

The Fact-Value Dichotomy as an Intellectual Prison

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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, the political scientist David Easton made the following observations about the widespread acceptance of the fact-value dichotomy in American social science:

This assumption, generally adopted today in the social sciences, holds that values can ultimately be reduced to emotional responses conditioned by the individual's total life-experiences. In this interpretation, although in practice no one proposition need express either a pure fact or a pure value, facts and values are logically heterogeneous. The factual aspect of a proposition refers to a part of reality; hence it can be tested by reference to the facts. In this way we check its truth. The moral aspect of a proposition, however, expresses only the emotional response of an individual to a state of real or presumed facts. It indicates whether and the extent to which an individual desires a particular state of affairs to exist. Although we can say that the aspect of a proposition referring to a fact can be true or false, it is meaningless to characterize the value aspect of a proposition in this way.¹

Easton's inelegant formulation of the logical positivist fact-value dichotomy has the advantage of its brutal frankness. So-called "value" propositions, do not "refer to reality" at all. "Reality" apparently is what we discover by "barefoot empiricism," to employ William Glaser's felicitous phrase. In any event, Easton tells us, "facts and values are logically heterogeneous." This means that were we to attempt to derive a norm (or value) from a fact (or a "part of reality"), we should be committing the "naturalistic fallacy" which forbids us under pain of methodological death to derive an "ought" from an "is."

The logic of logical positivism is this: stick to

your last and do not mess around in the muck of values and "soul stuff." To be sure, each of us could go about parading our "value judgments" but why should we do so, given that they are our irrational responses "conditioned by our total life experiences" to a set of "real or presumed facts"? The profession is interested in our "facts" not in our psyches, says Easton.

As an illustration of the markedly deflationary effect of the fact-value dichotomy on so-called statements of value, I offer the following translation, as it were, of Jeffersonian English into Eastonian political science. Thomas Jefferson, who died in 1825 and of course was benightedly unaware of the fact-value dichotomy, could write: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights."

Rendered into "mainstream" political science, Jefferson's words would sound today something like this:

We hold these values, which do not refer to a part of reality, and cannot be said to be either true or false, and which can ultimately be reduced to our emotional responses, not to be self-evident of course, but rather to indicate the extent to which we desire a particular state of affairs to exist: that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; except that neither the notion of creation, nor that of a Creator, nor that of "unalienable rights" is testable. And so, perhaps we might just as well forget the whole thing.

I shall not dwell on the obviously nihilistic implications of "mainstream" social science's fact-value dichotomy. Many good books have been written on this subject.³ I did find inter-

esting the following observation in Rudolf Carnap's "Autobiography" offered in rebuttal of the charge that value relativism promotes political nihilism:

*Someone's acceptance or rejection of any particular thesis concerning the logical nature of value statements and the kind and source of their validity has usually a very limited influence upon his practical decisions. The behavior in given situations and the general attitude of people is chiefly determined by their character and very little, if at all, by the theoretical doctrines to which they adhere.*⁴

It is noteworthy that Carnap, once a leading member of the Vienna Circle, here refers to something so "untestable" by the canons of logical positivism as "character," as if it were a "fact." However, I am not interested in hunting down all the inconsistencies of advocates of the fact-value dichotomy. Rather I wish to call attention to the defective conception of "reality" at the basis of the positivist fact-value dichotomy, a conception, I contend, that prevents "mainstream" social science from becoming a critical science of politics in the fully-developed sense.

