Chapter 9
Explanation in the Humanities and Social Sciences

'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.'

K. Marx

9.1 Methodological Collectivism Versus Methodological Individualism

There are two possible perspectives one can adopt when discussing social phenomena. One can either discuss phenomena with respect to some specific point in time, or else discuss phenomena in terms of historical development. The former adopts what is known as a synchronic perspective, while the latter adopts what is known as a diachronic perspective. In either case, one is confronted with a basic methodological choice: should one explain states of affairs, institutions, events, etc., in terms of the agent's motives, beliefs, desires and actions, or should one reverse the explanatory direction by looking instead at objective social forces in order to explain agents' actions and thoughts? The first alternative is called *methodological individualism*, and the latter *methodological collectivism*. If one opts for the first alternative one naturally starts using some version of the action explanation model, while if one prefers the latter alternative, some sort of causal explanation will be the most relevant.

From a methodological point of view, both alternatives have their pros and cons. A disadvantage of methodological individualism is that agents are sometimes inaccessible (agents of historical events are in most cases dead) and thus unavailable for questioning, leaving us with only the historical artefacts and sources they have left behind. These artefacts are often incomplete and difficult to interpret. Furthermore, one is often suspicious that the explicitly recorded motives of an action are fictitious, or outright lies. In politics, as in everyday life, few people are completely honest about their beliefs, motives and desires. Another drawback is that one sometimes gets the feeling that the individual agent's motives and beliefs are partly a product of the society in which they live. Therefore, an agent's individual characteristics may not be all that interesting or relevant. For, as regards a historically interesting event, it is possible that the characteristics of the agents involved did not play a large role. Perhaps they simply happened to be at the right

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place at the right time to fill in the necessary roles for some event's occurrence (or – as it may seem in some cases – the wrong place at the wrong time). The suspicion that agent's motives and beliefs are products of the society they live in is the basic intuition in methodological collectivism.

If we instead adopt methodological collectivism, another difficulty arises. Suppose we want to explain a specific event or the existence of a certain trait in society with the help of social forces, which operate more or less independently of the individual agents involved. Naturally, one would then give a causal explanation. If such an explanation is to be successful, one needs to discover the general causal laws connecting various features of society. This has proved an extremely difficult task. The difficulty lies in precisely stating the conditions under which a type of social phenomenon will occur. In principle, one could accept that there exist historical and social laws that manifest themselves only once, but how could we know anything about such a law? Furthermore, in order to have a successful explanation, according to methodological collectivism, we need causal laws that connect social phenomena with the thoughts and beliefs of the various agents in a society: one needs causal laws of the type, 'under objective circumstances X, people tend to desire (believe, think) Y'. Once again, this has proven difficult, if not impossible. To answer this concern one might opt for an account of singular causation ('event A caused even B') where laws play no role, but then there is a problem in regards to what is meant by a 'cause' in such a context.

Generally, one is a methodological individualist or collectivist on the basis of ones view of human nature. Methodological collectivists tend to view humans as social creatures by nature, whose character traits, beliefs and desires are shaped by interacting with other people. One exponent of the collectivist view was Aristotle who wrote: 'Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human.'[1] Another is Marx who claimed that man's consciousness is determined by his relations to others. There is certainly some truth in these statements, but a really explanatory theory about the relations between individual minds and the surrounding social structure is lacking. The problem is conceptual; the term 'social structure' covers phenomena that somehow are constituted by individual minds, so one need to think of the relation between individual minds and society as internal: the relata are constituted by the relation and so cannot be described and identified without reference to the relation.

Methodological collectivists can criticise the other camp for only going half-way when using individual beliefs and perspectives as explanans for social phenomena; Such an explanation does not exhibit the more basic elements of history and society, but only the manifestation of social forces in the minds of individuals. The methodological individualist may reply that human beings are autonomous agents whose beliefs, thoughts, motives and desires cannot be fully reduced to external social factors.

[1] Aristotle: *Politics*, *1253*.

Hence, explanations in social and human sciences differ profoundly from explanations in the natural sciences.

