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Publication Date

2013

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Three Political Philosophers Debate Social Science:
Leo Strauss, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor

By

Jason William Blakely

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Political Science

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Spring 2013

Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

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This dissertation analyzes the emergence of an alternative form of inquiry to that which has dominated the Anglophone social sciences for over half a century. Examining the philosophies of Leo Strauss, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor, it ultimately seeks to vindicate a humanistic and interpretive approach to the study of politics against the ongoing tendency towards mechanistic and pseudo-scientific forms of explanation.

An introduction gives readers the necessary background context for understanding the importance of these controversies. The contributions of Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor are to be understood in light of an intellectual, cultural, and political movement which I describe as “positivism.” Because this form of positivism continues to be of great influence today, the contributions of these three political philosophers also remain relevant.

The first part of the dissertation treats the work of Strauss. Chapters 1 and 2 argue that Strauss’s critique of social science, while marking an important first wave of resistance against positivism, nevertheless falls short. Although Strauss identifies some of the key problems with mainstream social scientific inquiry, his alternative remains inadequate.

The second part of the dissertation examines MacIntyre’s and Taylor’s respective critiques of social science. Chapters 3 through 6 argue that these two philosophers have successfully criticized modern social science, while also proposing a viable, interpretive alternative. These chapters also argue that MacIntyre and Taylor provide us with an approach to social science that overcomes the supposed dichotomy between facts and values. Rather than dichotomizing empirical and normative inquiry, MacIntyre and Taylor each devise novel ways of joining empirical research with moral and political reflection.

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Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Mark Bevir for the great intellectual inheritance he has given me. I wish to thank Kinch Hoekstra, John Searle, and Tyler Krupp for the depth and care of their insights. I wish to thank Shannon Stimson for her generosity and encouragement. Finally, I wish to thank my friends, family, and especially my wife, Lindsay, for material and spiritual support in this humble but demanding task.

Introduction: Social Science, Politics, and Positivism

This dissertation examines the work of three political philosophers who, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, labored in varied ways at the intersection of philosophy of social science and normative political theory. Specifically, Leo Strauss, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor all attempted to respond to what was once the looming challenge of positivism in the social sciences and politics. All three thinkers objected vigorously not only to the self-styled scientific status of positivist social theory, but also to its attempt to divorce empirical study from normative engagement. In doing so, these three thinkers attempted to rescue a more humanistic conception of political life in the face of the modern tendency towards mechanism, technocracy, and pseudoscience.

I will return at greater length below to the complex and often abused category of “positivism.”¹ But first I wish to make clear what my treatment of these three thinkers hopes to accomplish. For, although my dissertation is comprised of a loose set of interlocking essays, it is nevertheless unified by certain philosophical preoccupations or themes. Three such themes are worth detailing upfront.

First, my analysis of Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor is meant to trace the emergence of an alternative philosophy of social science to those that currently underwrite the majority of political science research. Specifically, I argue that these three thinkers, albeit with varying success, attempt to re-envision the conceptual basis for political inquiry today. My own point of view on these debates—as will become clear—is far from neutral. To the contrary, I present my position throughout.

To begin with, I argue that while Strauss represents a first wave of criticism of mainstream political science, ultimately his alternative, “great books” research program is too limited to pose a serious alternative to current social scientific practice. Thus, in chapter one, I claim that Strauss did not achieve a philosophical refutation of positivist social science but instead carried out a political one. In chapter two I then argue that Strauss’s research agenda has ironically encouraged a division of labor in political science that reproduces the very positivistic dichotomy of facts and values he so vehemently set out to oppose.

In the remaining chapters, I turn my attention to reconstructing and assessing MacIntyre’s and Taylor’s respective criticisms of positivistic thought. In these essays, I argue that these two philosophers have given us the philosophical basis for an alternative, interpretive approach to political science. Of course, I am not making the claim that they invented the interpretive approach. As we shall see, they drew on a long tradition of interpretive and hermeneutic thought, drawing on the linguistic philosophies of Peter Winch and Ludwig Wittgenstein, the phenomenology of Heidegger and Gadamer, and the cultural studies of E.P. Thompson to name only a few. So my claim is not that MacIntyre and Taylor are complete originals, but rather that

¹ As will become clear, my use of the term “positivism”—following Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor—is far broader than what is typical. For by “positivism” I do not mean logical positivism or some other narrow school of thought. Rather, what I hope to convey by this term is the general cultural and intellectual tendency to model the explanation of human actions on a particular conception of the natural sciences. One of the central tenets of positivism in this sense, as we shall see below, is the attempt to view the world in terms of a strong fact-value dichotomy. Positivism, in this regard, is largely fueled by the manifest prestige and success of the natural sciences, which drives many in the human sciences to attempt to recreate their research in its image.

they give us the state of the art in interpretive or hermeneutic philosophy of social science, advancing this tradition in key ways (see especially chapters 4 and 6).

In this respect, my dissertation hopes to vindicate and revive their insights in the face of skepticism and opposition. Indeed, over fifty years have passed since the much hailed “interpretive turn” emerged in the English-speaking world.² Yet today the reforms of this turn have stalled. And although many political scientists now accept certain interpretive criticisms of their work, they also tend to treat interpretivism as one method among many, one more tool in a kit.³ Against this tendency, the essays on MacIntyre and Taylor seek to reassert the case for interpretive social science.

But the concerns of my study are not restricted to philosophy of social science. A second major theme pursued in these essays is the search for conceptual links between debates in philosophy of social science and normative, political engagement. Social science, we are often told, must do its best to disengage and rise above the ideological tumult of the world it studies. By contrast, the three thinkers I examine here insist that empirical social science and normative inquiry cannot be successfully dichotomized. According to Strauss, this is because value-neutral political science itself has major political repercussions that must not be ignored (chapter 1). While according to MacIntyre and Taylor, this is because to have a normative theory is to exclude certain forms of social explanation, while to adhere to a given social explanation is to change the range of available normative theories (see chapters 3-6).

In assuming this position, these thinkers contrast with the dominant strain of political theory in the Anglophone world of the last thirty years. This dominant view has divided empirical social inquiry and normative theorizing. For example, one way of thinking of the late John Rawls’ massively influential project is as a vindication of political and normative philosophy after the challenges posed by the widespread endorsement in the English speaking world of a fact-value dichotomy. Indeed, a particularly extreme group of analytic philosophers, the logical positivists, even declared political philosophy “dead” because its language was unverifiable and therefore essentially emotive.⁴ But even after the demise of logical positivism, the notion that there was a dichotomy between facts and values remained largely unquestioned within mainstream analytic philosophy. In this context, Rawls’s project was received by many as a resuscitation of political and normative philosophy, showing that such research could be established on rational grounds, largely free from questions of fact. Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* can be read (and indeed was read by many) as an attempt to carve out a radically autonomous sphere for rational normative justification, separate from the empirical researches of the social sciences, thus overcoming the fact-value dichotomy.

² For a powerful, pioneering overview of this development see Richard Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978). For other important collections on the “interpretive turn” see: Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman, eds., *The Interpretive Turn* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

³ This trend is evident in a number of the more influential writers on methodology in the discipline. For example: Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 38-39; Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Henry Brady, and David Collier, “Political Science Methodology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, Box-Steffensmeier, Brady, and Collier, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 29-30; John Gerring, *Social Science Methodology*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴ E.g.: A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1946).

By contrast, in rejecting a strong division between normative and empirical research, Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor have opened alternative routes out of the fact-value dichotomy. Recovering this aspect of their work thus debunks the widespread perception that political theory died of a severe case of positivism until the healing powers of Rawls arrived on the scene and resurrected the cadaver.⁵ On the contrary, other major alternatives to Rawlsian political theory sprang up in part out of an ongoing critique of the social sciences that dates back at least to the early 1950s.

In this vein, too, my views are particularly favorable to MacIntyre and Taylor. Both these philosophers, I will argue, adopted interpretive conceptions of the human person against what they saw as the overly mechanistic and reductive tendencies of various intellectual and political strains in the contemporary world (chapters 3 and 5). Moreover, where modern political authority is often buttressed by the specialized and technical vocabularies of economic and political experts, MacIntyre and Taylor both insisted that explaining social reality requires engaging with the beliefs, language, and meanings of ordinary people. Interpretive theory is thus mobilized by these thinkers to resist modernity's tendency to authorize rule by experts, managers, and technocrats. In championing interpretive approaches to explaining human action, Taylor and MacIntyre sought to give voice to an anti-technocratic and humanistic vision of politics.

A final theme pursued in these pages is the attempt to heighten our philosophical understanding of these three philosophers by placing them in historical context. My hope is that by historically situating the philosophies of Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor, we might achieve a deeper appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of their thought. These thinkers must be understood in terms of particular key influences. But they must also be understood in terms of currents of positivistic thought that inspired their projects. Indeed, as we shall see, the general pattern of all their thought in philosophy of social science was reactive. Having come into contact with various currents of positivistic thought each of these thinkers recoiled and turned to alternative philosophies for resources and inspiration.

Positivism is thus the shared horizon upon which I scrutinize the varied philosophies of Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor. Understanding what I mean by "positivism" is therefore essential. It is to this key task that the remainder of this introduction devotes itself.

What is Positivism?

In order to grasp what motivated Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor to each mount their theoretical alternatives, it is first necessary to have some basic understanding of their shared antagonist: positivism. But first some remarks are in order to clarify my own appropriation of a term that has been so overloaded.

⁵ This view appears in the reception of Rawls by those who had discussed the "death" of political philosophy: for example, Peter Laslett and James Fiskin, "Introduction," to *Philosophy, Politics, and Society*, 5th series (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979) 1-5. It also appears in more general accounts of the history of contemporary political thought: for example, Richard Tuck, "The Contribution of History," in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 72-89. It also remains tacit among many historians and philosophers: for example, Quentin Skinner, et. al. "Political Philosophy: The View from Cambridge," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10 (2002) 1-19.

Strauss and MacIntyre use the term “positivism” to name a kind of opponent not only in philosophy of social science but also in the culture more widely.⁶ Taylor sometimes uses the term “positivism” in the same way but more often chooses the term “naturalism.”⁷ Richard Bernstein, in his pioneering work *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, like Taylor employs the term “naturalism” and often contrasts this with a tendency to caricature work in the social sciences with the broad brush term “positivism.” Bernstein’s main objection (and rightly so) is that the term “positivism” is often used to essentialize and reduce the many different kinds of work in the social sciences to a monolithic caricature.⁸ Having attacked this caricature, critics of “positivism” then congratulate themselves for what is in fact a false victory. As will become clear, I believe that a certain line of Straussianism is guilty of a less crude version of this error.

Bernstein therefore alerts us to one very real danger in the use of the term “positivism”: namely, to set up a straw man. That is why I now hope to sketch a brief account of how during the twentieth century something we might call positivism became predominant not only intellectually but also as a set of techniques and practices—that is as a form of power. This comprises the wider context for my account of Strauss’s, Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s respective philosophies. Positivism, thought of as a cultural and intellectual movement, forms a shared backdrop (though in later chapters I will distinguish much more specific, fine-grained variants within this movement).

How did positivism first emerge? In *After Virtue* MacIntyre suggests that one place to locate the origin of positivism is in seventeenth and eighteenth century attempts to transfer the mechanistic forms of explanation of Newton’s physics into the social sciences.⁹ Taylor similarly argues that this movement began with the belief that human behavior ought to be “understood according to the canons ... [of] the seventeenth-century revolution in natural science.”¹⁰ In this sense positivism was born when Enlightenment intellectuals tried to eradicate the influence of classical and medieval teleology (or explanation according to human purposes as conceptualized by Aristotle) in favor of mechanistic and impersonal forms of causation. Instead of explaining human behavior by reference to intentions or purposes, Enlightenment intellectuals increasingly favored mechanistic forms of explanation inspired by the new physics.¹¹

In such origins Taylor suggests that we can also make out a “metaphysical motivation” that informs all kinds of positivism from the seventeenth century up to the present day.¹² Inspired in part by the sheer prestige and success of the natural sciences, researchers in the human sciences have increasingly attempted to reduce or eliminate specifically human or

⁶ For example: MacIntyre, “Ideology, Social Science and Revolution,” *Comparative Politics* 5, no. 3 (1973): 321-342; Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1959) 18-27.

⁷ For this use of the term positivism, see: Taylor, “Neutrality in Political Science,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 58-60. For “naturalism” see: Taylor, “Introduction,” in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 2.

⁸ Bernstein, *Restructuring Social and Political Theory*, Part I.

⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 81-85.

¹⁰ Taylor, “Introduction,” in *Human Agency and Language*, 2.

¹¹ Such efforts to eradicate teleology through mechanistic explanation continued in the nineteenth century in the work of Auguste Comte and his English admirer John Stuart Mill. See: Stephen Turner, “Cause, Teleology and Method” in *The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences*, vol. 7, eds. Theodore Porter and Dorothy Ross (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2003) 57-70.

¹² Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 2.

anthropocentric properties from the explanation of the world in favor of hard facts akin to those of the natural sciences. A recurrent feature of positivism, in other words, is the assumption that the specifically human (which is thought of as subjective) can be reduced or at least explained in terms of the specifically nonhuman (which is thought of as objective and factual). One particularly important example of this is the effort, dating back to the Enlightenment, to dichotomize facts and values. As we shall see Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor are each critical of this particular positivist doctrine. Another important example is the attempt by positivists to explain human behavior in terms of ostensibly brute facts about individuals or groups (for example, their income level, race, political party, or gender) instead of engaging with their beliefs and meanings. Meanings thus frequently serve a subordinate function if they are not entirely subtracted from positivist explanations.

Of course, now that we have some general parameters with which to identify positivism as an intellectual tradition it is apparent that such parameters are too abstract to do much philosophical work. As MacIntyre puts it, there have been “many positivisms and not just one or even two” such that the “virtues of positivism emerge only in the detail of particular versions, not in summaries of its most general philosophical theses.”¹³ Moreover, even if our purpose were simply a historical summary of positivism as a tradition we would have our hands full. A complete account of this expansive tradition would need to account for a very wide set of thinkers including Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Diderot, Condorcet, Henri de Saint-Simon, David Hume, Auguste Comte, Adolphe Quetelet, J. S. Mill, Emile Durkheim, William Stanley Jevons, and Max Weber to name only a few. Fortunately, my own purposes are much more limited. My present concern is instead with sketching some of the background to the particular versions of positivism that formed a mainstream in the middle twentieth century in the English speaking world. For this is the world in which Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor, wrote.

In general terms there are three arenas I would like to sketch to give the reader a sense for how positivism captured the intellectual and political mainstream during the last century. The first arena is Anglophone analytic philosophy, the second is modern political science, and the third is modern management and governance. In all three of these arenas, theories and practices were developed which crowned the natural sciences as the supreme model, and attempted to subtract or at least demote the specifically human dimensions of reality. Positivism, in this regard, was not simply an intellectual movement, but a cultural movement, and ultimately a form of power.

I. The Rise of Positivism in Philosophy

Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor were all philosophers by training and in later chapters we will see that all of them engaged the rise of positivistic philosophies in the twentieth century. How did positivism become dominant in Anglophone philosophy at this time? Its most powerful source was the advent and development of analytic philosophy.

Analytic philosophy has roots extending into the work of European thinkers such as Gottlob Frege and the young Wittgenstein but its emergence in the Anglophone world was

¹³ MacIntyre, “Positivism, Sociology and Practical Reasoning: Notes on Durkheim’s *Suicide*,” in *Human Nature and Natural Knowledge*, eds. Alan Donagan, Anthony Perovich and Michael Wedin (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing, 1986) 87.

largely the result of G. E. Moore's and Bertrand Russell's early attempts to revive the tradition of British empiricism. Empiricism needed reviving because at the turn of the century idealism reigned supreme in England. British idealists led by F. H. Bradley and T. H. Green had under the influence of Hegel championed a historical, holistic and metaphysical approach to philosophy in which the world was understood in terms of an increasingly complete system of beliefs. Although both Russell and Moore had been educated within the tradition of British Idealism, they sought early on to overturn the late nineteenth century dominance of idealism and instead restore the empiricism of Locke, Hume, and Mill. They both did so, moreover, by attempting to rehabilitate updated versions of ahistorical and atomistic conceptions of reality discoverable through formal schemes of analysis.¹⁴

Moore's attempts to carry out such a project can be seen, for example, in his famous essay from 1899, "The Nature of Judgment." In this essay Moore begins by critiquing the idealist conception of judgment as untenable because it entails a vicious infinite regress. However, for our purposes the more important aspect of Moore's essay is his suggestion that as an alternative to idealism, philosophy be reconceived as the activity of decomposing complexes of concepts into their atomistic parts through analysis. These atoms, Moore believed, were non-temporal, non-mental objects that constituted the elementary stuff of reality and whose apprehension was immediate and unproblematic. In place of idealism's historical and holistic account of knowledge Moore therefore offered up an atomistic ontology whose constituent parts could form the foundations to a largely ahistorical and formal conception of philosophy.¹⁵

A related move towards atomistic foundations to knowledge was presented in Russell's early theory of logical atomism, which maintained that through analysis "you can get down ... to ultimate simples out of which the world is built."¹⁶ Such "simples" could be, for example, "little patches of color or sounds" out of which we constructed complex entities.¹⁷ Influenced by the early Wittgenstein's picture theory of language, this view then held that there was a correspondence between the simplest, atomistic units of language and the simplest, atomistic units of reality. Beyond such "simples" no further breakdown was possible. Russell's logical atomism also clearly borrowed from a view of the world popularized by modern physics. And although he distinguished philosophical analysis which arrived at "logical atoms" from the "physical analysis" of science which arrived at "physical atoms," nevertheless he did so as part of a wider effort to grant science an authoritative place within the domain of human knowledge with philosophy largely relegated to the role of logically analyzing general problems that science had not yet managed to resolve definitively.¹⁸

As with Moore, Russell's philosophy was also meant to overturn the Hegelian conception of knowledge as requiring the understanding of ever wider wholes or systems of historically

¹⁴ For a good account of the rise of analytic philosophy, see: Peter Hylton, *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford, 1990).

¹⁵ G. E. Moore, "The Nature of Judgment," in: *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*, ed. T. Baldwin (New York, 1993).

¹⁶ Bertrand Russell, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism [1918]," in *Russell's Logical Atomism*, ed. David Pears (London: Fontana, 1972) 129.

¹⁷ Russell, "Philosophy of Logical Atomism," 33.

¹⁸ The physical datum of empiricism also required organization in terms of these logical simples because, according to Russell, "the ultimate constituents of the world" were never "empirically given" and the continuity through space and time of objects like desks and the elementary particles of physics required considering them in light of their construction out of basic logical components. Russell, "Philosophy of Logical Atomism," 33, 131-133, 141.

formed beliefs.¹⁹ Both Russell's and Moore's turn toward atomistic foundations thus marked a rejection of idealist notions of philosophical understanding as intertwined in historical knowledge. Instead, Moore and Russell made appeals to a kind of ahistorical common sense as the starting point for philosophical analysis. Russell thus wrote that "the process of sound philosophizing ... consists mainly in passing from those obvious, vague, ambiguous things, that we feel quite sure of, to something precise, clear, [and] definite" through analysis.²⁰ In the same passage he lauded Descartes' approach to philosophy and stated that his own philosophical method like Descartes' would consist in "always begin[ning] any argument that I have to make by appealing to data which will be quite ludicrously obvious."²¹

Both Moore's and Russell's forms of atomism, although openly metaphysical, were also meant to rehabilitate empiricism by repudiating its dependence on holistic, historical narratives. In this regard early analytic philosophy was part of a wider modernist shift away from narrative forms of explanation across philosophy and the human sciences that we will revisit in the case of political science.

Within the formation of early analytic philosophy, this shift was also evident in a small but noisy band of intellectual radicals, the logical positivists, who drew inspiration from the Vienna Circle. Unlike Moore and Russell, the logical positivists largely rejected attempts by philosophers to articulate a basic ontology as inherently metaphysical. However, like Russell and Moore, the logical positivists accepted both the critique of idealism and the view of philosophy as a form of analysis subordinate to the natural sciences.

Probably the most influential logical positivist, A. J. Ayer, accomplished this view of philosophy in large part by assuming an extreme version of the analytic-synthetic distinction. This distinction had already been articulated by both the young Wittgenstein and various members of the Vienna Circle in their 1929 manifesto.²² However, it was Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) that helped popularize this doctrine. In *Language, Truth and Logic* Ayer argued that all meaningful propositions must be one of two types. Either they could be analytic; that is, the *a priori* tautologies associated with logic, mathematics, and philosophy. Or they could be synthetic; that is, the *a posteriori* empirical and verifiable hypotheses associated with the natural sciences. If a proposition could neither be verified by science nor was valid *a priori*, then it was "metaphysical" and thus "neither true nor false but literally senseless."²³ Ayer thus gave an even greater importance to philosophy as linguistic analysis than had either Russell or Moore, while also maintaining their view that the "activity of philosophizing" was "essentially analytic" with empirical science the primary authority on our actual picture of reality.²⁴

No less important was Ayer's popularization of the Vienna Circle's verification principle of meaning. The verification principle connected the meaningfulness of propositions to the ability to verify them. Again, a term could be analytic and therefore meaningful but tautologous (e.g. "all unmarried men are bachelors"), but all other meaningful language depended on empirical verifiability. The natural sciences thereby not only furnished truth, but also set the

¹⁹ Russell, "Philosophy of Logical Atomism," 32.

²⁰ Russell, "Philosophy of Logical Atomism," 33.

²¹ Russell, "Philosophy of Logical Atomism," 35.

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. Ogden, intro B. Russell (London, 1922); Rudolf Carnap, H. Hahn and O. Neurath, 'Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung: Der Wiener Kreis', in: *The Emergence of Logical Empiricism*, ed. S. Sarkar (New York, 1996).

²³ Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 31.

²⁴ Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 51.

boundaries of meaningful language. Accordingly, Ayer polemically denounced all kinds of statements from ethical, religious, aesthetic, and philosophic language as “meaningless.”

We have seen that Taylor identified as one of the basic family resemblances of positivism its tendency to reduce the distinctly anthropocentric to a purportedly more objective strata of reality furnished by the natural sciences. In Ayer’s logical positivism we have in some ways an exaggerated example of this very view. Famously, Ayer and those inspired by him like Charles Stevenson went on to argue that moral and ethical concepts were neither analytic nor synthetic but primarily emotive. Ayer’s emotivism maintained that “good” and “bad” were purely subjective language with no cognitive content and therefore no meaning. To call something a *good x* was like shouting *hooray for x!* Similarly to call something a *bad x* was like shouting *boo for x!*²⁵ But even beyond the ruckus caused by logical positivism’s more extreme doctrines, the wider analytic tradition itself endorsed Hume’s empiricist division between facts and values. Indeed, the doctrine of value-neutrality (in both logical positivist and other forms) loomed large throughout the 1940s, 50s, and 60s when Strauss was launching his critique of social science and Taylor and MacIntyre were training as philosophers.

Furthermore, analytic philosophers also succeeded in raising the prestige of positivistic views beyond the bounds of philosophy departments into various fields in the human sciences. For example, psychological behaviorists like Edward Tolman, Clark Hull and B. F. Skinner drew from analytic philosophy’s intellectual authority in order to legitimate their approaches.²⁶ Likewise, behavioral political scientists made use of a philosophy of science inspired by the analytic tradition.²⁷ More generally, the overwhelming success and prestige of the natural sciences continued to drive many philosophers and social scientists alike to remake their disciplines in the image of the natural sciences. Analytic philosophy was, in this sense, only one part of the larger movement to crown the natural sciences as the supreme model of human inquiry.

II. The Rise of Positivism in the Study of Politics

Although the thinkers who concern me criticized the emergence of positivism in all the human sciences including psychology, economics, and sociology, it is also true that they each paid particular attention to political science.²⁸ Looking briefly at how positivism became ascendant within political science can then stand in as an example of some of the broader shifts that led to the rise of positivism in the human sciences more generally.²⁹

²⁵ Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 108; Charles Stevenson’s emotivism improves on Ayer’s account in various ways in *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944).

²⁶ Roger Smith, *The Norton History of the Human Sciences* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997) 663.

²⁷ John Gunnell, *Philosophy, Science and Political Inquiry* (Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1975) chs. 1-3.

²⁸ For example: MacIntyre, “Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?” in *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978); Strauss, “An Epilogue,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989); Taylor, “Neutrality in Political Science,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*.

²⁹ For histories of the emergence of the modern human and social sciences see: *The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences*, vol. 7; Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Smith, *The Norton History of the Human Sciences*.

Like analytic philosophers, those who studied politics at the turn of the century also wished to transform their discipline into a more empirical, formal, and scientific enterprise. Also like early analytic philosophers, in order to do so such students of politics needed to unseat a dominant paradigm which was primarily narrative and historical in approach. This older approach to the study of politics and society not only considered historical narratives a form of science but also largely assumed that “progress was built into the order of things.”³⁰ Thus the study of politics in the nineteenth century tended to take on the form of large-scale historical narratives that made claims to a science of development toward some final goal or end state. There was, for example, the Darwinian-inspired account of Henry Jones Ford, the historical science of Karl Marx, as well as the developmental accounts of the state fostered by Americans like John W. Burgess who took a more Hegelian approach.³¹ In this way many nineteenth century accounts of social and political life drew intellectual support from a wide and often incompatible array of narratives to justify their competing accounts of historical progression.³²

As was the case with analytic philosophy, the new political scientists began to break from these grand historical narratives in the first decades of the twentieth century by moving towards increasingly ahistorical, atomized, and analytic forms of explanation. The First World War was particularly important in this regard as its sheer brutality and duration motivated increasing skepticism of the presupposed belief in historical progress that had been so influential during the nineteenth century.³³ Other factors historians cite as leading to the waning of faith in progressive histories included a discrediting of Teutonism among American scholars after World War I as well as a growing belief that the present age (with its industrialization, urbanization and mass immigration patterns) marked a complete break from the past.³⁴

Regardless of its causes, what is clear is that the transition away from grand progressive narratives towards atomistic forms of empiricism was the crucial event in the formation of modern political science as a discipline separate from that of history.³⁵ Scholars of politics in the late nineteenth century had for the most part not distinguished between the study of politics and history. To the contrary, they largely assumed that the study of one was in some sense the study of the other. But with the advent of a more empiricist political science, professional historians began to distinguish themselves more and more in terms of the study of the past “for its own sake,” while political scientists insisted on the need to discover policy relevant advice by abstracting from historical contexts and articulating the essential features of political and social life.³⁶

³⁰ Mark Bevir, “Political Studies as Narrative and Science, 1880-2000,” *Political Studies* 54 (2006): 585. Also see: Robert Adcock, “The Emergence of Political Science as a Discipline: History and the Study of Politics in America, 1875-1910,” *History of Political Thought* 24, no. 3 (2003): 485-491; *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges Since 1880*, eds. Adcock, Bevir and Shannon Stimson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) chs. 1-4.

³¹ John Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 55, 77; Henry Jones Ford, *The Natural History of the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1915) 1.

³² Adcock, “The Emergence of Political Science,” 485-491; Bevir, “Political Studies,” 584-588.

³³ Bevir, “Political Studies,” 588.

³⁴ Adcock, “The Emergence of Political Science,” 492-495; James Farr, “Political Science,” in *The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences*, 313; Gunnell, *Descent of Political Theory*, 79-80.

³⁵ Adcock, “The Emergence of Political Science.”

³⁶ Adcock, “The Emergence of Political Science,” 495-500. Adcock notes that such change, while marking a definite shift, was not monolithic.

Charles Merriam, who is often credited as one of the founders of this new political science, provides an example of such empiricist inclinations. Beginning in the early 1920s Merriam called for a political science that focused on classifications, typologies, the atomized beliefs of survey information and analytic psychological research. Like his contemporary Graham Wallas in England, Merriam believed that political science needed to make “broader use of the instruments of social observation in statistics . . . the analytic technique and results of psychology” while also forming closer relations with the “disciplines of geography, ethnology, biology, sociology and social psychology.”³⁷ In light of the developments we have been tracing one cannot help but note the conspicuous absence of history from Merriam’s list of disciplines. Such an omission would have been unthinkable only a few decades earlier. Yet this dramatic break from the recent past was hugely influential. Aided by his fundraising and organizational talents, he formed a Chicago school of political science that trained several of the leading political scientists of the next generation including Harold Laswell, Harold Gosnell, V. O. Key and Quincy Wright.³⁸

And while it is true that history still served an important function for political scientists like Merriam, it served more as a trove of data for filling in ahistorical typologies and building inductive generalizations than as a way to structure political understanding through narratives. Instead of narrative webs of unfolding history, the key to Merriam’s new empiricism was to find atomistic, measurable units of political data. Thus, in the 1931 edition to *New Aspects of Politics* he wrote approvingly of Gosnell, Rice, Catlin, Thurston, and other political scientists who now sought out “measurable units of political phenomena.”³⁹ In this way the new, empiricist political science differentiated itself not only from the grand historical narratives of the past but also from the newly formed discipline of history which rather than seeking “measurable units of political phenomena” sought instead to reconstruct the past on its own terms.

The desire to establish such atomistic, measurable units of political phenomena was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the explosion of survey techniques and research during this time period. Political polling in particular, which had its origins in nineteenth century straw polls and market research, became a field of intense academic interest. This interest was reflected in the opening of three major centers for survey research during the 1940s: Paul Lazarfeld’s Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia, The National Opinion Research Center in Chicago, and the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. The quantification of individual beliefs, attitudes and preferences was fueled by various factors including: the intensified electioneering of politicians; journalists wishing to “excite readers about the ‘horse race;’” and commercial firms seeking to both discover and manipulate consumer preferences. Thus polling became a standard of political science within the context of a wider cultural shift towards quantification.⁴⁰

As part of the growth in polling and survey techniques the period between 1920 and 1945 also saw a great increase in the number of universities that housed “political science” departments which resulted in nearly a tripling of the membership in the American Political

³⁷ Charles Merriam, “The Present State of the Study of Politics (1921)” in *New Aspects of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) 82-83.

³⁸ Barry Karl, *Charles Merriam and the Study of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) viii-ix, ch. 8.

³⁹ Merriam, *New Aspects of Politics*, 35-38.

⁴⁰ Susan Herbst, “Polling in Politics and Industry,” *The Cambridge History of Science*, vol. 7, 577-588, quote p. 578.

Science Association during this time period from 1,300 members to 3,300.⁴¹ Much of the push for a new political science was openly motivated by a wish to contribute to a wider twentieth century project of social engineering that swept not only the academy but newspapers, businesses, political parties, and institutions of power more generally (a series of events I return to below). As Merriam noted there was “a powerful trend” toward greater cooperation and exchange between “governing officials and research groups” in order to control social and political outcomes.⁴²

Ironically, greater policy relevance also came with more attempts at presenting knowledge as value neutral and ready for political elites to use regardless of their ideological persuasion. Value neutrality was thus part of a broader social problem in modern democratic societies, in which popular sovereignty became increasingly abstract and the role of elites in actual decision making increased.⁴³ And although in Merriam’s case the move towards formal and ostensibly neutral approaches was couched in terms of his democratic activism, nevertheless there was a growing tendency in the discipline toward distinguishing the knowledge of the political science expert from the partisan viewpoint of everyday citizens.⁴⁴ Thus, in the early 1900s, the founding members of the American Political Science Association self-consciously sought to present political science as a discipline that neither fell into the extremes of the antiquarian research agendas of history departments nor the partisan commitments of ordinary citizens.⁴⁵ Unlike the former, their knowledge was purportedly useful; unlike the latter, their knowledge was factual and thereby usable by anyone regardless of their ideology. The new political science was therefore presented as both instrumental and free of ideology.

This effort to fashion political science into a policy relevant science only became more intense as the century progressed. Indeed, it was this very goal of knowledge ready for the task of social engineering that helped motivate a critique of the new empiricist approach to political science from within its own ranks. The famous “behavioral revolution” of the 1950s and 1960s should, in this regard, not be viewed so much as a radical break from empiricism as an attempt to criticize empiricist political science for its irrelevance to public policy.⁴⁶

Specifically, behaviorism arose as a new generation of political scientists confronted the dilemma of hyper-factualism. Like the empiricists before them, the behaviorists also wished to emphasize quantification, typologies, and survey research. However, unlike the empiricists, the behaviorists believed that the attempt to simply induce laws of politics from ever growing amounts of data was a mistaken approach. This was the problem of “hyper-factualism”: after several decades of the new political science there were simply too many facts and too few theories (a problem which had vexed Merriam).

But how to create theories other than by induction? Here a new group of political scientists led by figures such as David Easton, Robert Dahl, Gabriel Almond, Sidney Verba and Karl Deutsch looked to analytic philosophy for inspiration. Such political scientists drew liberally from analytic philosophers of the time in order to legitimate a research program in

⁴¹ James Farr, “Political Science,” 315.

⁴² Merriam, *New Aspects of Politics*, 47.

⁴³ Gerd Gigerenzer and others, eds., *The Empire of Chance: How Probability Changed Science and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 235-237; Theodore Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁴⁴ Farr, “Political Science,” 316-319; Karl, *Charles Merriam and the Study of Politics*, x.

⁴⁵ Adcock, “The Emergence of Political Science,” 500-506.

⁴⁶ Cf. Bevir, “Political Studies,” 592.

which deductive theory-building was given priority. Particularly important in this regard was the work of the analytic philosopher Carl Hempel. Many behavioralists imported Hempel's deductive-nomological model into political science in order to guide their efforts at law-like generalizations that were both predictive and verifiable.⁴⁷ Where the old guard of empiricists had favored patient inductions to tentative generalizations fit into ahistorical typologies, the behavioralists advocated the deductive construction of laws.

The ongoing debate between these two forms of positivistic political science—one more inductively minded and the other inclined towards deductive generalizations—has largely defined two possible methodological poles within the discipline up to the present day.⁴⁸ But for our purposes, what is important to emphasize is that these particular forms of empiricist and behavioralist political science were the dominant ones when Taylor and MacIntyre first wrote, as well as when Strauss first turned his attention to critiques of political science. This dominance, as we have seen, runs parallel to the empiricism and vaunting of natural science that had reached a zenith in analytic philosophy. Likewise, a more extensive survey of the academic landscape would reveal a similar spread of positivism in other disciplines like psychology and economics.⁴⁹ However, we now turn our attention to how the rise of positivism was not merely an academic story but also embodied a major form of modern power.

III. The Rise of Positivism as Modern Power

The full story of the shift from the political forms characteristic of the late nineteenth century to those characteristic of the twentieth is much more complex than space affords. Still, I will sketch some important elements of this transition while relying on the much more detailed work of a number of recent historians.⁵⁰ One key to this transformation was the way that a new politics emerged as positivistic forms of social knowledge undermined and discredited the prior understandings of the state. So, where the tendency at the end of the nineteenth century had been to view the state as embodying a unified national identity forming the end-goal of a people across history, political elites in the early twentieth century, inspired in part by the new forms of political and social science, began increasingly to treat the state as a conglomerate of competing and self-interested groups not tied together by any pre-political bond. In this way, a conception of the nation state as a progressive moral and political unity was replaced by a disaggregated, pluralistic picture of atomized units organized by the formal structure of certain institutions.

These changes in the conception of the state rested in part on new theories of the self. Particularly important in this regard were various models of individual rationality that—although

⁴⁷ Gunnell, *Philosophy, Science and Political Inquiry*, 60-67.

⁴⁸ Cf. Bevir, "Political Studies," 592-593.

⁴⁹ Cf. Porter and Ross, eds., *The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences*.

⁵⁰ I draw heavily in this section on the valuable historical work on the intersection of social science and techniques of power presented by the collective efforts of historians in *The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences*. The pieces by Theodore Porter, Dorothy Ross, and Peter Wagner have been especially helpful. I also draw on the following work to flesh out my picture of positivism as a cultural-political movement: Bevir, *Democratic Governance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Peter Wagner and others, eds., *Social Sciences and Modern States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Johan Heilbron, Lars Magnusson and Björn Wittrock, eds., *The Rise of the Social Sciences and the Formation of Modernity: Conceptual Change in Context, 1750-1850* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998).

they had their roots in earlier thought extending back to the Enlightenment—gained greater prominence and political cachet throughout the twentieth century. Drawing from sociology as well as neo-classical economics, policy makers and political elites interpreted themselves and others through models of individual rationality that placed greater and greater emphasis on human beings as either utility maximizing or else making choices in conformity with preexistent social roles and norms.⁵¹ Rather than the common nineteenth century view of individuals participating in the collective political and moral unity of the state, individuals were instead increasingly cast as self-interested or else determined by demographics or other social groupings.

These new understandings of the state and its citizens in turn had an enormous impact on actual political practices. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in the bureaucracy. The common nineteenth century idea of a state as a political unity had sustained a view of bureaucrats as the servants of an identifiable, objective, and shared national good. By contrast the new social sciences produced a different view of bureaucrats as presiding over a collection of contingently related groups. Bureaucrats were increasingly cast not as trustees but as experts negotiating competing interests, pursuing the values and preferences furnished by the political process. Their professional authority in this regard was often staked on the success of sciences that purported to articulate value-neutral, factual knowledge of the laws governing human behavior. The ends of the new bureaucracy were thus conceived as given by the political process, while the means were the instrumental and factual knowledge of an administrative elite.

So too arose the modern version of this distinction now so widespread as to be viewed as nearly commonplace between value-laden “politics” and supposedly value-free “administration.” Hierarchic, managerial bureaucracies spread throughout states, corporations, non-profits and other organizations precisely on the basis of their claim to be purely instrumentally useful and thereby serviceable to any ideology, business plan, mission statement, or goal. The distinction between politics and values on the one hand, and management and strategy on the other, has now become a central feature of the modern political landscape. Indeed, it is often treated as implicitly valid or self-evident. But in truth the success of this view was contingent on the massive shift away from an older conception of the political community as growing out of a historical narrative of progress.

Yet another feature of this change in the politics of the state and bureaucratic administration came with a dramatic reevaluation of the conception of performance evaluation. Where many nineteenth century accounts of bureaucracy had emphasized a morality of “responsibility” to an identifiable common good, positivist-inspired elites introduced into the moral-political lexicon the notion of “accountability” and increasingly devised methods of evaluating outputs through procedures and later through quantifiable performance reviews.⁵² The measuring of outputs, benchmarks, examinations, and other auditing functions thus became an increasingly common way of presenting purportedly objective evaluations of administrators and politicians at the end of the twentieth century. Such quantification has been viewed by some historians as a political strategy for coping with the increasing deferment of power to the bureaucracy and experts in democratic societies.⁵³ What is certain is that it marks a shift away from the political ethos of the late nineteenth century.

⁵¹ These are what Bevir describes as the rise of an economic as well as a sociological rationality. See *Democratic Governance*, ch. 1.

⁵² Bevir, *Democratic Governance*, 33-37.

⁵³ See, for example: Porter, *Trust in Numbers*.

In short, I am following a number of recent historians in suggesting that modern bureaucratic and administrative power, and its inherent instrumentalism, has its sources in the new, positivistic social science.⁵⁴ Of course, this modern conception of the state and its citizens has not been without dilemmas. I have already alluded to how in democratic societies there is a tension between the commitment to democratic rule and the ever larger class of bureaucrats, managers, and experts who make many of the actual policy decisions. Indeed, as we shall see, this dilemma becomes a major point of attack on positivistic modes of power by MacIntyre. Yet, such tension withstanding, the influence of managerial authority predicated on positivistic science has been a steady presence in democratic countries since the turn of the century.

