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VALUE NEUTRALITY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Natural sciences struggled very hard to free themselves from the clutches of Aristotelian logic and in due course of time, they achieved it. Further, the Aristotelian philosophers were so very averse to inductive method that when Galileo, after designing the telescope, invited his colleagues to look through it. a professor of Aristotelian philosophy refused to do that on the plea that it was not sanctioned by Aristotle. But astounding success of natural sciences in the preceding centuries has led social scientist to emulate the concepts, categories and the methods of the former. Moreover, as the natural scientists tried their best to free themselves from the clutches of Aristotelian logic, the social scientist too, tried to free themselves from the clutches of religion and ethics. The impetus for such an attempt owes its origin to various sources. In fact, there are causal factors to such a shift in attitude of social science investigation. But enlisting the causal factors do not explain the nature of social science, let alone its value-neutrality. It simply tells us as to how value-neutrality came to have a grip on social sciences. But it does not tell us if the value-neutrality is compatible with the concept of social science.

The Concept of Social Science

The concept of social science depends very much on the concept of human society. So, the basic questions in this connection are : What is a society? What is the nature of human society? Let us examine the view of society advanced by the naturalist and the evolutionist. For them, society is a natural object like any other physical object. It has grown or evolved in a natural process in course of time. It is true that human beings are endowed with bodies which are material in nature. In short,

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the bodies of human beings are amenable to various laws of nature. They are part of the physical objects. The body of every human person, in this sense, has a history in space and in time. But the coming together of such bodies in space and in time does not give rise to a society. The combination of various pieces of rocks, for example, cannot be said to form a society, nor does the assemblage of animals, say, goats, results in one. It may be argued that not to extend the term 'society' to certain aggregate is just a matter of convention. There can be n valid reasons for this. Further, the convention can be changed and the use of the term society in the context of animals may not be considered out of the way. But this argument cannot sustain for the following reasons :

(i) Though language is a creation of man yet it is not arbitrary in nature in the sense that we can legislate to use any word to stand for anything. It is true that language is a system of symbols and the symbols are created by man. But once they are created, a kind of fixity gets attached to them. That is to say, in due course of time, the symbols acquire a kind of meaning reflective of the characteristics of the objects which they stand for. A large majority of words in human language are of this type. It is only in this sense that words are a kind of short-hand description of things or objects. 'Society' is such a word. It has acquired connotation by being used in the context of human beings. It is not just an arbitrary symbol; rather, it is a word which reflects the nature of man and society. Society is subject to evaluation. Further, conscious changes can be initiated in society by those who form it; whereas, it does not happen in the case of natural objects. Seen in this light, it turns out that the term society cannot be applied to animals; it can only be used with reference to groups of human beings. In fact, if we look to the way in which the term 'society' is used, it tells us a different story altogether. Sometimes, the ordinary use of a term contains the key to its understanding.

The naturalist and the evolutionist do not make any distinction between a natural object and human society. For them, there is no qualitative difference between the two. There might be difference in degree. In short, human society is a kind of natural

object. This type of thinking inspired Durkheim to advance the view that there are social facts and they are prior to individuals. Further, the social facts are a species of natural facts. But this view of society and social facts suffers from the following defects. It fails to take note of the fact that social facts are not as impersonal as they are supposed to be. The rock bottom of it is created by man at different period of time. But, now, the question is : How are they created? Are they created like any other manufactured object? An object whether uncreated or manufactured is visible. But social facts, though created by men, are not visible. This means that though social facts can be said to have an existence of their own, yet are neither visible nor tangible. But how do social facts come to acquire such an existential status? In answer to this, it can be said that it is the use of concepts that creates social facts. Take for instance, how do we explain social facts like marriage or prayer? Can marriage be explained in terms of movements or coming together of two persons; — a bride and a bridegroom on the altar, or in a mosque or in a church? Similar is the case with any other social facts. A social fact may involve physical movements, but it cannot explain the concerned social fact. The Hindu way of greeting by saying *Namaste* cannot be explained in terms of folding both the palms and bending the body a little bit. When somebody says *Namaste* to us we do not say that so and so bent his body and folded his palms. This shows that even if the so called facts involve physical movements, yet they are not constituted by it. What constituted or goes into making a social fact is the meaning that we ascribe to it. Whether meaning is explained in terms of use or the Platonic archetypes, the point remains that it is they (the meanings) that go into making of a social fact. Take away meanings, there are no social facts'. To use Searl's words, 'social facts are a kind of institutional facts distinct from the brute facts'. To understand the social fact of two persons marrying, one has to understand the institution of marriage. Similarly, to understand the social fact of prayer, one has to understand the institution of religion. Seen in this light, social facts turn out to be normative in nature for the simple reason that norms are built into the very hature of institutions. I short, institutions are subject to evaluation, whereas natural or physical facts are not subject to evaluation.

