Since the early decades of the twentieth century, emerging positivistic trends within the human and social sciences endeavoured to be ‘scientific’ in broadly the same sense that the term is applied to physics, chemistry, and biology. The objective was to uncover laws or regularities that govern social and political life. Positivism denoted great optimism about the unity of scientific method and faith in the power of formal logic both to permit the definition of abstractions and to describe the structures of permissible inferences. Interpretive theories rejected positivist directions toward crafting a ‘science of politics’, according to which human actions would have to be fixed in their meanings under law-like operations. Interpretivists argue that there is an ineluctable role of interpretation that makes impossible a science of politics, strictly speaking.

Historically, interpretive theories have drawn upon several philosophical schools of thought with varying emphasis and from across a number of disciplines in the human sciences. In particular, philosophers who inherited the idealist mantle of the late nineteenth century, and those who turned to continental traditions such as phenomenology provided the main alternatives to positivism. Idealists such as Michael Oakeshott and R. G. Collingwood argued for hermeneutic approaches to understanding history and by extension as a way of proceeding in the human sciences as a whole. Oakeshott, for example, insisted, against rationalists and positivists, that political knowledge could come only from history. Political activity should be explained by the wisdom and moral claims in the relevant tradition of behaviour.

While interpretive theories drew profound inspiration from idealism it is often taken for granted that the rise of linguistic analysis and logical positivism in Britain in the twentieth century wholly curtailed idealist philosophy. This chapter will show how idealist themes – such as a ‘thick’ conception of persons and thus vitalist analysis of behaviour, and a positive conception of freedom defined within social context – persisted through the rise of linguistic analysis through thinkers like Isaiah Berlin and Stuart Hampshire, and into post-war political studies by Charles Taylor. Berlin and Hampshire creatively adapted idealist ideas to oppose the new empiricists, like A. J. Ayer and Carnap and members of the Vienna Circle. They did so by advancing the importance of interpretation against positivism in a contest that constitutes a pivotal moment against which a great deal of interpretive studies defined itself, starting with the opening shot of Taylor’s interpretivism, discussed below. The chapter ends with discussion of a concrete contemporary example of interpretive political science that draws on idealism, in contrast to others that focus solely on ethnography as a methodology for yielding thick knowledge.
Idealism through analysis: Berlin and Hampshire

Since the 1860s, and prior to World War I, absolute idealism dominated the intellectual climate in Britain. Until the 1920s, idealists held nearly all of the leading chairs in British philosophy departments. At Oxford, T. H. Green provided a quasi-metaphysical backbone for evangelical liberalism; and Bradley, who shared neither the Christian enthusiasm of the early British neo-Hegelians nor the individualism of the later idealists, staunchly criticized utilitarian and Kantian ethics from a neo-Hegelian perspective. At Cambridge, Andrew Seth opposed Bradley but advanced a different strand of ‘personal idealism,’ which J. E. McTaggart further developed into an account of pluralism, opposite Bradley’s monism. Absolute idealism served to meet several needs in British social and intellectual thought, in particular by providing a defence of Christianity against threats from Darwinism and the geological sciences. It also helped to defend German biblical historical scholarship, reconciling science and religion in a ‘higher synthesis’. And it further contributed to non-Marxist Christian socialist ideas that the British Labour Party could draw on as it advocated social responsibility in opposition to both utilitarian and social Darwinism.

British idealism flourished until it was nearly overtaken by the rise of linguistic analysis, and a new empiricism in the form of logical positivism. Motivated by what they took to be the excessive metaphysical perspective of absolute idealists, the new empiricists sought to purge philosophy of meaningless speculation and Weltanschauung – or, recommendations of a moral, political, or religious order – and to take philosophy out of the mind. They sought to break from the German idealist tradition by reconstructing Humean empiricism, and defining what philosophy could legitimately aim to say by the ‘principle of verification’. While the initial British attack on idealism at the turn of the century came in the form of Platonic realism by Moore and Russell (Magee 1971), the arguments they laid down then became readily adaptable for logical positivists like Ayer and for ‘ordinary language philosophers’ like Austin, who each systematically challenged the meaningfulness of statements about morality and the philosophical import of normative theory. In Language, Truth, and Logic, Ayer lays out how all genuine philosophical propositions were of two types: either a logical tautology, the truth of which could be ascertained through the meanings of its constituent terms; or a statement displaying a potential for verification by ‘sense-data’ derived from actual or possible experience (Ayer 1936). Logical positivism’s answer to normative concerns, thus, or to questions of morality was simply to advocate a deflationary emotivism, according to which claims of ethics, aesthetics, and theology were pseudo-statements, neither true nor false but meaningless, or at best merely statements of like and dislike. ‘Ordinary language’ philosophers, moreover, such as J. L. Austin and T. D. Weldon, recast the task of philosophy solely as linguistic analysis, seeking, at bottom, to replace normative theorizing with linguistic analysis of how people actually used concepts in everyday life, uncomplicated by the trappings of highfalutin philosophical constructions.