This modern managerial authority has gained strength not merely by critiquing its rivals but also by the way a number of the events of twentieth-century history have been interpreted. I have already mentioned how the First World War in particular was seen by many as casting doubt on developmental views of the state, discrediting German idealist thought, while also making dubious the assumption that history was naturally progressive. No less important, however, was the way that the First World War furnished the conditions for what historian Dorothy Ross has called the rise and implementation of an “engineering” project among political and administrative elites.⁵⁵ Already a number of the wars in the nineteenth century had facilitated increasing interventionist and statist approaches to politics. However, the flourishing of hierarchical bureaucracies steered by the new, positivistic social knowledge was accelerated by the First World War’s unprecedentedly large “experiment in social planning” which involved the mobilization of entire economies and the “unforeseen involvement of large segments of the population.”⁵⁶ In this context, there was a great push towards technical intervention and the creation of sciences that could determine large-scale social and political outcomes. Statistics bureaus, government bureaucracies, and other positivist-oriented organizations all saw rapid growth across Europe and the United States at this time.⁵⁷

The perceived need for social and political organization guided by positivistic, managerial modes was only further heightened by the stress of the Great Depression and the Second World War. In the United States the New Deal and the Great Society were both heavily colored by bureaucratic and managerial ambitions. But the spread of such organizations was neither exclusive to the public sector nor to democracies, as can be seen by the flourishing of positivistic management strategies in both private corporations as well as totalitarian governments like that of the Soviet Union during this time. Indeed, the Cold War in particular served as an impetus for the spread of technocratic modes of social organization across both East and West, albeit that in the democratic countries it was in the form of Keynesian and also other forms of free market economics.⁵⁸

As part of this change, an information industry servicing both private corporations and governments also boomed at this time. Demand for statistical knowledge of mass markets and voter constituencies was particularly high. Research reflected this demand as efforts were made to clarify the desires and preferences of two of the most influential sociological composites of

⁵⁴ Compare, for example: Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science*.

⁵⁵ Ross, “Changing Contours of the Social Science Disciplines,” in *The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences*, 219-220.

⁵⁶ Wagner, “Social Science and Social Planning During the Twentieth Century,” in *The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences*, 595.

⁵⁷ Ross, “Changing Contours,” 220.

⁵⁸ Ross, “Changing Contours,” 222.

the modern world—the “consumer” and the “voter.” The ensuing market and political research helped create greater sophistication in statistical techniques as the university and other private institutes became increasingly involved in the business of creating the information desired by political parties, businesses, the media, and other organizations.⁵⁹ A new kind of expert authority thus flourished along with the demand for statistical and quantified knowledge “one whose claims rest[ed] more on information and formal techniques than on concrete experience and personal judgment.”⁶⁰ The explosion in quantification and statistics, in other words, helped justify the idea that abstract informational knowledge was to be prized over practical know-how.

Positivistic theories thus informed modern political practice, giving a new shape to government and financial authorities who in turn demanded more investment in such research. A kind of reinforcement loop for positivistic culture, practices, and ideas was formed. Money flooded into research programs from both public and private sources. Certain disciplines, like economics, were refashioned in terms of the demand for social engineering knowledge.⁶¹ In the United States the financial support for the new social knowledge came from the most powerful institutions both public and private. Throughout the twentieth century war time budgets and postwar state projects all contributed to the development of various forms of positivist social science. At the height of federal funding, reached in the 1970s, the U.S. government invested an average of a billion dollars per year on commissioned research for use in social science guided planning; during the same period the National Science Foundation became a major source of funding geared towards techniques and methods modeled on the natural sciences.⁶² The scope of these efforts was spread abroad by Cold War attempts to combat Soviet power through the liberalization and modernization of poorer nations in the hopes of inoculating them against totalitarianism and communism.⁶³

Many private foundations were no less eager to invest money in the quest to establish a bona fide positivistic social science. In the early part of the century the Rockefeller Foundation funded the Social Science Research Council, organized by Charles Merriam and the American Political Science Association, in order to foster social science focusing on the emergent behaviorism. During the 1920s alone, the Rockefeller Foundation invested forty million dollars in social science research and further contributed in the 1930s along with other groups like the Russell Sage and the Carnegie Foundations.⁶⁴ Later, as the Rockefeller Foundation reduced its donations the Ford Foundation took its place in funding the new conception of social science among academic and policy elites.

The drive for positivistic knowledge has thus been among the best funded intellectual programs in the human sciences of the last century. And although a definitive and authoritative social science has eluded researchers there has been an undeniable spread of its cultural and political forms. Indeed, the spread of the political authority of positivism has led historians like Ross to speak of a “mainstream” that by midcentury had begun to “marginalize alternative forms of reflection.”⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Wagner, “The Uses of the Social Sciences,” in *The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences*, 544-546.

⁶⁰ Gigerenzer, *The Empire of Chance*, quote on 235.

⁶¹ Mary S. Morgan, “Economics,” in *The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences*, 275-305.

⁶² Ross, “Changing Contours,” 230.

⁶³ Wagner, “Social Science and Social Planning During the Twentieth Century,” 602-606.

⁶⁴ Ross, “Changing Contours,” 227.

⁶⁵ Ross, “Changing Contours,” 223.

Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor all began to write and think in the midst of the formation of this mainstream. Moreover, they all saw “positivism” as something much larger than just an intellectual movement in philosophy and social science. It was a cultural-political form. It was a kind of power. As my essays hope to reveal, each of these three thinkers formed his perspective in part by wrestling with what he saw as the shortcomings of positivism, not only as an intellectual movement, but as a kind of politics. Indeed, the push to develop rival philosophies of social science, which in turn might undergird alternative political forms, is perhaps the central underlying concern of this project.

Chapter 1: Leo Strauss's Political Critique of Social Science Positivism

At the center of Leo Strauss's famous critique of modernity is his reaction against the positivistic cultural and intellectual currents I have just finished describing. And yet the very nature of Strauss's critique has been subject to much misunderstanding. It is the ambition of this chapter to present a new interpretation of Strauss's critique of social science positivism that also makes three contributions to the existent secondary literature.

In the first section of the chapter I work to show the extent to which Strauss's critique of positivism is a response to Weber. Although some of the secondary literature recognizes that Strauss's critique of positivism is centered on Weber's fact-value distinction (a doctrine I explain below), few scholars have noticed the extent to which Strauss also inherited certain practical dilemmas from Weber.¹ These practical dilemmas in turn help shape Strauss's critique of Weber. In particular, I will relate Strauss's critique of positivism to Weber's concepts of disenchantment, *Redlichkeit*, and the role of the vocations within modern, scientific societies.

In the second part of the chapter I draw on the first in order to argue that Strauss's critique of Weber's fact-value distinction was not primarily a philosophical refutation but instead a political condemnation. To do this I set up four types of arguments that Strauss deploys against the fact-value distinction. The first three of these arguments are meant to show, contra scholars like Nasser Behnegar, that Strauss's work on Weber's fact-value distinction was not foremost a "theoretical" refutation.² Instead, I maintain that Strauss's arguments against the fact-value distinction must be read in light of a fourth kind of argument: namely, his belief that the fact-value distinction presented a threat to political order.

This fourth type of argument is related in important ways to various aspects of the secondary literature on Strauss. I therefore conclude the chapter by showing how my political interpretation of Strauss's critique can be related not only to the context of Strauss's early intellectual formation as a Weimar Jew, but also to the wider controversy over Strauss's esotericism. In terms of the latter I will argue that although my interpretation is compatible with the work of Steven B. Smith there are reasons to instead view it as bolstering the case of those like Stephen Holmes and Shadia Drury who have argued that Strauss is a specific kind of esoteric thinker.

I. Strauss's Inheritance of Weber's Fact-Value Positivism

In *What is Political Philosophy* Strauss identifies positivism as a school of thought which maintains natural science is the "highest form of knowledge" on which all our understanding of the world ought to be modeled.³ But positivism defined in this way is still too abstract to do much philosophical work. Indeed, first we must ascertain *which* specific strain of positivism is being addressed. For although Strauss launched his critique of social science positivism after

¹ Cf. Nasser Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber, and the Scientific Study of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), Part II.

² Behnegar's fourth chapter concludes that Strauss had successfully "reduced Weber's thesis [of the fact-value distinction] ... as a theoretical thesis to absurdity." *Leo Strauss*, 111.

³ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959) 18.

emigrating to the United States in the 1940s, he only rarely engaged the various leading positivists of his time.⁴

In what follows I outline in what sense Strauss's conception of positivism is essentially inherited from Weber. It is Weber's positivism which shapes Strauss's understanding in two central ways. First, Weber pictures social science as dependent on a fact-value distinction (explained below). Second, and less widely noted, Weber articulates various ways in which this fact-value distinction entails certain practical dilemmas. It is therefore necessary to reconstruct Weber's fact-value distinction with particular attention paid to what parts are relevant to Strauss's later critique.

Strauss's engagement with Weber dates back at least to his time as a student in Germany working under the neo-Kantians.⁵ We know from Strauss's own scattered autobiographical remarks that reading Weber had a tremendous impact on him and it is evident from his published works that Weber became a consistent philosophical preoccupation.⁶ Most importantly, Weber enunciated what Strauss took to be the "fundamental premise" and "core" of modern social science: the value-neutrality of science based on a distinction between facts and values.⁷

Of what did Weber's fact-value distinction consist? Weber laid out this doctrine in "Science as a Vocation" where he claimed that the facts of social science *qua* science "are completely *heterogeneous*" from values.⁸ Facts are *heterogeneous* from values because they are part of the objective furniture of the universe, while values are subjective, mental phenomena projected outwards onto the world of facts. The heterogeneity between facts and values, in other words, is in their respective ontological statuses: values exist only perceptually and from a given point of view, while facts exist objectively and independent of all points of view. Science as a mode of explanation is restricted to facts (i.e. what is objectively true), which means values have no explanatory significance within science. It follows from Weber's doctrine that "whenever a man of science brings in his own value-judgment, a full understanding of the facts *ceases*."⁹

In his later work, Strauss noted that Weber's conception of the fact-value distinction fatally undermined moral and political philosophy.¹⁰ This is because if values are radically subjective they cannot be rationally vindicated over conflicting, incompatible values. A scientific inquirer into social reality would therefore see the world in light of the absolute distinction

⁴ Strauss did carefully study the major positivists of his day: Behnegar, "Strauss and Social Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 215; John Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 234-237. Gunnell has also argued that important aspects of Strauss's intellectual formation took place in the Weimar Republic prior to his arrival to America; see: "Strauss Before Straussianism," *Review of Politics* 51 (1990): 53-74.

⁵ Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997) 461.

⁶ See for example, Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," 461. For Weber's influence over a younger generation of Weimar intellectuals including Hannah Arendt, Eric Voegelin and Strauss see: Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory*, 146-174.

⁷ Strauss, "The Crisis of Our Time," in *The Predicament of Modern Politics*, ed. Harold Spaeth (Detroit: University of Detroit Press) 50.

⁸ Max Weber, "The vocation of science," in *The Essential Max Weber*, ed., Sam Whimster (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004) 279. Strauss echoed Weber's language when he wrote that the central doctrine of positivism is that "facts and values are absolutely heterogeneous." Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965), 39.

⁹ Weber, "The vocation of science," 280.

¹⁰ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 9-27.

between judgments of *fact* (which had objective status subject to rational criticism) and judgments of *value* (which did not). Scientific inquiry into social reality was in this way limited to facts, while disputes over ultimate values were left to the non-rational conflicts of politicians and ordinary citizens. Viewed from this perspective, the entire history of political and moral philosophy betrayed a basic error. Social scientists could describe the difference between two competing value systems (even judging which one was more effective as a means to a presupposed end), but they could give no rational vindication of which system of values was ultimately more choice-worthy. Strauss illustrated this point by noting that while Weber's social scientist could describe the efficacy of different value systems in achieving certain ends, he nevertheless could not provide a rational basis for valuing a non-cannibalistic society over a cannibalistic one.¹¹ Indeed, limited to accounts of how to explain and manipulate value neutral facts, Weber's social scientist was unable to rationally adjudicate between fundamentally rival moral schemes.

This relativism concerning ultimate, non-instrumental values brings us to another important dimension of Weber's positivism inherited by Strauss. Namely, a strict adherence to the fact-value distinction resulted in a number of practical dilemmas for agents who adopted it. Already in 1918, Weber noted that the exclusion of value judgments from scientific knowledge resulted in an inability to rationally justify the pursuit of science itself, as science could not furnish ultimate reasons as to why it should be taken up over rival pursuits. Or, as Weber put this dilemma, science "presupposes that what is produced by scientific work should be important in the sense of 'being worth knowing' ... [but] all of our problems lie here, for this presupposition cannot be proved by scientific means."¹² In other words, the fact-value distinction barred the rational vindication of science as a way of life. Indeed, in its most extreme form, the fact-value distinction barred the rational vindication of even the decision to be committed to logical truths.

We should pause at this point to add an important qualification to Weber's argument. For a critic might respond to Weber's position thus far by noting that so long as the agents in question do not reflect on whether or not the fact-value distinction undermines their capacity to rationally justify their choices, it does not in fact become a practical dilemma for them. This is because *pre-reflective* value commitments can and do sustain practices and ways of life all the time. For example, an individual might become a scientist because her parents were scientists or because she had a science teacher who inspired her in school, or because she thought it would attract a mate. Thus, social scientists adhering to the fact-value distinction might nevertheless go on valuing scientific inquiry due to pre-reflective value judgments, remaining unaware of Weber's practical dilemma.

But this answer does not satisfy the challenge of Weber's dilemma on its own terms (nor as we shall see does it satisfy Strauss's appropriation of it). For Weber believed that precisely one of the problems of social scientific inquiry in the modern world was that the question of rival value schemes and their seemingly non-rational basis inevitably arose. This is because modern, scientific sociology would have to look across a broad spectrum of societies in its formation of case studies. Moreover, when the sociologist turned to examine his own modern order he would become aware of *disenchantment*, by which social orders under the influence of science undermined naïve or pre-reflective beliefs in ultimate value schemes. In other words, the very

¹¹ Strauss, "Social Science and Humanism," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 9.

¹² Weber, "The vocation of science," 277.

spread of science, according to Weber, created sociological conditions in which the problem of the rational justification of ultimate values was unavoidable and value relativism became a widely shared phenomenon. This is what Weber called the “disenchantment of the world,” in which “sublime values have withdrawn from public life.”¹³ Weber’s dilemma thus had an empirical component: it was not only that the fact-value distinction theoretically undermined the notion of rationally justifying values, it was also true that the sociological conditions of modern, scientific societies made citizens aware of this fact through a process of disenchantment by which a pre-reflective belief in ultimate value systems, religions, and the “sublime” went into retreat.

Was there a solution to this dilemma? Weber was very sensitive to the difficulties involved. For he could consistently hold the theoretical truth of the fact-value distinction only at the cost of accepting the impossibility of rendering the ultimate values that orient human lives rational. So Weber noted that because “the different value systems of the world stand in conflict with one another,” and science cannot furnish ultimate criteria of preference, the only option left in the “inconclusiveness of the battle between them” is simply to “decide.”¹⁴ Thus, in terms of practical rationality, at the bottom of Weber’s fact-value distinction is also the belief that the strong evaluations of moral life are grounded on nothing more than individual will or choice. And this view of subjective *decision* as the only foundation for values (together with the disenchantment of modern societies as they became aware of the arbitrariness of their own value schemes) formed the nexus of a set of problems that were of central importance to Strauss.

However, before moving onto Strauss’s response to all this, it is worth noting that Weber’s position had a further related dilemma in the sphere of politics that also appears later in Strauss. Weber had experienced firsthand the conflict created by being both a social scientist as well as a politician. And his account of how a social scientist must avow the truth of value-neutral relativism, while a politician must commit to the values embodied in a given political order, was partly an exercise in autobiography. Thus, Weber’s value neutrality had an attendant political dilemma: one could not in any simple way be a good member of a political community (willing to make commitments to a given value based order) while at the same time being a good scientist (concerned solely with a truth beyond all values). It became necessary to radically compartmentalize the various parts of one’s life. Add to this that according to Weber in modern societies the growing authority of science and the process of rationalization heighten awareness of disenchantment and the arbitrariness of even one’s own most cherished values and the realms of science and politics seem to be on a collision course. Readers of Strauss will recognize how closely Weber’s predicament parallels the conflict between the *philosopher* and the *city* in Strauss’s philosophy. For now it is enough to note that the Weberian social scientist, not unlike the Straussian philosopher, must face the possibility that his knowledge might in some way be at odds with the politics.

Giving up on the problem of why the scientist ought to pursue science on rational grounds, Weber instead asserted that at bottom a non-rational decision must be made in favor of science as a vocation. A scientist is simply that individual who decides to value “straight intellectual integrity” over other rival ultimate values.¹⁵ Someone with a vocation for science would have the “capacity to put on blinkers” and specialize on their field of study all the while

¹³ Weber, “The vocation of science,” 271, 287.

¹⁴ Weber, “The vocation of science,” 281, 284.

¹⁵ Weber, “The vocation of science,” 287.

aware that his or her own work advanced the disenchantment of the world in which transcendent values withdrew from public life and even the value of science itself was no longer subject to rational vindication. Similarly, the vocation of politics was described by Weber as resting on individual decision. Thus, those who decided on a political vocation would cling to an “ethics of responsibility” despite the fact that they could see “the world as it really is,” trying to balance politics as reduced to the manipulation of power and means-ends calculus with whatever ultimate value system they happened to avow.¹⁶ Science as a vocation, in other words, meant absolute, non-rational commitment to the facts of science, while politics as vocation meant absolute, non-rational commitment to social engineering in the name of a given society’s most cherished values. The vocations—as highly compartmentalized ways of life—were to sustain modern, scientific societies.

Weber’s pessimism over moral rationality in both the vocations of science and politics resonated with counter-Enlightenment trends in Weimar Germany where Strauss came of age. Weber’s views were part of a wider Nietzschean ethos of *Redlichkeit* or brutal *intellectual honesty* in which even difficult, undesirable truths were to be faced unflinchingly by humanity’s future men.¹⁷ Strauss himself characterized Weber in terms of this ethos of *Redlichkeit* many years later in *Natural Right and History* when he wrote that Weber endeavored at a “freedom from delusion” that “dares to look reality in its stern face” and seeks the “knowable truth, which is valid regardless of whether we like it or not.”¹⁸ Indeed, it was precisely this hardheaded ethos that led Strauss to later confess that in the opening years of the Weimar republic he held Weber as nothing less than the “incarnation of the spirit of science and scholarship” and “the greatest social scientist of our century.”¹⁹

The reason Strauss admired Weber so much was because of what he saw as his “almost fanatical devotion to the basic problem of the social sciences.”²⁰ Following Weber, Strauss became convinced that this “basic problem” was the fact-value distinction which formed the fundamental premise of modern social science. Thus, when Strauss attacks “positivism” in his later works and claims that he can “show that this fundamental premise of the present-day social sciences is untenable” we can more concretely describe this as his attempt to grapple with Weber’s separation of facts from values as a guiding principle of social science.²¹

However, before reconstructing Strauss’s response to the fact-value distinction, it is worth touching briefly on an important point concerning his approach to this philosophical problem. Those familiar with Strauss’s writings will recognize that his approach to philosophical problems is to pit “greats” against one another: Weber versus Heidegger, Heidegger versus Plato, Plato versus Hobbes, and so on. In this way, the substance of particular philosophical dilemmas for Strauss is the outcome of disagreements between great minds across history.²² Robert Pippin and Alfons Söllner have identified this as a form of *Kulturkritik*—a style employed by some of Strauss’s Weimar contemporaries including Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin along with

¹⁶ Weber, “The vocation of politics,” in *The Essential Max Weber*, ed., Sam Whimster (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004) 269.

¹⁷ Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 18.

¹⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 72-73.

¹⁹ Strauss, “A Giving of Accounts,” 461; *What Is Political Philosophy?* 23.

²⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 36.

²¹ Strauss, “The Crisis of Our Time,” 50.

²² “Perhaps only great thinkers are really competent to judge of the thought of great thinkers”; Strauss, “Existentialism,” *Interpretation* 22, no. 3 (1995): 305.

seminal figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Germany such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Oswald Spengler.²³ *Kulturkritik*, in this sense, might be defined as an approach to philosophical problems that ties cultural and political criticism to the analysis of philosophical arguments that are defined by the conflicting positions of various canonical thinkers. *Kulturkritik* allowed Strauss to address both the theoretical and political features of Weber's philosophy together in one bundle. But it also allowed his criticisms to have a much wider scope. Thus, Strauss is never simply criticizing Weber but also an entire web of cultural beliefs and practices he associates with his thought.

II. Criticizing Weber's Fact-Value Distinction

Strauss believed at the core of modern social science lay the fact-value distinction and also that he could "show that this fundamental premise of the present-day social sciences is untenable."²⁴ In addition, interpreters such as Behnegar have argued that Strauss successfully reduced the fact-value distinction "as a theoretical thesis to absurdity."²⁵ But what did Strauss mean when he used the term "untenable" to refer to this doctrine? What is clear is that following Weber, Strauss understood the fact-value distinction to consist in an "absolute heterogeneity of facts and values," or, put in the form of a logical truth, the assertion that no statement of fact entails value and vice versa.²⁶ Thus, at first blush, Strauss's philosophical task appears plain. In order to refute the fact-value distinction and prove it "untenable" he must show that facts and values are not *heterogeneous* but in some sense *homogeneous*. Or, in other words, he must make the case that there is some way in which a class of facts or else facts in general entail values.

This, at least, is one plausible way of interpreting Strauss's philosophical task. Yet I will maintain that Strauss does not refute the fact-value distinction on these terms. By looking at three inconclusive arguments that Strauss advances against the fact-value distinction, I will maintain (contra Behnegar) that Strauss's primary interest was not a theoretical refutation. Instead, I will suggest that Strauss's critique of Weber ought to be read in light of a fourth kind of argument. This argument consists of Strauss's belief that the fact-value distinction was politically undesirable. That is, when Strauss writes that the fact-value distinction is "untenable," he does not foremost mean philosophically untenable but rather politically untenable. I will then show how this political interpretation of Strauss's critique can be related both to his intellectual formation as a Weimar Jew facing the threat of Nazism as well as to the controversy over his esotericism.

Because I have organized my treatment of Strauss's critique of positivism around four types of arguments that recur in his writings, it is important to note how these relate to his wider oeuvre. In order to guard against arbitrariness of interpretation I have drawn from texts limited to the period of Strauss's critique of positivism, which roughly dates from *On Tyranny* (1948) to

²³ Robert Pippin and Alfons Söllner, *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss*, eds. Peter Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 164, 167.

²⁴ Strauss, "The Crisis of our Time," 50.

²⁵ Behnegar, *Leo Strauss*, 111.

²⁶ "No conclusion can be drawn from any fact as to its valuable character, nor can we infer the factual character of something from its being valuable or desirable." Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 39. See also: Strauss, "An Epilogue," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, ed., Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989) 136.

Liberalism Ancient and Modern (1968). This work was realized after Strauss's emigration to the United States and at a time when his views had achieved a mature perspective.²⁷ Ultimately, the only test of my interpretation will be seeing whether or not it is corroborated by further textual and historical readings of Strauss's texts in relationship to rival accounts. For now my gamble is that, together with the work to contextualize Strauss in relation to Weber, I can give what a charitable reader will recognize as an interpretively fruitful rendering of Strauss's critique of positivism. It is to this task that I now turn.

i. A First Type of Critique: The Problem of Nihilism

A first type of critique that Strauss employs against the fact-value distinction relies on the assumption that every day, practical reasoning is inescapably evaluative and therefore that the Weberian social scientist cannot account for his own evaluations in the case of prizing scientific truth and the scientific way of life above rival pursuits. This type of argument is articulated various times in varying degrees of completeness in texts including *What is Political Philosophy*, the essay "Relativism," and *Natural Right and History* among others. The basic structure of this argument is that because Weberian social science is unable to rationally vindicate evaluation as such it entails ethical relativism and ultimately nihilism. In what follows, I argue that while Strauss does suggest certain ways in which Weberian positivism might be pushed toward Nietzsche's and Heidegger's understanding of the human condition as confronted by nihilism, he does not refute the doctrine of the *heterogeneity* of facts and values. Instead, he radicalizes Weber's own articulation of the practical problem created by the fact-value distinction in order to make nihilism a central concern.

In *What Is Political Philosophy* Strauss asserts that positivistic social science is "value-free" and "ethically neutral" because "science is incompetent to pronounce value judgments and must avoid value judgments altogether."²⁸ This view, as we have seen, is derived from Weber's belief that a fact-value distinction applies to the methods of social science inquiry. But can the social scientist in practice remain "ethically neutral" and "value free"? Still following Weber's line of thought, Strauss argues that he cannot. In particular he points to the way the social scientist's very pursuit of scientific truth seems to contradict his commitment to ethical neutrality. This is because the practical pursuit of social science is itself "essentially animated by a moral impulse, the love of truth."²⁹ Because Weber's fact-value distinction precludes the possibility of the scientific and rational justification of the value of science itself, the Weberian social scientist can remain committed to relativism in theory but not in practice.

In this way, Weber's social science comes with a practical dilemma: the value neutral methodology of science heightens awareness of the non-rational, arbitrariness of value judgments thus implying that the scientific way of life is no more choice-worthy or intrinsically good than other rival goals for human action. The attentive Weberian knows this is true due to the conceptual implications of the fact-value distinction. More troubling still, the actual choice in favor of science appears to come down to a non-rational decision: "the scientific orientation is as groundless as the choice of any alternative ... the reflective scientist discovers as the ground of

²⁷ For the intellectual developments leading up to this mature period, see: Gunnell, "Strauss Before Straussianism."

²⁸ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 18. See also: Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 40.

²⁹ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 16.

his science and his choice of science—a groundless choice—an abyss.”³⁰ This means that in practical terms (as opposed to theoretical terms) science as a vocation seems premised on a necessarily non-rational first move—“love of truth.” As Strauss puts the dilemma, science as a pursuit depends on ultimate values that “cannot be traced beyond our decision or commitment” to them.³¹ Although social science heightens man’s power to understand reality, at the same time it creates a situation in which moral and political life lose their rational foundations.

So far, Strauss’s and Weber’s accounts coincide. However, it is in the response to this dilemma that they part ways. For Strauss, unlike Weber, does not believe that the dilemma is surmounted by asserting a choice in favor of intellectual honesty and scientific truth over other values. Nor does he believe science’s demonstrated ability to give us greater technological control of the world justifies its value in practical terms. Against the latter view, Strauss seems to think it sufficient to cite counter-evidence such as the fact that scientific progress has led to the development of the atomic bomb and so is a deeply ambivalent good for human flourishing. Against the former view, Strauss believes the ethical relativism revealed by the fact-value distinction is not solved simply by making an arbitrary decision in favor of the value of scientific truth. Instead, he believes this value relativism ought to become the impetus for a different account of human society. It is at this stage in the argument that Strauss frequently criticizes Weber not so much for being wrong as for not pushing his own insights far enough. Specifically, Strauss accuses Weber of not grappling sufficiently with the way in which his “thesis necessarily leads to nihilism.”³² So he writes that “the more serious we are as social scientists the more completely we develop within ourselves ... a state which may be called nihilism.”³³ He criticizes Weber, in other words, for not seeing that nihilism becomes a central fact about human beings in the wake of thoroughly accepting the consequences of the fact-value distinction.

But what does Strauss mean by “nihilism” here? In most succinct form he defines nihilism as the belief that “objectively there is in the last analysis only meaninglessness, nothingness.”³⁴ It is important to realize that Strauss’s use of the word nihilism in this context is drawn from the philosophical tradition of Nietzsche and Heidegger but also stretches back to the coining of the term by the counter-Enlightenment polemicist F. H. Jacobi on whom Strauss wrote his dissertation.³⁵ Nihilism, according to this tradition, is a *crisis of meaning* understood not as the problems of linguistic meaning (as occupies analytic philosophy), but rather in terms of whether any action in human life has intrinsic value or worth. We might call this the *existential* definition of “meaning.” Strauss’s existential use of “meaning” is similar to that evoked in common phrases such as “the meaning of life.” An example of how Strauss ties Weber’s positivism to an existential crisis of meaning is the following passage from a 1956 lecture:

Science is unable to establish its own meaningfulness or to answer the question whether and in what sense science is good. We are then confronted with an enormous apparatus whose bulk is ever increasing but which in itself has no meaning ... The assumption that

³⁰ Strauss, “Existentialism,” 309.

³¹ Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism,” 9.

³² Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 42.

³³ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 18-19.

³⁴ Strauss, “Existentialism,” 311.

³⁵ For more on Strauss’s dissertation on Jacobi, see: Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 22-25.

we should act rationally and therefore turn to science for reliable information—this assumption is wholly outside the purview and interest of science proper.³⁶

Weber's fact-value distinction, in other words, points to nihilism as the problem of establishing anything within the sphere of life as intrinsically meaningful.

Yet what, according to Strauss, does such a critique amount to? It is at this point that Strauss evokes the analysis of the human condition provided by Nietzsche and Heidegger as the tradition that grapples at a basic level with nihilism more fully than Weber does.³⁷ Strauss is clear that Weber's analysis is incomplete on its own terms and he writes that "existentialism is the truth of positivism" and "the reaction of serious men to their own relativism."³⁸ Leaving the fact-value distinction completely intact Strauss accuses Weber of philosophical incompleteness, even a form of what we might call (borrowing a term from Heidegger's philosophy) "inauthenticity." For Strauss's criticism amounts to the allegation that Weber's positivism does not pursue the full implications of its own doctrines. As Strauss puts it, Heideggerian and Nietzschean existentialism "starts where positivism leaves off."³⁹

But this line of Strauss's critique of Weber's fact-value distinction does not refute that doctrine. Indeed, far from actually addressing how the heterogeneity of facts and values might be shown invalid, Strauss instead assumes its validity and then criticizes Weber for not giving a fuller account of the human subject in light of the nihilism that this doctrine implies.

ii. A Second Type of Critique: The Problem of Relevance

A second type of critique that I would like to briefly examine is Strauss's attack of the fact-value distinction on the basis of the assumption that practical reasoning is inescapably evaluative and that therefore the positivist social scientist cannot account for his evaluations when selecting certain facts over others. This argument makes a brief appearance in "An Epilogue," but is illustrative of a more general pattern in Strauss's thinking that I am trying to signal. As in the argument from the prior section, Strauss again begins from the assumption of value-neutral methods in order to see if such a theoretical commitment can be consistently maintained with certain features of practical rationality. His interest once again is therefore not so much to refute the fact-value distinction as to assume it and see if it leads to any dilemmas.

Strauss's allegation in this case is that without recourse to non-scientific evaluations modern social science would be overwhelmed by the sheer number of facts and unable to discriminate between the important and trivial ones. This is because prioritizing the influential or important over the inconsequential and trivial requires a value judgment. As Strauss says, because positivist social science "lack[s] objective criteria of relevance, we have no reason to be more interested in a world-shaking revolution . . . than in the most trifling 'social changes.'"⁴⁰ Without value judgments to furnish the criteria of relevance a Weberian social scientist would

³⁶ Strauss, "Existentialism," 308. Strauss echoes the same point five years later in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 19.

³⁷ Strauss, "The Problem of Socrates," *Interpretation* 22, no. 3 (1995): 323.

³⁸ Strauss, "Relativism," in *Relativism and the Study of Man*, Helmut Schoeck and James Wiggins, eds. (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1961) 154.

³⁹ Strauss, "Relativism," 154

⁴⁰ Strauss, "An Epilogue," 145.

have no way of granting more importance to Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon than to John Doe crossing Telegraph Avenue. Of course, the social scientist might note that Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon was of greater consequence than John Doe crossing Telegraph Avenue, but this implies that the consequential is more valuable and worthy of attention than the inconsequential. Inevitably, the superabundance of facts in the social world requires filtering, which in turn requires value judgments.

For this reason, Strauss argues that modern social science depends on an unreflective recourse to ideology. This is because in order to “distinguish soundly between important and unimportant political matters” the social scientist must momentarily abandon his commitment to value-neutral methodology and make recourse to a “prescientific understanding of political things”; that is, he must make “surreptitious recourse to common sense” value judgments or else lose himself in “the study of irrelevancies.”⁴¹ Yet the political “common sense” of a given society reflects its implicit value systems. Therefore, although committed to value-neutrality, the social scientist is perpetually letting his or her preferred ideology in through the back door in order to furnish some guiding principles as to what is noteworthy. Once again, Strauss is showing how Weber’s social science suffers a kind of inauthenticity: in this case unable to recognize that it is dependent on ideology.

Taking more recent philosophical language we might call this kind of critique by Strauss an attempt at identifying a *performative* contradiction in Weber’s social science. What Strauss seems to be aiming for is the way that a science of the fact-value distinction has not yet fully accounted for its own ramifications and that once it does so it may not be able to carry out its own activities in a way that would seem worthwhile to its practitioners. Yet once again, as with the prior critique, rather than attack the theoretical content of the distinction, Strauss instead criticizes the social scientist for not being able to maintain value-neutrality at the level of practice. This means that once again Strauss fails to do philosophical damage to the fact-value distinction. For although the problem of relevance shows that the Weberian positivist cannot evade certain value judgments implicit in his or her research, nonetheless this in no way shows that some set of facts or facts in general entail values or are *homogeneous* with them. To the contrary, Strauss’s line of argument once more relies on the validity of the fact-value distinction in order to assert that Weberian positivists cannot give a purely scientific defense of their own emphasis of certain facts over others.

iii. A Third Type of Critique: Are Social Science Facts Inseparable from Values?

So far Strauss’s critiques of the fact-value distinction do not undermine the philosophical assumption of that doctrine. However in a third type of argument—found in fragmentary form in texts including *What is Political Philosophy*, “Social Science and Humanism,” and “The Crisis of Our Time”—Strauss does attack the heterogeneity of facts from values by trying to stake out a sense in which a certain class of facts entail values and are thus homogenous with them. However, in this case, I find that while making some important observations, Strauss’s argument remains inconclusive—the argument referred at key moments to the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger.

⁴¹ Strauss, “An Epilogue,” 141, 143.

In *What is Political Philosophy* Strauss suggests that it is “not possible to divorce from each other the subjective and objective elements of social science.”⁴² A similar point is made earlier in the same text except in relation to political science of which Strauss writes that he can show the “impossibility of a ‘value-free’ political science.”⁴³ In both cases what is at stake is to what degree Strauss can convincingly refute the dichotomy between the assumed objectivity of facts and the subjectivity of values within the class of phenomena that comprise political and social science. The key to this line of argument is to establish how the facts of social science entail values and as such are homogenous with them.

One of the few extended treatments of this line of argument appears in *What is Political Philosophy* where Strauss asserts that in order to identify their field of study political scientists must first make value judgments. As Strauss puts it, “political science presupposes a distinction between political things and things which are not political.”⁴⁴ But the definition of what sphere consists in the rightfully political, that is, what counts as veritable political phenomena and what is non-political is itself variant, dependent on regime, culture, and ideology. For example: Is human biology political or not? In the conceptions of orthodox Marxism, Catholic Thomism, and ancient Greek Aristotelianism the very physical constitution of the species is a centrally important political phenomenon in a way that is not true of, say, Rawlsian liberalism. Strauss implies that the study of politics as a range of facts already presumes value judgments determining what belongs to the political sphere and what does not.

Perhaps a clearer way to this problem is through Strauss’s claim that it is not possible in the case of social science to divorce the subjective and objective elements. An example might help illustrate Strauss’s compact remarks in *What is Political Philosophy*. How does a social scientist know he has a *factual* case of “kingship” and not simply an instance of someone pretending to be king? Take for instance the crowning of an English monarch. There is a sense in which a large number of people who occupy many roles within society cooperate to perform a series of rituals within an institutional context and this then counts as a legitimate (and therefore factual) instance of English kingship. Yet such a ceremony necessarily depends on the evaluations of the relevant participants who for any number of reasons either judge the coronation as legitimate or not. The fact of English kingship, in other words, is value-laden with judgments of what ought to count as a legitimate coronation or not.

This way of framing the issue might help us to understand three related observations made by Strauss. First, that social science if it wishes to understand its subject matter cannot divorce itself from social reality as perceived by ordinary citizens. Social reality for such citizens is comprised of a range of facts that are not separable from the value judgments that help constitute them. And, as in the case of legitimate English coronation, values are “experienced as real qualities of real things” (i.e. this is a *legitimate* king because this is how kings *ought* to be inducted).⁴⁵ Put differently, social reality is comprised of value-laden facts because “the citizen does not make the fact-value distinction,” which “is alien to the citizen’s understanding of political things.”⁴⁶ Second, this explains Strauss’s recurrent objection to the reduction of social facts and political reality to the mere epiphenomena of another sphere of reality. So he objects in

⁴² Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 26.

⁴³ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 22.

⁴⁴ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 22.

⁴⁵ Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism,” 5.

⁴⁶ Strauss, “The Crisis of Our Time,” 50.

“An Epilogue” that the “new political science” (which he believes is the heir of Weber’s positivism) in its attempts to cleanly separate out the purely factual from the subjective and value-laden too often “must reduce the political things to non-political data.”⁴⁷ Strauss likely has in mind here the behavioralism which was popular during this time period. Finally, this helps us to understand why Strauss believed that Weber’s positivism led to historicism and a historically oriented social science. For example, if we wish to understand how the institution of the English crown came into existence under this account, we must give a history of how these social facts were constructed by the judgments, beliefs, and practices of specific communities. The same would be true for a whole range of social and political practices in which evaluation is constitutive of factuality. So Strauss writes that “social science [is] superseded by historical studies; social science itself proves ‘historical.’”⁴⁸ And this because “invisible value judgments ... [are] most powerfully present in allegedly purely descriptive concepts.”⁴⁹ Thus, in order to explain a range of social facts and even have “access to his subject matter” Strauss claims that the Weberian positivist must take a historicist turn and single out the phenomena that are “forbidden” by the fact-value distinction and try to “understand those cultures as they understand or understood themselves.”⁵⁰ This last heuristic—to understand cultures as they understood themselves—is important to emphasize not only because in the same passage Strauss ascribes this view to Heidegger but also because it is well known that this is a maxim of Strauss’s own approach to the history of political philosophy. Thus, the way ahead once Weberian premises have been assumed is once again identified by Strauss as presented in the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger.⁵¹

Still, in all of this does Strauss actually refute the fact-value distinction? It is true that if a number of the assertions Strauss made were to be fully argued one might have a case. But Strauss’s own presentation is inconclusive. For instance, to the above example of kingship, a Weberian positivist might retort that while the fact of kingship is no doubt constituted by the evaluations of the relevant societies, it does not thereby follow that the social scientist *qua* scientist must violate this distinction in order to point out the fact of kingship. Such a social scientist might note that while social facts are formed by evaluation, he or she can simply take them up as such facts and make no further evaluations that affect their status. That the English believe kingship is in a profound sense authorized by birthright does not mean that the social scientist must assume the truth of this proposition in order to identify the factual existence of this institution.

Of course, the basic position outlined by Strauss might have further resources from which to draw a response, but Strauss himself does not pursue them. Thus, in a telling moment, in one of the few texts where he treats this problem he writes: “It is not necessary to enter here and now into a discussion of the theoretical weaknesses of social science positivism. It suffices to allude to the considerations which speak decisively against this school.”⁵² But if it is not “necessary to enter here and now into a discussion of the theoretical weaknesses of social science positivism” then the reader can rightfully ask *when* is the necessary time? For this is one of the primary

⁴⁷ Strauss, “An Epilogue,” 139.

⁴⁸ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 26.

⁴⁹ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 21.

⁵⁰ Strauss, “The Crisis of Our Time,” 53; Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 25.

⁵¹ In the same passages Strauss often seems to go even further and imply that all theoretical reasoning might be inseparable from evaluative reasoning—but such arguments are similarly incomplete.