To sum up, social facts constitute a system of meanings which are subject to evaluation or value judgements; Society is a concatenation of social facts and social facts are value-based; *ipso facto,* society turns out be a value-object. Now the question is : Can the study of a value-object be value-neutral?

In other words, can social sciences be value-free? The term 'social science' stands for a plethora of a loosely grouped subjects like history, economics, political science, sociology and such others with diverse methods and techniques. As for example, history does not employ the same method as the one employed in economics and so on. In other words, there is no such subject as a unified social science though sometimes it is claimed that sociology is such a discipline. Sociology, like any other discipline, studies society and employs methods of its own. Every social-science discipline has two main aspects and this is how they differ from natural sciences. It is thus : Social Sciences like political science, sociology, social anthropology, law and even economics have something known as theory and a method; — very often empirical or hypothetico-deductive in nature. The natural sciences also contain theories but their theories have to be verified in the light of hard facts. On the other hand, this is not the case in the domian of so called social sciences. The social science theories are very often broad generalizations based on the supposedly basic nature of man in general. Take for instance, the theories of social contract, sovereignty, political obligation and even natural and fundamental rights. These theories are not the result of empirical generalization of what happens in society; they sometimes reflect our preference of one value in lieu of another as in the case of political obligation and sometimes present an alternative picture or model of society as in the case of functionalist and structuralist theories. Even the science of economics is not free from this type of preference. All the so called laws and theories in classical economics relating to wants, consumption, diminishing and equimarginal utility are based on a particlar picture of man. It is this : Basically, man is a utility-calculating animal. The legal theories including the one relating to positive laws cannot be thought of without an implicit or explicit value system. In short, all the core theories of social sciences are value-laden. Even the discipline of history is not

free from such value considerations. History is not just record of events. It collects evidences and on the basis of such evidences, it seeks to understand and interpret human past. To the extent it involves interpretation, it involves preferences, norms and values.

Attempts have been made by the social scientists from time to time to eliminate the so called normative theories from the domain of social enquiry. As for instance, it is argued that normative political theory belongs to political philosophy rather than to political science. Detached from the normative elements, political science turns out to be purely a descriptive or empirical discipline. Like any other empirical science, political science aims at making causal correlation between phenomena characterized as political ones in nature. Similarly, it is argued, albeit in a different tone, that the social theories like functionalism and structuralism have relevance to sociology and social anthropology to the extent they aim at explaining certain social phenomena. Or else, they have no importance for a social scientist.

Is it possible to have social sciences without any theory? This question can be answered in two ways. They are as follows :

i) The empirical method employed in social sciences does not call for any theory about man and society at all. Like any other science, social science aims at causal correlation.

ii) Social sciences cannot be detached from theories about man and society.

Let us concentrate on the first answer. Even the pure empirical method of causal correlation is not free from the use of concepts. When we make causal correlation, we earmark certain phenomena as cause and certain others as effect. But this cannot be done without application of concepts. By this method, the raw phenomenon becomes a meaningful category and a group of them forms the cause-effect nexus. Causality in the social domain is used in a different sense from its counterpart in the domain of nature for the simple reason that in the case of the former, cause and effect cannot be generalised. That is to say, that the one

wihch works as cause of a particular effect in a particular context, may not produce the same effect in all other contexts. Whereas, in the domain of nature, it is not the case. In short, the relationship between cause and effect in the social domain is very loose. Further, in the social sphere, cause and effect cannot be separated and treated in impersonal terms. This shows that to a very great extent, it is our decision or choice that enters into treating separate phenomena as cause and effect and it is determined by our interest and attitude. In short, interest and attitude of the observer decide what items should be treated as cause or effect. Even at the stage of making the so called causal correlation values do enter into it.

