



---

Hermeneutics, Political Inquiry, and Practical Reason: An Evolving Challenge to Political Science

Author(s): Michael T. Gibbons

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 100, No. 4, Thematic Issue on the Evolution of Political Science, in Recognition of the Centennial of the Review (Nov., 2006), pp. 563-571

Published by: [American Political Science Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27644384>

Accessed: 23/08/2012 17:32

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



American Political Science Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Political Science Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Hermeneutics, Political Inquiry, and Practical Reason: An Evolving Challenge to Political Science

MICHAEL T. GIBBONS *University of South Florida*

*In its evolution over the past century, mainstream political science has failed to take account of changes in the development of interpretive approaches to politics. Adherents of the dominant approaches to political inquiry have misunderstood the nature of meaning of social and political action and the import of that meaning for the explanation of political life. Or, to put it more sharply, its understanding of the nature and importance the meaning of political life and of interpretive political inquiry have stagnated, not evolved. As a consequence, although conventional empirical and rationalist modes of explanation capture many aspects of political life, they misunderstand or ignore other important political phenomena or important dimensions to politics. Hermeneutic modes of interpretative theory offer the prospect of a competing and/or complementary perspective on the explanation of politics. The prospects for a modern version of practical reason that would allow for a more engaged political science are available but not widely recognized.<sup>1</sup>*

In this essay, I trace the evolution of interpretive social and political inquiry and the responses of mainstream political science to it. I begin by recounting the early versions of interpretive social science, and go on to explain how the nature of the interpretive project changed from historicism and *verstehen* to a

form of inquiry that placed language and background social practices at the center of social explanation (what Clifford Geertz has called depth hermeneutics),<sup>2</sup> particularly as this is found in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Charles Taylor. Despite the significance of that change, many political scientists continued to frame interpretation as something that happens after the fact or is cast in terms of empathy or as a source of insight that has only heuristic value. Consequently, they see interpretation of meaning as a methodological issue. Proponents of hermeneutic interpretation, on the other hand, see the question concerning interpretation not simply in methodological and epistemological terms. From their perspective it is a question of the very nature and limits of social and political inquiry, involving issues of language, the self, moral evaluation, and practical reason. The significance of the last point regarding practical reason is amplified in recent calls for the discipline to become more publicly engaged. Robert Putnam (2003) has argued that public engagement is a fundamental commitment of the discipline. And the APSA-sponsored study coordinated by Stephen Macedo (2005), *Democracy at Risk*, challenges political science to help reinvigorate civic participation in contemporary democracy.

A disclaimer is appropriate here. I cannot draw out the implications of the debate among adherents of various forms of interpretation (i.e., hermeneutic-interpretation, pragmatism, and genealogy). In the course of its development, the hermeneutic-interpretive perspective was itself subsequently challenged by other modes of interpretation. Post-Nietzscheans such as Michel Foucault and the later William Connolly and pragmatists such as Richard Rorty have argued that hermeneutic approaches to interpretation fail to distance themselves sufficiently from accounts of truth, language, society, or the self that hermeneutic-interpretivists criticize. Moreover, some

Michael T. Gibbons is Associate Professor, Department of Government and International Affairs, University of South Florida, Tampa, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, FL 33620.

The author thanks William E. Connolly, Cheryl A. Hall, Lee Sigelman and three anonymous reviewers for their criticisms and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> It is appropriate here to make several points concerning terminology. The literal English translation of the German word "hermeneutics" is interpretation. In the modern world, the term was first applied in the human sciences in attempts to offer explanations of ambiguous and allegorical passages of the Bible and the Torah. In the twentieth century, the term has come to mean something more than that. The German term has been widely adopted for English use and refers to a specific approach to understanding and explaining in the social sciences and humanities. For present purposes, it refers to the attempt to explain social and political life in terms of the language and complex meaning of that political action for social and political actors. I elaborate on the nature of hermeneutic-interpretive explanation later in this essay. For the remainder of the essay, I use hermeneutic-interpretation to refer to those modes of interpretation that see distinctively human behavior and understanding as linguistically mediated. I use interpretation and interpretive theory in a more general sense, referring to any form of social science that emphasizes understanding the meaning that social behavior has for actors, whether or not that perspective emphasizes the centrality of language. I hope to make these distinctions clear in my account of the evolution of this perspective. The term "practical reason" borrows from, but is not identical with, Aristotle's discussion of *phronesis* in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There, Aristotle distinguishes between *theoria*, knowledge about those things that are not open to deliberation and human decision (e.g., the structure of the solar system) and *phronesis*, knowledge about those things that are subject to deliberation and intersubjective agreement, for example, how ought one to live one's life or what kind of constitution a society ought to have. In this respect, interpretive accounts, and hermeneutic interpretation in particular, emphasize the importance of public engagement with the political life under examination. For an argument from a somewhat different perspective that political science needs to become more publicly engaged, see Putnam (2003). The German term *verstehen* also found its way into Anglo-American social science lexicon. It refers to the interpretive understanding of the intended meaning and significance that an action has for an actor performing it.

