ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, CHARLES TAYLOR, AND THE DEMISE OF NATURALISM

Reunifying Political Theory and Social Science

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INTRODUCTION

The Problem of Superstition and the Divorce of Political Theory from Social Science

Imagine a far-flung, primitive society in which the sudden invention of an alphabet radically improves the lives of the inhabitants. Whereas once they communicated their traditions orally and were able to retain only limited amounts of knowledge, suddenly they are able to store vast quantities of information in written tomes. Their capacity for expression through written media also diversifies and deepens. Captivated by this great leap forward, this society develops a mania for writing. They write letters, journals, and books; they open institutes devoted to the written word and amass vast libraries. Their knowledge of the world advances in countless indisputable ways. They also, however, become so obsessed with written language that they gradually come to devalue speech in any form whatsoever. Various social and political movements that are hostile to speaking arise. Some of society’s brightest intellectuals demote speaking to a lesser form than written communication. “Speaking is dead,” these intellectuals adopt as their motto—which they write down because they refuse to speak it aloud anymore.

This, of course, is a wild fiction. But something like it has happened in our own time in the wake of the scientific revolution. For although the
natural sciences have undoubtedly proved to be a great leap forward, nevertheless their influence has also begun to overstep rational boundaries. As a result, our own society has become like that of the alphabet-obsessed primitives, in that the sciences (or at least a certain philosophical view of the sciences) have started to morph into various forms of superstition and political control. This may seem strange. Science is widely regarded as not only the exact opposite of superstition but also entirely apolitical. Yet science becomes superstitious and political precisely when it oversteps its bounds—when it seeks to replace and displace all prescientific forms of knowing and remake the world in its image.

This book examines how a certain mistaken philosophical conception of the natural sciences has inspired both superstitious and politically menacing forms of thinking in the domains of political theory and the social sciences. This phenomenon is far from new. There is a long history of scientism in the study of human culture and society—for example, the infamous eighteenth-century development of physiognomy, which claimed that an individual’s personality was completely determinable by the physical features of his or her face. Similarly in the nineteenth century, Auguste Comte called for a “social physics” and posited the “law of human development” as a three-stage evolution of history culminating in a form of scientific society that eliminated any serious need for religion or the humanities. Comte’s was of course only one of many “sciences” of history—including certain strains of social Darwinism, scientific socialism, technocratic utilitarianism, sociobiology, and so on—that crowded, confused, and menaced the political and intellectual life of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe. In the coming chapters I will explore in detail how in our own time, these attempts to imitate the natural sciences have become more sophisticated and subtle (if no less problematic) than the physiognomy, the social physics, and the rest of the teeming mass of pseudosciences of two centuries past.

But this book will also propose a way out of the scientism that clouds our age. In doing so, it will show how the reunification of social science and political theory can be achieved. Specifically, it will look to the argumentative resources of two recent philosophers—Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre—who each presented a new philosophical basis for social science theory in the face of reductive instrumental, technocratic,
and pseudoscientific ways of thinking. What I offer here is a philosophical history of two of the most important thinkers of the late twentieth century. My basic overarching assumption is that the story of how these two philosophers developed their views of social science generates a new approach to political inquiry that speaks to the concrete concerns of political theorists, social scientists, and policy makers. I will briefly elaborate its relevance to each of these three communities in turn.

First, Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s philosophical formulations of a new social science give political theorists a clear way to overcome the view that science is concerned with hard, objective facts while political theory mucks around in the subjectivity of values. Political theorists are often told that social scientists are concerned with empirical analysis, while theorists must be constrained to purely normative claims of value. But a proper recovery of Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s views of social science shows that empirical science and normative inquiry cannot be successfully dichotomized.

In overcoming this fact-value divide, this study offers political theorists and philosophers an alternative to approaches that have dominated Anglophone philosophy for over forty years. For example, one way of thinking of the late John Rawls’s massively influential project is as a vindication of political and normative philosophy after the challenges posed by the fact-value dichotomy. At midcentury, the logical positivists had famously declared political philosophy dead because its language was unverifiable and therefore essentially emotive (a discussion I return to in greater detail in later chapters). In other words, political theory was not a true form of knowledge because it dealt in subjective values and not in objective facts. In this context, Rawls’s project was received by many as a resuscitation of political and normative philosophy that showed 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 not running afoul of the philosophical division between facts and values. Although interest in logical positivism has long since waned, the notion that there is a dichotomy between facts and values has continued to remain largely unquestioned within mainstream
social science and analytic philosophy. Partly for this reason, Anglophone political philosophy has been hugely attracted to the Rawlsian paradigm.