⁵² Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy*, 20-27.

texts—*What is Political Philosophy*—in which Strauss engages with this problem and yet he claims that it “suffices to allude.” Strauss then goes on to stipulate the reasons why Heidegger’s and Nietzsche’s tradition of historicism has abandoned Weber’s positivism—but the vital points in question are never more fully developed in any of Strauss’s published works. This means that rather than show that the fact-value distinction is invalid, Strauss instead outlines how certain Weberian premises might be said to imply Nietzschean and Heideggerian conclusions.⁵³

But if I am right, and Strauss does not carry out the work of actually philosophically refuting the fact-value distinction in his works, it becomes fair to ask: Was a philosophical refutation really his chief aim? In a final section I hope to show how Strauss’s arguments might instead be read in light of a fourth kind of criticism that was in fact his primary concern.

iv. A Fourth Type of Critique: The Political Objection to the Fact-Value Distinction

So far I have shown how three possible critiques of the fact-value distinction articulated by Strauss either assume the validity of this doctrine or else claim that its full philosophical consequences are found in the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger. In none of these three critiques is the fact-value distinction actually theoretically refuted. At first this may appear puzzling. But I believe these arguments must be read in light of a fourth kind of critique which appears in nearly all of Strauss’s work on positivism. This fourth critique consists of the claim that the fact-value distinction is politically undesirable because it potentially undermines political order.

How does the fact-value distinction potentially undermine political order? Strauss elaborates in “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing”: “Every society rests ... on specific values or on specific myths, i.e., on assumptions which are not evidently superior or preferable to any alternative assumptions.”⁵⁴ The problem with value-free social science is that it “reveals and stresses the arbitrary character of the basic assumptions underlying any given society” while at the same time “fail[ing] to see ... that this state of things creates a tension between the requirements of social science (knowledge of the truth) ... and the requirements of society (whole-hearted acceptance of the principles of society).”⁵⁵ So while political communities require a commitment to foundational values, Weber’s fact-value distinction undermines belief in these very values. Social science reveals the arbitrary character of the moral assumptions underlying any given society. Strauss’s critique, therefore, rests on two claims. First that political orders require active commitment to certain founding values that are believed to be (or at least treated as) factual. And second, although the relativism entailed by the fact-value distinction does not necessarily lead to political chaos, it does perpetually leave open the possibility of drawing Nietzschean or Heideggerian conclusions that undermine commitment to the founding values of political order. Once again then we have a form of critique in which by first assuming the fact-value distinction Strauss investigates the problems this creates for practical rationality. In summary form Strauss’s argument is as follows: political life is premised on the commitment to certain values over others; the fact-value distinction potentially undermines these commitments; therefore, the fact-value distinction is a potential threat to the stable ordering of political life.

⁵³ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy*, 20-27.

⁵⁴ Strauss, “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 221-222.

⁵⁵ Strauss, “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” 221-222.

At this point there are at least two ways of understanding Strauss's wider project that are consistent with the thrust of my interpretation so far, and which also relate my interpretation to the wider debates over Strauss's esotericism. The first possibility, presented by Smith is that Strauss is a skeptic in the Socratic vein. This kind of skeptic is what Smith, drawing on a long tradition, calls a "zetetic" philosopher who while concerned with the perennial problems of political and moral philosophy is all too aware that these problems have no definitive resolutions.⁵⁶ From this point of view, Strauss's concern with the fact-value distinction is that although it is a live and abiding puzzle of philosophical reasoning (with arguments both for and against it) the relativism it potentially breeds is nevertheless a threat to political order. Therefore, there would be ample motive for Strauss to denounce this doctrine politically while also treating it as a perennial, unresolved problem worthy of philosophical engagement. Note too that under this interpretation Strauss need not be practicing a secretive esotericism and so can be made consistent with the view of him presented by Catherine and Michael Zuckert.⁵⁷ Instead of labeling Strauss an "esoteric" philosopher, we might instead argue that Strauss was open about both his *zetetic* view of the fact-value distinction as well as his belief that this doctrine was potentially politically destabilizing even to liberal societies. Strauss then becomes a philosopher who, like Socrates, is more concerned with the persistence of certain questions than with any one answer. Yet, also like Socrates, he is acutely conscious that the persistence of such irresolvable questions has a complex and potentially antagonistic relationship to the rival foundational values of political communities.

While the former is no doubt a powerful interpretation of Strauss, my own sympathies lie with a second possibility for two reasons. First, a dilemma created by this interpretation is that it does not fit well with the actual figure of Socrates who often and vigorously insisted on the politically salutary effects of his fundamental questioning.⁵⁸ There is reason to believe that for Socrates (as for many of the ancient Greek philosophers) there existed no clear wedge between truth and value, as my arguments have been designed to show did exist for Strauss. Second, by Strauss's own account the truths of social science—if valid—recommended an esoteric approach for those inquiring into them even within modern liberal societies.⁵⁹ In "An Epilogue," Strauss even strongly implies that Weber's intellectual heirs in modern political science are partly responsible for the decline of Western democracies in the face of Soviet power thereby imperiling the former's political security.⁶⁰ Strauss therefore seems to clearly admit that the problems he is wrestling with both call for esotericism and pose a danger even in liberal political communities where freedom of expression is otherwise sanctioned.

An alternative reading that resolves these dilemmas is presented by those such as Drury and Holmes who argue that Strauss secretly accepted the truth of relativism and nihilism but

⁵⁶ G.R.F. Ferrari has in this limited respect a related conception of Strauss as an "aporetic" philosopher. Ferrari, "Strauss's Plato," *Arion* 5:2 (1997): 36-65. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁵⁷ Catherine and Michael Zuckert argue that Strauss believed esotericism was only called for in certain times and places and was not a continual feature of philosophical life: *The Truth About Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 115-154, 177-178.

⁵⁸ Plato, *Apology*, 30d-31a.

⁵⁹ Strauss, "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," 221-222.

⁶⁰ Strauss, "An Epilogue," 144-148, 155.

believed that the political community must be protected from such destructive truths.⁶¹ From this point of view, Strauss's argument is for a kind of revived Platonism concerning the necessity of edifying myths or noble lies in order to protect the political order. Sustaining a political community requires a "life-giving delusion" while Weberian positivism, by leaving open the continual possibility of revealing the truth of relativism and nihilism "teaches a truth that is deadly."⁶² Thus, in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss writes that those like Nietzsche and Heidegger who have apprehended the truth of nihilism which "destroy[s] the protecting atmosphere within which life or culture or action is alone possible" have two remaining options: they can *either* openly theorize this truth which is hostile to all political communities *or* they can "insist on the strictly esoteric character of the theoretical analysis of life—that is restore the Platonic notion of the noble delusion."⁶³ Under this view, Strauss's disagreement with Weber, Nietzsche, and Heidegger is that they all in some sense opted for the former while he opted for the latter.

Strauss's esotericism in this sense can then be related to his rejection of positivism. Where Weber championed the fact-value distinction as part of the vocation of science and the disenchanting ethos of *Redlichkeit*, Strauss left the fact-value distinction theoretically intact while denouncing it as politically corrosive. Even more importantly, where Weber believed that disenchanting, scientific societies might be held together by the vocations of science and politics, Strauss doubted the political viability of fully disenchanting societies. Strauss's critique of Weber is therefore not that he is wrong about the fact-value distinction but that he does not sufficiently understand the political dangers of disenchantment. Strauss's critique of the fact-value distinction, in other words, is exoterically a theoretical refutation of the kind described by Behnegar, but esoterically is a critique of the political viability of Weber's vocation of science and his view of modern political order.

In place of a public *Redlichkeit* Strauss then rehabilitates the Platonic noble delusion. The Weimar ethos of *Redlichkeit* is transformed for political reasons into the esoteric privilege of philosophers, while the Platonic noble delusion that positivism can be theoretically overcome and indeed even shown to be obviously "untenable" on "various grounds" becomes part of the public, political face of Strauss's philosophy. As Strauss makes clear in "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," Weber's social science entails the "crucial premise" of the argument for esoteric writing—namely that the truth it has apprehended "endangers society."⁶⁴ So the Weberian social scientist must only learn to draw the proper conclusions: that "philosophy or science must remain the preserve of a small minority" and that "philosophers or scientists must [outwardly] respect the opinions on which society rests" due to the "tension" that exists between social science's search for truth and society's need for founding values.⁶⁵ In short, Strauss replaces Weber's *Redlichkeit* with esotericism, and replaces his vocation of science with the vocation of the Platonic political philosopher.

In addition, although I do not have the space to do the contextual work here, I do believe my interpretation of Strauss is also connected to a larger account of the Weimar republic,

⁶¹ Drury "The Esoteric Philosophy of Leo Strauss," *Political Theory* 13, no. 3 (August 1985): 315-337; Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1993), ch. 3.

⁶² Strauss, "Relativism," 152.

⁶³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 26.

⁶⁴ Strauss, "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," 221-222.

⁶⁵ Strauss, "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," 221-222.

European Judaism, and Nazism. Indeed, such contextual considerations—already partly advanced by historians such as Eugene Sheppard and John Gunnell—are part of what speaks in favor of this interpretation of Strauss.⁶⁶ Two dimensions of Strauss’s context are particularly important in this regard. First, if connecting my interpretation to Drury’s and Holmes’s understanding of Strauss’s esotericism is correct, then Strauss’s work might also be viewed in light of the ambivalence caused by his Judaism together with his attraction to thinkers associated with Germany’s far Right. Indeed, throughout his life Strauss believed the greatest philosophers of the modern age were also intellectually linked with the Nazism that dissolved the Weimar republic and murdered various members of his extended family. So, in posthumously published pieces, we can clearly see that Strauss especially held Heidegger (whom he first encountered in postdoctoral studies in Freiburg in 1922) in the highest possible regard, considering him as late as 1956 to be not only the greatest philosopher since Hegel but also “the only great thinker in our time.”⁶⁷ His accolades for Weber and Nietzsche—of only a slightly lower order—are also to be found throughout his works.⁶⁸ Yet, at the same time, Strauss repeatedly asserts a “kinship” between Heidegger’s and Nietzsche’s thought and Nazism; likewise, he writes of a “straight line” connecting Heidegger’s philosophy to Nazism and says that the “nihilistic consequence” of Weber’s “doctrine of values” leads eventually to the “shadow of Hitler.”⁶⁹ Indeed, if one reads Strauss from this perspective one begins to see that Weber, Nietzsche, and Heidegger are the *philosophical* heroes in Strauss’s story, but their ideas are the *political* villains.

Second, Strauss’s critique of modern political society should be viewed in terms of his judgment of the Weimar period. If my interpretation is correct, the primary example of the political danger of positivism for Strauss was Germany’s slide from the intellectually relativistic climate of Weimar Germany (fueled by the philosophies of Weber, Nietzsche and Heidegger) to the politics of Hitler’s total war on Europe. In this respect, Weimar Germany made Nazism possible by breaking down traditional forms of moral rationality (via a positivistic culture that led to relativism and nihilism). This meant that the philosophies of Weber, Nietzsche, and Heidegger presented Strauss with a dilemma: for he thought they were right to differing degrees philosophically, but he also thought their truth was subversive of the beliefs required for political life, breaking down the boundaries of law and order and making possible the most catastrophic programs of genocide without any philosophical resources to resist such actions as objectively “better” or “worse.” Nazi society, in other words, was from this viewpoint the product of subjectivism about values resulting from the disenchantment of scientific, modern society, leading to the terrible “*mein Kampf*” of a charismatic psychopath.

In this sense, my interpretation tied to the esoteric argument made by Drury and Holmes implies that a full extrapolation of Strauss’s views amounts to a unique perspective on modern political violence. His major antagonist in this respect would be Weber’s rival view of a disenchanted, modern society held together by *Redlichkeit*, the vocations, and the occasional jolt of charisma. Yet all this, Strauss believed, pointed to the long “shadow of Hitler.”

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⁶⁶ Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*; Gunnell “Strauss Before Straussianism.”

⁶⁷ Strauss, “Existentialism,” 305.

⁶⁸ See for example, Strauss, “A Giving of Accounts,” 461.

⁶⁹ Strauss: “Existentialism,” 306; “A Giving of Accounts,” 461; *Natural Right and History*, 42.

I have argued that Strauss's critique of the fact-value distinction, which he identifies as the central term of social science positivism, is not foremost a theoretical refutation but a political condemnation. Moreover, the latter reflects his view that the nihilistic implications of Weber's social science positivism present a perpetual danger to political order. Science as a set of practices requires resources, institutions, order, the careful devotion of students and researchers—in short it requires (if its inquiries are to be sustained over the long term) the cooperation and support of the political community. Strauss believed that Weber had partly discovered why value-free scientific rationality, although reliable in some cases as a source of knowledge, in fact opened a threat to political life that it lacked the resources to remedy. From this perspective it should now be clear why Strauss laid out so conspicuous a phrase found almost verbatim in both *City and Man* and in "The Crisis of Our time": namely, that the possibility of nihilism brought on in part by Weber's social science "may destroy the conditions of social science; it cannot affect the validity of its findings."⁷⁰ The ultimate aim of Strauss's critique of positivism was to open the door to a comprehensive critique of the role of scientific doctrine within modern society.

⁷⁰ Strauss: "The Crisis of Our Time," 49; *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) 7.

Chapter 2: Assessing Strauss's Alternative to Positivism

I have argued that Leo Strauss's critique of positivistic social science is largely a political rebuttal and not a philosophical one. I have also noted that Strauss often assumed he could address the many varieties of social science positivism through the central thesis of the fact-value distinction.¹ This essentialist treatment of modern social science places limitations on Strauss's already flawed critique. After all, its relevance is only as strong as its ability to truly stick to various specific research programs, many of which adhere to competing doctrines, methods, and techniques.² Perhaps more important, because Strauss's critique remains primarily political it does not in fact furnish definitive philosophical reasons for leaving mainstream social science behind.

But Strauss did not merely criticize "positivism," he also adumbrated an alternative approach. Specifically, he proposed a historical-philosophical task of recuperating classic Greek political philosophy as an antidote to positivism. This project has inspired various students and followers in political and social science departments. In this chapter I will lay out some of the features of this alternative research program to mainstream social science, evaluating it for how fully it can actually be said to articulate an alternative research program in social science. I will conclude by considering how, ironically, Strauss's proposed alternative to positivistic research has (no doubt against his own intentions) in fact helped entrench positivistic divisions of labor in American political science.

I. Recovering the Ancients as an Antidote to Positivism

Strauss's work in philosophy of social science was largely motivated by his dissatisfaction with the positivistic mainstream and the political crisis he saw it as helping engender.³ According to Strauss, modern social science had unwittingly helped create the "crisis of our time" by opening the possibility of a destabilizing nihilism spreading through modern, scientific societies, undermining the moral and civic commitments that sustain political orders. Although it was not the only intellectual movement to have done this (Strauss often mentions historicism), positivism had done this in a unique way: by championing the doctrine that the world is dichotomized into facts and values. Strauss also noted that due to philosophical shallowness and philistinism modern societies often missed the true, nihilistic significance of the fact-value distinction. Yet nevertheless the fact-value distinction opened up the possibility that political life would be viewed as increasingly subjective, arbitrary, and relativistic. In Strauss's colorful language, the fact-value distinction rightly understood leaves us with no rational way to

¹ Strauss, "The Crisis of Our Time," in *The Predicament of Modern Politics*, ed. Harold Spaeth (Detroit: University of Detroit Press) 50.

² It might also suffer similar failings to the a priori or impossibility arguments concerning positivistic social science that Richard Bernstein persuasively warns against. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978).

³ This is something admitted by his own most vocal defenders in this domain: "According to Strauss, the crisis can only be met by an adequate political science, and it is this fact that is the immediate justification of Strauss's interest in social science." Nasser Behnegar, "Strauss and Social Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 238.

decide between “civilization against cannibalism.”⁴ Strauss’s “crisis of our time,” therefore, is a political/spiritual crisis that stalks modern societies, threatening to undermine confidence in the civic values necessary for sustaining their orders.⁵

Against a positivistic social science, Strauss proposes a historical methodology whose principal goal is the recovery of certain aspects of ancient Greek political philosophy. Particularly, Plato’s and Aristotle’s political theories must be recovered because they comprise an understanding of political life that is consistent with the ordinary citizen’s view that there is no division between facts and values. Therefore, unlike positivism, ancient political philosophy does not introduce “the specifically scientific understanding” in which facts and values are dichotomized.⁶ Unlike positivism, ancient political philosophy does not have the potentially inimical effects on the social and political orders that house them. So Strauss exhorts:

We must understand the pre-scientific, the common sense understanding, the citizen’s understanding of political things ... But how can we get that understanding? ... Fortunately for us, this terrific burden, the most basic work which can be done and must be done in order to make political science and, therefore, also the other social sciences truly sciences, rational enterprises has been done by Aristotle in his *Politics*.⁷

Yet Strauss follows this astonishing declaration by seriously qualifying the readymade nature of Aristotle’s political philosophy. The political knowledge of those like Plato and Aristotle cannot be simply rehearsed. Rather, its recovery must be “tentative,” and “experimental,” as “we cannot reasonably expect that a fresh understanding of classical political philosophy will supply us with recipes for today’s use ... Only we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today.”⁸

I will return to this qualified avowal to Aristotle’s way of studying politics below. But we have achieved a basic formulation of the goal of the research agenda of Strauss’s philosophy of social science: namely, the tentative and experimental recuperation of the value-laden, “commonsense” view of political life that reached its profoundest articulations in Aristotle and Plato. In a letter to Karl Löwith, Strauss emphasizes even more clearly the historical nature of this recovery: “The possibility of a non-positivistic science of human society ... i.e., of a fundamentally Platonic-Aristotelian political science is so buried by centuries of a radically different approach that I regard it as *my primary task* to recover the classical approach.”⁹

This is the manner in which Strauss seeks to reopen the quarrel between ancients and moderns. Classical political philosophy represents a return to the pre-scientific view of political life, one which does not eliminate the value-laden, everyday view of politics held by citizens who perceive pre-scientific properties like good and evil, tyranny and freedom, justice and

⁴ Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism,” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 9.

⁵ See: Strauss, “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” in *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959) 221-222; “An Epilogue,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, ed., Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989). Also, Cf., Allan Bloom, “The Study of Texts,” *Political Theory and Political Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 113-114.

⁶ Strauss, “The Crisis of Our Time,” 50-51.

⁷ Strauss, “The Crisis of Our Time,” 51.

⁸ Strauss, “The Crisis of Our Time,” 54.

⁹ Leo Strauss letter to Karl Löwith, July 11, 1964, quoted in Behnegar, “Strauss and Social Science,” 216.

injustice. These latter are integral to the ordinary citizen's point of view, and yet they are filtered out by scientific consciousness, which hopes to give a value-free and thereby purely objective account of political life.

Strauss's task seems straightforward enough: recover and reconstruct certain conceptual features of Platonic and Aristotelian political inquiry and see if they do not fare better than contemporary political science. But this task is significantly complicated by Strauss's belief that the historical and textual recuperation of ancient political philosophy is shaped by a particular problem. This is the problem of what Strauss saw as the perennial tension between philosophers and political society. Ancient philosophers must be read with great sensitivity because they hide their views from the hostile political climate that surrounds them. Why is the political climate hostile to philosophers? According to Strauss it is because political communities are always sustained by certain local pieties, morals, and civic values; meanwhile, philosophers search for a universal truth that undermines or contradicts these local beliefs and pieties. As Strauss puts it: "Philosophy or science, the highest activity of man, is the attempt to replace opinion about 'all things' by knowledge of 'all things'; but opinion is the element of society; philosophy or science is therefore the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society."¹⁰ Ancient Greek philosophers, according to Strauss, recognized the basic tension between philosophical knowledge and the local pieties that sustain particular political orders. The ancient philosophers were thus "driven to employ a peculiar manner of writing which would enable them to reveal what they regard as the truth to the few, without endangering the unqualified commitment of the many to the opinions on which society rests."¹¹ In short, ancient philosophers employed an *esoteric* mode of writing, hiding dangerous truths in their works behind civically edifying, exoteric teachings.

It is important to understand a couple aspects of the project Strauss counter poses to mainstream social science research. First, the research program in interpreting and recovering the wisdom of "greats" was not simply a supplement to positivist social science meant to coexist peacefully with it. Rather, it was proposed by Strauss as an antidote, as a vital corrective, transforming the study of politics in our own time. Strauss makes this very clear:

the great political philosophers are important not only historically ... the questions raised by the political philosophers of the past are alive in our own society ... in order to understand any society, to analyze it with any depth, the analyst must himself be exposed to these enduring questions and be swayed by them.¹²

And in the same vein he adds elsewhere:

To the extent to which a behavioral political scientist takes his science seriously, he is compelled to engage ... in such a historical study of his own discipline, and he cannot conduct that study without questioning the dogmatic premises of his own science ... He must at least consider the possibility that the older political science was sounder and truer than what is regarded as political science today.¹³

¹⁰ Strauss, "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," 221.

¹¹ Strauss, "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," 222.

¹² Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds. *History of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987) xiii.

¹³ Strauss, "The Crisis of Our Time," 54.

So, Strauss's research program is not conceived as a supplement to existing practices and research programs. It is considered a rival and transformative of them. The study of the history of "greats" and especially the Greeks will itself inform our most pressing political researches.

Second, what might be called Strauss's historical or recuperative task—researching and interpreting canonical texts from the history of political thought with special care given to their esoteric meanings—in practice has become an enormous bulk of what he and his students have taken as the primary alternative activity to mainstream social science. Thus, when we pose what is the central question from the perspective of philosophy of social science—namely, what does this tentatively recovered, classical Aristotelian social science look like?—it must be admitted that the vast majority of Strauss-inspired researchers have not answered this question. Instead they have remained focused on interpretive studies of "greats."

This means the overwhelming majority of efforts and accomplishments by Straussian researchers in political science have been limited to the interpretation of canonical texts, as opposed to the direct study of actual, ongoing political phenomena. This marks a great weakness in Strauss's recuperative project as an alternative to positivistic, mainstream social science. So far Straussianism has not transcended texts as the primary objects of study in order to show how we might study the actual, direct objects of everyday political life. Indeed, it would be tempting to characterize the main currents of Strauss-inspired research as essentially a "great books" approach and little more. But already the above characterization is not entirely fair. After all, although comprising a minority of Strauss-inspired research, there have been numerous attempts in the last fifty years by those friendly to Strauss's views to make independent contributions to areas like political economy, political psychology, international relations, and especially the study of the American political system.¹⁴

Thomas Pangle offers one of the few attempts to articulate the philosophy of social science behind these Strauss-inspired alternatives. Pangle argues that Strauss's alternative social science is one guided by the ancient emphasis on politics as a form of practical wisdom and rationality. Strauss proposes an "Aristotelian" political science; one which strives "as much as possible to adopt the *same* perspective as the active statesmen," while also deepening the statesman's own understanding by bringing theoretical reflection to bear.¹⁵ Such a political science is supposed to focus on Plato's, and especially Aristotle's, conception of the political *regime* as the central and most definitive phenomenon in determining the political actions and beliefs of individuals. Indeed, this alternative political science will even make use of the ancient regime typology of aristocracy, democracy, oligarchy, tyranny, etc., though it will do this in light of the effects of modern ideology on political life. So Pangle writes that "the only genuine social science is the science of regimes" and "political science in the proper sense seeks to attain a sympathetic understanding of competing regimes."¹⁶ Pangle notes that Alexis de Tocqueville's study of American democracy is a classic example of such a sympathetic regime study.

Pangle's account, following Strauss's, also makes some more bizarre and tendentious claims. For example, Pangle suggests that the "genuine political scientist" will be loyal to his own regime but this loyalty will be expressed by criticizing excesses inherent to that particular

¹⁴ See the summary of such contributions in chapter 4 of Thomas Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Intellectual Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Pangle, *Leo Strauss*, 91.

¹⁶ Pangle, *Leo Strauss*, 95-96.

regime type; this criticism, though meant to promote the social order and stability of the regime, will “almost inevitably incur moral opprobrium in his own community.”¹⁷ Although Pangle does not fully clarify the status of these claims, they do seem to presuppose both the essentialism and quasi-deterministic view of the cycling of regimes that was common in ancient Greek political science, and particularly Aristotle and Plato. How such a position might be philosophically defended today seems difficult to see. It assumes not only a reductive account of the vast array of human political societies to a small typology, but it also does so with types of organization that seem most clearly to bear on the Greek polis. Moreover, how the relationship between regimes and individual human action and psychology is supposed to work is never clarified.

These eccentricities withstanding, Pangle’s basic intuition seems to follow Strauss’s suggestion that the alternative to positivistic social science ought to be the recovery of the pre-scientific, “commonsense” inquiry of the ancient Greeks and Aristotle. Of course, here there are further problems that Pangle and Strauss never address. For example, although treated as such, it is in no way clear or uncontroversial that “commonsense” and the view of ordinary citizens and statesmen are ahistorical phenomenon. To the contrary, there does not appear to be a universal, commonsense view of all the ages. Certainly the regime typology of Aristotle is not simply the commonsense view of things, be it among ordinary citizens or statesmen. To the contrary, it would strike the common person as quite alien. This is because it is the language of a specific cultural and political milieu: that of classical Greece and the ancient polis. Likewise, many of the commonsensical political concepts employed by people today are in fact completely modern in their origins (one has only to think of the discourse of basic human rights to see this is the case).

But there is a still more general problem with Pangle’s attempt to give an exposition of a Straussian social science. Namely, Pangle (like Strauss before him) does not theoretically justify or develop the conceptual basis for this purported alternative at any length. The conceptual basis and status for a genuinely Straussian philosophy of social science therefore remains obscure. Is there an actual alternative here? Or are those who apply Strauss’s insights simply doing so in an ad hoc manner, giving greater weight to certain concepts and themes favored by Aristotle and Strauss?

If Strauss had pointed the way to a genuinely alternative framework for the study of social science we might expect it to be incompatible with the positivistic social science it is intended to replace. And yet Pangle often suggests that positivistic approaches are fully conceptually and philosophically compatible with a Strauss-inspired approach so long as they are willing to apply classical concepts and make use of Aristotelian viewpoints.¹⁸ Indeed, Pangle even applauds the work of certain social scientists who use “quantitative methods” precisely because they remain consistent with certain doctrines of politics that Strauss extrapolates from the canon.¹⁹ But if quantitative methods are not conceptually or philosophically incompatible with the alternative Strauss proposes, then one truly begins to wonder what the point of shifting away from the mainstream perspective is. For not only do we lack a fully theorized critique of this positivistic mainstream from a Straussian perspective, but we also lack a fully theorized alternative. True, some thought-provoking, even profound questions have been opened up by Strauss and his followers. And as a first wave of criticism this work deserves a certain amount of

¹⁷ Pangle, *Leo Strauss*, 98.

¹⁸ Pangle, *Leo Strauss*, 99-100, 101.

¹⁹ Pangle, *Leo Strauss*, 101.

recognition. But the answers to these profound philosophical questions remains underdeveloped, as will be made clear by briefly looking at a further example.

There is at least one other notable attempt to put some flesh on the bones of Strauss's philosophy of social science. Nasser Behnegar has recently suggested that Strauss's philosophy of social science might be understood as partly a development of Edmund Husserl's project.²⁰ Husserl employed the phenomenological method in order to critique an excessive rationalism by trying to show the primacy of pre-scientific consciousness and perception for our understanding of the world. Similarly, Behnegar notes that Strauss tries to recover the pre-scientific understanding of social and political life, though not by phenomenological arguments but by recovering classical political thought in its canonical articulations. Strauss's project is to recover the way in which the scientific and theoretical "outlook emerges out of this more primary outlook" of commonsense and practical reasoning.²¹

Behnegar's presentation of Strauss's philosophy in light of Husserl's is undoubtedly a step forward in understanding some of the sources and context of Strauss's thought. However, from a philosophical perspective, it suffers a number of the same shortcomings present in both Strauss's and Pangle's philosophies of social science. For instance, Behnegar aligns Strauss's philosophy of social science with Husserl's attempt to recover a "natural" perspective prior to the theoretical perspective, an outlook that has features that are essentially the same everywhere ... what Strauss calls the world of commonsense."²² But it is extremely dubious to simply claim that commonsense is ahistorical, let alone that this universal commonsense is only achieved, paradoxically, by returning to the theoretical language and concepts of the ancient Greek polis. Behnegar immediately concedes this problem by noting that our own contemporary world of commonsense is in fact shaped and infiltrated by scientific concepts. This seems to Behnegar adequate grounds *prima facie* in justifying the return to a pre-scientific commonsense found in the Greeks. But this simply begs the question of whether or not natural commonsense exists to begin with, let alone among certain pre-scientific, Mediterranean peoples. Once again, much more justification is required for such problematic claims than has been forthcoming so far. Instead, Behnegar, like Strauss and Pangle, leans heavily on citing the recuperative nature of the task. And this brings us no step closer to the theorization of a rival philosophy of social science. To the contrary, it creates the impression of a dogmatism concerning certain "greats" and their doctrines. Meanwhile, what is needed if Straussianism is ever to become a genuine alternative to modern social science is an actual theorization of this classical Greek framework.

What would a fuller theorization of this kind look like? This will be easier to appreciate as my argument advances in later chapters, particularly in my accounts of MacIntyre and Taylor, who each develop more fully an alternative philosophy of social science. In this regard, Strauss and his defenders might be credited as an important but still under-theorized revolt against twentieth century social science positivism. The participants in this first wave of criticism intuit that there is something amiss with positivism both at the theoretical and political level. And they even outline a program for the recuperation of pre-modern conceptions and understandings of political phenomena. But they have as yet not furnished an original theoretical basis for such a momentous break in paradigm.

²⁰ Behnegar, "Strauss and Social Science," 238.

²¹ Behnegar, "Strauss and Social Science," 238-239.

²² Behnegar, "Strauss and Social Science," 238-239.

A good deal of Strauss's approach to the study of politics might thus be dubbed a "great books" strategy, in which the wisdom deposited in certain canonical texts is the lens through which the most pressing political concerns of the present day are viewed. Strauss's philosophy of social science has not answered the question of how we might tackle the study of everyday political phenomena in a way that isn't positivistic. It has not yet moved substantively beyond what I am calling the recuperative task.

This problem is compounded in the works of those who have taken certain Strauss-inspired concepts in order to guide their inquiries. So, we have seen that commentators like Pangle have made the surprising claim that we might in fact be able to square ancient and modern political science after all, by simply subordinating quantitative methods to select ancient insights. But how this surprising reconciliation is suddenly possible is not forthcoming. In this way, Strauss's philosophy of social science remains an initial cry of protest but is not finally a fully conceived alternative.

And yet, Strauss's emphasis on a "great books" approach to the study of political life has had a substantial effect on the actual practices of studying politics in our own time. Ironically, this influence has helped to further entrench a positivistic, fact-value division of labor in the social sciences. I would like to conclude my treatment of Strauss by briefly examining the nature of this ironic aspect of his legacy to the social sciences.

II. The Influence of Strauss and Great Books on Modern Political Science

Although Strauss has been a figure of heated controversy since he burst on the American scene in the 1950s, the influence of his work and ideas should not be underestimated. Indeed, his influence is often detectable even in those who most vociferously dismiss his work. It might even be said that Strauss's research program has helped shape a basic division of labor in modern political science departments in America: one in which political theorists chiefly study the history of political thought, interpreting and arguing the various points of view of past philosophers, while political scientists deal with the empirical features of the political world we inhabit. In this way, Strauss's work has actually helped reinforce a positivistic division of labor in political science between "values" on one side and "facts" on the other. Theorists engage values assured in their researches by maintaining close to a textual authority from the past, while social scientists claim authority over the pressing world of political facts. Political theorists are students of values, political scientists students of fact, and never the two shall meet except in faculty lounges and department meetings.

A defender of Strauss might reply that this division of labor has been chiefly due to the intransigence and incorrigibility of mainstream social science. Indeed, Strauss himself had a far more polemical way of putting it: positivistic social science is essentially a form of fiddling that "does not know that it fiddles."²³ It may very well be the case that social scientists have remained complacently unaware of developments in philosophy and philosophy of social science. But in the case of Strauss's specific critiques, a likely factor for his small impact on the practices of social scientists is that no complete theorization of alternative practices has been furnished. Instead, as we saw above, what has been thus far adumbrated theoretically is the ad hoc

²³ Strauss, "An Epilogue," 155.

intertwining of certain Strauss-inspired themes, along with ancient Greek concepts, into the study of politics.

Strauss's greatest impact has instead been on the way in which political theorists view their own labors. Among theorists a "great books" approach to the study of politics now extends far beyond the frontiers of Strauss's students. And although various historians of the discipline have recently shown the varying sources for this shift, Strauss is undoubtedly a central figure in the remaking of political theory as a subfield concerned largely with the study of greats.²⁴ In this regard, Strauss's influence can be seen not only on his own students, but also on major figures in the shaping of political theory in America like Sheldon Wolin and the so-called "Berkeley school of political theory."

Wolin in particular, following the lead of Weimar émigrés like Strauss, often bundled together critiques of the social sciences with the wider diagnosis that modernity itself was in a state of political crisis that could only be resolved with the resources found in great books. For example, contra Strauss, Wolin speculated that the crisis of our time was due to the inherently conservative nature of empirical political science, which precluded imagining radical new modes of political association.²⁵ Yet Wolin's antidote, as with Strauss, was the recovery of "new theoretical vistas" in great books from the past that would potentially save modern politics from its pathologies.²⁶ Thus, a number of the most prominent figures in late twentieth century American political theory—from Strauss-inspired theorists like Allan Bloom to the Left-leaning heirs of Wolin like Wendy Brown—have equally called for close reading and textual analysis within a tradition of "old and great books" as the antidote to the failings of the mainstream of the discipline.²⁷

Much of the disciplinary character of political science over the last few decades has been the result of political theory's self-isolation from the rest of political science. As the historian John Gunnell has argued, the dominance of positivistic approaches in the twentieth century has as much been the result of the self-isolation of theorists as anything else.²⁸ Strauss and his followers, I am suggesting, have contributed to the isolation described by Gunnell by failing to provide a fully theorized alternative to the research programs of contemporary political science.

* * *

I have argued that Strauss fails to give working social scientists an alternative to their current practices. What I would like to do in the chapters that follow is implicitly clarify the way that Strauss's initial cry of protest against positivism might be theoretically vindicated, while

²⁴ There was, for example, the influence of the "ideas and institutions" approach to political theory that had dominated Britain and America at the turn of the century and which emphasized the way that the ideas of past great philosophers shaped the principal political institutions of the day. But there was also German *Kulturkritik* advanced by thinkers like Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, Weber, and Heidegger, and brought over to America by Weimar émigrés like Hannah Arendt and Strauss. See: Adcock and Bevir, "The Remaking of Political Theory," in *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges Since 1880*, 210-224; and John Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) chs. 7, 11.

²⁵ Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation," *The American Political Science Review* 63 (1969): 1062-1082.

²⁶ Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation," 1077-1082.

²⁷ Quote in Wendy Brown, "Left Conservatism, I," *Theory & Event* 2, no. 2 (1998) <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed March 28, 2011); see also: Bloom, "The Study of Texts," 115.

²⁸ Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory*, 260.

also rejecting his over reliance on a “greats” approach to this problem. This alternative, I will suggest, has been accomplished on a theoretical level in a more recent wave of criticism—that presented by MacIntyre and Taylor. These theorists revisit some of Strauss’s intuitions that modern social science has gone badly awry and that the ancients (and particularly Aristotle) might inspire us to a better political science. But they do so with clearer and fuller theoretical articulations of both the case against positivism, as well as the philosophical basis for a rival research program.

As for Strauss, his efforts are best viewed as a first wave of still not fully formed criticism against the positivistic mainstream. Strauss had the insight to see that modern social science had gone astray and, moreover, that a return to certain pre-modern conceptual features of the study of human action might be intellectually inspiring. Nevertheless, he and his students have not yet given us a complete and compelling philosophical case for how we should actually make such a dramatic shift of paradigm. In short, Strauss poses a kind of question or problem, but he does not yet accomplish a satisfactory answer. It is to an analysis of MacIntyre’s very different and more comprehensive response that I now turn.

Chapter 3: New Left Humanism, Analytic Philosophy, and Aristotle: The Evolution of Alasdair MacIntyre's Critique of the Human Sciences

Like Strauss, the wider context within which MacIntyre's work in philosophy of social science ought to be understood, is the rise of positivism during much of the twentieth century. MacIntyre too was distressed by the spread of certain positivist doctrines (including, value neutrality) within both intellectual and political life. Indeed, he viewed such doctrines as not only philosophically controversial but politically objectionable—albeit from a much different viewpoint than Strauss's.

This chapter narrates the evolution of MacIntyre's critique of the human sciences up to his mature, *After Virtue* position, in the hopes of clarifying the substantive originality of his contribution. Indeed, although his philosophy of social science is for the most part neglected, I believe MacIntyre deserves to be counted among the select ranks of twentieth century theorists—including Habermas, Foucault, and Charles Taylor—who have given us profound insights into the relationship between the empirical human sciences and normative theory. More to it, MacIntyre gives us a form of social science that transcends the shortcomings of Strauss's philosophy that we examined in the prior two chapters.

In most general terms, my short history of MacIntyre's work in philosophy of social science attempts to clarify a neglected, humanistic connection between political theory and the wider social sciences. But this narrative also sheds light on two further areas of scholarship: first, on the history of analytic philosophy more generally; and second, on the reception of MacIntyre in particular.

These two further contributions are reflected in the division of my chapter. In the first part, I narrate MacIntyre's pre-*After Virtue* critique of the human sciences, arguing that it should be understood in light of two traditions—the humanism of the New Left and postwar, analytic philosophy. Specifically, I will focus on MacIntyre's melding of these two traditions in order to stage substantive critiques of research programs in the human sciences, including behaviorist psychology and behavioral political science. But the story of MacIntyre's early, analytic critique is also part of a much larger historical reassessment of analytic philosophy that is presently underway. In particular, my account of MacIntyre's early use of analytic philosophy contributes to the growing chorus of voices calling for the dismissal of the historical myth that analytic philosophy was morally and politically dead until John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* came along and resurrected the cadaver.¹ In this way, the story of MacIntyre's early critique of the human sciences brings attention to a neglected and sophisticated form of analytic political theory that existed well before the rise of Rawls.

Yet it is MacIntyre's roots in the second tradition—New Left humanism—that becomes of increasing importance in the second part of my account, in which I narrate what I call MacIntyre's mature, “post-analytic turn” away from the tradition of linguistic analysis. Here I

¹ For both the explicit and implicit assumption that Rawls played this role, see: Peter Laslett and James Fiskin, “Introduction,” to *Philosophy, Politics, and Society*, 5th series (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979) 1-5; Richard Tuck, “The Contribution of History,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 72-89; Quentin Skinner, et. al. “Political Philosophy: The View from Cambridge,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10 (2002) 1-19. For a collection of essays that works toward debunking this myth, see: Mark Bevir, ed., “Histories of Analytic Political Philosophy,” in *History of European Ideas* 37:3 (2011): 243-408.

will argue that inspired by the debate between Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos, MacIntyre revamped his earlier, analytic critique of the human sciences in order to fit historicist and anti-foundationalist modes of justification. This post-analytic turn allowed MacIntyre to more wholeheartedly adopt traditions that he had only flirted with before, most notably Aristotelianism. Crucially, focusing on this “turn” also allows me to identify with precision a theme of radical humanism in MacIntyre’s stance that spans both his early and late periods.² In this way, I hope to challenge a second widespread myth—namely, that MacIntyre’s political theory is best classified as that of a conservative communitarian thinker.³ To the contrary, my narrative of MacIntyre’s evolving critique of the human sciences reveals him as deeply engaged in a radically humanistic and anti-technocratic politics with roots in the first British New Left. My narrative thus joins those seeking to recover the radical aspects of MacIntyre’s thought, albeit I shift the focus away from his famous ethics to his much more neglected work in philosophy of social science.⁴

I. MacIntyre’s Early Critique of the Human Sciences

i. British New Left Humanism

The first British New Left lived out its brief life from the late 1950s through the early 60s, formed by a small group of Marxist intellectuals who banded together to seek alternatives to what they saw as the increasingly objectionable realities not only of liberal capitalism but also of Soviet communism.⁵ For our purposes, it is important to note that thinkers on the New Left, like E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and the young MacIntyre, all explicitly hoped to formulate a humanistic Marxism as an alternative to what they identified as the overly mechanistic and deterministic modes pervading Stalinism.⁶

² I am not arguing for a total unity to MacIntyre’s thought but rather a persistent, underlying theme. Although Paul Blackledge is partly right to see MacIntyre as backing away from a commitment to a theory of human nature in ethical debates beginning with *A Short History of Ethics* and up to *After Virtue*, he nevertheless overstates the depth and completeness of such a break. What he misses is MacIntyre’s lingering link to humanism via debates over philosophy of social science. Paul Blackledge, “Freedom, Desire and Revolution: Alasdair MacIntyre’s Early Marxist Ethics,” *History of Political Thought* 26: 4 (2005) 696-721. See also: MacIntyre, “Where We Were, Where We Are, Where We Need to Be,” in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre’s Revolutionary Aristotelianism*, eds., Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame press, 2011), 314-315.

