is the only model that can account for the crisis in terms of the 'missile gap' in its explanations, i.e. the difference in nuclear firepower between the United States and the USSR. Nonetheless, the missile gap and the ensueing imbalance of power is commonly seen as one of the USSR's main motivations for placing missiles nuclear missiles on Cuban soil.
- Model II manages to make sense of the absence of camouflage of Russian positions in Cuba, something which enabled an American U2 spy plane to detect Russian activity on Cuba, triggering the crisis.
- For its part, Model III makes sense of why the USSR still decided to place nuclear missiles on Cuba given that total annihilation was one of the more probable outcomes.

To make sense of this prima facie case in the light of Elster's remark, I start out by drawing a distinction between description and explanation. As Bas Van Fraassen put it:

> "The discussion of explanation went wrong at the very beginning [i.e. Hempel] when explanation was conceived of as a relationship like description: a relation between theory and fact. Really, it is a three-term relation, between theory, fact and context." (Van Fraassen, 1980; 156)

In Van Fraassen's view, an explanation requires not only description, but also relevance with respect to a context of inquiry, i.e. the specific question at hand. So an explanation is essentially an *answer.* This entails that it never stands alone, but always in relation to a question (like someone is never 'a daughter' but 'a daughter of'). As such, from a purely descriptive point of view, Elster might well be right in asserting that any social event can ultimately be described as the actions of individuals. However, an analyst in international relations is not concerned with merely describing social events, but in explaining them; and good explanations can not simply be equated with good descriptions.

To provide more insight in these contextual features of explanation, it has been suggested to analyse questions further by pinpointing the context-specific desire or *epistemic interest* they originate from. For example Peter Lipton states that:

> "More recently, it has been argued that explanation is 'interest relative', and that we can analyse some of this relativity with a contrastive analysis of the phenomenon to be explained." (Lipton, 1990; 249)

The idea of epistemic interests has been developed further by Jeroen Van Bouwel and Erik Weber, specifically with respect to social science. They distinguish between four different questions that are associated with different epistemic interests:

(E) SURPRISE
Why does *x* have property P, rather than the expected property P'?

(I) THERAPEUTIC/PREVENTIVE
Why does *x* have property P, rather than the ideal property P'?

(F) MANIPULATION/PREDICTION
Is the fact that *x* has property P the predictable consequence of some other events?

(H) PSYCHOLOGICAL DESIRE
Is the fact that *x* has property P causally connected with events we are more familiar with?

Consequently, I set out to show that even if one holds that social reality can ultimately be described in terms of individual actions, Allisons models still provide good and complementary explanations. Within the framework that has been introduced, this is possible by linking the models to the questions they answer and explanatory interests they serve.

4. MODELS IN CONTEXT

I start with the general question 'Why did the USSR put missiles in Cuba?'. Model I tends to favour the 'missile gap' hypothesis, positioning events within a broad international context of power relations. On the other hand, Model III reveals Krushchev's huge personal emphasis on Berlin and reports him making a strong link between Berlin and the Cuban missiles. The overall explanation that emerges is that by placing missiles in Cuba, the USSR wanted to close the missile gap *in order to* have more bargaining power as far as the stand-off in Berlin was concerned. Hence, the missile gap is indeed a cause (as pointed out by Model I), but Model III learns that it is only an intermediate cause. Model III is more complete (describes more phases of the causal chain) than Model I, so it might be argued that Model III gives the best answer to the general question 'Why did the USSR put missiles in Cuba?' and Model I can in this case be dispensed with. However, this conclusion is false because it presupposes that explanatory power depends solely on completeness of description; completeness is just one of the features which can constitute a good explanation. Explanatory power is linked to the underlying epistemic interest. Let us see how this works for our question.

One of the possible underlying epistemic interests is predictability, which is typically expressed in F-type questions. It can be argued that Model I is the only one that answers the following question:

Was the fact that the USSR put missiles in Cuba the predictable effect of other events?

Predictions demand a model that makes lawlike statements. For this, the statements must be general and necessary. From Model I it could be inferred for example that whenever there is a missile gap between countries and these countries have a disagreement, the weakest country will have a strong desire to close that gap. This statement is both general enough and gets its necessity from the underlying expected utility calculus which yields an unambiguous solution. The link with Berlin (and more generally, the ultimate reason why a country wants to fill the missile gap) is not important for answering this question.

Another possible underlying epistemic interest is reduction to familiar events, typically expressed by H-type questions. The coarse-grained, unrealistic nature of Model I is compensated by its ability to bring any situation down to a simple calculus. In this model,

Khrushchev wondering whether or not to put nuclear missiles in Cuba is in all Model I respects similar to being at a bakery pondering about whether to have just bread or to go for the croissant. As such, rational expectations are the ultimate stereotype, a crucial feature when familiarity is pursued. Then again, Model III has an interpretative approach, calling on the observers to *understand* why a person did something at a certain moment, trying to provoke a sense of 'if I had been in his shoes, I would have acted in the same way'. As such, Model III also makes an attempt to make a certain situation familiar. Thus, the H-interest is also served by this model.

Let us now look at some contrastive questions, i.e. questions not of the general form 'Why x', but of the form 'Why x, rather than y', for instance:

> Why did the Soviet Union decide to place offensive missiles in Cuba, rather than not place offensive missiles (and try to improve its bargaining position in another way).

This can be seen as an I-type question (other strategies may be considered more desirable). From Khrushchev's perspective, closing the missile gap was only one of the options to increase his bargaining position concerning Berlin. It was not the most rational one, because the situation might have led to total annihilation of both sides. To explain this undesirable action, Model III suggests the path of trying to get a closer understanding of what person Khrushchev was and how he looked at the world. Furthermore, Model III emphasizes Khrushchev's personal responsibility and suggests that the Cuban Missile Crisis might never have happened had someone else been in power.

When situations have unexpected outcomes, Model II offers tools to make sense of the puzzlement. As the actions emerging from large organizations can take very strange, unfamiliar forms due to organizational biases and raise serious doubts concerning the rationality of the organizational process as a whole, this second model allows for an account of why something was judged as unexpected. As such, unexpected events can be explained as the result of the presence of programmes of 'standard operating procedures' which were designed not for the present situation but for some previous circumstance or as outcomes of long and slow processes of organizational struggle bringing about actions nobody might ever have called for. An example of Model II providing an answer to an E-type question is the following:

> Why did the USSR decide to place offensive missiles in Cuba without camouflaging the nuclear sites during construction, while they did so (only) after U-2 flights pinpointed their locations?

The organizational process model explains this unexpected aspect the best. The implementation of the USSR decision is assigned to organizations that operate by SOP's; as the Soviets never established nuclear missile bases outside of their country at the time, they assigned the tasks to established departments, which in turn followed their own set procedures. The department's procedures were not designed for Cuban but for Soviet conditions. As a consequence, mistakes were made that allowed the US to quite easily learn of the program's existence. Such mistakes included Soviet troops forgetting to camouflage and even decorate their barracks with Red Army Stars viewable from above.

5. CONCLUSION

Bringing together the different models and epistemic interests yields the following diagram:

	E	**I**	**F**	**H**
I	-	-	x	x
II	x	-	-	-
III	-	x	-	x

None of the models provides the best explanations overall, so it seems that in no case for reductionism can be made here. Rather than suggesting to eliminate some of the models or incorporate one into the other, an analysis of the different models through the lens of the epistemic interests they serve shows that different models appear to be preferable depending on the kind of questions one sets out to answer. As such, good explanatory practice in international relations needn't start from the question which account is the right one, but rather from an assessment of their explanatory power relative to the purpose at hand.

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