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A RESPONSE TO MACINTYRE*

by

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I have to confess that I agree with a great deal of A. MacIntyre’s paper. In order to fulfil my role here as a discussant, I am reduced to attempting to reformulate the argument, in order to find some pretext for debate.

I agree, first, with MacIntyre’s rejection of the dichotomy: either merely contingently impossible, or impossible in principle. I think the barrier to constructing the sciences of man on the model of natural sciences is rather of the form of an impossibility-for-us, and it seems to me that this is what MacIntyre is hinting at in his fable of a world unfit for Kepler in the opening section of his paper. In other words, I think it is possible to argue that there are formidable constitutional obstacles to our constructing a science of our own behaviour which meets certain generally-accepted criterial conditions of natural science. These cannot be shown to be in principle insurmountable, but to identify them properly is to see that certain sanguine hopes in this regard are unfounded.

Secondly, I agree profoundly with the hints that MacIntyre gives us at the end of his paper about the fruitful directions of search in social science, particularly his suggestion that history may turn out to be the fundamental discipline.

Where I’d like, rather feebly, to try to pick a fight is in the formulation of the argument, and the place that unpredictability plays in it. MacIntyre’s argument is that the subject of natural-science-type explanation must behave with a certain type of predictability; and that what social scientists usually study doesn’t so behave.

Now the first argument to unpredictability starts from an important philosophical point: that “the identification of . . . particulars by the social scientist is made via the identification made by the agents who engage in the relevant activities. The social scientists’ concepts attempt to capture phenomena which are partly constituted by and in terms of the concepts of social and political agents.” I think this point touches the most important, one is tempted to say crucial, issue of philosophy of social science today. First in that whether one accepts it in some form or rejects it altogether is decisive for the paradigm of science one accepts; and secondly, because the point can be formulated in a number of different ways which have widely different results for the methods and goals of social science. To take a well-known case, Peter Winch’s formulation in his Idea of a Social Science has very different consequences from, say MacIntyre’s: cf. his review of Winch in Against the Self-Images of the Age, ch. 19.

This point is relevant to the flow of MacIntyre’s argument in the following way: “in the activities which embody their concepts agents extend, reinterpret and reshape those concepts.” Because of this, there is “an openness towards the future” in the history of classes, parties, etc. “which involves an openness

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towards the future application of the concept(s)”. This openness is the source of unpredictability, of which MacIntyre distinguishes three forms. I’m not sure that the latter two sources of unpredictability depend on what I have called the crucial point above. But the first one certainly does. To encapsulate that point in a slogan, we can say that the fact that self-interpretation is partly constitutive of some human behaviour opens that behaviour to the unpredictability connected with creative innovation.

Now I’d like to suggest that the self-interpretation point is itself the point of origin of a direct argument against the natural science paradigm which doesn’t hinge on unpredictability. I have tried to spell this out a little more fully elsewhere,¹ but I’d like briefly to give the bare bones of the point here.

I used the term “self-interpretation” above because the point that some ranges of behaviour are partly constituted by the concepts of the agents can be put in this way: for some ranges of behaviour, the human constant whatever it is admits of wide variation; and this variation is bound up with variation in the way the human constant is understood and experienced by the agents concerned. I say ‘understood and experienced’ because a great deal of the difference between one agent and another will not be conscious or at least not explicitly grasped by either. Thus within the constant of human sexuality, even within “normal” heterosexual life, there are wide differences from culture to culture and in some societies from individual to individual; and some of these are bound up with very different ways of understanding and experiencing sexuality, as evidenced in the very different conceptions of love—c.g., the quite different ways of relating or distinguishing sexual love from tenderness, companionship, and so on.

Now although these differences lie for a large part below or at least beyond explicit understanding and conceptualization—as witnessed by the fact that we never manage to make entirely clear to ourselves what is the nature of our determinative experience in a domain like the sexual—our only way of making them clear for the purposes either of self-understanding or of science is through the concepts of the agent concerned. Hence the point immediately above, that our evidence for differences of sexual experience is the different conceptions of love. And hence also the point of MacIntyre’s formulation which I quoted above which refers to the agents’ concepts.

This carries with it a danger that we will be tempted to explain behaviour in these central ranges in too “intellectualist” a way, i.e., in terms of explicit self-understandings. And this is plainly inadequate. To avoid this danger, we have to allow as well for conceptualizations of which the agent is not conscious, and also for explanations of other ranges, i.e., not in terms of self-understandings, which are in some way articulated with these couched in such terms. In both these respects, I think Freud’s writings provide a good example, and this is no doubt another potential source of dispute between MacIntyre and myself.