<sup>2</sup> By depth hermeneutics and depth interpretation, I mean explanation in terms of the language, tacit ideas, inchoate understandings, and historical background and social practices that helped constitute a way of life (see, e.g., Gadamer 1989; Taylor 1985a).

proponents of these other forms of interpretation, notably Rorty, are wary of the kind of political engagement that Taylor and Gadamer, and, as we will see later, Robert Bellah and Roxanne Euben consider a defining characteristic of hermeneutic-interpretation.

## EARLY INTERPRETATION: OBJECTIVIST HERMENEUTICS AND *VERSTEHEN*

The first notable arguments in favor of an interpretive understanding of social behavior can be traced to the work of Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber. Dilthey distinguished between the knowledge required for the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and that for the natural sciences. Human activity is characterized by an inner psychic dimension that is absent in phenomena studied in the natural sciences. According to Dilthey, this means that whereas natural phenomena can be described and explained in terms of empirical observation, human behavior requires us to understand the psychic world that informs, motivates, and constitutes historical and social phenomena. Dilthey saw this as an advantage of the human sciences. "Human sciences have indeed the advantage over the natural sciences that their object is not sensory appearance as such, no mere reflection of reality within consciousness, but is rather first and foremost an inner reality, a nexus experienced from within" (Dilthey 1999, 235–36). This inner reality is expressed or externalized in literature, art, language, historical documents, laws, rituals, and institutions. That externalized meaning must be interpreted in terms of its own historical context for an accurate understanding of the phenomena in question.

Similarly, Weber argued that "Sociology is a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action," including "all human behavior when and in so far as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it" (1947, 88). Weber goes on to give several different examples of interpretive understanding, from performing simple mathematical exercises to behavior driven by irrational motives. But one formulation of the interpretive task conveys a complexity that is too often overlooked: "... rational understanding of motivation ... consists in placing the act in an intelligible and more inclusive context of meaning ... the particular act has been placed in an understandable sequence of motivation, the particular understanding of which can be treated as an explanation of the actual course of behavior. Thus for a science which is concerned with the subjective meaning of action, explanation requires a grasp of the complex of meaning in which the actual course of understandable action thus interpreted belongs" (Weber, 95). Unfortunately, Weber's emphasis on the subjective meaning of action and his formulation of *verstehen* elsewhere emphasizing the empathic quality of interpretation made it easy for critics and supporters alike to overlook the social dimension of the interpretive project.

Both Dilthey's (1999) and Weber's (1947) prescriptions were subject to criticism from several quarters, not all with the same concerns. Karl Popper argued

that Dilthey's distinction between understanding and explanation was a false one and that the accumulation of knowledge in the humanities was subject to the same process of conjecture and refutation as in any realm of knowledge (1972, 183–90). David Easton argued that when applied to political theory, Dilthey's approach resulted in a form of historicism that compromised the scientific purchase of political theory (Easton 1967). Even as sympathetic a critic as Gadamer argued that Dilthey's account of hermeneutics issued in a form of objectivism that misunderstood the possibilities of interpretive-hermeneutic understanding (1989, 213–34). Similarly, critics of *verstehen* argued that the self-understanding of social life was either irrelevant or at best of heuristic value: "... the subjective experience of empathic identification with a historical figure, and of an immediate—almost self-evidently certain—insight into his motivations, constitutes no knowledge, no scientific understanding at all, though it may be a guide in the search for explicit general hypotheses of the kind required for a systematic explanation. In fact, the occurrence of an empathic state in the interpreter is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of sound interpretation or understanding in the scientific sense" (Hempel 1965, 161). In effect, what critics such as Hempel were claiming was that although *verstehen* may be a useful instrument of discovery, it is not a procedure of scientific verification.<sup>3</sup>

## LANGUAGE, THE INTERPRETIVE TURN AND PRACTICAL REASON

With the ascendancy of an empiricist approach to political science that was grounded in a positivist philosophy of science, the issue of understanding and interpretation seemed largely settled until the late 1960s and 1970s. Then two developments occurred that led to challenges to the adequacy of the empiricist-behavioralist account of politics. First, critics argued that behavioralism failed to offer an adequate account of some of the most important dimensions of politics. Perhaps most significantly, behavioralists had come to prominence in the discipline based in part on their claim to offer a precise and thorough account of the distribution and exercise of power in American politics. However, a range of critics pointed out that the empiricist-behavioralist account failed to recognize some of the most serious uses of power to exclude some groups from the political process. For example, as thoughtful and rigorous a student of power as Robert Dahl concluded that "full assimilation of Negroes into the normal system has already occurred in many northern states" (Dahl 1956, 138–39). Perhaps even more startlingly, David Truman (1971) reiterated an argument that he had originally made in 1951 that the emerging civil rights movement posed a danger to the stability of democracy because it challenged the rules

