the balance of power. But classical realism and the English School also embrace the concept of world society, which is another crucial dimension that needs to be considered.

As other chapters in this book clearly illustrate, Waltz’s attempt to develop a structural theory of international politics has been seriously challenged by more recent realist theorists. Despite the differences that separate these theorists, they all associate balancing with a common set of practices that can be identified across world history. But a survey of world history reveals that, on their own, these practices do not provide an adequate basis for maintaining a stable international system. As a consequence, although it is possible to find examples of anarchies in world history, these anarchies generally give way to some form of hegemony (Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth 2007). What is distinctive about the modern state system is that, although it is always possible for states to revert to systemic balancing, there have been recurrent attempts by the great powers to establish a general equilibrium or associational balance of power articulated in terms of a distinctive set of norms and practices. But in contrast with the systemic or adversarial balance of power that is associated with a set of practices that have not changed across the course of world history, the norms and practices associated with a societal balance of power have taken different forms inside and outside of Europe and have evolved across time.

The main strength of contemporary structural realists is that they have helped to clarify why systemic balancing in a multipolar system is so prone to instability. Members of the English School would certainly benefit by probing the idea of a societal balance of power with equal rigor. Nevertheless, the recognition that there is a need to accommodate systemic and societal structures represents an important advance in thinking, because it requires us to think in terms of alternative possible outcomes. The danger of one-dimensional analysis and predictive models is that they discourage us from thinking about the potential for alternatives. We are always conscious that the future is open, and yet there is a tendency to analyze the past as if outcomes in it had been predetermined. Thinking of the balance of power in terms of two dynamics helps us to rethink the past and to recognize that the future is open.

NOTES

1. On the distinction between revisionist and status quo powers, see chapter 3.
2. See Little (1989), where I draw the distinction between an adversarial and an associational balance of power.

Contemporary realism, which includes offensive realism, is a controversial family of theories that meet with mixed reviews among the scholarly community. This chapter answers this book’s basic questions about realism in three ways.

First, the diversity of realisms encountered reflects many causes, but poorly specified micro-foundations play an important role across the board.1 This point comes out clearly with regard to offensive realism, in which hypotheses may even work but not for the reasons put forward. A more precise foundation at the unit level is needed to clarify the philosophical basis of the theory in terms of human nature and to permit development and assessment of a set of logically consistent propositions about great power politics. At present the propositions of realism in its numerous variants are inconsistent with each other (Vasquez 1997), and that assuredly is not the way forward.

Secondly, realist scholarship should strive for determinate predictions by accepting that rational-choice theory already plays an underdeveloped role in thinking about great power decision making. This point is confirmed by revealing that offensive realism claims rational choice as one of its basic assumptions, but the theory also includes any number of statements that appear to contradict that axiom.

Thirdly, as becomes apparent in the case study of offensive realism, the tradition of power politics remains viable, but only by elaborating its systemic form. The key is to develop micro-foundations that are consistent with realism’s vision of world politics, which will enable the evaluation of falsifiable propositions. The alternative is the scattered and unpromising proliferation of reductionist theories now cast at the domestic level—a virtually certain path toward paradigmatic degeneration.

Offensive realism is relatively new and prominent among theories of international relations. The theory, which regards an offensive disposition among great powers as the anticipated norm, claims the primacy of status concerns as an accurate portrayal of the modern world and a sound guide to policy (Mearsheimer
Mearsheimer’s offensive realist theory seeks to compete with structural realism and variants of neoclassical realism for preeminent status within the paradigm. As will become apparent, offensive realism is in need of elaboration if such lofty goals are to come within reach.

This chapter unfolds in five sections. Analysis begins with a presentation of how we can judge the progressiveness of a theory, that is, the basis for the subsequent evaluation of offensive realism. The next task is to confront the paradox involving realism and rationality, which is essential to facilitate improvement in microfoundations. Offensive realism, which will serve as a case study of the pernicious effects of the paradox, then will be introduced. Three important problems with the micro-foundations of offensive realism are enumerated in tandem with historical illustrations from Mearsheimer’s (2001b) exegesis and evaluation of the theory. The chapter finishes up with some general conclusions about where realism is headed in light of the experience with its offensive variant.

Criteria for Theoretical Progressiveness

This chapter takes a clear position on the subject of progress in international relations. A theory should be appraised in terms of its overall contribution in describing, explaining, and predicting the empirical world. This frame of reference does not reduce to that of Lakatos (1970), although it is related to his way of thinking. The specific difference is the emphasis on empirical problems rather than empirical content. The latter is an open-ended and nonoperational concept. Who can say, in practice, how much empirical content a theory might have in relation to how much ultimately could be achieved? This is why critics, such as Sterling-Folker (in this volume), sensibly eschew the blind alley of seeking to compare theories in terms of empirical content and judge scientific progress in that way.