As a matter of history, Berlin and his fellow young radical philosopher friend at Oxford, Hampshire, were very much part of the younger generation of Ayer and Austin, through whom Oxford philosophy emerged from the shadows of the previous generation. Yet, their philosophical contributions show how they opposed the aims and methods of the new empiricists and helped to sustain idealist ideas through the rise of analysis. Berlin was initially drawn to the vigorous anti-metaphysical empiricism of the logical positivists, and was impressed with their rejection of what he took to be the excesses of Hegelian speculation and obscurity. Logical positivism imposed upon philosophy a discipline that curbed the flights of philosophical pretension, a method of logico-linguistic analysis that promised to ensure sober piecemeal progress, and a commitment to clarity of argument and reasoning. He was very much in favour ...
of the empiricist insistence on grounding philosophy in experience. But he became frustrated with the narrowly scientistic version of empiricism that Ayer and the logical positivists propounded. While both Berlin and Hampshire undoubtedly supported the empiricist insistence on grounding philosophy in experience, they staunchly opposed applying the narrowly ‘scientistic’ view of knowledge endemic to the natural sciences to human experience. They insisted on the strong, and indivisible, connections between epistemological issues and moral and political ones; and defended anti-naturalism where philosophy and inquiry into human life were concerned.

In the words of Bernard Williams, Berlin ‘was never a positivist but he was seriously interested in philosophy at a time when philosophy’s most pressing questions came from positivist directions’ (Berlin 1978). Berlin recalls Ayer’s 1932 paper on Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* as ‘the opening shot in the great positivist campaign in revolt against the entire traditional conception of philosophy as a source of knowledge’ (Berlin 1973: 3). When Berlin began his studies at Corpus Christi College, he was influenced by the British idealists – T. H. Green, Bosanquet, and Bradley. With the changing intellectual culture of his time, Berlin was then steeped in the realism of Moore and John Cook Wilson, both of whom attacked idealism head on. By the time he began teaching philosophy as lecturer at New College in 1932, the same year he was elected to a prize fellowship at All Souls, Berlin joined a new generation of rebellious empiricists at Oxford whose philosophical agenda was largely set by logical positivism – including the young Ayer, Austin, MacNabb, Woozley, and Hampshire. The group was mainly concerned with the conditions of sentences having a meaning; the connections between meaning and verification construed in terms of sense perception; and an empiricist view of science that regarded natural science as the paradigm of knowledge and scientific theory as a mere compendium and generator of actual and possible observations.

Ayer became logical positivism’s leading exponent, the central tenets of which he helped to develop as: (i) the principle of verification according to which meaningfulness is solely identified with verifiability; (ii) the dismissal of metaphysics as nonsense; (iii) the reduction of all empirical propositions to subjective experience; and (iv) ethical non-cognitivism or emotivism when it came to issues of morality. Ayer synthesized the Cambridge analysis of Russell, Moore, Ramsey, and the early Wittgenstein with Vienna Circle positivists, and recast the classical British empiricism of Hume in logical and linguistic materials. Austin was more interested in traditional epistemological issues than the Vienna Circle’s concern with the logic of science and the foundation of mathematics. He rejected the metaphysics of logical atomism and argued that philosophical analysis is essentially linguistic; and that philosophically problematic propositions needed to be paraphrased to display their ultimate verification in experience. Austin, and Berlin, remained sceptical of Ayer’s tendency of drawing correspondence between words and some basic unit of analysis such as sense-data or ‘atomic facts’.

Berlin rejected the ‘principle of verification’ and other such limitations on what philosophy can legitimately say that distort the complexities of human life, which philosophy should be employed to illuminate. In particular, he advocated a hermeneutic approach to understanding in the human sciences, which overlaps with the history of ideas. Berlin called for *verstehen*, or imaginative interpretation, which employs the study of history and even personality, and calls for an ‘inside-view’ approach in order to understand human life. The interpretive bases for critiquing logical positivism are present in Berlin’s earliest philosophical writings. In an essay called ‘Verification’ published in 1939, Berlin fundamentally took issue with the philosophical endeavour to reduce all explanation to a privileged category of basic propositions (Berlin 1978: 12–31). For Berlin, Ayer’s standard of meaning, premised on the translation, or reduction
‘without residue’, of any genuine philosophical sentence to a set of propositions describing the
individual sense-data of actual or possible experience presented far too excessive a restriction on
the scope of what could be considered legitimate philosophical inquiry (Berlin 1978: 33–4). The
principle of verification had the unwarranted consequence of turning any potential philo-
sophical disagreement into a mere procedural problem. Thus, the drive for clarity and precision,
which Berlin acknowledges had ‘a decisive role in the history of modern philosophy, by clear-
ing up confusions, exposing major errors’, nevertheless needed ‘to be abandoned or else
considerably revised if it is to be prevented from breeding new fallacies in place of those which it
eradicates’ (Berlin 1978: 12, emphasis added).