<sup>3</sup> For a more complete account of the debate surrounding *verstehen*, see Dallmayr and McCarthy 1977.

of the game that were the foundation of the consensus upon which American pluralist democracy was built.<sup>4</sup>

The second development was the influence of Thomas Kuhn's (1962) history and philosophy of science. Conventional accounts of science held that one theory replaces another because it explains more than its competitors over the same field of phenomena. Kuhn contended that this is hardly ever the case. He argued that competing scientific theories are often incommensurate because they are grounded in different paradigms that explain different phenomena, identifying different problems to be solved and disagreeing over what counts as evidence and as a good explanation. Kuhn concluded that more often than not one paradigm replaces another not because it shows itself to be scientifically superior but for reasons extraneous to science.

These two developments led critics such as Connolly (1974), Hannah Pitkin (1973), Taylor (1971), and Sheldon Wolin (1969) to argue that the shortcomings of behavioralism in explaining political life were endemic to that paradigm. Wolin perhaps put it best when he argued that what he called the *vita methodi* of behavioralism was not a neutral set of tools for scientific inquiry but rather helped foster an intellectual orientation that avoided "fundamental criticism and fundamental commitment" (1964).<sup>5</sup>

Just as criticisms of behavioralism were beginning to mount, Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958) resurrected and recast the Weberian focus on the interpretive dimension of social explanation. Drawing on the later work of Wittgenstein, Winch argued that because social behavior and institutions are in large part constituted by the concepts, ideas, and beliefs available to actors, explanation of social action must be cast in terms of those factors. Those ideas get their sense only in relation to the language and practices within which they have developed. In short, social practices and relations are themselves expressions of ideas about relations between human beings. This requires new attention to the connection between language and social action. To understand why certain social events occur, social scientists need to take into account the intentions, ideas, and concepts available to the actors involved in the behavior and institutions in question. In particular, Winch focused on understanding non-Western and premodern cultures. Too often Western social scientists presumed that the categories and ideas common to the West were universally applicable. Winch argued that such an approach was bound to misunderstand the behavior of members of primitive, premodern societies (as these societies were

referred to at the time). He argued that to avoid misunderstanding those cultures and their social practices, we need to take account of their ideas about what they are doing and at least initially formulate our account in terms common to their way of life (Winch 1964).

Unfortunately, at times Winch framed his argument as a reformulation of the Weberian account of interpretation as an act of *verstehen*. Consequently, critics were inclined to interpret it as a reiteration of the idea that the understanding of social and political behavior should be cast in terms of the subjective intentions of social actors. They interpreted Winch as simply making a new case for empathic understanding, a project that he in fact sought to go beyond.

In a turning point in the development of interpretive inquiry, Gadamer (1989) and Taylor (1971/1985b) further clarified the relationship between language and social and political action and the implications for social and political inquiry. Both see language as ultimately distinctive of human experience of the world: "Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather on it depends the fact that man has a *world* at all" (Gadamer 1989, 443). Because language mediates and enables our distinctively human experience of the world, the ideas, concepts, and beliefs embodied in a language become central to understanding the behavior of human beings, including an account of what they are doing, why they do what they do, and the point behind their behavior. Consequently, to explain social action accurately, we must employ the language that helps to constitute that behavior. "The range of human desires, feelings, emotions, and hence meanings is bound up with the level and type of culture, which in turn is inseparable from the distinctions and categories marked by the language people speak" (Taylor 1985b, 25). This language must further be interpreted against the background practices within which those ideas develop and which in turn shape and form that complex background.

Two examples might be useful here. It is widely recognized that the concept and practices of individualism are distinctive of and valued in the West and in American culture in particular. Moreover, individualism is not just an idea that Americans could dispense with and still have the society they have. Their political system, ideas of the distinction between the public and the private sphere, notions of individual rights, educational system, institutions of marriage and childrearing, patterns of work and leisure all revolve around their ideas and practices of individualism. The same cannot be said for many non-Western cultures. Indeed, in some, such as Singapore, Western individualism is seen as dangerous to the fabric of their society. Consequently, it would be a mistake to try to explain the behavior of members of those cultures in terms familiar to and taken for granted by American political culture. We would run the risk of misidentifying what they are doing and why they are doing it.