Let us now concentrate on the second answer that social sciences cannot be detached from theories about man and society. As has been urged in the preceding sections, theories about man and society are not empirical. In short, they are neither confirmed nor rejected in the light of facts; rather, facts have to conform to them. Seen in this light, theories about man and society turn out to be preference-laden. Physical theories contain a major ingredient of experimental findings. As a result, any fresh discovery in the realm of nature is bound to change the concerned theory, whereas, social theories about man and society do not contain that type of empirical findings which can alter the concerned theory, if fresh facts are met with. As for example, no amount of fact can either prove or disprove the indivisible theory of sovereignty or the social contract theory relating to political and social obligation. The so called theories about man and society are really disguised value premises presented in the form of definitions. The definitions of society as a bunch of functions, a concatenation of structures or a sophisticated system, turn out to be instances of preference. No fact can decide the issue between, say, functionalism and structuralism. It is our preference or interest that decides the issue in favour of one rather than another. If this is accepted, then study of society which draws its sustenance from any one of such theories cannot be treated as value-free.

Further, it is argued that like any other scientific theorizing, study of society is kind of dispassionate understanding and it emerges out of the urge to understand society for its own sake. In this context, it is pointed out that history of natural science stands testimony

to it. It is doutful if there could be any urge that is free from all kinds of interests and preference. In human world, one kind of thing is preferred to another. An urge is not something which comes to man on its own. An urge is natural and so many factors may be responsible for it. Seen in this light, understanding in natural sciences cannot be treated as dispassionate. But, then, the question arises : In what sense, is 'dispassionate understanding' used in the context of natural science? In answer, it can be said that 'dispassionate' does not stand for bereft of any kind of interest or preference; rather it stnads for absence of any kind of prejudiced and misconceived interpretation. If this is the case concerning understanding in natural sciences, it is more so in the case of social sciences. The choice of a particular segment of social reality for study and investigation is dictated by individual interest and choice. This tendency is reflected most in study of other societies and cultures by an outsider. When somebody studies an alien society he is likely to use the concepts and categories prevalent in his society. So, at this stage, preference and value elements are likely to enter into the body of investigation process. Even in the study of one's own society, the preferences and values are not kept at bay. Certain categories such as 'anomie', 'functional' and 'dysfunctional' are not free from a particular value-orientation. Even the term 'system'is not free from value-connotation. That is to say, the characterisation of society in any term is bound to be laden with preferences and values. On the other hand, the caterories and concepts in terms of which we characterize nature can be made value-free for the simple reason that they are, to a very large extent, observational in nature. On the other hand, the basic catergories or concepts in terms of which we think about society are non-observational in nature. The categories and concepts used in mathematics are also non-observational in nature but they cannot be said to be value-laden for the simple reason that they are meant to characterize 'form' of a different sort; whereas, the categories that are used to characterize human society are concerned with phenomena of altogether different sort. These are hopes, ambitions and aspirations of human life. In this sense, the categories and concepts cannot be made value-free at all.