In ‘Logical Translation’ (what is widely thought of as his final contribution to the specific
field of analytic philosophy), Berlin already made clear his critique of certain forms of analysis.
What Berlin saw driving the logical positivist’s claim that a statement must be capable of being
translated into a single ‘good’ or proper type of proposition to be correct or genuinely meaningful
was not the desire for a true perception of reality, but rather a reductivist drive, what he calls
the ‘Ionian Fallacy’, that is, the erroneous assumption that everything is made out of, or can be
reduced to, or understood in terms of one and the same substance or type in conjunction with a
psychological need for certainty (Berlin 1978: 56–80). Berlin identified two different, yet
equally erroneous, approaches to forcibly assimilating all propositions: (i) the ‘deflationary’
approach, which sought to assimilate all propositions to one true type (e.g. phenomenalism,
which sought to reduce all statements to statements about immediately perceived sense-data),
and (ii) the ‘inflationary’ approach which posited entities corresponding to all statements,
thus ‘creating’ or asserting the existence of things that Berlin believed didn’t exist at all.
Berlin argued that given the awesome variety and complexity in human reality, and the fact
that no absolutely incorrigible type of knowledge exists in the human world, the assumption
of a single criterion of meaningfulness simply cannot hold and the demand for certainty is
self-defeating.

The new empiricism’s view that no proposition had meaning unless it was verifiable by
observation or deduction meant that the only route to knowledge was through the natural
sciences, which reduced philosophy to a ‘handmaiden to the natural sciences’ at best. To reduce
meaning to what could be verified in terms of propositions constructed solely on the basis of
real or possible sense-data – that is, to restrict philosophy to only what can be said without
doubt or fear of being mistaken – was to condemn it to silence, since to say anything about the
world inevitably requires invoking things other than immediate sense-data experience. The way
such logically perfect languages depended on clear-cut dichotomies was unacceptable since the
drive for clarity and precision served to obliterate rather than to elucidate the important
distinctions in the subject matter that language was used to describe in the first place.

Berlin was troubled by the extent to which the new empiricism construed experience in
abstract and ahistorical terms that ultimately distort, rather than convey, human reality.
Regarding scientific theory in purely operationalist terms afforded no room for historical
imagination or for insight in philosophy. Despite the metaphysical excesses he saw in absolute
idealism, Berlin saw at least its appreciation for historical perspective and more broadly the role
of personal and cultural purposes in human conduct to recommend it. These convictions would
eventually draw him away from traditional philosophy to the history of ideas and to social and
political theory. Berlin was keenly aware of the complexity of the human world, of the many
strands that make up human experience that are ‘too many, too minute, too fleeting, too
blurred at the edges’ to be testable by isolation (Berlin 2000: 34). He understood that absolute
certainty is an impossible ideal because most of the certainties on which the unfolding of human
lives depends, and the types of reasoning on which our beliefs rest, are not reducible to formal
deductive or inductive schemata, or to some combination thereof. His opposition to verificationism, his claim of a larger task for philosophy, and the importance of history, imagination, and insight revived idealist themes and would prove essential for their adoption and continuation through his students like Taylor.

The roots of Berlin’s idealism can be seen in his affinity for a hermeneutic approach to exploring the existential nature of understanding, while recognizing the ways that it is embedded in social contexts and traditions. In this way, Berlin was much more deeply influenced by R. G. Collingwood than by any other philosophical figure at Oxford. With his own brand of historicist idealism, Collingwood was contemptuous of the Cook-Wilsonians’ attacks on idealism and never showed interest in the new style of analytic philosophy. Collingwood argued all history was ‘thought’, where thought was a series of answers to specific questions arising in a historically specific set of taken-for-granted ideas. Collingwood reinforced Berlin’s Kantian belief in the importance of the basic concepts and categories by which human beings organize and analyse their experience to human life, which implied a much broader view of philosophy than any analytical philosopher’s models and presuppositions about experience would allow. Collingwood fostered Berlin’s interest in the history of ideas and introduced him to founders like the Italian historian, philosopher, and jurist, Giambattista Vico and the German philosopher, theologian, and literary critic, Johann Herder. It was in the spirit of Collingwood that Berlin disdained the modest role that logical positivism attributed to philosophy as ‘secretary to science’ and ‘obituarist of metaphysics’. According to Berlin, philosophy as the means to understanding the concepts and categories of human experience must entail a broader range of tasks that are more historical and more culturally rich than logical positivism could ever allow. And for this reason Berlin ultimately remained sceptical even of ordinary language analysis, which systematically neglected the importance of history, and questions about the objectivity of what is regarded as knowledge, as well as questions about the constitution of human experience in different eras and cultural situations.

