

## Book Reviews

Elster, Jon. (2007). *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.  
DOI: 10.1177/0048393109332155

Philosophy of  
the Social Sciences  
Volume XX Number X  
Month XXXX xx-xx  
© 2009 SAGE Publications  
<http://pos.sagepub.com>  
hosted at  
<http://online.sagepub.com>

This book is presented on the cover page as a very much expanded and revised edition of Elster's original *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. We think, however, that it is more than this: *Explaining Social Behavior* is, on the contrary, a new book. The size of the book—compared to the previous one—has doubled: new chapters have been added, older ones have been radically expanded, and new material and more detailed analysis of specific issues and claims have been included across the board. The bibliography—sometimes pointing to extremely interesting further readings—has been completely updated. The whole package now looks like a more ambitious project, covering a richer range of topics in much more depth. There is one aspect, however, where the ancestral relationship between these two books remains obvious: both texts are supporting a sophisticated concept of methodological individualism, granting to mechanisms a crucial role within the general economy of social explanations. Belief-desire psychology is taken as the starting point for the social sciences: they provide the inevitable premises upon which to construct social explanations. We take this to be the heart of Elster's contribution.

Explanation is the central topic of the book. The social sciences attempt to account for intriguing or perplexing phenomena that we do not understand. Why is sibling incest so rare, given the temptations and opportunities? Why are parents much more likely to kill adopted children and stepchildren than to kill their biological children? Why has the Calvinist idea of predestination induced greater peace of mind than the belief that one could achieve salvation through good works? Why is logrolling more frequent in ordinary legislatures than in constituent assemblies? These are some of the "puzzles" that the social sciences attempt to solve. Note, however, that Elster is not so much concerned with lending support to one explanation rather than another of these puzzles; rather, he is interested in uncovering the underlying structure of successful social explanations: his focus is on the general principles governing social explanations.

Elster's book is organized in five parts. It is impossible to state in just a few words all of the issues and problems tackled by Elster in his book. We instead will have to content ourselves with just briefly giving mention to those aspects that—according to our own lights—are the more philosophically significant. The first part of the book concerns the general structure of social explanations. The author explores the notions of methodological individualism, intentional explanation, and social mechanism, providing the principles that are supposed to underlie his own understanding of social sciences. According to methodological individualism, "social explanations must refer only to individuals and their actions" (p. 13). Reference

to supra-individual entities, such as families, states, firms, nations, and so forth, is a rather shorthand or second-best approach, having its source in the lack of data or in insufficient knowledge. According to Elster, fine-grained explanations are always preferable to less-fine-grained ones. But making reference to individuals and their properties is not enough to give sound social explanations. We further need to make explicit the mechanism that is governing the behavior of those individuals and generating the outcome that we wish to account for. Mechanisms are, according to Elster, “frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences” (p. 36). Note that social mechanisms are, in a way, making *operative* the principles of methodological individualism: simply enumerating individual properties will not be enough to generate a sound social explanation. We also need to provide some understanding of how these individual properties *generated* the outcome that figures at the *explanandum* of our explanation. Of minor importance—but still discussed in this part of the book—is the notion of interpretation and its relationship with the rationality assumption. It is sometimes held that there is a strong connection between rationality and intelligibility. According to Elster, however, although the process of interpretation can sometimes rely on rationality assumptions, it need not be so: wishful thinking, for instance, is an irrational but intelligible process of belief formation.

In the second part of the work, Elster analyses the role of the mind in the understanding of social behavior: he discusses the problems of altruism and selfishness, motivation, myopia and foresight, emotions and beliefs. The importance given by Elster to the mind is directly connected with his commitment to methodological individualism. He supports a very large version of a belief-desire model of explanation, including both folk and scientific notions. Interestingly, he claims that mental states like desires, beliefs, emotions, and so forth, should not be conceived as permanent entities; they have a context-dependent, unstable, transient nature. There is a strong irrealist flavor in Elster’s argument: he mentions, for instance, some experiments attempting to elicit preferences. Subjects were asked whether they would buy various items at a dollar figure equal to the last two digits of their social security number. When asked how much they would be willing to pay for the product, their answer was correlated with their own social security number: those having a social security number in the top quintile were willing to pay significantly more for the product in question than those in the bottom quintile. This is a startling result. Elster comments, “Although the procedures were supposed to tap or elicit preexisting preferences, the results show that there was nothing there to elicit, no fact of the matter. The numbers owed more to the anchoring provided by the social security numbers than to any ‘real’ preferences” (p. 69).

