

# Chapter 5: Human Sciences, Values and Understanding

## Values and Understanding in Human Sciences

The subject matter of sociology is human behavior in society. All social behavior is guided by values. Thus the study of social behavior can never be value-free if value freedom is interpreted in the sense of absence of values because values of the society under investigation form a part of the social facts to be studied by sociology. Moreover social research is in itself a type of social behavior and is guided by the value of search for true knowledge. In other words, the values can operate at three levels:

1. At the level of philological interpretation.
2. At the level of ethical interpretation in assigning value to an object of enquiry.
3. At the level of rational interpretation in which the sociologists seeks the meaningful relationship between phenomena in terms of causal analysis. The point of value interpretation is to establish the value towards which an activity is directed.

Sociologists should observe value neutrality while conducting social research. It means that s/he should exclude ideological or non-scientific assumption from research. S/he should not make evaluative judgment about empirical evidence. Value judgment should be restricted to sociologists' area of technical competence.

S/he should make her/his own values open and clear and refrain from advocating particular values. Value neutrality enables the social scientists to fulfill the basic value of scientific enquiry that is search for true knowledge. Thus sociology being a science cherishes the goal of value neutrality. According to Alvin Gouldner value-free principle did

enhance the autonomy of sociology where it could steadily pursue basic problems rather than

journalistically react to passing events and allowed it more freedom to pursue questions uninteresting either to the respectable or to the rebellious. It made sociology freer as Comte had wanted it to be –to pursue all its own theoretical implications.

Value free principle did contribute to the intellectual growth and emancipation of the enterprise. Value-free doctrine enhanced freedom from moral compulsiveness; it permitted a partial escape from the parochial prescriptions of the sociologists' local or native culture. Effective internalization of the value-free principle has always encouraged at least a temporary suspension of the moralizing reflexes built into the sociologist by her/his own society.

The value-free doctrine has a paradoxical potentiality; it might enable researchers/scientists to make better value judgments rather than none. It could encourage a habit of mind that might help sociologists in discriminating between their punitive drives and their ethical sentiments. However in practice it has been extremely difficult to fulfill this goal of value neutrality. Values creep in various stages in sociological research. According to Gunnar Myrdal total value neutrality is impossible.

In other words, chaos does not organize itself into cosmos. To put it otherwise, we need viewpoints. (Myrdal, 1958) Thus in order to carry out social research viewpoints are needed which form the basis of hypothesis which enables the social scientists to collect empirical data.

As a result a sociologist has to be value frank and should make the values which have got incorporated in the choice of the topic of the research of the formulation of hypothesis clear and explicit at the very outset in the research.

The value-free doctrine is useful both to those who want to escape from the world and to those who want to escape into it. They think of sociology as a way of getting ahead in the world by providing them with neutral techniques that may be sold on the open market to any buyer. The belief that it is not the business of sociologist to make value judgments is taken by some to mean that the market on which they can vend their skills is unlimited.

Some sociologists have had no hesitation about doing market research designed to sell more cigarettes although well aware of the implications of recent cancer research. According to Gouldner the value-free doctrine from Weber's standpoint is an effort to compromise two of the deepest traditions of the western thought, reason and faith but that his arbitration seeks to safeguard the romantic residue in modern man. Like Freud, Weber never really believed in an enduring peace or in a final resolution of this conflict. What he did was to seek a truce through the segregation of the contenders by allowing each to dominate in different spheres of life.

How all these debates are relevant to Allama Jafari? Of course, the question of "relevancy" itself is a very paradoxical concept within sociological discourse as it is not unproblematic to demonstrate the relation between things which may not look related to each other based on the perspective of the beholder.

In other words, to those who consider the works of Allama Jafari as irrelevant to sociological discourses then the debates on the “relevance” of Allama Jafari within a sociological paradigm are futile but we have, in the course of this work, showed that this view is unfounded. Because the questions of “value”, “observation” and “episteme” have occupied the minds of many *alternative* social thinkers who have not operated within the paradigm of disciplinary social sciences. Allama Jafari, to my view, is one of the paragonic examples of this genre.

To put it otherwise, when Allama Jafari was debating these issues in Iran during seventies very few scholars even realized the scope of his critique which later on came to be known as *subaltern theories* versus *mainstream theories*. This view was only recognized in Europe and America by very few social scientists, such as Gunnar Myrdal from the 60s onwards. However, today these ideas have gained global momentum and few dare to neglect the problematic state of eurocentricity and other ills of disciplinary social sciences.

The claim of traditional science to analyze, describe and causally explain independently of any particular observers' evaluation and (value–neutrality) is unfounded, as already noted here. Value–neutrality may be important in certain research phases of establishing facts or in mediating conflicts, but if absolutised without it becomes entirely self–defeating. However, the full consequences of this fact have by no means been drawn in the practice of these sciences.

## Types of Interventions in Human Sciences

In Allama Jafari’s view, the questions of positions and vectors are of pivotal significance within human sciences and complex to tackle indeed. Perhaps everybody approaches problems within society based on her/his own contextual position and in accordance to this particular viewpoint issues a verdict upon complex issues of human existence.

