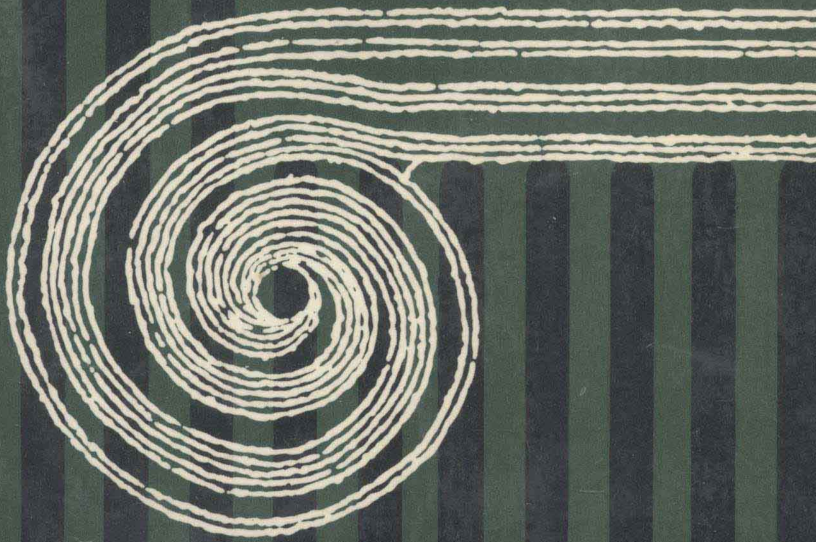
DAVID BRAYBROOKE

Philosophy of Social Science



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PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

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MEMORIAL NOTE FOR MONROE C. BEARDSLEY (1915-1985)

One of us worked with Monroe from the start, as co-editor of the *Foundations of Philosophy* series, and remembers vividly how much his breadth of philosophic interest and his wide acquaintanceship among good philosophers did to shape the series in its formative years. His sense of style gave him a keen editorial eye, while his talent for teaching led him to suggest changes that were genuinely constructive and usually appreciated.

The other of us joined the team of *Foundations* co-editors more recently and found that Monroe's contributions to the series remained significant. Both of us feel an immeasurable loss; but we resolve that future series volumes will maintain the standards that Monroe did so much to help establish in Philosophy and in pedagogy.

Elizabeth Beardsley
Temple University

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Georgetown University

In Memoriam

BROOKS OTIS

a great humanist, from whom I first
heard of Weber and of Keynes

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Foundations of Philosophy

Many of the problems of philosophy are of such broad relevance to human concerns, and so complex in their ramifications, that they are, in one form or another, perennially present. Though in the course of time they yield in part to philosophical inquiry, they may need to be rethought by each age in the light of its broader scientific knowledge and deepened ethical and religious experience. Better solutions are found by more refined and rigorous methods. Thus, one who approaches the study of philosophy in the hope of understanding the best of what it affords will look for both fundamental issues and contemporary achievements.

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Elizabeth Beardsley / *Monroe Beardsley* / *Tom L. Beauchamp*
Temple University / Temple University / Georgetown University

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CHAPTER ONE

Three Sides of Social Science

Not so long ago, there appeared in the "True Facts" section of the *National Lampoon* the following report:

> A bus carrying 5 passengers was hit by a car at the corner of Sarah Street and Cook Avenue in Saint Louis, Missouri. By the time police arrived at the scene of the accident, 14 bystanders had boarded the bus and begun complaining of back injuries. All were taken to a nearby hospital.[1]

"How absurd!" we cry. An explanation of why it is absurd is hardly called for, though the explanation comes forward immediately. People are not supposed to act that way. The bystanders were not—before or after boarding the bus—in a position to attribute their back injuries to the accident. The rule is that one can make such attributions only after being causally affected by the accident in question. It is a further rule that one can move on from such a complaint to press claims for damages only when the attribution is in place. The bystanders' complaints were flagrantly out of place in two ways: first, in the attribution, which the bystanders implicitly made by raising the complaints inside the bus; second, in the claims, which we understand the attribution to be preparing for.

We may learn something from spelling these matters out carefully. However, if social science does this for us, it risks being banal, telling us little more than we already knew. It would be different if we were outsiders. Suppose we did not know about the practice of suing for damages or

[1] *National Lampoon* (1981): 87.

know that public transportation agencies are regarded as fair game for such litigation. We would find both the bystanders' behavior and the amusement created by the report of it very puzzling. Social science, just in helping us make sense of what was going on, could then tell us a lot that would be news to us. We are outsiders when we find ourselves dealing with exotic cultures. In another culture, perhaps, no one can get back complaints treated except by joining a group of patients collected from the site of an accident. We are also outsiders when we deal with subcultures not our own in our own society. Law courts and the legal profession constitute a subculture. Social science can tell us a lot, for example, which we could not find out by reading the laws on the books, about how litigation is actually carried on in court and on the way to court. It can tell us what outcomes to expect for various sorts of claims for damages. Would claims as baseless as those that the bystanders are preparing to press ever get a hearing in court? If not, at what stage and by what devices are they blocked?

