METAPHYSICS AND SOCIOLOGY

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Students of social science must always fear popular approval; evil is with them when all men speak well of them.

Alfred Marshall[1]

EVERY POLITICAL OR SOCIAL theory that attempts to calibrate between social authority and the liberty of the individual has as its basis a particular theory of man and his nature. How does one then furnish the methodological principles, proposed by sociology, that organize criteria of scientific quality and relevance as well as practical procedural rules? In an age where the fundamental understanding of the hierarchy of the sciences, organized knowledge in accordance with first principles, has become

forgotten amongst Muslims as well as non-Muslims, it is contended that there is an urgent need for a re-examination of what our intellectual *turath* can assert as a metaphysical basis for sociological thinking.

Modern society oscillates nervously between the principle of liberty and that of authority. Both are dangerous categories, polarized positions that traditional Islamic societies on the whole managed to avoid. Liberty, when untempered, turns into license leading to consequent chaos and disorder. Authority, when not derived from a necessity for order but rather on the basis of sheer power, leads to disorder through the appropriation of privilege by the unworthy and ambitious. The traditional functionalist society of reciprocal rights and duties partook of authority and liberty without acknowledging them as positivized standards.

I would like to set out a broad thesis that revolves around the main theme of the myth of metaphysical neutrality in sociology. I will then set out briefly some of the rationale behind the dismissal of metaphysical categories in the social sciences such as the Comtian positivization of metaphysics, the contentions of the Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, and finally the inadequacy of the social fact. I

would like to then conclude by asserting some normative elements of the Islamic social order and their raison d'être.

Primarily, it should be stated at the outset that the Islamic sciences possess a real unity, as shown by the interdependence of logic, metaphysics, and ethics. This interdependence is conditioned on the answer to the question of the fundamental epistemic nature and validity of knowledge (*'ilm*). If reason and experience are the two central modes of knowledge, the interdependence of the two is clear for anyone to intuit. The use of reason alone, in accordance with logic, will furnish validity without truth if disassociated from the world of experienced facts. It is equally foolish to gather and record facts without a clear understanding of the principles by which these facts can then be interpreted.[2] It is well to remember that there is no science without first principles (*mabadi'*) to which one's reasoning may be reduced. If it were not so then there would be an infinite regress, which would make any form of demonstration impossible.

To make a decision on any question therefore, the practitioner of a science prior to any deliberation would necessarily have already adhered to various philosophical positions,

even though he may be unconscious of them. These positions are arrived at from without the science, usually as postulates. This is because the axioms of any science are themselves determinations of the principles of metaphysics, as are the nature and identity of the primary objects of a science.

Second, when I refer to metaphysics, I do not mean Kant's anorexic typology of that science. The metaphysics that is referred to in this lecture is the science of first principles, known in the *kalam* tradition as *ilahiyyat* or *hikmat*. The current dismissal of metaphysics is largely motivated by the remnants of logical-positivism that have built a molehill out of a mountain utilizing the unreformed Wittgensteinian work set out in his *Tractatus*. A few words on this at this juncture might be opportune to clarify my approach, especially regarding so-called language-games.

METAPHYSICS AND LANGUAGE-GAMES

Wittgenstein considered that propositions of philosophy and metaphysics are nonsense (*unsinn*), as they go beyond the limits of language and attempt the inexpressible.[3] For Wittgenstein, a proposition (*satz*) is a picture of reality, so that it portrays a fact. Propositions

of logic therefore do not say anything about reality, as they are not pictures of fact but relate to the logical order. The question of their truth and falsehood thus cannot arise, as they are essentially tautological,[4] since only propositions that stand for things can be true or false. So a philosopher may speak of the phenomenal world, and if his terms were representative of the facts then his discourse would have meaning. Language can also discuss or reveal the ontological structure of the world, but cannot utter in language the identity of this structure as it would be meaningless to do so. This is because the language used for this would be the same language required to reveal the structure. So the relation of language to the world is inexpressible. Philosophical propositions therefore are nonsense because they exceed the limitations of language.