One problem with the mainstream notion of "reality" is that it cannot account for the larger reality in which the two "worlds" of fact and value are situated. If factual "reality" consists of phenomena "out there" to be observed by a self-conscious observer, there is no provision for the very "real" capacity of the self-conscious, valuing subject to "get behind" himself or herself as it were and "see" the reality encompassing both the observed facts and the observing subject. Nor is there provision for the reality of the interaction between the perceiving mind and the perceived "real" phenomena. Such considerations as these eventually led Karl Popper, one of mainstream social science's leading philosophers, to posit a "third world" beyond that of either objective "facts" or subjective "values."⁵

Popper's "third world" construction represents a seemingly important departure from the fact-value dualism to which in one form or another he had long been committed. As de-

scribed by Sir John Eccles, who follows Popper in endorsing the third-world construction, "World 1" represents physical objects and states; it is the "total world of the materialists." "World 2" consists of states of consciousness and subjective knowledge. "World 3" represents the "whole world of culture," or knowledge in the "objective sense."⁶ For both Eccles and Popper there is a reality resulting from the interaction of objectivity and subjectivity which is not explainable by the fact-value dichotomy. Popper calls the third world the realm of "epistemology without a knowing subject."

Despite Popper's attempt to move beyond the fact-value dichotomy by positing a "third world," he fails to cope with the dichotomy's deflationary effect upon all "non-empirical" discourse. Indeed, in the same volume containing his third-world speculation, he makes clear that he stands by his earlier teaching concerning a line of "demarcation" distinguishing the "statements of empirical science from non-empirical statements."⁷ As the philosopher Henry Veatch has noted, in claiming to "solve" the so-called "problem of demarcation," Popper appoints himself a kind of "pope" to oversee the proper drawing of the "line." Veatch's remarks on this subject will only lose in paraphrase, so let us hear him directly:

Time was when only a pope was deemed a fit officer to draw a line of demarcation; but nowadays this onetime papal function would appear to have devolved upon an unblushing and ever ready Sir Karl. Moreover, he would appear to have confidently drawn his line in such a way that on the one side are to be reckoned all of those enterprises that are properly scientific in character, and scientific just in the sense that they place their reliance upon the hypothetico-deductive method; and on the other side of the line, there would seem to be ranged an indeterminate and somewhat motley crew of enterprises—some of them resembling metaphysical speculation, others being perhaps classifiable as religious discourse or theological argument,

others reminding one of ethical or aesthetic judgements, and still others as amounting to little more than projects of ordinary, everyday human reflection and discussion. By and large, enterprises of these latter kinds are scarcely marked by any exclusive or even precise reliance upon the hypothetico-deductive method. But if they do not rely upon the proper and distinctive method of science, then all such enterprises as lie on what we might refer to as the far side of the line of demarcation cannot possibly claim to be scientific. And if not scientific, then can they claim to be even properly cognitive enterprises at all? True, Popper himself has always refused to go along with the old-line positivists and simply write off metaphysics, theology, ethics, *et al.* as meaningless. But while not meaningless, it is still questionable whether metaphysical language, religious language, and, for that matter, any and all forms of non-scientific discourse can be regarded as properly informative or descriptive. Interesting, suggestive, inspiring they may well be at times, but do they convey knowledge? Likewise, as regards truth, while there might be some hesitation in denying flat-out that metaphysical statements or religious affirmations or even such statements as may be implicit in poetry or in art generally—while it might be going too far to say that statements of these varying sorts are incapable of being either true or false, still it would seem that such truths as are to be relegated to the far side of the line of demarcation can hardly claim to be truths of fact or truths about the world in the way scientific truths are.⁸

Not surprisingly, Popper attempts to positivize, as it were, the contents of his third world, calling it the realm of “objective knowledge.” In this way, World 3 can fall mainly on the positive side of the line of demarcation and count as something empirical and objective, even though it perforce contains elements of subjectivity. Thus, even “poetic thoughts and works of art” are subsumed under World 3, which comprises the “*world of objective con-*

tents of thought.” (Popper’s italics.) To summarize, Popper’s three worlds are: World 1: the “physical world”; World 2: the “world of our conscious experience”; and World 3: “the world of the logical *contents* of books, libraries, computer memories, and such like.”⁹

Compared with the Eastonian “mainstream” fact-value dichotomy, Popper’s third world construction marks a tiny opening of the door toward the multidimensional reality which must be the basis of any critical science of politics and society. It is interesting to note what convolutions scholars who accept the fact-value dichotomy as their starting point have to go through in order to produce even a tiny chink in the prison. Other movements such as the “Frankfort school” have attempted to arrive at a different “solution” to the fact-value problem. Some of these attempts have been discussed by Richard Bernstein in a book which also implicitly accepts the regnant fact-value assumption as the starting point for a critique and for what he calls a “restructuring” of social and political theory.¹⁰ However, such a “restructuring” as Bernstein describes amounts only to a shuffling around of the furniture in the same warehouse (or let’s say in the same minimum-security prison).

