METATHEORY in SOCIAL SCIENCE

Pluralisms and Subjectivities

Edited by
Donald W. Fiske and Richard A. Shweder

The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

1984
11 The Forms and Functions of Social Knowledge

Donald N. Levine

The quest to identify a kind of knowledge that enjoys a privileged status over common-sense perceptions and understandings of the world has been pursued since the very beginnings of reflection about how we know. The record of responses to that quest provides a capsule summary of major moments in the history of human speculation. The idea of the Good, the authority of Revelation, the clear and distinct truths of geometry, the controlled outcomes of experimental investigation, the self-understanding by humans of human projects, the demystified grasp of real historic forces, the quantification of metric operations, the analysis of unconscious expressions, the enlightenment that follows disciplined meditation—these are some of the well-known historical candidates for that privileged position.

In the last two centuries in the West, and increasingly throughout the world, the single most popular candidate has been known generically as “science.” Far and away the most successful rhetoric for establishing superior warrants for a proposition is to claim that it is scientific and that other contenders should be disqualified because they represent only common sense, pseudoscience, or insufficiently scientific science. Yet the success of this candidate has by no means laid to rest the uneasiness that underlay that historic quest. As the last half century of debate in the history and philosophy of science has shown, there has been very little consensus concerning what it is that makes a work of science scientific. From Hempel to Popper to Kuhn to Toomlin to Lakatos to Feyerabend, we have witnessed a succession of inconclusive efforts to establish a diacritical marker for scientificity. At this point, it may perhaps be acknowledged that the very notion of “science” belongs to that category of mental constructs that R. B. Gallie referred to as “essentially contested concepts”—concepts that are so closely linked to
charged substantive debates, normative issues, and historical contexts that their meaning can never be fixed with a single unambiguous definition (1964, 157–91).

Yet even without the record of those inconclusive efforts—even without the massive evidence that underlies Lakatos’s claim that there has been “little agreement concerning a universal criterion of the scientific character of theories” (1978, 124)—one might have predicted the futility of any such effort. The notion that there is some single absolute standard of cognitive value belies what has been a major intellectual achievement of the social sciences during the last two centuries—the solid awareness that all human expressions are conditioned by their rootedness in the exigencies of human action. The effort to identify a single diacritical marker for science, like the quest to find some privileged type of knowledge more generally, must be inconclusive, because of the irreducible variety of values, norms, and motives that organize all kind of action, contemplative as well as conative or practical.

To acknowledge that fact, however, is not necessarily to assert that there are no forms of privileged knowledge. Rather it is to state that sincere adherence to a single criterion of the generically scientific is to commit oneself to a polemical position that invalidates the legitimate claims of other kinds of knowledge. An alternative way to proceed would be to accept the notion of an irreducible plurality of privileged forms of knowledge.

I

Although the perspective I shall finally use to develop this point of view is known to sociologists as the theory of action, let me begin by approaching it from a philosophic perspective. Increased awareness of the plausibility of alternative claims to cognitive privilege has produced a variety of philosophic efforts to deal with the Babel of contending intellectual positions in our time. Working on this problem in the area of literary criticism, Wayne Booth has identified five common responses that appear “when we try to decide how to listen to the actual clamor of critics’ voices today” (1979, 4)—none of which he finds satisfactory. In incorporating his analysis here, I follow Booth’s typology but alter his formulations slightly.

1. The polemician response—just let everyone get out there and fight, because what the world needs is more assaults on complacency and conformity—is unacceptable because it generates destructive and wasteful exchanges and fosters the vice of misconstruing the ideas of one’s intellectual opponents.

2. The semanticist response—just let intellectual antagonists specify the referents of their terms and thus remove ambiguities, and apparent disagreements will disappear—is unacceptable because it assumes that the only real differences among contending intellectual positions are trivial ones, also because it denies that many concepts remain inexorably ambiguous and consequently depreciates those fruitful inquiries that are stimulated by controversies over such ambiguities.

3. The monist response identifies one of thecontending positions as valid and portrays all others as wrong, misleading, or unimportant. A more tolerant version of this response would encompass those who view alternative approaches as historically valid but currently outmoded positions or as necessary stages in the evolution of current true belief. This response cannot, however, secure universal assent to such invalidation or depreciation of all other positions.

4. The response of skepticism (or relativism, or nihilism) questions the possibility that any position can arrive at statements possessing truth value. The grounds for such a position are enormously varied; its proponents may appeal to the intractable complexity of observed phenomena, to the incorrigible limitations of observers, or to the hopelessness of arriving at mutual comprehension or intersubjective validation among a plurality of knowers. Such a position is ultimately untenable because it rests both on a logical contradiction (the professed certainty about the impossibility of securing statements beyond doubt) and a practical contradiction (the inhibition of the irreplaceable quest for truth).