Similarly, the practice of negotiation found in Western cultures presupposes a set of background ideas, practices, and concepts such as autonomy, sincerity, choosing between alternatives, and bargaining in good

<sup>4</sup> As Ira Katznelson has put it, "Truman thus implied in 1951 and again in 1971 that it would be far better for the excluded to remain apolitical than challenge the dirty secrets of the country's liberal regime" (2003, 174).

<sup>5</sup> Wolin is not an interpretivist proper, but his critique of behavioralism and his endorsement of political judgment in his 1969 essay were echoed by thinkers such as Taylor and Gadamer. Moreover, many, if not most, interpretivists in political science acknowledge a substantial debt to Wolin's (1969) analysis of the shortcomings of behavioralism and his contributions to political theory.

and bad faith. Without that complex of background practices, the idea of negotiation would make no sense; negotiation as we understand it would not be applicable as a description of social relations between actors, and institutions predicated upon negotiation would not exist. This points to the close connection between language and the social practices with which it is intertwined. "The situation we have here is one in which . . . the vocabulary would not make sense, could not be applied sensibly, where this range of practices did not prevail. And yet this range of practices could not exist without the prevalence of this or some related vocabulary. . . . The language is constitutive of reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is. To separate the two and distinguish them as we quite rightly distinguish the heavens from our theories about them is forever to miss the point" (Taylor 1985b, 33–34). One implication of this, and one thing that distinguishes hermeneutic interpretation from *verstehen*, is that the interpretative understanding of behavior must go beyond the subjective intentions of actors. To speak of the ideas, concepts, and so on simply as the subjective intentions of actors is to fail to see that the ideas are themselves embedded in the practices or the way of life in question. This implies that we must go beyond the subjective intentions of actors to the intersubjective and common meanings and practices that constitute the background, or what Gadamer (1989) would refer to as the historical horizon, of a way of life and that help shape the possibilities for social action.

Despite the emphasis on language and the claims that interpretation must go beyond empathy and the subjective intentions of actors, the hermeneutic project is still recast in terms of *verstehen* and empathic understanding. King, Keohane, and Verba (1994), for example, offer a fairly sympathetic acknowledgment of the importance of some of the hermeneutic-interpretive insight: "... we agree with the interpretivists that it is crucial to understand a culture deeply before formulating hypotheses or designing a systematic research project to find an answer" (39). However, their understanding of what interpretation boils down to is still cast in terms of empathy and *verstehen* that Taylor and Gadamer claim to have gone beyond: "Scholars who emphasize 'interpretation' seek to illuminate the intentional aspects of human behavior by employing *Verstehen* ('empathy: understanding the meaning of actions and interactions from the members' own point of view' [Eckstein 1975, 81])" (39). In addition, they see the role of interpretation largely as helping to provide insightful and fruitful hypotheses rather than as part of the process of confirmation. Although they seem to appreciate the significance of what I have been calling hermeneutic interpretation, in the end they view its role in social inquiry as ancillary to the empirical enterprise rather than as an alternative mode of explanation. In short, although they look to incorporate some of the insights of hermeneutic interpretation into their account of social inquiry, by reformulating it in terms of *verstehen* and empathy their account of it is in principle no different than that of previous generations of political scientists.

What explains this failure of a substantial segment of political science to take accurate account of the changes that have taken place in interpretive theory and its reformulation of the interpretation of the meaning of social and political action? Three interconnected forces have pushed empirical and rationalist inquiry in the direction of framing the interpretation of meaning in terms of empathy.

First and most important has been the tendency of empiricist and rationalist theorists to assume, knowingly or not, that Western rationalist assumptions about the human mind and the possibilities of knowledge were part of the very nature of things, that is, had an ontological status. The tenets of rationalism, for example, the emphasis on single procedure, reductionism, disengaged reason, the distinction between fact and value, and the ideal of objectivity, became, in effect, part of the understanding that shaped modern identity, self-interpretation, and the assumptions of social science about the nature of human agency (Taylor 1989, Parts I and II). This disengaged sense of the individual led political scientists to presume that any question of the meaning of social and political action must be formulated in terms of subjective meaning, with the accompanying conclusion that interpreting that meaning must be an empathic enterprise.

Gadamer and Taylor, drawing on Heidegger and Wittgenstein, challenge this conception with their respective accounts of historically situated and socially engaged human agency, "... agency whose experience is only made intelligible by being placed in the context of the kind of agency it is" (Taylor 1995, 68). This context, the complex background of language, historical tradition, and social practices, provides the means by which political actors are able to cope with or negotiate their way in the world. Consequently, from this perspective one goal of moral philosophy, social science, and political theory is to articulate this background, to give it expression through public discourse and institutions, that is, the practical reason that I referred to earlier.

