

*Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and the Demise of Naturalism:
Reunifying Political Theory and Social Science*

by Jason Blakely

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Margaret Thatcher supposedly said that being powerful is like being a lady: if you have to tell people you are, you are not. Is the same true of being a science? Readers interested in that question, ethicists, and students of human society will probably enjoy Jason Blakely's book, *Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and the Demise of Naturalism*, which argues that MacIntyre and Taylor's approach to social science, which Blakely calls interpretivism, has a great deal to teach us about the best ways to study human behavior and society. Blakely shows that, as disciplines, the social sciences are more akin to the humanities than to the physical sciences, precisely because of "the deep disjuncture between human beings, who are creative, rational, self-interpreting agents, and the other objects that compose the universe," which are not (113).

Blakely, an assistant professor of political science at Pepperdine, focuses on Charles Taylor (b. 1931) and Alasdair MacIntyre (b. 1929), both of whom came to philosophy and social concerns via the British New Left. About half of Blakely's concise book traces the remarkably similar intellectual backgrounds of these two philosophers, beginning with their dissatisfaction with Marxism and naturalism. In this context, naturalism is the idea that human action can be studied and predicted just as scientifically—which is to say empirically and objectively—as nuclear physics or butterflies. Marxists call this dialectical or historical materialism. Next, Blakely traces Taylor and MacIntyre's formation in analytic philosophy and education in Heidegger and Aristotle before finally examining their

original but related contributions to the philosophy of social and moral understanding.

As Blakely explains, both Taylor and MacIntyre advance sophisticated arguments against naturalism in favor of a more humane, interpretivist approach to the study of people and society. Here interpretivism refers to the special interpretive task that falls to all students of humanity: unlike the objects of natural science, the objects of social sciences, people, are strongly affected and motivated by self-understanding, that is, by their own narrative accounts of themselves. Since "human action [and human identity and human motives are] expressive of these self-interpretations" (72), the study of human action, whether in ethics, political science, economics, psychology, or any social science, needs first to grasp "the self-interpretations, meanings, and language" (73) of whoever is being studied. That is roughly how Taylor puts it, while MacIntyre reasons that since "man is a teleological, storytelling animal, social-science explanation must conform to the object of study" (73) by being narrative and teleological, that is, attentive to ends, or the flourishing of things according to their natures. While "reductive neuroscience of a certain kind and . . . psychological behaviorism . . . are examples of the attempt to reduce human behavior to material, impersonal causes" (73), wise scholars take heed of interpretivism and consider, in addition to material and impersonal sources of human activity, those motivations that are most personal, namely, a person's self-interpretations, desires, and ends. Thus Blakely, following

MacIntyre and Taylor, invites us to become interpreters of interpretation if we want to get anywhere in the social sciences. Without denying the importance of quantitative and statistical work, Blakely and the philosophers he studies would have us go further and recognize that “the social sciences are dealing with the same explanatory form as history and even literature. The social sciences are one of the humanities” (96).

Blakely also devotes an interesting chapter to the old fact–value dichotomy popularized by David Hume, the gist of which is that we can never get from an empirical statement to a moral imperative, or from “is” to “ought.” The natural conclusion of this premise is, of course, that we should concern ourselves only with what is, not with what ought morally to be. This belief seems to be built into modern science, and according to Blakely, it has a “bewitching” effect on the social sciences (79). Both Taylor and MacIntyre critique the fact–value divide, denying that social sciences should attempt to be value-neutral in the same way as astronomy or marine biology. Instead, Blakely, MacIntyre, and Taylor urge social scientists not to purchase neutrality in their accounts of human action “at the cost of relativism” (90). Blakely advises them to either (a) follow Taylor and admit that human wants, needs, and purposes inevitably shape all human acts, including acts of social research and description; (b) recognize with MacIntyre that the “rationality guiding social science is [inevitably] normative of the rationality guiding actual social actors in the world”; or (c) do both. In any case, the desired result is for social researchers to see that their endeavors, however specialized, are still part of ethics or moral philosophy.

In connection with the fact–value dichotomy, Blakely makes an important point that shapes the book’s final chapter. He observes that in their arguments against naturalism, both Taylor and MacIntyre effectively turn the tables on false objectivity in social science: “For where naturalism often presents itself as a strictly scientific endeavor, an interpretive approach instead sees it as being used to

fortify a particular politics—one that justifies the authority of experts over and against the supposedly unscientific value commitments of non-experts. . . . Interpretive philosophy thus generates a critique of the technocratic hierarchies of modernity” (92–93). We will have to hope that Blakely spends more time on this issue in books to come.

The final chapter outlines how interpretive approaches like Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s contribute to a reunion of the empirical and the normative, or moral, in social research, and Blakely justly credits other philosophers who have made similar contributions, including Hegel, E. P. Thompson, Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Aristotle (113). Yet the final paragraph, somewhat surprisingly, assumes a darker and more sober tone, concluding that a naturalistic approach to the study of man can be as dangerous a superstition as any: “The interpretive tradition is a precious resource for resistance against the increasing naturalism that dominates our technocratic age. For every day this distorting power advances, stripping humanity of its dignity and replacing it with the levers and gears of a deadened machine” (113).

Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and the Demise of Naturalism should be read by all social researchers, and it merits a place in academic libraries, especially those that specialize in postgraduate philosophy or social science. It also belongs in Catholic ethics and theology libraries. Some readers will regret that Blakely does not address religion’s influence on Taylor and MacIntyre (who are both Catholics) or the links between these men and contemporary forms of Thomistic, Augustinian, and Benedictine social reflection. But then, you cannot have everything in one book, and what we do have in this one gives rich promise that Blakely’s future work will be both useful and important if it is as adept as this first volume.

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