

Organization / What are concepts and theories good for?

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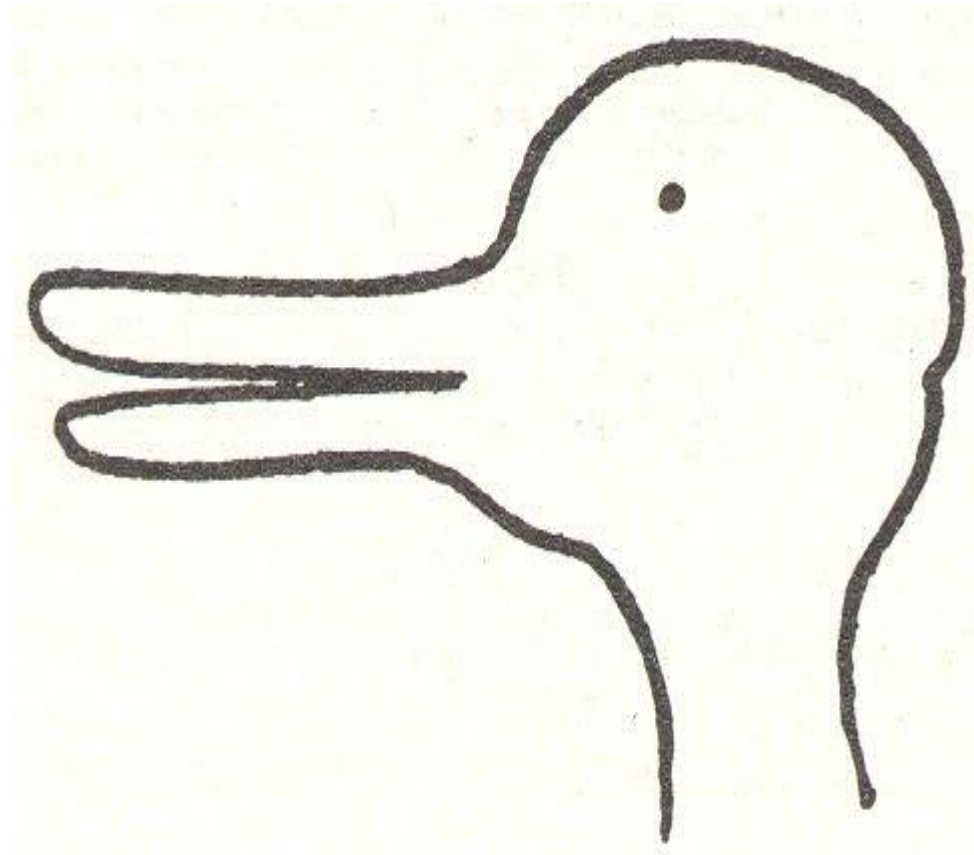
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Outline

- What are concepts and theories good for?
- Ontology and epistemology: back to the very basics

What are concepts good for?