Eric Voegelin has penetrated to the core of the problem. As he wrote in *The New Science of Politics*:

The notion of a value-judgment . . . is meaningless in itself; it gains its meaning from a situation in which it is opposed to judgments concerning facts . . . and this situation was created through the positivistic conceit that only propositions concerning facts of the phenomenal world were “objective,” while judgments concerning the right order of the soul and society were “subjective.” The classification made sense only if the positivistic dogma were accepted on principle. . . .¹¹

The language of values serves only to prevent the development of a critical science of politics. Such a science would need as its starting-point an openness to the experience of the order of Being, an order which is not created by man, but within which man finds

himself situated. The language of Being arose out of the quest by the noetic philosophers in Greece for the ground of their being and of all being. The language of Being is ignored or twisted beyond recognition by the language of values; hence we need to jettison the language of values and attempt to recover the language of Being before we can move forward to develop a critical political science adequate for our own time.

As we know, Popper lays great stress on "openness"; yet in the language he employs he himself is closed to the experience of creatureliness. Popperian man is pictured as "facing" a phenomenal reality external to him upon which he projects his "values" and in interaction with which he creates a "third world" of culture or "objective knowledge." Thus, he describes his third world as a "man-made product."¹² It is true that Popper struggles to get out of the positivist prison into which he voluntarily put himself by also recognizing that there is something "super-human" and "autonomous," something that "transcends its makers"¹³ in the Third World idea. What he is presumably attempting (despite the dead weight of the fact-value dichotomy) to articulate is the experience of nonmetric, spiritual reality, a reality that cannot possibly be accommodated within the fact-value universe. For experiences of spiritual reality (or nonmetric reality to use Arthur Eddington's term) are supposed to be on the deflationary side of the line of demarcation, are supposed not to have truth-content, are supposed not to be "empirical." In other words, such experiences for Popper can only be made "real" by being objectified into a world of "the logical contents of books, libraries, computer memories and such like."

In *Objective Knowledge* Popper even cites the very Plato he had so mercilessly savaged in his open society book as the philosopher who, for all his "essentialist" errors, might lead us back to a language of the reality not accounted for in the language of values.¹⁴ Struggle as he does, however, Popper cannot bring himself to break through and re-enact within himself Plato's experience of the reality of human existence in the *Metaxy* or the "Between." For all

his attempts at revising the inadequacies of the fact-value language, Popper's man remains "facing" the reduced "reality" of the neopositivists. All he has accomplished is to have added a realm of cultural "facts" (in the creation of which his Pelagian-like individuals have had a share through their self-conscious interaction with the physical world and with the realm of "objective" knowledge) to the physical "facts" of the positivists.

I wish to conclude with some brief observations on the requirements for a critical science of politics in our time. Such a science would be open to the language of past searchers for reality (not the positivist "reality" but the reality experienced by the whole human being). It would learn as much from an Egyptian hymn or a Buddhist prayer or a Biblical text or a Platonic dialogue as it does from the pages of the *Congressional Record* or the *New York Times* about what constitutes the political reality in which we all participate. In its language a critical science of politics would not mirror the very world—the "modern" world—which it is supposed to interpret. It would know itself to be a science—a form of *knowledge*—rather than a mere "blik" (as the fact-value dichotomy implies). It would be able to identify and expose ideological "second-reality" constructions for the threats that they are to the freedom of the spirit and the dignity of the person. It would also know its limitations and have no more illusions than did positivism's greatest representative, Max Weber, about offering up "recipes for practice" for the specific problems of the day. Its knowing would be a *questioning* knowing and a *knowing* questioning.