Wittgenstein's main postulate in the *Tractatus* is that language only has one purpose, which is the statement of facts, a very instrumentalist approach eventually adopted by the school of logical positivism. A proposition is true, according to him, only if it correctly pictures facts in the phenomenal world. At the end of his treatise he declares solemnly that the propositions in his book are nonsense,

but nevertheless important nonsense. In the *Philosophical Investigations*[5] published posthumously in 1953, Wittgenstein revisits his previous conclusions and reapproaches language as a natural phenomenon, asserting a more functionalist view that goes beyond the theory of mere communication of empirical facts. Primarily the different uses of language at play in the world have nothing in common since they have no shared essential function. Language has to be understood therefore within the ambit of a behavioural pattern, a game within a complex social setting. To understand the meaning of a word, one must learn how names or words are used in a specific language-game. The meaning is not something other than its use. The role of philosophy thus becomes only useful for the description or clarification of the use of language.[6] Philosophy is merely therapeutic.

The Vienna Circle, with figures like Carnap (d. 1970)[7] taking Wittgenstein as their mentor wanted to establish a theory of meaning that would restrict propositions that are meaningful about the phenomenal world to those that are empirically verifiable. For Carnap, words have meanings that are empirically based. So the word *principle*, coming from the Latin *principium* or the Greek *archê*, originally meant

a beginning. Its use in a metaphysical sense, as a non-temporal cause, does not exist on the face of the words. There are no criteria for this usage. The word has been deprived of its old meaning for a new one, leaving the word as an empty shell, a pseudo-statement. This approach, however, is problematic. How, we may ask, can such a theory of empirical concordance be established without primarily undertaking the non-empirical task of relating propositions to facts?

The traditional Islamic view is that the order of language constitutes the living order of society, as human society is only made possible by language. It is well to note that society is also God-given and not a free human construction. This notion of divine origin to language is premised on the primordial naming of things, as taught to the prophet Adam (may peace be upon him) by Allah. This view of language is referred to by the grammarians as *tawqifi*, or divinely ordained, and not subject to rational deduction (*mutawaqqif wujuduhu 'ala al-ittijah al-dini*).[8] The misuse of language consequently amounts to a grave subversion of humanity itself. Words as naturally given are not the creation of society grasping along an evolutionary ladder for self-expression. Rather,

society merely choreographs their ordering or the use they are put to.[9]

I would like to briefly set out why metaphysics is not itself subject to what is widely accepted as the sociology of knowledge (that is to say, the study of the relationship between human thought and the social context).

The notion of knowledge has long been associated with science or philosophy, and as such, long considered to be seemingly separate from social reality. The sociologist sees knowledge as the production of ideas within the social frameworks that surround it. Both Comte and Marx wanted to establish the ideal of the separation of the two realms so that there would be a surer subordination of knowledge systems to social frameworks. This relationship between mode of knowledge and social framework structures Durkheim's main assertion, that the placement of knowledge in a sociological perspective does not invalidate it. Many of you will recognize that this is an elaboration on the positions of Saint-Simon, Condorcet, and Comte. As we said at the outset the most detached forms of knowledge

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from social frameworks are natural science and philosophy, and thus present a particular difficulty for sociological analysis. The sociology of knowledge, therefore, naturally concentrates on modes of knowledge that are thoroughly involved with social reality and its myriadic structures. These modes are perceptual knowledge of the external world, knowledge of the Other, political, technical, and common-sense knowledge.[10]

The possibility of ontological truth, however, which traditional metaphysics espouses, necessitates the concomitant possibility of a cognitive judgment possessing universal validity. The objection to universally valid judgment, for someone like Georges Gurvitch, is on the spurious basis that a judgment is necessarily attached to a precise frame of reference, usually a social framework. His argument continues to establish that this is so because if truth and judgments were always universal, no distinction would be possible between particular sciences or types of knowledge. The fact that we are naturally able to distinguish these seems to demonstrate for Gurvitch the proof of his assertion.[11] The logic is evidently bewildering and no less fallacious.

One can understand the objection that there can be no sociology in the sense that John Milbank describes, as a universal 'rational' account of the 'social' character of all societies.[12] Consequently the adoption of a particular vantage point or the explication of a distinct society is necessitated. One can perhaps disagree with Milbank's theologically positive outlook as it admittedly ends up in denying the reality of reason and morality as ahistorical universals. Such denial would be on the basis that their relationship with the social framework would rob us of the possibility of understanding their effects on a particular society. Contrary to this view, it has long been held, uncontentiously, that a discipline that is strictly limited to the statement of singular facts is not capable of amounting to a science, because such propositions predicate something of an unspecified part of the denotation of the subject. Given though that such propositions are too indefinite to be a science, it does not nevertheless bar such propositions from playing an important auxiliary role as starting-points of inductions or as end-points of deductions.

