26
Social Science Assumptions

Reflections on Meyer's Chapter

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26.1 Is It Science?

There is a model of scholastic and Cartesian philosophy, still current, that aims to specify axioms from which necessary truths can be deduced. Viewed this way, philosophy is a game of showing that other people's arguments are invalid or unsound. The game drives us to pour our creative energies into imagining counterexamples to each other's axioms.

Descartes treated this game as the required intellectual foundation for disciplined scientific inquiry. The aspiration of science was to begin with what could validly be derived from premises that were not only true but indubitable. This assumption was huge, incorrect, and costly. Perhaps the assumption seemed like common sense at the time. It would have been what Descartes's scholastic readers were expecting and what they would have found familiar and reassuring. In any case, although the assumption was unmotivated, it stuck. For centuries, epistemologists who followed Descartes struggled to articulate an analysis of the concept of knowledge: the set of necessary and sufficient conditions for it to be true that "S knows that p." Has that quest been fruitless? Surely not, but neither has it been a great success, and that is a mystery worth pondering. What else could philosophy be?

A few decades ago, Alvin Goldman gave up on the Cartesian project. He did something resembling epistemology, but Goldman's epistemology was a game with a different objective. Goldman gave up on trying to offer a geometry-style proof that we cannot possibly be dreaming, and instead examined empirical evidence regarding which ways of gathering and processing information are more reliable than others—more reliable (very roughly) at leaving subjects with true beliefs. Goldman's approach is an alternative to starting with axioms. Goldman started with observations pertaining to human psychology, and with a question. We might wonder how exactly to pigeonhole Goldman's project. We might ask, is it really epistemology? Is it philosophy? Is it science? Today, I might say Goldman was doing moral science. He was studying the human condition in general, and more specifically, where we get our information and how reliable our information is. He was doing philosophy as it once was done, and as it could again be done today (see, for example, Goldman 1999).

At the height of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1888; originally published in 1739) likewise started with what could be observed. Hume taught us that correlation is not causation. We can observe correlation. We cannot observe causation. We infer causation, but that inference is a leap.

What an arresting, disturbing idea! It is hard for modern eyes not to read Hume as taking a radically skeptical position on the subject of causation. What else could he have

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been doing? There is an answer. Hume was not being skeptical about causation. He was being skeptical about deduction. Hume was observing something crucial about the nature of science: science is not deductive. Science is about what is true, including what is not *necessarily* true. Science is about leaping to the best explanation of observed data. Science leaps. Leaps are fallible. So be it.

Another of Hume's profoundly disturbing observations is that there is a gap between "is" and "ought." Here, too, it is hard for us not to read Hume as a skeptic about morality, but here, too, there is another way to read him. Hume in fact was a skeptic about deduction. We can read him as pointing out the limits of deduction as a way of framing the objective of the emerging scientific enterprise. We can read Hume as saying, "You find science dubious for gathering data and then leaping to a conclusion not entailed by the evidence? But that can't be an insuperable problem. Even ethics is like that!" A four-year-old budding scientist who experiments with touching the red-hot plate on top of the stove learns fast that she ought to move her hand. How does she learn this? Her inference that she ought to move her hand is not valid, but neither is it a mistake. The child is learning something real, and she is learning from experience, not from deduction.

The idea was that jumping from observed correlation to conclusions about causation—in full awareness that one is jumping to conclusions that could be wrong—is a scientific *ideal* rather than an admission of guilt. This ideal does not explicitly guide philosophical practice. The urge to prove things—and to dismiss as *unproven* whatever we do not want to believe—is Cartesian. But we can get past it.

26.2 Theories Are Testable

Theory identifies robust, law-like correlations between independent and dependent variables. A *theory* is an attempt to cut through an ocean of potentially relevant variables to isolate a particular relationship. It has to be understood, however, especially in social science, that all those other potentially relevant variables remain potentially relevant. Thus, for example, we see a robust, law-like logical correlation between raising minimum wages and raising unemployment rates among teenagers whose labor isn't yet worth that higher wage. Robust, law-like relationships license predictions. That does not entail that rising minimum wage is always followed by rising teenage unemployment. Even licensed predictions are not confirmed in every case.

