

FOUNDATIONS OF POLICY ANALYSIS: BEYOND THE SUBJECT/OBJECT DICHOTOMY

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Introduction

Policy analysis underpins and informs policy making, even if there is a lengthy lag between policy analysis and its gradual absorption into political debate. Once established as common sense, a text of policy analysis becomes incredibly powerful, because it delineates not only what is the object of knowledge but also what it is sensible to talk about or suggest. If one thinks and acts outside the framework of the dominant text of policy analysis, he risks more than simply the judgment that his recommendations are wrong; his entire moral attitude may be ridiculed or seen as dangerous just because his theoretical assumptions are deemed unrealistic. Therefore, defining common sense and, in essence, what is ‘reality’ and ‘realistic’ is the ultimate act of political power. Policy analysis does not simply explain or predict, it tells us what possibilities exist for human action and intervention; it defines both our explanatory possibilities and our moral and practical horizons. Hence, ontology and epistemology matter, and the stakes are far more considerable than at first sight seem to be the case.

1. The traditional epistemological schools

Empiricism: it is the view that the only grounds for justified belief are those that rest ultimately on observation. Based on the philosophies of David Hume and John Locke, the central empiricist premise is that science must be based on a phenomenalist nominalism, i.e. the notion that only statements that refer to observable phenomena are cognitively significant and that any statements that do not refer to independent atomized objects cannot be granted the status of justified knowledge

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(Kolakowski, 1972, pp. 11-17). According to empiricism, science can be founded on a bedrock of such objective sense data ('pure observation'), and from this bedrock can be established, by induction, the entire structure of science.

But empiricism has the following defects: (i) The epistemological warrant offered by empiricism is very narrow, because it is based on direct observation, and, therefore, it rules out any consideration of (unobservable) things, e.g. social structures, or even social facts (which, according to E. Durkheim, refer to those shared social concepts and understandings such as crime, which he argued that should be treated as 'things'). Hence, a strict empiricism actually offers a very restricted understanding of 'reality'. (ii) Empiricism does not allow us to talk about 'causes', since these are unobservable. In the context of empiricism, causation is reduced to mere correlation, and our enquiry is therefore limited to that of 'prediction' and cannot involve 'explanation'. (iii) The kind of pure unvarnished perception requested by empiricists is impossible. John Searle has pointed out that subjectivity is an essential characteristic of conscious states (Searle, 1992), and W.V.O. Quine has pointed out that theory is involved in all empirical observation, thus making absolute objectivism impossible (Quine, 1961).

Rationalism: it is based on the philosophies of René Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Baruch Spinoza, and it has been the historical counterpoint to Hume's and Locke's empiricism. Rationalism was very much influenced by the scientific revolution of Newton, Kepler and Galileo, and thus it has subscribed to the view that the kinds of mechanisms discovered by the previous natural scientists were quite different kinds of things to those which people can observe. In other words, rationalists stress that perception or observation is never sufficient on its own, and it requires logical processing. The central rationalist premise is that the sense cannot give us an understanding of the mechanisms that generate the observables we perceive and that the notion of logic, which is a property of the human intellect, can work out the relationship between observables and deduce the causal mechanisms at work. We can only gain knowledge of the world by using logic in order to process-explain what we observe or experience. This notion of rationality, with mathematics as the exemplar, was based on a foundation of certain truth, which for Descartes was an intuitive truth known by all minds; thus he declared "cogito ergo sum" (I think therefore I am): reflective minds could doubt everything, except they could not doubt that they were thinking, and this provides the basis for secure knowledge about the world.

But rationalism has the following defects: (i) There is more than one kind of rationality, if, in Cartesian spirit, we take it to mean a deductive system based on intuitive axioms. Different individuals might claim that their intuitions were different from those of others. For instance, Descartes claimed that Euclidean geometry was absolute, being based on definitive axioms, but Riemann, Lobachevsky and other mathematicians have created non-Euclidean geometries, based on different intuitive axioms. Moreover, N.A. Vasiliev, Jan Łukasiewicz, Hans Reichenbach, A.H.S. Korzybski, Lotfi Zadeh, R.A. Wilson and other logicians have created various non-Aristotelian logics, based on different intuitive axioms. (ii) Man is a “symbolic animal”, according to Ernst Cassirer’s terminology (Cassirer, 1955), and, therefore, the fundamental significations (i.e. the values) that underpin human action must explicitly find their position in every meaningful discussion about social systems.