Many philosophers, for example Popper, have claimed that the only reasonable stance is methodological individualism, since the existence of impersonal forces not based on the thoughts and actions of individual people is pure mysticism. In my opinion, this argument does not sufficiently take into account the essential social nature of human beings. There is a known case where a girl has been kept alive in the cellar by her father but not really being interacted with or spoken to for several formative years. When she was found, she got the best possible care and linguistic training, but she never became a fluent speaker and she was mentally retarded. This is but one drastic example, but the general conclusion is supported by a wealth of evidence. Maturing into a person with a mind requires intense social interaction.

It is obvious that more than one person is required in order to create languages and norms. Methodological individualists do not deny this, but they do claim that social forces are the results of individual actions. Thus this discussion appears similar to the question as to what came first, the chicken or the egg.

According to the methodological collectivist, history should be cleansed of descriptions of individual actions, because such events are determined by external, impersonal forces. An explanation that consists of a description of a chain of events containing some individual actions is thus considered insufficiently penetrating. An illustrative example is the Marxist view on the creation and development of the capitalist system. Marx claimed that a historical explanation of economic development misses the point if it draws upon individual desires and actions, (Why is the nobility so rich? They are greedy!) since these things arise in social situations. Rather, it is the development of productive forces – the technical and organizational development of material production – that determines the economic-historical process. The methodological individualist replies that every such technical or organizational change is the result of individual decisions guided by the individual's desire to better his or her own life.

We can, perhaps, see here the contours of a solution to the methodological collectivist's problem of describing social forces in a way that does not involve the conscious actions of agents. The basic regularities that govern human action can perhaps be described in biological terms, such as the basic desire to live, reproduce, and improve one's living conditions. These are regularities among humans that can be explained without resorting to mysticism.

It is not unreasonable to say that the choice between methodological collectivism/individualism is really just a choice of the starting point for an explanation. Every explanation consists in presenting certain statements, an explanans, as an explanation for some explanandum. An inquisitive person might accept the overall explanation and yet request an explanation for some of the circumstances expressed in the explanans. Just like causal chains, explanation chains progress, and regress, indefinitely. In other words, there is no phenomenon such that it does not require an explanation. From this perspective, one could say that the methodological individualist finds it reasonable to make the beliefs and desires of individual agents the ultimate starting point of an explanation, whereas the collectivist is more interested

in the social forces that brought those beliefs and desires into being. The choice between methodological collectivism and individualism is thus a choice concerning which questions one finds most interesting and which facts one finds so obvious that they do not require explanation. This conclusion points towards a pragmatic view of explanation like the one discussed at the end of the previous chapter. In short, the choice between methodological collectivism and individualism depends upon the type of question one wants answered.

9.2 Explanations of Historical Events

In the case of historical events, it is difficult to claim that similar events occur: every historical event is more or less unique. It is therefore doubtful that there are any historical laws similar to those used in describing natural phenomena. In historical explanations, individual events make up both the explanans and explanandum. So then, what kind of relations must obtain between two historical events such that the first event explains the second event?

Every historical event depends on the interaction of a great number of factors. Thus according to many historians, the most reasonable model for historical explanation is *narration*. To explain an historical event is to describe a number of these factors such that the explanandum appears natural as the next step in the story. This view seems reasonably intuitive and appears to coincide with how most historical explanations are presented. The links of the chain of events that build up the story are of different kinds. Some are the actions of individual agents, some social processes and others are natural phenomena. Adherents to the narrative model of explanation are often methodological individualists, although most would accept that the individual agent's feelings, motives and beliefs are influenced by the circumstances in which the agent lives. However, narration, i.e., story telling, leaves many things unaddressed. Historical narration is often allowed to omit those beliefs and thoughts that we commonly consider obvious or natural. As regards western medieval history, for example, one need not explain why agents tended to have strongly religious world-views. But one would require an explanation for why certain individuals were *extremely* pious or *notably* irreligious.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who forcefully argued for narration as the model for historical explanation, has claimed that Hempel was right in insisting that if a description of a chain of events is to have any explanatory force, the connection between two events must not be a literally unique case. For, if we are to understand the former event as explaining the latter event, we must see these events as instances of types of events that regularly follow each other. That is to say, there must be, at least implicitly, a law-like connection between two events in order for explanation to be possible. The narration must be presented such that the explanandum follows rationally and naturally in the given circumstances, which means that one must describe the circumstances such that one grasps the generality of the situation.

