

Phil. Soc. Sci 7 (1977) 209-227

What Would An Adequate Philosophy of Social Science Look Like?*‡

BRIAN FAY, *Philosophy, Wesleyan University*

J. DONALD MOON, *Government, Wesleyan University*

I

During the last twenty years an enormous literature has grown up around the question, what is the nature of social science? Two positions have dominated these discussions, the 'naturalist' view which holds that social science involves no essential differences from the natural sciences, and the 'humanist' view which holds that social life cannot adequately be studied 'scientifically'. Whole models of social science have been propounded that argue for one position and view the other as an incompatible alternative.¹ Given such a vigorous tradition of discourse, it may seem odd that anyone would now ask the question, what would an adequate philosophy of social science look like? Unfortunately, however, neither naturalism nor humanism is capable of answering the three questions which the idea of a science of behaviour raises. These questions are: first, what is the *relationship between interpretation and explanation in social science?*; second, what is the *nature of social scientific theory?*; and third, what is *the role of critique?*

In this essay we will show why these three questions must be answered by any compelling account of social science, and why humanism and naturalism are unable to answer them. The first question will be taken up in section II, the second in section III, and the third in section IV. By showing that the dualism which dominates current philosophical thinking makes it impossible to answer these questions adequately, we will point to the need for a new synthesis in the philosophy of social science, one that transcends the antimony of humanism and naturalism.

* Received 30.3.76

‡ This essay was written while the authors were receiving a Joint Research Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (RO-22106-75-139). The authors wish to acknowledge the importance of the free time which this grant made possible, and to publicly thank the National Endowment. The argument presented here does not necessarily represent the view of NEH. An earlier version of this essay was read at Williams College.

1 See Maurice Roche, *Phenomenology, Language and the Social Sciences*, London 1973, and G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding*, Ithaca, N.Y. 1971, for recent examples of this opposition between these two models of social science.