That being said, however, it is feasible to engage in effective comparison via the range of empirical problems a theory can identify and solve. Solving an empirical problem, such as identifying the causes of war—the most fundamental concern among realists—can take the form of description, explanation, or prediction. It is beyond the scope of the present exposition to consider this process in detail, but it is feasible to compare theories in terms of their performance across these dimensions. Structural realism, for example, identifies and attempts to address the recurrence of war and power balancing as empirical problems. For any theory, enumeration of empirical problems identified and solved is the beginning point for assessment of progress. Moreover, progress can be evaluated more precisely in terms of parsimony, that is, how much has been accomplished by the theory in relation to the degree of its complexity. How internally complex, in terms of its assumptions, is the theory in relation to the insights it yields? In sum, is handling the theory “worth the trouble”?

One attraction of systemic variants of realism, such as offensive realism (or structural realism—the two are distinguished from each other a bit later), is that they begin from simplicity and can be elaborated as needed in response to unsolved empirical problems. Offensive realism, as will become apparent, indeed is too simple, but it does not need to become intricate in order to explain much more about international politics. System-level theories start off with an advantage in terms of likely scientific progress because the denominator of the ratio between empirical problems (identified and solved) and theoretical complexity starts off much smaller than is the case for actor-level theoretical competitors. From this point of view, offensive realism looks worthwhile in terms of investment of time and energy to obtain a more effective variant.

Neoclassical realism, by contrast, begins with a high degree of internal complexity. One adherent refers to “incoherence” as a natural product of neoclassical realism as a “tradition” in the field of international relations (see Sterling-Folker, chap. 8 in this volume). The idea of a tradition is fundamentally sociological. Rather than identifying a theory or paradigm through the designation of its axiomatic basis, and requiring fidelity to those principles, Sterling-Folker regards neoclassical realism’s existence as a product of intersubjective agreement among its adherents. Neoclassical realism is, in other words, what its self-identified adherents make of it. A positivist epistemological vantage point is rejected as unnecessary to the project of neoclassical realism because the latter is to be assessed on the basis of whether those practicing the tradition find it useful as a way of understanding the world around them.

Sterling-Folker’s arguments in chapter 8 are useful in helping to identify the perspective offered in this chapter, which, in contrast, embraces positive political theory and the notion that scientific progress is desirable and discernible, also in a field that involves human agency. The key difference here is how to interpret the relevance of internal consistency within a theory family: It is a basic point of logic that a set of assumptions that contains a contradiction can be used to generate any statement. The problem of “letting a thousand flowers bloom” in neoclassical realism is that its vast array of variables and propositions ultimately becomes self-defeating for the school of thought as a whole. The path to frustration has two signposts at its outset, and each should be heeded.

One signpost notifies us that contradictions cannot persist and still permit adherents to find the theory useful in terms of understanding the world. No self-contradictory explanation will hold up under scrutiny. Moreover, a permissive ap-
proach toward adding variables to theoretical frameworks guarantees that the situation will get worse with time. "X" and "not X" cannot coexist as statements in a theory that is supposed to have value either in abstract or in policy-oriented terms.

The other signpost alerts us to the relevance of the aforementioned ratio of solved empirical problems to the internal complexity of a theory. The history of natural and social sciences argues in favor of beginning with simplicity and adding complications only as necessary. Neoclassical realism is quite distant, at its own peril, from that approach to theorizing. The following question could be posed, for example, to Devlen and Özdamar (chap. 6): Is the descriptive, explanatory, and predictive value of the model worth the encumbrance created by its high degree of complexity from the outset? The general presumption here is that theories starting at the system level are less likely than those originating at the actor level to produce an unfavorable ratio of achievement to complexity.

Mouritzen (chap. 7) does advocate a streamlined and internally consistent approach toward theorizing about foreign policy from a realist point of view. His point of departure, however, is the domestic level. Further application of his framework (or similar ones) to empirical problems would be the only way to constructively lead the debate about which way is more promising. Is it better—regarding prospects for ultimate theoretical success in terms of description, explanation, and prediction—to begin at the actor or system level? This question cannot be answered in a single chapter, but the claim here is that theories such as offensive realism should be given pride of place due to the belief that it is better to begin at the systemic level and add complexity only as necessary. The careful elaboration of offensive realism to enable it to more effectively address the overarching empirical problem of the causes of war is the aim of the remaining sections of this chapter.

Strange Bedfellows: Realism and Rationality

One of the most controversial aspects of realism, in whatever variant, concerns the role of rationality. A brief overview of the degree of disagreement about this assumption's position within realist theorizing will be sufficient to encourage realism's critics everywhere. That dramatically opposed impressions can be obtained among even the most careful and well-informed reviews of the literature is sufficient to establish the incoherence that plagues contemporary realism (Vasquez 1998). The problem manifests itself most directly in terms of a division between those writing from the inside of the paradigm and those who are trying to characterize it from some outside vantage point. The former generally deny a place for rational choice theory within realism, while the latter sometimes go so far as to see it virtually everywhere in the paradigm.