A distinction here needs to be made between what was referred to earlier as postulate and hypothesis. A postulate is a premise that a given science assumes as proved. As a starting-point in that respective science it is considered not only as demonstrable (i.e. can be proved), but also as having been proved. To engage in its demonstration once again for that science would not only be considered a waste of time but also be considered unscientific. As sociology deals with the relationship and existence of man in his social relations, so as an individual and as a member of society, the essential constituents of society and individual are taken as postulates.

A hypothesis is a working theory, a theory that has not been demonstrated and may be incapable of demonstration. A hypothesis taken as a postulate, and thus upon which one may build the constituents of a science, would render that science as worthy or as unworthy as the supposition upon which the hypothesis rests. Theories of the origin of society, theories such as the Bachofen-Morgan series, are for example hypotheses taken as postulates by ethnologists such as Frazer. When such hypotheses were

shown to be baseless assumptions by the fieldwork of figures such as Lowie and Schmidt, the standing of ethnology was greatly affected.

I mentioned earlier the postulate of the individual. The notion of the individual originated as a term in medieval logic, the nearest equivalent being *individuum*, *individualis*, and *singularis*. The use of the term arose from the consideration of the central problem of medieval philosophy in the context of man, namely the relationship of the individual object *(unum singulare)* with the universal class to which it belonged. This is ultimately dealt with in the realm of metaphysics. Another postulate is the establishment of the social fact, to which we will return below.

Sociology can be considered on the whole, because of its focus, as a practical science rather than a speculative one. But first one must consider whether it may be entitled to the name of science at all. If we consult any *kalam* or *usul* textbook, such as for example Sayf al-Din al-Amidi's (d. 631/1233) *al-Ihkam fi usul al-ahkam*, it typically sets out the elements of a formal science or *'ilm*. It must have a subject matter (*mawdu'*), an agenda of topics assembled for treatment (*masa'il*), a body of postulates or first principles (*mabadi'*), and an end (*ghayat*).[13] Let us

look at subject matter first. Without delving too much into the influences of the early schools of sociology, one can learn much from examining the juxtaposition of state and society as related to the formulation of subject matter. In terms of medieval scholasticism, the term *society* as distinguished from *state* is the product of a conceptualization that was unknown. Society for the medieval mind was a reality deriving from the fact of men constituting a union and tending by free activity to a common end.

In the eighteenth century, drawing on the works of Jean Bodin (d. 1596) and Hugo Grotius (d. 1645), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (d. 1778) devised his political theory on the basis of a hypothetical state of nature and a body politic, that is, according to him, brought about by contract. It is Thomas Paine (d. 1809) in particular who makes the distinction between society and state, the former considered a natural product resulting from human desires and needs, the latter developed for the restraint of human vice. In that vein, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) in Prussia took up the conceptual baton, by explicitly promoting the distinction between state (*staat*) and what he termed the social union (*nationalverein*). Saint-Simon (d. 1828), author of *Du système industrielle*

and a rediscovered faith in *Nouveau christianisme*, made the distinction between state and society, observing that over a period of twenty-five years the government changed ten times whereas society never did. This is debatable on the microcosmic level, as the state of religion between 1793 and 1830 had dramatically been altered and thus affected the social order, but not in the direction nor in the manner that Saint-Simon saw fit. The solution for him lay in the reorganization of society on the basis of a new social science. This task was to be taken up by his disciple Comte, despite the latter's disappointment with his teacher's final theistic leanings.

Let us examine next topics and methodology. Auguste Comte (1798–1857) can be regarded as the founder of sociology, what he initially termed 'social physics', seeing it as a synthesis of all the social sciences much as Saint-Simon did. The social sciences for him were those that considered the life of man in society, sciences such as Law, Ethics, Religion, Politics, Languages, and *inter alia,* Economics. Comte's main conception of society was premised on the law of the three stages, a process borrowed from Turgot (1727–1781), Louis XVI's finance minister. The three stages were those of the

evolutionary development of mankind from the theological to the metaphysical stage, then in turn onto the present-day positive period wherein sociology should dethrone theology and metaphysics to save mankind from the malefic influence of other sciences. Sociology in this scheme, akin to a natural science according to Comte, usurps the first place of metaphysics in the hierarchy of the sciences. The immediate problem with Comte's law of the three stages is precisely their lack of positiveness. As Max Scheler has shown in his critique, the central notion of each stage abolishing the preceding one is empirically and culturally false. Contrary to Comte's contentions, every novel way of thought receives the preceding ways, adapting and developing them accordingly rather than simply abolishing them.[14] Furthermore, and more importantly, the simple act of purporting to abolish metaphysics is an act of metaphysical intent, a conundrum unnoticed by Comte or his disciples.