³ Prominent examples of misclassifying MacIntyre as a conservative communitarian, include: Amy Gutmann, “Communitarian Critics of Liberalism,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14:3 (1985): 308-322, 309; Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 209.

⁴ Blackledge and Knight, *Virtue and Politics*. For other outstanding examples of this reappraisal see: Blackledge and Neil Davidson, eds., *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953-1974* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008); Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007).

⁵ Most acute were the dilemmas brought on by the invasion of Hungary by Soviet forces as well as Khrushchev’s secret speech in 1956. For a full account see: Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995) 4-6, ch. 1.

⁶ For the best discussion of the nuances of MacIntyre’s shifting relationship to the New Left see: Blackledge and Davidson, “Introduction: The Unknown MacIntyre,” in *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, xiii-l.

The concern of these thinkers was at once political and social scientific. So, Thompson denounced Stalinism for “belittling” conscious human agency by reducing it to impersonal economic laws that in turn helped underwrite political atrocities.⁷ By contrast, Thompson, MacIntyre, and their New Left allies sought to understand society in a way that was not “passive and impersonal” but instead placed emphasis on the “activity and agency” of individuals.⁸ Instead of a narrow economic determinism, the New Left advanced a cultural studies approach to political life that allowed for the creative and rational agency of individuals. In this way, the New Left saw itself as not only morally and politically superior to various strains of orthodox Marxism, but also as better able to cope with actual nuances of modern social and political life.⁹ Thus, the New Left staked out a humanistic position with which to critique power and practice in the Soviet Bloc. As the young MacIntyre put it, the New Left was to be praised for rebelling “against the bureaucracy of the Stalinist party machines and the mechanical determinism of Stalinist ideology ... in the name of a conception of human nature.”¹⁰

But it is important to see that this humanistic critique was in no way limited to Communist orthodoxy. Rather, it was leveraged by MacIntyre in particular with equal vigor against capitalist and liberal practice. So MacIntyre wrote that both the Soviet Bloc and the liberal democracies were increasingly saturated by “enormous faith in the ‘levers’ of social engineering;” and both assumed there was “nothing distinctive in human behavior” such that the “mode of understanding human beings resembles the mode of understanding natural objects in that to understand is to control.”¹¹ In liberal democracies, this faith in technocratic sciences of human behavior was evident not only among top politicians and bureaucrats, but also in the corporate chiefs, economists, managerial gurus, and even psychologists and therapists who were granted ever greater authority.

Indeed, MacIntyre argued early on that technocratic, anti-humanist forms of science had infiltrated the medical and psychological practices of the day, reshaping individuals’ moral outlook by giving them instrumental and mechanistic concepts of selfhood. For example, in his 1958 book *The Unconscious*, MacIntyre argued that certain strains of Freudian analysis had become encumbered by deterministic, neurophysiologic idioms. What needed salvaging, according to MacIntyre, were the features of Freud’s psychoanalysis that cast light on the boundaries of conscious agency without simply eliminating that agency. As we will see in greater detail below, MacIntyre also extended this humanistic critique of psychology to the other major paradigms of the time, especially behaviorism.

For now it is important to underscore that in addition to bolstering technocratic, rule by experts and managers, the mechanistic worldview also wreaked havoc on individual moral reasoning. Specifically, deterministic views of human agency had a tendency to reduce moral responsibility to causal structures, at worst rendering “moral life as traditionally conceived [into]

⁷ E.P. Thompson, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,” *The New Reasoner* 1 (1957): 105-143, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1957/sochum.htm>.

⁸ E. P. Thompson, “The Long Revolution,” *New Left Review* 9 (May-June, 1961): 24-33, quote on p. 33.

⁹ Kenny, *The First New Left*, 87-88; Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ MacIntyre, “The ‘New Left,’” in *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, 88.

¹¹ MacIntyre, “Notes from the Moral Wilderness,” in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998) 36; “Breaking the Chains of Reason,” in *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, 145-146.

a charade.”¹² In the liberal democracies the mechanistic outlook was often combined with the overriding culture of individualism producing dualistic conceptions of moral life. This was a dualism in which a ghost of pure volitional agency floated within the purely deterministic machine of the body. In ethics this gave rise to the fiction of an utterly autonomous ego: voluntarism, the will-to-power, and (less grandly) consumer preference all became plausible if not attractive visions of moral agency. Meanwhile, in the Soviet Bloc, Stalinism operated on the assumption that human agency was reducible to deep structures of economics and history. Soviet party elites, gulags, and the forced industrialization of the peasants, were all merely part of the mechanics of history, giving bloody birth to the future utopia.

In short, MacIntyre’s engagement with the New Left gave him a way of framing one of the basic problems facing modernity. This was the problem of the human sciences and their relationship to the central forms of modern power and authority—for the veracity of mechanism versus humanism was a problem that could only be settled in the human sciences. In this way, MacIntyre’s New Left inheritance created a powerful impetus for him to critically engage these sciences, while also furnishing him with a rival conception of human agency. Given his assumptions, the stakes of seemingly arcane controversies in the human sciences could hardly have been higher.

ii. Analytic Philosophy

The substance of MacIntyre’s early engagement with the human sciences undoubtedly betrays New Left ties. But it also draws heavily on the resources of a very different tradition, namely, that of postwar, British analytic philosophy. This can be seen not only in MacIntyre’s early defense of Wittgenstein’s linguistic philosophy, but especially in the influence of ordinary language philosophers like J. L. Austin and Gilbert Ryle on his work.¹³ Ryle’s ideas in particular shed light on MacIntyre’s early approach to criticizing mechanistic assumptions in the human sciences.

Ryle was a major figure in postwar analytic philosophy (along with Wittgenstein and Austin), helping to turn it away from the construction of formal philosophical languages and toward the analysis of language as used by actual, everyday agents in the world. Famously, Ryle rejected the early classics of analytic philosophy, like *Principia Mathematica* and Carnap’s *Aufbau*, on the grounds that they mistakenly assumed there was a hidden, universal grammar beneath the surface of conventional languages. Instead, following the late Wittgenstein, Ryle exhorted philosophers to shift their attention to the informal logics of what he called “ordinary language.” Ordinary language referred to the standard speech of a given community, and could include the technical jargon of specialists as well as the vernacular of everyday life. Learning a language, like learning to use “coins, stamps, checks and hockey-sticks,” required “learning to do certain things” and not others.¹⁴ Thus, for Ryle, the role of philosophy was to alert language

¹² MacIntyre, “Determinism,” *Mind* 66 (1957): 28-41, 29.

¹³ MacIntyre has recently affirmed his early debt to Ryle in particular, evident not only in his anti-dualism, but also in his adoption of conceptual analytic critique. See, for example, the new preface as well as the original subtitle to his book on Freud: MacIntyre, “Preface to the revised edition” in *The Unconscious: A Conceptual Analysis*, revised edition (New York: Routledge, 2004). For Wittgenstein’s early influence see: MacIntyre, “On Not Misrepresenting Philosophy,” in *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, 33-40.

¹⁴ Gilbert Ryle, “Ordinary Language,” in: *Collected Essays: Volume II* (London: Hutchinson, 1971) 306.

users of the logical rules entailed by their own concepts, correcting mistakes and offering useful distinctions.¹⁵

It was this approach to philosophy that was adopted by MacIntyre in his critiques of the human sciences prior to *After Virtue*. So in a 1972 interview, MacIntyre argued that “philosophical analysis” should come to the aid of social and political research by scrutinizing “ordinary agents in their practices—pre-scientific, non-scientific, and scientific” and overcoming “conceptual difficulties” present in their language.¹⁶ In addition, MacIntyre argued that an analysis of conceptual distinctions resident in our language entailed an interpretive conception of the social sciences that was incompatible with mechanistic explanations.¹⁷ This can be seen, for instance, in the early Wittgensteinian-inspired distinction he drew between the conceptual logic of actions versus physical movements.

Specifically, MacIntyre argued that physical movements—for instance involuntarily twitching one’s head—could be exhaustively explained by non-agentive chains of causation such as those presented in neuroscience. By contrast, actions—for example, nodding one’s head—required grasping the beliefs and purposes that distinguished one action from another (e.g. nodding “hello” versus nodding one’s head in time to the music).¹⁸ Thus, actions required a different kind of explanation from physical movements because the former entailed interpreting the beliefs and intentions of the person in question.¹⁹

MacIntyre also argued that this conceptual analysis of human action revealed not only that the social sciences were interpretive but also contextual and historical. This was because deciphering the beliefs informing particular actions required understanding the wider language community, including “the socially recognized conventions, the rules in virtue of which the movement is taken as signifying this or that.”²⁰ Since these linguistic contexts changed across time, the explanation of human actions was historical in nature—a point which made it incompatible with “mechanical explanations” that were “unhistorical” because “a machine runs or breaks down” but “has no historical development.”²¹ In other words, sounding a humanistic, New Left theme, MacIntyre concluded that the beliefs of particular agents must be taken seriously and could not merely be reduced to some impersonal strata of explanation.

Yet MacIntyre’s employment of ordinary language analysis also went far beyond simply clarifying the basic distinctions between interpretive and mechanistic approaches. It also extended to the detailed critique of particularly influential research programs that showed mechanistic tendencies. Two of the most prestigious of these at midcentury were behaviorist psychology and behavioralist political science. Looking at MacIntyre’s critical rebuttal of each

¹⁵ Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 8.

¹⁶ MacIntyre, “Conversations with Philosophers: Alasdair MacIntyre talks to Bryan Magee,” *The Listener*, February 25, 1971: 236-237.

¹⁷ E.g., MacIntyre, “Determinism”; and “Notes from the Moral Wilderness.”

¹⁸ MacIntyre, “Notes from the Moral Wilderness,” 41. MacIntyre pursues a similar line of argument in other essays from this time: “A Mistake About Causality in Social Science,” in *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, ed. Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), 48-70, especially 56-66.

¹⁹ MacIntyre, “Breaking the Chains of Reason,” 147. In later essays, MacIntyre further elaborated on this distinction. See, for example: MacIntyre, “The Antecedents of Action” in *Against the Self Images of the Age*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978) 198; and “Behaviorism: Philosophical Analysis,” in *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, eds. Warren Reich and others (New York: MacMillan, 1978) 112.

²⁰ MacIntyre, “Breaking the Chains of Reason,” 147.

²¹ MacIntyre, “Breaking the Chains of Reason,” 147.

will help us better see how he intertwined linguistic analysis with anti-technocratic humanism in order to fill out a critique of modern power.

iii. MacIntyre's Critique of Two Behaviorisms

MacIntyre's engagement with psychological behaviorism began in the late 1950s and became gradually more intensive in the 1970s. In its heyday, behaviorism was of far greater import than its origin in psychology departments might imply. This was not only because (much like rational choice economics today) it held the title of standard bearer for a more rigorous and scientific form of social science. It was also because at midcentury behaviorism had a well-funded political front, which advocated and carried out experiments in engineering human behavior through various models of stimulus and response.

The most important exponent of behaviorism was the Harvard professor, B. F. Skinner, who argued that behaviorism could be used to "successfully design" the "behavior modification" of individuals in all domains of life, including making workers more productive, students more attentive, and citizens more law-abiding.²² All that was needed, according to Skinner, was the continued advance of a behaviorist science that would yield "the power of a technology of behavior" able to engineer "a social environment in which people behave well."²³ Of course, although by no means necessarily reactionary, in Skinner's case the politics of behaviorism had an especially paternalistic streak, as he publicly touted behaviorism as the cure to what he saw as the social disorders of 1970s youth culture, including protests, burning draft cards, and dressing "poorly."²⁴

MacIntyre's conceptual critique of behaviorism was multifaceted and complex. But focusing on one particularly important line of argument will be sufficient to substantiate how he employed linguistic analysis to humanistic, anti-technocratic ends. Behaviorists, MacIntyre argued, assumed that there existed a necessary, non-contingent connection between emotions and observable behaviors. This assumption was vital to their research program because it allowed them to treat actions not as expressive of the meanings and beliefs of particular agents, but as chains of verifiable behavioral types subject to scientific verification.²⁵ Yet the problem with this key assumption, as MacIntyre argued in a 1971 essay, was that it rested on a basic confusion about the logic of the concept of human emotion. Our concept of emotion, according to MacIntyre, was contingently constituted by beliefs such that there could be no necessary link between a given emotion and an observable behavior. Rather, emotions could manifest themselves in an indefinitely large variety of behaviors.

There were at least two reasons for this, MacIntyre argued. First, the physiological symptoms of two vastly different emotions could be the same. So, for example, fear and gratitude might both be characterized by a dry throat, a raised pulse rate, and the prick of tears in the eyes.²⁶ But although the felt qualities between two emotions might be indistinguishable, they

²² B. F. Skinner, "B. F. Skinner says what's wrong with the social sciences," *The Listener*, September 30, 1971: 430-431.

²³ Skinner, "B. F. Skinner says what's wrong with the social sciences," 431.

²⁴ By contrast, Skinner believed behaviorist social engineering would inculcate "the value of order, security, and affluence." Skinner, "B. F. Skinner says what's wrong with the social sciences," 430.

²⁵ MacIntyre, "Emotion, Behavior and Belief," in *Against the Self Images of the Age*, 230-231.

²⁶ MacIntyre, "Emotion, Behavior and Belief," 235.

were clearly differentiated by the attendant beliefs that informed them. Second, different emotions might manifest themselves in the same action depending upon the surrounding web of beliefs. So, for example, an office worker might throw his colleague a surprise party because he resented him, and believed he disliked surprises. But likewise, someone might throw that same colleague a surprise party out of gratitude and guided by the false belief that they love surprises. Such examples imply that there is no necessary link between emotions and either observable actions or physiological states. Rather, emotions are dependent on a particular individual's beliefs, making the behaviorist assumption that human actions can be treated as observable, verifiable types, invalid.²⁷

Of course, given the political and social goals of the behaviorist movement, the failure of its own concepts would prove devastating to the project of "a technology of behavior comparable in power with the technologies of physics and biology."²⁸ Rather, the inability of behaviorists to reduce beliefs to observable forms of locomotion brought back to the fore the need for a conception of human agency as uniquely creative, rational, and purposive. The dignity of the human agent in the explanations of the social sciences was thus tied to an anti-technocratic politics. And, this returned to the basic New Left theme, that treating humans as purposive, belief-bearing agents had both social scientific and political ramifications. At least in the case of behaviorism, MacIntyre believed philosophical analysis came firmly down on the side of humanism.

A similar blend of analytic analysis and New Left humanism was used by MacIntyre in the 1970s to attack behavioral political science. Led by the likes of Robert Dahl, Gabriel Almond, Sidney Verba, and David Easton, behavioralists drew on the philosophy of Carl Hempel to help legitimize their empirical inquiries.²⁹ Hempel held that scientific explanation in the human sciences required the discovery of "general empirical laws" that could in turn predict and control social outcomes.³⁰ Yet, according to Hempel's theory, building such causal laws also first required identifying atomistic, universal properties of reality that repeated themselves across historical contexts. In other words, political scientists needed to discover "kinds or properties of events" that could migrate across historical contexts and establish the "determining conditions" for the scope of a given causal law.³¹ But it was precisely this atomistic requirement that MacIntyre argued behavioral political science could not secure without falling into confusion.

MacIntyre's most extended conceptual critique of the behavioral attempt to secure atomistic kinds was leveled against Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* (1963). The latter, a

²⁷ Nor, MacIntyre argued, could behaviorists salvage the argument by arguing that holding beliefs was a type of observable action. See: "Emotion, Behavior, and Belief," 235.

²⁸ Skinner, "B. F. Skinner says what's wrong with the social sciences," 431.

²⁹ Ironically, Hempel didn't intend his model as a guide for how scientific practice ought to be carried out, but simply as an idealized logic of science. Yet the behavioralists were right to see that Hempel did believe that scientific explanation entailed predictive power. See: Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," in *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: The Free Press, 1965) 234. For an account of the uses and abuses of Hempel by behavioralists, see: John Gunnell, *Philosophy, Science and Political Inquiry*, (New Jersey: General Learning Press, 1975) 60-96.

³⁰ Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," 240. According to Hempel's "deductive-nomological" model, the explanation of a given statement of fact (the *explanandum*) could be logically deduced from the relevant statements of antecedent conditions together with the relevant general laws of science (the *explanans*). See: Hempel and Paul Oppenheim, "Studies in the Logic of Explanation," *Philosophy of Science* 15 (April, 1948): 135-175.

³¹ Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," 231-233. See also: Hempel and Oppenheim, "Studies in the Logic of Explanation" 142.

classic of behavioral political science, gathered an impressive trove of data in hopes of explaining why some political cultures were more conducive to democracy than others.³² MacIntyre, however, focused on how the wider failings of the behavioral framework could be illustrated by analyzing one of Almond and Verba's more modest claims: namely, that Italians were less committed to the actions of their government than the British.

Almond and Verba came to this conclusion on the basis of surveys in which Italians ranked "government actions" lower on a list of items in which they took pride than British respondents.³³ The problem with this finding, according to MacIntyre, was that "pride" could not be treated as an atomistic unit, able to migrate across cultural contexts in order to prop up generalized political explanations. Rather, beliefs and meanings were constituted by reference to unique linguistic contexts and thus did not serve as "identifiable units in different societies and cultures about which we may construct true causal generalizations."³⁴ So, MacIntyre argued, the Italians did not mean the same thing by "pride" as the British, a point evident in the fact that if you asked Italians at that time "to list the subjects which touched their honor, many would spontaneously place the chastity of their immediate female relatives high on the list—a connection that it would occur to very few Englishmen to make."³⁵ The meaning of "pride," in other words, was not some chunk of reality like a stone or a stick, which could be carried without alteration from context to context. It was therefore conceptually invalid to transport beliefs from one linguistic context to another while assuming a uniformity of identity.

This point held, according to MacIntyre, if the units of explanation were shifted from political attitudes to the seemingly greater stability of institutions and practices instead. This was because "social practices, institutions and organizations [were] partially constituted by the beliefs and concepts of those who participate in ... them."³⁶ We thus arrive at the central conceptual distinction upon which MacIntyre's critique of the behavioral project rested—namely, the difference between the identity of particulars that constituted the core of relevant phenomena in the natural sciences (e.g., atoms, amino acids, chemical compounds) and the identity of the particulars that constituted the core of relevant phenomena in the social sciences (e.g., political parties, religions, the practice of marriage).³⁷ The former were independent of beliefs for their existence, while the latter were not. And this meant that while the objects of natural science could be abstracted into universal kinds, those of political science were historically situated and context specific.³⁸ It followed that a mechanistic, general causal science of politics was a conceptually confused endeavor.³⁹

Once again, MacIntyre's analysis entailed that the creative, purposive intentions and beliefs of individuals could not be stripped from inquiry into political and social reality.

³² Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965) 307-315.

³³ MacIntyre, "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" in *Against the Self Images of the Age*, 262.

³⁴ MacIntyre, "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" 263

³⁵ MacIntyre, "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" 262.

³⁶ MacIntyre, "Social Science Methodology as the Ideology of Bureaucratic Authority," in *The MacIntyre Reader*, 57. See also: MacIntyre, "The Essential Contestability of Some Social Concepts," *Ethics* 84 (October, 1973): 3.

³⁷ This distinction is drawn by MacIntyre in a different argumentative context in "The Essential Contestability of Some Social Concepts," 4-5.

³⁸ This was a point MacIntyre also made in a 1972 essay on Hegel, which argued that the events which constitute social reality are best conceptualized as the result of unique histories of internal reference. MacIntyre, "Hegel on Faces and Skulls" in *The Tasks of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 81.

³⁹ MacIntyre, "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" 269.

Moreover, if it was true that political scientists could not construct the atomistic properties necessary for general causal explanation, then neither could the predictive power of such a model of science be achieved. What many social scientists had failed to understand, according to MacIntyre, was that this underlying, ineliminable form of unpredictability was a “central feature of human life.”⁴⁰ *Fortuna* could not be conquered by a managerial, technocratic, expert class working in government bureaucracies, corporate hierarchies, or academic disciplines. In short, MacIntyre’s analytic critique of behavioral political science supported a New Left-like, humanistic unmasking of modern technocratic power and practice.

II. MacIntyre’s Post-Analytic Turn

We have seen how MacIntyre’s pre-*After Virtue* critiques of mechanistic assumptions in the human sciences combined analytic conceptual analysis with the politics of New Left humanism. This should be enough to show that in the case of the early MacIntyre we have a prominent example of sophisticated work in political theory that draws heavily on the analytic tradition and also begins well before the publication of *A Theory of Justice*. Yet perhaps what has obscured this very fact is precisely MacIntyre’s own abandonment of the analytic tradition shortly before publishing his most famous work. It is to the nature of this post-analytic transformation that we must now turn.

MacIntyre’s pre-*After Virtue* critiques of the human sciences often appealed to certain conceptual distinctions as if they were quasi-universal or at least the default form of understanding. Thus, for example, his distinctions between movements and actions or the difference between the particular objects of the social and the natural sciences, all appeared as if they were a kind of free-standing analysis.

In this way, despite his great sensitivity to the importance of history, there remained something deeply ahistorical in MacIntyre’s early philosophy of social science. Thus there was a deep tension between the more historical orientation of works like *A Short History of Ethics* (1966) and the ahistorical, “detailed, analytical, conceptual inquiries” of some of the essays collected in *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (1971).⁴¹ And MacIntyre himself seemed acutely aware of this tension, as during this time he both avowed the analytic approach while also chastising this tradition for its “lack of attention” to the “historical and social sources” of language and concepts.⁴² This ambivalence, as MacIntyre later admitted, reflected a basic problem of his early approach, which was carried out “piecemeal” in the manner of analytic philosophy and “without sufficient reflection upon the larger conceptual framework.”⁴³

This tension was only resolved once MacIntyre took a turn away from analytic philosophy after reflecting on the famous debate in philosophy of science between Kuhn and Lakatos. MacIntyre’s breakthrough essay in this regard was 1977’s “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science.” As MacIntyre later put it: “What I learned from ... Kuhn and Lakatos together was the need ... to break free from that [analytic]

⁴⁰MacIntyre, “Ideology, Social Science and Revolution,” *Comparative Politics* 5 (April 1973): 332.

⁴¹ MacIntyre, “Introduction,” in *Against the Self Images of the Age*, vii.

⁴² MacIntyre, “Introduction,” in *Against the Self Images*, ix.

⁴³ MacIntyre, “Preface,” in *The Tasks of Philosophy*, viii.

framework.”⁴⁴ In positive terms, MacIntyre adopted from these philosophers an anti-foundationalist concept of rival research programs, which led directly to the writing of *After Virtue*.

The lesson MacIntyre drew from Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was that objective knowledge was internal to the practices of a community of inquirers working together within a shared paradigm. Straight appeals to brute, theory-neutral facts were not possible to justify rival theories. Rather, shared facts were always colored by a mutual framework or paradigm. What Kuhn left unresolved, however, was how to rationally arbitrate between radically rival paradigms.⁴⁵ Lakatos’ contribution, according to MacIntyre, was to resolve this dilemma by proposing a post-foundationalist mode of objectivity between competing paradigms. Specifically, Lakatos saw that knowledge between competing paradigms could still be justified in terms of criteria of comparison (an insight which would be of profound importance to MacIntyre’s own work in moral philosophy).

For our purposes, what the Kuhn-Lakatos exchange made clear was that MacIntyre needed to reconsider the nature of his critique of the human sciences. Specifically, his criticisms of mechanistic presuppositions in various disciplines of social science could no longer be presented as a necessary, universal analysis belonging to no paradigm or research program in particular. MacIntyre had recognized at least as early as 1971 that the danger of analytic analysis was precisely that it might confer a false “necessity, inevitability, and universality on some conceptual scheme,” thus appearing to “guarantee one way of looking at the world by seeming to demonstrate its necessity” *a priori*.⁴⁶ After reflecting on Kuhn-Lakatos, MacIntyre realized he would need to remake his own critiques by linking them to contingent, historical traditions.

Thinking through the Kuhn-Lakatos debate also allowed MacIntyre to turn more fully toward influences outside the Anglo-analytic world. Of particular importance for our story, is the way MacIntyre adopted Gadamer’s historicist concept of “traditions” in place of the more ahistorical concept of “research programs” proposed by Lakatos. As is well known, Gadamer had rehabilitated the concept of tradition from its discrediting by the Enlightenment, arguing that traditions were not simply a passive cultural inheritance, but the context for all rational cognition and inquiry.⁴⁷ In an essay devoted to Gadamer’s importance that was published just before *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argued that all thinking is “shaped by tradition” and “all understanding is inescapably historical.”⁴⁸ In this way, Gadamer’s hermeneutics reinforced and enriched the basic lesson of the Kuhn-Lakatos debate: namely that any justification in philosophy would have to thoroughly purge itself of ahistorical conceptions of analysis. Philosophical analysis had to situate itself within a framework of thought.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ MacIntyre, “Preface,” in *The Tasks of Philosophy*, viii.

⁴⁵ Cf. MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science,” in *The Tasks of Philosophy*, 16-23.

⁴⁶ MacIntyre, “Introduction,” in *Against the Self Images*, ix.

⁴⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (second, revised edition) trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004) Part II: II,1.

⁴⁸ MacIntyre, “Contexts of Interpretation: Reflections on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Truth and Method,” *Boston University Journal* 26 (1980): 177-178.

⁴⁹ MacIntyre affirmed “the historical situatedness of all thinking” as part of his debt to Gadamer: MacIntyre, “On Not Having the Last Word: Thoughts on Our Debts to Gadamer,” in *Gadamer’s Century*, eds., Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) 158.

It was the need to become more deeply aware of the traditions informing his own position that led MacIntyre to dramatically adopt Aristotelianism in *After Virtue*. Of course, MacIntyre had lost his ties to any orthodox Marxism many years earlier.⁵⁰ Yet, as I have been arguing all along, he never fully broke from the New Left's anti-technocratic, humanistic politics. I will now argue that the same is true of MacIntyre's post-analytic turn. Namely, MacIntyre would maintain his allegiance to an anti-technocratic humanism, only now the latter was neither justified in terms of *a priori* linguistic analysis nor Marxism, but rather in light of the Aristotelian tradition. In order to accomplish this aim I will first briefly look at how MacIntyre revamped his critique of the human sciences in terms of the more historicist and anti-foundational notion of rival traditions. This will mean succinctly examining the altered nature of his critique of Skinner's behaviorism post-*After Virtue*. I will then conclude by reconstructing some of the features of MacIntyre's Aristotelian inspired critique of the human sciences.

i. Rival Traditions: Skinner's Behaviorism Revisited

During his period as an ordinary language philosopher, MacIntyre's arguments often flirted with a kind of *a priorism*. That is, they often took the form of conceptually legislating what was possible in certain domains of research.⁵¹ This followed the Rylean notion of the philosophical analyst as someone who refereed the uses and abuses of ordinary language, correcting errors and dissolving pseudo-problems. But it also created a deep ambivalence between MacIntyre's more ahistorical, formal modes of analysis and his historically oriented and anti-foundational forms of argumentation.

By contrast, MacIntyre no longer suffered this deep inconsistency once he had taken the post-analytic turn. Instead, all forms of philosophical argumentation existed in the context of rival traditions, with some of those traditions divided by incompatible conceptual frameworks. Where his early confrontation with rival research programs in the human sciences was quasi-universalist in tone, the post-analytic MacIntyre was much more sensitive to the historically situated nature of his own concepts. There was now no longer a neutral space from which to referee philosophy or conceptual usage in the human sciences. Rather, every argument was situated within some tradition.

This change of approach is vividly evident, for example, in MacIntyre's 1987 essay, "Post-Skinner and Post-Freud." Here he returns to his old critique of behaviorism, only now he admits that the behaviorism of Skinner cannot be treated to any straightforward conceptual refutation, but rather presents a radically incommensurable, rival tradition. Briefly reconstructing

⁵⁰ MacIntyre's break with Marxism was based on both a loss of faith in the Marx's economic theory of crisis as well as the ability of the Marxist tradition to formulate an ethics free of conflicting liberal allegiances to either utilitarianism or rights-based discourses. See: MacIntyre, "Where We Were, Where We Are, Where We Need to Be,"; MacIntyre, "Three Perspectives on Marxism: 1953, 1968, 1995" in *Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Blackledge's discussion is also especially illuminating although it misses MacIntyre's ethical reasons for breaking with Marxism: Blackledge, "Freedom, Desire and Revolution."

⁵¹ For example, in his 1971 critique of behaviorism in which MacIntyre declared that his conceptual analysis held for "anything that it would be worth calling behaviorism," because it showed that "the notion of belief turns out to be ineliminable." MacIntyre: "Emotion, Behavior, and Belief," 230; and "Rationality and the Explanation of Action," in *Against the Self Images of the Age*, 254. See also: MacIntyre, "Predictability and Explanation in the Social Sciences," *Philosophical Exchange* 1 (1972): 8-9.

MacIntyre's later appraisal of Skinner's work will help us better understand the nature of his post-analytic shift.

According to the later MacIntyre, Skinner's behaviorism remained untouched by his earlier conceptual critiques because unlike other forms of behaviorism, it didn't posit a necessary link between beliefs and observable actions. Skinner broke from what we saw above were the problems of positing such a link through his theory of "operant conditioning." This theory held that contingencies within the environment reinforced and conditioned particular responses to the consequences of an individual's past behavior.⁵² Crucially, operant conditioning allowed for the possibility that any number of mental states might accompany a given behavior. Indeed, under this theoretical schema, an individual's beliefs could be treated as the result of a unique and vastly complex history of conditioning. Because each history of the conditioning of a given individual was unique, Skinner maintained that there could be an indefinite set of "mentalist" states accompanying any given behavior. Thus, operant conditioning in the environment was the root cause of both an individual's behavior and whatever mental states happened to accompany that behavior.⁵³ Skinner had in this manner formulated a theory of behaviorist explanation that in no way depended on the concepts of belief, purpose, and action that MacIntyre had simply presupposed in his earlier, analytic critique of this tradition.

The latter was the achievement that the later MacIntyre conceded to Skinner. Namely, by accounting for beliefs and intentions without having to make explanatory use of them, Skinner provided a workable model of "how much of human behavior can be explained in entirely nonintentional terms."⁵⁴ In the same essay MacIntyre praised the ingenuity of Skinner's theories and quipped that "if Skinner had not existed, it would have been necessary to invent him."⁵⁵ The insights drawn from Kuhn-Lakatos thus began to play out in MacIntyre's critiques of the human sciences. For it now became clearly evident that simply defining concepts in the style of ordinary language analysis might prove to be hopelessly circular. The circularity of such an approach was the result of assuming intentional concepts like beliefs and actions in order to criticize a research program for failing to account for intentions, beliefs, and actions. But what if—as MacIntyre now saw had been Skinner's distinct accomplishment—a research program managed to purge itself from any dependence on such concepts whatsoever? Insofar as a rival conceptual scheme had managed to break from the terms employed by the analytic critic, it could remain immune to such philosophical maneuvering.

Of course, none of this meant that MacIntyre had become a behaviorist. But what he had learned was that in the case of radically rival traditions, success or failure could not "be predicted *a priori*" via conceptual analysis, but required carrying "through the research program as far as proves to be possible" while all the time comparing it to the successes and failures of rival approaches.⁵⁶ Thus, in the place of straight linguistic analysis, MacIntyre's post-*After Virtue* critique of the human sciences offered instead a narrative account of the success and failure of

⁵² Similar to other forms of behaviorist stimulus-response, Skinner argued that if the consequences of a particular behavior were positive, the individual had a stronger tendency to repeat such behavior in the future, while if the consequences were negative, the individual had a stronger tendency to reduce such outcomes by avoiding or altering behavior within the same context. Skinner, *About Behaviorism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 51, 247.

⁵³ Skinner, *About Behaviorism*, 20.

⁵⁴ MacIntyre, "Post-Skinner and Post-Freud," in *Scientific Controversies*, ed. H. Tristram Engelhardt and Arthur L. Caplan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 298.

⁵⁵ MacIntyre, "Post-Skinner and Post-Freud," 298.

⁵⁶ MacIntyre, "Post-Skinner and Post-Freud," 298.

rival traditions. In the case of Skinner's behaviorism, the best reason for rejecting its claims became its own inability to succeed on its own terms.⁵⁷ Moreover, what was true of Skinner's behaviorism was also true, according to MacIntyre, of other mechanistic frameworks of explanation in the human sciences—from neuroscience “eliminativists” to Durkheimian positivists.⁵⁸ Refutation of a rival tradition thus required a form of immanent critique combined with comparison of a rival tradition. Traditions had to compete with one another for explanatory and theoretical supremacy. But all this brings us to the question of what exactly was MacIntyre's substantive standpoint after his post-analytic transformation. It is to MacIntyre's adoption of the tradition of Aristotle that we now turn.

ii. Mechanism versus Aristotle

MacIntyre's early, New Left inspired rejection of the mechanistic outlook resurfaces in *After Virtue*, albeit now under the banner of Aristotelian conceptions of human agency. Indeed, whereas before MacIntyre's conception of human agency was largely historically ungrounded, now he situated this vision of human life within an Aristotelian framework.

Unsurprisingly then, the decline and loss of Aristotelian forms of understanding is a major preoccupation of MacIntyre's mature work. Tellingly, MacIntyre traces the decline of the Aristotelian tradition to the historical rise of what he calls the “ideal of mechanical explanation.”⁵⁹ This ideal, MacIntyre argues, emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the well-founded rejection of Aristotelian forms of explanation in the natural sciences led to the much more dubious rejection of Aristotelian forms of explanation in the human sciences. In this way, the old antagonists of the New Left (mechanistic human sciences authorizing technocratic modes of social control) are revived in *After Virtue*. And once again MacIntyre warns of an anti-humanistic cultural outlook that seeks to belittle human consciousness by reducing it to the “physiological and physical mechanisms which underlie action.”⁶⁰

However, unlike his earlier self, the later MacIntyre has situated the problem of mechanistic modernity within a larger historical narrative about the rise of competing traditions. From now on Aristotelianism will appear in MacIntyre's works as the best framework for defending non-mechanistic and purposive accounts of human action. This shift also accounts for why many of MacIntyre's earlier conceptual analyses are recycled in *After Virtue*, only rather than presented as free-standing they are interwoven into a defense of Aristotelian concepts.⁶¹ Indeed, MacIntyre's arguments against mechanistic assumptions are now advanced not as

⁵⁷ MacIntyre, “Post-Skinner and Post-Freud,” 309-310, 304.

⁵⁸ See, for example, MacIntyre's similar line of reasoning concerning Durkheim in “Positivism, Sociology, and Practical Reasoning: Notes on Durkheim's *Suicide*,” in *Human Nature and Natural Knowledge*, ed. Alan Donagan, Anthony Perovich and Michael Wedin (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing, 1986) 92.

⁵⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 83.

⁶⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 82-83.

⁶¹ For example, MacIntyre devotes considerable space in *After Virtue* to identifying four systematic sources of unpredictability in social and political reality that had appeared in earlier, more analytic essays. Specifically, already in 1973's “Ideology, Social Science, and Revolution,” MacIntyre presents the four reasons he cites in *After Virtue*.

definitive necessary statements of conceptual logic, but rather in the spirit of offering an “alternative and rival schemata” and “systematically different possibilities of interpretation.”⁶²

Aristotelianism also becomes the banner under which MacIntyre fuses philosophy of social science with a radical critique of the central institutions of modernity. For, MacIntyre notes, the Aristotelian tradition since its inception has rejected the “modern contrast between the sphere of morality on the one hand and the sphere of the human sciences on the other.”⁶³

In *After Virtue*, a chief nemesis is the ideology of managerial power. Echoing his New Left essays, MacIntyre argues that managerial power not only structures the bureaucracies of the modern state but also corporate hierarchies, non-governmental organizations, health clinics, and other key institutions of modernity. The power of the manager derives from his or her claim to possess “recipes for producing effects” and manipulating outcomes in the realm of human behavior.⁶⁴ In other words, managerial power rests on the very vision of the human sciences that MacIntyre had by now spent decades disputing. Thus, sounding very much like his earlier self, MacIntyre in *After Virtue* declares that the “answer to the question of the moral and political legitimacy of the characteristically dominant institutions of modernity turns on how we decide an issue in the philosophy of the social sciences.”⁶⁵

A significant innovation afforded by MacIntyre’s adoption of the Aristotelian tradition, is his ability to offer a more fully developed alternative theory of human action. So, in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre attempts to defend an Aristotelian inspired teleological framework as the basis for understanding and explaining human actions. Specifically, like Aristotle, MacIntyre argues that human actions are only ultimately intelligible when placed in the context of an agent’s further goals and aims. Borrowing from Heidegger’s revival of Aristotelian philosophy of action, MacIntyre defends a conception of the human agency as structured by narrative sequences.⁶⁶ According to this view, human beliefs and actions are not carried out in atomistic, disconnected segments. Instead, they are unified by a context of goals and desires that relate the past, present, and future to one another in a narrative stream. In this way, human agency gathers and temporally orders belief and action. As MacIntyre puts it, human agency actually embodies a narrative and human beings are “a story-telling animal” that continually enacts stories.⁶⁷

The importance of this point for an Aristotelian social science is that rendering beliefs and actions intelligible requires placing them in the context of narrative sequences. A social scientist working within this Aristotelian framework is thus faced with the task of constructing narratives about actual, lived-out narratives. Moreover, because human beings can revise and change their beliefs and aims based on contingent reasoning, an Aristotelian social scientist must construct contingent narratives, and not necessary, law-like generalizations about political life.

The Aristotelian rejection of law-like explanations, bring us to another significant departure from MacIntyre’s earlier work. Namely, MacIntyre now contrasts technocratic claims to predictive power with Aristotelian conceptions of political know-how. Indeed, in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre elaborates on what kinds of expertise an Aristotelian social science allows. In the Aristotelian view, even the most distinguished social science generalizations can only be true

⁶² MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises,” 4.

⁶³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 82.

⁶⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 74.

⁶⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 87.

⁶⁶ See Heidegger’s seminal articulation: *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) 292-304.

⁶⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216, 211-212.