Schweller forcefully rejects the rationality postulate as a trait of realism: "Realism's hard core of assumptions do not—contrary to conventional wisdom—include rationality. Indeed, both Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, considered the preeminent theorists of modern-day realism, reject the claim that states necessarily act rationally to achieve intended goals, which themselves may not be rational in terms of the actual opportunities and constraints presented by the external environment in which they are embedded" (2003, 324). It would be difficult to find a more direct statement than this one, regarding unit-level foundations, coming from a realist perspective. While Schweller is a self-identified "neoclassical" realist, his assertion pertains to the paradigmatic level—hence, the references to Morgenthau (a classical or traditional realist) and Waltz (the founder of neorealism). He even adds that Keohane's frequently cited enumeration of rationality as one of the basic assumptions of realism is "simply incorrect" (Schweller 2003, 324). Schweller's position, though one of the most explicit, is fairly representative of the realist research community in general and shared also by Christopher Layne (chap. 5).

From outside the paradigm, perceptions of the role reserved for rationality in realism are different. According to Freyberg-Inan's authoritative assessment of the motivational assumptions employed in realism, states are taken to be "self-interested and rational." Moreover, realism and rational choice theory "are particularly compatible" in their epistemological foundations and "share similar views on actors' basic motives, the way they go about achieving their goals, as well as on the ways in which their behavior may be 'regulated' by affecting their preference orderings or probability calculations" (2004, 65, 84, 86). The contrast with realist self-perception is equally stark in an overview from Rosenau and Durfee, who refer to "interest defined in terms of power" as a guiding principle and even connect the paradigm to expected utility theory: "States will take the value of what they expect to get from some action and multiply it by the likelihood they can actually get it (producing what is known as 'expected utility')" (2000, 12, 13). With the possible exception of game theory wrile large, expected utility theory is the most common application of rational choice theory as a worldview on decision making. It is interesting to see expected utility, in particular, linked to realism because this suggests that the latter frequently comes across in such terms, even if many of its advocates would likely react with contempt at the suggestion.

Perceptions from within and outside realism about its unit-level foundations would seem very much at odds with each other. So who is right? Do we believe the
goldfish swimming in the bowl or those peering in at them? The answer is the latter—and, as will become apparent, that is fortunate for the goldfish, if they hope to do better in the future and swim beyond self-imposed limitations. The fundamental position of this chapter is that realism is not only compatible with rational choice theory but already makes use of it and needs to do so in a more logically consistent and developed way. To demonstrate the validity of this position, I examine the offensive realism of Mearsheimer (2001b) as a case in point. Other realist theorizing is noted as relevant, but a reassessment of Mearsheimer’s offensive realism should be sufficient here to make the claim that paradigmatic progress will require realists of all stripes to strive for clarity and consistency regarding unit-level foundations. Moreover, offensive realism is exceptional among theories within the paradigm because it explicitly adopts rational choice as an axiom. An attempt to reformulate offensive realism in a way that makes it consistent with rational choice in practice therefore cannot be criticized for attempting to force a square peg into a round hole.

What Is Offensive Realism?

Offensive realism is a theory that falls clearly within the realist worldview, which includes an emphasis on states, war, and, above all else, relative power (Mearsheimer 2001b; see also James 2002 and Sterling-Folker 2005, 13). According to Mearsheimer, who develops and evaluates the theory in The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, offensive realism is the sad but true story of international relations. The basic idea regarding foreign policy is that great powers are “primed for offense” and all want to be “the hegemon” (Mearsheimer 2001b, 2, 3). Offensive realism’s five principal assumptions stress the importance of anarchy, great power possession of offensive military capabilities, a lack of certainty about each other’s intentions, survival as a goal, and states as “rational actors” (30, 31). These axioms combine to produce a world in which great powers see each other primarily in zero-sum terms, allowing for cooperation only on the margins, with an ever-present risk of war.

Where, then, does all of this differ from the other “fully articulated theory of international relations” (Schweller 2003, 313), namely, Waltz’s neorealism? Great powers can never be sure about their safety, so the will to survive causes them to maximize their share of world power and “think offensively” (Mearsheimer 2001b, 34; see also Freyberg-Inan 2004, 76). This is a different world than that of Waltz’s defensive positionalists, who seek security, not power in and of itself. Instead, Mearsheimer’s world looks much more like that of Morgenthau, with a tragic character because of the inability to escape rivalry, suspicion, and episodic war, which becomes more potentially destructive over time as technology develops space among great powers.