The second assumption of empirical and rationalist approaches has been methodological individualism. Methodological individualism holds that ultimately all explanation of human behavior must be cast in terms of the behavior of individuals. It arose in response to some early-twentieth-century attempts to explain political behavior in terms of holistic categories such as "the German mind" or "the State," concepts that suggested that holistic categories have a life of their own, a kind of anthropomorphism of abstract categories. Not only were such categories of questionable explanatory value, but also at times they had pernicious political consequences.

Hermeneutic-interpretation, on the other hand, is committed to a kind of holism different from that just described. It recognizes that the explanation of behavior, ideas, beliefs, and so on requires reference to the larger complex of background practices, historical situation, and linguistic community that helps constitute and define the behavior in question. As a trivial example, the role of quarterback in American football does

not exist outside the context of the game. One cannot make sense of what the quarterback does without some knowledge of the background of the formal and informal rules of the game and the strategies in football that have developed over the years. More seriously, if one were to examine empirically the work activities of a thirteenth century serf, an early-eighteenth-century African slave in preplantation North America, and a late-seventeenth-century indentured servant, one would find that in many cases both the type of labor performed and the conditions under which it was performed were for the most part indistinguishable from one another. One certainly would not see in those activities anything that would allow one to identify them as the qualitatively different kinds of labor that they were. What made them very different forms of labor was the larger context, the way each was defined within its own historical and social context. One cannot accurately describe and explain the behavior without reference to this larger whole.

Dovetailing with the two previous assumptions, the third assumption of mainstream political science is a liberal conception of the self. Individuals are seen as ultimately potentially sovereign over their ideas, beliefs, and intentions—in short, sovereign over their personal and political identity. Here the assumption is that at least in principle individuals can distance themselves from the language, culture, beliefs, ideas, and range of personal identity that are historically and socially transmitted. The individual is, in other words, ultimately an unencumbered self, in Michael Sandel's (1998) words.

These three background assumptions converge to fortify a conception of the problem of meaning in terms of subjective meaning and empathy.<sup>6</sup> The hermeneutic-interpretive perspective, on the other hand, insists that the concrete self is always embodied, which means that it is always already situated in a historical-linguistic community that embodies a range and horizon of possible personal and public identity. The historical-linguistic horizon provides the individual with the capacity to appropriate the world reflectively. But the language through which we reflectively appropriate the world is never something we can totally dominate or extricate ourselves from. There is no God's eye perspective from which to survey the whole and put it completely at our disposal. Although we can critically assess parts or regions of our language, we always do so from within a historical-linguistic tradition, relying on the resources that it provides for that reflective appropriation.

## HERMENEUTIC-INTERPRETATION AND PRACTICAL REASON

This view of language and the connections with social and historical practice and political inquiry have significant implications, of which I will focus on two

in particular. The first deals with the way in which interpretation takes place. The second deals with what both Gadamer and Taylor see as the moral-evaluative-critical moment intrinsic to this mode of inquiry that reflects the orientation of hermeneutic interpretation as the basis for practical reason.

### Interpretation and the Fusion of Horizons

According to the Gadamer-Taylor position, our appropriation of the world, at both the intellectual and practical levels, always takes place within a linguistic-historical tradition from which we can never fully extricate ourselves (Gadamer 1989, especially 438–550). At the same time, we need to begin our understanding of the past or other cultures in terms of their language and practices. This raises the obvious question of how to bridge the gap between our linguistic tradition and that which we are trying to understand. Gadamer's answer, which Taylor (2002) endorses, is that a "fusion of horizons" must occur (Gadamer, 306). The fusion of horizons resembles a dialogical process in which we treat the other as a partner in a dialogue in which we attempt to extend our categories of understanding to encompass the ideas, beliefs, or way of life of the other. This "consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person [or culture] to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but that of the other" (Gadamer, 305). Two examples will help illustrate the kind of interpretive explanation that Gadamer and Taylor are advancing.

Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1996) argue that contemporary American political culture is experiencing significant strains and stresses between individualism and community. This development is a consequence of the changing languages and practices of individualism. Whereas in Tocqueville's time religious and republican languages of individualism created "habits of the heart" that lessened the tensions between the self and the community, today utilitarian and therapeutic forms of individualism create a divide between the self and community. The result is a variety of dangerous implications for both public and private life. Most serious is the administrative despotism about which Tocqueville warned, facilitated by the narrow, self-regarding character of therapeutic and utilitarian individualism with the accompanying withdrawal of increasingly larger numbers of citizens from the public sphere.