- heuristics
- learning
- communication
- evaluation

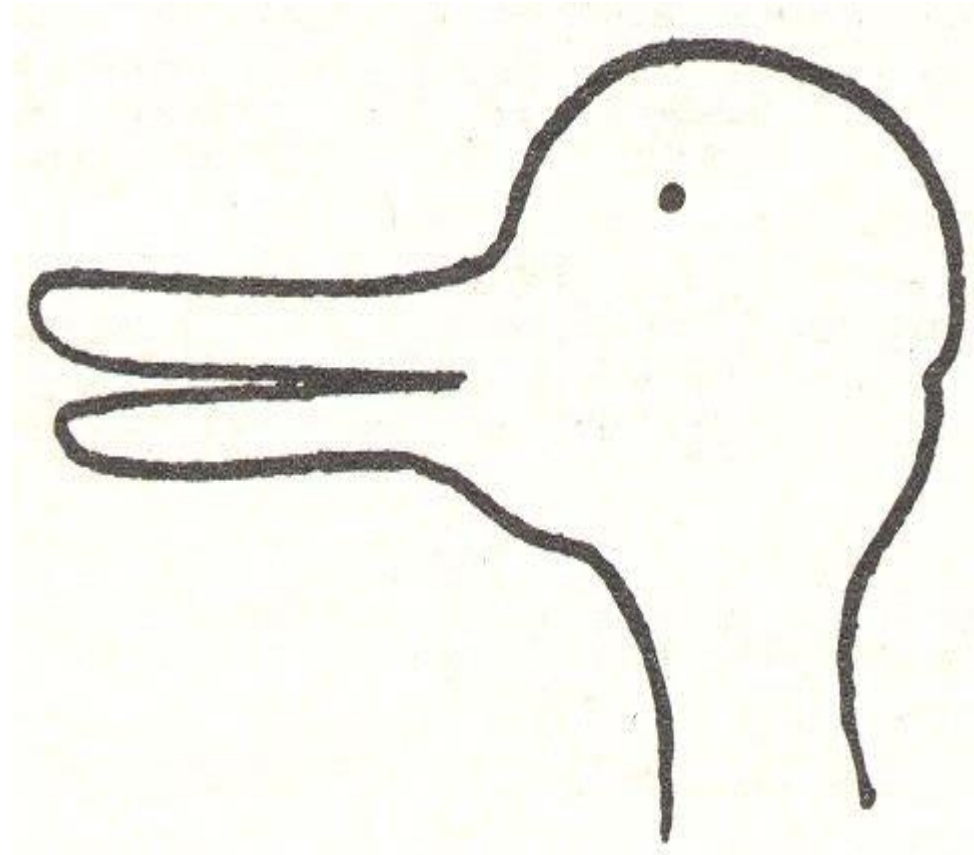


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Concrete vs. abstract concepts



Security as an abstract concept

National security must be defined as integrity of the national territory and its institutions. (Morgenthau 1960: 563) ... The survival of a political unit, such as a nation, and its identity. (Morgenthau 1952: 973)