When warranted predictions are disconfirmed, something good is happening. When your theory is disconfirmed, your theory is telling you that your world is poised to teach you something. It is telling you: something in that ocean of *potentially* relevant variables has manifested its potential, and it is pulling the system in something other than the predicted direction.

Adam Smith evaluated trade barriers by asking whether they correlate in robust, law-like, intelligible ways to changes in price and employment rates. I can imagine Smith wrapping up discussions of fairness not with deductions from fundamental principles but with something like science. I imagine Smith saying, "I've seen how trade barriers and monopoly licenses correlate to rising domestic prices and rising unemployment. Given what I have seen, I would not want to be remembered as defending trade barriers. You want me to call them fair? I will

say this much: observable correlations may not disprove the idea that trade barriers are just, but they sure do embarrass it."

I see Hume and Smith as aspiring to practice moral science. I see them as having succeeded. Following Galileo and Francis Bacon, then Newton, they were on a quest to "introduce the experimental methods of reasoning into moral subjects" (to borrow the subtitle of Hume's *Treatise*). Among philosophers, the Scottish observation-based approach was called *empiricism*.

By the mid-1800s, John Stuart Mill had taken empiricism to the limit, arguing that everything we know comes to us by experience and experiment. We draw inferences from observed empirical regularities. Even propositions like "2 + 2 = 4" are learned by generalizing from observed results. In his day, Mill was visible and influential as an expositor of the new moral sciences. Accordingly, he was taken seriously when, in a series of works culminating in 1848 with *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill separated the study of how goods are produced from the study of how goods are distributed. That is what you do for the sake of analytical rigor and tough-minded science: if two things can be separated, you separate them.[1]

Today, we hardly remember John Stuart Mill pressing that distinction, or that we took Mill's authority for granted and went along with him. Today, we cannot see how spurious that distinction was, for we can hardly imagine not seeing production and distribution as separate topics. Sometimes what looks like two things is actually one, along the lines of the morning star and evening star. If we presume to treat them as separate simply because they appear to be so, we make mistakes.

Ironically, in the aftermath of Mill's distinction, philosophy retreated from what empiricism had been, and was cut off from the scientific study of what makes some societies more productive than others. Production became the province of some other department. Since Philosophy came apart from Political Economy and Sociology, we have portrayed what society produces as a pie. We have portrayed fairness as a question about distributing opportunities to consume the pie. Questions about what possesses people to devote their lives to getting pie to the table were left to the social sciences. What Philosophy in isolation was equipped to study was intuitions regarding what to count as a fair way of dividing the pie among consumers.

26.2.1 To Be Ideal Is to Be an Ideal Response

Amartya Sen has been working for a long time on an idea that I might describe as the idea that ideals can be endogenous. In other words, responses to a problem can be realistically ideal in the sense of being best responses to evolving problems as those problems take shape. But ideals so conceived are *testable*.

Some of those who call themselves ideal theorists sometimes seem to assume an ideal is not a solution to a problem but is instead a call to imagine what it would be like to not

[1] Mill thought humanity might someday, perhaps soon, reach an economic steady state. See Mill (1848). For commentary, see Vallier (2010: 109). To be sure, the telegraph was invented in 1837, and by 1848, many thinkers suspected that electricity's potential, especially in the realm of distance communication, was far from exhausted. Yet, for whatever reason, Mill thought that someday there would be relatively little news on the production side; human progress and human welfare would have more to do with better distribution than with rising productivity.

have a problem. Ideals so conceived may be untestable and to that extent indefensible, but one theorist's "indefensible" is another theorist's "irrefutable." Itzhak Gilboa (in this volume) questions how economics works as a predictive science. For what it is worth, it does not bother me to see the predictions of economics often turning out to be false. The bigger problem would be if economics were like astrology, with postulates too ambiguous ever to be genuinely testable. If nothing could ever disprove your predictions, then whatever else you may be, your work is not scientific.