Narration can have either an individualistic or collective character. If a chain of a narrative contains a description of the origin of some agent's desires or beliefs (e.g. strong nationalistic sentiments), then the methodological collectivist can explain this chain in terms of social forces. This seems reasonable as long as the beliefs or desires in question are not agent-specific. However, if the agent (s) involved have peculiar or unique beliefs or desires, then perhaps what we want to know is how this peculiarity came about, which would require a more individualistic perspective.

All narration is selective. We choose a number of aspects out of a multifaceted reality and include these in our story, while other aspects are left out. This selection is governed by what one believes about the audience's perspective, as is always the case in situations of communication. Thus we have yet another case for the pragmatic character of explanation.

The following example illustrates a number of the points made above. It is an article written by leading economist Jeffery Sachs and published in the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter on March 23, 1998.

> What caused the Asian crisis during the fall 1997?
>
> There are those who blame Asian capitalism for the Asian crisis: a devastating mixture of corruption, nepotism, governmental interference and bad financial control. This explanation suits western banks just fine, as it relieves them of all responsibility. But if Asian capitalism is so bad, then why did those banks invest so much money in Asia to begin with?
>
> A more plausible explanation is that the investors panicked. Perhaps they were too euphoric in 1996, and already too pessimistic the year after. In the end, the result was a devastating panic that hurt both investors and the Asian economy.
>
> The immediate cause was clearly a sudden change in the flow of capital. In 1996, foreign investors placed 93 billion dollars into Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. In 1997, they withdrew 7 billion dollars. This swing of 105 billion dollars corresponds to 11 per cent of the national income of these countries and has driven them into a deep recession.'

The structure of this explanation, or rather suggested explanation, is the following. The Asian crisis is explained as being caused by negative capital flow. A causal law is thus being implicitly applied here; namely, '[i]f a country's capital flow changes rapidly in a negative direction, then this country will experience an economic crisis'. This 'law' is not very precisely formulated, and is perhaps not as deterministic as is suggested above, but it is obvious that Sachs uses such a law in his argument. It is also clear that Sachs takes this law to be well known and generally accepted, since he does not bother to argue for it separately.

The triggering factor in this case is a sharp decline in the flow of capital. But why was there such a drastic change in flow in 1997? The reason is, according to Sachs, that the investors panicked. This part of the outline is thus an explanation of an action. To panic is to enter into a certain mental state. In this case, the investors believed they were loosing money in Asia and that the best way to avoid this loss was to pull out of the Asian market as fast as possible. Obviously, the investors' goal was to earn money and avoid any losses.

In summary, we have here a short narrative consisting mainly of two coupled explanations. The first, the explanation of the change in the flow of capital, is an

action explanation. The second, an explanation of the effect of this change in capital flow, is a causal explanation. However, neither explanation is complete. The story only contains the elements the author believes to be necessary in order for the reader to follow his argument, nothing more. The pragmatic element that shows itself here is the choice of factors that are to be included, and those that are omitted, in the explanation.

9.3 Explanation of Social Phenomena

Explanations of social phenomena, especially social institutions, are controversial in two respects. One is the conflict between methodological individualism and methodological collectivism, and the other concerns what kinds of concepts should be used. The latter dispute is most clearly seen within psychology and psychiatry where one either treats humans as agents, in which case action explanations are appropriate, or one treats humans as organisms that exhibit certain behaviour, in which case the appropriate explanation will be the one that explains that behaviour. Recall that *action* and *behaviour* are different things. When we describe something as behaviour, we do not assume that it is accompanied by any conscious mental processes, (or it may be tacitly assumed that it is, but treated as irrelevant) whereas when describing an action, we do.