THREE VIEWS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Some philosophers incline to hold that everything that can be intelligibly and suitably attempted in social science consists wholly in bringing to light what the actions that people do signify. Social science tells us when the actions are appropriate—in place—and what expectations they give rise to. I shall call this the "interpretative" view of social science. The philosophers who hold it would not agree, nor would I, that social science so conceived is confined to explaining to us how we are to understand what is going on in cultures or subcultures not our own. They would recognize the risk of banality. They would point out, however, that there are all sorts of subtle aspects of our own actions that we probably have not reflected on closely. Just when, for example, are we prepared in ordinary life to hold some person or firm responsible for injuring another? How far does our everyday conception of responsibility match that upheld by the courts?

Interpretative questions of the sorts favored by these philosophers take us inside the bus incident and lead us to view it as the participants do. We appreciate, for example, what is in the mind of the bystanders. We thus understand their actions as virtual participants ourselves. We also participate, virtually at least, by reacting to what they do and intend to do. We laugh at it, deplore it, let it pass with tolerant amusement, or prepare to block it. Yet is this all that we might be moved to think about the incident? Are there not other questions that we could raise about it, which would not fit into the interpretative view?

There certainly seem to be. Some of them would arise for us if we were interested—on the part of the city, the bus company, or the insurance company—in keeping claims for damages within manageable limits. We

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would then want to find out what we could about the times and circumstances that led people to start up such far-fetched claims for damages as the bystanders, getting on the bus, were preparing to make. Are they penniless? Unemployed? Heavy gamblers who have had a run of bad luck? With these questions, we would be looking for causes of the bystanders' behavior. We would be hoping to discover, along with the causes, generalizations about the times and circumstances under which claims like the bystanders' are forthcoming. Do such claims start up less often on payday, when people feel flush with funds? More often after big games, when people have lost a lot of money in heavy betting? More often in hard times than in prosperous ones? These are questions looking for connections between statistical quantities. We might hope, however, to get beyond the statistical connections to causal generalizations asserting that whenever certain conditions were satisfied—and only then—would there be people making claims like the bystanders'.

Philosophers and social scientists (more often, as things stand, social scientists than philosophers) who think such questions constitute the agenda of social science take what I shall call the "naturalistic" view. (It is often, somewhat misleadingly, called "positivism.") If it has any room at all for the questions about rules and meaning that preoccupy the interpretative view, the naturalistic view tends to underrate them. It finds them too banal to be interesting. The naturalistic view prefers questions that according to it invite treatment by methods taken over from the natural sciences. These methods commonly begin with the observation of loose connections. They look for various conditions that make the occurrence of certain phenomena more probable. The methods in question aim to identify more perfect connections as inquiry proceeds. In the end, ideally, they look for conditions that lead without exception to the phenomena in question.

On the interpretative view, it is a mistake to try to use the methods of the natural sciences in the study of social phenomena. For just in being social such phenomena imply the presence of human intelligence, intention, and choice. One champion of the interpretative view, Charles Taylor, in a typical expression of it, holds that social science in the naturalistic tradition is impaired by "sterile" notions about methods. In consequence, and to its dire impoverishment, it "excludes a consideration of social reality as characterized by intersubjective and common meanings."[2] It is, on the interpretative view, a mistake, too, to think it even possible to have laws and theories about social phenomena comparable to those that we have for the realm of nature. Some say that it is impossible to make descriptions of social phenomena value-free. Purported scientific findings about politics will therefore always be distorted by political prejudice. Some say that it

[2]Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," *The Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1971–1972): 3–51.

is morally wrong to degrade human beings into objects of would-be scientific study. Others say that, degrading or not, to do so is bound to belittle or ignore what is most distinctive and significant about social phenomena. It is said—and here critics resisting the use of scientific methods are joined by some critics championing those methods—there are no exact, universal laws about social phenomena, understood in the terms that currently make those phenomena significant to us. Some go on to say that there are no causal generalizations of any sort to be had with such terms.

At the very least, it may be objected that the search for causal generalizations, fruitless or not, takes us very far away from the joke about the bus incident. In the crossplay of meanings and rules lies the heart of the joke. A third view of social science takes us back toward this crossplay but raises considerations too melancholy to revive our laughter. On this view—which I shall call the "critical" view of social science—the questions to be raised about the bus incident most prominently include questions like the following: How is it that the bystanders feel so little responsibility for the public institutions of their society (if the government runs the buses and will have to pay damages)? Alternatively, if some privately owned transportation firm is involved there seems to be a breakdown in trust between the bystanders and the firm. They are all agents and participants in market arrangements. But why are the bystanders not willing to abide by the rules of the market, which exclude force and fraud? In either case, are they alienated from their own society? Do they have cause to be, in disadvantages imposed upon them? The critical view refuses to take at face value the rules that may be cited by the interpretative view. It wants to know, whose interest is served by the rules? How do the people whose interest is served get into the position to exercise power? Through what devices does that power operate?