This perspectival approach to vital questions of human life is a *common syndrome* which needs to be explored extensively as in issues related to human being and also of primordial importance have metaphysical roots. In all kinds of epistemic pursuits, in general, and in sociology which deals with our destiny, in particular, we are faced with two kinds of interventions, i.e. unstudied type of interference, and intentional type of interference. (1976. Ch. 4)

## The Unstudied Type of Interference

The first kind of interference is related to what Allama Jafari considers as the natural position of the researcher which is crucial in the fabric of her/his conclusions. Of course the researcher is not guilty of charge in this case, as the onus lies somewhere else which is beyond her/his reach, i.e. the milieu. In Allama Jafari’s words, the factors which were instrumental in the configuration of her/his personality have caused such a makeup. For instance, an individual who is squint–eyed would willy–nilly see one thing in a squinty fashion without being guilty of charge as her/his natural condition has caused such a vision.

However, Allama Jafari argues that

*...we cannot rely upon his optical vision either as her/his visual perception is not accurate. She may be a good person but her/his ocular observations could be unreliable. When, for instance, the moon seems to be two for a squint-eyed person while I can see only one moon in the sky with my own eyes or a telescope then it is verified for me that there is only one moon. Of course, I will not condemn her/him as this is due to the positional interference, i.e. based on her/his conditions the moon seems to be two instead of one. I, on the other hand, should be careful not to follow the verdicts which are the results of positional interference in a sociological research. There are other characteristics such as **specific ideology, race, class,** and other aspects which may have dominated vital dimensions of the personality of a researcher in a fashion that one could link between worldview and layers of personality. (1976. Ch. 4)*

In other words, our unintentional inclinations could color the fabric of our vision in a very fundamental fashion which could turn our research into a deeply biased narrative without any epistemological significance. To put it differently, one should distinguish between evaluative statements and actual value judgments.

All things considered, despite all the flip sides caused by the *positional interferences*

*... it is undeniable that the interference of natural positions in sociological studies is both necessary and normal. When a student of social sciences reads the works carried by another social scientist who may have her/his own ideological inclinations or background assumptions which has driven her/him to conclude in certain fashion and explain the facts in reference to her/his particular framework – she could study problematiques and research conclusions without buying into her/his ideological assumptions. Of course, this is not an easy task but it is achievable for those who look at research data with armed sociological eyes. (1976. Ch. 4)*

For instance, the primary and fundamental sociological rule in

Durkheim's perspective is that one should make a distinction between

'social facts' and the sociologist who studies these facts. In other words, Durkheim argues that the social events should be approached as a *thing out there*. (Jafari, 1976. Ch. 4) In Allama Jafari's perspective,

*... these two statements should be taken either as a sign of wishful thinking or unachievable ideals. (1976. Ch. 4)*

Allama Jafari levels a critique at Durkheim by arguing that the validity of his statements are doubtful as well as one should not disregard the philosophical problem in Durkheim's remarks, as one cannot infer based on the primary sociological rule as does Durkheim. It seems Allama Jafari comes very close to the Weberian position when he states that

*... the sociologist should appraise the social fact apart and independent from her/his own position ... by considering the society as an independent thing ... in a fashion as though the sociologist is a mere spectator. This is not an accurate depiction of the logic of sociological studies ... as this would lead us to consider society as a solidified entity ... which would not be factually influenced by people's attitudes. (Jafari, 1976. Ch. 4)*

## The Intentional Type of Interference

The second type of intervention is, in the paradigm of Allama Jafari's methodological approach, the 'conscious interference' in knowing the subject-matter. Our knowledge about natural phenomena and facts are generally outside the orbit of these kinds of interferences. In Allama Jafari's words, whether we like or dislike a glass is a glass and the researcher's intentions cannot affect the factual state of glass. Because the objects have realities of their own and our intentions cannot affect their objective positions and even our intentions would for some time cloud the state of affairs these cloudy states cannot endure the test of reality. However,

*... when I state that I am a sociologist this would have some serious consequences in the future by those who may make assumptions based on my sociological assessments. (1976. Ch.4)*

What does Allama Jafari mean by this? He explains his points by giving an example from the history of ideas. He argues when

*... we look at the slavery in the history we see that grand thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle by being influenced by the dominant norms in their society assumed that the slavery is an inalienable fact of human social life. In other words, they assumed erroneously that human beings are essentially created as two different kinds of species, i.e. shepherd and herd. Now the question is how could such grand thinkers express such vulgar ideas? (1976. Ch. 4)*

This question seems to be directed at Durkheim who in Allama Jafari's view tended to neglect

*... the role of education in making of sociological theories. In other words, when in the pantheon of knowledge we turn Plato and Aristotle as two fundamental pillars of reason then what will happen to young researchers who would like to approach the crucial questions of human paradoxes? Wouldn't they be influenced by these fads and fables? Wouldn't our socialization patterns or civilizational norms and cultural horizons affect our judgments in construing sociological theories? (1976. Ch.4)*