Are there any unconscious actions? Yes. For instance, an actor can honestly deny having a particular belief without anyone taking his words at face value; few nowadays deny that our minds contain unconscious elements.

One can generalize this conceptual observation to all of the social sciences. Many, perhaps most, of the relevant concepts in the social sciences have an *intentional* component that refers to conscious or unconscious attitudes or beliefs. Consider, for example, the concept *buying something*. This concept is connected to a host of juridical and economic institutions, such as contracts, money, and property. If I buy something, then I *own* it and I have the *right* to use it. Furthermore, I am *obligated* to pay for this object. If someone *stole* the object from me, I would have the right to ask for the help of certain authorities to *get it back*. Most often we do not consciously entertain these beliefs, but we are aware of these social facts. All these concepts describe social relations between people based on *collective intentions* that exist among the members of the society in which the object was purchased.

An event that clearly illustrates the intentional character of these juridical/economic relations is the Dutch colonists' purchase of Manhattan from the Native American community, the Lenape Indians, who used the island as hunting ground. According to the colonists, they *bought* the land from the Native Americans for 60 guilders. However, the Lenape Indians did not think of the interaction that way. On the home page http://delawaretribe.org/blog/2013/06/26/faqs/#Living their descendants write: 'Our ancestors were asked to sign treaties giving up the land, but they had no idea that they were actually selling land any more than you would

think someone could sell air. The belief was that all land was put here by the Creator for use by his children, and that you should not be stingy with it.'

One might guess that the Lenape people viewed the transaction as an act of diplomacy, through which the colonists were expressing their peaceful intentions by giving them gifts. Hence, whether we should classify the handing over of 60 guilders from the colonists to the Lenape people as a purchase or as a gift depends on whose perspective we speak from. If we ask 'but was this transaction really a purchase or a gift', we are erroneously assuming that one can use these concepts without referring to the beliefs of the people involved.

These two controversies, methodological collectivism/individualism and causal/intentional explanations, are intimately connected without being identical. An adherent to methodological collectivism tends to neglect intentional components of actions, whereas the methodological individualist stresses them.

Thus the question is whether the correct model of explanation in the social sciences is some form of causal explanation, or some version of action explanation. The answer depends, to a great extent, upon how one perceives human beings. If one views humans as primarily autonomous individuals, it is natural to adopt methodological individualism. If, on the other hand, one views humans as primarily social creatures, which have few or no properties (except biological ones) independent of their society, then it is natural to adopt methodological collectivism.

Any given view of human beings is a mixture of factual and ideological convictions. Although it may in principle be possible to formulate the question about methodological collectivism/individualism as a question about what is the most scientifically interesting way to study social phenomena, ideological aspects cannot in practice be disregarded.

One might think it obvious that a sociologist would be a methodological collectivist, since in this discipline one is mostly interested in collective phenomena and not the specific properties or actions of individuals. However, the question of methodological collectivism versus individualism is a question about what explains what. Can one explain social phenomena via a description of the involved individuals' properties, or are the properties of individuals explained by the social environment in which they live?

No matter which type of explanation is correct, one might think that, since many relevant concepts in the social sciences have an intentional component, the only reasonable model is that of action explanation. However, the matter is not that simple. First, the intentional aspect of social concepts is a collective intentionality, and not an individual one. Since the goal of many sociological inquiries is to investigate the genesis, structure, and development of social institutions involving such intentional components, one cannot take collective intentions as primitive elements of explanations, as it is precisely these one wants explained. Secondly, one can claim – as many have done – that intentions (individual as well as collective) are a type of causes. It is therefore reasonable to use causal models even in the social sciences.

In my view, collective intentionality is a central concept in the social sciences. Furthermore, it is a theoretical concept, as one cannot observe collective intentions.

A difficult problem is the relation between collective and individual intentions. The simplest view, which states that collective intentions are nothing but the sum of individual intentions among the members of a group of people, is clearly inadequate, since individual intentions are heavily influenced by experiences of belonging to different groups.

Besides these two alternatives (causal and action explanations), there is a third alternative known as functional explanation.