Contemporary social science is ill-suited, Bellah and his colleagues (1996) argue, to address this issue. What is required is a form of social inquiry that draws on the historical character of social life, explains the relationship between one's public and personal identity and background social practices, and acknowledges that, to understand our contemporary political culture and address the dangers we face, we need to engage in a dialogue with our past. In effect, this requires a reconstitution of social science as a form of practical reason

<sup>6</sup> There are other issues as well, most notably the different understandings of language. Again, space does not allow for that detailed discussion.

that would enable us to construct contemporary analog of the older biblical and republican forms of individualism.<sup>7</sup>

The second example is found in Roxanne Euben's *The Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Western Rationalism* (1999). Euben argues that western attempts to understand Islamic religious revivalism have many shortcomings, traceable to the limits of scientific approaches to the study of politics. Specifically, rational-actor models explain the behavior of Islamic fundamentalists in terms familiar to western culture and in particular to western rationalism. The result is a series of explanations that see the rise of Islamicism as a strategic action to obtain some other goal, or as a displacement of the loss of one satisfaction with another, or as parasitic on the existence of the West, or as compensation for the inability to deal with the processes and disappointments of modernization. What is not even considered is trying to understand Islamic fundamentalism in terms of the ideas, beliefs, and cultural understanding of Islamicists themselves. Hence, the possibility is not considered that what might motivate some Muslims is the idea of Islam as an autonomous ethical-religious-political vision of the good life.

As an alternative, Euben engages in a dialogical model of understanding Islam, grounded in the interpretive theory of Gadamer, considering the intrinsic appeal of Islam on its own terms. Working with the Arabic texts of a range of Islamic thinkers, she deftly traces the historical origins of Islamic fundamentalism, showing that its appeal for many is in the ethical-religious vision itself, which ironically shares some concerns with western critics of western society and rationalism. This is not to say that there are no religious fanatics motivated by an animosity toward the West. Euben's point is that to understand the variety and complexity of the problem, we need to employ an interpretive, dialogical theoretical approach that will explain the differences among various reasons for Islamic revivalism.

### Interpretation, Strong Evaluation, and Practical Reason

The claim made earlier about language being expressive of and constituting social and political life, including the claim that interpretive understanding and explanation take the form of the fusion of horizons, has moral-normative implications for the study of politics and practical reason. In Gadamer's words, it "*gives the problem of method a moral relevance*" (Gadamer 1989, 313). That is, insofar as language has the expressive

and constitutive role identified earlier, it also makes possible the articulation of new forms of political action and understanding. As the foundation for human reflection and a critical perspective on one's desires, it provides the possibility for the transformation of our desires, wants, needs, and purposes. "The expressivist theory opens a new dimension. If language serves to express/realize a new kind of awareness, then it may not only make possible a new awareness of things, and ability to describe them; but also new ways of feeling, of responding to things. If in expressing our thoughts about things we can come to have new thoughts; then in expressing our feelings, we can come to have transformed feelings" (Taylor 1985a, 232–33). In short, language provides the possibility for the transformation and revision of those feelings, desires, wants, and so on that it enables us to experience; human reflection, like human experience, is not prelinguistic. What is particularly important here is that this reflection that is an inherent part of language at times takes the form of deep moral-normative evaluation.

The hermeneutic-interpretive account of the connection between explanation and moral evaluation is perhaps best understood in contrast to the empiricist and rationalist account of normative discourse. Parallel to their understanding of meaning in terms of the subjective intentions of actors, empiricist/rationalist theories have framed normative issues largely in terms of the subjective values or preferences on the part of both political actors and social and political scientists. Values and preferences are taken as a given with no ultimate reasoned basis for judging one set of preferences as better than any other. For the social scientist this means trying to limit or minimize the influence of one's own values by means of scientific method. From the hermeneutic-interpretive account, the issue of the moral-evaluative element in political inquiry has several dimensions to it that go beyond the formulation in terms of individual values. I will focus on just one.<sup>8</sup>

Over the course of its developing challenge to the mainstream of political science, one focus of hermeneutic-interpretation has been the different kinds of evaluation that language makes possible. Every natural language embodies vocabularies of evaluation. Some of these can be described as weak, that is, evaluations framed in the language of mere preferences. The preference for this or that ice cream or

<sup>7</sup> At first glance, Bellah et al.'s argument seems to have much in common with later work on the decline of social capital. Although there are similarities between the two points of view, the differences emphasize what is distinctive about an interpretive approach. Whereas analyses that frame the problem in terms of social capital tend to be instrumental in nature, Bellah's argument is an ethical-moral-political one.

<sup>8</sup> Representatives of the hermeneutic-interpretive perspective have also argued that when it comes to explanation in social and political science, a moral-evaluative component of explanation is inherent in the very structure of explanation (Taylor, 1967/1985b; see also Martin Heidegger, 1982). In addition, they have also argued that some concepts necessary for political explanation (e.g., politics itself) are formed from an explicitly moral or normative point of view and cannot be operationally redefined in a morally neutral fashion without radically changing the meanings. Moreover, some such attempts so disfigure the concept in question as to make its explanatory value questionable. The best statement of this is still Connolly 1974. I have cited the 1974 edition rather than the 1983 second edition to give the reader a sense of the chronology of the argument. Perhaps the most comprehensive account of the empiricist/rationalist position is Oppenheim 1976.



basketball team are examples of such weak evaluations. Weak evaluation does not depend on the qualitative appraisal of the thing desired. It does not require that one articulate reasons or justifications for one alternative over another beyond the fact that it is merely preferred.

