

Jason Blakely, *Alasdair MacIntyre,  
Charles Taylor, and the Demise of  
Naturalism: Reunifying Political Theory  
and Social Science*. Notre Dame, Ind.:  
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One of the profoundest ironies of the modern age is that the natural science revolution—the source of so much that is good, admirable, useful, and authoritative—has helped inspire illusion amid the social sciences. What naturalism misses is the deep disjuncture between human beings, who are creative, rational, self-interpreting agents, and the other objects that compose the universe. The renewed call to humanism voiced by Taylor and MacIntyre requires carefully distinguishing human beings from other sorts of objects. For science, no less than religion or ideology, can be distorted and turned into a form of superstition.

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In this regard, 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. These words not only conclude Jason Blakely's insightful commentary on the development of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor's thinking but also summarize his argumentative purpose in this short and economical work.

Naturalism in the social sciences has long been for me “the emperor with no clothes,” so from the outset I must admit complete sympathy with and enthusiasm for Blakely's purposes. Consequently, I would not be his best interlocutor for improving his arguments. His commentary, however, has encouraged me to reread MacIntyre, whose work I have not picked up since a graduate course in political philosophy at the University of British Columbia in the early 1990s. Further, Blakely's commentary has impelled me to read Charles Taylor for the first time, even though he is somewhat of a household name in Canada.

Blakely's book is required reading for anyone involved or interested in social or political research and policymaking. Indeed, Blakely's arguments—in expounding the thought of Taylor and MacIntyre—provide an antidote to much of the chaos and rather flimsy (though generally unarticulated) philosophical anthropologies currently evident in much policymaking and technocratic forms of management prevalent in 2016.

As a trained social scientist, I have spent the last two decades following a detour into theology as a consequence of pursuing a vocation as a Roman Catholic priest and member of a religious order. Therefore, I found Blakely's book an excellent review of

state of the discipline from the time Taylor and MacIntyre started thinking about the human person as a social animal in the 1950s to the present. I now find I have a way to exit the theological detour and merge once again with the path of social and political thought.

My previous suspicions about “naturalism” in social scientific thought and methods stemmed from two sources. First, I have always been numerically challenged, so I could never really cotton to the dominance of the language of the behavioral approach in social and political study. Second, in the research and writing of my doctoral dissertation (1995), I was strongly influenced by ordinary language philosophy in addition to the thought of R. G. Collingwood and thus drew a strong distinction between the idea of history and the idea of natural science. In addition to not having the confidence at the time to assert that there was really no place for natural scientific methods in the study of human agency and society, I saw no adverse effect in adopting a “live and let live” stance toward a pluralism in social-scientific methodologies that admit naturalism in its pantheon of approaches—indeed as its dominant approach within this pantheon.

Two decades later, on the other hand, having since embraced a thick theological anthropology, I can now see clearly the human damage done by “naturalism” in its position as the dominant method of the social sciences. Taylor and MacIntyre still admit theoretical pluralism, but, according to Blakely, they offer a means of objectively measuring between theoretical approaches. Rather than determining which approach most nearly pretends to mimic natural science, we need only answer one simple question: “Which theoretical approach, by comparing it to others, better explains the range, depth and nuance of human socio-political experience?” (96–97)

For example, the standard secularization thesis cannot account for why religion widely still exists in an advanced industrialized society such as the United States. The noted social scientist Steve Bruce attempts to explain this lingering effect in the United States citing the need for social cohesion among immigrant groups. (102) Thus, according to Bruce, religion serves an “integrating function.” However, in challenging that approach, Taylor “believes that functionalist explanations like Bruce’s in fact rest on a banality (i.e., a system of beliefs like religion helps create social cohesion) but are incapable of explaining why particular people adopt the beliefs that they do, religious or otherwise.” (103) In contrast, Taylor offers an alternate explanation, and the reader can decide which offers a better account of the range, depth, and nuance of human experience. I will not repeat Blakely’s account of Taylor’s argument here, for the point is not to decide between the approaches but rather to demonstrate Blakely’s point that there is an objective way of determining the best approach without appealing to the criteria employed by the natural sciences. (104)

I now turn briefly to MacIntyre’s contribution which has further convinced me that my previously uncritical acceptance of naturalism within the pantheon of social scientific methodologies is no longer appropriate. MacIntyre describes “a dual moral culture that dominates late-capitalist societies: on the one side are rival claims to foundational, quasi-scientific moral objective certainty and on the other are subjectivist philosophies that reduce all morality to emotive preferences.” (105–6) For MacIntyre, this moral chaos is rooted in Enlightenment naturalism. It was believed that by rejecting religion and traditional understandings, morality—following the model of the natural sciences—could be based on reason alone. Enlightenment naturalism, however, generated not

a single but several “rival naturalist standards for resolving moral disagreement. . . . Various competing strains of utilitarianism, natural rights theory, deontology, rival Marxisms, and so on all laid claim to universal rational status.” (106–7)

Both Taylor and MacIntyre not only level a devastating critique of naturalism but also offer an alternative approach: a narrative of interpretive philosophical history. Contingent causes, and not unvarying laws of nature, are what best explain human agency.