vs.

The freeing of people (as individuals and groups) from those physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do. ... Security and emancipation are two sides of the same coin. Emancipation, not power or order, produces true security. Emancipation, theoretically, is security. (Booth 1991: 319)

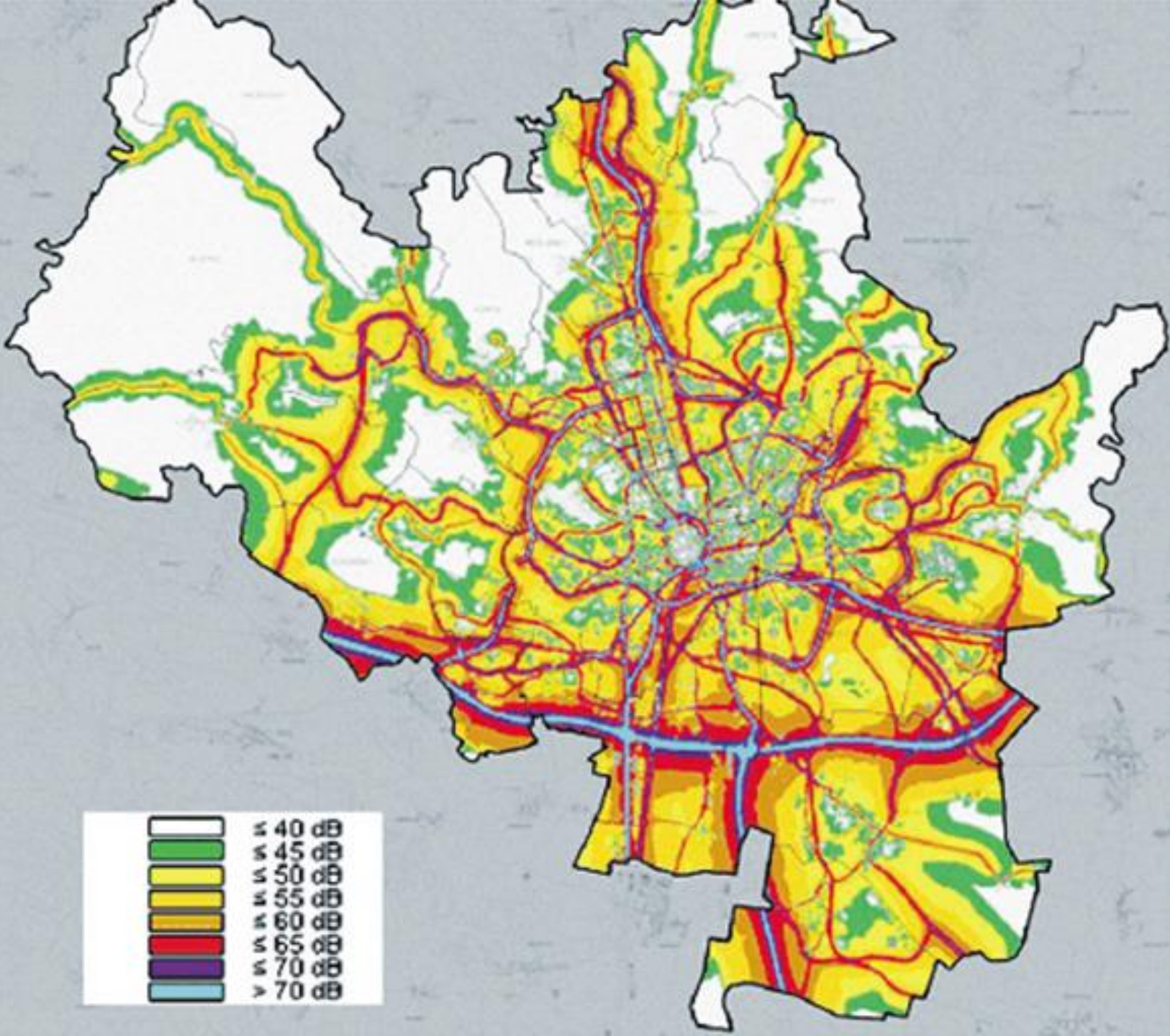
Essentially contested concepts (Gallie 1956)