9.4 Functional Explanations

If we turn our attention towards scientific practice, it seems we quite often find that there is a special type of explanation in the social sciences; namely, functional explanation. An explanation is called functional if it explains a social phenomenon in terms of an important, though often unintended, function that phenomenon performs in a society. If a habit or trait that is not inherited serves no function, then it is not reproduced, and soon disappears. That is to say, there must be a feedback mechanism that helps some habit or trait be reproduced from time to time. Thus in some sense, the existence of a phenomenon is explained by its positive function.

An example that is often discussed in illustrating this point is taken from Robert Merton. Merton studied a number of American companies and discovered a significant difference in conflict level between successful and less successful companies. The more successful companies had higher conflict levels. Merton interpreted this fact as the result of the existence of a feedback mechanism. That is to say, if a company tolerated conflicts and allowed different opinions to be expressed, then the organization would become more flexible and open for change. The more employees were allowed to express their opinions, the more information regarding the ever-changing environment would flow through the company, allowing the management to more effectively adapt to economic changes and increase the company's competitiveness. In short, conflicts have a positive function; thus benefiting the organization that allows for them.

A much-debated question is whether or not functional explanation is actually a new and distinct type of explanation. Jon Elster has answered in the negative, suggesting that functional explanation can be reduced to either action explanation (if one assumes an individualistic perspective) or causal explanation (if one assumes a collectivistic perspective). For, how does the feedback mechanism work exactly? That a social phenomenon fulfils a function means that (assuming methodological individualism) every individual involved is aware of what decisions are considered rational and that the sum of these decisions lead to a certain social phenomenon being reproduced. For example, a political party exists only so long as a number of people actively decide to be members of that party. Thus the correct type of explanation in regards to the existence of political parties (in the individualistic perspective) is action explanation. In other words, the existence of

political parties, organizations, corporations, or other social phenomena is never an unintended side effect. On the other hand, if we assume that the individual agents' beliefs and desires are, in turn, determined by social situations those agents find themselves in, then an explanation with the agents' beliefs and desires as the explanans is not satisfactory. Rather, the explanans should be comprised of a description of the social context and causal connections responsible for these beliefs and desires. According to this perspective, the individual's beliefs and desires are caused by external circumstances, which means that the feedback mechanism must be described as a causal connection, reducing the functional explanation to a causal explanation. In the example taken from Merton's investigation one does not assume any conscious intent to streamline the organization behind the agents' actions. The feedback mechanism must then be a causal mechanism. Merton's explanation is thus a good fit for the causal model of explanation, given that we ask ourselves why conflict-ridden organizations exist and prosper.

Functional explanations are apparently inspired by evolutionary biology, where the surface structure of many explanations is to explain the existence of a certain trait of a species in terms of its role, or function, in the survival of that species. However, this is only a surface explanation, and requires deeper analysis. A more complete evolutionary explanation can be formulated in the following way. A random mutation in the genetic make-up of an individual may give it a new trait, or property, which increases its chances of survival and reproduction. Thus it is likely that this individual will produce more offspring than the other members of its species. This results in an increase of individuals with the same beneficial property in the next generation. After a certain number of generations, this property will have spread throughout the entire species. Thus we have a fundamentally causal explanation of the spread of a certain property or trait. The feedback mechanism is purely causal, and the only non-causal element in the explanation is the appearance of spontaneous mutations.

If we now compare this with possibly similar mechanisms in e.g. organizations, the question becomes, what produces the feedback mechanism? If such a mechanism exists, and is such that it works without people being conscious of it, then it must be a causal mechanism, as in biology. If, on the other hand, the feedback mechanism is a conscious activity, reflecting our behaviour so as to better achieve our goals, then what we have is an action explanation at the collective level. According to Elster, there is no such thing as *functional* explanation, distinct from causal explanation or action explanation; a conclusion that I find well grounded.

Without going any deeper into this discussion, one can clearly see that there is an intimate connection between the type of explanations one deems correct for the social sciences and the basic views one has of humans as social creatures.