Mearsheimer focuses on great power politics in the era from the wars associated with the French Revolution to the end of the twentieth century, or 1792 to 2000. On the surface, the history of great power warfare in this period seems to confirm the depressing story foretold by offensive realism. Wars of conquest kill ever-increasing numbers of people, and conflict, not cooperation, emerges as the great power norm. Moreover, in a departure from structural realism, power balancing is anticipated and encountered only in a limited range of cases. Instead, buck-passing is more frequent and, as will become apparent, its more common appearance in great power foreign policy fits in with offensive realism’s expectations. Furthermore, in a separate analysis that uses quantitative data rather than case studies, Levy and Thompson confirm that balancing among great powers occurs against “disproportionate concentration of military power” (2005, 4, 26–27). This result serves as an effective triangulation for offensive realism, at least regarding the relative scarcity of power balancing as compared to what might be expected by structural realism or possibly other theorizing based on power politics.

Like other realist frameworks, however, offensive realism is troubled by inconsistency and cannot achieve explanatory power without developing a clearer picture of its unit-level or micro-foundations. Three issues emerge. The first pertains to the theory’s motivational, or human nature, assumptions. A second uncertainty concerns which factors enter into the calculus of survival. Third is the question of how offensive realism deals with bilateral versus multilateral concerns. As will become apparent, only through the resolution of these matters can offensive realism become a progressive theory within the realist paradigm. The theory’s micro-foundations are problematic as a general worldview and as concerns their inability to elucidate specific puzzles related to the practice of great power politics.

The Uncertain Micro-Foundations of Offensive Realism

The Question of Human Nature

Perhaps the most fundamental problem for offensive realism is its proclaimed, but ultimately unconvincing, departure from Morgenthau on the question of human nature. Morgenthau’s exposition in Politics among Nations is labeled “human nature realism” by Mearsheimer (2001b, 18; see also Sterling-Folker 2005, 13). It is also clearly rejected: “I do not adapt Morgenthau’s claim that states invariably behave aggressively because they have a will to power hardwired into them. Instead, I assume that the principal motive behind great power behavior is survival. In anarchy, however, the desire to survive encourages states to behave aggressively” (Mearsheimer 2001b, 53).
This attempted separation from Morgenthau does not succeed on logical grounds. If states are not inherently aggressive, then why should they act in such a manner? Offensive realism has no good answer to this question. Consider the logical underpinnings of the following assertion: “Great powers behave aggressively,” according to Mearsheimer, “not because they want to or because they possess some inner drive to dominate, but because they have to seek more power if they want to maximize their odds of survival” (2001b, 21). This idea assumes that anarchy induces aggression. But why should that be so unless some human disposition to predatory behavior, which anarchy in turn would facilitate, is also assumed? For Morgenthau, the progression (or perhaps degeneration) is straightforward, leading from fallen human nature to the grim world of power politics and resultant episodic warfare.

Mearsheimer’s world of great powers, by contrast, lacks a genuine microfoundation because the will to survive, on its own, does not entail the maximization of relative power. A single-minded fixation on power seeking can occur only with a belief that such capabilities will be needed because danger exists a priori. Thus, contrary to Elman (chap. 3) and Layne (chap. 5), offensive realism in the initial variant of Mearsheimer (2001b) is not a structural theory. Offensive realism is not about the power structure of the international system. Instead, as will become apparent, it is systemic in the sense that it pertains to the overall “tragic” nature of great power politics as opposed to a focus on decision making per se. Once offensive realism is elaborated (see the discussion of expression 2.4 below) to include its hidden dependency on pessimistic assumptions about human nature, the interplay between the microfoundation of the theory and great power behavior produces the systemic patterns anticipated by the theory.

This elaboration does not make the theory structural. Structure, as defined by Waltz (1979) in a way that is conventional throughout social science, refers to the distribution of some characteristic(s) at a systemic level. In his context the characteristic is the capabilities possessed by states, with an added focus on the subset of great powers. Mearsheimer’s theory, by contrast, centers on the maximization problem faced by any given great power independent of the distribution of capabilities that exists at a given time. Mearsheimer’s vision is systemic in the sense that all great powers are expected to maximize power but not structural in the sense that the distribution of power is expected to shape the way they do so. Maximization of power will persist regardless of variation in polarity or other indicators of structure (see James 2002 for examples).

Most accurate as a self-description, perhaps, is Mearsheimer’s observation that “realists are pessimists when it comes to international politics” (2001b, 17). His own theory entails a pessimistic sense of human nature, in spite of protests to the contrary. As Freyberg-Inan (2004, 86) points out, power maximization is a product of anarchy and fear. Put differently, a reference to the macro level via anarchy is not sufficient to generate the foreign policies anticipated by Mearsheimer; a psychology of offensive realism must be operative at the micro level in order for effects from the system to be translated into action by its units.

With that revision in mind, two other, less philosophical issues also need to be resolved if offensive realism is to serve as a progressive force within the paradigm.