The broader view of philosophy that Berlin held can be found distilled in two essays that appeared in the early 1960s, ‘The Purpose of Philosophy’ and ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist’ (Berlin 1978). Philosophy, for Berlin, the purpose of which is ‘to assist men to understand themselves, and thus operate in the open, and not wildly, in the dark’, can never be the object of strictly empirical knowledge. He held that philosophy is tentative, abstract, even esoteric and indirect, but that it is nonetheless an important and essential human activity since it responds to the vital and ineradicable human need to describe and explain the world of experience. Berlin insisted on the social usefulness of philosophy for scrutinizing the validity of subconscious presuppositions and for bringing to light errors and confusions that lead to misunderstanding, distort experience, and even do real harm. Philosophy may seem subversive and troubling because it is opposed to orthodoxy and calls commonly accepted assumptions into question, but that is precisely what makes it valuable, and indispensable, and potentially liberating. Berlin’s approach to philosophy combined a sceptical empiricism with neo-Kantianism. He took seriously Kant’s distinction between matters of fact and the structures or categories in terms of which facts are made sense of, but rather than take categories to be prior to or independent of experience, Berlin held the interpretive view that the ideas through which we make sense of the world are closely tied up with our experiences, shaping and being shaped by them, and are thus logically prior to both the acquisition of empirical information and from deductive reasoning. And since experience varies from one time and place to another, so, for Berlin, do basic concepts.

Berlin classed philosophy as part of the human sciences, and as having a unique status in that not only are the answers to philosophical questions themselves in question but also the means
for arriving at answers, and the standards by which to evaluate and judge whether an answer is plausible, can never be known in advance (Berlin 1978: 11). Like neo-Kantians Heinrich Rickert and Wilhelm Windelband, he insisted on the fundamental difference between the natural and human sciences. To understand human actions we should follow the empiricist commitment to lived experience, bearing in mind that access to that experience is available not through the natural sciences alone but, for Berlin, through the ‘inside view’ of people’s goals, beliefs, and values, which requires a ‘thick’ conception of persons, in addition to the study of history and of personality. The natural sciences are distinctly unsuited for this and thus Berlin remained staunchly opposed to the positivist belief that the natural sciences are the paradigmatic form of knowledge that the human sciences should seek to emulate.

Following Vico and Dilthey, Berlin thought that the natural and the human sciences fundamentally differed in the very nature of the subject matter that they studied, in kind; and Berlin insisted that the sort of knowledge each sought made different methods, standards, and goals appropriate to one and not the other. In ‘The Concept of Scientific History’ Berlin argued that the natural and the human worlds must be studied differently because of the relationship between the observer or thinker and the object of study. The peculiarity of the human sciences consists in its having a subject matter that is of the same nature as the investigator. Natural science studies the physical world of nature dispassionately and objectively from without, while the human sciences study the world that human beings create for themselves and inhabit from within culture, which permits and requires an insightful kind of understanding and a vitalist account of behaviour. To study human life, Berlin thought, we cannot divest ourselves entirely of our experience which bases our judgements, but rather that we must begin from our understanding of other human beings in the ‘thick’ sense, of what it is like to have motives and feelings.

Berlin thought the human sciences could not be conducted in the same way as the natural sciences, since the latter seek to establish general laws based on similarities and regularities that, by categorizing into types, can explain whole classes of phenomena. In contrast, the whole point of the human sciences is to understand the particulars of human life in and of themselves. Precisely what Berlin saw necessary for such a task is Verstehen, or imaginative understanding, which is based on a knowledge of humanity that can only be derived from direct experience, by interaction with others and not merely from introspection. This meant that to be a good historian, for example, the concern, for Berlin, should be with individuals, to understand the uniqueness of particular human phenomena by stepping into the mental world of a thinker and presenting it in its own terms. Berlin’s notion of a historical ‘sense of reality’ was about the importance of an intuitive feel for the way particular observations and ideas fit within a plausible overall picture. No fixed method that could be set in advance could accomplish the transmission of a historical sensibility that would set ideas within their context, but also look beyond the immediate context to connect the past with the present. In keeping with his general ‘inside-view’ approach to the explanation of human conduct, which eschewed the detached and impersonal methods of the natural sciences, Berlin favoured an empathetic stress on the values, the purposes, and worldviews of the actors themselves. His preferred approach in philosophy was therefore decidedly not the conventional analytical technique of constructing arguments and counterarguments, but a Collingwoodian historical style that traced ideas to their origins in the work of key thinkers whose personalities were shown to be as important as their logic. And it is this capacity to recapture the view of past cultures and past ages that Berlin salutes in Vico and Herder’s powerful sense of the reality of the past.

Alongside Berlin, Hampshire’s equally strong and early conviction that not everything can or should be reduced to a single model, theory, standard, or ideal made for a strong countervailing
voice amidst the reductivist drive of logical positivism’s view of meaning and knowledge from the late 1930s onward. Hampshire was educated at Repton, read Literae Humaniores at Balliol College, and graduated in 1936 at which time he was elected to a prize fellowship at All Souls. There, he joined Austin and Berlin’s weekly meeting group on Thursday afternoons, which Berlin later recounted, ‘in retrospect they seem to me the most fruitful discussions of philosophy at which I was ever present’ (Berlin 1973: 9). Hampshire argued for an intentional and embodied conception of human agency that can recognize the unity of mind and body in human action. He opposed what he saw as the marks of an empiricist inheritance from Hume and the long shadow of Cartesian epistemological conceptions on modern philosophy, according to which our experience consists of a succession of impressions and ideas, which holds that thought, sensation, sense-perception, emotion, and will are given in logical independence of knowledge of ourselves as active animals in a world of material things.