5. The response of eclecticism acknowledges the validity claims of contending positions or approaches and simply copes with their apparent incompatibility by chopping up the work of others into fragments, salvaging and conjoining whatever of those fragments appear useful. The weakness of this response is its failure to retain the contextual significance of the opposing claims.

In contrast with these responses, Booth espouses a possibility that he terms “methodological pluralism,” which holds that “two or more conflicting positions may be entirely acceptable” (1979, 24). Rather than develop de novo the internal texture of such a position, Booth discusses the work of three other critics who in his judgment qualify as exemplary proponents of methodological pluralism.
In philosophy proper, many essential elements of a methodological pluralist position were developed during the last half century by a scholar who has been Booth's mentor as well as my own, Richard McKeon. McKeon has grounded the pluralist position historically, by showing ways in which inquiries have been advanced by going through cycles of methodological approaches (1966a), and systematically, by showing the power of alternative methods to illuminate commonplace notions like freedom and history (1952). Although a position of methodological pluralism appears implicitly or embryonically in the writings of several social scientists, I am unaware of efforts comparable to those of Booth and McKeon in the literature of the social sciences to develop the rationale and implications of that position. Among the few social scientists who have sought to articulate such features, I might mention Robert K. Merton (1976) and Arthur Stinchcombe (1968) in sociology, Henry Briefs (1960) in economics, and Aslam Legesse (1973) in anthropology.

My own work over the last three decades has been informed by a program that seeks to contribute to a framework for a defensible pluralist position in the social sciences. My dissertation (1967) articulated the structure and implications of the divergent principles and methods embodied in the work of Georg Simmel and Talcott Parsons, work that presented two acceptable, yet largely incommensurable, approaches to the study of society. My monographs on Ethiopia sought to illustrate, first, the effect of applying a plurality of observational styles and descriptive modalities to the study of Amhara tradition and Ethiopia's modernization and, subsequently, the effect of applying a plurality of explanatory logics to the question of Ethiopia's historical survival as an independent nation (1974). In pursuing this line of inquiry over the years, I have come to emphasize three considerations that perhaps go beyond the analysis provided by Booth and other advocates of methodological pluralism.

II

I would emphasize that it is no longer productive to limit our advocacy or analysis of pluralism to those rather diffuse entities denoted by such terms as "intellectual approaches" or "methodological orientations." Insofar as an investigator or intellectual school sustains a relatively distinctive and consistent orientation, it necessarily consists of a number of discrete cognitive components. Although these components exhibit mutual affinities in the work of a given person or school, they are not necessarily closely linked and in fact usually exhibit the property of independent variability. Failure to realize this has produced those endless confusions that come from calling someone a positivist, a Marxist, an empiricist, a historicist, a Freudian, a Durkheimian, and the like. To say that someone is a Durkheimian, for example—does that mean he follows the master in using aggregate statistics rather than survey data, in analyzing contextual effects rather than individual properties, in talking about anomic rather than alienation, in positing the relativity rather than the universality of moral norms, in searching for functional rather than compositional explanations, or what?

To obviate such confusion, I have found it helpful to distinguish between "approaches," the total concrete orientation of a scholar or a research program, and cognitive "features," the constitutive elements of an approach. Each feature represents a discrete aspect or moment of inquiry. What to identify as a discrete cognitive feature is itself a matter of judgment or controversy, but the following have emerged in my work over the last two decades as unavoidable categories:

1. Categorical frameworks—conceptual forms that identify the units of social phenomena and how they are to be understood in combinations
2. Empirical procedures—operations forms that enable one to make observations
3. Descriptive modalities—conceptual forms that specify the types of observation one should make
4. Explanatory logos—conceptual forms that specify how sets of observations are to be construed in relationships of independent to dependent variables
5. Epistemic methods—conceptual forms that specify the strategic pattern of any inquiry or research program
6. Interpretations—conceptual forms that specify how to relate observations of phenomena to notions of what is real
7. Epistemic products—rhetorical forms by which one organizes and makes public the results of inquiry

Some of the variance among divergent approaches reflects differences in the weighting of various features. Thus survey research highlights the feature of empirical procedures, "rational choice" research gives primacy to categorical frameworks, while ethnomethodology stresses the feature of what is here called "interpretations." More complex approaches, like Marxian, Freudian, or Weberian social science, pay serious attention to a number of
features—one reason why their proponents so often engage in controversy over what is truly the essence of their respective approach.