“generally and for the most part” and not with the predictive certainty of laws.⁶⁸ A narrative social science would mean one in which generalizations would always exist with counter-examples.⁶⁹

The later MacIntyre thus presents us with a view of political expertise that might be considered Aristotelian in that rather than predicated on a formal set of rules or scientific calculus, political knowledge is a skilled know-how. As for the value-neutrality so often claimed by modern political experts, MacIntyre observes that managerial expertise itself represents a form of power, authority, and social control.⁷⁰ Indeed, the figure of the value-neutral manager is, ironically, a key moral figure within modern life. MacIntyre therefore concludes that from the Aristotelian perspective this form of authority is one of the great political and moral fictions of our time “because the kind of knowledge which would be required to sustain it does not exist.”⁷¹

In sum, where MacIntyre’s early brand of interpretive philosophy was distinguished by New Left humanism and piecemeal linguistic analysis, his later philosophy absorbs major themes from both into a historicist defense of the Aristotelian tradition. What remains largely the same in his early New Left and late Aristotelian periods, is a radical critique of modern political life that exhibits the central theme of an anti-technocratic humanism. In this sense, MacIntyre’s critique of the human sciences returns to New Left themes, while also making post-analytic, Aristotelian advances.

* * *

In narrating the evolution of MacIntyre’s critique of the human sciences I have endeavored to fulfill three goals. First, I have hoped to bring attention to the early MacIntyre’s melding of ordinary language analysis with New Left humanism, in order to further challenge the widespread historical myth that serious and sophisticated work in political theory was not being carried out in the analytic tradition until Rawls came along. Second, I have argued that although the late MacIntyre underwent a dramatic post-analytic turn, this did not involve an abandonment of his radical, humanistic critique of modernity. Therefore, those who continue to cast him as a conservative communitarian are mistaken. Indeed, far from a conservative, MacIntyre’s decades of work in the human sciences reveal a thinker devoted to a profound critique of modern power inspired, partly, by New Left preoccupations. Third, I hope my narrative has helped elaborate a set of philosophical links between interpretive and Aristotelian approaches to philosophy of social science and an anti-technocratic politics. It is this final contribution that is of central importance to the general themes of this book. For I have argued that Strauss failed to give us an adequate alternative to positivist social science, whereas MacIntyre offers a vision of social inquiry that is at once interpretive in approach and humanistic in its politics.

And yet key questions remain unanswered for this MacIntyrean project. In particular, how do value judgments enter into factual and empirical research? So far I have narrated the outline of MacIntyre’s position and furnished some of his arguments in favor of interpretivism. But I have not yet given a more detailed conceptual account of how MacIntyre sees the empirical

⁶⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 90-91.

⁶⁹ Cf., MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 91.

⁷⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 93-105.

⁷¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 75.

and the normative melding. How is the famous fact-value divide overcome? The next chapter achieves greater clarity on this question.

Chapter 4: The Forgotten Alasdair MacIntyre: Beyond Value Neutrality in the Social Sciences

The prior chapter mapped out the basic evolution of MacIntyre's position within philosophy of social science. Specifically, it argued that MacIntyre developed a unique view of social science that was both interpretive and humanistic. The present chapter builds on this portrait by examining in greater detail how MacIntyre theorized an inherently *critical* social science—one that overcomes the positivist dogma that social research can be conducted in value-neutral, descriptive terms, free of moral or evaluative taint. For the sake of convenience, in this chapter I will refer to this latter doctrine as “descriptivism.” I will also return to some of the observations from my introduction, noting how descriptivism retains as much bewitching allure today as it ever did, not merely among practicing political scientists, but in major schools of political theory as well.

This chapter proceeds in two parts—the first historical and the second contemporary. In the historical part I recount MacIntyre's complex relationship, spanning several decades, with the philosophy of Peter Winch. Winch is a crucial figure not only because he epitomizes the midcentury turn by analytic philosophers towards interpretive social science (a turn MacIntyre followed), but also because he adopted a particularly extreme version of the doctrine of value neutrality. Thus, my first goal will be to show how starting from Winch's interpretive premises, MacIntyre nevertheless reached conclusions that take us beyond value neutrality in the social sciences. MacIntyre is in this way an important corrective to Winch's melding of the interpretive tradition with the doctrine of value neutrality. Instead, MacIntyre offers us a social science that is at once interpretive and critical.

In the second part of the chapter I turn my attention to the contemporary landscape, arguing that MacIntyre's transcending of Winch is still of live philosophical interest today. I do so by identifying descriptivist assumptions in some of the most influential research programs of our day—including mainstream political science, Quentin Skinner's Cambridge School, and Michel Foucault's post-structuralism. The purpose of this section is not to give a full account of either descriptivism today or of these three varied approaches. Rather, my purpose is simply to highlight how MacIntyre's position offers philosophical resources against the ongoing slide towards value neutrality in the social sciences.

Thus, the “forgotten MacIntyre” is a thinker whose accomplishment was to accept Winch's argument that the social sciences be interpretive, while also rejecting his argument that they be value neutral. In doing so, MacIntyre gives us one way of moving past gridlock not only in positivist social science, but also within the interpretive tradition itself, where there continues to exist a false dichotomy between the so-called “hermeneutics of recovery” versus the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Indeed, the interpretive tradition today is often portrayed as split into two opposing camps: one advocating the mere “recovery” and description of a culture's meanings, and the other “suspicious” of such meanings, insisting that social scientists unearth deeper, repressed ideological causes for beliefs and actions.¹ As we shall see, deciding between

¹ For more on the “hermeneutics of suspicion” versus those of “recovery” (which derive from Paul Ricoeur's philosophy), see: Michael Gibbons, “Introduction” in *Interpreting Politics*, ed. Gibbons (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987). This split is also often cast in terms of the disagreement between Gadamer (advocating recovery) and Habermas (advocating suspicion): Bjørn Ramberg and Kristin Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics,” *The Stanford*

recovery and suspicion is unnecessary. For while interpretivists like Winch may have limited themselves to the recovery of a given culture's meanings, MacIntyre's social science instead fuses recovery and suspicion, description and normative evaluation. In this way, MacIntyre vindicates the Aristotelian view that social science is always at one and the same time a moral science.² It is for this accomplishment that MacIntyre's relevance to interpretive social science deserves to be rehabilitated.³ Indeed, if I am at all correct, then the theoretical basis of future social research may have its roots in this neglected past.

I. Overcoming Winch's Descriptivism

i. Rational versus Irrational Beliefs and Actions

Any full understanding of MacIntyre's accomplishment within the philosophy of social science must take into account Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. Published in 1958, this seminal book helped turn much of the Anglo-analytic debate over social science in an interpretive direction. It did so by forcefully advancing the claim that the goal of social science was not causal generalizations as in the natural sciences, but rather the reconstruction of the meaning of particular beliefs and actions within cultural context. This argument rested on an ingenious extension of the doctrine of meaning holism as defended by the late Wittgenstein.

According to Winch, Wittgenstein's meaning holism implied that human beliefs and actions were only properly understood within the context of a particular language game or way of life.⁴ This was because human beliefs and actions were themselves forms of meaning, and thus needed to be grasped holistically, in light of further beliefs that informed them. On this basis, Winch then drew a distinction between the social versus the natural sciences. Where natural scientists might discover causal laws that transcended historical context, social theory needed to grasp the meanings of beliefs and actions within a particular culture. In this way, Winch's view of the unique status of social science was predicated on an argument about the conceptual or logical entailments of meaning holism. As he put it: "I want to show that the

Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2009 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/hermeneutics/>.

² Here my argument dovetails with recent scholars who have advanced important explorations of MacIntyre's continuing relevance to an Aristotelian conception of politics. See, for example: Kelvin Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007).

³ MacIntyre is largely excluded from collections on the interpretive turn. For example: Mark Bevir, ed., *Interpretive Political Science*, 4 vols. (London: Sage, 2010); Gibbons, *Interpreting Politics*; David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman, eds., *The Interpretive Turn* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Ramberg and Gjesdal, "Hermeneutics"; Joan Scott and Debra Keates, eds., *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretive Social Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴ Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 40, 108.

notion of a human society involves a scheme of concepts which is logically incompatible with the kinds of explanation offered in the natural sciences.”⁵

These arguments cast the job of the social scientist in polemical terms, against the mainstream of positivist research in the Anglophone world. Instead of searching for causal laws like the natural sciences, social researchers needed to interpret meanings. Joining a long tradition of “*verstehen*” theorists, Winch argued that such interpretive knowledge was achieved when a social theorist had reconstructed an ideally articulate insider view of a culture. As MacIntyre expressed it: “according to Winch the successful sociologist has simply learned all that the ideal native informant could tell him” by rendering the “implicit and partial” knowledge that members of a society possess “explicit and complete.”⁶

This Wittgenstein-inspired turn toward interpretation or hermeneutics was of tremendous importance to MacIntyre, as he acknowledged Winch had identified the “true starting point” of all social inquiry.⁷ Specifically, Winch was right to insist that individual actions and beliefs could only be properly grasped in light of the further beliefs that made up a way of life. However, MacIntyre also believed that Winch’s mistake had been to turn this true starting point into the endpoint of social inquiry as well. For doing so stranded social research in value-neutral descriptions of the self-understandings of those it studied.⁸ Under Winch’s conception there simply was no theoretical basis for the social researcher to challenge a culture’s self-understandings. Each way of life simply had to be described on its own terms. And this had the effect of barring deeper normative criticism from the social sciences.

MacIntyre’s full response to the complex ramifications of Winch’s descriptivism took years to develop. But early on he drew a key distinction between rational versus irrational beliefs and actions. The problem, according to MacIntyre, lay in Winch’s particular conception of the social sciences. For Winch had grounded the difference between the natural and social sciences on the view that understanding the specific meanings of human beliefs and actions was something utterly different than citing general causal laws.⁹ Moreover, Winch had advanced this claim as if it were an *a priori*, logical truth about the concepts appropriate to the social versus natural sciences.

Yet, MacIntyre noted, even on Winch’s own terms there was no compelling, *a priori* reason why causal explanations should be incompatible with meaning holism and an interpretive approach. After all, individuals might possess reasons as a state of affairs identifiable independently of a given action, such that the “possession of a reason by an agent” might be “an

⁵ Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, 72.

⁶ MacIntyre, “The Idea of a Social Science,” in *Against the Self Images of the Age* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 212. See also: Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, 88.

⁷ MacIntyre, “The Idea of a Social Science,” 222-223.

⁸ Richard Bernstein has articulated a powerful critique of Winch in this regard: *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 63-74.

⁹ Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, 117. Tellingly, Winch later criticized his own work on similar grounds. See “Preface to the Second Edition,” in *The Idea of a Social Science*, xii. Likewise, Winch later amended his position, citing MacIntyre and arguing that the “concept of causal influence is by no means monolithic” and so might have application in both the natural and social sciences. Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 320.

item of a suitable type to figure as a cause.”¹⁰ This suggested that it was at least possible to ask—without a conceptual error being committed—whether a specific action had in fact been caused by the reason cited by the agent or if perhaps there had been some hidden source, ideological, pathological, or otherwise. Winch’s *a priori*, conceptual arguments simply begged this question.

In this regard, Winch’s mistake had been to assume that causal explanations were limited to the necessary, law-like generalizations typical of the natural sciences. Such a law-like conception of cause was indeed incompatible with explaining human beliefs and actions in terms of contingent reasons. But the concept of cause, MacIntyre noted, did not need to be thought of in monolithic terms. Instead, a cause could be thought of as anything that “makes any outcome different from what it would otherwise have been.”¹¹ So, the causal bonds typical of the natural sciences might very well be necessary and law-like, while the causes of human beliefs and meanings might instead be contingent and contextual. There was no way to philosophically legislate the case beforehand. Ironically, for a follower of Wittgenstein, Winch had failed to notice that causality was a pluralistic concept such that “the notion of causality has application independently of the notion of necessary condition.”¹²

MacIntyre’s more pluralistic conception of cause allowed him to view social inquiry in light of a basic distinction between rational versus irrational beliefs and actions. Rational beliefs and actions were those caused by “an antecedent process of reasoning and could only be generated as the outcome of such a process.”¹³ For example, T.S. Eliot writing the poem “Four Quartets” might be considered an action whose explanation requires engaging a contingent formation of beliefs in context. This was in contrast to irrational beliefs and actions in which “some antecedent condition” might be “sufficient to produce a belief, irrespective of the reasoning appropriately to be invoked.”¹⁴ In this vein, MacIntyre cited a number of possible candidates for irrationality from the social research of that time, including cases of post-hypnotic behavior as well as Erving Goffman’s work on the effect of preexistent social roles on patients in asylums.¹⁵ But perhaps clearer cases of this kind of causality might be the paranoia of a schizophrenic or the hallucinations of a drugged patient.

MacIntyre’s point was not to vindicate any one particular example, but rather to insist that in the case of rational versus irrational beliefs and actions a social theorist’s explanation might legitimately trump native self-understandings in ways that Winch had neglected.¹⁶

¹⁰ MacIntyre, “The Idea of a Social Science,” 216.

¹¹ MacIntyre, “Causality and History,” in *Essays on Explanation and Understanding*, ed. Juha Manninen and Raimo Tuomela (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1976), 149-150.

¹² MacIntyre, “Causality and History,” 146.

¹³ MacIntyre, “Rationality and the Explanation of Action,” in *Against the Self Images of the Age*, 246. See also, MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 207-208.

¹⁴ MacIntyre, “Rationality and the Explanation of Action,” 246.

¹⁵ MacIntyre, “The Idea of a Social Science,” 216, 219.

¹⁶ Cf., MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 207. MacIntyre’s own analysis of rational versus irrational beliefs, although successfully moving past Winch’s descriptivism is not without flaws. Specifically, MacIntyre often dichotomizes rational explanations and “impersonal,” naturalist causes in such a way that neglects a more nuanced analysis of repressed and distorted beliefs. Critics like Mark Bevir have rightly noted that the causal links in distorted beliefs might still be volitional (as opposed to naturalistic) without being either conscious or rational. See: Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 265-308, 299. Compare: MacIntyre, “Positivism, Sociology and Practical Reasoning: Notes on Durkheim’s *Suicide*,” in *Human Nature and Natural*

Because human beings could either succeed or fail to act and hold beliefs rationally, social theorists would need to be sensitive to all the myriad ways distortion might occur.¹⁷ Indeed, this was why grasping native self-understandings formed the true starting point of social inquiry. For as MacIntyre put it: “We cannot begin to evaluate the rationality of procedures until we know what is being said on the relevant occasions, and we cannot know what is being said until we know into what genres the utterances of a given culture may be classified.”¹⁸

Thus, far from being trapped in describing native self-understanding, social theorists were faced with an inescapable evaluative task: assessing whether particular beliefs and actions could be taken on their own terms, or if they were instead irrational or distorted in some sense. There was an “asymmetry” in the kinds of explanation appropriate to rational versus irrational beliefs and actions.¹⁹ This asymmetry essentially meant that in cases of rational beliefs, the self-understandings of the subject of study should be charitably reconstructed in order to form explanations; while, in cases of irrational beliefs, the language of self-understanding needed to be challenged and perhaps even supplanted. So there was at least a convincing “preliminary case for holding that not all beliefs are to be explained in the same way” and the “form of explanation appropriate to rational beliefs” was not always the same as “the form of explanation appropriate to irrational beliefs.”²⁰

In this way, the distinction between rational and irrational beliefs and actions was an initial effort by MacIntyre to argue that there was a perpetual, inescapable contestability between the social theorist and the subject of study. This was because when a social scientist identified a particular belief, action, or practice as somehow distorted or irrational, he was also evaluating it. The social scientist could not remain entirely neutral on the question of the beliefs held by the groups, institutions, actions, and individuals he studied. Nor, MacIntyre noted, was the evaluation an added component to a purely descriptive one: to call beliefs rational or irrational, correct or fallacious, was always “at once to describe and to evaluate” them.²¹ It was therefore ironic that the dogma of descriptivism was often considered to follow from a “truth of logic, when logic is itself the science in which the coincidence of description and evaluation is most obvious.”²²

ii. Rival Rationalities

Knowledge, ed. Alan Donagan, Anthony Perovich and Michael Wedin (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing, 1986), 99, 100-103. For a more defensible (though still incomplete) analysis of how volitional desires might distort beliefs, see MacIntyre’s reassessment of his early work on Freud in *The Unconscious: A Conceptual Analysis, Revised Edition* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2-5.

¹⁷ Where Winch tended to overly dichotomize natural and social science, MacIntyre made clearer the role of natural scientific explanation in establishing the physiological conditions for healthy human reasoning (e.g. in cases like injury, disease, diet, age, and so on). These conditions for the flourishing of rational human agency became a central theme of MacIntyre’s later moral philosophy: MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

¹⁸ MacIntyre, “Rationality and the Explanation of Action,” 251.

¹⁹ MacIntyre, “Rationality and the Explanation of Action,” 255.

²⁰ MacIntyre, “Rationality and the Explanation of Action,” 246.

²¹ MacIntyre, “Rationality and the Explanation of Action,” 258.

²² MacIntyre, “Rationality and the Explanation of Action,” 258.

MacIntyre's early response to Winch also formed the basis for a later insight into a deeper sense in which social research was inescapably fused with evaluation. For it was not simply the case that rational versus irrational beliefs required different kinds of explanations—one that took self-understandings more or less on their own terms, and the other that challenged them. It was also that the various forms of rationality embodied both in social life and social inquiry were inherently normative. How the latter assertion holds will once again be clarified by revisiting the dispute between Winch and MacIntyre.

A key way in which Winch had excluded normative evaluation from social science was by arguing that the concepts of rationality and truth (upon which any normative judgment rests) were themselves radically relative to particular cultures, and therefore had no critical purchase outside their home context. This type of relativism was famously proposed in the paper "Understanding a Primitive Society," where Winch made the claim that modern scientific knowledge was in no way more rational or true than the witchcraft of peoples like the African Azande. According to Winch, this was because all rationality and concepts of truth were context-dependent on the particular framework of rules that informed them.²³ It followed that there were no universal epistemological foundations that might arbitrate as neutral criteria between radically incommensurable frameworks. And although Winch allowed that there were clear and binding standards of truth and rationality within a given framework or system of beliefs, the problem of relativism was inescapable between radically incommensurable paradigms.²⁴ Indeed, in such cases all an individual could do to switch from one competing paradigm to another was make an irrational leap of faith.

These assumptions brought Winch to the dramatic conclusion that when faced with radically incommensurable frameworks it was "illegitimate" to say a given "concept of reality is the correct one."²⁵ That is, modern scientific knowledge could not be deemed one bit more rational than the primitive, witch-believing system of the Azande. This meant that Western social scientists could not criticize the Azande for their witchcraft, they could only describe their given rationality and way of life. MacIntyre summed up Winch's position as follows: "[in Winch's view] we cannot ask which system of beliefs is the superior in respect of rationality and truth; for this would be to invoke a criteria which can be understood independently of any particular way of life, and on Winch's view there are no such criteria."²⁶ Social science could describe Azande witchcraft, but it could not offer evaluative or normative judgment.

We have arrived again at the doctrine of descriptivism. Only now it is clearer how descriptivist doctrines are often buttressed by claims of the relativity (or even insignificance) of normative evaluation to social research. In order to overcome Winch's brand of descriptivism, MacIntyre needed to give some account of how his relativism might be mistaken. And here, once

²³ Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," 308-312.

²⁴ Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," 309-310.

²⁵ Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," 313.

²⁶ MacIntyre, "The Idea of a Social Science," 228.

again, MacIntyre's basic strategy was to retain Winch's basic Wittgensteinian premise (anti-foundationalism) while rejecting his conclusions (relativism).²⁷

MacIntyre began by granting Winch's anti-foundational premise: namely, he affirmed that substantive conceptions of rationality were relative to particular conceptual schemes. It followed that there were no theory-neutral criteria available for judging rival conceptions of rationality. Judgments of truth and rationality were in this sense relative to some theoretical paradigm. However, he rejected the conclusion that transitions between such paradigms could not be rational. To make his case, MacIntyre drew on the hermeneutic tradition's concept of a narrative. According to MacIntyre, the epistemological importance of narratives had been overlooked because many philosophers assumed narratives were a "merely aesthetic form."²⁸ MacIntyre, by contrast, argued that two kinds of narrative performed vital epistemological functions that allowed for objectivity.

The first kind of narrative was what MacIntyre dubbed "traditions." In his earlier critique, MacIntyre had noted that Winch's brand of relativism was partly the result of an overly synchronic and monolithic view of human systems of thought.²⁹ In Winch's picture, ways of life seemed to exist in a kind of splendid epistemological isolation, as standalone, self-contained systems. Yet, MacIntyre observed, such theoretical constructs did not fit well with the actual history of ideas, where such systems existed in innumerable and constantly changing variations.³⁰

Drawing from the work of Imre Lakatos, MacIntyre argued that rather than stark monoliths, the history of ideas consisted of a series of iterations he dubbed "traditions." Lakatos had shown how traditions could be assessed in light of their own prior iterations along a temporal axis such that to "evaluate a theory, or rather to evaluate a series of theories ... [was] precisely to write that history, that narrative of defeats and victories" that constituted its status thus far.³¹ A tradition, then, was a series of open and developing debates, continually transforming through a historical, iterative process but unified by a narrative. Because traditions did not consist of a closed system of rules, the evaluation of theories that occurred within them were ongoing and dialectical in nature. In a later book, MacIntyre described the process of evaluating theories internal to traditions as follows:

At every stage beliefs and judgments will be justified by reference to the beliefs and judgments of the previous stage, and insofar as a tradition has constituted itself as a

²⁷ The key essay here casts Thomas Kuhn as caught in a Winchean form of relativism and so can be read as part of an ongoing response to Winch. See: MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁸ MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises," 7.

²⁹ MacIntyre, "The Idea of a Social Science," 228.

³⁰ Winch accepted the open-ended nature of systems of thought, arguing that the rules governing a way of life were "limited by what we have hitherto accepted" without being "uniquely determined" by them (318). He also considered the possibility of bridging incompatible languages by what he called a "realignment of our categories" into a third, shared language. Nevertheless, because he didn't resolve this problem theoretically, he was still forced to defend the thesis of radical incommensurability and relativism. Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," 317-318.

³¹ MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises," 20.

successful form of inquiry, the claims to truth made within that tradition will always be in some specifiable way less vulnerable to dialectical questioning and objection than were their predecessors.³²

Thus, traditions could be dialectically evaluated in light of a narrative of developing internal standards. So, for example, the utilitarianism of J. S. Mill is normally considered by utilitarian philosophers as a significant advance over the felicific calculus of Bentham, on grounds internal to the development of utilitarianism. Likewise, in this very chapter I am in part arguing that MacIntyre's critique of Winch constitutes a major advance within the hermeneutic tradition of social explanation and my assessment is based on critically comparing an earlier iteration of hermeneutic theory (Winch) to a later one (MacIntyre).

Still, this concept of traditions does not yet resolve Winch's fundamental problem of incommensurability between entire frameworks. After all, a Winchean could respond that entire traditions might conceivably remain incommensurable. This brings us to the second kind of narrative that MacIntyre proposed for overcoming the problem of relativism: the narrative concept of self. Here MacIntyre drew inspiration from the ontological hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer in order to argue that narratives were an intrinsic feature of human agency because human action itself always existed with reference to a temporal stream of "what has gone before" and "future possibilities."³³ This was the familiar point from phenomenological hermeneutics that human agency was always oriented through time by some tacit sense of narrative. These narratives were inescapable insofar as actions always occurred within some sequence of goals through time. As MacIntyre put it, human beings are "essentially a story-telling animal" living out "enacted narratives" such that "narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions."³⁴

For our purposes, the key point is that this conception of human agency embodied a kind of rational continuity that might be employed to overcome Winch's relativism. As a form of rational continuity, the narratives intrinsic to human actions might be appealed to in order to bridge otherwise incommensurable traditions or systems of thought. Crucially, the transition from one tradition to another might be assessed not in absolute, theory-neutral terms, but rather in comparative terms, based on whether the experience of transitioning from one position to the other presented an epistemological gain or loss for the individuals involved. In sum, although Winch was right to see that sometimes arguments between incommensurable traditions could not be resolved by some third, neutral criteria, he had missed that a comparative form of rationality was still available for individuals facing the actual alternatives.³⁵

So, for example, in critically assessing incompatible traditions, an individual might consider whether one tradition was able to resolve certain anomalies or dilemmas better than its rival. A tradition might in this way solve what were intractable problems within the rival

³² MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 359.

³³ MacIntyre, "Ideology, Social Science, and Revolution," *Comparative Politics* 5 (April, 1973): 325.

³⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216, 211, 208.

³⁵ MacIntyre's line of argument here has been a major influence on Charles Taylor's hermeneutics; see: Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 34-60, 54.

framework.³⁶ Thus, anomalies might deeply trouble one tradition, while its rival remained unscathed. The transition from the anomaly-ridden tradition to its successful adversary therefore became a rational move. Likewise, a tradition might force a crisis on its rival not by resolving anomalies interior to it, but by achieving some success outside of it. It might, for example, increase technological know-how or open a new field of inquiry or understanding in a way that its adversary acknowledged as valuable. Once again, the tradition that had been bested might be thrown into an epistemological crisis by this challenge. And once again, it would become objectively rational for an individual faced with the two alternatives to transition from the one tradition to the other.

This analysis implied that traditions that became radically indifferent to their own inconsistencies, or to the greater explanatory successes of their rivals, could be considered weak or implausible. At any time it might be found that a tradition by “its own standards . . . ceases to make progress” such that its “hitherto trusted methods of inquiry have become sterile.”³⁷ Such theories might persist historically for indefinite periods of time (think astrology or palm reading) but they no longer advanced or attempted to resolve the dilemmas presented to them. Instead, they simply quarantined those dilemmas, by ignoring them or covering them over with *ad hoc* explanations. Moreover, because this form of objectivity appealed not to absolute, tradition-independent standards, but to the comparative gain or loss between two positions, all such comparisons involved an *ad hominem* component. Objectivity was a function of *ad hominem* argumentation because comparisons between rival traditions inescapably implied that it was either more or less rational for particular agents to remain within a given tradition.

We have thus come to a further way in which MacIntyre’s overcomes Winch’s descriptivism. For it is not merely the case that social theorists must continually evaluate the rationality versus the irrationality of certain beliefs and actions. It is also that the rationality adopted by agents (including that of the social inquirer) is implicitly a challenge to rival forms of rationality. To hold a form of rationality necessarily entails judgments about the reasonableness of rival conceptualizations. The rationality guiding social research is necessarily normative of the comparative rationality guiding actual social actors in the world.

The foregoing may be clarified by an example. Consider, in this vein, Winch’s claim that social research simply consists of describing an ideal, insider perspective, with no form of outsider social criticism available. The problem is that Winch’s own conceptual language (that of the Wittgensteinian reconstruction of language games) is fundamentally at odds with some of the conceptual languages that guide people in the world. So, for example, some Russian Bolsheviks in 1923 believed that based on structural, causal laws governing human history, their regime would soon be bolstered by inevitable revolutions in Berlin and London.³⁸ Insofar as this expectation relied on purported causal laws determining historical events, it is fundamentally incompatible with the interpretive assumptions that guide Winch’s very social research: namely, that human beliefs and actions cannot be explained by such laws. But this means that Winch’s position entails an evaluation of the comparative rationality of all those forms of political action and authority that appeal to laws governing social events. Indeed, the rationality guiding Winch’s

³⁶ MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises,” 18.

³⁷ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 361-362.

³⁸ See: Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 16.

idea of social science must imply that the Bolsheviks of 1923 were deluded, even ideological, in terms of the beliefs that guided their hopes and actions. And a similar point could be raised today about all the contemporary forms of political authority that evoke causal laws—from technocratic economics to social Darwinism.³⁹

In this way, Winch's very approach to description is inherently evaluative. Because his account of what qualifies as a good description must be guided by some concept of rationality, it is in turn normative of all those social and political agents in the world who construct their lives according to rival rationalities. Winch's very concepts challenge the language of self-understanding of those he studies, and in some cases must displace it. So Winch's social science cannot accept the explanation offered by the Bolsheviks of 1923 on their own terms for the simple reason that this would involve switching into an entirely different form of social explanation (that of structural Marxism). Rather, Winch must implicitly recode the language of explanatory causal laws into the language of intentional belief formation within a cultural context.

We have thus arrived, through debates in social science, to MacIntyre's well-known concept of rival traditions of moral inquiry. Only it should now be clear that moral and social inquiry do not stand absolutely divided from one another as the descriptivist dogma would have us believe. This central point will perhaps come into sharper focus if we contrast it with three examples of descriptivism that continue to thrive today.

II. Descriptivism Today

The fruit of MacIntyre's long confrontation with Winch is a social science that is at once *interpretive* and intrinsically *critical*. Social science is essentially interpretive because it requires grappling with beliefs and actions that form contingently in light of other webs of belief. Social theory is essentially critical because normative evaluation is an inescapable feature of social explanation, and this in at least two ways. First, MacIntyre showed that within a shared tradition or framework social theorists must continually evaluate rational versus irrational beliefs and actions. But second, between rival traditions, social theorists must continually reckon with the way that a given concept of rationality evaluates and implicitly challenges the other models of rationality guiding human agency.

The consequence of MacIntyre's arguments for social researchers is that they must always be aware of how their own guiding rationality exudes a normative verdict on rival forms. Competing frameworks (e.g. economic utilitarianism, social Darwinism, structuralism, providential deism) entail a critique of the rationality of agents guided by lesser or illusory frameworks. And while such rationalities do not necessarily over-determine one's politics, they are—as we saw in the example of Winch and a certain brand of Bolshevism—critical of incompatible conceptual schemes. Social researchers must therefore be clear about how their conceptual languages challenge and implicitly evaluate the self-understandings of those they seek to explain. The confrontation between the self-understandings of the social researcher and

³⁹ As we saw in the prior chapter, MacIntyre advanced an anti-technocratic critique of modern politics precisely on the basis of an interpretive philosophy of social science. Cf., *After Virtue*, chs. 7-8.

the self-understandings of the subject cannot simply be swept away.⁴⁰ Social scientists must think about and engage moral and political questions like—is the belief system I’m studying an ideology, false, or otherwise distorted?

And yet this normative, political dimension to social inquiry is precisely what is muted if not repressed within a number of research programs today that continue to harbor—albeit in new forms—descriptivist sympathies. Specifically, I will very briefly look at three developments in order to signal the varied existence of such sympathies: first, the ongoing tendency towards value-neutrality in mainstream political science; second, Skinner’s contextual approach to political history; and third, Foucault’s post-structuralism.

One caveat before beginning: my purpose isn’t to capture the full features of these complex and varied approaches, nor am I attempting to reduce them to descriptivism alone (something that would be especially dubious in the cases of Skinner and Foucault). Rather, I simply wish to briefly highlight the ongoing influence of descriptivist methodological prejudices in some of the major schools of our day. This should give readers not only a point of contrast for MacIntyre’s hermeneutics but also a sense of the continuing relevance of his critique of Winch.

Consider first the longstanding tendency to defend value-neutrality within mainstream political science. As is well known, this tendency extends at least as far back as the behavioral revolution of David Easton, Robert Dahl, and other such political scientists who helped shape the modern discipline.⁴¹ But claims to a value neutral political science are also found among seminal figures within qualitative methods (notably Giovanni Sartori) as well as in commonly employed methods textbooks.⁴²

These cases of descriptivism are relatively straightforward. But perhaps of greater interest is the way the descriptivist doctrine remains prevalent even among qualitative methodologists who express doubts about the stronger positivistic currents within the discipline. For example, the methodological writings of John Gerring are a case in point. Gerring is worth singling out because he offers an articulate defense of the shift among many qualitative political scientists towards a softer view of the old fact-value dichotomy. In fact, Gerring goes so far as to call for a “normative turn” in political science.⁴³ One might thus expect to see from him, more so than his colleagues who still accept a strict divide between facts and values, an overcoming of the descriptivist dogma.

What drives Gerring away from the old, hard-line dichotomy between facts and values is what he sees as the problem of significance or relevance. Noting that much of political science

⁴⁰ Cf. Charles Taylor, “The hermeneutics of conflict,” in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 226.

⁴¹ For a succinct account of the behavioral revolution’s relationship to the doctrine of value neutrality, see: James Farr, “Remembering the Revolution: Behavioralism in American Political Science,” in *Political Science in History: Research Programs and Political Traditions*, ed. James Farr, John Dryzek, and Stephen Leonard (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 203, 205.

⁴² For Sartori as adhering to the doctrine of descriptive neutrality, see: Mark Bevir and Asaf Kedar, “Concept Formation in Political Science: An Anti-Naturalist Critique of Qualitative Methodology,” *Perspectives on Politics* 6 (September 2008): 503–17. As evidence of the ongoing influence of value-neutrality in political science John Gerring cites Earl Babbie’s widely used methods book, *The Practice of Social Research* (New York: Wadsworth, 1983). Cited in: Gerring and Joshua Yesnowitz, “A Normative Turn in Political Science?” *Polity* 38:1 (2006), 103.

⁴³ Gerring and Yesnowitz, “A Normative Turn in Political Science?” See also: Gerring, *Social Science Methodology: A Criterial Framework* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 249-252.

toils on questions whose significance to anyone beyond the researchers is unclear at best, Gerring argues that social scientists should instead be much more open and proactive about relating their empirical inquiries to normative questions of relevance. According to this view, values are intrinsic to social inquiry only insofar as they are necessary to the selection of a topic. So, “while the choice of subject matter is almost inevitably value-laden, the conduct of research may be undertaken in a value-neutral (‘positivist’) manner.”⁴⁴ Political science, according to Gerring, must learn how to explicitly engage and articulate the normative concerns that guide its research. Thus, Gerring’s primary remedy for the political and moral insignificance of much present social science research is that political scientists engage anew in the task of articulating how their work is of relevance to a broader public. In this regard, Gerring even encourages his colleagues to cultivate an understanding of the different kinds of normative justification that might guide the selection of a topic, as well as keeping an eye out for cases where empirical findings might resolve political disputes.

In short, Gerring’s goal is to “tether science to normative concerns” and “not a rejection of ‘positive’ science but rather its application to normatively valued topics.”⁴⁵ In this conclusion, Gerring is far from alone. Although more highly developed, Gerring’s arguments are not altogether dissimilar from the standard position defended nearly two decades ago by Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba in their hugely influential methods book, *Designing Social Inquiry*. For, similar to Gerring, these authors also argue that the “personal experiences and values” motivating social research should be guided by a criteria of relevance or what is “‘important’ in the real world.”⁴⁶

So, what are we to make of this view of the relationship between evaluation and social research in light of MacIntyre’s own critical hermeneutics? In one sense, the shift called for by Gerring and other qualitative political scientists is welcome. After all, the study of politics only stands to gain if the empirical researches of political science become more relevant and well-versed in the value-laden vocabularies that actually guide political activity. However, in light of MacIntyre’s foregoing arguments, it is also clear that Gerring (and with him much of political science) has not in fact broken from the basic assumption of descriptivism. That is, the assumption remains that at least in principle description is one kind of activity and normative evaluation another. Although it is affirmed that description ought to be increasingly guided by questions of relevance, what drops out of this account are the ways in which social explanation is itself inherently evaluative.⁴⁷

By contrast, we have seen how MacIntyre’s critique of Winch suggests that the normative component is not something we simply use to guide our selection of topics. Rather, our very explanatory concepts are shot through with normativity—the normativity of rival rationalities,

⁴⁴ Gerring and Yesnowitz, “A Normative Turn in Political Science?” 120.

⁴⁵ Gerring and Yesnowitz, “A Normative Turn in Political Science?” 114, 130. This line of argument is echoed in Gerring’s most recent book, *Social Science: A Unified Framework* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 69-73.

⁴⁶ King, Keohane, Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 14-19.

⁴⁷ Gerring goes so far as to warn his fellow political scientists that “nothing could be more damaging to [their] discipline than an inability, or unwillingness, to distinguish between normative and empirical arguments.” Gerring and Yesnowitz, “A Normative Turn in Political Science?” 121.

and rational versus irrational actions. Thus, from MacIntyre's perspective, Gerring's "normative turn" misses the key point by failing to see how the very concepts and rationality employed by political scientists are themselves normative.

A similar point of contrast arises if we look to the hugely influential and historically nuanced work of Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School he helped inspire. Skinner's approach echoes the value-neutrality of Gerring and qualitative political science in a number of important ways. First, Skinner shares with Gerring the basic Weberian view that while political values should guide a scholar's choice of subject matter, they should in no way be integral to the treatment of that subject matter. Skinner expresses this point forcefully: "It has always been a principle of mine ... to adopt something of that kind of vision of objectivity of Weber's ... [such that] the *choice* of the topics that I talk about cannot fail to reflect my values, but I hope it doesn't enter the handling of the topic."⁴⁸

Also like Gerring, Skinner presents his Weberian approach to objectivity as the antidote to irrelevance, or what Skinner calls the problem of the "purely antiquarian" in the study of history.⁴⁹ Indeed, very similar to Gerring, Skinner argues that allowing one's values to select a relevant field of study is necessary for justifying research to non-experts, while the value-neutral treatment of the subject remains the source of scholarly authority.⁵⁰ In other words, historians should become more conscious of engaging values in order to guide their choice of topic, but such evaluations should not infiltrate or substantively shape the inquiry.

Of course, MacIntyre's alternative conception of social theory gives us reasons to doubt both Skinner's and Gerring's avowal of this kind of value-neutrality. Indeed, some of Skinner's own statements on his approach to history suggest that this Weberian line cannot be the full story. In this regard, perhaps Skinner's own position is best recast into more consistently MacIntyrean terms. Take, for example, a number of late interviews in which Skinner has affirmed that his own form of historical explanation arose in part as a type of anti-Marxism. So he recently confessed:

From the perspective ... of an intellectual historian, the economic determinism associated with Marxism always seemed to me a hostile as well as a misguided argument ... much of my early philosophical work was directed against the accompanying assumption that intellectual life is simply 'super structural.'⁵¹

⁴⁸ Skinner, "Quentin Skinner in Context," interview by Teresa Bejan, *The Art of Theory: A Political Philosophy Quarterly*, www.artoftheory.com/quentin-skinner-in-context/ (accessed May 4, 2012). Skinner has echoed this sentiment in other recent interviews, confessing that: "moral and political motivations have always affected my choice of subjects for research ... [but] I very much hope that they have not affected the way in which I then approach and treat those subjects." Skinner, "Quentin Skinner on Encountering the Past," by Petri Koikkalainen and Sami Syrjämäki, *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 6: 34-63, 54.

⁴⁹ Skinner has spoken at length about this as the dilemma of "either becoming too purely instrumental or too purely antiquarian." Faced with this dilemma, he argues that the historian's "choice of what to study should be motivated by our sense of what matters here and now. We should select the subjects we study in light of their having some kind of general social significance. But having selected them, we should be as rigorous in our scholarship as we can possibly manage to be." Skinner, "Intellectual History, Liberty and Republicanism: An Interview with Quentin Skinner" by Javier Fernández Sebastián, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 3 (2007): 118-119.

⁵⁰ Skinner, "Intellectual History, Liberty and Republicanism," 118-119.

⁵¹ Skinner, "Intellectual History, Liberty and Republicanism," 104.

What surfaces in this kind of self-reflection is a sort of repressed or unacknowledged evaluative component to Skinner's social explanation—one which I believe MacIntyre's theory helps us better understand. It is a telling fact that the emergence of a new form of social and historical explanation should be so closely tied, in the mind of one of its primary advocates, to political controversy.

The source of this evaluative dimension in Skinner's case is much like that we saw in Winch. For the problem here is that it is impossible to disentangle Skinner's methodological commitments from the narrowing of the possible political vocabularies that we might rationally hold. This is once again because any effort to account for structural Marxism's meanings through the theoretical framework of the Cambridge School (i.e. speech acts, methodological individualism, and linguistic contexts) necessarily recodes and challenges the self-understandings of those described. That is, Cambridge School accounts of the meaning and origin of structural Marxism are incompatible with the account that structural Marxists would themselves give. Similar points might be made in terms of the compatibility of Skinner's contextualism with a great number of competing rationalities that guide human agency—possibly including the very Hobbesian materialism to which Skinner has contributed so much insight.

