What is it for a (social) theory to be right?

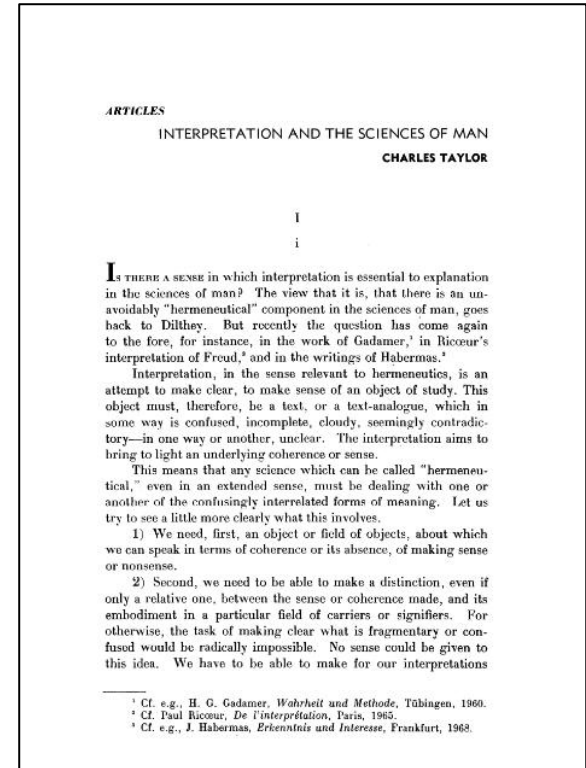*Litt: Charles Taylor: Social theory as practice 1985*

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Background - "positivismestriden"

How the social sciences and humanities differ from the natural sciences

– Humans as self-interpreting animals
– Explaining things vs understanding humans
– Seeking universal laws vs idiosyncratic historic understanding

Interpretation and the science of man
Charles Taylor 1971

Fifteen years later
Social theory as practice

When do we know we got it right? Taylor propose to shift our attention from

- the content of theories (and how they relate to the world) towards
- "the practice of theorising"

This shift does not come without resistance

- Context of discovery vs context of justification
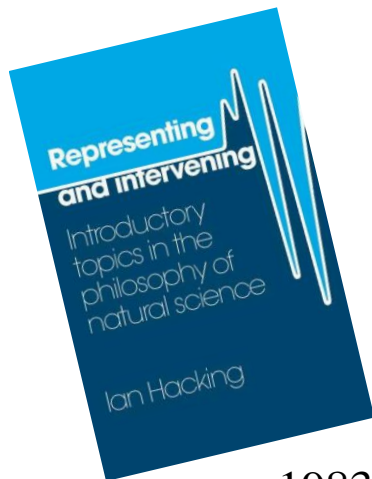- "Theory-oriented" philosophy of science

The practice of theorising
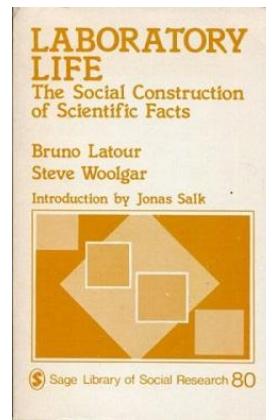
"What is it for a theory to be right?"

- Level 1: A practical methodological question we may ask at work in our practices of theorising: How do we know we got it right?

- Level 2 (philosophy of science): A theoretical question we may typically ask when, or if, we run into difficulties in our practices of theorising. Theorising the practices of theorising may hopefully create 'clairvoyance', clarity on what is going on when we theorise. Like when we seek to sort out controversies on the "scope and validity of theories"
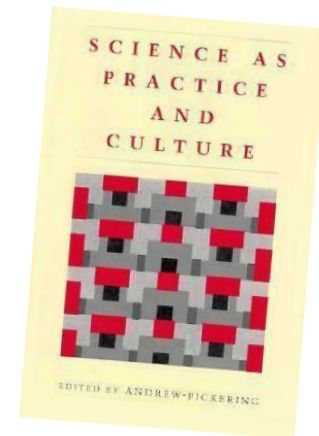
Level 2: theories of theorising practices

- Level 2 practices (reflecting on the practice of theorising) may themselves be practiced differently.

- Heated debates between different schools of Level 2 partitioners (perhaps especially heated at the time this paper was published)

1983

1979

1992

Social theory as practice

Taylors approach also comes with a diagnosis; there is a widespread lack of self-understanding among practitioners at level 1.

- – "The activities of searching for, creating, espousing and rejecting theories are too little understood, and that they are far from being unproblematic, as we often assume in our concerns to focus on the *content* of our theories"
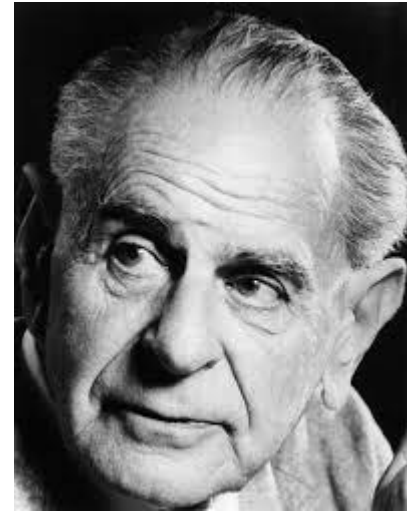
Natural science model

"We *think* we know the activity of exploring nature"

- The natural science model may be a "tolerably clear story" of what is going on in the natural sciences – but it is a "disastrous" imaginary for the social sciences.