Every cognitive feature, moreover, can be realized in a variety of ways, which I call "forms." Thus the feature of explanation can take a genetic, a structural, a compositional, or a functional form. Most of the variation and controversy in the social sciences stems from divergences among forms. Just as one finds the "empiricist" and the "theorist" each denouncing what the other does as not "really science" because of their investment in different features or aspects of the cognitive process, so one finds proponents of different forms of the same feature depreciating one another's work in similar wise. It follows from the pluralist position I am advocating, however, that knowledge gained through any form can be valid and indeed can constitute a privileged kind of knowledge when it is pursued on the basis of special training and experience. The name I would give to this type of knowledge is "disciplined."

In addition to transforming a general pluralist appreciation of different approaches into one that appreciates different features and forms, I would stress that the question of the relationship that obtains among divergent forms is genuinely an open question. At this point, at least, I can find no grounds for arguing a priori that the relationship between any two divergent forms is necessarily of a single kind when applied to any problem whatsoever. That relationship can and does take a number of possible forms. It can be the case that divergent forms are *mutually irrelevant*, as when they define and address themselves to wholly different problems. It can be that they *cross-cut* one another, as when they generate different definitions of a similar problem. It can be that they are *competitive*, as when they address a similar problem but lead to different solutions. They can be related in a *collaborative* mode, as when they address different parts of the same problem. Or, when they address different aspects of the same problem, we can view their relationship as *complementary*. Finally, we can see their relationship as lodged in some *architectonic* synthesis when they appear to be performing different tasks that are integrated or integrable in some hierarchical or sequential structure.

III
The third consideration I would stress in articulating a pluralist position is one that brings the array of cognitive forms back into a context of human action. Although the analysis of forms by itself
A. Inquiry re: The forms of social science (How does one learn about disciplinary resources?)
   1. What are the properties of each feature? To what kinds of issues is it relevant?
   2. What are the properties of each form? What is it good for? What is it bad for?
   3. How does it relate to other forms? To what extent is it independently variable? What elective affinities/incompatibilities does it have with forms of other features?

B. Inquiry re: The relationships among different forms
   1. Mutually irrelevant (wholly different problem)
   2. Cross-cutting (different definitions of the problem)
   3. Competitive (similar problem, different solutions)
   4. Collaborative (same problem, different parts)
   5. Complementary (same problem, different aspects)
   6. Architectonic (different tasks, hierarchically or sequentially integrated)

C. Inquiry re: The functions of social science (How does one produce nonalienated social knowledge?)
   1. What are the defensible objectives of social scientific inquiry? How are they defended?
   2. What are the most appropriate features and forms for each function?

D. The critical assessment of features and forms (How does one identify excellent, decent, wasteful, alienated, or harmful social science?)
   1. Criteria of validity
      a) accuracy
      b) logical consistency
      c) clarity
      d) completeness of scope
   2. Criteria of significance
      a) heuristic value
      b) appropriateness to content of inquiry
      c) appropriateness to purpose of inquiry
      d) quality of relevant purposes and values
   3. Criteria of quality of execution
      a) extent to which forms are properly or elegantly realized
      b) extent to which forms remain linked to defensible purposes

II. Toward a critical inventory of the forms of disciplined social knowledge
A. Categorical frameworks (How does one conceptualize the units and organization of social phenomena?)
   1. Choices and markets (A. Smith, G. Becker)
   2. Controls and hierarchies (Marx, Dahrendorf)
   3. Affects and connections (Simmel, Bales)
   4. Beliefs and consensus (Durkheim, Benedict)
   5. Needs and mechanisms (Spencer, Parsons)
   6. Themes and patterns (Kroeber, Lévi-Strauss)
   7. Intentions and conjoint actions (Toennies, Weber)

B. Empirical procedures (How does one make observations?)
   1. Unobtrusive-noninduced (direct observation, content analysis)
   2. Unobtrusive-induced (questionnaires, concealed experiments)
   3. Intrusive-noninduced (participant observation)
   4. Intrusive-induced (depth interviews, lab experiment)

C. Descriptive modalities (What does one observe?)
   1. Externals (behavior, artifacts)/internals (thoughts, sentiments)
   2. Simple properties/rich detail
   3. Dominant trends/contradictory tendencies
   4. Parts/elements
   5. Microscopic/mesoscopic/macrosopic
   6. Behavioral system/personality/social system/culture
   7. Types of social facts
      a) global
      b) analytic
      c) interactional
      d) institutional
   8. First-person/second-person/third-person accounts

D. Explanatory logics (How does one relate sets of observations construed as independent/dependent variables?)
   1. Genetic (explaining y as a consequence of some antecedent process or event)
   2. Compositional (explaining y as a result of the properties of its constitutive elements)
   3. Structural (explaining y as a consequence of its position in a set of ordered relationships)
4. Functional (explaining y with reference to the needs of x that it fulfills)