The Calculus of Survival

One of the other two important issues at the micro level that should be addressed concerns the calculus of survival. For Waltz (1979) and many other realists, the primary goal of a state under conditions of anarchy is security. If Mearsheimer’s offensive realist perspective is to be believed, however, calculations should focus instead on maximization of relative power. But is this self-evident if the objective is survival in a world of uncertainty? One basic point of criticism emerges right away regarding how to maximize the likelihood of survival. Consider the single-minded focus upon relative power: “When a state surveys its environment to determine which states pose a threat to its survival, it focuses mainly on the offensive capabilities of potential rivals, not their intentions. As emphasized earlier, intentions are ultimately unknowable, so states worried about their survival must make worst-case assumptions about their rivals’ intentions” (Mearsheimer 2001b, 45).

These assertions are at odds with the axiomatic basis of offensive realism. Rationality is one of the assumptions. A rational decision maker will act according to Bayes’s rule in updating prior guesswork or probability estimates about intentions. It would be irrational, for example, to ignore the estimates of one’s own intelligence services and diplomats in such a dangerous world and focus strictly on military capabilities in arriving at security policy. Preparations for different wars might entail variation in military spending or deployment as a product of updated beliefs.

Consider a simple, abstract example: If great power A might fear invasion from great powers B or C and has a border with each, then beliefs about the likelihood of war can and should influence deployment against these respective dangers. Policy would not simply be a matter of focusing on the military capabilities of B and C; instead, it logically would entail some consideration of their prior and ongoing behavior in figuring out where front-line forces and reserves should be stationed. This example might loosely correspond, perhaps, to the situation of Germany (A) vis-à-vis Austria-Hungary (B) and France (C) in the years leading up to 1914, with a naturally greater focus on France, at least as much in reaction to its intentions as to its
capabilities. It would not be difficult to manufacture many other, similar examples. The more general point is that offensive realism, as currently constituted, assumes a perfect correlation between military capabilities and intentions; that is, the level of threat corresponds exactly to the level of capabilities. Neither theory nor practice supports such an assumption, and thus the rationality postulate is contradicted by offensive realism's exclusive focus on capabilities.

Bayesian updating of beliefs as a basic component of rationality does not contradict the idea of leaders focusing on the worst-case scenario, as per offensive realism or even realist theory in general. Instead, this mindset suggests a particular disposition toward processing data. Put simply, from an offensive realist point of view, decision makers should be more sensitive in their probability calculations to negative rather than positive information about rivals. Perhaps the probability of attack is taken to start out at a high level, below 100 percent but still appreciable, with its magnitude varying as a result of experience. Bad experience is weighted more heavily than good experience, which produces vigilance about the possibility of war but also the ability to optimize military preparedness based on updated beliefs rather than more static estimates about capabilities.

Given that perceived intentions can and do influence practical matters such as military spending and deployment in practice, offensive realism needs a new expression of great power goals to replace its self-limiting focus on relative capabilities. As of right now, goal seeking in offensive realism corresponds to the following:

1. maximize (your own relative power among the great powers)

As it turns out, the story of power politics told by Mearsheimer in subsequent chapters of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* corresponds more directly to the following expression:

2. minimize (threat combined with opponent's military superiority)

It is the combination, or product, of threat and capability that needs to be minimized in order for the probability of survival to be maximized. The validity of this proposition comes through in cases and data provided by Mearsheimer himself.

Consider, for example, the share of European wealth held by the United Kingdom, which never fell below 50 percent from 1830 to 1890 (Mearsheimer 2001b, 71). Continental actors did not balance against the UK, even though it had impressive, quasi-hegemonic, capabilities. Presumably, Mearsheimer would explain this through his ad hoc assumption about "the stopping power of water," which is brought in at various points in the narrative to squash would-be anomalies (Mearsheimer 2001b, 128). However, if the UK is taken to be an actor in search of hegemony—the beha-

viour expected of all great powers, according to Mearsheimer—why does it not pursue a more aggressive foreign policy on the continent, especially around 1850, when its latent capabilities appear to be at a zenith? Why does the UK not make an effort to convert more of its enormous latent strength into military power? Instead of attempting to provoke continental powers into war with each other and thereby creating more openings for expansion onto the continent itself, while also upgrading its military capabilities, UK foreign policy in this era as described by Mearsheimer looks rather restrained. As another assumption of offensive realism emphasizes, future intentions can never be certain, and a unified anti-UK continent cannot be ruled out, so why not do more to make gains under especially favorable circumstances? This case, among others, appears to challenge the theory in a way that makes reference to ad hoc assumptions necessary to camouflage the anomaly.