Taylor contrasts this weak form of evaluation with strong evaluation, which goes beyond evaluation in terms of mere preferences. It deploys a language of qualitative worth (e.g., justice or injustice, cowardice or courage, nobility or ignobility) of the desires entertained or alternatives under consideration. In other words, to qualify as the result of strong evaluation, it is insufficient that something merely be desired to justify or warrant the fulfillment of that desire or that choice of alternatives. In the case of strong evaluation, the evaluator deploys a vocabulary of deeply contrastable ways of life or ways of thinking about alternatives. The language of justice and injustice, courage and cowardice, nobility and ignobility, or, in the case of Bellah, utilitarian individualism versus republican individualism, describes inherent incompatibilities between the alternatives, reflecting the fact that the alternatives embody inherently incompatible ways of life.

Now, this distinction between strong and weak evaluation has several implications for the very possibilities of distinctively human experience of life. Most fundamentally, from the hermeneutic-interpretive perspective, this capacity for deep evaluation is one of the qualities of distinctively human existence and society. To put it in more traditional terms of political theory, it is an essential part of human nature. This means that deep evaluation that one engages in plumbs the depths of personal identity. By personal identity, I mean the most fundamental evaluations that help constitute one as a person, that make me who I am. Of course, the range of evaluations reasonably available to me, including the very possibility of experiencing this or that emotion, need, or want, is always circumscribed by the language, practices, and institutions that I inherit. Nonetheless, within the language and tradition handed down to me a range of alternative evaluations is available, and these fundamental evaluations are constitutive of the very person I am. "Shorn of these," Taylor writes, "we would cease to be ourselves, by which we do not mean trivially that we could be different in the sense of having some different properties other than those we now have . . . but that shorn of these we would lose the very possibility of being an agent who evaluates; that our existence as persons, hence our ability to adhere as persons to certain evaluations, would be impossible outside the horizon of these essential evaluations, that we would break down as persons, be incapable of being a person in the full sense" (Taylor 1985a, 34–35).

Taylor reiterates this last point in *Sources of the Self* (1989). He argues that to be a self (rather than simply an organism) is to negotiate the world from a moral space that provides us with a personal, social, and moral identity. This moral space, this background of social and moral practices and understandings, gives us a sense of what is morally significant.

We are selves only in that certain issues matter for us. What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me. And as has been widely discussed, these things have significance for me, and the issue of my identity is worked out, only through a language of interpretation which I have come to accept as a valid articulation of these issues. To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self-interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there couldn't in principle be an answer. . . . But the self's interpretations can never be fully explicit. Full articulation is an impossibility. The language we have come to accept articulates the issues of the good for us. But we cannot have fully articulated what we are taking as given, what we are simply counting with, in using this language. We can, of course, try to increase our understanding of what is implicit in our moral and evaluative languages. . . . But articulation can by its very nature never be completed. We clarify one language with another, which in turn can be further unpacked, and so on. Wittgenstein made this point familiar. (Taylor, 34)

The upshot is that we need to take account of the forms of moral evaluation of the members of the polity or the society we are studying. To fail to account for those differences, to recast them as simply self-interest or mere preferences, is to miss the point behind them and perhaps the centrality they occupy in a culture, society, or polity. Euben offers us an example of this point. To interpret the behavior of all Islamicists simply in terms of the assumptions of western rationalism, in strictly strategic or instrumental terms, misses the point of much of their behavior. It fails to consider how Islam might constitute an ethical-moral-religious self-understanding, that is, understanding in terms of what Taylor calls strong evaluation, bound to the personal identity of the actors. In that respect it misunderstands the depth of commitment and the significance of moral purpose, moral purpose that is qualitatively different than simple self-interest or mere preference. And in offering an explanation that is a re-description or rearticulation of the self-understanding of actors, an explanation that takes the form of the fusion of horizons discussed earlier, we are likely to find ourselves engaged in a moral dialogue, as Bellah and Euben are, with those whose political life we are explaining.

If the argument to this point has been correct, then explanations of social and political life that ignore the essential nature and importance of moral evaluation for the political life under examination and that claim that explanations of politics can be politically and morally neutral misunderstand the nature of political explanation and its moral implications.