Many philosophers and social scientists who adopt the critical view incline to think of their view as superseding the other two. More exactly, they have so little sympathy with the naturalistic view that they incline to think of social science insofar as it answers to their view as doing a better job of what the interpretative approach begins. So the critical view, too, in its way, tends to demand exclusive rights. Which of the three views shall we choose? Many people—many social scientists—may resist choosing between them. Rightly so. Yet nothing like a systematic acknowledgment of the merits of all three views prevails. Few people, moreover, seem to realize how robust all three views are, and how complexly interconnected.

ARE THERE THREE SIDES CORRESPONDING TO THE THREE VIEWS?

All three views will have merit if each picks out features of social science that the others disregard. To each of them, furthermore, there will then

correspond some instances in social science. That they have such instances, at least potentially, has already been established, one might argue, by the differences in the three lines of questions raised about the bus incident. Yet it would be much more convincing evidence of correspondence and merit to produce actual specimens. Moreover, if such specimens are produced, one of the main things that I have to say about the three views will already be established: None of them can be granted what each tends to claim—exclusive truth.

I am about to produce three actual specimens. The naturalistic one carries out a comparison of American and Canadian political parties. The interpretative one aims to expose certain life patterns of unemployed (or underemployed) black laborers in Washington, D.C. The critical one aims to expose certain limitations of government and party competition in liberal democracies, particularly as regards policies about employment. In the course of examining these specimens, beginning in this chapter but continuing in the succeeding ones, I shall be elaborating my account of the three sides of social science that answer to the three views. (I shall revert again and again to the same specimens throughout the book. They have been chosen just because they offer such rich possibilities for comment.)

The differences between the three sides, striking at first sight, will survive this closer examination. Social scientists working on any one of the three sides will characteristically be preoccupied with different topics. They will be asking different questions in a different style and spirit. They will be pursuing different objectives. They will be seeking to give different sorts of explanations. They will be looking for different sorts of impact upon current policies and activities.

Yet as the argument proceeds, I shall be showing how these real differences coexist with a great number of parallels. On all three sides, for example, there are group facts as well as person facts, opportunities for quantitative methods, and parallel successes in meeting the standards of empirical science. I shall also be showing that there are many points of mutual dependence between the three sides. In this demonstration, I shall concentrate upon the relation between the naturalistic and interpretative sides. In methods and sorts of questions, I shall argue beforehand, the critical side of social science reduces to a mixture of methods and sorts of questions from the other two sides. The reduction leaves standing nevertheless all the important features that entitled the critical side to distinctive attention in the first place.

The naturalistic and interpretative sides are complementary in ways that go far beyond mutual support—itself remarkable—in the exchange of information. The complementarity extends to mutual presupposition between the key ideas of the two sides: causal regularities on the naturalistic side; settled social rules on the interpretative. In the end, it will become plain that the interdependence of the two sides, hence of the three, is so intimate that the three sides of social science are consistent with fundamental unity.

It is not a homogeneous unity, as in a bottleful of milk. It is a unity, but a heterogeneous one, as in a cloth woven from yarns of different textiles or (as in the case of critical social science) of different colors.

OTHER ISSUES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

The book is thus organized to deal chiefly with the question, How are the three sides of social science, once recognized, related to one another? Will the book cover enough of the standard issues in the philosophy of social science to serve as an introduction to the field? It will. The chief question—the superquestion—of the book invites attention to the standard issues. They will figure in the argument as subordinate questions. A recent list of "the four major questions for the philosophy of social science" includes "(1) the cross-cultural question; (2) the humanism-scientism question; (3) the individualism-collectivism question; (4) the fact-value question."[3] The list comes from a book very different in outlook from this one, but I think it is a reasonable list. The present book will have something substantial to say about all four questions on it.

It will have most to say about the humanism-scientism question. Indeed, this question runs through the book, since the interpretative view of social science has been arrayed against the naturalistic view precisely as a means of defending humanism against scientism—that is to say, against unwarranted extensions of natural science. I shall also be treating the individualism-collectivism question in a number of passages expressly set aside for the purpose of distinguishing person facts from group facts and discussing their relations. My treatment of the fact-value questions—Can we establish facts in social science without committing ourselves on values? Should we try to?—will be concentrated in the discussion of critical social science. This is the connection in which it arises most urgently as a programmatic difference within social science. The cross-cultural question will be treated and answered in the course of recognizing that the regularities, like the settled social rules, discovered by social science may be transitory and may vary from one culture or region to another. I shall argue that discovering these regularities is a respectable scientific achievement notwithstanding; and so is discovering the rules.