26.3 More Is Better

Suffice it to say, it's a big assumption that justice is about how to treat the pie. Elizabeth Anderson's work, Iris Marion Young's work, and Robert Nozick's work too point in the direction of a different approach, almost a different subject (See Anderson 2010, Young 1990, and Nozick 1974). Namely, we can see justice, including egalitarian justice, as pertaining more to a process than to an outcome. Questions about justice are questions about treatment.

Justice, analytically, concerns what people are due. It concerns what we expect from each other. More narrowly, it concerns what we have good reason to expect from each other, which is pretty close to speaking of what it is *right* for us to expect. To speak of what it is right to expect is pretty close to speaking of what we have a right to expect. But if we speak of what we have a right to expect, then we are speaking about what we are due, which is to say that we are squarely on the topic of justice. The Young/Nozick/Anderson question, then, is a question not always and not typically about shares. Sometimes, indeed typically, it is a question about how we ought to treat each other. Because we now think about the outcome more than the process, we have fallen into seeing justice as a question of how to treat the pie, but there was a time when we understood that justice is about how to treat bakers. Anderson and Young gave us egalitarianism for adults: their egalitarianism is not about slices; it's about dignity.

Hume and Smith likewise saw economic justice as pertaining to an ongoing process, not an outcome. To Hume, we assess patterns of mutual expectation. To be sure, not all patterns command respect. On Hume's theory, the expectations that command respect are useful or agreeable to self or others. For starters, converging on expectations can help people to understand each other, and understand what to expect from each other. To Smith, the question is even more pointedly empirical. We assess expectations in terms of how they affect the wealth of nations. How do wealthier societies manage commercial traffic? What are the documented consequences of alternative trade policies? Their questions mattered. Their questions did not beg the question. And their questions had testable answers.

So, today, we have John Meyer's well-taken admonitions about economistic reasoning on one side, but on the other hand we have Weber's (and then Woodrow Wilson's) jaw-dropping assumption that the experts who would run the administrative state would have no agenda other than to deploy their expertise for the common good. (Weber's *Economy and Society* [1978] was originally published, posthumously, in 1921.) From that perspective, democratic checks and balances would in effect be a mere hindrance on the efficient operation of said administrative state.

When it comes to specialization, it is not always true that more is better. Our reasons to endorse specialization depend on specialization having enough content for us to be able to draw a line between specialization and overspecialization. A company that produces buggy

whips or key punch cards or movies stored on DVD media will turn out someday to be overspecialized and face extinction accordingly. A species of woodpecker can be overspecialized if it feeds on only one kind of tree that is liable to disappear from the ecosystem. However, we don't confirm that the woodpecker or the business is overspecialized, and that it will not adapt to a changing niche, until it disappears.

Can an academic be overspecialized? Can a whole field be overspecialized? Yes, if work in the field has no potential to translate into results with external application. Yes, if the question of what an ideal ruler would do is oblivious to the discipline that studies abuse of power. Yes, if the academic's work is only readable to half a dozen other specialists. Yes, if a theorist is respected when they retreat from saying socialism is the most efficient economic system to saying socialism's fundamental principle cannot be disproven merely by observing what happens when people are forced to live by it. Recall the tobacco industry's claim that correlations between smoking and cancer do not constitute *proof*. We cannot retreat so far from the realm of observable correlation that we end up claiming that the only way to disprove a fundamental principle is to validly deduce from indubitable axioms that it is necessarily false. We cannot retreat so far from the realm of the testable that we end up saying that once we designate a principle "fundamental," then the principle's contingent correlation with misery, no matter how robust, is not relevant.

The feedback that we call creative destruction, which blows away overspecialized businesses, cannot operate in the academy so long as an academic can safely assume that the work will be refereed by two or three of the half-dozen writers who write the same sort of stuff. I like specialization in general, but we should trust specialization (or specialists) only when success in a specialty has enough empirical content and external validity to give us a way of recognizing overspecialization. Maybe to the extent that business can incorporate ethics (so that we can conceive of things like "triple bottom lines"), and ethics can incorporate social science (so that we can talk about conditions under which people find it fulfilling to bring the pie to the table), we are moving in the direction of an antidote to overspecialization—an antidote to being untestable.[2]

26.4 We Assume a Lot about What Needs Justifying

To John Meyer, the premise for sociological analysis—shared with economics and with modern liberal ideology in general—is that (1) society is built of individual persons and their behavior; (2) these persons are to be seen as primordially equal; (3) inequalities in resultant condition should reflect differences in education rather than background condition; and (4) individual status variations can be seen as occurring within national societies. Meyer observes that these assumptions limit the field.