The point of the metaphor of ‘interpretation’ is thus that these differences of experience and understanding can be seen as different “interpretations” of the human constant. The dangers of this metaphor are exactly those described in the last paragraph, that it tends to focus us onto the explicitly understood side of
experience; the temptation to use it is also the one mentioned above, that we come to understand these differences through expressing how they are seen, through imputing intentional descriptions.

Now insofar as self-interpretations are unsubstitutable in the language of social science, and insofar as these are grasped through explicit formulations which are attributed to the agent, and insofar as explicit formulations can never be fully adequate to the relevant experience in all its scope and depth—except in that never-never limit case where our motivation is totally transparent to ourselves—to that extent a crucial element in our formulation of the phenomena to be explained will remain approximate and uncertain, that is, constantly open to potentially more acute and adequate reformulation, and hence continuously uncertain as to the degree of adequacy of the currently accepted formulation. That is, to the extent that our scientific language tries to characterize self-interpretations, we are dealing with inexact formulations whose degree of inaccuracy we can never plumb, because the paradigm of full adequacy must lie beyond our understanding—until that limit experience of full self-transparency.

This epistemological problem can be seen from another angle if we look at what it means to arbitrate a dispute. The crucial disputes in social science, I would like to argue, are disputes of interpretation, that is, disputes about the definition of constitutive self-interpretations. And these are not liable to settlement by crucial experiment, even to the limited degree that disputes are in natural science. Thus, in natural science, a "crucial" experiment can fail to knock out an opponent, that is to be really crucial, because in a complex many-levelled system, there are other moves he can make besides abandoning his theory to accommodate the awkward finding. But at least the experiment can be so framed that the finding is unambiguous and irrecusable. But where the crucial data are partly constituted by self-interpretation, there are not even such crucial findings in the minimal sense of being unambiguous and irrecusable. The data, the tracts of behaviour in question, are open to different interpretation, that is what the dispute is all about. We are thrown back rather on the over-all plausibility of an interpretation as a whole, as applied to this and many other tracts of behaviour. This predicament has sometimes been referred to as the "hermeneutical circle".

It is therefore understandable that those who hold to the natural science paradigm have tried to finesse the interpretive level and focus on more immediate segments of behaviour the identification of which is less open to dispute. This is what lies behind the emphasis on a science of "behaviour" and the different forms this has taken in different disciplines: "behaviourist" psychology, "behaviouralist" political science.

But this won't work. For the relevant level, that on which the phenomena admit of illuminating explanation, is not that of basic actions, or pre-interpretive tracts of behaviour, but rather of action which is partly constituted by self-interpretations. The idea behind many forms of "behaviourism" is that we can take pre-interpretive terms as our data language, and treat the attributions of self-interpretations as theoretical propositions, following something like a Carnapian paradigm of scientific explanation. Hence, we could claim, that some-
body voted Liberal can be unambiguously established: but whether this was a response to mounting disorder, an identification with the attractive leader, an expression of solidarity with a certain ethnic community, or whatever, this must remain a matter of dispute. But these less certain attributions can be considered rival explanations on a theoretical level for what on the observable level is unambiguously characterized.

But the relation between the two “levels” is quite different from that of natural science. Rival notions of what self-interpretations can be attributed to people carry with them rival views about the meaning and relevance of behaviour characterized pre-interpretively. Thus in the above case, we can imagine political scientists coming to some kind of agreement as to what happened because the three explanations mentioned are all within the purview of mainstream political science, which believes it has a relatively uncontroversial methodology for deciding between them, viz. some form of questionnaire administered to the voters. But let us imagine that a Marxist-influenced student of politics wants to explain this vote shift in terms of development or regression of class consciousness. Then a dispute will break out in which the questionnaire technique itself, the relevance of the questions asked, and the meaning of the answers gleaned will all be challenged. In other words, the very notion of what is data is caught up in the dispute.