With expression (2) rather than (1) as the micro-foundation, the UK's behavior in the mid-nineteenth century becomes much easier to explain. With so much capability already in hand, it makes sense to act in a way that will minimize threat in particular. A prudent, restrained foreign policy can be expected under these conditions, even from the standpoint of offensive realism. There is more room for decline than ascent in the UK's position, so a focus on minimizing threat is supported by both intuition and expression (2).

Another, perhaps more compelling instance of nonmaximization of relative power concerns a land-based great power. "Why did Bismarck, who was so inclined toward offense during his first nine years in office, become defense-oriented in his last nineteen years? . . . He and his successors correctly understood that the German army had conquered about as much territory as it could without provoking a great-power war, which Germany was likely to lose" (Mearsheimer 2001b, 184). Once again, the discourse above suggests that expression (2), not (1), is at work. Given power maximization and uncertainty, why not risk war anyway? Risk considerations are key to an explanation for the observed degree of restraint. Risk aversion infused Germany with caution, as it did the UK in the previous example. And in this instance there is no water in the way of further warfare; Germany can be seen to have expanded through conquest to a perceived optimal level once the full configuration of threat and power is brought into consideration. The only way to salvage this case for offensive realism is to observe, sensibly, that power maximization is subject to constraint once threat—something clearly related to intentions—is allowed into the process of calculation.

Another problematic case for the initial variant of offensive realism emerges from U.S. foreign policy in mid-nineteenth-century North America: "The United States had little need for more territory after 1848—at least for security reasons. So its lea-
ers concentrated instead on forging a powerful state inside its existing borders. Expansion to the north and south never materialized, and the United States instead expanded westward toward the Pacific Ocean, building a huge territorial state in the process" (Mearsheimer 2001b, 244).

Based strictly on the uncertainty and power maximization postulates of offensive realism, however, the United States should not have stopped its efforts to expand. Conquest, Mearsheimer notes, is profitable, especially in the presence of weakness. Why not expand to the greatest degree possible, in light of the ever-present risk that a hegemon with sufficient power to threaten the United States might emerge someday on one of the other continents? The explanation, which basically reduces to saying "you can get enough of a good thing," is not compelling in light of the imperatives conveyed by expression (1). Instead, expression (2) seems more on target; perhaps the United States did not want to try to conquer the rest of North America, or South America, for that matter, because of the resulting highly enhanced risk of a continental coalition forming in Europe against it. In other words, with hegemony in its own region, why take the risk of heating up the threat component of expression (2)? This seems like a more realist(ic) sense of things for the United States in the historical situation reviewed here. In sum, even examples from within Mearsheimer's exposition itself suggest that both capabilities and threat play key roles in the calculus of survival under various circumstances.

**Bilateral versus Multilateral Calculations**

Third among the unit-level challenges to offensive realism is the apparent inconsistency of how it deals with bilateral versus multilateral calculations in power politics. Consider the admonition that "survival mandates aggressive behavior" in search of maximum power (Mearsheimer 2001b, 21). Instructions as to how to achieve this goal, however, are unclear. The example of Anglo-Dutch warfare in the seventeenth century is cited to show that great powers can be expected to emphasize security over wealth when these goals conflict. Mearsheimer (2001b, 48) observes that the Navigation Act of 1651, while harmful to England's economy, had a devastating effect on Holland's commerce. Thus, England managed to weaken significantly the only naval power it might have had reason to fear at the time.

England's policy in this instance entailed a high acceptance of risk. Is it clearly best to weaken one's own position to inflict greater damage on an immediate rival? Given ever-present uncertainty about the intentions of other great powers, why not pursue alliances instead of a direct policy of self-damaging punishment? This would have the advantage of not reducing one's own relative power at the system level, as did England's policy, which made a priority of weakening Holland even at great expense to itself. In fact, such behavior looks inconsistent with advice elsewhere in Mearsheimer's (2001b, 153-54) exposition concerning "bait and bleed" scenarios. The idea, as the name suggests, is to encourage protracted and destructive warfare between other great powers in order to make gains relative to all of them simultaneously. In the Anglo-Dutch example, however, Mearsheimer (quoting someone else) seems to be praising England for engaging in exactly that kind of warfare, at least in economic terms. How, then, can the Anglo-Dutch case and the bait and bleed tactic coexist within the same theory?

This apparent contradiction is a product of offensive realism's lack of decision rules pertaining to bilateral versus multilateral calculations of power. To resolve the tension between immediate concerns about one rival and the immanent issue of how much power is held relative to the system as a whole, it becomes necessary to return to expression (2) introduced earlier. Consider the following elaboration of (2):

(2') minimize (sum of threat combined with capability posed by other great powers)

Anomalies in great power behavior that accumulate because of a one-dimensional focus on relative power can be addressed more effectively by a simple, yet still realist, expression such as (2'). The expression focuses on interaction effects produced by allowing intentions to complement capabilities. The practice of great power politics proves the point. Intentions do matter, and they do so, arguably, in ways that can be accounted for within a realist frame of reference. Furthermore, calculations by necessity go beyond the bilateral to the multilateral if great powers truly act toward each other on a rational basis.