9.5 Summary

The debate about explanations in social and human sciences is multifaceted. The fundamental dispute concerns deep metaphysical issues about the relations between individuals and society and how one conceives a human being, a person. The dividing line goes between those who conceive individual human beings as basically independent of society and other persons, (which seems to be implicit in the liberal political tradition), and those who rejects this view, holding that a human being is constituted by its social relations. At the methodological level this distinction becomes methodological individualism versus methodological collectivism.

The individualist view on man is the default option in the western intellectual tradition, but there are good arguments for the other view.

Exercises

First, discuss whether the following explanations are expressions of methodological collectivism or methodological individualism. Then discuss which model of explanation best fits the argument.

1. (Translated from J. Elster: Økonomi og historie, Pax forlag, Oslo, 1972, pp 61–62)

   The pre-industrial society could best be described with the word 'stagnation'. The economy was trapped at a low level, in a vicious circle of mechanisms inhibiting growth. Technical development stood still because the investment level was so low that capital-consuming investments never left the ground. This was partly caused by the fact that productivity was so low that there was rarely any surplus left for investment, and partly by the lack of interest in investments among members of the ruling class in the pre-industrial farming society. They preferred a life of luxury, and any money left over was saved instead of being placed into productive investments. At most, they bought more land or more slaves, but investments in the mechanization of production were seldom made. The productivity of the workers was low because of a lack of proper tools, and because they were so malnourished they could not work effectively. It was no use to raise their salaries, because workers preferred working less to earning more money. Malnourishment and disease kept the population low. War and theft regularly stopped society from building up a continuous surplus. On the whole, it seemed as if the entire society was organized to make economic growth impossible. As soon as there was a slight increase in one sector of the economy, other mechanisms soon reduced this sector to its previous level. An increase in the standard of living brought about an increase in population, which soon reduced the standard of living again. An increase in the level of education brought about a shift from productive work to unproductive activities such as administration and commerce. The efforts made to cultivate more land in order to feed the increasing population led to soil erosion and overwatered soil.

2. Why are birth-rates lower is Western Europe than in Asia? Economic historians maintain that there must be a rational explanation for this difference. Indeed, one may ask oneself why people in South-East Asia do not try to reduce birth-rates in order to reduce the number of mouths to feed.

   E.L. Jones proposes an explanation in his book *The European Miracle*. The difference has to do with the fact that the risk of natural catastrophes is much greater in South-East Asia than in Western Europe. After a catastrophe in which

many people die, such as an epidemic, hurricane, or flood, people must restart their food production as soon as possible. This requires that a substantial work force is still available after the catastrophe; hence families try to produce as many children as possible so that this may be the case. This need is not present in Western Europe, where wide ranging catastrophes hardly ever occur. For example, pandemics such as the Black Death are quite rare. This pattern has been present for a long time, and the modern possibility of transporting food over long distances where it is needed has not yet affected reproductive trends.

3. In a game theoretic study, *The Peter Principle Revisited: A Computational Study* made by Alessandro Pluchino, Andrea Rapisarda and Cesare Garofalo, the authors give an explanation why bosses so often are clearly incompetent for their jobs.

   Here is the abstract, adapted from http://arxiv.org/abs/0907.0455.

   In the late sixties the Canadian psychologist Laurence J. Peter advanced an apparently paradoxical principle, named since then after him, which can be summarized as follows: 'Every new member in a hierarchical organization climbs the hierarchy until he/she reaches his/her level of maximum incompetence'. Despite its apparent unreasonableness, such a principle would realistically act in any organization where the mechanism of promotion rewards the best members and where the mechanism at their new level in the hierarchical structure does not depend on the competence they had at the previous level, usually because the tasks of the levels are very different to each other. Here we show, by means of agent based simulations, that if the latter two features actually hold in a given model of an organization with a hierarchical structure, then not only is the Peter principle unavoidable, but also it yields in turn a significant reduction of the global efficiency of the organization. Within a game theory-like approach, we explore different promotion strategies and we find, counterintuitively, that in order to avoid such an effect the best ways for improving the efficiency of a given organization are either to promote each time an agent at random or to promote randomly the best and the worst members in terms of competence.

Further Reading

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