Pragmatism: it is based on the philosophies of William James, Charles Pierce and John Dewey, and it attempts to combine the rationalist thesis that the mind is always active in interpreting experience and observation with the empiricist thesis that revisions in our beliefs are to be made as a result of experience. According to pragmatism, theories are underdetermined by the evidence, and, therefore, scientists have to choose between a number of theories that may all be compatible with the available evidence. Hence, as William James has put it, truth is “only the expedient in the way of belief”, meaning that we need to adjust our ideas as to what is true as experience unfolds. Pragmatism, then, defines what is true as what is most useful in the way of belief (a utilitarian epistemology).

However, pragmatism is ultimately self-defeating. Even though pragmatism appears to reflect a dynamic attitude toward reality and epistemology and to be a progressive epistemological stance, it is deeply conservative and assigns a deeply pathetic role to human consciousness. By stressing the adaptation of our ideas to an unfolding experience, pragmatists ignore the dynamic continuity between the reality of the world and the reality of consciousness, a dynamic continuity that allows conscious beings to impose their intentionality on reality, instead of merely adapting to a reality that is external to their consciousness. Conscious beings are not merely obliged to look for methods of adaptation to reality, but they can utilize and restructure reality according to their intentionality.

2. Contemporary epistemological debates

Scientific realism: it is based on the philosophies of Roy Bhaskar (1978) and Rom Harré (1986). The central premise of scientific realism is that it makes sense to talk of a world outside of experience. Thus, scientific realism is primarily concerned with the uncovering of the structures and things of an objective scientific cosmos. Scientific realism treats theoretical concepts such as electrons or sets in the same way as so-called 'facts', and, therefore, it argues that the empiricist conception of the role of theories (as heuristic) is wrong. Bhaskar distinguishes among the real, the actual and the empirical: the first refers to what entities and mechanisms make up the world, the second to events, and the third to that which we experience. According to Bhaskar, empiricism makes the mistake of looking at the third of these as a way of explaining the other two so that it reduces ontological questions to epistemological questions. Furthermore, Bhaskar rejects rationalism, too, by arguing that it too reduces ontology to epistemology by its reliance on theoretically necessary conceptual truths to explain the world. In contrast to empiricism and rationalism, realist science is an attempt to describe and explain structures and processes of the world that exist independently of human consciousness.

But many of the arguments of scientific realism have been falsified by recent advances in science, especially in the context of quantum theory and cybernetics. Niels Bohr, who made foundational contributions to understanding atomic structure and quantum mechanics, is reported to have said to Werner Heisenberg, who was another great pioneer of quantum physics: in the field of atomic and sub-atomic physics, "language can be used only as in poetry", since, like poets, physicists are not concerned so much with the description of facts as with the creation of images (quoted in Bronowski, 1974, p. 340). Moreover, in the same spirit, Alfred Whitehead, who co-authored the epochal *Principia Mathematica* with B. Russell, has argued that nature is always in a state of becoming and that the reality of the natural world is the natural becoming itself (Whitehead, 1944, p. 106).

Within the framework of cybernetics, epistemologists focus on the observer in addition to what is observed. Lynn Segal (1986) and Ernst von Glasersfeld (1987) have explained that, according to modern cybernetics, scientific laws should not be considered as discoveries, as one, for instance, might discover an island in an ocean, but they should be considered as inventions by which scientists explain regularities in their experiences. As I have argued in my book *The Rediscovery of Western*

Esotericism, cybernetics stresses that “persons interact with reality, and hence they construct and reconstruct reality” (Laos, 2012, Chapter 7).

The most catalytic argument against scientific realism is the following: if the structure of the world were totally distinct from the structure of consciousness, then the latter could not gain even partial knowledge of the first (Laos, 2012, Chapters 5-7).

Hermeneutics: it is based on the philosophies of Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl, Max Weber, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Its central premise is anti-naturalist in that it does not see the social world as in any sense amenable to the empiricist and especially the positivist epistemology. Hermeneutics, having developed out of textual analysis, emphasizes the difference between the analysis of nature (‘explanation’) and the analysis of the mind (‘understanding’). According to hermeneutics, we can only understand the world by our being caught up in a system of significance. Persons analyze and act within what Gadamer refers to as an “horizon”, by which he means their beliefs, preconceptions and situatedness and which both enables and constrains them. Thus, from the viewpoint of hermeneutics, the notions of truth and reason are consequences of man’s embeddedness in systems of significance (value systems). Epistemology, hence, can never be something prior to or independent of culture and has to be seen as secondary to ontology.