Hampshire fervidly opposed the way the new empiricist wave in the philosophy of mind, redolent of Hume, understood experience as a succession of impressions and ideas, which rendered persons as passive observers instead of the self-willed, space-occupying experimenting agents in the world that they are. Hume’s notion of experience was incoherent because it relied on the notion of impressions and ideas that were somehow obtainable independently of a notion of oneself as a self-moving agent in a world of independent objects which was simply untenable. Our concept of a voluntary, intentional agent is embedded in a network of concepts of space and time, of material object and of motion, of the perceiving agent and of perceptual faculties. So tightly woven are these concepts that the idea of an observer who is not also an active agent, of a thinker who is not also an actor, is precluded as nonsensical (Hampshire 1959). Hampshire believed that the sense-datum philosophers who failed to see the conceptual connections involved in perception inherited the empiricist mistake. The error Hampshire saw running through empiricist philosophy was the assumption of the possibility of Cartesian statements of immediate experience that relied on a mind–body distinction, and on a conception of human consciousness primarily as mental states of passive awareness, independent of bodily conditions.

Hampshire sought to disabuse the conceptual commitments of logical positivism by arguing for the primacy of intentional action that is unified in mind and body in our conceptual scheme. He insisted that the philosophy of mind was distorted by the mistaken understanding of persons only as passive observers and not as self-willed agents. Moreover, in focusing on the unity of cogitative and active powers of man against the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, and on the ramifying role of intention in our conceptual scheme, Hampshire sought to bring moral argument closer to the philosophy of mind. The interconnectedness of our concepts – of our perceptions and their objects, of our intentions and their execution in action, of our beliefs and their truth or falsity – forms such seamless a web that questions of knowledge must be seen as related to moral philosophy. Hampshire sought to shift moral philosophy’s focus away from the logical properties of moral statements to the moral problems as they presented themselves to people as practical human agents. This meant that we had to take seriously both the social bases of human intentionality as well as the embodied nature of human agency. As can be seen in his ‘The Analogy of Feeling’, Hampshire emphasized the necessity of communication with other persons for self-knowledge (Hampshire 1952). And he elaborated the interpretive view of how self-knowledge depends also on the embodied subject’s sense of its own identity and on its being a physical agent in a physical environment (Hampshire 1959). Clearly these interpretive features of Hampshire’s thought exhibit the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre as well as Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Hampshire repeatedly stressed the connections between mental concepts and physical agency, and sought to give the notion of introspection and the possibility of
incorrigible declarations by a speaker of his own intentions an intelligible place in philosophy (Hampshire 1953a, 1956, 1959).

Even before Charles Taylor’s famous critique of behaviourism appeared it was Hampshire’s rejection of behaviourist analyses of psychological concepts that fleshed out a clear defence of anti-naturalism in the human sciences (Hampshire 1950; Taylor 1964). Hampshire insisted on distinguishing between human actions and mere events, based on his theory of freedom and the fundamental difference between decision and prediction. His claim was that there is an ineliminable human power of ‘standing back’ from any prediction of one’s future actions, which changes the situation, and thus troubles the aim of making predictions in the human sciences (Hampshire with Hart 1958). Hampshire’s anti-naturalism developed through his account of the special notion of a disposition applied to human character, which must be historical and genetical, and thus distinct from ‘dispositional properties’ that may be possessed by material objects (Hampshire 1953b, 1962). Hampshire’s emphasis on the psychoanalytical account of dispositions is just one particular application of his wider view that human activities must be understood historically, not abstractly as behaviourist psychology sought to do. His view of the vitality of human identity and selfhood is an idea that is further borne out in his outlook on ethics, namely that any comprehensible system of ethics must be grounded in a view of human nature, and that all views of human nature are historically conditioned and essentially revisable.

Charles Taylor: interpretation and the human sciences

Berlin and Hampshire’s arguments in defence of anti-naturalism make clear their vitalist conception of human beings and human action. The connections they see between epistemological questions and moral and political ones have to do with their idealist understanding that such concerns are unified in human experience. In many ways this idea only needed to be advanced as a claim because of the new empiricism’s epistemology that implicitly – if not explicitly – divorced what is true (i.e. what could be validly deduced from discrete premises) from interpretation, which necessarily makes reference to and relies on further interpretations. According to their cultural understanding of human life and their thick conception of persons, only a vitalist account of human behaviour makes sense for acquiring knowledge about human subjects. Both Berlin and Hampshire were clearly liberal in their nominalism, that is, their individualism in emphasizing the importance and priority of particular things, especially of individual people as moral subjects. They recognized the social aspects of identity and selfhood; of the uniqueness and historically specific nature of particular human phenomena; and held an anti-utopian belief in the plurality of values in human life, which made them suspicious of deductive abstractions, led them to oppose utilitarian moral and political philosophy and other forms of ethical monism, and to fear what could be construed as the disastrous despotic and totalitarian effects in politics of attempting to unify and harmonize human values.