E. Epistemic methods (Where does one start, toward what does one move, and how does one proceed?)
   1. Logistic—by construction and decomposition
   2. Dialectic—by assimilation and exemplification
   3. Problematic—by resolution and question
   4. Operational—by discrimination and postulation

F. Interpretations (How does one relate observations of phenomena to notions of what is real?)
   1. Ontological: reality is transcendent, appearances are imperfect manifestations thereof (Plato, Hegel)
   2. Entitative: reality is underlying nature, appearances are secondary derivatives thereof (Marx, Freud, Lévi-Strauss)
   3. Essentialist: reality is phenomena, properties and causes that are natural functions or acquired conditionings (Durkheim, Malinowski)
   4. Existentialist: reality is phenomenal, socially constructed (Schutz)

G. Epistemic products (How does one organize and present findings?)
   1. Case studies
   2. Narratives
   3. Graphs, tables
   4. Propositions
   5. Ideal types
   6. Models
   7. Axiomatized systems
   8. Discursive syntheses

III. Toward a critical inventory of the functions of disciplined social knowledge

A. Cultural functions
   1. Grounding a world view (Marx)
   2. Grounding normative criteria (Durkheim)
   3. Providing aesthetic symbolism (Nisbet)
   4. Providing empirical understanding
      a) of universals and variants
      b) of self-experience and others

B. Social systemic functions
   1. Technical knowledge (Spencer, Coleman)
   2. Counsel to rulers/insurgents (Machiavelli, Lenin)

The Forms and Functions of Social Knowledge

3. Shared beliefs/enhanced communication (Comte, Dewey)
4. Clarifying collective values and enhancing their transmission (Lasswell, Skinner)

C. Personality functions
   1. Increasing consciousness about self and self’s situation (Berger)
   2. Increasing clarity about one’s values (Weber)

D. Behavioral system functions
   1. Enhanced cognitive competence

IV
What, now, is the potential usefulness of a paradigm of this sort? First, it enables us to analyze more efficiently the structure of a given approach by constraining us to identify and locate the forms of its central defining features. Second, it may facilitate constructive communication among proponents of different approaches, and provide a less polemical way for them to talk about their differences. Above all, it provides a more coherent way for critics to assess the value of different kinds of social knowledge—to indicate what kinds of social knowledge may legitimately claim privileged states and why.

Section I.D of the paradigm schematizes three sets of appropriate criteria. There is no mechanical way to indicate the relative weighting of these criteria. That is a matter of value judgment that will vary with the background and purposes of each critic. What this part of the paradigm can do is constrain critics to be aware of a broader range of legitimate criteria than they would be likely to acknowledge otherwise and prod them to be more articulate in defending the criteria they choose to stress.

One set of criteria concerns the validity of cognitive efforts. These are the criteria familiar to scientists, who, however, are not always aware that the criteria are seriously competitive among themselves. Disciplined work that ranks high according to all of these criteria has a very special claim to privilege with respect to its truth value. Yet validity has never been the exclusive general criterion for assigning special merit to scientific work. Not only may one criterion of validity be sacrificed for another—as when accuracy is sacrificed for logical consistency, or scope is sacrificed for accuracy—but other kinds of criteria may or should be invoked as well. What may be called the criteria of significance also became prominent. These include (1) the extent to which a given finding,
idea, or research program opens up new areas of discovery or new ways of looking at some part of the world; (2) the consideration of how appropriate a given cognitive form is to the type of phenomena being studied; (3) the consideration of how appropriate a given cognitive form is to the purpose of the inquiry; and (4) the quality of the purpose served and the values embodied in or promoted by the research program.

Finally, there are criteria that have to do with what may be called the quality of execution of a program. Two chief criteria of this sort stand in chronic tension with one another. On the one hand, there is the consideration of how well a given form is realized in practice. To what extent is its integrity respected? What is the level of technical ability with which it is employed? How elegantly is its script performed? On the other hand, there is the consideration of how closely the execution of form remains linked to defensible purposes. It is often the case that the integrity of a form is sacrificed on behalf of a given purpose; it is perhaps even more often that the integrity of purpose is sacrificed to the intrinsic requirements of the form. Yet no final claim to privileged knowledge can be made without addressing these two concerns.

These remarks have been abstract and schematic. I hope they have been sufficiently clear and suggestive to elicit some support for their central thrust: that the time is ripe for articulating a self-conscious pluralist program in the social sciences in which the point will be, not to scrap the demarcationist project, but to sophisticate it.

Note

1. The typology presented under II.C.7 is based on Lazarsfeld and Menzel (1961). Typology II.D may be viewed as a transmutation of Aristotle’s four causes. Typologies II.E and F are adapted from McKeon (1966b).

References