Critical Theory: it has developed out the work of the Frankfurt School in the inter-war years (see for instance Held, 1980), and its most influential thinker has been Jurgen Habermas. In his book *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1987, first published in 1968), Habermas puts forward the thesis that there are three types of knowledge: empirical-analytical (the natural sciences), historical-hermeneutic (concerned with meaning and understanding), and critical sciences (concerned with emancipation). According to Habermas, each of these types of knowledge has its own set of “cognitive interests”, respectively: those of a technical interest in control and prediction, a practical interest in understanding, and an emancipatory interest in enhancing freedom. From the viewpoint of the Critical School, there can be so such thing as true (interest-free) empirical statements (e.g. in the realm of the natural sciences independent of the knowledge-constitutive interest in control and prediction).

However, in the late 1960s, Habermas moved away from the above-mentioned rather restricted notion of knowledge-constitutive interests toward the development of what he calls a theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984; 1987). Thus, his epistemology is based on the

notion of discourse ethics or universal pragmatics, according to which knowledge emerges out of a consensus theory of truth. Central to his epistemology is his idea of an ‘ideal speech situation’, which he sees as implicit in the act of communication and as rationally entailing moral and normative commitments. The ‘ideal speech situation’ is based on the notion that acts of communication necessarily presuppose that statements are: (i) comprehensible, (ii) true, (iii) right and (iv) sincere (see Outhwaite, 1994, Chapter 3). Habermas is aware that the ideal speech situation is something that is not commonly found in communicative actions, but he believes that we could in principle reach a consensus on the validity of the previous four claims, and that this consensus would be achieved if we envisaged a situation in which coercive power and distortion were removed from communication so that the “force of the better argument prevails” (Outhwaite, 1994, p. 40). Hence, Habermas, following Kantianism, seeks to avoid the simple objectivism of positivism whilst at the same time refusing to endorse the kind of relativism implicit in traditional hermeneutics.

Post-modernism: it seeks the overthrow of virtually all preceding positions of epistemology, and it is strongly influenced by the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Michel Foucault, one of the most influential post-modern scholars, argues that “nothing in man –not even his body– is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men” (Foucault, 1977, p.153); therefore, there is no escape from the functioning of power and contingency, and struggle is always necessary to avoid domination.

Is the will for truth a truth, or is it simply another name for the will for power (and authority)? “What in us really wants ‘truth’?” Nietzsche’s answer is the will for power. This is Foucault’s epistemological thesis, too. Moreover, following this Nietzschean epistemological argument, Jacques Derrida, one of most influential post-modernists, developed the theory of deconstruction, according to which texts collapse under their own weight once it is demonstrated that their ‘truth content’ is merely the “mobile army of metaphors” identified by Nietzsche (see Norris, 1987).

From the viewpoint of Nietzsche’s approach to the will for power, a false judgment can be seen as an expression of creativity, and, hence, it can be interpreted as a consequence of a dynamic attitude to life. But, when philosophy recognizes untruth as a condition of life and therefore it moves beyond every distinction between good and evil, identifying will as such with truth, then it is necessarily indifferent as to whether an untrue judgment underpins injustice and violence. In other words,

Nietzsche respects creativity as such, without any further qualifications. But, in this way, contrary to the classical Greek philosophers' approach to creativity, Nietzsche's approach to creativity is unable to provide a solid foundation of life (see Laos, 2011).

As I have pointed out in my book *Foundations of Cultural Diplomacy* (2011), Nietzsche argues that philosophers are dishonest because they pretend that their thoughts echo objective reality, whereas, for Nietzsche, what they really do is to reduce their prejudices, their ideas, to "the truth". In reality, Nietzsche contends, philosophers defend judgments that are equivalent to advocates' tricks or their own hearts' desires but they present them in abstract forms and by means of arguments which they have articulated after (not before) the original conception of their ideas. It is useful to mention that this Nietzschean thesis underpins Richard Rorty's post-modern approach to epistemology, according to which philosophers should give up on the idea that our knowledge 'mirrors' nature and instead adopt a pragmatic theory of truth which is compatible with Rorty's self-description as a "postmodern bourgeois liberal" (Rorty, 1991, pp. 197-202). However, as I have argued in my previous book, Nietzsche makes a mistake: the validity of truth does not depend on its genealogy but on its logic, its consistence, and the logic of truth depends on the fact that it can harmoniously unite a multitude of data toward a specific perspective. Therefore, philosophers (at least when they do not have the arrogance of Hegel to declare that their philosophies mark the end of the history of philosophy) are not as dishonest as Nietzsche contends.