As such, their emphasis on the social bases of intentional action, the importance of recognition, the embodied and vitalist nature of agency, and interpretive nature of selfhood and identity are echoed in the writings of their student, Charles Taylor. Taylor is well known for supporting arguments about the socially embedded self, the need for vitalist analyses of behaviour, as well as a positive conception of freedom. Taylor made the idealist themes from Collingwood and Oakeshott to Berlin and Hampshire integral to his arguments for an interpretive social science (Bevir and O’Brien 2003). He argued for an organicist view of knowledge, and defended anti-naturalism for the human sciences. He insisted on meaning holism in the philosophy of language, and gave voice to the importance of social ontologies for social and political theory. He also drew on Hegel and phenomenology to understand the meanings...
people attach to social action in their own or other societies. Taylor’s interest in philosophers in the so-called continental tradition began as a graduate student at Oxford in the mid-1950s (Taylor 1965). He rebuked some of his Oxford teachers for their long-standing ‘cultural solipsism’ and sought to bring much needed clarity and refinement to the ideas of Herder, Hegel, von Humboldt, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, among others. Taylor quite explicitly praised his other teachers. In the preface to his first book on Hegel, Taylor attributes his interest in the philosopher to his Oxford teachers Berlin, Hampshire, and A. J. Ayer, who set him on the enterprise ‘many years ago, more than I can remember or would like to recall’ (Taylor 1975: viii). He especially thanks Berlin with whom he comes to share a key interest in other German thinkers such as Herder, as well as Humboldt (Taylor 1991).

Like Berlin and Hampshire, Taylor tried to mediate the virtues and insights of both enlightenment and counterenlightenment thinking, by opposing the scientific and reductivist tendencies of the first, but also eschewing the metaphysical esotericisms and totalitarian overtones of the latter. Taylor defends anti-naturalism in the humanistic disciplines in favour of an interpretive view of knowledge but also maintains broadly empiricist assumptions when inquiring into the natural world. His anti-naturalism also picks up on a phenomenological theme that echoes widely in the late twentieth century, in particular from Heidegger, in advancing the view that interpretation is essential to human existence. Taylor adopts the notion of Dasein, that is, of human beings as self-interpreting beings, and claims that our interpretation of ourselves and our experiences is so constitutive of what we are that they cannot be considered as merely a view on reality or separable from it or be bypassed in the way that the natural science goal to achieve objectivity demands (Taylor 1985: 45). Taylor’s anti-naturalism therefore involves multiple related claims about how human agency is intertwined with language and morality, which he thinks is precisely what is lost when we neutralize the moral nature of human agency and try to reduce the human to the natural sciences.

His famous 1971 essay, ‘Interpretation and the Sciences of Man’, responded critically to the gradual ascendancy in the twentieth century of trends in the human sciences aspiring to emulate the natural sciences. Political studies, in particular, witnessed the gradual ascendancy of behaviouralism, structuralism, and rational choice theory, all of which embody the assumption that the methods and categories recognized in the natural sciences constitute the proper mode of inquiry about the social and political world. Behaviouralists made use of scientific techniques of data collection and stressed the use of quantifiable variables to analyse observable relationships. Varieties of structuralism like neo-Marxism and critical realism focus on discovering the unobservable structures that guide or determine events, irrespective of the beliefs of individuals or the meanings of actors. Rational choice theory, while it takes individual preferences seriously, employs positivist criteria for judging and conducting research, namely parsimony, deductive structure, and instrumental use for empirical research. It seeks to demonstrate causal laws that operate between atomized units and assumes predictive power can generate expert policy advice. Behaviouralism, structuralism, and varieties of rational choice theory – including computer-influenced theories of intelligence and computer-based models in psychology – all operate on the assumption that the methods and categories from the natural sciences can be replicated in studying the human world.

For Taylor, however, who takes Aristotle’s view that method depends on matter, the epistemological question of how we might acquire scientific knowledge is inextricably linked to the ontological question of the nature of the subject matter we seek knowledge of. The major problem with attempts to mimic the natural sciences is the hostility such approaches show to the need for interpretation in the study of humans and society. This prevents them from grasping some of the most important features of human beings. The self-interpretive,
strong-evaluative nature of human beings renders the empiricist model of knowledge inapplicable to the human sciences. Employing standards of absoluteness, objectivity, representative clarity, and measurable accuracy in the human sciences can only lead to miscalculating and fundamentally misunderstanding the nature of the subject. Empiricist attempts to reconstruct knowledge so as to achieve absolute certainty beyond interpretation end up distorting, rather than conveying, the meanings that agents understand, hold, and which motivate their action.

