Many contemporary realists, who are influenced by the philosophers of ordinary language, think that a realistic account of the world is unrelated to theory. However, as Newton knew, every application of theory, whether general or systems theory, or invocation of the relevance of a proposition, rests on pragmatic assessments of the relevant states of the world. I think the mistakes of realists arise from a failure to understand what it means to say that a general theory is deductive. As I noted in the first chapter, Kepler’s theory cannot be directly derived from Newton’s theory.

The designs of products or of policies cannot be deduced from the theorems of a theory. These theorems set constraints on what can work. Thus, for instance, in designing an engine, an engineer may use a theorem of physics to show that a particular form of wiring will not fit productively the other pragmatic aspects of the engine. In this sense theoretical physicists are realists who use pragmatic information. Thus, the emphasis on realism does not distinguish theory from pragmatic practice although its advocates apparently believe they are saying something that theorists ignore.

If a person who knew nothing of physics made a pragmatic assessment of how different engines work under different conditions and called this realism, it would not be an alternative to the use of theory, which might enable an engineer to understand why a type of fuel would not work in a particular type of engine. A maker of foreign policy needs a good map of the relevant factors of international relations before choosing a foreign policy. If he has such a map, then he may be able to use it by applying theory to a relevant issue. Realism in the sense of pragmatic description is complementary to theory. Theory, unlike a maxim, as I will show in this
chapter, permits an agent to reach a conclusion that is not contained in pragmatic assessment.

Theory provides knowledge that a maxim cannot provide. In the case of a systems theory, this is because the essential rules of a system constitute a foundation for making inferences. Because the essential rules of a particular type of system are in a state of equilibrium, a deviation with respect to one of the rules will have a focused effect on one or more of the other rules, which will yield a projection about how the elements of the system will shift. If an agent does not like the focused projection, the agent has a starting point for examining the costs of avoiding it. This is how theory adds to pragmatic assessment. The maxims of the philosophers of ordinary language, as I will show, do not perform a similar function.

When international relations experts copied the methods of the philosophers of ordinary language by using the maxim of balance, they inherited the weakness inherent in that choice. So-called realism is irrelevant. An advocate of systems theory when designing a policy might refer to the same pragmatically-determined real world elements as the realist. If a deviation with respect to one of the rules was upsetting equilibrium, the systems theorist would focus on how changes in the use of other rules could be employed either to restore equilibrium – or alternatively to accelerate change if that is what is desired.

Because some realists seem to believe that theories must include agency, it is useful to make a distinction. Application of a theory, including a systems theory, closes the world. Thus, although agents may be included in a theory, agency is always external to it. The failure to understand this produces puzzles, including those attributed to the concept of freedom of the will, which I discussed in the addendum to Chapter 3. These puzzles can be avoided by recognizing that agency is always external to theory, even though agents may be components of a theory. The object language is always a product of a recursive procedure in which the current phase is open while the previous stage is closed.

Realism and maxims

The rejection of theory and the resort to maxims by ordinary language philosophers is central to what a great many students of international affairs now call realism, the defects of which I will comment further on in Chapter 9. However, it amuses me to comment on Santayana’s much-quoted saying that those who do not learn from history are condemned