Intentions, threat, and risk are concepts interrelated within this elaborated variant of offensive realism that combine to provide its micro-foundations. Intentions lie along a continuum of threat, from none to absolute malice. Expression (2') above represents risk (that is, danger) in systemic terms. Risk is here a function of the interaction effect between threatening intentions and capabilities. Taken together, these relationships provide offensive realism with a much more complete and rigorous representation of how states are anticipated to view the system and why they then could opt for power maximization as a way of minimizing risk. These observations point toward offensive realism, realizing its potential as a systemic theory of international politics.

All of this serves as an instructive introduction to the high-profile debate over
balancing versus buck-passing. According to offensive realism, these are the "principal strategies that great powers use to prevent aggressors from upsetting the balance of power," and threatened states prefer buck-passing "whenever possible" (Mearsheimer 2000b, 139, 140, 155). This predisposition, perhaps, is what most effectively separates offensive from structural realism as a system-oriented theory. One strength of offensive realism, as compared to structural realism, which predicts balancing, is the sheer amount of buck-passing that is observed in the international system. Great powers prefer to see others in the role of buck-catcher, as per the earlier reference to the bait and bleed proposition. In other words, great powers want counter-hegemonic coalitions to form (except against their own bid for dominance, of course) but strongly prefer that others do this work for them. Bait and bleed serves as an example of this kind of thinking in action, because costly wars between other great powers can stifle hegemonic ambitions among those involved.

Can that preference, however, be derived from expression (1)? The answer would seem to be "maybe," at best. Mearsheimer points out that balancing is "often slow and inefficient" (2000b, 156). If this is common knowledge among great powers, then the bait and bleed strategy emerges as a rather risky one to pursue. What if the presumed primary target of the strategy is able to pick up relatively easy gains, while one or more secondary targets (that is, the balancers) fail to occupy their designated roles? If the goal is merely to maximize relative power, the question of what to do becomes indeterminate, and the answer depends upon additional beliefs, not specified by the theory, about what will happen and, perhaps, the degree of preference attached to the safety of would-be targets for conquest by other great powers. A focus upon intentions among a full range of great powers, as suggested by expression (2'), suggests a more precise answer to the question: The degree of affinity for the possible target(s), assessed in terms of the degree of threat they pose, can play a decisive role in the choice between fighting an aggressor or standing by in the hope that others will do so. Logically, potential allies are seen as less threatening by definition, or they would not be considered for that status against one or more perceived adversaries. Given the earlier discarding of power as a direct measurement of threat, it becomes possible for even very strong states to support each other because some other state is seen as representing a common danger.

Another aspect of the buck-passing strategy that makes sense only in a multilateral context that goes beyond a simple calculation of relative power is the tendency to "allow or even facilitate the growth in power of the intended buck-catcher" (Mearsheimer 2000b, 159). Offensive realism certainly can tolerate some Machiavellianism in its politics; it naturally makes sense to help a weaker power improve itself but only if the degree of confidence about it fighting against one's adversary is reasonably high. But what if that great power, or candidate for that status, grows stronger but begins to bite the hand that feeds it? Inherently, more than power maximization is at work here. The calculations about such scenarios are inherently multilateral and concern beliefs about how additional capabilities are more or less likely to be used by the state one is considering as a candidate for assistance. Without a belief that the junior partner is likely to use itself up in warfare against one of the senior power's adversaries, cooperation in this context becomes irrational. Thus, once again, the calculations emphasized in expression (2') come to the fore. The goal is to minimize the capabilities, weighted by perceived threat, of one's adversaries. This diminution might be achieved by building up a client state or perhaps even a peer among the great powers to engage the primary adversary in what is hoped to be protracted, destructive warfare that will leave it in a weaker condition even if victorious. Moreover, this process could entail lost ground relative to one state in order to make gains relative to an especially salient threatening other state, a tradeoff that clearly transcends bilateral assessment of relative power.

This point can be extended to a discussion of alliances in general. Why would such arrangements be viable at all, given offensive realism's assumptions about power maximization and uncertainty regarding future foreign policies among the great powers? The answer once again lies in the acceptance of risk in response to calculations made about power and intentions. Alliances occur between great powers and also smaller powers because each party concerned believes that it is sharing costs in deterring aggressors (Mearsheimer 2000b, 156). Allies of choice are regarded as less threatening than a potential aggressor for reasons that may transcend military capabilities altogether. Germany, for instance, clearly had outdistanced France by the onset of the twentieth century and, in principle, would have made a more attractive ally for the UK than France, with which the UK had colonial rivalries and a long history of warfare. But German behavior at the turn of the twentieth century, often labeled "gunboat diplomacy," along with its accelerating naval armaments, alienated Britain and eventually drove it into an alliance with France and Russia. It is impossible to tell this story strictly in terms of capabilities. Instead, the UK came to perceive German capabilities as more threatening than those of either Russia or France or even both together. Thus the UK's policy looks more like an attempt to minimize expression (2') rather than maximize (1). Once again, the story told by offensive realism either must incorporate intentions or lack a final chapter that tells the reader how things end. The present critique of offensive realism extends to an inability of the theory's initial incarnation to explain outcomes as well as behavior.
What Way Forward?