I do not want to recite the development of positivist thought per se, and the anti-positivist sociological schools of Georg Simmel (1858–1918) and Max Weber (1864–1920), but rather to outline how we arrive at a relationship with the moral science approach after Comte. By the

second half of the nineteenth century, Neo-Kantians such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936) had begun to question Comte's narrow natural science methodology, and to further distinguish it from that of the moral sciences wherein they firmly established sociology as a non-physical science. Sociology's aims and definition, as well as its declared independence, were still far from settled in this period. Georg Simmel (d. 1918) sought to find a solution by making a clear distinction between the content and the forms of social life. The contents were to remain the domain of the existing social sciences, leaving the social forms, relations, and laws to the domain of 'formal' sociology.[15] The dilemma with this view, posited on such analysis of formal structural elements, is that their ethical and substantive nature is ignored. As the metaphysical understanding of the essence of society and man is the central constituent required for the intelligibility of a social form, it clearly cannot be substituted by mere empirical analysis.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, and contrary to Comte's predictions, the rise of social philosophy in the German Idealist, neo-Kantian, Romantic, and phenomenologist

schools had put paid to the idea of the delivery of the metaphysical stage into the hands of sociology. The difference between the two, to use an Aristotelian term, is a formal rather than a material one. Sociology can be said to be an attempt to understand social reality in its immediate phenomenal setting identifying proximate causes for events to explain natural laws. Although akin to social philosophy, sociology is distinguishable from it since social (one can say moral) philosophy deals with what society should be, it identifies the essence of social reality and compares it with an ideal by which it makes a judgment. Revelation in this scheme posits the directing principles.

To go back to the question of whether sociology is a science on the basis of the criteria we had set out, I think one of the main difficulties one faces is the equivocity of the word *sociology*. Formulated by Comte in 1839, its hybrid etymology suggests an equally hybrid nature, half Latin, half Greek. In its practical aspects, is it just the application of social ethics to concrete social issues, then? Clearly not. By practical I mean moral, since practical science is synonymous with the science of human acts. Do sociologists in that case, then, make value judgments if their science is clearly a species of

moral science? If they do, do they not run the risk of prejudice with respect to their research, in the form of potential result-oriented conclusions? Do sociologists therefore need a moral philosophy, one may ask?

Well, the study of positive social acts implies an intra-individual relation, Durkheim's *fait social*: the social fact. The intra-individual relation here is ultimately a psychological one, which unites one individual to another via an object or the rationale of a particular end. This psychological factor is an underlying one that granted does not form the primary concern since sociology looks at the social fact scientifically concentrating on the material and secondary efficient causes for it. This means, however, that there is a dependence on moral philosophy, a subalternation in fact. The study of human behaviour in short requires value judgments, whether about a sociologist's particular application of a methodology, or about the subject studied by the sociologist (for example, whether or not criminal behaviour is injurious to society). It is contended that these are postulates that reside in a higher science, namely moral philosophy or ethics.

So far I have designated sociology a practical science subordinated to the science of ethics

(*akhlaq*). It should be underlined though that this may be implicitly or unconsciously accepted and applied by modern social scientists and at the same time explicitly rejected by them. The empirically minded sociologist is mainly concerned with measure and correlation that aims at prediction, which once verified is then designated a law or a theory. It is this usurpation of the role of metaphysics that then causes confusion, by allowing a designation of theories as to the ultimate nature of society to be formulated on an empiriological basis.[16] This frames what we are trying to arrive at in distinguishing between the scientific method and the formal aspect of society (i.e. the ontological aspect of society). Ontological analysis, the traditional viewpoint, is independent formally, but dependent materially on objective facts. Empirical analysis is formally and materially dependent on the individuated and particular as its point of reference; it studies physical regularity in human acts instead of moral regularity. This subjection to method disengages one from being able to make any formal distinctions, as methodology unveils rather than prescribes principles at work, as they are objective presences.