3. Kairos: beyond realism and idealism

'Kairos' means the 'opportune moment'. The concept of kairos can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophy and Pantheon. In particular, in the ancient Greek mythology, the notion of kairos was divinized, and Kairos was a son of Zeus. For instance, Aesop (*Fables* 536, from *Phaedrus* 5:8) writes: "Running swiftly, balancing on the razor's edge, bald but with a lock of hair on his forehead, he wears no clothes; if you grasp him from the front, you might be able to hold him, but once he has moved on not even Jupiter [Zeus] himself can pull him back: this is a symbol of Tempus [Kairos] (Opportunity), the brief moment in which things are possible". The famous Greek travelogue Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece*, 5.14.9 (trans. W.H.S. Jones), writes about Kairos: "Quite close to the entrance to the stadium [at Olympia] are two altars; one they call the altar of Hermes of the Games, the other the altar of Kairos (Opportunity). I know that a hymn to Kairos is one of the poems of Ion of Khios [5th century BC poet]; in the hymn Kairos is made out to

be the youngest child of Zeus”. Moreover, Callistratus (Greek rhetorician who flourished in the 3rd/ 4th century AD), in his *Descriptions* 6 (trans. by A. Fairbanks), wrote about Kairos: “On the statue of Kairos (Opportunity) at Sikyon. I desire to set before you in words the creation of Lysippos [4th century BC sculptor] also, the most beautiful of statues, which the artist wrought and set up for the Sikyonians to look upon. Kairos (Opportunity) was represented in a statue of bronze...but a man who was skilled in the arts and who, with a deeper perception of art, knew how to track down the marvels of craftsmen, applied reasoning to the artist’s creation, explaining the significance of Kairos (Opportunity) as faithfully portrayed in the statue: the wings on his feet, he told us, suggested his swiftness, and that, borne by the seasons, he goes rolling on through all eternity; and as to his youthful beauty, that beauty is always opportune and that Kairos (Opportunity) is the only artificer of beauty, whereas that of which the beauty has withered has no part in the nature of Kairos (Opportunity); he also explained that the lock of hair on his forehead indicated that while he is easy to catch as he approaches, yet, when he has passed by, the moment of action has likewise expired, and that, if opportunity (kairos) is neglected, it cannot be recovered”.

The concepts of kairos and kairicity do not merely refer to the sense of timing, but they signify something much more important than that. They signify that, even though the reality of the world is not a projection of human consciousness, it can, nevertheless, under certain conditions, be utilized and restructured by the intentionality of human consciousness. Realism sees ‘Kairos’ as if he were totally bald, i.e. it fails to notice and grab the lock of hair that exists on Kairos’ forehead, whereas idealism sees Kairos as if he had hair on the back of his head, too, i.e. it fails to understand that Kairos cannot be arbitrarily manipulated. A kairic consciousness, contra realism and idealism, is aware that that the reality of the world and the reality of consciousness are not one, but they are united with each other. Therefore, a kairic consciousness recognizes and respects the ‘otherness’ of the reality of the world, but simultaneously it acts in order to impose its intentionality on the reality of the world (Laos, 2012, Chapter 7).

Conclusion

If the structure of the world were totally distinct from the structure of consciousness, then the latter would be unable to gain even partial knowledge of the reality of the world (it could only know itself). If the reality of the world were merely a projection of human consciousness, i.e. if the reality of the world were identified with the contents of human

consciousness, then consciousness would not try so hard to know the world, and the knowledge of the world would be identified with the knowledge of the self. Thus, neither realism nor idealism can stand as a general theory of reality. Kairicity implies that there is a dynamic continuity between the reality of the world and the reality of consciousness. Therefore, policy analysis should be focused on the analysis of the relationship between the reality of the world as a tank of opportunities and the reality of consciousness as a tank of intentions.

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