Further, social policy making is intimately connected with social theorizing. This shows that pure discursive and theoretical investigation without any contact with action is not possible at

all. A thought without any action is not a thought at all. The so called pure thought gives guidelines to action. Even a simple informative sentence like "it is raining", is not free from action-guiding elements. When some-body comes to know that it is raining, accordingly, he plans his course of action. If it is the rain before the sowing season and a farmer comes to know it, he plans sowing seeds in the land. If this is true of singular informative sentences, it is more so of well developed and sophisticated theories. This is how technology is built into the very structure of theoretical sciences. Technology and engineering grew out of the so called dispassionate understanding of nature. At present, no theoretical understanding of nature is respected on its own unless it has something to do with practice. In a way, practice dictates and determines a theory. Seen in this light, even natural sciences cannot be treated as value-free enquiries. In short, it is our preferences and interests that determine scientific enquiry. Of course, social sciences have not been able to produce any such thing as social technology or engineering in a systematic manner like their counterparts in natural sciences. That is to say, the so called social engineering, if there is any, is not the result of experimental research in social sciences. But at the same time social-science theories are great attitude moulders. Theories of democracy, sovereignty, political and social obligation have not only created awareness among people but have brought about changes in the management of public affairs. Even understanding of past history has made its impact felt. Economic theories, to a very great extent, have guided planning at different levels. All these show that social sciences cannot get rid of values, preferences and interests. We accept and implement something in society only when we are convinced that these things will prove valuable in the end. The social policies are the direct outcome of the social theories in the sense that the latter provide justification for the former. In this sense, social policies cannot be detached from social theories. Irrespective of empirical or normative nature of the social theories, they continue to influence and mould social actions.

All the human sciences centre around man; that is to say, it is man that constitutes the main thrust of all social and human sciences. Though the concept of human person cannot

be visualised without the concept of body, yet the body is not investigated in the human sciences. It is the ideas, hopes, ambitions, aspirations and etc. which are created by man and become the subject matter of social and human sciences. In this sense, social sciences study entities which do not belong to the physical world. Further, all the questions about man and society basically and ultimately relate to his fate and destiny. In other words, even if a question about man and society may appear non-normative on the surface, at the base, it is value-centric. Max Weber and other social scientists claim that their task is not to recommend any value, though they can study value purely in causal terms. According to them, man might be creating values but it is not the task of social scientists to create values. Study of values is different from creation and propagation of values. In this sense only Max Weber visualized value-neutral social science. But at the same time, his conception of meaningful behaviour comes in conflict with value-neutrality. A piece of behaviour is not just any happening. In this sense, human behaviour is distinguished from an event or incident. We understand what an event is, but the type of meaning human behaviour is said to have is absent in the case of natural events. An action to be meaningful means to be significant. But what is it to be significant? When we say that an action is significant it means that it carries with it the values or preferences that we have created. To be meaningful means to be recognised as having meaning or significance. In this sense, the sum total of human behaviour forms a cluster of meanings and these are created by men. To accept the thesis that human behaviour is meaningful is to distinguish it from raw events and to treat it as value-laden.

Further, Weber treats culture as a value concept. He says :

> "The concept of culture is a value concept. Empirical reality becomes 'Culture' to us because and in so far as we relate it to value ideas. It includes those segments and only those segments of reality which have become significant to us because of this value-relevance. Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is coloured by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us. It is significant because it reveals relationships

which are important to us due to their connection with our values. Only because and to the extent that this is the case is it worth while for us to know it in its individual features. We cannot discover, however, what is meaningful to us by means of a "presuppositionless" investigation of empirical data. Rather perception of its meaningfulness to us is the presupposition of its becoming an object of investigation".[1]

The quotation proves that Weber is making contradictory statements. On the one hand, he pleads for value-neutral social science and at the same time, he also argues that culture is a value concept and no human behaviour will be intelligible without relating to certain values. How to account for this type of contradiction? One way is to accept the contradiction and point out that Weber was not very careful in what he said. The other way to go about it is to reinterpret the concept of 'value-neutrality'. It is thus : value-neutrality does not mean that human behaviour is vlaue-free at the base. But when we study human society we whould not extrapolate any value to it. But this position is self-defeating for the simple reason that it does not controvert the position that human actions are basically value-centric. Rather, it exhorts the social scientists to refrain from recommending any value-system to the people. But Weber's arguments do not prove that social sciences can really be value-free. To conclude, the concepts of society and social action are value-laden for the simple reason that the basic concept of society, i.e., man is a value-concept. To attempt to free social sciences from the consideration of values and bring them on par with natural sciences is a misadventure.

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Reference

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