By contrast, in rejecting a strong separation between normative and empirical research, Taylor and MacIntyre have opened new, non-Rawlsian routes out of the fact-value dichotomy. Recovering this aspect of their work thus debunks the myth that Anglophone political theory was made defunct by positivism until Rawls arrived on the scene and resuscitated the cadaver. Rather, the approaches to social science championed by Taylor and MacIntyre have roots extending back to the early 1960s, with normative ramifications that have yet to be fully realized by philosophers and political theorists. I hope to make these ramifications clear in the account that follows.

Second, social science in our own day is overwhelmed by the towering accomplishments of the natural sciences. Social scientists are everywhere on the defensive as they are asked to meet the same success in prediction, explanation, and technological control as is found in the precincts of physics and biology. But what if the predictive, technological-control model of scientific success is a mistaken standard when applied to the social sciences? My treatment of Taylor and MacIntyre is a narrative of the historical emergence of an alternative philosophy of social science to those that currently shape the majority of research programs in society and politics. As shall be made clear, Taylor and MacIntyre each drew on a long tradition of interpretive thought that includes the cultural studies of E. P. Thompson, the linguistic philosophies of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Peter Winch, and the phenomenology and hermeneutics of G. W. F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Although MacIntyre and Taylor are not sui generis, I believe they do represent the state of the art in interpretive philosophy of social science.

In this respect, the narrative that follows is meant to vindicate and revive interpretive insights in the face of skepticism and opposition. Over fifty years have passed since the much hailed “interpretive turn” emerged in the English-speaking world. Yet today the reforms of this turn have stalled. And although many social 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. Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s philosophical accounts of the social sciences run directly against
this tendency. Their philosophies give social scientists working in all
disciplines (from economics and sociology to political science and psy-
chology) an alternative theoretical framework for conducting research.
This interpretive framework also provides social scientists with a norma-
tively engaged way to do research, bridging the gap with political theory
and ethics. Social science and political theory can at last be reunified.

Third, policy makers and everyday political actors will find in these
pages the philosophical justification for more deliberative, democratic,
and antielitist approaches to politics. Both Taylor and MacIntyre, I will
argue, adopted conceptions of the human person that rebuff mechanis-
tic and reductive trends within modern policy making. Where modern
political authority is often buttressed by the specialized and supposedly
value-neutral vocabularies of economic and political experts, these phi-
losophers both give reasons to insist that explaining social reality requires
engaging with the beliefs, values, and meanings of nonexpert citizens.
Interpretive social science resists modernity’s tendency to authorize rule
by value-neutral experts, managers, and technocrats in favor of a more
participatory and humanistic vision of political life. Thus, in policy for-
modation also, the dichotomy between normative political theory and em-
pirical social science is overcome.

Of course, the affinities between Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s philoso-
phies have been observed by many. Both these philosophers are widely
known for their contributions to ethics and are often lumped together as
so-called communitarians for their influential critiques of Rawls. How-
ever, what has received very little recognition is the way the story of their
respective intellectual developments furnishes the resources for an alter-
native approach to the study of politics—one that fuses normative and
empirical research. No study I am aware of identifies the extent of the
parallels in their intellectual trajectories or the deep philosophical sym-
pathies that arise from considering their respective works as responses
to encroaching scientism. A new set of insights into Taylor’s and Mac-
Intyre’s philosophies, as well as an alternative and neglected approach to
political theory and social science, is afforded by reading them in tan-
dem within specific historical contexts. The Taylor and MacIntyre that
emerge in these pages are thus in some senses unfamiliar and strange.
This is not because the abundance of attention paid to Taylor’s work on,
say, multiculturalism and secularism or to MacIntyre’s on virtue ethics is wrong. Rather, it is because no one has yet considered in full the approach to social science that is articulated in their respective philosophies. Doing this requires seeing the complex ties between social science and normative theory. It also requires narrating Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s surprisingly parallel tracks through various historical contexts: the British New Left, analytic philosophy, phenomenology, and modern social science. In what follows I hope to recover a largely neglected element of Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s thought by engaging in a philosophical form of history—a historical narrative with philosophical analysis and implications.

The first context that must be grasped in order to recuperate the force of Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s respective positions is that of twentieth-century “naturalism.” In other words, understanding Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s alternatives first necessitates an understanding of the philosophical and political challenges they sought to overcome. These challenges are those of a society grown superstitious because of the increasing encroachment of mechanistic, instrumental, and technocratic ways of treating human life. I must begin my account, therefore, with a brief picture of what this political philosophy is intended to refute: social science morphed into superstitious forms of reasoning and domination, frequently dubbed “naturalism” by philosophers.