- Conceptual confusion and contestation are major sources of difficulties in both theory and empirical analysis (Collier 2006)
- ECCs
 - generally recognized as meaningful
 - internally complex
 - are subject of competition/contestation
 - have normative character

What are theories good for?

- Theory can be seen as a set of interrelated concepts – or more illustratively as **a map which orients us in a specific part of reality**
- Theories provide us with (relatively) **coherent perspectives** through which we understand specific parts of reality
- Any **intelligible political action** rests upon certain (although often implicit) theoretical assumptions





White	40 dB
Light Green	45 dB
Yellow	50 dB
Orange	55 dB
Red	60 dB
Dark Red	65 dB
Purple	70 dB
Blue	70 dB

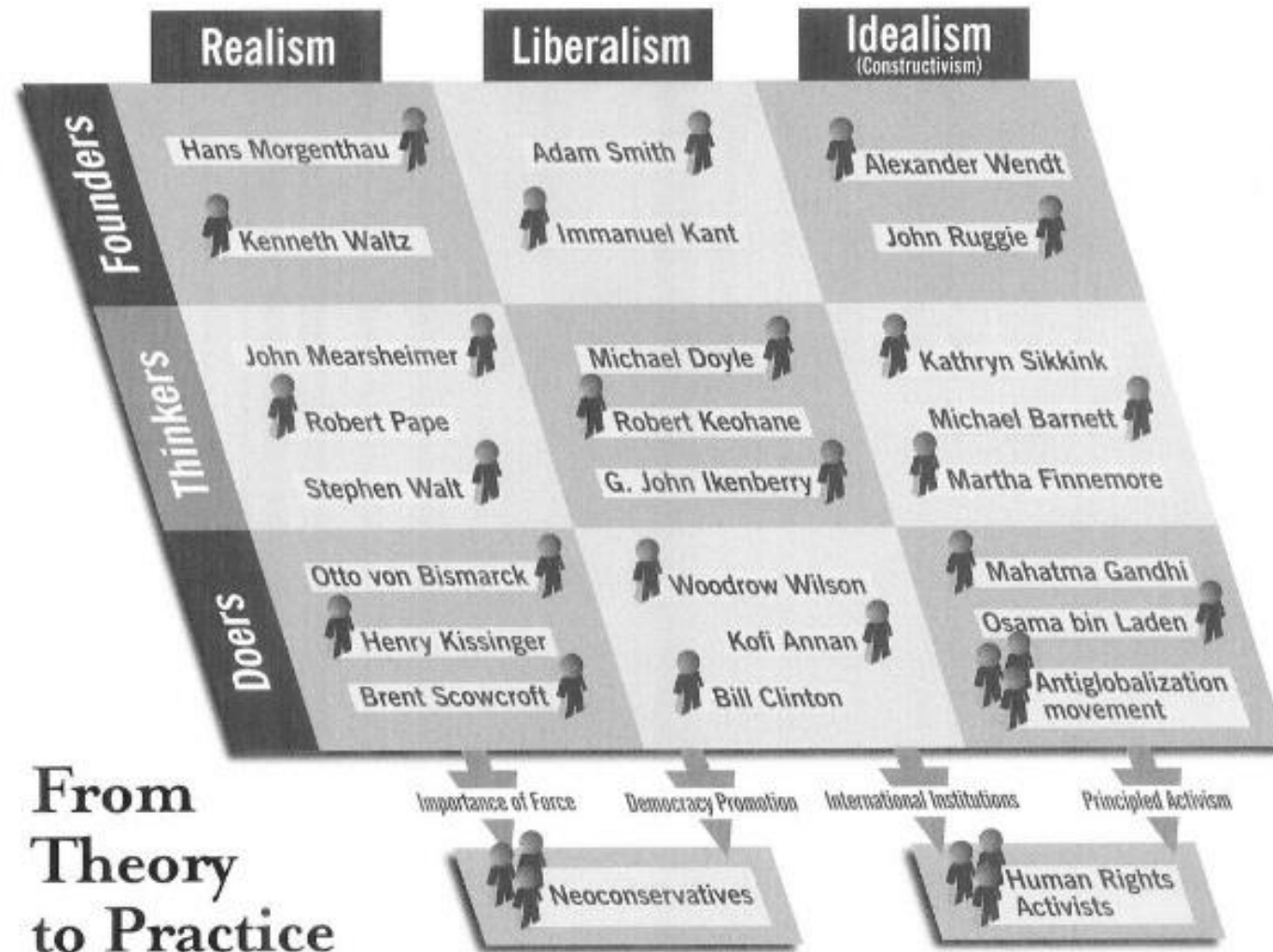


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Theories and politics (Snyder 2006)



Are theories built out of a scratch?

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- No, **theories are domain specific** (e.g. theories of international politics) and dependent on **antecedent conditions** (e.g. international system consists of national states)
- Theories rest on more general (philosophical) assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge

There is no such thing as philosophy-free science; there is only science whose philosophical baggage is taken to board without examination.
(Daniel Dennett)

→ **ontology** and **epistemology** relevant (for any scientific inquiry...)

Ontology: main cleavages

- materialists vs. idealists
- agency vs. structure debate

Materialists vs. idealists

- **materialists:**

- reality is ultimately made of matter
- social world is (primarily) driven by material forces

- **idealists:**

- social reality is mentally/socially constructed
- social world is (primarily) driven by ideational forces