The author extends his investigation from mind to actions in the third section of his book. The focal point in this chapter is rational choice theory. Elster points out that an important limitation of rational choice theory is that it may fail to yield unique predictions about what, in a given situation, people will do. This is an intriguing

ing objection, given Elster's own relaxed attitude toward the nonpredictive use of mechanisms. If we take seriously the idea that explanation and prediction might not come together—something that Elster explicitly endorses (p. 28)—we cannot see why this should be a problem for rational choice theory. It could be argued—sticking to Elster's previous comments—that rational choice theory is an explanatory theory, rather than a predictive one. If you see here a limitation, it is because you are—like we are (but not Elster)—skeptical about theories that fail to predict but which are good at explaining. We see here then a tension in Elster's thought. Whatever the solution to this puzzle, it is important to compare Elster's claims on methodological individualism to his claims on rationality: while methodological individualism is an unavoidable ingredient of successful social explanations, rationality is not. There is room in Elster's framework for nonrational explanations of action. Elster does not deny, however, that rationality has an important role to play within the social sciences; he simply denies that it is the only game in town.

In the fourth part of the book, Elster discusses the relationship between the social sciences and the natural sciences. He has two fundamental claims to make. The first one is that the social sciences can be reduced to psychology. The second is that natural selection is of dubious value when imported to the social sciences (p. 257). We find the first claim a bit difficult to assess given that Elster does not say which notion of reduction he has in mind. Mainstream philosophy of science has explored different—and nonequivalent— notions of reduction: type-type reduction, token-token reduction, supervenience, multiple realizability, and so forth. Depending on which one of these notions we are thinking about, we will be able or not to grant Elster his point. The second claim made by Elster is developed in more detail. Elster is very careful at the moment of distinguishing between natural and social selection—pointing to important features where these two mechanisms seem to differ. He points out that a crucial aspect that must be taken into account at the moment of assessing the applicability of selection models to the social sciences is the rate of elimination of innovations compared to the rate of change of the environment. Elster suggests that rapid changes in the environment create an obstacle to the fruitful applicability of selectional models in the social landscape. Obviously, Elster must be right that a totally unstable environment would not allow for significant patterns to form out of selectional processes, but still we wonder whether this is the norm in *all* the social sciences, not just in economics. We are thinking primarily of anthropology, a discipline where selectional models do play a crucial role.

Last but not least, in the fifth part of the volume, Elster targets the fundamental subject matter of the social sciences: the problem of interaction. The variety of topics covered in this part—unintended consequences, social norms, strategic interaction, social games, collective action—makes it particularly difficult to summarize in a few lines. We content ourselves with pointing out that Elster has provided an illuminating taxonomy of the different possible types of interactions that are common in the social domain. We find Elster's taxonomy extremely illuminating, shedding light on various, theoretically crucial conceptual issues. In each case, his remarks are carefully supported

by concrete examples of current social explanations. Particularly interesting is the chapter on social norms, which makes very explicit the different kinds or types of social norms usually underlying social interactions. This is a hot topic in the mainstream philosophy of social science, and there is here a challenging attempt to integrate social norms with the explanatory tools of the social sciences.

We find the book extremely interesting. Our major source of skepticism lies in Elster's discussion of mechanisms in social explanations: according to Elster, mechanisms may lack *predictive power*. The problem with this claim is that it is epistemologically too cheap. Evidently, for any possible state of affairs, we can imagine a mechanism that may explain it. Elster could certainly argue that not just *any* mechanism will do the trick: we must prefer those mechanisms making intelligible the larger number of known facts. Elster would be right in claiming that this is an important constraint that could drastically reduce the *range* of serious putative mechanisms. This is a reasonable *caveat*. We are not sure that it will, however, deliver the goods. It seems to reintroduce predictive power as a crucial element to be taken into account whenever we have competing explanatory mechanisms. Due analysis of this issue would require much greater philosophical scrutiny than we can do here. The only point that we want to make is that we are intuitively allergic to mechanisms having no predictive power at all; we did not find in Elster's text, though, a compelling argument to alleviate our ailment.

*Explaining Social Behavior* is an illuminating book. Elster is extremely skillful at combining rigorous conceptual analysis with concrete empirical analysis: in his book, there is a wealth of crisp—and sometimes very penetrating—examples. This is a distinctive feature of the type of theorizing that Elster is advocating: rather than relying on abstract considerations and high-level philosophical intuitions (as seems to be the rule in the mainstream analytical philosophy of social science), Elster proceeds by dissecting actual pieces of social research and by drawing from them interesting and perspicacious theoretical conclusions. *Explaining Social Behavior* is the work of both a philosopher and a social scientist. The way Elster bridges the gap between examples and concepts is very successful: examples are used both to *illustrate* previous conceptual distinctions and to *open* new lines of thought. This marriage between philosophy and the social sciences is perhaps one of the major contributions of the book. Elster has made a good—even definitive—case against the search for a general theory in the social sciences. We may disagree with Elster on how far this claim fits with the results already obtained in some disciplines—like economics, for instance; we may also disagree on whether this state of the social sciences is transient or permanent. However, we cannot disagree, we think, on the fact that a great deal of what is actually going on in the social sciences squares with Elster's picture.

Graciela Küchle

Diego Ríos

Witten Herdecke University, Germany