I contend, then, not as my private "blik" or value-judgment but as a matter of record, that for there to be a critical science of politics there must be openness on the part of its practitioners to the reality of the Between in which we participate and to the search for the ground of Being. Such a conclusion may sound dogmatic and arbitrary. For those who wish to pursue the search, however, there exists a rich body of literature which they may use to help them to re-enact within themselves the experiences of reality to which the language of Being refers.^{15*}

*This article is drawn from a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, held in New York City in September of 1978.

¹David Easton, *The Political System* (New York, Knopf, 1953), p. 221. ²If by the naturalistic fallacy one means deriving an "ought" from an "is," the positivists themselves are guilty of committing it. They assume reality to be split between fact and value with the "subjective" valuing individual as the source of norms rather than factual "reality" itself. Thus, they accept as "real" the "fact" that the individual is the source of norms rather than, say, the community or the traditions of a civilization. In truth, there is no way of avoiding the "fallacy." Positivists argue that "reality" is such that the individual imposes his "values" on the "real" world: *i.e.* the positivist assumes that he "ought" not to regard "values" as derivable from "reality."

In any event, the problem of a critical science of politics is not to avoid deriving an ought from an is, but to strive to see that the "ought" in question is derived from what truly, enduringly, and ultimately "is" rather than from the *Zeitgeist* or some evanescent and perhaps brutally successful "fact." If by "is" one means merely what "exists" as a "brute fact" in the phenomenal world, then no one but a clod or a time-server would favor making that the source of the "ought." When Thomas Aquinas wrote that *bonum et ens convertuntur*, he did not mean by "is" what merely "exists." Indeed, what other source can there possibly be for an ought that is authoritative for us than that it may be derived from the ultimately true "is," or the order of Being? Of course, vast opportunity for error in "reading" the Order of Being exists, which is why the "ought" is better expressed in the language of the sense of movement toward reality or the ground of Being than in apodictic statements. The pre-analytical quality of openness to the quest for (enduring) reality is presupposed for any valid ethical language; such openness is the *sine qua non* for avoiding

megalomaniacal ideological constructions and self-righteous repressiveness, both of which ignore the truth of man's creatureliness, imperfection, and finitude. The man who presumes to measure must experience himself as measured by a Truth which his judgments may at best only approximate. ³See, for example, John H. Hallowell, *Main Currents in Modern Political Thought* (New York: Holt, 1950). Chapters 9 and 10 and the literature cited there are particularly relevant, as is his article "Politics and Ethics," XXXVIII *American Political Science Review* (August, 1944), 639-655. ⁴Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1963), p. 82. This is from Carnap's "Intellectual Autobiography," pp. 3-84. ⁵Karl R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 111. ⁶John Eccles, *The Understanding of the Brain* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1973), p. 193. ⁷Popper, *op. cit.*, p. 12, n. 19. ⁸Henry Veatch, "A Neglected Avenue in Contemporary Religious Apologetics," *13 Religious Studies* (1977), 29-48 at 31-32. ⁹Popper, *op. cit.*, pp. 166, 74. ¹⁰Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) for the latest criticism of "mainstream social science." Some of the leading contemporary political philosophers who point the way beyond the language of values are not even discussed by Bernstein. For example, Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin are not even cited, which is rather odd for a book on the "restructuring" of political thought. ¹¹Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: 1952), p. 11. ¹²Popper, *op. cit.*, p. 158. ¹³*Ibid.*, p. 159. ¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 122, 158. ¹⁵See in particular Eric Voegelin's *Order and History* (4 volumes, LSU Press, 1956-74) and my article "Eric Voegelin's Framework for Political Evaluation," 72 *APSR* (March, 1978), 110-121, and the literature cited therein. Voegelin's theory of experiences of reality and their symbolization has been further developed in essays to be published in *Order and History*, Volume V (forthcoming).