Of course, MacIntyre's position does not exclude the possibility that there may very well be overlapping agreement between two particular rival frameworks. Nor does it mean that politics is over-determined by this relationship (the Marxism of E. P. Thompson, for example, might be made fully compatible with Skinner's form of social explanation). Rather, the point is that the old, Weberian and empiricist trope, used to shore up scholarly authority through an appeal to value-neutrality, is misplaced. The social sciences, as Aristotle believed, inextricably involve normative elements. In short, contra Skinner's and Gerring's remarks, it is *not* possible to carry out social research that does not reflect at least some features of one's own politics. The moral and social sciences are not nearly so far apart as many today assume.

So far I have briefly identified descriptivist sympathies in the work of Anglophone social theorists. But perhaps more surprising is that descriptivist assumptions also at times color the work of poststructuralists who follow Foucault. This is surprising because of all the views I am contrasting with MacIntyre, Foucault seems the most sensitive to the pervasiveness of normativity within social theory. That is, Foucault more than Skinner and qualitative political science, is attuned to the implicit critical, normative dimensions of forms of knowledge. Indeed, his many inquiries into the intersection of knowledge and power have often illuminated how normativity and science are bound together.

However, these insights withstanding, a number of important commentators also observed a tendency in Foucault to slide into the mode of writing as if from a completely descriptive, even ideological neutral vantage point.⁵² For example, this tendency is evident in Foucault's entire methodological commitment to "archaeological description" as a way of unearthing the "systematic description of a discourse-object" as well as his bracketing of

⁵² Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions," *Praxis International* 1 (1981): 272-287; Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 182.

questions of normativity and ideology.⁵³ But it is also present in later, genealogical works like *Discipline and Punish*, not only insofar as they continue to avail themselves of an archaeological method, but also in their employment of impersonal metaphors from the physical sciences in order to describe social reality (e.g. “physics,” “anatomy”).⁵⁴ Here there seems to be an implicit commitment to a purely descriptive social science—one which catalogues dispassionately the anatomy of different discourses and systems of power.

There are a number of heated and complex questions involved in the ultimate sources of normativity in Foucault’s thought. For my limited purposes, however, the key point is that MacIntyre’s critical hermeneutics offers a way poststructuralists might remake their concepts in order to avoid drifting toward the descriptivism of Foucault’s early archaeologies. One way this might be achieved is if poststructuralists instead adopted MacIntyre’s insights about the way that our own beliefs and thoughts participate in a series of iterations and debates that make up a particular tradition. Poststructuralists might take a more radically hermeneutic turn by trading their concepts of episteme and discourse for concepts like tradition, ideology critique, and rival narratives. The concept of tradition in particular might help poststructuralists account more fully for the sources of their own normativity, though this latter point opens on questions far beyond the scope of this chapter.

* * *

The purpose of this chapter has been to impress upon readers how MacIntyre’s advancement of hermeneutics over first generation, Anglo theorists like Winch might inspire a genuinely critical social theory. Such a theory would not view the moral, political, and evaluative task as ever fully separable from the descriptive work of social science. This is because, as I hope to have shown, social inquiry must reckon with the evaluation inherent in grappling with rational versus irrational actions, as well as rival forms of rationality. We have also seen how the explanatory languages employed by social scientists implicitly narrow the range of what counts as rational political and moral vocabularies. In other words, the model of rationality guiding the social inquirer is implicitly and inescapably evaluative of the rationalities guiding agent activity.

This brings us to a basic distinction between the natural and social sciences. For only in the social sciences are the subjects of study themselves potentially guided by the very social theories that are deployed in order to study them. This self-reflective dimension of human agency makes it so that the adoption of a particular rationality is never fully separable from moral and political questions about what counts or does not count as a defensible form of human agency.

If the foregoing analysis is correct, social scientists should take a turn towards interpretive approaches in such a way that remains sensitive to the interplay between empirical explanation and normative judgment. Indeed, MacIntyre’s arguments imply that there is a two-way street between explanatory frameworks and normative assessments. For example, as we saw

⁵³ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Translated A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 140; Foucault, “Truth and Power,” *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 118.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 215.

above, those drawn morally to the politics of structural Marxism or social Darwinism, are unlikely to accept explanations shaped by a more interpretive conception of human agency. Likewise, those committed to interpretive explanations of human agency are unlikely to endorse the politics of structural Marxism or social Darwinism in unaltered form. All this is to say that in the social sciences there is a much deeper interrelation between the ethically normative and the empirically explanatory than is often recognized.

Indeed, MacIntyre holds that both interpretive and positivist approaches to social science are suggestive of particular political positions. Thus, MacIntyre turns the tables on empiricist political science. For where the latter often presents itself as a strictly scientific endeavor, MacIntyre instead recasts it as linked to a particular politics. Specifically, MacIntyre believes that the doctrine of value neutrality is asserted in part to justify the authority of experts over and against the supposedly unscientific value-commitments and opinions of ordinary citizens.⁵⁵ So while positivists claim a scientifically privileged, value-neutral standpoint, MacIntyre instead attempts to vindicate the ordinary citizen's view of the study of politics as inescapably ethically colored. In this way, MacIntyre associates an interpretive social science with a humanistic, anti-elitist, and anti-technocratic politics.⁵⁶

However, to what extent interpretivism is in fact suggestive of a particular ethical and political position takes us beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, it suffices to conclude that the empirical and normative are not separate in the social sciences as is commonly believed. I have tried to argue that one of MacIntyre's great, if also forgotten, accomplishments is to have shown us this. We now shift our focus to the importantly different, but also supporting findings of the final philosopher treated in this dissertation—Charles Taylor.

⁵⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chs. 7-8; "Social Science Methodology as the Ideology of Bureaucratic Authority," in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 53-68.

⁵⁶ As we saw in the prior chapter, this politics is precisely what MacIntyre has attempted to develop with his revival of the Aristotelian tradition.

Chapter 5: Charles Taylor's Critique of Social Science

In the present chapter I begin my examination of how Charles Taylor succeeded where Strauss did not. That is, he both seriously called into question positivist frameworks of explanation in the social sciences, and he articulated the theoretical basis for a viable alternative (one that was narrative, teleological, historical, and humanistic). But as with Strauss and MacIntyre, understanding how and why this new theoretical basis for social science emerged requires situating his arguments. I will do so by relating Taylor to the dual midcentury contexts of Anglo-analytic philosophers' support for the fact-value dichotomy, as well as to the major forms of research design in political science at that time. Ultimately, I will argue that Taylor's rebuttal of the fact-value dichotomy was carried out by seeing if some of its central doctrines could in fact be consistently or plausibly carried out by working political scientists.

For Taylor, a long and productive career in philosophy was set in motion by disappointment. After studying history at McGill, Taylor was granted admission to Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship. There he confronted the fact-value dichotomy that dominated Anglophone philosophy and social science in the 1950s and 60s. Taylor later described the initial disappointment vividly:

I guess I just got angry ... I came to Balliol, Oxford to do [philosophy, politics, and economics] and I thought it was going to be mainly politics. But ... unluckily for me there were two very tired dons who were fed up with the subject and who gave lectures sub-sub-sub-Hume in a bored tone of voice. I thought: this can't be what it's all about, so I began to move around and get into other reading ... It was kind of reactive.¹

One of the places Taylor wandered was into the New Left, a movement formed out of intellectuals from the labor movement, former communists, and anarchists, and led by the likes of E.P. Thompson and the young Alasdair MacIntyre. The New Left hoped to articulate a more humanistic politics in the face of what it saw as the increasingly mechanistic ways of organizing and explaining modern life.² Specifically, the New Left saw itself as opposing two dehumanizing trends that predominated at that time: on the one side, was the technocratic, social engineering of Soviet Communism with its mechanistic and Stalinist interpretation of Marx; on the other, was the technocratic, social engineering tendency of the free markets and bureaucracies of the liberal democracies.

Taylor's interest in an expressive, anti-technocratic humanism extended as far back as his days as a boarding school student at Selwyn House in Quebec where he was introduced to Romantic poetry.³ His up-bringing as a Roman Catholic was no doubt of key influence here as well. But a more philosophically developed humanism first came to be expressed in a number of early pieces he published in journals like *The New Left Review* (originally titled *Universities and*

¹ Charles Taylor, "Charles Taylor Interviewed," by Ben Rogers, *Prospect Magazine*, February 29, 2008, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2008/02/charlestaylorinterviewed/> (accessed March 5, 2010).

² See, for example: E. P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution," *New Left Review* 9 (May-June, 1961): 24-33; and Alasdair MacIntyre, "Notes from the Moral Wilderness," reprinted in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998) 31-49.

³ Charles Taylor, "The Malaise of Modernity (Part 1)" by David Cayley, *Ideas*, CBC Radio, April 11, 2011, <http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/episodes/2011/04/11/the-malaise-of-modernity-part-1---5/> (accessed September 16, 2011).

Left Review, which Taylor helped found).⁴ It was also during this time that Taylor came upon the life-changing influence of phenomenology via Merleau-Ponty, an influence I will return to in the next chapter.

Taylor's initial orientation was therefore informed by the New Left's anti-positivistic and anti-technocratic backlash, along with a goal of re-humanizing both modern political life as well as academic disciplines like philosophy, political science, and economics. At Oxford—and indeed in the Anglophone world more widely—one of the primary sources of support for positivism was analytic philosophy's avowal of Hume's is-ought distinction. Meanwhile, in the human sciences, a major source of positivist doctrine at that time was the behaviorist movement centered in psychology departments. (Indeed, psychological behaviorism was the subject of Taylor's scathing critique in his 1964 dissertation, *The Explanation of Behavior*.)

What much of analytic philosophy and psychological behaviorism shared with positivism, according to Taylor, was a basic epistemological outlook that was essentially subtractive or reductive of specifically human features of the world. As Taylor put it, this epistemology was distinguished by a tendency to "avoid recognizing some important and obtrusive aspect of human life."⁵ This was typically done because it was believed that in order to remake the humanities in the image of the natural sciences, researchers in various disciplines needed to first reduce anthropocentric properties to purportedly brute and objective data that was free of subjective content. In other words, the distinctively human features of reality (values, meanings, morals, etc.) needed to be explained in terms of supposedly more fundamental and objective features.

This general epistemological orientation informed a wide and disparate set of research agendas across the later twentieth century—everything from cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, behavioral political science, and mainstream economics. But although Taylor's work has always been characterized by various open fronts and engagements with disciplines across the human sciences, my focus will be limited to how during the 1960s and 70s he criticized the attempts to remake political science in this epistemological image.

Specifically, Taylor rejected two ways in which social scientists and philosophers attempted to remake political science on epistemological assumptions inspired by the natural sciences. The first was the aim at value-neutrality in political science explanations. This corresponded to the traditional Humean doctrine of a dichotomy between facts and values. The second was the attempt to eliminate interpretation from political science by positing brute facts. This corresponded to the analytic doctrine of a verification principle of meaning. I believe Taylor's critique of political science should be considered as a rebuttal to these philosophical doctrines. I then end the chapter by showing why Taylor maintained that positivism was tied to a particular political ideology. This final point, countered the widely held belief among analytic philosophers that linguistic analysis could simply play the role of a value-neutral umpire between ideologies, moralities, religions, and political theories.

I. Is Value-Neutrality in Political Science Possible?

⁴ For the early publishing years of Taylor's career see the most comprehensive bibliography of his work currently available: "Charles Taylor Bibliography," by Ruth Abbey, Notre Dame University, <http://nd.edu/~rabbey1/> (accessed September 16, 2011).

⁵ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 2.

Traditional forms of empiricism often assume that values must be subtracted as much as possible from truly scientific explanations of the world. This is because values are viewed primarily as subjective additives onto a world of brute, value-free reality. Although evaluation may to some degree be inescapable for human beings, the less of it enters into our explanations the more scientific they become. This, roughly speaking, is the philosophical intuition that often informs the pursuit of value-neutrality.

Probably the strongest theoretical justifications of value-neutrality in the social sciences at midcentury were provided by various analytic philosophers who had come to accept the Humean doctrine. For example, while still a graduate student at Oxford in the 1950s, Taylor had various exchanges with A. J. Ayer, then the leading logical positivist in the English speaking world.⁶ Although logical positivism was already on the wane at this time, the traditional fact-value dichotomy was still widely accepted by English speaking philosophers. Sketching Ayer's version of the fact-value dichotomy will give us one example (albeit an extreme one), that will then help us understand Taylor's strategy for rejecting this doctrine, both in its logical positivist form as well as part of the wider consensus within analytic philosophy.

In English speaking philosophy, the fact-value dichotomy has a lineage extending at least as far back as Hume, and the doctrine remains alive even today. By contrast, Ayer's defense of this doctrine (which he essentially imported from the Vienna Circle) was of a much more limited lifespan, reaching its prime in the years after World War II. In *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer argued that all meaningful propositions must be one of two types. Either they could be analytic; that is, the *a priori* tautologies that are true by definition (which he associated with logic, mathematics, and philosophy). Or they could be synthetic; that is the *a posteriori* empirical and verifiable hypotheses associated with the natural sciences. According to Ayer, if a proposition could neither be verified by science nor was valid *a priori* by definition, then it was "metaphysical" and thus "neither true nor false but literally senseless."⁷ As part of his philosophy Ayer argued that this analytic-synthetic distinction entailed a dichotomy between facts and values. Facts were the meaningful propositions about the world that were verified by science. Values neither had objective observable status nor did they hold *a priori* by tautology. They were not part of the objective furniture of the world, nor were they true by definition. Rather they were simply subjectively projected emotions or attitudes—in Ayer's language they were "emotive."

In effect, Ayer rearticulated the Vienna Circle's defense of the traditional fact-value divide. This in turn was part of an attempt to reassert the longstanding claim of the empiricist tradition of Hume that from factual premises no evaluative conclusion could be deduced. Facts, on this view, were devoid of an evaluative dimension and argumentative deduction from factual premises was tautologous and therefore could add nothing to the conclusion that was not part of the premises. Values were ruled out from reasoned argument by a principle of verification combined with a truth of logic (i.e., in a deductive argument no element can appear in the conclusion that was not in the premise). Thus analytic philosophy more widely also affirmed the Humean notion that *no "ought" can be derived from an "is."*

⁶ Although Ayer was a full professor and Taylor still a graduate student, they published one particularly vigorous disagreement over linguistic analysis and phenomenology. Charles Taylor and A. J. Ayer, "Phenomenology and Linguistic Analysis," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 33 (1959): 93-124.

⁷ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1946) 31.

One of Taylor's first attempts to grapple with the fact-value doctrine was published while he was still a student at Oxford, in a short article from 1957 entitled "Can Political Philosophy Be Neutral?" Here Taylor observed that analytic philosophy's promotion of value-neutrality in the social sciences was in fact strongly evaluative of various rival frameworks of social explanation (for example, Marxist or Christian) while at the same time exhibiting a tight fit with political liberalism. As we shall see below, this early observation anticipates Taylor's much later argument that value-neutrality is often part of a complex of theories that includes social atomism and a certain brand of political liberalism. But in his 1957 piece Taylor's purpose was simply to object to analytic philosophy's self-characterization as neutral: "The moral and political philosophy of linguistic analysis is not neutral ... it is not the umpire between different views checking the logical fouls but one of their ideological competitors."⁸

Yet, philosophically speaking, these early remarks did not amount to much. At most they suggested that linguistic arguments evoked in defense of the fact-value dichotomy might not be ideologically neutral. But Taylor had done nothing to show that value neutrality in the social sciences was itself misguided or somehow mistaken. This task had to wait a decade until his 1967 article, "Neutrality in Political Science."

We have seen that the traditional defense of the fact-value dichotomy accepted by analytic philosophy rested on the assumption that beginning from factual premises we can never arrive at evaluative conclusions. Framing the problem in such a way might lead us to assume (as I did for argumentative purposes in the first chapter on Strauss) that the main way to overcome the fact-value dichotomy would be showing how one could arrive at an evaluative conclusion from a factual premise. Indeed, something like this strategy was famously taken up by John Searle (a contemporary of Taylor's at Oxford and fellow Rhodes Scholar) in his critique of the fact-value dichotomy in the 1964 essay "How to Derive 'Ought' from 'Is.'"

Yet Taylor's approach to rebutting the fact-value dichotomy was importantly different from Searle's. This is because Taylor did not start from the logical doctrine that no statement of fact entails a judgment of value. Instead, his essay "Neutrality in Political Science" did two things to shift the debate over value-neutrality, which are clarified when related to Taylor's historical context. First, Taylor rejected the typical analytic framing of the problem in terms of whether or not values could be deduced from atomistic statements or propositions of fact. Taylor believed this way of discussing value-neutrality was misleading as it skewed the case in favor of the traditional Humean position from the beginning. Second, Taylor rejected the typical starting point of the debate (as a supposed truth of logic) moving instead into the arena of actual research programs in social science. That is, he looked to what working political scientists were actually doing in their attempts to build value-neutral frameworks. Then he posed the question of whether or not value-neutrality could be consistently carried out in this domain. What he discovered was that value-neutrality in the social sciences was not foremost a question of individual facts in relations of logical equivalence with one another, but rather of competing frameworks of explanation. Thus, for Taylor, values do not derive deductively from atomistic statements of fact. Instead, they inextricably imbue larger explanatory webs.

This point will become clearer if we look at Taylor's engagement with the political science of that time. Various approaches to political science in the 1950s and 60s hoped to meet the standard of value-neutrality—Taylor identified some of the major approaches in the discipline at that time, including Harold Laswell's behavioralism, S. M. Lipset's political

⁸ Taylor, "Can political philosophy be neutral?" *Universities and Left Review*, 1, no. 1 (1957): 70.

sociology, and the functional theories of Gabriel Almond, David Easton, and Karl Deutsch. Behaviorists in particular often appealed to analytic philosophy and empiricist theory extending back to Hume as a source of authority for the idea that social science ought to be value-free.

What Taylor saw was that the traditional, Humean conception of value-neutrality was plausible only if one remained at facts so trivial that they did not explain anything. Indeed, he conceded that many facts of social life could be trivially described in such a way that made them compatible with widely varying explanatory frameworks. For example, the fact that Boulder County, Colorado has traditionally been a stronghold of Democratic politics is something that both Thatcherites and Trotskyites could presumably affirm. In this sense, the trivially descriptive could be value-neutral. However, the problem emerged when political scientists tried (as indeed they must) not simply to collect a random assortment of facts but to order them according to some explanatory theory. In other words, the answer to the question “how did Boulder County become a Democratic stronghold?” would not elicit value neutral responses.

How so? Taylor’s main thesis here was that all theoretical frameworks that attempt to explain human action are ineradicably normative because they must “contain some, even implicit, conception of human needs, wants, and purposes” and therefore support a particular view of what is good for human beings.⁹ Thus, although Taylor conceded that many of the theoretical frameworks of modern political science did not outright establish the validity of a set of values, they nevertheless implicitly promoted them such that “establishing a given framework restricts the range of value positions which can be defensibly adopted” and shifted “the onus of argument” in favor of certain values.¹⁰ This built-in support towards certain values and outcomes (which is part of all frameworks of political explanation) Taylor dubbed their *value-slope*. The language of a “slope” is important because it metaphorically evokes the way a given framework pushes evaluative judgments in a certain direction even while it does not establish those values outright.

This thesis will perhaps be clearer if we look at examples from Taylor’s own critique of the political science at the time he wrote. Take first Almond’s edited work *The Politics of the Developing Areas*. In an introductory piece to this volume, Almond defends the view that all viable political societies must fulfill among other functions what he calls “interest articulation.” Interest articulation is defined by Almond as the processing of individual demands and wants by the political system. The inability to effectively articulate these individual demands and interests, according to Almond, results in degrees of failure in terms of the stability and survival of political society. Almond then identifies four types of interest-articulating structures and judges one (“associational interest groups”) as more effective in processing and aggregating the raw demands of individuals.

Of this latter set of classifications Taylor rightly observes that “in characterizing different institutions by the way they articulate or aggregate interests, Almond is also evaluating them.”¹¹ But there is also a more basic sense in which Almond’s framework of explanation is shot through with evaluation. Almond’s model assumes a view of human needs. Namely, that individuals in political society *need* to articulate their interests and demands and that this need takes the form of

⁹ Taylor “Neutrality in Political Science,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 89-90.

¹⁰ Taylor, “Neutrality in Political Science,” 90.

¹¹ Taylor, “Neutrality in Political Science,” 77.

a set of inputs that feed into the political system from the bottom up. In Almond's language, the more functional a society is, the greater its ability to "attain a maximum flow of inputs of raw claims."¹² The political system, in this view, *needs* in some way to meet the mass demand of "raw claims" if it is not to fall into varying states of dysfunction.

Now, it is true that Almond's framework does not force by logical clamps or deductive argument that we must wish for the continuance of political society or its greater freedom from dysfunction. But then those who would seriously go all the way in rejecting the benefits and order of political society in favor of political dysfunction are few. Moreover, once we accept Almond's description there is an evaluative press or slope towards favoring certain outcomes—namely, political societies that efficiently amass and articulate the demands and interests of individuals. Given Almond's explanation, the model clearly favors pluralistic political societies in which various groups' interests are articulated from the bottom up.

But such a view of human needs is incompatible with and favors different evaluative outcomes than others. It is incompatible, for instance, with the elitist/aristocratic view that effective political society requires not efficient aggregation of the mass of individuals, but rather the top-down creativity and insight of a few. Such an elitist framework assumes a radically different view of human needs and purposes in which political society depends on the achievements of a few elite individuals who actualize some higher value on behalf of the community (philosophic, religious, military, or whatever) and thus furnish it with a coherent social identity that it is otherwise unable to provide itself. The flourishing of political societies on this model rests not on the efficient aggregation of individuals' various interests from the bottom up, but instead on consolidating and unifying achievements from the top-down. Something like this view has informed various aristocratic cultures (e.g. Lycurgus and Sparta) and can arguably be ascribed to Nietzsche as well as perhaps Socrates in Plato's *Republic*. Today there are certain versions of theocracy that have a similar top-down, as opposed to bottom-up, view of the articulation of interest. What I am calling "elitist" views also involve an evaluative push towards favoring social conditions that contribute to the formation of philosophers, prophets, military generals, theologians, clerics, or whatever. In Taylor's language, the explanatory framework comes with a built-in value slope. This is because it gives us a different account of what is normally needed for political orders to become stable and flourish.

Of course, Almond tries to account for such aristocratic models of order, but he does so in a way that assumes they are simply primitive forms of the differentiated functions of interest articulation, rule-making, and aggregation found in modern, pluralistic societies. So he writes that in authoritarian and primitive societies "what appears to be a single act" by a "headman" is in fact the ability by an individual to "read cues in his people" and "aggregate different cues and complaints."¹³ In other words, elites are simply a primitive, imperfect, and inefficient mechanism of mass aggregation and articulation. Almond's view is once again that interests and "raw claims" originate from the bottom-up, which makes it incompatible with the radical top-down model sketched above.

The point of this discussion is not which (if either) of the accounts is more plausible or desirable. The point is that the explanatory framework is evaluative insofar as it pushes towards a norm of what is needful or necessary within human political life. And it does this by assuming a specific view of human needs, desires, purposes, and wants. Perhaps it is now clearer why

¹² Gabriel Almond, *The Politics of the Developing Areas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960) 39.

¹³ Almond, *The Politics of the Developing Areas*, 39.

Taylor's metaphorical language of "slope" is particularly evocative as it points to the way explanatory frameworks in the social sciences push in certain directions without utterly determining our adherence to those values. Frameworks of explanation (because they assume a view of human needs, wants, and purposes) strongly recommend particular values without utterly binding us to them. This is an important subtlety. For the distinction between the *suggestiveness* of frameworks versus their *determinateness* is perhaps much at the root of the spread of the idea of a fact-value dichotomy in the social sciences. As Taylor notes, one can always go against the evaluative grain of a given framework with what he calls an *overriding* value. So we could imagine a situation in which one of Almond's interlocutors accepted the account of politics as stabilized by interest aggregation and articulation, but nevertheless maintained that another value should be favored over and above this stability and efficiency. This might be true in the case of a diehard aesthete who believed a stable political society was bad for artistic creativity. Great art, such an aesthete might maintain, only comes out of bad politics. Such an individual might thus accept Almond's framework while nevertheless making a case for an overriding value that goes against the evaluative grain or slope of the framework.

Such an "overriding" valuation might still become incompatible with Almond's framework "if a new need were introduced which was important enough motivationally to dictate quite different behavior" (think Nietzsche's view of artists as the necessary lawgivers and founders of flourishing political societies). Then it would become what Taylor refers to not as an "overriding" but an "undermining" value because it is attached to an incompatible explanation of human needs. But the notion of an overriding evaluation also allows for the possibility of retaining the explanatory framework while simply over-ruling its value slope.¹⁴ The distinction between "undermining" and "overriding" valuations helps show how explanatory frameworks in the social sciences, while inextricably value-laden, do not utterly determine a value position.

Yet even when arguing for an overriding value, Taylor notes, an individual must implicitly make the case against the evaluative grain or slope of the framework. Political frameworks of explanation, in Taylor's view, thus create a push toward certain value outcomes without absolutely fixing or determining them. They shape the argumentative onus of those who take them up. To use more of Taylor's colorful language, a given framework *secretes* values—that is, it strongly suggests the valuation of certain outcomes. In short, in the case of political explanations, the "connection between factual base and valuation is built in" without being utterly determinate.¹⁵

A second example helps show how Taylor's critique might also apply in the case of explanatory theories that are not functionalist like Almond's, but purportedly more descriptive. This was the case with Lasswell's behavioral classifications of societies on spectrums between libertarian versus authoritarian, juridical versus tyrannical, and impartial versus partial. This classification, Taylor observes, is such that it builds in support for liberal democracies. This is in part because to opt for the authoritarian/tyrannical end of Lasswell's spectrums would require an utterly dysfunctional (one might even say implausible) account of human desires and needs. For instance, Lasswell defines libertarian politics as those in which one is able to judge for oneself and exercise reason, while authoritarian politics are defined by coercion and manipulation of citizens. What presents itself as mere description actually loads our preferences. As Taylor puts it, Lasswell's framework is such that "we cannot accept [his] descriptions and fail to agree that

¹⁴ Taylor, "Neutrality in Political Science," 75.

¹⁵ Taylor, "Neutrality in Political Science," 75-76.

democracy is a better form of government than its opposite.”¹⁶ So, what presents itself as mere description, in fact creates a strong slope in favor democratic politics.

This can be seen in the hypothetical case of someone who accepts Lasswell’s classifications and yet nevertheless opts to support authoritarian regimes. In such a case, we would expect the person in question to furnish some overriding value judgment. So we might expect this person to say: “Yes, authoritarian regimes are coercive and manipulative, but human beings are happier when decisions are made for them and so they prefer coercion and manipulation to freedom.” Although unpalatable, this hypothetical view helps highlight the strong evaluative slope pervading Lasswell’s entire descriptive enterprise. We would expect someone who accepted Lasswell’s framework, and yet went against its clear support for democratic regimes, to furnish some special explanation.

Likewise, it is no less difficult to imagine an objection in which Lasswell’s entire descriptive language is called into question. For example, presumably very few advocates of authoritarian regimes would agree to the description of them as mindlessly coercive and manipulative. They might instead argue that humans more fully realize their capacities by participating in a stratified and hierarchical collective effort, in which different classes complement one another. Such an anti-democrat might also argue (as some leaders in contemporary China do) that democratic freedoms fragment social life by valuing individualism over collective goods and so endanger the political community by being inherently unstable. The point being that far from value-neutral, Lasswell’s framework is “value-determinate” unless one either breaks from it or brings up “overriding” reasons to counteract its value-slope.¹⁷

One would need to go on applying Taylor’s notion of value-slopes inherent to explanatory frameworks throughout the world of social theories to see if it held. In this regard, philosophical criticism is interminable and must take up each new case. However, enough has been said to show why Taylor believes the frameworks for explaining political life are potentially impossible to extract from evaluative judgments and assessments.

According to Taylor, the models of political science—be they behavioralist, institutionalist, or rational choice—are to some degree participating in normative theorizing. This is because they are presenting us with what Taylor will later call “philosophical anthropologies”—that is, necessarily they make assumptions about what are normal human motives, needs, desires, and purposes. In doing so, they present us not simply with descriptive but also moral visions of human life and with what ought to be considered a normal and central set of desires within human experience. This, according to Taylor, is an inescapable feature of inquiry into the human sciences. Our assumptions about human nature are the overlapping point between empirical social science research, and normative, moral, and political theorizing.

But this raises the question: what is the best account of our actual motives, purposes, needs, and wants? In Taylor’s language: What is the correct philosophical anthropology? As we have seen, this is at once an empirical and normative question. So it seems that for Taylor moral and political theory also are necessarily engaged in social science. This is because their own arguments cannot be entirely indifferent to the question of anthropology—of what we are. Indeed, much of their argumentative force will be based upon how plausible the account of human needs, motives, and desires is.

¹⁶ Taylor, “Neutrality in Political Science,” 80.

¹⁷ Taylor, “Neutrality in Political Science,” 79.

This last point touches on an ongoing concern of this dissertation—namely to show how a form of political theory that is an alternative to Rawlsianism and emotivism arose out of philosophy of social science. I will return to the subject at greater length below. But we can already see that, for Taylor, constructing social scientific as well as moral and normative theories of political life are not wholly separate enterprises. A political theory of autonomous rational justification (like that of certain strains of neo-Kantianism) misses the way that questions of “is” and “ought” are inseparable in the human sciences.

To summarize this section, we have seen that Taylor rejected the traditional, Humean way of framing the debate over the fact-value dichotomy. He did this by instead looking to how working political scientists, who were trying to achieve the standard of value-neutrality, actually built their explanations. Doing so helped Taylor realize that evaluation occurred on a holistic level. This meant that arguing the case for a fact-value distinction on the basis of atomistic facts tied into relationships of logical equivalence via deduction was misguided. As Taylor put it, dividing our language into “descriptive” versus “evaluative” meaning is “seriously misleading” for it implies that the meaning of our concepts “can be ‘unpacked’ in statements of logical equivalence.”¹⁸ Moreover, when this epistemological assumption is made *a priori* (as a truth of analytic logic) the way that values pervade frameworks becomes largely invisible. The traditional Humean formulation of the issue therefore has something of a bewitching effect. Defenders of the fact-value dichotomy fail to see how explanation in the social sciences is actually carried forth.

II. Is a Political Science of Brute Data Possible?

But values are not the only human element that Taylor discovered are neglected by positivist approaches in the social sciences. Certain kinds of meaning also become invisible within such science, and with them disappears the understanding that politics is foremost an interpretive science. Four years after writing “Neutrality in Political Science,” Taylor returned to his critical engagement with the political science of his day in “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man” (1971). Once again it is important to situate Taylor’s work in the dual contexts of analytic philosophy and the political science of his time.

Leading the push for a study of politics of greater scientific standing was the behavioral movement that emerged at midcentury. Behavioral political scientists like David Easton, Robert Dahl, Gabriel Almond, Sidney Verba, and Karl Deutsch attempted to evade the messy work of interpreting the varying meanings that pervade human social and political life by building theories based on “brute data.”¹⁹ What made brute data specifically “brute” was that it was verifiable and therefore no longer subject to serious interpretive disagreement. Behavioralism was thus premised on an ideal of verification in which (at least some) basic facts “cannot be challenged by the offering of another interpretation.”²⁰

¹⁸ Taylor, “Neutrality in Political Science,” 88n.

¹⁹ Present day behavioralism has largely changed its position on whether facts are verifiable free of any theoretical standpoint. See: David Sanders, “Behavioralism,” in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, 2nd ed., eds. David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002) 45-63.

²⁰ Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 28.

An analytic counterpart to this ambition can again be illustrated through the work of Ayer, and specifically his verification principle of meaning. We have already seen that Ayer's theory of knowledge was based on a theory of language in which there were only two kinds of meaningful propositions: either, tautologies which included all analytic statements that were true by definition, or else statements of observable, verifiable fact. Although, the latter became subject to wide criticism as Ayer struggled to explain strongly verifiable and weakly verifiable propositions, what was clear was that Ayer believed meaning could in some sense be reduced to observable evidence. This, in short, was the verification principle of meaning, which in Ayer's version again had roots in the Vienna Circle.

Yet, as was the case with the fact-value dichotomy, Taylor's strategy was not to tackle the verification principle straight on. Instead, he looked to see if the reduction of all meanings to verifiable propositions was possible in the actual workings of political science.²¹ This reflects Taylor's belief that whether the epistemological arguments in philosophy had any force depended in large part on seeing if they could be carried out within actual research programs in the human sciences. A criterion by which we might assess the verification principle of meaning was if, say, political science could persuasively construct a research program on brute data alone (a similar move toward immanent critique had also driven Taylor's extensive and meticulous critiques of behaviorism, A.I., cognitive psychology, and other branches of the human sciences).

In behavioralism's case, the brute data upon which political science was built was so-called "political behavior." Examples of political behavior were observable actions, for instance, running for office, dropping out of high school, or owning a firearm. But it also included verbal behavior—actions like assenting or dissenting to items in a questionnaire or ballot, participating in a protest, or providing types of answers on an opinion survey. The importance of political behavior was that it allowed the construction of correlations between more or less interpretation-free items of brute data. So, for example, political scientists might try to prove voters who expressed negative opinions about the economy on a survey, were more likely to vote against incumbent candidates in the next election. Or else they might try to formulate a general relationship between negative campaigning and voter choices in elections. These in turn could be correlated with other social facts about individuals like their race, economic class, gender, or age. From the construction of stronger correlations there might eventually emerge promising candidates for general laws. The ultimate goal of behavioral science was thus a set of causal relationships between antecedent and consequent brute facts.

Integral to this approach to the study of politics was the reduction of questions of meaning and interpretation to questions of verification and correlation. This was in large part accomplished by assuming that all meanings could ultimately be attributed to specific individuals and could in this way be treated as discrete items subject to verification. The emphasis was thus shifted away from interpretation and toward the verification of certain behaviors—e.g., "person X holds opinion/attitude/belief Y." What mattered from the perspective of behavioralism was that two or more verifiable bits of data could be identified, correlated, and perhaps eventually formulated as a law-like generalization. The question of meaning and interpretation was secondary.

This attempt to limit the need for interpretation by translating meanings into brute data was largely motivated by a positivist understanding of science. Epistemology was in the lead

²¹ A related form of verificationism also came under attack in Taylor's early treatment of psychological behaviorism in *The Explanation of Behavior* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

again. The problem with interpretation from a positivist point of view was that it did not allow for a starting point that was epistemologically certain (brute data). As Taylor notes, interpretation is a form of understanding that is not based on observation but rather on “insight” and seeks degrees of coherence, of “making sense or nonsense” out of languages or meanings.²² This is why interpretation is the dominant mode of inquiry in disciplines concerned primarily with the study of meanings—for example, literature, the arts, and theology. Such disciplines are not without objectivity, but the criterion for a “correct” interpretation is that cloudier understanding becomes clearer and greater coherence is gained. Meanings replace one another and either make more or less sense out of a passage. This process of replacing meanings with other meanings is the well-known phenomenon of a “hermeneutical circle,” in which interpretive understanding advances but never hits some kind of rock bottom data or foundation beyond the circle of interpretation. There is no method of verification for settling the best interpretation of *Hamlet* or a passage from the Psalms.

Taylor’s view of behavioral political science is that it sought to break out of the confines of the hermeneutic circle by making the brute facts of political behavior its foundation. In this way, the epistemological quest for a science founded on brute data was the counterpart to the quest for value neutrality as both attempted to reduce subjective elements of political life to reified and atomistic objects. Once meanings and values were reduced to individual atoms, they could then be safely treated as one more brute-identifiable fact. Political reality might then be verified and constructed piece by piece, as the totality of interpretation- and value-free facts. Verification thus largely displaces interpretation and a truly scientific study of politics is born.

Yet there is a fatal flaw with such a project, according to Taylor. Meanings are not, in fact, reducible to verifiable building blocks. They therefore cannot simply be placed as isolatable units in causal and correlational relationships with other brute facts. Instead, according to Taylor, meanings pervade social and political reality in such a way that much of politics is comprised not of brute facts, but of webs of meanings in need of interpretation. Social and political reality are themselves expressive of meanings. It follows that politics is primarily an interpretive science and not one of the atomistic accumulation of brute data.

How are meanings constitutive of political and social reality? Taylor gives two related ways. The first is that human beings are what Taylor calls self-interpreting animals whose actions and behavior cannot be understood apart from the particular meanings that constitute them.²³ This is so, according to Taylor, because “the language by which we describe our goals, feelings, desires is also a definition of the meaning things have for us.”²⁴ Many human actions and behavior are expressive of meanings. Taylor illustrates this with the example of shame. With shame the actions and behavior that express it are not separable from the agent’s meanings. This is because the urge to hide oneself that often accompanies shame requires reference to situations that are only identifiable if we understand the meanings those situations have for the agents involved. There is no phenomenon of shame without the specific meanings (e.g. nakedness, a blemish, a mistake, a secret, a reminder) that an agent perceives. The point being that “what is interpreted [in the social sciences] is itself an interpretation; a self-interpretation which is embedded in a stream of action.”²⁵ Many of our actions and behavior are an expression of

²² Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 15-18.

²³ I will return to Taylor’s argument that human beings are self-interpreting at greater length in the next chapter.

²⁴ Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 23.

²⁵ Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 26.

specific meanings and in this sense as much in need of interpretation as a line from Henry James or Shakespeare.

This much could still perhaps be squared with a behavioral approach. Yet problems arise because the meanings that are expressed in the actions and behavior of individuals are not free-standing and self-evident. They rely for their sense on reference to meanings that extend beyond the individual and as such are not simply reducible to the verbal content of individual minds. That is, human actions and behavior are not simply a reflection of subjective, first person meanings, but also expressive of the meanings they have inherited in the institutions, practices, and modes of life of their communities. These other, non-first person forms of meaning are what Taylor calls “inter-subjective.” Inter-subjective meanings reach the heart of why Taylor does not believe that behavioralism’s reduction of meaning to individual minds is valid and therefore why a political science of brute, interpretation-free data is not possible.

Inter-subjective meanings, according to Taylor, are not “the property of one or some individuals.”²⁶ Rather, they are elements of our shared language which are embodied in our practices and form the background to all social action; they “are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves” and form “the social matrix in which individuals find themselves and act.”²⁷ In this way, Taylor believes that inter-subjective meanings precede us, embodied in the institutions, practices, and languages that we have inherited from the past. Far from being reducible to individuals they are not even reducible to the collective consensus of all living individuals. This is because they shape the background against which individuals and groups always find themselves and act. As Taylor put the same point much later: “we grow up [amidst such meanings and languages] and can transcend what we are given only by leaning on it.”²⁸ For this reason inter-subjective meanings cannot be single-handedly changed by individuals. And although they are continually modified by shared changes in practice, this occurs only by first drawing upon them as the starting point.

In this sense, the inter-subjective meanings of political and social life are like our inheritance as English speakers of the English language or as Spanish speakers of the Spanish language, and so on. All individuals within a society find themselves within the ambit of a language. No single one of us can unilaterally declare that a new language or grammar we have developed is the only one we recognize. And even major shifts and changes (such as that which occurred when Latin devolved into the various provincial Romance languages) only occur by drawing upon a shared inheritance. More to it, because Taylor believes that language is holistic, the meanings we use always exceed what anyone of us can articulate or express. As Taylor would later put this holistic feature of language:

It is not just that each of us is inducted into a language as something which preexists us. Nor is it just that any one of us, however erudite, never manages to master a whole language. Each one of us understands ourselves as using a language which we don’t fully command ... Our implicit speech intentions, if we were to spell them out, would have to be formulated in terms of a language which no single person fully possesses.²⁹

²⁶ Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 36.