The book will treat a number of standard issues somewhat more particularized than any on the list cited, among them intentionality and the distinction between reasons and causes. I do not claim that I shall be treating all standard issues. One that I shall do little more than refer to, then set

[3]Graham MacDonald and Philip Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science* (London: Routledge, 1981), 1.

aside, is the nature of functional explanations. Even a book that dispensed with an overall argument in favor of an issue-by-issue survey would inevitably omit some issues and slight others. More important, it would not offer the compensation that comes with my overall argument. Answering the superquestion about the relation of the three sides, I shall not only be offering a resolution of the most salient current controversy in the philosophy of social science, a controversy generated by the three views. I shall also, by reconciling these philosophical views to the extent that they admit of reconciliation, be giving a comprehensive philosophical account of the character of social science.

NATURALISTIC SOCIAL SCIENCE

Producing a specimen of naturalistic social science will, as things currently stand in the philosophy of social science, create more surprise and more controversy than producing a specimen from either of the other two sides. With philosophers, naturalistic social science is quite out of fashion. But I shall bring forward my first specimen on the naturalistic side, choosing one that in overall preoccupation concerns facts quite different from those that preoccupy the interpretative view. Philosophers and social scientists who hold that view often think only of how individual persons act in the presence of others ready with the appropriate expectations to interpret the actions. They often quite ignore facts that have to do with how groups operate—groups maybe as large as nations—together with the institutions that the groups maintain.

In a famous article, Leon D. Epstein, an American political scientist, took up the problem, "Why do Canadian political parties, unlike American parties, put in disciplined and cohesive performances in the national legislature?"[4] Canadian parties in Parliament in fact vote as blocs just as British parties do. Yet in other respects Canadian politics is more like politics in the United States than it is like politics in Britain. Like the United States, Canada is a diverse nation spread out over a large land area (F_1). Like the United States, it tends not to divide politically on a class or ideological basis (F_2). Like the United States, it is organized constitutionally as a federal system (F_3). Like the United States, it has national parties that outside the national legislature are no more than very loose federations of relatively strong state or provincial parties (F_4). What Canada does have in common with Britain is the British parliamentary system (F_5). Executive authority rests in a strong cabinet selected from legislators belonging to the party holding a majority in the House of Commons. It is

[4]Leon D. Epstein, "A Comparative Study of Canadian Parties," *The American Political Science Review* 58 (1964): 46–59.

this circumstance that Epstein singles out as the solution to the problem. He holds that Canadian political parties are cohesive in Parliament because they operate under the same sort of parliamentary system as the British one.

Notice how Epstein arrived at this conclusion. Beginning with the problematic feature (F_c, parties cohesive in the legislature) that Canada shares with Britain but not with the United States, he asks in what other respects is Canada like Britain and not like the United States? In the other respects that he considers, F_1, F_2, F_3, F_4, F_5, he observes that Canada is like the United States and unlike Britain in all except respect F_5. The respects in which there is no difference can hardly be supposed to cause Canada to be different in respect to party cohesiveness. F_5, however, is an eligible candidate for being a cause. In F_5, as in the problematic feature, Canada is like Britain rather than the United States.

This reasoning illustrates the methods outlined by J. S. Mill for identifying causes.[5] The illustration shows, moreover, that the methods admit of application, just as Mill claimed, in a case where we have no opportunity to conduct experiments. Then we must rely on sorting out observations of phenomena that take place without design and intervention on our part. Mill says, "If two or more instances of the phenomenon under investigation have only one circumstance in common, the circumstance in which alone all the instances agree is the cause (or effect) of the given phenomenon." This is the Method of Agreement, illustrated in the present case by the comparison of Canada with the United Kingdom. Mill says further,

> If an instance in which the phenomenon under investigation occurs and an instance in which it does not occur have every circumstance in common save one, that one occurring only in the former, the circumstance in which alone the two instances differ is the effect, or the cause, or an indispensable part of the cause, of the phenomenon.

This is the Method of Difference, illustrated in the present case by the comparison of Canada with the United States. Since both Methods are present, we may also say that the present case illustrates the method that Mill gives third, the Joint Method of Agreement and Difference.

Now, it may be asked whether Epstein's study illustrates any of these methods very exactly. Have the circumstances been so exhaustively enumerated that we can be sure that Canada has only one circumstance (besides parties disciplined in Parliament) in common with the United Kingdom, and every circumstance save one in common with the United States? Surely not. This would be true even if, with a good test for relevance, we could

[5]John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic,* 7th ed. (London: Longman's Green, 1868), 425–448. See also J. L. Mackie, "Mill's Methods of Induction," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan/Free Press, 1967), vol. 5, 324–332.

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