This chapter started out with the goal of reassessing progress within the realist paradigm on the basis of a case study of offensive realism. That study has revealed major challenges to the paradigm and offered responses. As noted in the introduction, the chapter puts forward three general theses.

First, the diverse realisms out there, at least in part, reflect a lack of sound micro-foundations. The proliferation of realist theories represents degeneration in that sense. Some, perhaps even many, realist theories may be candidates for synthesis once a rigorous system-unit linkage is identified. For example, offensive and defensive realism may turn out to be special cases of a more encompassing framework.12 Certainly, the experience with offensive realism presented in this chapter is troubling, if only because of the difficulty with which propositions are derived from the theory's core claim that great powers focus exclusively on relative power maximization. A path toward synthesis may lie in the direction of expected utility theory, which links power to interests and can be adapted to a state-centric view of the world.

Second, and perhaps more disturbing, is the lack of determinate predictions produced by the initial variant of offensive realism. Only by pursuing the nuances suggested by rational choice theory could specific predictions be derived regarding great power decision making about war and peace. In particular, and ironically, with some adjustments, offensive realism begins to sound more like expected utility theory than either advocates or critics might have imagined.

Third, and finally, the case of offensive realism suggests that the realist paradigm remains viable, with the most promising path forward provided through elaboration of its structural form (James 2002). The basic need is for more specific micro-foundations that remain consistent with power politics, perhaps beginning with a return to traditional principles concerning the disappointing content of human nature.

Overall, the experience with offensive realism suggests the potential value of elaborated structural realism (ESR) as a framework within which to achieve theoretical coherence for systemic realism (see James 2002). ESR is neither defensive nor offensive realism. Instead, it advocates the integration of structural indicators into a causal vision of international politics filtered through rational choice. In other words, ESR seeks to answer the question of what can be expected from states as rational actors in response to the full range of structural indicators—polarity à la Waltz being just one example—if they are maximizing their utility as defined by an expression resembling (2') above. ESR effectively brings together defensive and offensive realism. It focuses on the distribution of capabilities (like Waltz) and threat (like Walt, as characterized by Layne, in chapter 5). But it also does not deny the major insight of a more nuanced offensive realism, namely, that circumstances may exist under which power maximization is to be expected. ESR's point in response to all of the "realisms" enumerated is that they have something to offer but need to be integrated more effectively into an overall systemic vision. ESR, in other words, is a call to study more carefully the effects of structural indicators in conjunction with each other upon state action, with the latter assumed to take place on the basis of rational choice.13

To adopt instead one or more variants of neoclassical realism, with their emphasis on domestic politics and foreign policy formulation (Talabferro 2004, 40), is to abandon the advantages provided by economy of explanation.14 A system-level variant such as offensive realism, however, can become more effective and scientifically valuable only with solid micro-foundations. The perspective on scientific progress offered here—namely, that it is viable and can be achieved through incremental success in identifying and solving empirical problems—is the foundation for the advice offered regarding offensive realism throughout this chapter. At the very least, such a version of realism would become falsifiable and more competitive with whatever rival theories emerge as "champions" from other paradigms.

Offensive realism, at present, is underspecified, not refutable, and incapable of producing cumulative understanding about international relations. Realism is, however, one of the time-honored traditions when it comes to understanding historical processes. In spite of the protests of the theory's creator, offensive realism can and should consider the role of intentions in the playing out of great power politics. To leave this promising theory in its current form would be a tragedy, albeit of intellectual rather than life-threatening dimensions.

NOTES

1. The term micro-foundations is used because it is encompassing and can refer to actors and agency in any system. In the current case, the reference is to states, given that the realist ontology is state-centric. However, in their views of the goals these actors are expected to pursue (as well as how they pursue them), variants of realism conflict, provoking the criticism that realists work with inadequate micro-foundations.

2. While other offensive realist studies exist (see Lieber 2005, 186, n. 28), they do not depart from the basic principles enumerated in Mearsheimer's magnum opus and therefore are not addressed in further detail here.

3. The concept formation and arguments in this section are based on James (2002).

4. To cite one example, Schwebel (2003, 330, 342) refers to "interests of states" and "irrational" state behavior while simultaneously denying the rationality postulate. It is clear also from the major exposition of Mearsheimer's theory (to be considered now at greater length)