In natural science there can be a crucial finding in the sense not that it forces the interlocutor to abandon his theory, but in the sense that it poses an irrefutable refutation of theory-together-with-presently-accepted-ancillary-hypotheses. The freedom left is to jettison one of these latter hypotheses rather than the theory. But that the finding must force some change is inescapable. This is because there will at least be agreement on the causal properties of the observed events, that is, both sides will agree that a given movement of the needle could only be caused by events of a certain list of types, albeit an open-ended one. This provides a clear requirement that each theory must adjust to. But in those ranges of behaviour where self-interpretations are crucial, it is not the causal properties of the pre-interpretive behaviour which are relevant in relating them to the “underlying” self-interpretations, but rather the meaning this behaviour has in the light of these self-interpretations. And precisely this meaning comes into dispute when very different kinds of self-interpretations are attributed to the agents whose action we are trying to explain.

In other words, the flight to a “behaviourist” data language doesn’t save us from the problem of interpretation, because this problem returns in the form of a dispute over the relevance of the data, over what data is in a given realm.

There is also a temptation to circumvent the interpretive problem in the other direction as well. by going “below” the level of self-interpretation to the supposedly deeper forces at work, instincts, structures, drives, mechanisms, and so on. This move has a certain plausibility from the fact mentioned above that consciously explicitable self-interpretation has obviously not the last word. Any theory which aspires to explanatory richness must dig below it.

But having recourse to such deeper factors cannot allow us to circumvent the problem of interpretation. For even where the deeper factors are not themselves
understood as unconscious self-interpretations, our only way of access to them is through the pattern of self-interpreted behaviour. Thus for example the Freudian factor of repression which involves not only a barring from consciousness but a fixation and in a sense distortion of a given idea affect can only be identified through the pattern of (unconscious) self-mis-interpretation in a symptom, say. We get to the real truth by treating these symptoms as cyphers. Once more, therefore, the self-interpretive level of behaviour lies athwart our path, and we cannot circumvent the problems it poses for us.

What I have tried to do in the above is to reformulate Alasdair MacIntyre’s argument so as to arrive at substantially the same result but without making use of the feature of unpredictability. Rather I have tried to derive the inapplicability of the natural science paradigm directly from the point that self-interpretation is partly constitutive of some human behaviour. My attempt has been to derive the obstacle MacIntyre points to: the impossibility of unambiguous identification of a clearly demarcated explicandum, directly from the inescapable necessity of defining self-interpretations when we are dealing with certain ranges of behaviour.

But in spite of the change I think that many of my conclusions agree closely with MacIntyre’s. First, the argument to unpredictability from the possibility of creative innovation follows from any view which sees action as partly constituted by self-interpretation. Only in the impossible limit case where human motivation was fully transparent to us could we hope to be able to predict all future possible shifts in interpretation, that is, in the way men understand and experience the human constants. The other two arguments to unpredictability seem to me partly independent of this self-interpretation point, except in this respect: the second argument reposes on a limitation in possible exact knowledge of one’s self. MacIntyre alludes to Pears’ case of self-prediction, “where there is complete knowledge available to the agent of his own beliefs and desires insofar as they are relevant to the choice.” But the thesis of self-interpretation would lead us to expect this only in our limit case of full self-transparency, and thus to set it aside for the purposes of any foreseeable scientific endeavour.

Second, the inherent approximateness and uncertain boundary of attributions of self-interpretation lead us to expect the indeterminacy about counter-examples which MacIntyre mentions and which is surely more than evident as a source of bedevilment and cross-purposes in social science.

Thirdly, the conclusion meets MacIntyre’s on the crucial point that it is neither an argument in principle against natural science explanation, nor the delineation of a purely provisional incapacity. First, it is not an argument in principle in an unqualified way, but more an argument about impossibility-for-us. It is because our motivation is always to some degree opaque for us that we must have recourse to uncertain and inadequate interpretations. But this says nothing about the possibilities open to a higher species which might disembark one of these days from Alpha Centauri, and which might develop an exact anthropology. Our difficulty is that we are the species we are trying to understand. We might notice here that the difficulty doesn’t arise only for self-understanding in the individual sense, like that for predicting my own decisions. To
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understand you I have to have a grasp on what your interpretations are of, a grasp of the human constants, that no human being is likely to obtain.

But second, even as an argument about possibility-for-us, it allows of circumvention, viz., by a complete mechanistic neurophysiological science of human behaviour. The interpretive point simply rules out meeting the natural science paradigm while trying to account for behaviour qua action. How sanguine one is about this paradigm for the sciences of man depends on how strongly one bets on mechanism. And on this issue I don't believe that there are any decisive arguments in principle. Philosophical analysis can show an order of plausibility which is vanishingly small, but this is something else again, although not to be despised.

FOOTNOTES