²⁷ Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 36.

²⁸ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) 52.

²⁹ Taylor, “Charles Taylor Replies,” in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 238. Taylor goes on to note: “where

Language taken as a whole, in other words, is itself an inter-subjective phenomenon. Indeed, it might be considered a paradigmatic case of reality that exists relationally or is irreducibly social.

The role of such inter-subjective meanings in politics may perhaps become clearer if we look at a couple examples. One which Taylor examines (also a favorite of behavioralism) is the act of voting. The meaning of the act of voting, Taylor observes, is not self-standing and self-evident as an individual act. Intrinsic to our society's understanding of voting is the notion of some kind of distinction between autonomy and forced choice. Thus, if a voter were under fear, duress, or the serious influence of propaganda we would question the authenticity of his or her vote. This is because the practice of "marking and counting papers has to bear intentional descriptions which fall within a certain range before we can agree to call it voting."³⁰ Without the shared meanings and norms that are expressed in our institutions and practices of voting we do not recognize this action as occurring, even if the individual in question claims to have done so or was observed to have accomplished certain movements. Rather, implicit to the practice of voting "is a certain vision of the agent and his relation to others and to society."³¹

Such inter-subjective meanings that inform our "vision of the agent" are not necessarily explicitly in the mind of the individuals who enter the ballot box. The meaning is resident in the practice but in many cases is not available for quotation or extraction or simple attribution to a given psyche. Instead they form a background set of meanings which give the individual act its sense. In this regard, it may even be the case that many of the meanings which inform our practices are not fully or consciously known to us or available for conceptualization. As Taylor has noted, this inability to explicitly conceptualize one's own inter-subjective meanings was the fate of primitive societies and may still be our own condition, albeit to a lesser degree due to the rise of philosophy and social theory.³²

Thus the inter-subjective meanings that constitute voting go very deep into our society's shared conceptions of moral selves as autonomous, self-reflective, equal partners in political life. Similar points could be made concerning our practices of courtship, schooling, work, dress, diet, worship, transportation and countless other acts that comprise our social and political reality.³³ Human behavior does not make sense in brute isolation. It depends upon the interpretation of a far wider web of meanings that are embodied in our institutions, practices, and modes of life.

That inter-subjective meanings are embodied in such a way that they are not reducible to individual beliefs or even a consensus of beliefs will perhaps be clearer if we look at the example of money. It would be futile if a single person were to deny the inter-subjective meaning of value

does language reside anyway? ... There is an atomist answer to this question. A language resides in the minds (or brains) of the individuals who speak it." Taylor rejects this view and concludes that "Languages—and other repertoires with the same structure—have to be taken as irreducibly social realities" (238-239).

³⁰ Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 35. Also see Taylor's much later related discussion of voting in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 24-25.

³¹ Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 35.

³² Taylor, "The Philosophy of the Social Sciences," in *Political Theory and Political Education*, ed. Melvin Richter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 84.

³³ In later works, Taylor has explored the way that our interlocking, inter-subjective meanings form different webs that comprise the moral and perceptual backgrounds of entire civilizations and time periods. He has later called these "social imaginaries" and used their interpretation to make impressive contributions to philosophy of history, politics, aesthetics, and religion in *Sources of the Self*, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, and *A Secular Age*. A hermeneutic of the historical formation of modern inter-subjective meanings might even be thought of as the most original and distinctive feature of Taylor's approach to social research.

and exchange money holds within our society. The inter-subjective meaning of money would persist undisturbed in the practices of buying, selling, stealing, going bankrupt, etc. This is because the social reality of money is beyond the unilateral control of any one individual. Its meaning is instead embodied in our shared practices and institutions.

But this points to the way that inter-subjective meanings are not directly reducible to a consensus of beliefs either. As Taylor notes, the values and norms implicit in our inter-subjective meanings are not the “property of a single person, or many, or all ... because they are rooted in social practice.”³⁴ That is to say, these meanings exist as part of the social relations and social reality that precedes any one of us or even all of us in collective. Moreover, because language is comprised of holistic webs that exceed any one person’s full, conscious understanding the “language I speak can never be just *my* language, it is always largely *our* language.”³⁵

Thus, even if the vast majority of people decided tomorrow to stop acknowledging the meanings inherent to the monetary system, we would still be left with an enormous crisis (as well as perplexity) as to what practices should then facilitate the exchange and movement of goods. Our decision to radically disown the meanings of the monetary system would have real and perhaps uncontrollable repercussions on our lived social reality (for example, possibly shortages or outbreaks of violence). This is because major shifts in inter-subjective meaning require not simply a consensus, but also some transformation in the practices, institutions, and social relations that are expressive of those meanings. We cannot, in any simple way, abandon the inter-subjective meaning of money unless we have some widespread, embodied practice that either replaces it or renders it superfluous.

The existence of such inter-subjective meanings is of enormous importance to the study of politics. This is because inter-subjective meanings constitute and differentiate distinctive modes of social and political life. Indeed, as Taylor has gone on to argue in a series of much lauded philosophical histories, inter-subjective meanings inform everything from our notions of moral order, self, public sphere, the market, rights, legitimacy, religion, secularity—in short the whole of social reality. They are the very stuff of social and political life—pervading and informing the actions, events, and behaviors that occur within it—and individual acts cannot be fully understood unless related holistically to this context.

This brings us back to Taylor’s critique of behavioralism. We have already seen that behavioralism, because it follows the precepts of a particular epistemology, “cannot allow for inter-subjective meanings, that is, it cannot allow for the validity of descriptions of social reality in terms of meanings, hence not as brute data, which are not in quotation marks and attributed as opinion, attitude, etc. to individual(s).”³⁶ Meaning must not spill the banks of individual minds, let alone pervade the entire political and social space. The elimination of inter-subjective meanings is therefore integral to the success of the behaviorist project. Once meanings are safely corralled within individual psyches a political science of brute data verification appears plausible.

But the problem is that, if Taylor is right, and human behavior is expressive not only of individual self-interpretation but also of inter-subjective meanings, then the primary objects of study in political science are meanings and not brute data. Political and social realities are as expressive of meanings as any literary text. It is only that these meanings are embodied. What is

³⁴ Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 37.

³⁵ Taylor, “Language and Human Nature,” *Human Agency and Language*, 234.

³⁶ Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 31-32.

interpreted in the social sciences is itself an interpretation—a self-interpretation by a given people in a given time and place of what it means to be a citizen, a human being, a member of society. Politics is an interpretive science. And although we could verify and correlate subjective meanings with certain behavior, a social science which limits itself to this task is woefully incomplete. This is because in the effort to build a picture of political life datum by datum, it misses the historical shifts and changes in the formation of the inter-subjective background which shape that life. An entire dimension—perhaps the most important and definitive—goes unnoticed. In order to recuperate this inter-subjective background:

we have to drop the basic premise that social reality is made up of brute data alone ... We have to admit that inter-subjective social reality has to be partly defined in terms of meanings; that meanings as subjective are not just in causal interaction with a social reality made up of brute data, but that as inter-subjective they are constitutive of this reality.³⁷

In short, we have to return to interpretation as the main mode of understanding and explaining politics.

This leads us into a final element of Taylor's critique. The fact that for epistemological reasons behavioralism has eliminated inter-subjective meanings from its purview has led it into confusion over what are the brute givens of political life and what are historically contingent formations. Taylor thus notes that behavioralism tends to build its theories from the brute data of its own "North Atlantic" type society and from there generalize to a supposed universal science of politics as such.³⁸ Its explanations perennially reflect the individualism, rationalism, and contractual inter-subjective meanings of our own society. Indeed, a foremost example of how behavioralism is bound up in a particular set of inter-subjective meanings is its very presumption that individuals are radically autonomous in terms of the meanings they express. This view of individuals as radically autonomous in terms of meanings reflects a particular political philosophy extending back to John Locke that we will touch on in the next section. Yet behavioralism assumes the truth of the radically autonomous individual as a premise of its own methodology.

In this way, there is a continual ideological and cultural bias that dogs behavioral political science. For this reason, its models of political behavior begin to lose explanatory plausibility when used to explain pre-modern societies or societies far outside the North Atlantic cultural ambit. It is no accident that behavioralism has been found unpersuasive for the explanation of human behavior across the wider sweep of history. For it cannot come to grips with radical breaks or shifts in the background of inter-subjective meaning. As Taylor puts it, behavioralism "cannot accommodate a genuine historical psychology."³⁹ It appears most plausible when studying our own society under normal conditions, though even then it fails to attain its goal of predictive power.

³⁷ Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 38.

³⁸ As Taylor puts it, behavioralism's "inability to recognize the specificity of our inter-subjective meanings" is "inseparably linked with the belief in the universality of North Atlantic behavior types or functions." "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 47.

³⁹ Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 48.

The latter failure is not incidental or contingent. Taylor views it as inescapable. This is because the kind of prediction available in the natural sciences requires an exactitude of measurement that is possible with brute data while meanings and interpretations (whether subjective or inter-subjective) are not. More devastating still, the meanings and interpretations that constitute social reality and human identity are themselves subject to radical and incommensurable changes or innovations. This is a problem because in the natural sciences prediction requires that “all states of the system, past and future, can be described in the same range of concepts” or variables.⁴⁰ But the practices, institutions and social realities of the social sciences are subject to unpredictable and radical conceptual innovations. So Tsarist Russia was radically transformed into Soviet society or, in another context entirely, the Puritan rebellion transformed Christianity. Taylor makes clear what the behaviorist goal of prediction in this domain would require: namely, nothing short of the ability “to have explicated so clearly the human condition that one would already have pre-empted all cultural innovation and transformation.”⁴¹

What we have in political science, according to Taylor, is a domain of study whose subject is entirely pervaded by meaning. In this regard, Taylor’s efforts in this early essay might be viewed as a prologue to the recuperation of a genuinely historical study of politics—one that could come to terms with the vast changes and variations in meaning that have shaped human political life. It also anticipates his later breakthrough works in the study of inter-subjective meanings, frameworks, and “social imaginaries” that govern his approach in his impressive later contributions to politics, history, philosophy, aesthetics, and religion. As Taylor already began to understand in 1971: future students of politics needed to “go beyond the bounds of a science based on verification to one which would study the inter-subjective and common meanings embedded in social reality.”⁴² Perhaps no one has done more than Taylor since to show us that there is an entire world of undiscovered political phenomena for those willing and able to take up this task.

As for verificationism in political science, it was more the result of the bewitching effect of a certain view of epistemology, than a response to the phenomena of the field on their own terms. Far from the view that only the verifiable or analytically true by definition is meaningful, it appears that verifiable behaviors are not themselves fully explicable or understandable without the wider horizon of meaning to which they belong. Yet as was the case with value neutrality, the epistemological doctrine once presupposed has the effect of blinding us to the holistic dimensions of meaning that extend beyond the verifiable.

Taylor’s account also gives social scientists, philosophers, and historians a new way to conceive of meaning that is not simply reducible to individual minds. As he would later write, this helps break out of the “imprisoning assumption” that the individual subject is the “sole possible locus of meaning,” and move beyond the “sterile grooves of ‘methodological individualism,’” in which any inter-subjectivity must posit “some mysterious collective super-subject.”⁴³ The inter-subjectivity and holism of Idealism could be re-envisioned without the distracting and implausible myth of some absolute *Geist*.

⁴⁰ Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 56.

⁴¹ Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 57.

⁴² Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 52.

⁴³ Taylor, “Charles Taylor Replies,” 236.

III. Bridging Political Science and Political Theory

When we put Taylor in historical context we can see that he rejected various empiricist doctrines of analytic philosophy (particularly value-neutrality) on the grounds that they could not be realized within the actual practices of political science. Insofar as analytic philosophy, empiricism, and related traditions had encouraged such research programs, Taylor's conviction is that they distort the ability of social scientists to see the phenomena of human behavior on its own terms. But analytic philosophy in general at this time also held the view that philosophers could remain a neutral umpire between competing conceptions of ethics, politics, religion, and aesthetics. Philosophers could assign themselves the function (among other things) of ferreting out nonsense and invalid arguments through linguistic analysis.

The novelty of Taylor's approach is highlighted if we contrast it first with other movements in political philosophy from the 1950s through the 1970s. For instance, the same year Taylor published "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," John Rawls published *A Theory of Justice*. In this work we have a much different response to the emotivist wedge between facts and values. Without succumbing to emotivism, Rawls's work seemed to suggest that normative justification might be resuscitated in a fully rationalist sphere, separate from empirical questions, behind a veil of ignorance. Similarly, Strauss and his followers had spent the last two decades largely separating moral and political theorizing from the actual debates and findings of social science. They had done so (along with other theorists like Sheldon Wolin) by carving out a space for contemplating great thinkers through the "close reading" of canonical texts. In this way, although through approaches that were worlds apart, both Rawlsians and Straussians seemed to presuppose in their political theory that scientific inquiry into empirical questions and value-questions were largely separate types of activity. Yet this is precisely what Taylor rejected.

We reach the point at which Taylor's arguments in philosophy of social science converge with his moral and political philosophy. There are many points of connection here. Yet I will limit myself to examining two ways that positivist social science in particular (which we have seen has endeavored to present itself as purely descriptive and empirical science) is, according to Taylor, linked with normative concerns of political and moral philosophy.

The first is the way positivism tends to entail an instrumentalist view of social and political life—an argument Taylor advanced in "Philosophy of the Social Sciences" (1980). Taylor defines an instrumentalist view of political life as one in which the practices and institutions that comprise social reality are viewed as not having any inherent meanings or values beyond those given to them by individuals. Institutions and practices thought of in this way fit the definition of an instrument as things which serve "some goal definable without reference to that instrument."⁴⁴ Thus, in this view, meanings and values are only present in the individual participants who take up the meaning- and value-neutral things of political and social life. The descriptions and uses of things in the social world are neutral until individuals add values or meanings to them. This is consistent with the empiricist view we examined in the prior section, in which "psychological predicates" apply strictly to individuals or aggregates of individuals.⁴⁵

A social science that claims value-neutrality and brute data in this way encourages a view of politics in which practices and institutions are mere tools awaiting individuals to determine

⁴⁴ Taylor, "The Philosophy of the Social Sciences," 78.

⁴⁵ Taylor, "The Philosophy of the Social Sciences," 81.

their meanings and functions. In doing so, Taylor believes positivist social science implicitly justifies a vision of the individual as radically autonomous and atomistic with respect to meanings and purposes. Positivist social science, in its efforts to reduce all meanings and values to individual psyches, is therefore wedded to a radically individualistic and atomistic view of human political life. It expresses a commitment to what Taylor calls the “primacy of the subject.”⁴⁶ The individual decides meaning and function, rather than being embedded in a world of meanings and functions that to some extent shape his or her own.

This kind of instrumentalism, Taylor points out, also bars the ability to view political life in terms of a common good or goods. This is because instrumentalism entails atomism and atomism involves the reduction of shared meanings and goods to concatenations of competing individuals.⁴⁷ Indeed, when atomistic and instrumentalist assumptions about political life are widespread it becomes self-evident that any “common good” is nothing more than the sum of a set of individual interests and competing groups. The spread of instrumental views of political and social reality thus makes it “much harder for people to conceive how certain institutions or practices may embody a certain quality of community spirit.”⁴⁸

What is the alternative to an instrumentalist viewpoint? According to Taylor, it involves understanding how inter-subjective meanings and norms are ineliminable from social and political life. Instead, practices and institutions are expressive of inter-subjective meanings that precede any one of us. This means that social reality, far from being composed of a set of instruments lying in waiting for individuals to use for their own devices, is in fact constituted of inter-subjective meanings and norms that shape our own subjective meanings and values. Specifically, institutions and practices are value- and meaning-laden in such a way that they express given conceptions of political and moral life. These expressive dimension of practices and institutions “are not neutral descriptions,” rather they “offer conceptions of the proper or improper, the excellent and the deviant” embodied in the social and political life of man.⁴⁹ This means that collective goods might be identified as the inter-subjective meanings already expressed in our institutions and practices. Such a move, for example, is behind Taylor’s championing of Rawls’ concept of an “overlapping consensus” on human rights and dignity—albeit on different grounds than Rawls.⁵⁰ It is also part of his argument for a more authentic understanding of what it means to live in a secular age over and against subtraction and disenchantment narratives.⁵¹

Inter-subjective meanings make clear how institutions and practices do not exist as instruments apart from us but rather are partly constitutive of our subjectivities—giving us possibilities of expression and self-understanding. As Taylor puts it, in participating in specific institutions and practices our subjectivities are brought into certain modes where we are invited to “‘say’ certain things, to aspire to certain states.”⁵² Institutions and practices cannot be taken up like instruments independently of their inter-subjective meanings and norms. Indeed, the view that they can be is itself expressive of a moral vision of the human agent as radically autonomous and atomistic. Put differently, social science positivism assumes a moral and metaphysical vision

⁴⁶ Taylor, “The Philosophy of the Social Sciences,” 78.

⁴⁷ Taylor, “The Philosophy of the Social Sciences,” 81.

⁴⁸ Taylor, “The Philosophy of the Social Sciences,” 81.

⁴⁹ Taylor, “The Philosophy of the Social Sciences,” 85.

⁵⁰ For example, Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007) 532, 693.

⁵¹ See: Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

⁵² Taylor, “The Philosophy of the Social Sciences,” 85.

of the individual subject as far more autonomous than he or she is with respect to the political and social world.

What Taylor is showing us here is how what are often taken as purely epistemological questions converge with much deeper political and moral questions. Taylor believes an ideal of self-determination and autonomy actually helps motivate positivism as an epistemological perspective. Indeed, it is the appeal of the moral vision that covers over what Taylor believes are its apparent conceptual flaws. So, it is not simply the prestige of the natural sciences that helps drive the continual reinvention of positivist modes of thought. It is also their connection to a powerful “moral vision” of the “ideal of the self-defining subject,” which gives them such resilience in our cultural and intellectual life.⁵³

Whose is the moral vision of human life as comprised of self-defining, autonomous individuals who form groups, barter, and negotiate amidst value and meaning-neutral institutions? In brief, this is a picture of human life promoted by certain influential strains of liberalism. So it turns out positivist social science converges not only with instrumentalism but also with the view of human life that undergirds much of modern liberalism.⁵⁴ Here Taylor has done extensive historical work to describe how social contract theories that emerged in the seventeenth century with Grotius, Pufendorf, Locke and others have become moral sources for the view that human beings “start off as political atoms” capable of “disengagement” from the world around them which no longer has any “larger, meaningful order.”⁵⁵ Instead the individual is seen as the sovereign source of meanings and values. This in turn “yields a picture of the sovereign individual, who is ‘by nature’ not bound to any authority.”⁵⁶

This is not the place for a full exposition of Taylor’s critique of this kind of liberalism. But it is important for my purposes to end by briefly sketching the link between this stripe of liberalism and positivism. Part of what lies behind these individualistic defenses of liberalism, according to Taylor, is an atomistic social theory in which it is assumed that individuals can achieve radical freedom apart from society. Such individualism has found recent expression in the work of Robert Nozick, for example.⁵⁷ Taylor believes that Nozick’s political philosophy (like Locke’s before him) tends to assume that “the conditions of a creative, diversifying freedom were given by nature” and available to individuals independent of society.⁵⁸ Because individuals have this radical and natural autonomy society is treated as subordinate to the primacy of individual freedoms and rights.

⁵³ Taylor, “The Philosophy of the Social Sciences,” 90-91. It is here that Taylor has opened up a very deep series of investigations into the moral and political sources of modern subjectivity. *Sources of the Self* in particular attempts nothing less than to narrate and analyze the emergence of the modern subject in both epistemological and moral/political terms. Here Taylor has argued that although the epistemological case is flawed, the persistence of such modes of thought is motivated in part by a particular moral vision of the self: *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) ix.

⁵⁴ See, for example: Taylor, “Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 285.

⁵⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 193.

⁵⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 194.

⁵⁷ The Locke-Nozick strain of liberalism, which emphasizes the primacy of property, has been especially powerful in shaping the political institutions and practices of the modern world. It is important to note that Taylor believes this is only one strain of liberalism and there are a number of important variants. For example Kantianism offers a challenging alternative: Taylor, “Kant’s Theory of Freedom,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 318-337.

⁵⁸ Taylor, “Atomism,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 206.

One problem with this doctrine, according to Taylor, is that the very freedom liberalism defends is utterly contingent upon the success of a particular set of inter-subjective meanings that exceed any one individual. Far from having a kind of primordial access to liberal freedom, liberalism owes its existence to the flourishing of a particular kind of historical community. We have already seen how this is the case in the example of voting, which in contemporary Western society is dependent upon an “ideal of self-determination” and self-realization.⁵⁹ In this regard, the inter-subjective meanings that sustain the modern institution of voting are part of both our post-Enlightenment and post-Romantic inheritance, in which an individual is not truly free if “motivated through fear, inauthentically internalized standards, or false consciousness.”⁶⁰ More to the point, freedom in the sense conceived by Locke and Nozick is simply not available outside a society which has not made such historic gains. It certainly is not available in some primordial sense (either metaphysical or historical).

So Taylor believes the Nozickean political/moral vision has in part been sustained by our failure to understand the epistemological question aright. Because we tend to view our institutions and practices as instrumental, we do not see their expressive dimensions. But once we have an expressive and inter-subjective view of political life these Nozickean and Lockean assumptions appear far less plausible. Rather, the individualist conception of freedom requires the health and flourishing of the inter-subjective meanings embodied in institutions and practices of a given society—some which have required centuries and generations to form, and none of which can be simply reduced to a concatenation of individual beliefs. Far from simply being available in a state of nature, voting is expressive of a certain kind of agency that can only be achieved in a “varied culture” with a “complex and integrated society.”⁶¹ Modern, individual freedom is contingent upon the formation of a kind of inter-subjective cultural matrix embodied in our institutions and practices. Therefore, Taylor believes the primacy of the individual cannot within the liberal framework trump the maintenance of that society.⁶² To the contrary, Taylor has consistently argued across his many political writings that liberalism, if it is to be salvaged as a political theory, must be reconceived in such a way that it can authentically come to grips with the communal practices and institutions that in fact sustain it.

This, in brief, touches on only a few of the issues at stake in Taylor’s influential critiques of modern, proceduralist liberalism and its attendant negative freedom. We can also discern (albeit still incompletely) how Taylor offers an alternative defense of liberal modernity premised not on atomistic and radically autonomous conceptions of self, but on holistic and communal notions of solidarity and the need to create and maintain the shared political and social background in which modern liberalism actually becomes a living possibility.

Yet, for our purposes, the importance of this discussion is to begin to see how social science positivism, instrumentalism, and a certain tradition of liberalism overlap and reinforce one another’s philosophical commitments. In particular, they all share in what Taylor believes is an exaggerated view of individual autonomy. But if Taylor is correct, one route toward what is wrong with this collection of social and political theories is via philosophy of social science. Specifically, philosophy of social science can make clear how the existence of inter-subjective meanings calls into question the radically autonomous, atomistic subject, with a disengaged and

⁵⁹ Taylor, “The Philosophy of the Social Sciences,” 85.

⁶⁰ Taylor, “What’s Wrong With Negative Liberty,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 215.

⁶¹ Taylor, “Atomism,” 206.

⁶² Taylor, “Atomism.”

instrumental relationship to the world about him. Indeed, if Taylor's arguments hold, this view of human agency is at once an epistemological and political fiction. Thus, there is no absolute demarcation in Taylor's work between problems in social science and those in political and moral theory. Fully coming to grips with the force of Taylor's insights could have the power to entirely remake both.

Chapter 6: Returning to the Interpretive Turn: Charles Taylor and his Critics

So far I have rejected both positivistic social science and the Straussian “great books” approach as research programs. Both of these approaches, I have argued, suffer grave dilemmas. But I have also suggested that the most promising alternative to these rival approaches is an interpretive social science that is at once critical and humanistic. Although I believe the political dimensions of this interpretive approach are underappreciated, its methodological claims have been widely recognized for quite some time.

Indeed, during the twentieth century, an impressive array of philosophers beyond MacIntyre and Taylor made impassioned calls for a social science remade on interpretive grounds (Hans-Georg Gadamer, R.G. Collingwood, Peter Winch, and Alfred Schutz, to name only a few).¹ And yet today the insights of interpretivism are often paid lip-service, while the dominant research programs in political science ignore calls for broader methodological reform.² Among political scientists, this neutering of the interpretive turn commonly occurs under the banner of “multi-methods.” So, the most widely read methodological books in political science today assure us that interpretivism may be useful for “soaking and poking” and taking in local color, but that it is nothing like a full-fledged alternative to mainstream social science.³ In short, the radical program of the interpretive turn has been largely defanged and demoted—transformed by critics into a footman servicing the very research programs it had once hoped to oust.

But a growing number of critics of mainstream political science have begun to complain that the rejection of the interpretive turn is often based on unfamiliarity with the state of the art in hermeneutic philosophy. For example, Michael Gibbons and Mark Bevir have both respectively argued that political scientists are dealing in straw-men, rejecting the interpretive theories of yesteryear (perhaps attributable to Dilthey or Max Weber) but in no way representative of the cutting edge.⁴ One name frequently cited as representing this cutting edge is Charles Taylor.⁵

¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (second, revised edition) trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004); Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. T. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946); Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958); Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967). Also, for important collections on interpretive theory see: Michael Gibbons, *Interpreting Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

² Cf., Mark Bevir, “Editor’s Introduction: Interpretive Political Science” in *Interpretive Political Science*, vol. 1, ed. Bevir (London: Sage, 2010) xxi-xlii.

³ For examples of such misplaced critiques of contemporary interpretive practice in political science from a more “quantitative” point of view see: Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 38-39; and from a more “qualitative” one see: Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Henry Brady, and David Collier, “Political Science Methodology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, Box-Steffensmeier, Brady, and Collier, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 29-30; John Gerring, *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). King, Keohane, and Verba’s book is particularly influential in political science today, where it is often chosen as the basic textbook for methodology courses training graduate students.

⁴ Bevir, “Editor’s Introduction: Interpretive Political Science”; Michael Gibbons, “Hermeneutics, Political Inquiry, and Practical Reason: An Evolving Challenge to Political Science,” *American Political Science Review* 100:4 (2006): 563-571.

⁵ Clifford Geertz, “Interview with Clifford Geertz” by John Gerring in *Qualitative Methods* 1: 2 (2003): 26; Gibbons, “Hermeneutics, Political Inquiry,” 563; Michael Martin, “Taylor on Interpretation and the Sciences of

And yet at present no study systematically considers Taylor's interpretive theory to see how it fares against the most salient criticisms made of it. This chapter seeks to rectify this situation, while also showing how Taylor's interpretivism helps bring empirical social science into closer proximity with normative political and ideological concerns. In the latter tasks, it adds to the insights of the prior chapter.

As we shall see, Taylor's critics make two principal objections to his interpretivism (echoed in the literature that rejects the interpretive turn more generally). First, critics argue that Taylor's interpretivism is unable to offer explanations of social reality, thereby *trapping the social sciences in descriptions of the self-understandings of agents*. And second, critics charge that Taylor's interpretivism lacks criteria of objectivity, thereby *making the social sciences relativistic*. In what follows, I argue that both these criticisms rest on basic confusions. Not only is Taylor's interpretive theory explanatory, but it also has sophisticated modes of objective validation. I argue this by drawing on a novel, Heideggerian analysis of moods as the justification for Taylor's interpretivism. Moreover, I also explore two little noticed ways in which Taylor's conceptions of explanation and objectivity have important political and normative ramifications. This chapter is therefore a vindication of Taylor's hermeneutics. But given Taylor's importance as a standard-bearer for interpretive theory, this battle serves as a proxy for a larger war. At stake in such debates is the very fate of an interpretive turn in the study of politics. But as we shall see, also at stake is the possibility of a more comprehensive political science, one that encompasses both empirical and critical features.

My argument is divided into three parts. In the first part I present the most powerful criticisms made of Taylor's interpretivism to date. In the second, I analyze the actual ontological basis for Taylor's interpretivism by relating it to Heidegger's conception of human agency. Specifically, I argue that Taylor employs a Heideggerian phenomenology of human moods in order to provide the justificatory force for the ontological claim that humans are self-interpreting animals. Finally, in the third part I show how Taylor's actual position (part 2) is not vulnerable to the criticisms made of it (part 1). Also in the third part, I conclude by showing how a defense of Taylor's interpretivism opens onto critical treatments of ideology and political practice, yielding a social science that is normative as much as it is empirical. These novel ways of bridging the normative and the empirical have not been developed at any length in the secondary literature, and in order to rectify this situation I draw briefly for illustrative purposes on Taylor's latest work in *A Secular Age* and *Dilemmas and Connections*.

The structure of this chapter is relatively straightforward. But before beginning, a few prefatory remarks are necessary in order to situate my arguments within the already ample secondary literature on Taylor. First, as is probably already clear, my aim is not primarily historical. Rather, because I am treating Taylor as a key point of reference in wider debates over the interpretive turn, my approach is both pragmatic and synchronic. It is pragmatic in that my ultimate goal is to vindicate Taylor in the context of debates over the interpretive turn. My chief task, in other words, is to pragmatically use the resources of Taylor's philosophy in order to respond to critics of the interpretive turn. In this regard, I follow in the spirit of Richard

Man" in *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, Michael Martin and Lee C. McIntyre, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) 259. Taylor's essays on interpretivism are also frequently reprinted in major collections on the philosophy of social science. See for example: Bevir, ed., *Interpretive Political Science*, vol. 1; Rabinow and Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science*; Fred Dallmayr and Thomas McCarthy, eds., *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1977).

Bernstein, whose keen commentary on Taylor has always been conducted with an eye toward our current situation in social and political theory.⁶

But my approach is also synchronic in that I restrict myself to what Naomi Choi has identified as Taylor's mature "hermeneutic realism," ignoring his earlier "empirical" critique of naturalism.⁷ Choi has persuasively argued that Taylor's defense of an interpretive approach began as a critique of naturalism on empirical grounds.⁸ Only later did he develop an ontological argument about the uniqueness of human nature as the basis for an interpretive approach to social science. Choi's contribution, in other words, has been to narrate the moving picture of Taylor's intellectual evolution. By contrast, I limit myself to exploring his mature position.

Finally, a number of scholars—most notably Ruth Abbey, Choi, and Nicholas Smith—have emphasized the centrality of Heidegger's ontological thesis for Taylor's mature views.⁹ My contribution in this regard is to draw attention to the importance of a Heideggerian phenomenology of moods as a form of justification underlying Taylor's interpretivism. Although Taylor's ontological thesis is well known in the secondary literature, little attention has been paid to his creative appropriation of Heidegger's conception of moods. This phenomenology of moods has also been neglected by critics of the interpretive turn more generally. Yet one of the basic claims of this chapter is that those who wish to do away with the interpretive turn in political science must refute precisely this line of argument.

In short, although I am in fundamental sympathy with Abbey, Choi, and Smith (and will do my best to note my heavy debts to them throughout), I nevertheless believe I expand and innovate upon their work. I do this not only by bringing attention to the phenomenology of moods, but also by elaborating on Taylor's conceptions of objective validation, while drawing on his latest published work. Moreover, my work, unlike theirs, is primarily addressed to critics of the interpretive turn at large. Engaging and rebutting critics of interpretivism is a perennial task because ongoing objections and misunderstandings must always be considered and assessed. In what follows I carry forth this dialectical task, operating under the belief that Taylor is a key resource for these debates today.

I. Critics of Taylor's Interpretivism

There is considerable convergence among the critics of the interpretive turn in political science on the one hand, and the critics of Taylor's interpretivism on the other. In particular, both groups claim that interpretive theory is simply too narrow a paradigm for social science because

⁶ Richard Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978)109-113.

⁷ Naomi Choi, "Defending Anti-Naturalism After the Interpretive Turn: Charles Taylor and the Human Sciences," *History of Political Thought* 30:4 (2009): 693-718.

⁸ Choi rightly notes that this can be seen in Taylor's early critique of behaviorism: Taylor, *The Explanation of Behavior* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

⁹ Cf., Abbey, "Introduction: Timely Meditations in an Untimely Mode — The Thought of Charles Taylor," in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 3; Choi, "Defending Anti-Naturalism After the Interpretive Turn," 709; Smith "Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition," in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Abbey, 31.

it can offer neither forms of explanation that challenge an agent's self-understanding nor standards of objectivity.¹⁰ Let us look at each of these two criticisms in turn.

First is the claim that interpretive social science cannot offer explanations that challenge the self-understandings of those it studies. Critics as varied as Michael Martin, Terry Pinkard, Harold Kincaid, and Daniel Little have all argued that Taylor's interpretivism is stuck in the viewpoints of its subjects.¹¹ According to Martin this failing in Taylor is part of a wider failing of the interpretive tradition, which is marred by what he calls the "Verstehen" doctrine, or the view that all social scientific inquiry reaches its goal by "taking the subjective standpoint of the social actors."¹² In making this the goal of social science, critics believe that Taylor and interpretivism essentially ban causal explanations in favor of descriptions of subjective viewpoints. As Little puts it, the "strict adherence to the interpretive dogma would seem to lead to a form of social analysis that is highly descriptive and not at all explanatory."¹³ And Pinkard echoes this sentiment writing that Taylor denies an "explanatory social science" and leaves us with a "purely descriptive hermeneutic."¹⁴

This line of criticism, if true, has an important consequence. Namely, once trapped in the interpretive paradigm, social science has no way to challenge or override agent self-understandings. Instead, interpretive social scientists must simply take agents' beliefs more or less at face value. This also means that ideology critique and the analysis of distorted beliefs are not given sanctuary in an interpretive social science. Rather, Taylor's interpretivism dead-ends in a barren *descriptivism* (i.e., a form of social science that is little more than the description of subjective viewpoints).

The charge of descriptivism brings us to a second major critique of Taylor that resonates with the wider debates over the interpretive turn. This is the claim that interpretivism is relativistic because it lacks standards of objectivity. For instance, Martin argues that in Taylor's hermeneutics "there is no objective way of validating interpretations of social phenomena."¹⁵ Likewise Pinkard claims that Taylor's hermeneutics present a "fairly straightforward relativism" that "outlaws rationality" in favor of the bare assertion of rival intuitions; while James Bohman observes that Taylor's position "disallow[s] any epistemic clarification of 'correct' interpretations or 'true' meanings."¹⁶ In short, social science under the wayward stewardship of Taylor's interpretive theory is deemed unfeasible because it suffers the twin defects of descriptivism and relativism.

Surely no one aware of these twin flaws would be attracted to such an impoverished vision of social science. But then the question becomes why Taylor believes the social sciences are interpretive in the first place? In answering this question we reach an even deeper level of

¹⁰ For prominent political scientist methodologists that share some of the objections to interpretivism presented in this section see: King, Keohane and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, 38-39; Box-Steffensmeier, Brady, and Collier, "Political Science Methodology," 29-30; and Gerring, *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework*.

¹¹ Martin, *Verstehen: The Uses of Understanding in Social Science* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000) 182; Kincaid, *Philosophical Foundations of the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 207; Terry Pinkard, "Interpretation and Verification in the Human Sciences," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 6 (1976): 172.

¹² Martin, *Verstehen*, 4-5.

¹³ Daniel Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991) quote on 86, cf. 68, 233.

¹⁴ Pinkard, "Interpretation and Verification," 172. See also: Kincaid, *Philosophical Foundations*, 208.

¹⁵ Martin, *Verstehen*, 168.

¹⁶ Pinkard, "Interpretation and Verification," 167; Bohman, *New Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) 112-114.

critique leveled against Taylor. Many critics have rightly noted that Taylor's interpretivism rests on the basic philosophical assumption of *anti-naturalism*, or the view that there is an essential difference between the forms of explanation appropriate to the natural versus the social sciences. But according to these critics, Taylor's anti-naturalism is fundamentally contradictory.

Martin, for example, argues that Taylor's anti-naturalism rests on the claim that all social science data is theory-laden, and therefore not subject to the forms of explanation common to the natural sciences. In other words, Martin argues that Taylor's interpretivism is derived from the belief that social science data is somehow theory-laden in a way that the data of the natural sciences is not. But, Martin notes, this would mean that Taylor's anti-naturalism is invalid; for even if data is theory-laden, this would apply equally to the natural sciences. Therefore, Taylor cannot conclude that the social sciences require different forms of explanation from the natural ones. Taylor has confused a valid thesis about the theory-laden nature of data in general, with an invalid claim about social science data in particular.¹⁷

A similar criticism is offered by Kincaid who argues that Taylor's anti-naturalism rests on the belief that the social sciences require "contextual" interpretations while the natural sciences do not. But then the problem is that this does not present sufficient grounds for Taylor's anti-naturalism, as "contextual factors play an important role in much good natural science."¹⁸ And Pinkard, too, takes much the same tack when he argues that Taylor's premises do not secure his conclusions, a fact made plain by someone like Quine who affirmed the theory-laden, contextual nature of all data without accepting Taylor's anti-naturalist conclusions.¹⁹

It is clear that, if true, the charges leveled against Taylor's interpretivism are devastating. For not only is his model of social science hopelessly descriptivist and relativistic, but it is also based on a faulty argument about the supposed difference between the natural and social sciences. And if Taylor is indeed the standard-bearer for the hermeneutic tradition today, this would spell disaster for the interpretive turn more widely. However, there is a problem with this entire line of critique. Namely, it is predicated on a long chain of misunderstandings and confusions.²⁰

In the next section, I will begin by debunking the claim that Taylor's anti-naturalism is premised on a contradictory argument about the nature of social science data. Specifically, I will present a detailed analysis of the importance of Heidegger's conception of human agency as the actual basis for Taylor's anti-naturalism. Once this detailed analysis is in place, I will then return to the claims that Taylor's interpretivism is descriptivist and relativistic. As part of rebutting these latter criticisms, I will also suggest that far from being too narrow, Taylor's interpretivism actually manages to encompass both empirical and normative features of the study of politics.

II. The Actual Grounds for Taylor's Interpretivism

¹⁷ Martin, *Verstehen*, 168-175.

¹⁸ Kincaid, *Philosophical Foundations*, 209, 205-210.

¹⁹ As Pinkard puts it: "If there are no 'brute data' in the natural sciences, why claim anything more for the sciences of man?" Pinkard, "Interpretation and Verification," 168-169.

²⁰ Ironically, confusion concerning the basic source of Taylor's anti-naturalism is even evidenced in fellow interpretivists. Notably Clifford Geertz assumes that the basis of Taylor's anti-naturalism is not ontological but rather strategic. Geertz, "The Strange Estrangement: Taylor and the Natural Sciences," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 83-95.

There is a fundamental problem with the critics' interpretation of Taylor's anti-naturalism. Namely, Taylor would agree that both the data of the natural and social sciences are holistic, theory-laden, and held on anti-foundational grounds.²¹ Therefore, the distinction between the forms of explanation appropriate to the natural versus the social sciences cannot rest here. Rather, as rightly noted by Abbey and Smith, the true source of Taylor's anti-naturalism is an ontological claim about human agency as uniquely "self-interpreting."²²

Moreover, Abbey, Choi, and Smith have all stressed the importance of Heidegger to the ontological thesis that humans are self-interpreting animals.²³ In asserting the priority of this thesis I therefore clearly follow the precedent set by these thinkers. However, my own presentation is different in that I believe the justificatory force of Taylor's position can be better appreciated by seeing how it rests on a much less frequently noted Heideggerian phenomenology of moods. My basic claim in what follows is that Taylor justifies the thesis that humans are self-interpreting by formulating a Heideggerian-inspired analysis of what he refers to as "the logic of our language of the emotions."²⁴ Critics who wish to refute the interpretive turn (at least in terms defended by Taylor) need to somehow invalidate this account.