The issue that arises here is how one distinguishes between better and worse forms of deep evaluation. Taylor argues that to answer this question properly we need to understand exactly what the appropriate question is, particularly as it relates to questions of practical reason. In addressing such questions, we are not looking for some external, immutable standard with which to compare competing accounts of knowledge or different interpretations. We do not even always do that in the natural sciences, Taylor suggests. More typically, we



compare competing claims to knowledge or competing interpretations with each other. That being the case, one test of the truth of an interpretation in human affairs is the extent to which it helps us understand or articulate the background preunderstanding that is the condition of our coping with or negotiating the world. Insofar as it accomplishes the former, it should also enhance the latter. "One of the directions of increasing knowledge of which we are capable consists in making this preunderstanding explicit, and then in extending our grasp of the connections which underlie our ability to deal with the world as we do. Knowledge of this kind is intrinsically linked with increased ability to effect our purposes, with the acquisition of potential recipes for more effective practice. In some cases, it is virtually impossible to extend such knowledge without making new recipes available; and an extension of our practical capacities is therefor a reliable criterion of increasing knowledge" (Taylor 1995, 48). In other words, interpretation necessarily involves a potential normative dimension. It takes the form of practical reason that looks to engage, as Bellah et al. (1996) point out, the political life that it attempts to explain. In offering new understandings, new possibilities can eclipse old practices and alter ways of life. In short, the opportunities for public engagement as a form of practical reason are built into the theoretical assumptions of hermeneutic-interpretation. This is not because its proponents claim to offer the answers to the moral and political questions that societies face, but because it opens the possibilities of framing and reframing political issues and explanations as Bellah and Euben have done.

## CONCLUSION

The question of interpretation in contemporary social and political inquiry necessarily goes beyond empathy and the interpretation of subjective meaning of political action and beyond epistemological issues. Interpretation is not simply a tool in the kit of instruments of explanation. Its emphasis on the importance of language and complex social-cultural background, its emphasis on the expressivist dimension to language in moral evaluation, its conception of political inquiry as practical reason, and its views of the evaluative element inherent in political explanation all mark it as an alternative to empirical-rationalist approaches to political inquiry. Many political scientists now argue that the discipline should be problem-driven rather than method-driven and some argue that such an approach would facilitate public engagement by political scientists. Interpretive theorists would agree, as they have long held that given the complexities and multi-dimensional nature of social and political life, no single theoretical perspective is likely to provide an exhaustive account of politics. As one theoretical alternative, interpretive theory looks to engage competing theoretical perspectives and alternative and complementary accounts of social and political life as well as the public life it interprets.

## REFERENCES

- Bellah, Robert, et al. 1996. *Habits of the Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Connolly, William E. 1974. *The Terms of Political Discourse*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath.
- Connolly, William E. 1981. *Appearance and Reality in Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dahl, Robert. 1956. *A Preface to Democratic Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dallmayr, Fred G., and Thomas McCarthy eds. 1977. *Understanding and Social Inquiry*. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Dilthey, Wilhelm. 1999. *Selected Works: Hermeneutics and the Study of History*. Edited with an Introduction by Rudolf Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Easton, David. 1967. *The Political System*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Euben, Roxanne. 1999. *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Western Rationalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. *Truth and Method*. New York: Continuum Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1982. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper Row Publishers.
- Hempel, Carl. 1965. *Aspects of Scientific Explanation*. New York: Free Press.
- Katznelson, Ira. 2003. *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- King, Gary, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kuhn, Thomas. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Macedo, Stephen. 2005. *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Democracy and What We Can Do About It*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press.
- Malpas, Jeff, Ulrich Arnsperg, and Jens Kertscher eds. 2002. *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Oppenheim, Fleix. 1976. *Moral Principles of Political Philosophy*, second edition. New York: Random House.
- Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1973. *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Popper, Karl. 1972. *Objective Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Putnam, Robert D. 2003. "APSA Presidential Address: The Public Role of Political Science," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 1 (June): 249–55.
- Sandel, Michael. 1998. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, second edition. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1967. "Neutrality in Political Science." Peter Laslett and Garry Runciman, *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 3rd series. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Reprinted in Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Science: Philosophical Papers 2*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985b.
- Taylor, Charles. 1971. "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man." *Review of Metaphysics* 25 (September): 3–51. Reprinted in Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985b.
- Taylor, Charles. 1985a. *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1985b. *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1995. *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 2002. "Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes," In *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Malpas et al. Cambridge: MIT Press.

- Taylor, Charles. 2004. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Truman, David. 1971. *The Governmental Process*, second edition. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Weber, Max. 1947. *A Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Edited by Talcott Parsons. New York: Free Press.
- Winch, Peter. 1958. *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Winch, Peter. 1964. "Understanding a Primitive Society." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (October): 307–24.
- Wolin, Sheldon. 1969. "Political Theory as a Vocation." *American Political Science Review*, 63 (December): 1062–82.