To sum up: Not unlike the physical sciences, an experience becomes scientific only when it is concerned with a regular succession of phenomena that can be adequately recorded and described. This experience has to be therefore organized within a scientific apparatus, for it is only within the framework allotted that it can be observed as scientific fact. For sociology this represents several problems. Primarily on what basis does one choose a particular behaviour from another to be recorded in order to obtain the information required?[17] A fact therefore cannot be the first thing that a scientist encounters, as a series of formal questions regarding the identification of the fact must precede its observation. Another problem with the notion of observation is one that arises from the consideration of the language used to record facts pertaining to the human sciences. Needless to say, the view that the use of non-quantitative language is synonymous with subjectivity is still a widespread fallacy. These choices require a metaphysical input ultimately.

Heidegger once held rather lucidly that the values of modernity could be characterized as man's claim to two traditional attributes of God, namely omniscience and omnipotence. The former is reflected by the scientism of

modern culture, holding in principle that nothing is beyond the ambit of positivist science. The technical dimension of culture reflects the latter. The Islamic social order stands at opposite ends to this characterization. The multi-layered dimension of society is teleologically imprinted in its service to the ends of revelation, and its lived reality in the figure of the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace). This trajectory is practically premised on the principle of subsidiarity, where every realm is held competent prima facie to deal at its own specific level with the social organization it is entrusted with. This teleology necessitates that the social end of man is always tied to an ontological understanding of his role as man. The social dimension thus is reflective of the spiritual priorities inherent in acceding to the dictates of the revelation. This is evident in the social planning of the traditional Islamic city, and the organization of the corporate craft and merchant guilds. The socio-economic order is united with the legal and moral orders and in turn dependent on the first principles as presented in metaphysics. Without them we truly face the deluge of incoherence and socio-political chaos.

ENDNOTES

1 Quoted in A.C. Pigou, *Economics in Practice* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 10.

2 It should be stated that a fact, in order to qualify as a fact, must be capable of being isolated, so that which is being observed can be isolated from the concrete situation. So the birth date of a historical figure can be a fact, the character of the same historical figure though cannot.

3 See the preface to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, 1922), 3, 5.6.

4 Ibid., 6.13.

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), para. 11.

6 Ibid., para. 124.

7 See Rudolf Carnap, 'The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language', in Heimir Geirsson & Michael Lossonsky (eds.), *Beginning Metaphysics: An Introductory Text with Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 447.

8 The eighteenth-century exegete Isma'il Hakki al-Burusawi comments extensively on Qur'an 2:31 ('And He taught Adam the names, all of them'), where he relates that God taught the father of humanity the names

of all things that ever are to come into existence, in all languages that are to be, as well as the crafts by means of which man is to make his livelihood ethically. See Isma'il Hakki al-Burusawi, *Ruh al-bayan fi tafsir al-Qur'an*, 10 vols. (Istanbul: al-Matba'a al-'Uthmaniyya, 1392–1346/1911–1928), 1:98–101.

9 A passage from John of Salisbury's twelfth-century *Metalogicon* states: 'To inquire into the effective force of speech and to investigate the truth and meaning of what is said are precisely or practically the same. A word's force consists in its meaning. Without the latter, it is useless, and (so to speak) dead. Just as the soul [anima] animates the body, so, in a way, meaning breathes life into a word.' See John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium*, trans. & ed. Daniel McGarry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 81.

10 Georges Gurvitch, *The Social Frameworks of Knowledge* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 13.

11 Ibid., 13–14. It is interesting nevertheless that Gurvitch does adhere to the notion of collective knowledge as a nominalist substitute for universality.

12 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 381.

13 Sayf al-Din al-Amidi, *al-Ihkam fi usul al-ahkam* (Cairo: Matba'at al-Ma'arif, 1322/1914), 1:6. The subject matter or *mawdu'* of any science is the thing whose accidental characteristics (*al-ahwal al-'arida*) are under investigation in that science. Only accidental characteristics can be a proper object of investigation since essential characteristics are postulated.

14 Wilhelm Schwer, *Catholic Social Theory* (St. Louis: Herder, 1940), 51.

15 Ibid., 57.

16 That is to say, a physical and non-ontological basis.

17 See Helen Peak, 'Problems of Objective Observation', in Leon Festinger & Daniel Katz, *Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1953), 243–5.

FURTHER READINGS

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E.B.F. Midgeley, *The Ideology of Max Weber: A Thomist Critique* (Aldershot: Gower, 1983).