Abbey and Smith both note that Taylor follows Heidegger in "ontologizing" hermeneutics into the very structure of human action.²⁵ Prior to Heidegger, hermeneutics was concerned primarily with texts. But Heidegger advanced the view in *Being and Time* that humans are embodiments of self-interpreted meaning. Like an octopus's ability to change colors or the phases of a butterfly's life, self-understandings change and restructure the very way humans exist in the world. So Heidegger wrote that in the case of human beings "understanding constitutes this being."²⁶ As I now hope to show, the basis for this claim in both Heidegger and Taylor is a phenomenological analysis of human moods. I will begin with a brief sketch of Heidegger's views before turning to Taylor's appropriation of them.

According to Heidegger, a primary way humans embody self-understanding is through what he called "attunement" or "moods." Heidegger maintained that human beings are "always already in a mood" such that they "never master a mood by being free of a mood, but always through a counter mood" be it "elevated," "a bad mood," or even the apparent "smooth, and pallid lack of mood."²⁷ Moods, in other words, are an inescapable feature of all motivated human action. Moreover, according to Heidegger, these inescapable moods or motivational stances are not simply projections but rather disclose features of reality. Human moods, in other words, are

²¹ Abbey's discussion is particularly illuminating: *Charles Taylor*, 170-171.

²² Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 58-62; Smith, "Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition." This point is not entirely lost on Taylor's critics. Pinkard and Martin are particularly aware that Taylor's anti-naturalism might in fact derive from the peculiar objects of study in the human sciences. But both also largely neglect this ontological line of argument, focusing their energies on specious candidates for Taylor's anti-naturalism. And although Pinkard has the defense of writing before "Self-Interpreting Animals" was published, the concept does appear already in Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 23. Cf., Pinkard, "Interpretation and Verification," 169, 172-173; Martin, *Verstehen*, 181.

²³ Abbey, "Introduction," 3; Choi, "Defending Anti-Naturalism," 709; Smith, "Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition," 31.

²⁴ Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 59.

²⁵ Abbey, "Introduction," 3; Smith, "Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition," 31.

²⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) 134.

²⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 126-128.

forms of understanding: “Attunement always has its understanding ... Understanding is always attuned.”²⁸

Most famously, Heidegger argued that the mood he called *Angst* allowed individuals to realize the truth of their own mortality. More generally, Heidegger claimed that moods were “disclosive” of features of reality and made it possible that “things that matter to us can be encountered.”²⁹ Moods in this way have a cognitive dimension and are ways of knowing and accessing features of reality that otherwise remain inaccessible. In short, Heidegger’s view of humans is that their way of being in the world is inescapably constituted by understanding in the form of various moods that cue them into different facets of reality. The latter, as I will now argue, is the true basis for Taylor’s anti-naturalism in the social sciences.

Taylor was clearly impressed by Heidegger’s account of human agency. So he explicitly set out in “Self-Interpreting Animals” to vindicate the view of human life “adumbrated by Heidegger.”³⁰ But in doing so, Taylor also hoped to go beyond Heidegger, creating arguments capable of greater leverage in the debates over the human sciences. In order to accomplish this goal, Taylor began from Heidegger’s premise that moods are an inescapable feature of human agency (though he substituted Heidegger’s “moods” with the more common social science term “emotions”). Insofar as we are acting, or even deciding not to act, Taylor argues that we are being motivated by some emotion—e.g. wonder, steadfastness, excitement, listlessness. Emotions thus comprise the “experienced motivation” of human action and behavior.³¹ But in what sense are these moods not merely subjective projections but cognitive modes of understanding that grant access to certain features of reality? Taylor’s argument here rests on a phenomenology of the logic of our emotional language. Specifically, he sets out distinctions between three classes of emotion. Together these distinctions are meant to establish an account of embodied human agency as essentially self-interpretive.

The first type of emotion distinguished by Taylor is what he calls “immediate feelings.”³² Immediate feelings do not require language and are shared by animals and humans alike. An example of an immediate feeling is pain. Pain is immediate in that it requires no interpretation and is not contingent upon or mediated by judgment. If the dentist’s drill slips onto a hapless patient’s gums, the stimulus and response are direct. There is no way to be wrong or mistaken about pain in this sense. It is simply a direct response to stimulus. As Taylor puts it, “a situation is painful, just because we feel pain in it” such that “we cannot ... feel pain mistakenly.”³³ For this reason we need not grapple with human self-understanding in order to account for this kind of pain. Likewise we have no trouble imagining what it is like for non-linguistic animals—say, birds or polar bears—to feel such immediate sensations as pain.

A second type of emotion is also shared by humans and some animals. This kind of emotion requires the ability to judge the *significance*—or what Taylor calls the “import”—of a situation. An import, in Taylor’s sense, is inseparable from an affective relationship to some feature of reality. So Taylor writes that imports are “affective modes of awareness” that cue us

²⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 134.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 129-130.

³⁰ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 76.

³¹ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 48.

³² Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 72.

³³ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 49, 72.

into a “property of something whereby it is a matter of non-indifference to a subject.”³⁴ Import emotions thus disclose the significance of certain features of reality in Heidegger’s sense.

An example of an import emotion is fear. Fear requires the ability (whether linguistically or not) to grasp the significance of a situation as menacing or dangerous and therefore fear-inducing. So, a herd of elk perceives the stalking pack of wolves and flees for safety. This is because the elk ascertain the significance of the wolves as menacing. Such perception depends upon judging a situation correctly and so can also be potentially mistaken. Thus, the same herd of elk might fear the forest ranger who is trying to administer medicine. Likewise, a lonely foreigner might fear the stranger come to help. The point is that judgment in these cases is inextricable from an affective mode. Fear is the mode through which the significance (e.g. menacing property) of the situation is normally ascertained.

Human subjectivity is partly comprised by the above two types of emotion. That is, we experience both immediate sensations like pain as well as feelings that require judgments like fear. This much we share with non-linguistic animals. Yet there is a third type of emotion that Taylor believes is peculiar to linguistic beings and key to the thesis of self-interpretation. What distinguishes this class of emotions is that they are *strongly evaluative* of what it means to be human.³⁵ Taylor lists shame, dignity, envy, remorse, and pride as a few examples of the many strongly evaluative emotions humans experience. What this wide range of emotions shares is that they are all comprised of affective judgments about the significance of our “lives as subjects” and “as self-reflexive beings.”³⁶ Crucially, strongly evaluative emotions involve qualitative judgments of worth, of seeing some goals and states of affairs as higher than others. Thus, they capture the way humans experience not only immediate *de facto* or felt desires, but also desires about their desires. As Taylor puts it, unlike other animals, humans don’t take “de facto desires as the ultimate justification” but move “beyond that to their worth.”³⁷ Smith has made the important observation that strong evaluation need not be consciously or reflectively carried out; that is to say, such evaluation might remain entirely implicit to an agent’s actions and behavior.³⁸

Take the example of pride. Pride is an emotion defined by strong evaluation in that it consists of a judgment as to the worthiness of a particular state of affairs and how this reflects on one’s sense of self. So, one man might feel pride in his ability to seduce women while another feels shame; likewise, one woman might take pride in her money while another on her ability to renounce worldly goods and serve the poor. As these brief examples suggest, strongly evaluative emotions do not merely judge some feature of reality, but also the significance of one’s own desires, actions, and identity as part of that reality.

Indeed, as Abbey and Smith have both rightly emphasized, Taylor believes strong evaluation is at the very heart of human agency insofar as it is what makes human identity

³⁴ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 48.

³⁵ My discussion of strong evaluation is highly indebted to Abbey and Smith. See: Abbey, *Charles Taylor* 17-26; Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002) 89-97. Smith makes the distinction between evaluation (as conscious, rational activity) and strong values (as tacit, implicitly present distinctions of worth). I accept Smith’s argument but for the sake of simplicity here follow Taylor in using “evaluation” to cover both.

³⁶ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 60.

³⁷ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 66; “The Concept of a Person,” in *Human Agency and Language*, 102-103.

³⁸ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* 90, 94-95.

possible.³⁹ In contrast to other animals, when we ask of a person “who is that?” the full answer requires articulating “what is of crucial importance” to that individual, what are his or her desires about their own desires.⁴⁰ Questions of human identity are questions about the self-interpretations and strong evaluations that shape a life. For example, is she a nationalist? An anarchist? A vegetarian? Is he a Muslim? A “good old boy”? A Buddhist? Strongly evaluative emotions are expressive of the self-interpretations of human identity.⁴¹ This is such that according to Taylor, in the case of humans, even emotions occurring in the first two classes tend to be colored by the interpretations that comprise our sense of identity. Thus, an emotion like fear or even pain might appear to us as cowardly or heroic, exulting or masochistic. And this means “human life is never without interpreted feeling; the interpretation is constitutive of the feeling.”⁴²

But with this last move Taylor does not intend to collapse the importance of the prior two distinctions in his account of the logic of our emotions. Rather, his basic point is that although human emotions are colored by our self-interpretations, nevertheless, we recognize that some kinds of emotions can exist independently of language. Thus, immediate feelings (e.g. pain) as well as emotions that are not subject-referring (e.g. fear) are both what Taylor calls “language-independent,” and can be experienced by non-linguistic animals.⁴³ This is in marked contrast to subject-referring emotions which absolutely require language and articulacy to be experienced. As Taylor puts it:

what we experience in the dentist’s chair, or when the fingernail is rubbed along the blackboard, is in a sense quite independent of language ... we feel that this pain is language-independent; and we have no trouble imagining an animal having *this* experience.⁴⁴

At the same time, human subjectivity is such that we incorporate even immediate emotions into our articulated, subject-referring senses of self. Thus, for example, human pain is typically perceived against some background sense of articulated emotion and identity.⁴⁵ There is no contradiction here. For Taylor’s claim is that humans, as linguistic animals, can experience even their immediate feelings in light of further, subject-referring emotions. Thus, to return to our original point, even our immediate sensations can show up as colored by self-interpretation—as cowardly, proud, ashamed, exalted, self-defeated, and so on.

What are the upshots of this Heidegger-inspired phenomenology of human emotion for debates over interpretivism and the social sciences? One upshot is that it vindicates the ontological thesis that human agency (belief, action, and identity) is expressive of self-interpretation and as such constitutes a unique object of study. How this view of human agency

³⁹ Again, I should reiterate my debt to Abbey’s and Smith’s insights in this discussion: Abbey, *Charles Taylor* 17-26; Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 89-97.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

⁴¹ Taylor has argued that coherent strong evaluation is an inescapable feature of healthy human agency and undamaged personhood. See: *Sources of the Self*, 33, 27.

⁴² Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 63.

⁴³ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 72.

⁴⁴ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 72.

⁴⁵ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 63, 72.

requires an interpretive social science is brought out by two inter-related features that are corroborated, albeit via very different argumentative routes, by both Abbey and Smith.⁴⁶

First, as we have already seen, strong evaluation requires animals with linguistic capacities because it presupposes the ability to characterize a situation in relation to distinctions about what is worthy or unworthy for oneself. Thus, human emotional life is what might be termed language-dependent, in that it typically exists through a process of self-articulation and self-expression. As Taylor puts it: “these feelings are articulated” even if only implicitly so.⁴⁷ And this means that human action is expressive of these self-interpretations.

This brings us to the second, essential point. Namely, the language dependency of human emotion and action gives our agency a unique ontological status. Rather than an independent relationship between object and description, in the case of strongly evaluative emotions we have a feature of our being in the world that is shaped by what Taylor calls *redescription*. In cases of redescription, “description and experience are bound together in [a] constitutive relation ... [that] admits of causal influences in both directions” such that an “altered description of our motivation can be inseparable from a change in this motivation.”⁴⁸ So, I might reinterpret my resentment toward my brother as a form of repressed envy and then struggle to transform this into a nobler emotion such as admiration. Because such emotions are susceptible to redescription, the reality of emotion and experience can themselves be transformed through self-interpretation. This kind of redescription highlights a basic difference between the social and natural sciences. As Taylor notes, the objects of the natural sciences like livers, DNA helix, or chemical compounds are not capable of transformation via self-interpretation.⁴⁹ Yet this is centrally true of human action, motivation, and self.

A major consequence of this for the social sciences is that explaining human action, motivation, and self requires, as a first step, grasping the self-interpretations, meanings, and language of the subject.⁵⁰ This is not true of objects of the natural science which are incapable of self-interpretation and redescription. The natural sciences no doubt involve interpretation, but the social sciences involve interpretations of interpretations.⁵¹

But Taylor’s Heideggerian-inspired phenomenology not only furnishes a powerful justification of the ontological thesis underlying interpretivism. It also directly undermines two forms of reductive materialism that often encroach on explanations in the social sciences. These two forms of materialism are given a particular pithy summary by Taylor in *A Secular Age*.⁵² The first kind of materialism, Taylor notes, would do away with human-motivated action entirely, explaining everything in terms of material, efficient causation. Reductive neuroscience of a certain kind might qualify as an example of this attempt to reduce human behavior to material, efficient causes. The problem with this sort of approach, as we have seen, is that it misunderstands the language-dependent nature of human motives and actions. Grasping human actions requires interpreting the languages that inform them, and not simply diving down into a supposedly more absolute, non-linguistic dimension of reality.

⁴⁶ Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 153-154; Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 121-123, 90.

⁴⁷ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 63-64.

⁴⁸ Taylor, “What is Human Agency?” in *Human Agency and Language*, 36-37.

⁴⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 34.

⁵⁰ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 55.

⁵¹ I have thus arrived, by way of a Heideggerian phenomenology of moods, at Taylor’s famous “double hermeneutic.” Compare with Abbey’s insightful discussion: *Charles Taylor*, 58-62, 153-154.

⁵² Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007) 595.

The second kind of materialism Taylor dubs “motivational materialism.” Unlike the first kind, motivational materialism allows for motivated human actions while only accepting “explanations on the lower motives, not moral aspirations ... [or] strong evaluations.”⁵³ Here Taylor cites crude forms of Marxism as well as the massively influential behaviorism of B.F. Skinner as examples. But if Taylor’s phenomenology of emotions is valid, then this second type of materialist explanation is also clearly mistaken. For as we saw, in the case of self-interpreting animals even lower human motives are colored by the moral language of strong evaluation. This means any attempt to reduce human action to the stimulus of language-independent emotions like fear, pain, hunger, sexual appetite, or other such non-subject referring emotions is fundamentally problematic. For while it may be a valid move in the study of non-linguistic animals, it subtracts the central feature of motivated human action: namely, its strongly evaluative, subject-referring dimension.

In short, contra the critics, Taylor’s interpretivism rests on a phenomenology of the logic of our emotions and *not* an argument about the theory-laden nature of data. Specifically, Taylor establishes the unique ontological status of human agency by following Heidegger in arguing that our emotion (and hence our agency) is always colored and structured by interpretation, such that man “cannot be understood simply as an object among objects, for his life incorporates an interpretation.”⁵⁴ Thus, in order to refute Taylor’s interpretivism, critics would have to in some way invalidate this phenomenology of human moods/emotions. Failure to engage this phenomenological argument means that Taylor’s claims for the uniqueness of human nature as an object of study remain unscathed. We will now see how Taylor’s interpretive social science, built on this basic ontological premise, is also not vulnerable to critics’ charges of descriptivism and relativism.

III. Responding to the Critics

i. Explanation and Ideology Critique

My exegesis of Taylor’s position thus far implies that social scientists must begin with agents’ self-understandings. This is because without first identifying self-understandings there is no way to grasp the actions in need of explaining. As Taylor puts it, “interpretive social science requires that we master the agent’s self-description in order to identify our *explananda*.”⁵⁵

But grasping these self-understandings requires locating them within specific contexts—what Taylor, following Gadamer, dubs a “home culture.”⁵⁶ The need to contextualize actions within home cultures is not only for the obvious reason that understanding meanings requires knowledge of the languages and concepts in which they are expressed. It is also because the meanings informing human actions often remain at the level of the implicit or inarticulate, manifest in practices and institutions but not in actual speech. Placing agent’s self-

⁵³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 595.

⁵⁴ Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” 75.

⁵⁵ Taylor, “Understanding and Ethnocentricity,” 118.

⁵⁶ Taylor, “Comparison, History, Truth,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 148-151.

understandings in the context of a particular culture's practices, institutions, and inter-subjective meanings is therefore necessary to render actions intelligible. Indeed, if social science ever managed to fully purge the contexts of self-understanding it would also "dissolve the field of human action into meaningless motion."⁵⁷

This particular point has not only been made repeatedly by Taylor, but has also received extended and illuminating exegesis by Abbey and Smith.⁵⁸ And yet this requirement of hermeneutics also brings us back to one of the primary criticisms of Taylor made by Martin, Kincaid, Little, Pinkard, and others. Namely, these critics argue that because Taylor's interpretivism makes agent self-understandings essential, it also reduces social inquiry to insider views of individuals and their communities. It is in this way unable to rationally challenge or override these self-understandings and terminates in a stale descriptivism. As Martin puts it, Taylor's hermeneutics fail to see that "there might be aspects in all social sciences including political science that are beyond self-understanding in the sense that social actors are unaware of them."⁵⁹

Such descriptivism would indeed make for an intolerably hobbled social science. Fortunately, it is not Taylor's position. In fact, he criticizes other interpretivists for this very descriptivism.⁶⁰ Instead, Taylor's hermeneutics occupies a middle ground between the extremes of a stale descriptivism of self-understandings and a crude positivism that neglects self-understandings altogether. The reason Taylor's critics fail to see this is because they draw an invalid inference. Namely, they assume that the requirement that all social science begin with self-understandings entails an inability to seriously challenge an agent's own explanations. But this confuses the language of the *explananda* with that of the *explanantia*. For although interpretivism implies that we must engage self-understandings in order to properly identify the *explananda* of social phenomena, "it by no means requires that we couch our *explanantia* in the same language."⁶¹ In other words, while the self-interpretation of agents is an essential component of what needs to be explained, the explanation itself need not support that self-interpretation.

In this regard, it is quite telling that Taylor himself rarely uses the term *Verstehen* and when he does it is explicitly to draw a contrast between "Verstehen" and something like Martin's doctrine, which he dismissively dubs an "incommensurability thesis."⁶² In fact, as readers of Taylor like Abbey and Smith have argued, interpretivism involves no such commitment to the incommensurability of the views of those studied.⁶³ To the contrary, according to Taylor, interpretive explanation by its very nature pushes beyond mere agent self-understandings. This is because explanation inescapably involves some judgment as to truth and validity. Specifically, our own assessment of what is real is essential to our understanding others and thereby to our explanation of their actions and motives. Taylor attributes this insight to Gadamer, who saw that a social inquirer's own assumptions about reality are necessarily evaluative of those he seeks to explain.

⁵⁷ Taylor, "Comparison, History, Truth," 149.

⁵⁸ Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 158-164; Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 129.

⁵⁹ Martin, *Verstehen*, 182. See also: Kincaid, *Philosophical Foundations*, 207; Pinkard, "Interpretation and Verification," 172.

⁶⁰ E.g., Peter Winch; Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 117.

⁶¹ Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity," 124, 118.

⁶² Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity," 123.

⁶³ I draw on their respective discussions in what follows. Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 154, 156; Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 123, 130-131.

As Taylor puts it: “There can’t be explanation without a judgment of truth;” and therefore “one’s own language of explanation” must confront that of “one’s subjects’ self-understanding.”⁶⁴ In other words, when we are trying to explain a man’s actions in a way that he “would have found strange ... we are *ipso facto* challenging his picture of things and putting our own in its place.”⁶⁵ In this way, all social and political explanation is inescapably evaluative. That is, it involves assessments as to the truth and reasonableness of given beliefs and actions.

Taylor illustrates this point with the vivid example of a man who is frantically waving his hands to fend off a swarm of flies. We might assume the explanation of this man’s actions is obvious and terminates with his own self-understanding. But suppose we observed no flies swarming around the man’s head and yet when we asked him why he was waving his hands, he replied: “Because of those damned flies!” Suddenly we would be pressed to seek a new explanation for the man’s actions. According to Taylor, this example illustrates a basic feature of social scientific explanation. Namely, if an agent’s self-understandings are found incompatible with our notion of what is real or valid we turn to explanations “in terms of illusion; and we identify something else to explain.”⁶⁶ By the same reasoning, if our notion of reality coincides with the self-understandings of those in question then our explanations will terminate with an ideal articulation of this self-understanding. This means the more seriously we take the validity of someone’s beliefs and actions the more likely we are to accept them as explanatory on their own terms. It also follows that social and political explanation must involve (either implicitly or explicitly) some assessment in terms of rationality, illusion, reasonableness, ideology and so on.

Interpretivism, therefore, doesn’t mean social scientists must find an agent’s views sensible or even sane. To the contrary, the interpretive social scientist is inescapably involved in the task of evaluating the explanation of such self-understandings. Interpreting self-understandings might even mean challenging an agent’s own account by proposing some overriding cause of which he or she remains unaware. In other words, in Taylor’s account, social and political scientists cannot avoid the normative task of ideology critique. This is because all explanation either implicitly or explicitly involves an evaluation as to the reasonableness of the agents in question.

That Taylor’s interpretivism (far from being trapped in descriptivism) is capable of explanations and even ideology critique should have been obvious to any reader of *Sources of the Self*. For in this work Taylor turns the tables on mainstream social science, arguing that he can offer a better explanation of the existence of their very own research programs than they can. Although we do not have the space to go into the nuances of this immensely rich work here, in brief form Taylor’s argument is that naturalist research programs are not best explained by scientific advances, but by a repressed ideological motive. As Taylor puts this, naturalism encourages us to espouse pseudo-scientific theories that are “extremely implausible” and require a “very powerful metaphysical set of preconceptions” in order to “over-ride so much that is so intuitively obvious about human life.”⁶⁷ Rather than driven by a veritable science, Taylor argues such research programs are actually sustained by a moral movement that he traces back to the time of Descartes and Locke; this moral movement sees human life as striving towards an ideal

⁶⁴ Taylor, “Comparison, History, Truth,” 153; Taylor, “The hermeneutics of conflict,” in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 226.

⁶⁵ Taylor, “The hermeneutics of conflict,” 220.

⁶⁶ Taylor, “Comparison, History, Truth,” 153.

⁶⁷ Taylor, “Introduction” in *Human Agency and Language*, 5-6. See also: *Sources of the Self*, 9-10.

of autonomous and disengaged mastery over self and nature.⁶⁸ In other words, Taylor's claim about modern social science is that we are in the territory of a man waving his hands frantically at flies that don't exist (the non-existent or illusory element here being a naturalistic science of man).

Whether or not Taylor's narrative of the moral sources of modern social science is correct, our wider point should be clear: far from being stuck in self-understandings, Taylor believes successful interpretive explanations actually involve critically evaluating the reasonableness of the agents involved. Crucially, the critical overriding of agent self-understandings doesn't negate the essentially interpretive task of social science. Grasping self-understandings is an inescapable part of social explanation insofar as it is a necessary step in order to successfully identify what it is that needs explaining. (After all, the man waving his arms frantically might not be worried about flies at all but instead be trying to invent a new dance move.) The point being that we cannot even begin to challenge the meanings of an agent's actions until we have some sense for what they are doing in the context of their home culture.

If Taylor is right, it clearly follows that social science must be both interpretive and critical. More to it, opponents of the interpretive turn cannot in good faith accuse it of descriptivism or try to limit it to "soaking and poking." Indeed, far from being too narrow, Taylor's interpretive approach actually affords a more comprehensive role to social science research than mainstream political science currently does. For unlike the latter's lingering value-neutrality, Taylor's interpretivism encompasses both the tasks of empirical investigation and ideology critique.

ii. Objectivity and Political Practice

But the above line of argument does nothing yet to combat the claim that Taylor's interpretive theory is hopelessly relativistic. Pinkard, for example, accuses Taylor of a relativism in which "any interpretation is as valid as another" and there are "no rational guidelines" for adjudicating between rival interpretations.⁶⁹ Similarly, Martin declares that in Taylor "there is no objective way of validating interpretations" because "interpretations are ultimately based on rationally unsupported intuitions and value decisions."⁷⁰

Yet the problem with this line of criticism is that it once again fails to grasp Taylor's actual position. For Taylor's claim is not that objectivity is impossible in the social sciences, but rather that because of the nature of the object (i.e., self-interpreting) validation cannot be settled by methods that do not take agent beliefs centrally into account. This is present in Taylor's formulation of an anti-foundational account of objectivity, one inspired by another important interpretive theorist, Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre's primary insight, according to Taylor, was to see that we can still rationally assess rival theories even after we have accepted that it is no longer possible to appeal to an absolute criterion existing outside of all interpretations (e.g. brute

⁶⁸ Taylor has continued to elaborate on his historical and ideological critique of naturalism in his recent work *A Secular Age*, 559-593.

⁶⁹ Pinkard, "Interpretation and Verification," 170, 168-169.

⁷⁰ Martin, *Verstehen*, 168, 174. See also: Kincaid, *Philosophical Foundations*, 209. Even Bohman, who acknowledges Taylor's turn toward comparative forms of rational validation, nevertheless neglects the key text and his exegesis remains incomplete. Bohman, *New Philosophy of Social Science*, 132-133.

or foundational data). Taylor's version of this insight is in terms of what he calls "transition arguments" or reasoning that informs transitions between two or more competing theories.⁷¹

According to Taylor, transition arguments do not offer an absolute criterion or method of assessment. Instead, they make claims to *comparative* superiority. They evaluate between two theories X and Y in such a way that the "claim is not that Y is correct *simpliciter* but just that whatever is 'ultimately true,' Y is better than X."⁷² In this way, such appeals are a form of ad hominem argumentation, in that they are "specifically addressed to holders of [theory] X" and claim that "whatever else turns out to be true, you can improve your epistemic position by moving from X to Y."⁷³ This means that transition arguments never establish absolute truth or validity; rather, as MacIntyre noted, they offer a best account so far in light of rival accounts.

Taylor identifies three types of transition arguments. In the first he follows MacIntyre's lead by appealing to anomalies/dilemmas. A theory Y may better account for rival theory X's self-recognized anomalies or dilemmas. In doing so, theory Y establishes itself in comparative terms as an epistemic gain over X, better able to deal with X's own difficulties and breakdowns. For example, Taylor's *A Secular Age* argues that traditional theories of secularization, which hold that religious practice is in inexorable decline, are unable to resolve certain dilemmas. For instance, they have difficulty explaining the contemporary mass mobilization of politicized religious identities, as well as the explosion of individualist spiritualities.⁷⁴ Much of Taylor's book is an attempt to give a better theory of what secularism in fact means in light of the anomalies plaguing traditional secularization theories. The point, of course, is not whether Taylor's view on secularism is correct, but rather to illustrate how objectivity might be established through comparing anomalies.

A second type of transition argument similarly forces a dilemma onto its rival. Only this time the dilemma is imposed from the outside by a theory's having some kind of success that cannot be matched by its rival. So theory Y may have success in developing some new technology or know-how, or else opening new lines of inquiry or understanding, such that theory X is unable to account for or match this advance. Taylor notes that the mediating factor here might be some implicit feature that both theories acknowledge as valuable or of worth.⁷⁵ For example, Taylor suggests that post-Galilean natural science's triumph over its Aristotelian predecessor was in part due to the technological mastery and know-how it facilitated that the old, Aristotelian science was completely unable to match.⁷⁶

A final type of transition argument has no parallel in MacIntyre and is of particular importance to social science because, as I will show, it links social science to the evaluation of political practice. Smith briefly but illuminatingly discusses this kind of transition argument as

⁷¹ Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," in *Philosophical Arguments*, 54. While they do not pick up on the influence of MacIntyre specifically, a similar point has been compellingly made by both Abbey and Smith, who argue that Taylor's view of an interpretive social science allows for objectivity on the basis of comparison and comprehensiveness between rival theories. Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 156, 152-172; Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 125.

⁷² Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 54.

⁷³ Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 54.

⁷⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, chs. 12-14.

⁷⁵ Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 48.

⁷⁶ Smith has a particularly rich discussion of this sort of objectivity: Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 132-134.

what he dubs “testing in practice.”⁷⁷ I will try to expand on his discussion here, drawing on Taylor’s most recent work for illustrative purposes. This type of transition argument claims that theory Y might be shown to be an epistemological gain not through comparison to a rival theory but by direct appeal to a specific individual’s lived experiences, intuitions, or sense of what is true. In this last case the shift to a new theory is presented as an “error-reducing move” in which one tries to offer someone “an interpretation of themselves which ... if accepted, will bring about the self-justifying transition.”⁷⁸ Taylor notes that this form of argument is intensely ad hominem and common to biographical changes, as when we suddenly “see the light” and fall in love with someone, or else convert to a new political party or religious tradition.

At first blush this last type of transition argument perhaps appears the least relevant to social science hermeneutics. But in fact the opposite is true. In his 1983 essay “Social Theory as Practice,” Taylor showed how a special form of it is of unique importance to social science. In condensed form, Taylor’s claim in this essay is that certain forms of personal transformation are hugely important to social and political science because “in politics ... accepting a theory can itself transform what that theory bears on ... theory in this domain transforms its own object.”⁷⁹ That social science is able to transform the very reality it seeks to explain, is another way of returning to the thesis that human beings are self-interpreting. Typically, the objects of study in the natural sciences are unable to transform themselves through the phenomenon of redescription. Yet in the social sciences the very theories which seek to explain the world might infiltrate the self-understandings of the people in question, leading them to alter their identities, motives, and practices.⁸⁰ This is why, for example, the advent of Marxist economics and social science forever altered the course of modern politics, spawning parties, guerilla movements, and governments.

How does this bear on the above discussion about evaluating rival theories? Taylor’s claim is that a further way of establishing the strength of rival social science theories is “to judge how practices fare when informed by the theory.”⁸¹ Indeed, Taylor notes that in our ordinary political life it is quite common to evaluate social and political theories by assessing how they fare when informing practice. For instance, during the Cold War it was not uncommon to hear anti-communists like Leszek Kolakowski argue that the practical embodied consequences of Marxism were a Stalinist state, while radicals like Trotsky argued that the undistorted principles of Marxism had never been realized due to contingent and obstructing factors. Likewise, today one might debate the practical merits and demerits of the increasing influence of rational choice theory and preference maximizing economics on a growing number of human practices.⁸² The point being that in such cases a theory can be evaluated through practical validation: namely, whether the “practices informed by wrong theories will be in an important way self-defeating” or if instead our actions become “less haphazard and contradictory, less prone to produce what we did not want at all.”⁸³

⁷⁷ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 127.

⁷⁸ Taylor, “Explanation and Practical Reason,” 51, 53.

⁷⁹ Taylor, “Social Theory as Practice,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 101.

⁸⁰ Once again, in this claim I follow the leads of Abbey and Smith: Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 155, 157; Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 126-128.

⁸¹ Taylor, “Social Theory as Practice,” 113.

⁸² For a popular example of this spread see: Stephen Levitt and Stephen Dubner, *Freakonomics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

⁸³ Taylor, “Social Theory as Practice,” 109, 111.

Taylor's own work is again helpful in illuminating this feature of interpretive social science. So, for example, in *A Secular Age* Taylor argues that certain forms of twentieth-century communism have been tragically self-defeating because they were guided by flawed theories of what humans are in actual practice capable of becoming. In this vein, Taylor frequently cites Soviet Bolshevism, which began from the benevolent aspiration of transforming the human race, but later came to motivate systematic violence and misanthropy. As Taylor puts it:

The history of despotic socialism, i.e., twentieth-century communism, is replete with this tragic turn ... [in which] a lofty humanism posits high standards of self-worth, and a magnificent goal to strive towards ... but by this very token it encourages force, despotism, tutelage, ultimately contempt, and a certain ruthlessness in shaping refractory human material.⁸⁴

Taylor's argument here is meant to show how a certain theory of political and social life can in practice become self-defeating, as a form of heroic "philanthropy, in actual practice, can breed misanthropy."⁸⁵

Another, example of such argumentation (and one that is perhaps closer to the concerns of working political scientists today) appears in Taylor's recent work on nationalism in *Dilemmas and Connections*. Here Taylor contests a theory of nationalism that he claims shapes much of the politics of the modern world. This is the theory that each nation, as the cultural expression of a unique and sovereign people, is legitimately entitled to an independent political state. Taylor summarizes this theory of nationalism, which he claims has caused the world "bitter trouble," by citing Ernest Gellner's formulation that it is the "political principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent."⁸⁶

Much of Taylor's recent thought on nationalism pushes back against this tendency to equate national identity with absolute political sovereignty. For instance, this is evident in the work he has done to distinguish nationalist sentiment from patriotic identification.⁸⁷ But what is of interest for our purposes is another way in which Taylor attacks this theory. Namely, he questions its feasibility not at the theoretical but rather at the practical level. In this vein, Taylor argues that the theory that national units should be made congruent with political units is utopian and self-defeating. It is utopian because "thousands of groups ... can claim the status of 'nation'" such that even "giving each its parcel of land would still leave each pocket handkerchief state with national minorities, so inextricably mixed are the world's peoples."⁸⁸ But it is self-defeating because beginning from a claim about the dignity and right of every people to political independence, its "utopian scheme could only be carried through by massive ethnic cleansing" in order to purge those political units of further sub-groups of sovereign peoples.⁸⁹ So, this conception of nationalism, which justifies the view that each nation has "monopoly control over 'their' territory ... can only be applied by negating its own universalist ethical basis."⁹⁰ In this

⁸⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 697.

⁸⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 699.

⁸⁶ Taylor, "Democratic Exclusion (and Its Remedies?)" in *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011) 140.

⁸⁷ Taylor, "Nationalism and Modernity," in *Dilemmas and Connections*, 91.

⁸⁸ Taylor, "Democratic Exclusion," 140.

⁸⁹ Taylor, "Democratic Exclusion," 140.

⁹⁰ Taylor, "Democratic Exclusion," 140.

way, Taylor assesses the validity of this theory of political sovereignty by appealing to practical considerations and debating how true the theory can become in practice.

Of course, the point is not whether Taylor is right or wrong about nationalism or the “tragic” turn in twentieth-century communism. Rather it is to illustrate how an interpretive social science involves a critical dialogue between social scientific theories and lived political practice. Put differently, Taylor’s insight is that social science, far from being relativistic, is susceptible to objective evaluation according to how it fairs within concrete political practice. Theories of social science can be assessed not only in terms of how true they *are* but also of how true they can *become*. So we might only be convinced of the objective validity of a theory Y once we put it into concrete political practice. Because humans are self-interpreting animals, social science is never a straightforward matter of description; it is also always a question of how true a theory can become in and through political practice.

But this means that—contra his critics—Taylor has developed an interpretive theory capable of various forms of objective validation. Far from a non-rational, relativistic appeal to intuitions, Taylor has instead articulated a robust rationale for evaluating rival interpretations that includes comparing anomalies, successes, and the ability of particular social theories to guide practice. This last form of objectivity in particular shows that Taylor’s interpretivism is in no way too narrow. Instead, it actually frees social science to encompass both empirical research and the critical assessment of lived political practice. Thus, my defense of interpretivism has turned the tables on those who would criticize Taylor’s interpretivism as too narrow a paradigm. Far from suffering the dilemmas imputed to it, Taylor’s interpretivism actually starts to open novel connections that breakdown the long estrangement between empirical research and normative, critical work in the social sciences.

* * *

I have argued that Taylor’s form of interpretive theory is not vulnerable to the most trenchant criticisms made of it so far. Far from being stuck in describing self-understandings, it is actually inescapably evaluative and explanatory. Far from being relativistic, it is subject to forms of objective validation that help us reflect on the interactive relationship between social science theories and lived political practice. I must therefore conclude that it is not presently a defensible position to argue (as both Taylor’s critics and mainstream political scientists often do) that interpretivism is only good for “soaking and poking” or descriptive understanding. Rather, such arguments reflect confusion as to the state of the art in hermeneutics. I must also conclude that far from being too narrow, interpretivism offers a paradigm that is in important respects more capacious than contemporary social and political science. In particular, Taylor’s brand of interpretivism points the way to a social science that is both interpretive and critical.

Moreover, this chapter has presented these arguments by drawing on a novel, Heideggerian-inspired phenomenology of emotions. Such a phenomenology vindicates the basic ontological thesis of interpretive approaches, while also showing just how far critics of interpretivism are today from engaging with the key arguments. Finally, this leads us to consider afresh the ways in which Taylor’s interpretive social science generates innovative forms of validation that allow for a study of social reality that is at once critical, practical, and politically engaged.

Conclusion: An Interpretive and Humanistic Tradition of Political Philosophy

This work has dwelled at length within what is often considered an arcane and purely academic field of research: namely, the philosophy of social science. In particular, by examining the philosophies of Strauss, MacIntyre, and Taylor I have endeavored to critically analyze the emergence of a proper framework for the explanation of human action. These three philosophers are unanimous in their rejection of positivistic doctrines in the social sciences. Furthermore, MacIntyre and Taylor in particular have helped contribute to the vindication of a hermeneutic or interpretive approach.

Yet, as should be clear now, what first appear as obscure controversies within the philosophy of social science, in fact turn out to be of enormous consequence to the politics of our age. MacIntyre and Taylor have made especially clear the ways in which an interpretive social science helps us face the dilemma of what constitutes rational authority within modern political life. More specifically, the interpretive tradition helps us face the problem of positivistic or pseudo-scientific forms of knowledge, practice, power, and social organization in the world today. For, although MacIntyre and Taylor made the bulk of their contributions to the philosophy of social science during the late twentieth century, the problem of pseudo-scientific power and authority remains no less acute today.

Interpretive social science, in this regard, presents us with a humanistic political philosophy—one which champions the importance of ordinary human agency. This political philosophy is essentially humanistic in that it rejects scientific reductivism and impersonal, mechanistic explanations of human life. As part of this, an interpretive approach also criticizes the hierarchical politics of expert and elite authority. Thus, where positivism tends to legitimate technocratic, bureaucratic, and managerial authority, interpretivism instead insists on the need to listen to the ordinary self-understandings of regular citizens. This is because—if interpretive philosophers are right—there is no such thing as scientific expertise in politics, anymore than there are people who can predict the future by studying palms or reading horoscopes. Rather, authoritative understanding within political life is the fruit of practical know-how and fluency within the contexts in question. And the latter is an understanding that ordinary agents may master through their everyday experiences, and is not the result of adopting a formal, ahistorical, de-contextualized language of science.

A live problem for political philosophy today is the problem of drawing out the boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate scientific authority. This is an especially pressing task in societies in which the natural sciences have (albeit with good reason) acquired such tremendous prestige. An interpretive and humanistic political philosophy helps us negotiate the ongoing struggle to properly demarcate the uses and abuses of science today. For science, no less than religion or ideology, can be abused and turn into a form of superstition. It is *science as superstition* (i.e. science extended beyond its proper limits and bounds) which an interpretive and humanistic form of political philosophy vigorously opposes.

Moreover, as we have seen at length (particularly in chapters 3 through 6) the emergence of an identifiable interpretive and humanistic political philosophy, marks the historical convergence of a number of otherwise distinct traditions of thought. One of the signal accomplishments of MacIntyre and Taylor alike has been to bring these diverse strands together into a unified and coherent thread. So, these two thinkers have drawn for inspiration and support on the phenomenological hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, the post-analytic

philosophy of action of the late Wittgenstein and Peter Winch, the cultural studies of E.P. Thompson and the New Left, and the idealism of Hegel and his later defenders.

MacIntyre and Taylor stand at the confluence of these traditions, and present us with a living tradition—one which not only straddles the tired dichotomy between empirical, descriptive politics and normative theorizing, but also the no less tired dichotomy between “Right” and “Left” ideologies. This is because an interpretive, humanistic politics resists and unmaskes pseudo-scientific power wherever it finds it: be it the centralized state or corporate business. Everywhere this political philosophy calls out the practices of pseudo-science: in the therapies of care of the self, in the management schools of business, in the social engineering of policy programs, in the education policies of schools, in the reportage of the modern press. Indeed, if the investigations of these preceding pages are at all correct, interpretivism heralds a politics whose full potential has yet to be realized in practice. There is much work left to be done.