In contrast to the natural sciences, a double hermeneutic must be at work in the study of human and social phenomena, because human beings are subjects for whom things matter and which have meaning; they are agents with purposes, intentions, feelings, emotions, and language. Students of the human sciences are interpreting self-interpreting beings. As Taylor says, ‘what a given human life is an interpretation of cannot exist uninterpreted; for human emotion is only what it is refracted as in human language ... the self that is to be interpreted is essentially that of a being who self-interprets’ (Taylor 1985: 75). And for Taylor, to define humans as self-interpreting is also to see them as linguistic beings, since the activity of self-interpretation is inextricable from the constitutive role that language plays in enabling us to have and express self-understandings. As linguistic animals, our motivations, desires, and evaluations are not merely given to us, or fixed truths that we discover. Rather, as Taylor sees it, our self-understandings are constituted by the articulations we come to accept of them. Accepting a certain articulation actually shapes our sense of what we desire or find important. But this does not mean that the articulations are arbitrary, or that self-interpretations make themselves true. Self-interpretations can be more or less adequate, clairvoyant, or deluded. There is a getting it right and getting it wrong in articulation. Our self-understandings shape what we feel, so even when wrong they can shape what it is they are wrong about.

For Taylor, the meanings humans live by cannot be bracketed from an understanding of their actions. These meanings are, moreover, formed and made intelligible only against the wider background of concrete contexts of social practices shared with others. He postulates a deep internal connection between language and practice. Political practices, for instance, are not only expressed in but are constituted by language, and that language in turn acquires its sense and significance from the political practices around and through which it develops. The objects of investigation and the tools by which investigation is carried out essentially share the same pervasive context. Taylor opposes any idea of a separate political reality that could in principle be discovered independently of the language of that polity. Thus the proper mode of social scientific inquiry neither assumes an objective nature to social reality nor reduces the world to subjective personal experience, but takes seriously the intersubjective dimension of socially constitutive meanings. Interpretive approaches like Taylor’s oppose the idea that there is a separate political reality that exists and that in principle can be discovered that is independent of the language of that polity. Interpretivists view human practices as so constituted by webs of intersubjective meanings that giving account of these meanings, which may be tacit or inchoate, requires a depth hermeneutics.

The idealist themes that Berlin and Hampshire marshalled against the new empiricists, as well as the ontological arguments of Hegel and the phenomenological arguments of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, provided ample resources for Taylor to defend hermeneutics against behaviourism and other positivistic approaches in the human sciences. The hermeneutic aim is not just to measure, correlate, systematize, and settle, but to formulate, clarify, and appraise cultural meanings and social practices, ultimately acknowledging that because they result from interpretation, the results are always incomplete and open to challenge. Interpretivists since Taylor have continued to uphold the idealist notion of positing a deep internal connection between language and practice, but they differ on exactly how to do so. Some have portrayed...
interpretive theory as appropriate for understanding, but not suited for explanation giving in the human sciences. Relativists like Peter Winch, for example, insisted the human sciences must understand the objects they study rather than seek explanations for them (Winch 1958). He argued that different cultures and ways of life each generates its own standards of rationality, which is sufficient for evaluating its internal practices.

Many other interpretivists reject casting understanding and explanation as alternative goals of social scientific inquiry. They argue that we can give explanations of the connection between beliefs, desires, intentions, and actions that are essentially narrative, not causal, by pointing to the conditional and volitional links between beliefs and actions. Interpretivists in sociology and anthropology were also influenced by phenomenology which favours textual approaches and ethnography. Ethnography focuses on the different forms of everyday common-sense knowledge and practical reasoning that provide the ontological bases of experience. Cultural anthropologists like Clifford Geertz called for ‘thick descriptions’ in the study of other social contexts. The ethnographer proceeds by recording the meanings that particular actions have for social actors, and interprets the social discourse and its symbols to understand the webs of meaning and significance that operate within those practices. The ethnographer generalizes by guessing at meanings and draws explanatory conclusions from best guesses (see Chapter 12).

All interpretive approaches that emphasize the construction of knowledge in the human sciences challenged behaviourists and rational choice theorists’ claims to objectivity. But interpretivists influenced by post-structuralist and post-modern philosophies in particular went further and denounced reason altogether. For Foucault, all modernist projects of redefining concepts for uniformity of measurement and elimination of their evaluative dimensions is hubris, and in all likelihood, sinister (Foucault 1973, 1986). They mask and seek to control the essential contestability and value-laden nature of political life as well as all our concepts. Moreover, historians and other practitioners should not understand subjects as occupying a realm of subjective intentionality since they are only the scripted products of contingent discourses. Interpretive methods inspired by anti-foundational ontologies thus hold that the relevant meanings within cultural discourses and complex systems of signification are co-extensive with practices. These interpretivists seek to depict and uncover these meanings by delving into the discordant practices of political life, which are fundamentally irreducible to the products of mind or to self-consciousness.