Meyer might agree that "limited" and "specialized" are two sides of the same coin. While "specialized" is not a bad thing per se, there is a line, however blurry, between specialized and overspecialized, and academics tend to cross that line. We are trained to work on half-problems; that is, "tractable" problems. (As I've said, we work on justice as a half-question about how to divide an already-produced pie rather than as a whole question

[2] Jay Barney (see his chapter in this volume) compares and contrasts positioning theory and resource-based theory as an example of two frameworks that make sense on their own terms, but where each represents a fair challenge to the other.

about how to respect bakers.) Meyer also says equality is a highly constructed element, not a natural baseline. It would be useful to have models and analyses starting with observable inequalities as points of departure.[3]

A simple conjecture: if we treat equality as an achievement rather than a natural default, we would be in a better position to understand and appreciate what counts as realistically feasible progress toward an equality worth wanting. We could, with Hume, ask which equalities are *demonstrably* worth achieving, by virtue of furthering other values we also embrace (such as usefulness to self and others). Such empirical tests could reveal that achieving equality along that dimension has robust instrumental value *even if* we make no assumption about its intrinsic value. (As per Sen [1992], the opportunity cost of achieving equality along one dimension is that we sacrifice equality along some other.)

To be sure, some inequalities are caused, indeed *engineered*, by tribal structures of class, sex, race, religion, and so on. But if we assume that it is a necessary truth that inequalities are deliberately engineered, as if that were a tautology, that will blind us to how profoundly offensive it is when the engineering of an inequality is an observable empirical fact rather than an empty tautology. It will blind us to the difference between inequalities that are no one's fault versus inequalities deliberately chosen or upheld by particular agents who deserve to be held accountable.

In any case, following Meyer, a point worth registering is that treating any particular equality as an ideal worth wanting may or may not be justified. We are trained to regard our identities, our membership in a particular tribe, as a matter of the questions we learn not to ask, especially questions about equality. (See the chapter in this volume by Jerry Davis.) The point is neither hostile to nor even skeptical about equal treatment being an ideal; the point is simply that it's worth thinking about how we ever actually know that a given equality is something we have genuine reason to want.

What makes us assume that inequalities need justifying? To assume inequalities are what need justifying is dangerously close to assuming justice pertains to the outcome, not the process, which is dangerously close to assuming that the "right" outcome justifies whatever horrors we perpetrate in service of it, where "right" can mean conforming to intuitions about a fundamental principle that we bend over backwards to insulate from testability, thereby revealing how little faith we have in its ability to withstand scrutiny.

26.5 Are Ideals an Alternative to Tradeoffs?

Suppose we entertain equality of income as an alleged ideal. Then we reflect on the fact that some workers are older than others. Older workers have lifetimes of acquired skill and knowledge that younger workers will not have for another generation. We might think that bit of information is telling us that if we want to equalize income, we had better think about equalizing lifetime income, since equalizing the incomes of people of all ages at any frozen

[3] Theorists talk about our responsibility for deciding how to handle undeserved inequalities, as if there were no comparable questions about undeserved equalities. But what if we stop assuming that equality is not beyond examination? Consider an analogy. In medieval times, the phenomenon of motion was thought to need explanation. (Why do objects remain in motion, absent any obvious force to keep them in motion?) The Enlightenment view that supplanted this perspective is that objects in motion have inertia. Objects go on unless something (friction, for example) stops them. Change, not motion, is what needs explanation. We assumed that motion needs explaining, but that is a big and unmotivated assumption. Indeed, it turned out, switching to a different assumption was fruitful. We now see change, not continuation, as what needs explaining.