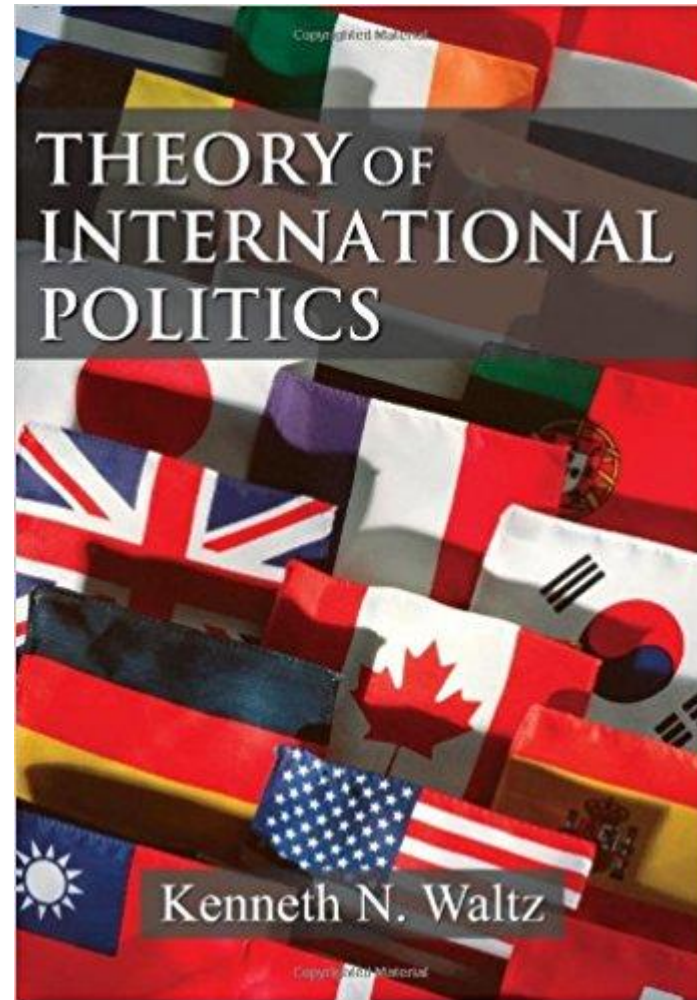
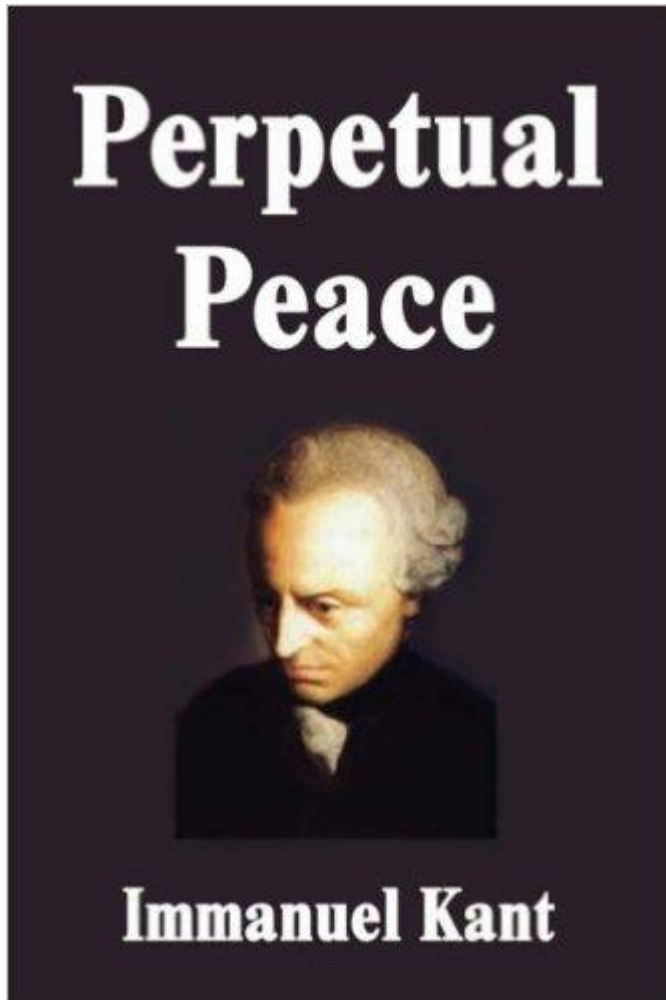
Materialists vs. idealists



The agency vs. structure debate

- To what extent we are able to shape our lives against to what extent our lives are determined by external forces?
- **individualism** (priority of agency):
 - complex social phenomena can be explained on the basis of individual behavior
- **structuralism / holism** (priority of structure):
 - social phenomena cannot be reduced to actor interactions, individual behavior is determined by social structures

The agency vs. structure debate



Epistemology: explanation vs. understanding

Epistemology: explanation vs. understanding

- **explanation:**

- naturalist model of science (law-like regularities)
- social world as an external environment
- objective (observer-independent) knowledge is possible
- focus on causal explanations generalizable to broader class of phenomena

- **understanding:**

- rejection of naturalism
- social world as an internalized constructed rules and meanings
- knowledge is always situated (observer-dependent)
- focus on (often idiosyncratic) insights to/interpretations of phenomena

Didactic classification

	explanation		understanding	
individualism	rational choice theory (neo)liberalism	classical realism	historiographical approaches	materialism
structuralism	neoclassical geopolitics neorealism Marxism	Critical Theory	strong constructivism (Copenhagen school) Paris school	idealism
		weak constructivism		hybrid