These are questions which, Allama Jafari thinks sociologists such as Durkheim have neglected and need also urgent attention. Thus

*... I may express that the state of society is like this at the current moment but in the course of future transformations our conceptions of theories on the **social** could change. The nature of social knowledge is very different than physical knowledge of material facts. (1976. Ch. 4)*

Finally the natural interferences would,

*... soon or later, appear and the facts see the light of the day. As in regard to elements and other issues in the history of human ideas many conceptions were naïve and rudimentary but the course of human reasoning changed many misconceptions about reality and the world which have been unprecedented. (Jafari, 1976. Ch. 4)*

In other words, Allama Jafari seems to have a critical approach to the principle of ‘scientific accumulation’ as far as human sciences are concerned. To put it differently, he argues that

*... one can discern in the history of ideas that our conceptions about natural issues have become more sophisticated but the same is not true about issues in humanities. For instance, the quest for validity of conscience in the constitution of human existence goes back as far as Egyptian Pharaohs but the question is still unresolved and specialists have not agreed upon the crucial authenticity of conscience yet. What is the position of sociology in this regard? (Jafari, 1976. Ch. 4)*

In other words, how should we account for the arbitrary state of concepts and conceptual frameworks in social sciences, in general, and sociology, in particular? To put it differently, how far could one go with relativism? What are the underlying problems in disciplinary sociology in the sense that it is unable to equip modern self with a conscientious ethos? Said differently, is the absence of religion in the makeup of modern system interrelated to demise of conscience?

It seems Allama Jafari views the problematiques of conscience and religion at the same inseparable plane. In the Old Persian language there is one word for two concepts which we use today in English for conscience and religion, namely *Daena*. (Clark, 1998. Pp 69–70) *Daena* refers to religion and conscience in the Old Persian language. In other words, it seems ancient magus or wisdom philosophers did not differentiate between the realms of conscience and religion as modernists do today.

To put it otherwise, the underlying streams which run through the works of Allama Jafari are deeply intertwined with wisdom philosophy tradition where to be religious is tantamount to be conscientious and both are not devoid of insight in the realms of self and society.

Of course, it should be reemphasized that we do not employ the term ‘magus’ in the derogatory sense which was used by early Arab royalists (such as the supporters of Umayyad Dynasty) who considered Iranian people as ‘*Majus*’.<sup>1</sup>

On the contrary, when we speak of magus the term is used in the paradigm of Hafez <sup>2</sup> who refers to *Pir-e Mugan* as the principal wayfarer in the path of self-realization. In other words, the intellectual depth which constitutes the background assumptions of Allama Jafari’s theoretical universe has a long tradition that stretches back into antiquity in a successive fashion.

To put it otherwise, the making of alternative discourses in an Iranian context could come about through

working on intellectuals such as Allama Jafari whose discursive universe is connected organically to the streams of their tradition [3](#) in a meaningful fashion [4](#) where reason is not divorced from intellect and none is outside the realm of *Daena*.

[1](#). This term refers to the Iranian religion which has been mentioned in Koran as one of the 'People of the Book' without any pejorative connotations. But later on, it has been employed by Arab royalists in a derogative fashion.

[2](#). Khawja Shams al-Din Muhammad Hafez-e Shirazi, known by his pen name Hafez (1325/1326 – 1389/1390), was a Persian lyric poet. His collected works composed of series of Persian poetry (Divan) are to be found in the homes of most Iranians, who learn his poems by heart and use them as proverbs and sayings to this day. His life and poems has been the subject of much analysis, commentary and interpretation, influencing post-Fourteenth Century Persian writing more than any other author. He may be known as a poet to the world but he is more of a poet-philosopher who has expressed his ideas through the medium of poetry.

[3](#). By tradition, we do not refer to the modern meaning of tradition which has evolved in the European discourse in the last two hundred years, during the Enlightenment period, as philosophers and thinkers counter-posed the concept of modernity with the concept of tradition, in the context of progress. (Giddens, 2002. p 39)

In other words, we refer to the ability and nobility of thinkers such as Allama Jafari and Allama Tabatabai who have not broken up with the intellectual tradition of religio perennis due to hegemonic pressures of progressive ideology of modernism. To put it otherwise, the ability refers to the concept of intellect while the nobility originates from the concept of revelation which in the frame of primordial school is different but interrelated modalities of being present in the world of reality.

[4](#). In figures such as Allama Jafari, we can discern a solid chain of knowledge which is absent in disciplinary epistemic mode. It may sound bizarre but in the context of primordial school knowledge has a very deep humane face while intellect has a rigorous modality beyond any anthropomorphic aspect.

In other words, when we trace the chain of masters of Allama Jafari's school of thought we shall soon or later come face to face with the chain of Being. To put it differently, within the context of disciplinary mode of knowledge this search would lead ultimately to Void. How many of modern professors talk, for instance, affectionately about their teachers? In a rationalized world there is no place for affectionate souls. This is another story which I leave for another treatise in the near future.

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