Although interpretivists do not, in principle, reject the use of statistics and quantitative measurements, most see their interpretive analysis as necessarily and appropriately extending beyond the data supplied by empirical inquiry. Interpretivists therefore take issue with a wide range of social scientists who claim to be concerned with beliefs, ideas, preferences, or norms, but typically treat them as if they could be differentiated from and related individually to actions. Many social scientists bypass beliefs and preferences by correlating actions with objective facts about people – e.g. all forms of co-variation analysis, qualitative small-n comparisons, and complex regression analyses. Rational choice theorists, for instance, build deductive models on basic universal assumptions about the rationality of human actors, without offering adequate evidence that the relevant actors do in fact hold the intentional states attributed to them. Interpretivists extending the idealist insight that the beliefs and preferences of agents form holistic webs that are constitutive of actions and social practices hold that beliefs cannot be reduced to mere intervening variables or correlated with isolated attitudes. They require explanations to be unpacked in terms of the outcome of identifiable political actors – whether individual or aggregate – acting on intentional states they can plausibly be said to hold.

An interpretive approach to governance advanced by Mark Bevir and R. A. W. Rhodes provides a concrete example of such an interpretive form of explanation grounded on an
intentionalist view of action (Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Bevir et al. 2003; and Chapter 1). They challenge the positivist account of governance as networks by contrasting it with an interpretive approach to networks understood through agents and their beliefs. They instruct practitioners to interpret the individual meanings of politicians, officials, citizens, and participants of social practices by relating their beliefs to other aggregated beliefs in the form of traditions, discourses, or ideologies. In so doing, they illustrate how governance is created and recreated as a meaningful practice through beliefs informed by traditions and modified in response to dilemmas.

Bevir and Rhodes’ view of interpretation lies between hermeneutics and post-structuralism. They defend the possibility of agency even without autonomy, against strands of interpretive theory that assume autonomous subjects who think and act solely according to their own reason and commands. At the same time, they eschew the wholesale rejection of subjectivity, truth, and reason that marks post-structuralism and post-modernism (Bevir 1999). They use the concept of tradition to understand social structures, not as epistemes, languages, or discourses that fix or limit an agent, as Foucauldian studies do, but as that which provides the background to subjects’ beliefs, seeing agents as able to select particular beliefs and actions, including novel ones, which might transform the relevant tradition. Because people produce traditions through their actions as agents, traditions are regarded as contingent, and lacking any fixed essential part that is necessarily present in all its adherents say or do. Nor do they see traditions as having some internal logic of development whereby the principles in a tradition could fix their own use.

These authors argue that in order to understand the content and nature of a tradition, students of politics have to decentre it. A decentred study of a tradition, practice, or institution unpacks the way in which it is created, sustained, and modified through local reasoning involving the beliefs, preferences, and actions of individuals in many arenas. They use the concept of dilemma to explain why people change their beliefs or actions. Change occurs in response to dilemmas that arise for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to an existing idea and so forces reconsideration. Because we cannot reliably read off the beliefs and actions of individuals from objective social facts about them, Bevir and Rhodes urge us to understand how social practices are produced, maintained, and changed by exploring the ways in which individuals conceive of, and respond to, dilemmas. The content the authors attach to governance reflects their interpretive approach. They argue that there is no necessary or given pattern of governance, but that the transfer of state powers and functions to organizations within civil society and the problems posed by increasing regional and international complexities have all arisen out of contingent and contested narratives.

Bevir and Rhodes in particular creatively adapted idealist themes to speak directly to understanding changes in governance since the 1970s, from the centralized locales of power of unitary states to the increasingly differentiated array of networks across boundaries of state and civil society. Their narrative explanations of these changes in terms of contingent traditions and dilemmas have brought critical attention to the way governance is typically studied in political science, public administration, political economy, and sociology. Causal explanations, all too prevalent in the social sciences, misrepresent how social practices are actually radically contingent, lacking a fixed essence or logical path of development. According to these authors, explanations that attempt to ground social scientific research in apparently given facts about the nature of reasoning, the path dependence of institutions, or the inexorability of social developments belie the fact that no institution, practice, or norm can fix how its participants will act. Governance practices, thus, must be studied for the interplay and contest of the multiple beliefs and complex meanings of the agents classified within them. Such narrative stories provide explanation by deploying the concepts of tradition and dilemma, through which agents create, sustain, and alter the practices they constitute.
In conclusion, with the rise of positivism throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the new empiricists called for, and seemed to execute, the near complete overhaul of idealism within philosophy’s ranks. Yet, the idealist themes of Oakeshott and Collingwood nevertheless managed to persist through thinkers like Berlin and Hampshire, and they took hold in political studies in the wake of analysis through thinkers like Taylor. Berlin advanced the importance of historical interpretation against his positivist contemporaries’ concern with verification and reduction. Hampshire asserted the importance of a vitalist analysis of behaviour and a ‘thick’ conception of person against positivism. They both insisted on a positive conception of freedom against the atomism characteristic of their counterparts, further evidence of how idealist philosophy endured even though it had to be revised and reinvented against the new empiricist challenges. Moreover, through the defence of anti-naturalism and phenomenology of Charles Taylor (1931–) these idealist themes continue to have strong echoes in the development of post-positivist social science and post-analytic political theory in the latter half of the twentieth century, as can be seen in the clear example of the interpretive studies of governance of Bevir and Rhodes.

**Bibliography**