moment would seem preposterous to the kind of egalitarian who believes in equal pay for equal work but does not believe in pretending that all work is equal. To think like this is to see a particular egalitarian ideal—equality of income—as testable, and as a hypothesis that could evolve in response to emerging information. But if we accept equal lifetime income as less antithetical to human flourishing than equalizing all incomes in a frozen moment, then our ideal will appear to be a massive compromise at any frozen moment. We can look all day at any particular time-slice of income distributions, and we will not be able to tell whether we are looking at a picture of equality. (Analogy: if we look at a traffic management system, do we believe that everyone should get a green light eventually, or that everyone should get a green light at the same time? The latter stifles progress, but the former will look like a grossly unequal distribution of green and red lights at any given moment. And it will encourage us to believe a falsehood—namely, position is everything, while being able to move is not relevant. Even if the ideal were achieved, any particular snapshot would still appear to be a picture of great inequality simply by virtue of our not having been born on the same day. In hands of egalitarians like Liz Anderson, ideals of equal treatment are once again leading us back to the kind of egalitarianism that in the nineteenth century was a genuinely liberal ideal.[4])

One takeaway of Amartya Sen's work on equality is that we can ask: are serious ideals *alternatives* to messy tradeoffs? Do serious ideals preclude tradeoffs? Another way to look at it would be to suppose that true ideals are themselves tradeoffs. A true ideal might emerge from asking when we have reason to believe that insisting on equality along one dimension contributes more to human flourishing than insisting on equality along some other dimension. If one equality has to be sacrificed for the sake of another, couldn't there be an ideal place to stop? A realistic egalitarianism avoids assuming too much. A realistic egalitarianism will reflect changing experience and accumulating historical observation regarding contexts where one way of equalizing makes people worse off while some other way makes people better off. Or, if we create more and more power in a vain quest to crush all the social forces that make equality of outcome impossible, what could make us dream that such power will be equally distributed?

So, what would count as a reason to see one equality rather than another as a worthy ideal? What would make a hypothesis that it's ideal *testable*? Can we learn what the various dimensions of equality measurably contribute to human flourishing? Can we learn what various ways of creating the power to enforce equality contribute? (Do they affect life expectancy? Do they affect whether poor people want to move to where an alleged ideal is put into practice? Do they affect whether people see their community as a zero-sum game?) What would take an intuition about equality out of the realm of untestable intuition that analytic philosophy became when the scientific method disappeared into silos of emerging departments of social science over the course of the 1800s? (See Robert Frank's and Jerry Davis's chapters in this volume.)

[4] In passing, a conjecture about the nineteenth-century assumption that bargaining power is a key ingredient in any recipe for equal treatment. The Marxist model of the labor market assumes the labor market is a monopsony, with no competition of the buyer side, and assumes the seller side of the market is a reserve army of desperate unskilled workers driven to accept any offer that beats starving. On this model, there are three remedies: (a) unionize, so that there is a corresponding monopoly on the seller side, and therefore a symmetry of power; (b) have a minimum wage to put a floor under the monopsony buyer that is above the natural floor of the starvation wage but not above a worker's marginal productivity; (c) legislate in an attempt to force employers not to collude. See Anderson's chapter in this volume.

26.6 We Assume Methods of Ethics Are for Deciding What to Do

Consequentialism as a moral science was once a response to questions about what works. There was a time when a philosopher like Adam Smith would have asked: where is life expectancy rising? Where is quality of life changing in ways that make those places the ones where poor people want their kids to grow up? (Why would people who profess to care about the poor reject such seemingly decisive information?) What works is still what economists study to some extent. But philosophers after Sidgwick and culminating in Singer came to treat consequentialism as something other than a question of what works to improve the human condition. They came to treat it as a method of deciding what to do.[5] Eventually, scholars like Peter Singer came to treat it as a question of how much we have to give in order to count as morally innocent. In conjunction, in the case of consequentialism in particular, the question was how much we have to give in order to count as taking the principle to its logical conclusion. The point is not that Singer's question is a bad question, but that it is a different question. Somewhere along the line, in our Sidgwickian quest to make moral philosophy more methodical, we unwittingly changed the topic.[6]

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[5] Sidgwick (1874). See also Singer (1972).

[6] But see my "After Solipsism" (2016). See also the book to which this essay ultimately led, namely Schmidtz (2023).