- At stake: the model's understanding of the practice of theorising.

Popper's natural science model
Science allow us to let our theories die instead of us

"But have we not destroyed the environment with our natural science? No! We have made great mistakes. It is indeed impossible to foresee all the unintended consequences of our actions. Here science is our greatest hope: its method is the correction of error"

In search of a better world, 1992: viii

Natural science model of the relation between theory and practice

The natural science relation between theory and practice

- A doctor may research what is going on in a living body that become sick
- Understanding of 'underlying mechanisms' may in turn guide her medical practice

Tempting analogy to social science. The basic question for social science is also to understand "what is really going on".

- An economist may research what is going on when inflation takes place
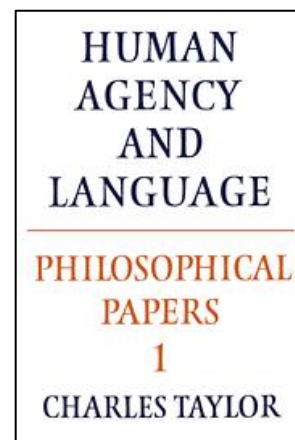- Understanding underlying mechanisms may in turn guide policy decisions

Claim: The practice of theorising and the (other) practice the theory is informing is not independent in the social science (as appears to be the case in the natural sciences)

The social science and the relation between theory and practice

- Social theories are not about an "independent object" that can be validated by "comparing with facts"
- The object of a social theory is a human practice, "accepting a theory can itself transform what the theory bears on"
- So -
  - what is it for a social theory to be right if social theories "transforms its own object"?
  - how can we test and validate if we got it right?
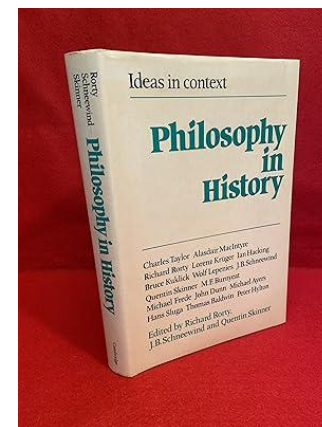
Taylors philosophical anthropology
- Self-interpreting vs self-evaluating animals

- Self – interpreting animals:
  - beliefs, opinions: intentionality
- Self – evaluating animals:
  - commitments, identities, constitutive norms

- First and second order desires
- Weak and strong evaluations.

- Social theories as theories of "shared goods"

HUMAN AGENCY AND LANGUAGE

PHILOSOPHICAL PAPERS 1

CHARLES TAYLOR

"What is human agency?" Taylor 1985

Shared goods

"The good, the value embodied in a practice, its point or purpose, may not be formulated. The people engaged in the practice have to have some sense of the good or the purpose, and this emerges, for instance, in the 'fouls' they call on each other when they deviate (or the 'fairs' they call when people do well). But they may have no way of saying what this good consists in. "

Taylor
Philosophy and
its history
(1984:22):

Rorty et al (eds)

What is it for a social theory to be right?

We cannot just reply that it is right when it corresponds to the facts it is about. Because, to oversimplify slightly, political theories are about our practices (as well as the institutions and relations in which these practices are carried on), and their rise and adoption can alter these practices. They are not about a domain of facts independent of, or resistant to, the development of theory. Put testily, our social theories can be validated, because they can be tested in practice. If theory can transform practice, then it can be tested in the quality of the practice it informs. What makes a theory right is that it brings practice out in the clear; that its adoption makes possible what is in some sense a more effective practice.

(Charles Taylor. Social theory as practice, 1985: 104)

Social theories as a practice of articulation

- The target of investigation for a social scientist is a practice that is already understood by practitioners, maintained and sustained considering the good, the point and purpose of the practice.

- "A social theory arises when we try to formulate explicitly what we are doing, describe the activity which is central to a practice, and articulate the norm which are essential to it".
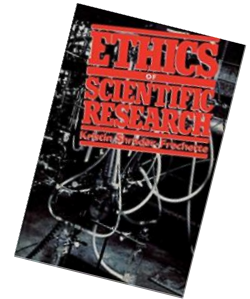
The norms of the practice studied

- Articulating the norms of the practice "brings the practice out in the clear"
- It may of course fail to do so (and then it is not a valid theory)
- A valid theory may help practitioners to have a better understanding of why they do what they do.
- A valid theory may be trivial and not worthy of being published
- A valid theory may, when accepted, lead to improvements and lead to "in some sense a more effective practice"
- ….

Theorising research as "research ethics"

"Research" – "ethics"

- – Research: Activity that aim to produce new knowledge and apply knowledge in practical applications
- – Ethics: Specifies the way researchers ought to conduct themselves when pursuing research
- • "The term research ethics refers to a wide variety of values, norms, and institutional arrangements that help constitute and regulate scientific activities"

Kristin Shrader-Frechette. Textbook in research ethics
Guidelines: The National committee for science and technology

Tranøy's influence on research ethics in Norway

«Forskning er i dag en profesjonell virksomhet på like linje med mange andre. Forskningens form kan variere sterkt avhengig av emneområdet, sammenheng, målretting og annet. Men forskning innen de fleste disipliner skjer i tråd med bevisste eller ubevisste forskningsnormer. Slike normer bidrar til å definere og regulere forskningen innen vedkommende disiplin og disiplinens forpliktelser ovenfor den videre omverden eller samfunnet.»

Report 1981

Tranøy 1987

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